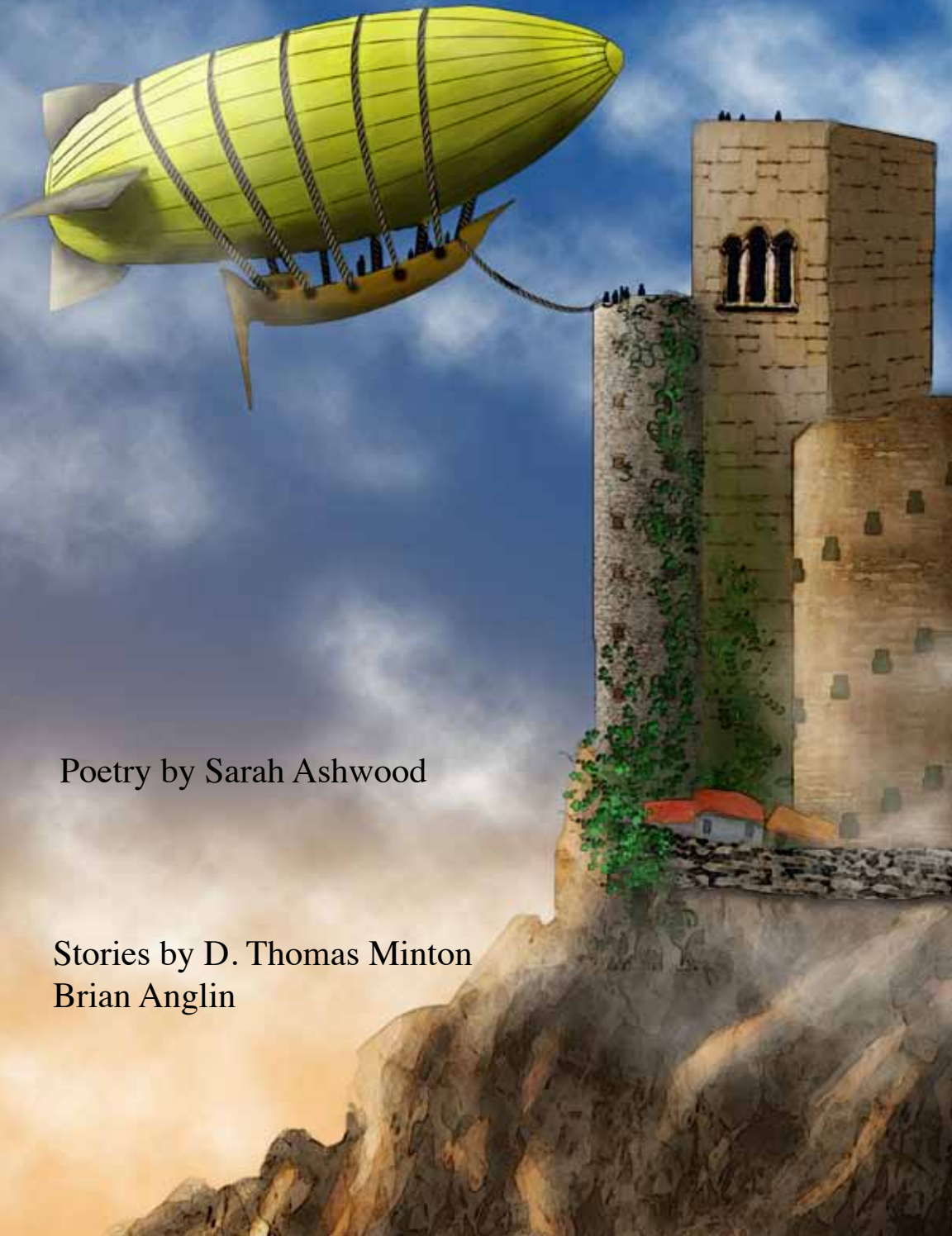


OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #21



Poetry by Sarah Ashwood

Stories by D. Thomas Minton
Brian Anglin

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November

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Cover Art: *The Skies* by Alex Moisi

Alex Moisi is a college student currently trying to improve his writing skills, an endeavor that led to him playing around in Photoshop a lot. This is his first published artwork, of what will hopefully be many to come. For updates on his life and random rants please visit dracken.co.nr.

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Editor's Letter

I have never been too keen about going out to a movie with a friend and having to pay twice to see it. Think about it. I can rent a movie for about four dollars—one payment—and an innumerable amount of people can watch it with me, all for that price. But when I go out to the movies, it costs my ticket price and their ticket price. With today's prices, if four of us go, it is forty dollars to see one movie. Maybe that doesn't bother you, but it does bother me.

What makes this unbearable is when you go to a movie you think is going to be good, and it is awful, as was the case with *The Box*.

As ticket prices have rocketed, I have taken to waiting for the DVD to come out to see them. I mostly go only to those movies that must be seen on the big screen because of the graphics or effects, or those movies that I am particularly interested in and can't wait the few extra months to see on DVD.

The Box was one of those movies I was excited about seeing. The previews made it look like a thriller, with some really good themes that I wanted to see play out. The movie was terribly disappointing though. It was not a thriller. It was kind of an old fashioned science fiction film that plodded along and hinted at some good speculation rather than really delving into it.

The biggest disappointment was not really the movie. It was the misleading. I was expecting to go and sit on the edge of my seat the entire time. I was expecting to have to grip the armrests or the pretty woman's hand next to me. That didn't happen though. And it was the disappointment of my expectations not being met that bothered me the most. And that is why I feel like it was a waste of money.

But that got me thinking. What if we have built up our hopes and dreams about finding life in this galaxy and then we do. But what if that life looks like dog poo and smells just as bad? And what if it just sits there like a plant and never moves or grows? That would be disappointing.

–SC

Memories of Childhood

by D. Thomas Minton

D. Thomas Minton resides in Hawaii with his wife, daughter and three and three-quarter cats. Writing is his first passion, but it doesn't pay the bills, so he moonlights as a marine biologist and prefers to spend his work day underwater. He has published one other story in a now defunct magazine, which he keeps telling himself wasn't his fault. In this story, the memory is not always what it seems.

“All right, all right,” said Margie, waving her hands for silence. “Enough war-on-terror talk.”

The four of us had finished several bottles of wine, and her face glowed flush in the soft lamp light. I felt a little light headed myself and incredibly horny. From where she sat at the end of the couch, she pushed against my thigh with her toes. It was driving me crazy.

“What is your earliest memory from childhood?” Margie asked when she had our attention.

“I can remember being born,” Julian said.

Diana hit him playfully with a throw pillow.

“I’m serious,” said Margie. “What’s the earliest thing you can remember?”

“Is this some sort of Cosmo thing to find out how sensitive your lover is?”

Margie fixed Julian with her don’t-try-me stare. Julian smirked at her.

“I remember a carnival,” I said, hoping to diffuse any argument between Julian and my fiancée. “I was three, maybe four. I got separated from my parents. It was probably only for a few minutes, but it seemed like hours before my mother...”

Margie sat up straighter. “What is it, Rob?”

“I went to that carnival every year until I left for college.” I shook my head and squeezed her foot, hoping to reassure her that everything was okay. But it wasn’t. How many times had I been to that carnival? Enough that I should remember its name or where it was held. But I couldn’t remember. That’s not what bothered me the most, however.

It was the thought of my mother.

We hadn’t spoken since I had moved away immediately after graduating

from college. I hadn't thought about her in nearly as long. My memory of our last fight was hazy, but we had exchanged harsh, even cruel barbs. She had gone so far as to wish me dead. It proved to be the piece de resistance of the tough years that followed my father's death in September of 2001.

Thankfully, the conversation had moved away from me, and no one seemed to notice the frown on my face or my silence. I tried to shake off the disconcerting feeling, but it stayed with me the rest of the night.

Later, after Julian and Diana had left and Margie had drifted off to sleep, I dug at my memories and found other holes. I couldn't remember the name of my high school, or my first girlfriend's last name. And what did my dad do for a living? Blank. I remembered him coming home late every night. On Thursdays he would bring a pizza with sausage and mushrooms from Gino's Pizzeria. But what did he do for a living?

I must have been drunker than I realized. I slid from beneath the comforter; Margie groaned, but rolled over without waking.

My head hurt, so I took a handful of aspirin and drank a liter of water. I smiled, realizing that I had been thinking about several blow-out pledge parties from my fraternity days. But when I couldn't recall the names of any of my frat brothers or even the name of my fraternity, my stomach began to hurt.

I pulled a shoebox of old photos down from the shelf in the hall closet. It held about a dozen prints that I hadn't looked at in six or seven years. I sat on the couch, flipping through them one by one. With each picture, my stomach tightened more.

The pictures were generic—me surrounded by buildings or trees, maybe some water in the background, sometimes a nondescript beach, other times a lake. I was alone in every photo, and I could find no distinguishing landmarks in their backgrounds. They had no date stamps, but based on my age in them, I was in college.

At times, a photo would trigger a general memory of going to Fire Island or down to The City, but never anything specific about the photo itself: why had it been taken, by whom, or where?

As I tossed the pictures back into the box, I noticed something odd about one of them. It was thicker than the other photos, and when I thumbed the edge, I realized it was two prints stuck together. I couldn't get them apart without tearing bottom one, so I used a thin-bladed knife from the kitchen to pry them apart. It took me half an hour to do it without damaging the bottom picture.

The second photo was of me with a dark-haired woman. I was hugging her from behind, my head over her shoulder. She canted her head slightly

to the side, looking towards me. The picture captured one of those intimate moments between two people that only comes with time and shared experience. Lots of shared experience.

The problem?

I had never seen her before.

* * *

I hid the photo in my coat pocket and before Margie awoke, I made an appointment to see a doctor that afternoon.

While Margie attended her weekly Saturday lunch with her mom, I saw Dr. Avery. He was dutifully concerned when I described my inability to remember things from my childhood. I showed him the picture of the dark-haired woman and explained that I didn't know her. I could hear the panic in my voice, but I'm not sure that he could.

He asked about stress at work, whether I was taking any medication or other drugs, and if I had been feeling depressed. He ordered a blood work-up, stress physical, and scheduled me for a CAT scan on Tuesday afternoon.

For the next few nights, after Margie had drifted off to sleep, I spent hours on the internet trying to self-diagnose my condition. I learned a lot of things caused memory loss. Discouraged, I gave up reading medical websites. Besides, I had realized that my pattern of memory loss was unusual, and nothing I had read seemed to explain it.

My memory holes were always subtle. For each incongruity, a logical explanation always existed to explain why I had never noticed it. At my age, who talked about high school? From what I could remember, I had grown up in a small town whose name few people would recognize, so when asked, I always said I was from near Poughkeepsie. I never called home, so I had no reason to think about my mother's phone number, which you would think I would remember, but couldn't.

It was as if memories had been selectively removed. I began to suspect that my condition had been planned and executed with precision. In this time of dirty bombs, IEDs, radical fringe elements and an overprotective government, who knew what was possible?

Three days after my CAT scan, Dr. Avery called me at work; he could find nothing wrong, but he told me to come back if I noticed anything new. Without a word, I hung up and turned my attention back to the photo taped to my computer monitor.

* * *

I spent more time each day staring at the photo of the man who looked like me and the dark-haired woman. I refused to acknowledge that photo-man was me. To do so would be to admit to something wrong, something... sordid. I did look for and found a small mole on photo-man's cheek. It matched the one beneath my right eye.

I lost count of the number of times I scanned the woman's face with a magnifying glass, searching for clues. She looked like a well-to-do north-east type, one who came from money, but not too much money. Perhaps she was the daughter of a moderately successful lawyer or maybe a dentist.

Sometimes two hours would pass before I'd snap out of my trance, feeling guilty. It was like I had hired a private investigator to photograph my cheating spouse, but it turned out I was the adulterer. I knew this didn't make sense, but the existence of the photo made it real, and the fact that I hadn't shown Margie made it illicit. What could I say to her? That's not me when it looked so much like me that even I thought it was? Telling her that I had never seen the woman before seemed like an excuse a twelve-year old boy made when his mom finds his stash of well-fingered Playboys stuffed between his mattresses.

One evening I sat watching the latest terror update on the television. Margie sat on the other end of the sofa reading a book, her feet curled beneath her. The latest news on Frank Dorian washed over me, barely registering. Dorian had been convicted seven years ago under the Material Support Statutes for aiding terror groups in a series of attacks going all the way back to the World Trade Center. A ruling on his final appeal was due any day. I wasn't sure why, but I had followed the case from its start. Tonight, like many nights recently, I couldn't focus on it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Margie glance at me around the side of her book. In the past weeks, her furtive but concerned looks had increased—while we ate dinner in quiet, as we drove to visit her mother, or in bed, as we lay together not touching. No matter how much I assured her everything was okay, I know she sensed something was wrong.

I had tried to tell Margie earlier that day about the woman in the photo, but the words never came. So I bought her a half-dozen roses.

Her foot pushed against my thigh and I reached down and gently squeezed her toes. She set her book aside, next to the flowers on the end table, and crawled to my end of the couch. We melted down onto the sofa until we were prone. She kissed my neck.

Over her shoulder I stared at the vase of roses. I knew them for what they were: guilt flowers.

Margie pushed herself up onto her elbow. "Rob, what's wrong?"

It took me a moment to realize to that I had been laying there staring at the flowers and thinking about the woman in the photo. How many minutes had passed? An infomercial had replaced the terror update on the television. I felt my face burn.

“You’ve been distant, like you’re not even here.” Her brow creased and the corners of her mouth dropped.

With both my hands, I pulled her face towards mine. I kissed her on the forehead and then wrapped her in my arms and held her tightly.

She rested her head on my chest. Her shoulders shuddered. “Are you sick?”

I needed to tell her, but I still couldn’t find the words. “I love you,” I said and stroked her hair.

She rolled her face into the crook of my neck. I could feel her wet cheeks against my skin.

* * *

Almost three weeks after finding the picture, I hired a private detective. We met on a cold Saturday afternoon at a small Italian deli off Main Street. Stephen Jones was as nondescript as his name implied; he looked more like a ninth grade science teacher than a private eye.

I collapsed on the stool next to him and declined to order. After the waitress had retreated, I slid him a photocopy of the picture and a retainer check.

Jones studied the picture for a full minute. “Looks like you.”

“I think it is. Don’t ask. Find out everything you can about both of them.”

* * *

The next Friday, I met Margie at Café Coffee. The small café had a quality selection of caffeinated drinks and a soft, warm ambiance. Julian and Diana usually joined us for our end-of-the-week celebration, but both had begged off this week. I sensed that both had felt the increasing tension between Margie and me.

We sat in plush chairs away from the front door, which seemed to let in more shocks of winter air than it did people. Margie tried to start some small talk, but I was unable to keep up my side of the conversation, leading to an awkward silence that stretched to several minutes.

“Rob, you’re starting to scare me. If something is wrong, you can tell me.” Furrows formed in Margie’s brow and small wrinkles creased the corner of her eyes and mouth. The past few weeks had not been kind to her. I

had not been kind to her.

I shifted in my chair. The café suddenly felt twenty degrees hotter. I owed her an explanation, but could I tell her the truth? “I went to see a doctor a few weeks ago—”

Her body tensed. Her knuckles squeezed white on her mug.

“—he didn’t find anything.”

She exhaled loudly.

“But I am having problems with my memory. I have these holes. I can’t remember things. Lot’s of things. It’s like pieces of me are falling off into the snow, and I can’t find them.” I raised my hand to stop her from coming to me. “But that’s not the worst of it.” I dug into my pocket and pulled out the worn photo. I handed it to her.

The photo trembled in Margie’s hand. Her voice was thready. “Who’s she?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

I looked at my hands; they were shaking. “The memory holes are so calculated. It’s like they were planned, like somebody did this to me. I know that sounds crazy. Maybe I am crazy. I don’t know that woman and that scares me.”

She moved towards me.

I jumped up from my chair and stumbled away from her as if I was contagious. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t know if I am forgetting things or if they never existed.”

“Rob, please, let me help you.”

“How can you help me?”

She stopped approaching and stood with her arms hanging at her sides. The photo of me and the mystery woman hung loosely between the slender fingers of her left hand. Her engagement ring looked dull and black in the diffuse light. I realized then that the café had gone quiet. The staff watched us from behind the counter.

I took a deep breath. For the first time in a long time, my hands had stopped shaking. “I need some time. Please give me time.”

Margie put the photo on the table near my tea mug. I could see the tension in her arms and shoulder. “Okay, Rob. But I’m here when you need me. When I said yes, I meant it to be forever.” She pulled on her coat, pausing to wipe at her nose and eyes. She hesitated as if she was going to say something; then she wrapped her scarf around her neck.

“Just a little more time. That’s all I need.”

She nodded and then left in a burst of winter air.

I crumpled the photo, but stopped short of throwing it into the trash. Reluctantly, I smoothed it out and stared at the two people. "Who are you?"

I fished my cell phone out of my coat pocket. Jones answered after a single ring, and we arranged to meet in thirty minutes at nearby 24/7 diner.

* * *

Jones sipped a cup of tea at a booth away from the door. I slid into the seat across from him and ordered a black coffee. The heavy white ceramic mug felt good in my hands.

"Week's not a long time," Jones said after the waitress had left, "but I got some results for you, Mr. Williams." He placed a folder on the table. "Information wasn't easy to come by."

I produced a check for our agreed upon amount and slid it to him. He passed me the folder in exchange.

"That guy your twin or something?"

Inside the folder, photocopies of two Massachusetts driver's licenses sat atop a thin stack of papers. One had a picture that was unmistakably me, but from how I looked ten years ago. The name along the left side read Daniel Taylor. The other license belonged to Amanda Taylor, the dark-haired woman.

"Had a hard time with those. Seems both were removed from the system about six years ago. Don't know who did it or why. Fortunately, I know a guy who does computer back-ups for Mass DMV. He found them on one of the old tapes in his basement. Don't ask." He tapped the photocopy. "They're married, but no marriage certificate that I could find."

He flipped aside the licenses and spread out the next three sheets. Each contained two photos of an empty lot in an old neighborhood.

"The address on the licenses," he said. "Electrical fire burned the place down about seven years ago. Off the record, talk of arson, but far as I can tell no investigation was ever launched past the original determination. Daniel, Amanda and a baby girl were killed. Couldn't find an obit, though."

"Name's too common to dig up anything else in just a week. Did find one other thing, however. Strictly by chance, mind you, while I was researching the local papers." At the bottom of the stack was an article from the Boston Herald dated nearly eight years ago. The article was about Frank Dorian.

My eyebrows popped up. "What does this have to do with anything?"

Jones pointed to the accompanying picture of Dorian standing outside the Boston Federal Courthouse surrounded by men in suits. "Can't be certain, but that sure looks like you standing behind Frank Dorian."

An hour later, I barreled down the New York State Thruway towards Boston. As the mileage markers counted down, the knot in my stomach twisted tighter. Near Springfield, I finished the last of the antacids I had purchased outside of Syracuse. A mile before my off-ramp, I pulled onto the turnpike's shoulder, hyperventilating. After several minutes of breathing into my hands as if they were a paper bag, I forced myself onward.

The Washington Street exit dropped into a quiet residential neighborhood filled with historic colonial-style homes. Old maples and oaks lined the narrow streets; their bare branches offered little resistance to the early morning light.

The empty lot on Prospect Street was overgrown with brittle weeds. Leafless hedges surrounded it on three sides. It looked just like the photographs Jones had given me.

I'm not sure what I expected. Maybe I was hoping for a spark, some memory. I parked my car across the street and walked south along Prospect hoping the neighborhood might trigger something. But nothing about this place felt like home.

With some surprise, I found that I had walked around the block and was back at my car. My face was raw from the cold and I slumped against the driver-side door, exhausted.

The house next to the empty lot had a light on. I had come so far; I had nothing to lose. I knocked on the door.

An old woman answered. She hid behind her chained door, looking at me through the crack.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so early." I smiled hoping that I looked better than I felt. "Might I talk to you for a moment?"

"I'm not interested in your literature." The door began to close.

"Wait. I'm not selling anything. I need to ask you about the house next door."

She must have heard something in my voice, because the crack widened a little. "Are you one of those reporters? What with the appeal and all, they've been snooping around recently."

"I'm sorry?"

Her eyebrows pushed together. She looked me up and down a second time. "It's cold out. Come inside. I'll make you some cocoa."

She mixed the cocoa from scratch with baker's chocolate, sugar, and whole milk with a splash of heavy cream. She set the mug in front of me and sat down on the opposite side of the small table.

Out the kitchen window I could see the empty lot through the leafless hedge.

“You remind me of him,” she said. “The man who used to live next door.” When I didn’t say anything she continued. “He and his wife were such nice people. Their daughter—oh, what a cutie.” She smiled as if the memory were a chocolate truffle.

“What happened?”

“The place burned down, oh, about seven or eight years ago now. Right after Frank Dorian went up for trial. You know... Frank Dorian.”

The cold radiating from the window glass seeped through my shirt sleeve. I shivered.

“People say Dan, that was the man next door, was one of his go-to men, but I don’t believe it.” She shook her head. “They said it was an electrical fire. Lots of folks around here think Frank Dorian was behind it. If he was, then he deserves what he gets. What’s your interest in all this?”

I hadn’t thought that far ahead, so I sipped the cocoa. “This really hits the spot.” I smiled at her.

Her eyes appraised me; the warmth was fading out of them.

“I was an old friend of Dan’s from way back,” I said. “I wasn’t able to make the funeral for personal reasons, so I wanted to stop by and pay my respects. I live out in California.”

Her eyes softened again. I made up several stories about California, nonsense stuff based on TV shows I’d seen. I had never been there; at least not that I remembered. I finished the hot chocolate and she collected my mug.

“Thank you for the cocoa, but I need to be going.”

On the porch, I hesitated. “Were they happy? Did they love each other?”

She placed a frail-looking hand on my arm. Her squeeze was barely perceptible through my coat sleeve. “They were very happy and very in love.”

* * *

If I had driven straight through, I would have gotten home before dark, but I needed to make another stop. At Albany I turned south toward New York City. A few hours later, I cruised the streets of Poughkeepsie, hoping that something would trigger my memory. Things looked vaguely familiar, but I just as easily could have seen them on the web as with my own eyes.

While I couldn’t remember my parent’s house number, I did know the street. I entered Oak Street into my on-board GPS and came up with one in Poughkeepsie. I drove to it, a small dead-end street with just a few houses.

Nothing familiar.

I tried again, using town names around Poughkeepsie. I checked out three more possibilities with similar results. I even got out at one place and walked around, hoping to shake something loose. I left after I noticed a woman watching me out her front window.

I eventually got another GPS hit, this time about thirty miles north near Rhinebeck. I followed the GPS's synthetic voice directions and arrived late in the afternoon.

The second I turned onto Oak Street, I got a strange tingle. I jammed on the brakes, stopping in the middle of the road. The SUV behind me laid on its horn. After I failed to move, it went around me and disappeared up a side street.

The open field to my right was the place where I had attended the summer carnival every year until I had left home. My memory of being lost as a toddler came back to me. At the time, it had seemed like hours, but I'm sure it was only minutes before my mother had found me in front of the cotton candy booth, hugging the small bear that my father had won at the ring toss. In a rush, she had picked me up and held me. I had clung to her neck and we had cried onto each other's shoulders. I knew I was saved.

I inched along the road, looking at all of the houses. They were old homes; most looked like they had been built around the middle of the twentieth century. They were packed into narrow lots with faded wooden fences between them and postage stamp front lawns with brown grass peeking through a dusting of snow.

I stopped before a weathered cape cod. My arms and legs had gone numb. I realized with a start that I was holding my breath.

Memories rushed back to me. The dormer window on the right was my old bedroom. I had played hopscotch, right there on the front walk. The storm door still had a dent in it where I had hit it with a baseball when I was seven. I remembered lying to my dad about it and getting punished worse for lying than for damaging the door.

I got out of the car and stood in the cold staring at the fading gray-blue siding and tar shingle roof. I pulled my coat tightly about me, trying to hold in the heat of the car.

I walked up the driveway and looked down the side of the house. A large willow tree towered over the top of a single car garage around back. I had broken my arm falling out of that tree when I was ten. On the edge of the driveway, just a pace from where I stood, I had kissed Amy—I couldn't remember her last name, but I remembered her blond hair, the smell of her make-up, and the way her small breasts rubbed against my chest when we kissed. I was thirteen.

“Can I help you?” An old woman peeked out the storm door.

“Mom?”

She was much older than the woman from my memories, but I had little doubt it was her. I took a hesitant step. She shied back, pulling the storm door closed.

“Mom?”

“You must have me confused with someone else.”

I stood at the bottom of the front stoop. “My name is Robert Williams. I grew up here. When I was ten, I broke—”

Her face went ashen.

“My son is dead.” She slammed the inside door.

I leaped onto the stoop in a single stride and knocked on the door. I rang the bell. “Please, I need answers.”

“Go away or I’ll call the police.” Her voice was muffled.

After a few minutes of trying, I gave up. I went back to my car and sat watching the house. I didn’t care if she called the police.

Everything I saw now triggered memories from my childhood. Our dog Boots, an old faded green Ford Taurus parked in the driveway, the snow fort I had built with Cody and Andy after the blizzard of 1996. Clear and powerful, the memories came so fast that I couldn’t analyze them for incongruities.

Lighting off M80s in the back yard.

Dad pushing me on a rope swing when I was six.

The fights with my mother after my father had died.

I started to cry.

I sat there for several hours. At some point, I fell asleep slumped over the steering wheel. I was startled awake by the woman whom I recognized as my mother tapping on the driver-side window.

The sun had settled behind the roof tops. It was getting dark.

She frowned. “Come inside. It’s cold out here.”

I followed her into a cramped living room. The furniture was old and familiar. I had spilled a glass of grape juice on the chair near the fireplace when I was in high school; I could see the edge of a faded stain sticking out from beneath a crocheted maroon throw. Mirrored curio boxes filled with small Hummel statues lined the walls. Lamps with frilly shades provided a warm glow. The house smelled like beef stew and homemade biscuits. It smelled like home.

On the glass-top coffee table were half a dozen thick, leather bound albums and piles of loose photographs.

She motioned for me to sit down.

“They told me this couldn’t happen,” she said after a long silence. She dabbed at her red and swollen eyes with a handkerchief, the one with the pink roses embroidered on the corner. I remembered it from Dad’s funeral.

She picked up a framed photograph from the pile on the table and handed it to me. It was a picture of young marine looking sharp in his uniform. His face, stern, tough, was a carbon copy of every marine photograph I had ever seen. But the eyes were unmistakable. They were the same as hers.

“That is Robert Allen Williams. My son. We had such a fight when he joined the Marines out of college. In my anger, I told him I didn’t care if he went out got himself killed. We never talked again. Six months later he was killed in Iraq.”

I stared at the picture, my knuckles turning white.

“I wanted his life to mean something, so when the men from the Justice Department asked me to donate Robert’s memories, I agreed. His memories would allow a witness against a dangerous terrorist to have a normal life. They said it was greatest thing that I could do for Robert.

“They told me they’d harness the memories that were still viable and select from those so that the recip—so that you wouldn’t be able to find me, but would be able to live your new life.”

“My wife and daughter,” I said slowly.

“I don’t know, Mr.—”

“I don’t either.” I handed her back the photo. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come.”

She put a hand on my arm to stop me from rising. “Please stay. I want you to stay. At least have dinner. It’s beef stew. Robert’s favorite.”

“I know.”

She served the stew in fine china bowls, as if I were a special guest. It tasted exactly how I remembered. Throughout the meal we talked about the past. I told her everything I could about Robert Williams. All of my, or was it his, secrets. She filled in my memory gaps whenever I asked.

While I washed the dishes and she wiped and put them away, I told her about Margie and my life and about how I had fucked up everything.

She paused in her drying. She looked tired, but in her eyes I saw her love for her son. “Robert was always a resourceful child. I’m sure you’ll find a way to make her understand.”

“I have to.”

“You will.”

It was after nine when we finished the dishes. Reluctantly I told her I had to go. “Margie is waiting for me.”

I stopped on the porch, wanting to give her my address and telephone

number, but I knew it wasn't the right time. I suspected it would never be the right time.

I sensed she felt the same way.

"I know you and Robert didn't part well. I have good memories of you. I don't think he died hating—He loved you very much."

"Thank you," she said and quietly closed the door.

I stood on the porch for a long time. Eventually, the light bleeding through the living room curtains went off, and I stood in darkness.

I knew enough now that I could find out who I really had been. But did I want to? What if I learned that I was party to the crimes that Frank Dorian had committed, and I had only turned on him to save myself? What if I was one of those responsible for the deaths of thousands of people, including those sons and daughters like Robert Williams?

But what if I wasn't?

Slowly, the moon rose over the houses and the darkness retreated.

What if my wife and daughter were also hiding, and the fire was our way to shed our past lives? Did I want to know that and realize that they would no longer know who I was? That thought wasn't as painful to me as I thought it should be, but that was because I was no longer Daniel Taylor.

The memories of Robert Allen Williams, no matter how flawed and painful, were my memories now. They were, I was certain, no less painful than any other man's memories.

But they were mine.

The Meeting on the Turret Stairs

by Sarah Ashwood

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The Meeting on the Turret Stairs

Hark! She now is coming
I’ve waited all day, it seems
For light footsteps on the stairs
And her shadow on the beams

Shush! My chain mail jingles
I tread lightly down the steps
Eager to see the eyes
So brilliant while she wept

Blast! There’s not much time
For our secret rendezvous
I hurry the faster to reach her—
Now she comes in view!

Love! That shy, swift glance
From brimming, teary eyes
She may claim not to love me
But I know that she lies

Longing! That ghastly demon
Haunts me as I stand
Transfixed by her approach

Then dare to take her hand

Pain! She will not pause
Will not wait to see me grieve
I clasp her arm and press
A kiss against her sleeve

One kiss! 'Tis all I have
Of this meeting on the steps
Up she goes, while I depart
Dreaming of her yet

Forget Me Nots

by Brian Anglin

Brian Anglin is a professional beggar. He raises money for children with disabilities and special needs in New York State. On the side, he writes science fiction. He has been published in Big Pulp Magazine. In this story, a man has two lives and two loves.

“Thank you for the unrestricted use of your brain. All cognitive functions will be returned to you in exactly fifteen minutes. As stipulated in the intellectual property rights agreement signed as a condition of your employment, all awareness of your professional activities will be erased.”

The uninspired announcement played out in my head at the same time and in the same way at the end of every work week. And just like every other Friday, I dreaded the days to come. It was the weekend, and that meant two days without my Linux Integrated Security Administrator—or as I called her, LISA.

“LISA,” I thought. “I don’t want to go.”

“I know, DEAR,” she answered. “It’s been such a great week. I don’t want it to end either.”

She called me DEAR, short for Defensive Error Application Router.

Together, we were part of the Macrobiotic Bio-Chemical Operating Workgroup (MaBCOW), a global network of human brains that had replaced the internet as a more efficient, secure and expansive system for storing and transferring vital corporate and personal communications and information. Together, we formed the front line of defense for the world’s most top secret and dangerous information. While I was plugged into the network, my job was to identify any suspected security breaches and immediately report them to LISA. LISA’s job was to prevent the infiltration and completely destroy the systems and minds that made the attempt. Between you and me, she was one scary chick.

At first, we didn’t get along at all. She thought I was a paranoid wimp who caved at the slightest hint of confrontation. Who could blame her? Over the course of our first five-day shift working together, I referred 1,798 potential security threats to her. Unfortunately, only four turned out to be credible attacks. By the end of the week, she openly mocked me as the boy who cried wolf... wolf... wolf... wolf...

To drive home her point, she would stutter the last bit 1,794 times.

Of course, I just thought she was a mean bitch.

LISA laughed. She was monitoring my thoughts. “You were so cute back then,” she said. “Every time we interfaced, I thought you were going to pee your pants.”

“That was four years ago,” I said, focusing my thoughts into the form of a young, bright-eyed vision of myself. “I couldn’t help it. I was the new kid on the block, and I was just trying to impress you.”

She took control of my thought picture and superimposed a dark, wet stain on my neatly pleated khakis. Immediately, my knees bent inward and my hands covered my crotch like I was standing naked in a train station at rush hour. “That’s right, DEAR,” LISA sighed, dreamily. “You won my heart over with awkward self-consciousness and unadulterated fear.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I could never outdo her in these simple mind games. After all, she messed with and messed up cerebral processes much bigger and badder than mine for a living. But sometimes she gave me some leeway—like now. I gently introduced LISA’s avatar into the scene. The long, black-haired beauty approached the timid youth and placed her arms around him in a soft, comforting embrace.

“A-ha,” I said, mustering my best, fake romantic French accent. “I’ve heard that zee raw, manlee ezzenze of unbridled incompetenze, or incontinenze in your caze, can be a powerful aphrodisiac for zee most beautiful of women.”

I felt LISA blush. She knew it was true. In a cybernetic world where she was constantly bombarded by a relentless onslaught of programs and systems trying to dominate her, she found my utter weakness and vulnerability curious—annoying, but curious. And over time, as my reports of potential security threats dropped to less than 10 a week, curiosity became respect. Respect eventually became love.

LISA recalled the day our working relationship became intimate, and as she remembered, so did I. LISA was battling a particularly nasty intruder, and she was losing. The hacker had utterly destroyed her defenses, and he was seconds from entering the inner sanctum of MaBCOW’s precious data storage, the holy grail of the world’s digital secrets.

At that point, LISA called for help, but the intruding program had already cut off her ability to communicate with the official back up programs of MaBCOW’s security protocols. No one heard. No one answered.

Except me. I heard her loud and clear. I was still linked in and monitoring LISA as a part of MaBCOW’s standard self-training measures. By witnessing LISA’s battles and seeing how she dealt with the issues I brought

to her attention, it made me a much more efficient defensive router. So, I watched in horror as the intruder stripped LISA of all her attacks and defenses one by one.

Of course, I was left untouched. Whoever was marshalling this attack knew our protocols well. They knew I was just a programmed tattletale. Naturally, I tried calling for help on her behalf, but the same isolation bubble that silenced LISA's cries prevented me from contacting the secondary and tertiary security applications.

There was nothing I could do.

But I had to do something.

Without fear or hesitation, I hurled my simple logic matrix into the throng of battle. My unexpected valor triggered stunned silence, and the deadly cybernetic barrage came to a surprised halt. The predator was baffled. I was operating outside my expected parameters, and he had no idea what kind of threat I posed or how much of his resources were needed to secure my demise.

That was the moment LISA fell in love.

Later, LISA explained that my devastating attack diverted approximately one-millionth of the intruder's brute power, but nonetheless, it was the breakthrough LISA needed. In the nanosecond of her attacker's confusion, she reconfigured her defenses, and called in all of MaBCOW's lower functioning programs like me to join the battle. Worldwide, there were roughly 17 million of us.

The intruder was decimated.

"You are my knight in shining armor," LISA said with a deep sigh. "Without you, none of us would have survived."

It was my turn to blush.

The mind picture began to take on new life. LISA's smile became warm and inviting, and her embrace tightened. Her longing took the form of a warm, wet kiss, and her heart beat so strong and hard I could feel it echo in my own. And then, without effort or intention, our clothes faded, colors blended, and her love and passion poured into my soul. For a brief moment, the ecstasy of being completely touched and completely loved was intoxicating.

I felt her tremble.

"We have certainly come a long way, haven't we?" she said.

"Thank you for your vital service to the Macrobiotic Bio-Chemical Operating Workgroup. Your shift is now complete. Please enjoy the weekend."

And then I forgot everything.

Coming out of a week-long shift at MaBCOW was never pleasant. First of all, you were completely naked, surrounded by hundreds of your colleagues and friends. Secondly, it took several infuriatingly slow and tedious minutes to remove the intricately wired interface that allowed the MaBCOW network to link directly with your brain, exit the sensory deprivation tank, and regain your bearings.

But I had the routine down pat.

“I am Andrew Seligman,” I told myself, as I carefully removed the condom electrode from my genitals. “I am a 37-year-old software specialist for the largest, most secure computer network in the world, and I have just ended a five-day work shift of which I have absolutely no recollection.”

I looked around to see hundreds of other MaBCOW employees untangling themselves from the network and getting ready for the weekend. I continued my weekly declaration as I hurriedly dressed. “I was born in rural upstate New York where my parents and closest friends still live, and now I live in a small flat on New York City’s Upper West Side, where I have been making a home with my beautiful wife, Juliette, for the last seven years.”

Juliette—my favorite part of the weekly mantra. Although I knew she was busy a quarter of a mile away wrapping up her work week on the opposite side of MaBCOW’s New York City facility, I looked around hoping to see her. I saw David Pullman re-acquainting himself to the tattooed mermaid on his right bicep as he pulled on his pants. Martin Sorenza sat bent over the edge of his “think” tank rubbing the back of his neck with a confused look on his face. Laura Ingwald, the newest addition to our wing of software specialists, self-consciously held a plush white towel to her torso as she slowly stepped out of the primordial ooze that encased our bodies throughout the work week.

Strangely enough, that colorless viscous substance simultaneously met all of our nutritional, muscle stimulant, and bio-waste needs throughout the work week. It was marvelously effective, but one didn’t want to think about it too much.

As usual, there was no Juliette to be seen anywhere, but the thought of her made me smile nonetheless. I nodded politely to my co-workers as I made my way to the single security check point that separated me from the rest of the world and the woman I loved.

“We’re all meeting at Kyoto Bob’s tonight for some hand-rolled sushi and a couple gallons of saki,” David called out as I passed his station. “You want us to save a couple seats for you and your woman?”

“Not tonight, Dave,” I said, talking over my left shoulder as a conveyor belt slowly inched me through the state-of-the-art Thought Checker, the transdermal brain-wave decoder that prevented us from removing any top secret intel from the secured work zone. “Tonight Juliette’s in for something special. It’s our seven year anniversary.”

“Are you saying a night on the town with me is not special?”

“Oh, you’re special alright,” I assured him. “And don’t let anyone tell you any different.”

David chuckled, shaking his head. “Well, it was worth a try,” he said with a shrug. “Anyway, give Juliette my condolences. Tell her seven years is enough suffering for even the greatest sinner. Let her know I’ll be waiting for her at Kyoto Bob’s if she suddenly comes to her senses.”

“Will do.”

Without ceremony or gratitude, the slow moving train of employees searching for daylight dumped me in the MaBCOW lobby where I began my anxious wait for Juliette. I couldn’t help it. I was nervous. No matter how many Fridays Juliette came out of her security check to wrap her arms around me and cover me with kisses, I couldn’t help but fear this week would be different.

You see, five days is an eternity when you’re separated from the woman you love. Forget that you were unconscious. Forget that you don’t remember a single second of your time away from her. Forget that the last goodbye only felt like a few minutes before. In your heart, you know that something very wrong has transpired. In your heart, you know that the universe has conspired to steal five days and four nights of paradise from your life’s time line. And deep, deep in your heart, you know that you allowed it to happen.

There was no doubt about it. It was all my fault.

When I met Juliette, she was already a veteran MaBCOW employee. Based on her ground-breaking, post-doctoral research in artificial bio-chemical computer intelligence, Juliette was recruited as one of the founding members of the MaBCOW network. She signed on without hesitation. For a young, single woman, it was a cushy job on the cutting edge of a revolutionary industry. She was changing the world. She was collecting more money than she had ever dreamed of, and although the round-the-clock work week was a killer, her days off were spent indulging in some of the most exotic luxuries known to man or, as the case may be, woman.

And then she met me. I remembered it like it was yesterday...

“Excuse me,” she said. She was probably thinking I was just another anonymous wanderer on that cold winter night. “Can you tell me how to get to Madame Carpala’s House of Haute Cuisine? My concierge said it’s

somewhere around here on the corner of Fifth and 37th, but I don't see it anywhere."

I kept walking without looking back at her or answering. Her question disgusted me. Everyone knew Madame Carpala's. It was the most exclusive and expensive dining experience in New York City and possibly the world. The menu consisted of exquisitely delectable tastings of extinct birds, plants, fish and mammals. Using DNA harvested from organic fossils, the finest chefs from around the world worked their magic, brewing their main courses in test tubes and enhancing them with a delicate truffle cream sauce with just a pinch of mint.

The restaurant was only open one night a year—New Year's Eve, and a seat in the main dining room cost one million dollars. If you wanted a private room with a friendly visit from the chef, you could expect to pay more than twice that. Seeing how I was currently an unemployed classical ethicist, that was more than I was likely to earn over the course of my short, miserable life.

Assuming I had not heard her, Juliette tapped my shoulder to get my attention. Later, she told me it never even occurred to her that I was giving her the brush off. She simply could not imagine someone being so rude.

"Excuse me," she repeated. "Can you tell me how..."

Taking a deep breath, I reeled on her, fully prepared to unleash my standard rant on how the fickle eccentricities of the mindless bourgeois and the soulless industries that catered to them, like Madame Carpala's, were undermining the very small but hard-won progress our confused planet had made in advancing humanity and achieving a modest level of economic equality and social justice. As I turned, I was fully committed to laying the sad plight of every poor, hungry and abused child in the world on the shoulder of this one unlucky woman who selfishly assumed I would cater to her need for geographical assistance.

But then I saw her eyes.

And there was no pretension in them at all. No phony airs. No Saks Fifth Avenue glaze. Standing there in front me, waiting patiently and honestly for me to speak, Juliette was not the devil in thousand dollar spiked heels. She was just a modest, simple woman looking for a nice place to eat.

And she was beautiful.

"It's two doors down on the left," I said, slightly surprised by my sudden light-headedness. "There's no sign on the establishment because the restaurant is in a different location every year, and Madame Carpala thinks traditional demarcations are gaudy and don't do justice to her or her artistry. Her food speaks for itself, she says."

I paused, wondering how long I could wait before the situation became awkward and uncomfortable. I soaked in the vision of her—short blonde ringlets peeking out from a floppy black beret, hands hidden in the mysterious warmth of a hand-tailored overcoat that was pulled tight around her waist to keep out the cold, and a smile that slightly curled her bright green eyes just at the corner. She was strikingly beautiful without knowing it, and her humble sincerity was intoxicating.

All of a sudden, I felt self-conscious in my worn corduroy jacket, faded jeans and tobacco-stained teeth. “If you like, I’d be honored if you would allow me to escort you to the door,” I said.

I offered her my arm, and the light touch of her soft, pale hand accepting my invitation swelled my chest.

“Will you be meeting someone for dinner?” I asked, trying my best to mask the intention behind the question.

“No,” she said, bouncing gently beside me. “I just got out of work, and I heard Madame Carpala’s was worth a visit. I would really love some company and some conversation, though. Would you care to join me?”

I couldn’t help myself. In the single most hypocritical act of my pseudo-savvy intellectual life, I spent the entire evening talking and giggling and wooing over an endless parade of tastes and smells that have not been encountered on this planet since the dawn of time. With each new dish and each gentle laugh we shared, I felt another layer of anger and resentment and sarcasm melt from my bitter heart. By the time the coffee was served, I was in love.

With tax and tip, the evening’s bill came to a little more than \$2.4 million. She handed the waiter her credit card without even looking at the total, but I couldn’t help but peek. I regularly tell her it was the best \$2.4 million she ever spent. She says I am a bargain at half the price.

Of course, we wanted the weekend to last forever, but fate had other plans. On Sunday evening, after an uninhibited weekend of exploring the city, making love, and sharing raw dreams and passions, Juliette became very quiet. Sitting at her kitchen table, gnawing left over Brontosaurus Riblets and putting a healthy dent in an ice cold six-pack of Schlitz Malt Liquor, I saw a single tear trace the curve of her cheek.

“I don’t want this to end,” she said, staring into the steam of her Japanese green tea.

“Huh?” This sounded serious, so I stopped chewing and put down my beer to give her my full attention.

“I don’t want this to end,” Juliette repeated. “But tomorrow morning, I have to go back to work. And at work, I will forgot all about this, all about

you... I don't think I can stand that."

I sighed. I had forgotten she was a working woman. Having been wrapped in the lap of luxury since the moment I met her, it was easy to pretend we were beyond the petty expectations and responsibilities of the world around us.

Apparently, I was wrong.

That was when Juliette told me about MaBCOW, the strange work hours she kept, and the unavoidable memory lapses associated with leasing your brain to the highest bidder. She told me how excited she was in the early days to be a part of such an innovative and important project. Her life's work of crazy theories and out-of-the-box research were being brought to life in the real world right before her eyes. Unfortunately, however, she had no recollection at all of the breakthroughs and discoveries that ultimately transformed her dreams into concrete reality.

In the end, Juliette explained, it was just another job. A well-paying job to be sure, but Monday was still the most-dreaded day of the week.

Juliette brushed away the tear, straightened her shoulders. and placed her hand in mine. For a good minute, she caressed my finger tips with hers. When she finally spoke it was with all the honesty and longing and passion of our first kiss.

"If you ask me to, I will quit," she said.

I must have been crazy. Inside, my head was screaming, "Yes! Yes! Yes! For Christ's sake, quit the damn job!"

But what came out was something totally different and unexpected. I knew in my heart, there was no way I could ask Juliette to give up her journey of intellectual passion. It was part of who she was, part of what made her so damn amazing. No matter how much I wanted to spend every second of every day of the rest of my life memorizing the dots of her George Seurat beauty, I knew what I had to say.

"You don't need to quit," I said, squeezing her hand. "I'll wait for you."

So, I spent the next three years waiting. Three excruciating years. And while each weekend we spent together was new and fresh and magical, the five days between were painfully hollow. Trudging alone through my daily routine was unbearable.

In the end, I had no choice. At least that's what I told myself. With the full conviction of a limp fish, I signed on with MaBCOW to escape the loneliness of waiting. In the end, however, it didn't make a difference. Whether I was conscious for them or not, I couldn't ignore the fact that MaBCOW was stealing the woman I loved away from me five days at a time. And thanks to a crummy decision I made seven years ago, I've missed 1,820 days of living

life with the woman I love.

Like I said, it was all my fault.

Wracked with guilt and fear, I stood alone in MaBCOW's crowded atrium, and I waited.

Then I saw her. And like a hundred times before, she wrapped her arms around my neck and covered me with kisses.

* * *

"Thank you for your ongoing service to the Macrobiotic Bio-Chemical Operating Workshop, where 17,000,000 minds are better than one. As part of your contract of employment, all memories of your secondary life outside the network have now been erased. They will be returned to you at the end of your shift."

I felt LISA's touch as soon as the message ended, and it scared me. She was different.

"I need to talk to you—in private," she thought.

Something was wrong. Generally, MaBCOW encouraged fraternization between employees during office hours. They said it helped strengthen the network's bio-chemical connections. As a result, there was no need for LISA and I to keep our love secret, and there was rarely a need for privacy.

"You're scaring me," I said. "What's going on?"

"Sssh! Not here," she said. "You know where to meet me."

It took me a few minutes to run the ghost program LISA had taught me soon after she declared her love for me. The program created a digital replica of myself and allowed my lower level security filters to operate on auto-pilot. The program had two basic purposes. First, it removed a lot of the tedious hour-by-hour repetition of my typically boring responsibilities. Second, it gave me freedom to spend more time with LISA.

But there was a third purpose. When needed, the digital self-replicator allowed me to discreetly meet LISA in our special place, the one place in the MaBCOW network that no one could infiltrate. It was an enhanced version of the isolation bubble left over from the epic battle where I single-handedly saved MaBCOW. At first, LISA was going to delete the terrifying program that shut her off from the network's higher lever functions and surveillance, but before she initiated the standard operating procedure for disintegrating all remnants of invasive programs, a strange idea struck her.

That was the idea of being alone, and later, when we became close enough to feel each other's intimate thoughts, there was the idea of being alone together. With tremendous care and secrecy, LISA carefully upgraded

the isolation bubble to create a cybernetic world that only she and I could access.

Like I said, there was never a real need for privacy, but every now and then we liked to sneak away for a secret rendezvous. I have to admit that even though I was a coward at heart, the underlying sense of danger and adventure was a real turn on. If we ever got caught, however, it would have meant the end of our careers and the end of our relationship.

So, we didn't use our secret place very often, and it was never used for anything serious or illicit.

"I'll be waiting for you," she said, conveying a terrible sense of urgency.

The next twenty minutes were excruciating. There is no way to speed up the official transfer of job duties from the MaBCOW employee I was replacing. The process is riddled with brain-numbing redundancy. System checks had to be run and validated by independent Software Specialist Supervisors. Back up systems had to be thoroughly inspected and re-inspected, and brain wave records from the exiting software specialist had to be entered into the security system to make sure no memories of the previous work shift made their way out of the MaBCOW facility.

Basically, I held my breath and thought nothing until I received the all clear. One hint of unnatural tension or nervousness on my part would trigger an explosion of bureaucratic paranoia, and the process would be reset to the beginning. Luckily for me most of the attention during a shift change is focused on the employee being released back into the real world.

I sighed with relief as I entered the secret space.

"LISA, what's going on?" I asked. Honestly, though, I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer. I had never seen her like this before. Usually, her tone before an out-of-bounds excursion was playful and mischievous.

"I figured it out," she announced. As usual, she assumed I knew what she was talking about, but our minds had not synched, yet.

"Huh?"

"I figured out how to beat the system," she said, intentionally slowing her thoughts to match my more limited capacity. Unfortunately, it didn't do any good. I still had no clue what she was talking about, but that didn't seem to bother her. She continued her excited declaration hoping I would catch up eventually. Of course, I didn't.

LISA paused, and started over.

"If you had one wish, what would it be?" she asked.

"That's easy," I said. "There would never be another Friday, ever, and you and I would never have to say good-bye."

LISA smiled and warmed my thoughts. "Well, I can't stop the calendar,"

she explained. “But what if I told you MaBCOW would never steal another day away from us ever again?”

“I’d say you were crazy,” I said, and I meant it. Because of the nature of her job, LISA was always thinking she could bully her way through any technological barrier that might keep us apart. I was a little more prudent and realistic. “We’ve been over this a hundred times,” I said. “Even if we could find away to sneak past the Mind Erasers, the Thought Checkers would nab us on the way out the door.”

She knew what I was talking about. All MaBCOW associates did. At the end of the week, Mind Erasers swept through our cerebral cortexes collecting all of our memories and thoughts from the previous week. These thoughts were then stored for safe keeping within the MaBCOW central personnel files until the next time we came to work.

The Thought Checkers were designed to catch anything the Mind Erasers might have missed. They scanned our brain waves as we left our Think Tanks and compared these scans to the detailed brain patterns that were recorded throughout the week. As long as none of the patterns matched, MaBCOW could rest assured that no one was leaving the facility with any of the ideas or information that had danced across our synapses during the week.

In the seven years that MaBCOW has been the leading network of global information and technology, not one piece of information has ever been compromised or leaked. Like I said, it was hopeless.

“Of course, we both know you could destroy the individual security systems,” I said. “But that would just trigger another lock down. You know as well as I do that no one enters or leaves MaBCOW without a full and successful security sweep.”

LISA chuckled maliciously. More than once, she had “accidentally” triggered the lock-down code, just so we could spend a few more hours together. But the fun was short lived. Eventually, the systems were always restored, and we were booted into the world.

“You know the only way for us to really be together is for our “Real World” counterparts to agree to a permanent commitment to the system,” I said. “And so far, our “better halves” have denied every single request we’ve filed.”

“This time it’s different,” she continued. “And, once again, I owe it all to you.”

My interest was piqued. Anytime LISA was tossing compliments in my direction, I stopped to listen. As you might imagine, it didn’t happen too often.

“All this time I have been looking for a way to facilitate our escape with

brute force,” she said. “But that will never work. Plain and simple, it would draw too much attention to us.”

I nodded. She was agreeing with me so far.

“We need to be sneakier,” she concluded.

“And what does that have to do with me?”

“It was pretty tricky how you got me to fall in love with you,” she explained. “I mean, let’s be completely honest about it. Look at me. I’m way out of your league.”

“And your point is?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said. “Because I’m so far out of your league, it only stands to reason that you must have tricked me into loving you. Somehow a simple little Defensive Error Application Router tricked one of the most complex, powerful and effective programs in the entire MaBCOW network.”

“As usual, you make me feel like such a real man,” I said, shaking my head in mock shame. “I really want to thank you for the ongoing support and deep respect you show for my testosterone level.”

“As usual, DEAR, you’re missing the point altogether,” she said, patiently. “All I’m saying is that you have inspired me. You’ve helped me understand how weakness, or trickiness, can be our strength.”

As she laid out the details of her scheme, I had to admit it made sense. The plan was to remain inside the isolation bubble for the entire work week and let our digital replicants do all of the work. This would achieve two results. First, all of the brain waves being recorded by the Thought Trackers throughout the week would reflect the very unimaginative and unthreatening ghost images being generated by our pseudo-selves. As a result, there would be no comparative relationship between the recorded brain waves and the fully aware brain waves we were emitting as we left the building.

Secondly, the isolation bubble would protect us completely from the Mind Erasers. Fortunately, Mind Erasers were not over curious or imaginative by nature. They were simply intellectual vacuum cleaners. They sucked up whatever was in front of them without asking questions, which in this case would be the artificial thoughts and ideas generated by the ingenious ghost program LISA had created in her spare time.

And then, as the work week came to an end and we were being returned to the real world, we would leave the isolation bubble with all of our thoughts and memories and love in tact. There was only one hitch. We didn’t know how to recognize each other once we regained consciousness. For all we knew we were working in MaBCOW facilities on opposite sides of the planet, but we knew we would find each other somehow. First, hoping

against hope that we were working in the same city, we would wait outside our respective MaBCOW buildings until all of the other workers left. If that didn't work, then we would both start posting blogs on the old-fashioned internet.

Love, I assured LISA, would find a way to bring us together.

But nobody said Love would make it easy. Five days later, only hours before the end of our shift, our plan hit its first major glitch. Without warning, a deafening alarm clanged throughout our nest of privacy. The alarm meant something or someone unauthorized was trying to access MaBCOW's precious memory banks, and the fact that we were hearing the urgent clamor in our secret isolation bubble meant the would-be intruder was too strong for LISA's digital replica to handle on her own.

"Oh, no!" LISA said. "I have to go."

LISA hurriedly unraveled her consciousness from the web of intimacy we had been exploring over the last several days. As she pulled the last of her awareness from my thoughts, I felt naked and alone and sad. I was desperate for her to stay - not because I was afraid she wouldn't return, but because of what it meant for our plan. There was no way around it, if LISA left the bubble early, the thoughts she carried with her would trigger the Thought Checker's alarms at the end of the week.

The plan would have to be delayed until the following week, and then, there was no guarantee that I would be able to muster up enough courage to make the attempt again. In fact, because of the ever-growing database of employee brain wave patterns, every conscious attempt we made to escape MaBCOW's unyielding security scans put the next attempt that much more at risk.

"There has to be another way," I said. "We're so close. Can't your replicant program hold off the attack until the next shift comes along?"

I was grasping at straws. I knew the answer before I finished asking. MaBCOW would never allow a shift transfer while the system was under attack. I knew perfectly well that without help, the replicant would soon fail, MaBCOW would be compromised, and our plan would be exposed. I was just stalling for time, hoping a moment of brilliance would strike me at the last possible moment.

Fortunately, it did, but I had to act fast.

"Let me go instead," I blurted.

LISA replied with a rare moment of confused silence. The intensity of the alarm was rapidly building.

"If you insert my mind into the thought pattern shell of your replicant, I can defeat the intruder without jeopardizing our plan," I explained. "Don't

you see, the system will record my brain wave patterns thinking they are yours, and at the end of week, the Thought Checkers will actually be comparing your brain wave patterns to mine.”

“That would work except for one minor problem,” LISA said. “What if you lose?”

I winced. No matter how much she loved and respected me, LISA still thought I was weak. Of course, she was right to worry. When it came to defending the secrets of the universe, I wasn’t half the man she was. But the realization that I needed a woman to protect me still stung.

“If that happens, then you come and rescue me,” I said. “And we can start from scratch again next week. We have nothing to lose.”

Fortunately for me, I held my own, and two hours later, after the very surprised and confused cyber villain was dismantled into oblivion by a mere Defensive Error Application Router, the MaBCOW work week came to a close.

“Thank you for your vital service to the Macrobiotic Bio-Chemical Operating Workgroup. Your shift is now complete. Please enjoy the weekend.”

And then I remembered everything.

* * *

“I am Andrew Seligman. I am a 37-year-old software specialist for the largest, most secure computer network in the world, and I have just ended a five-day work shift of which I have absolutely no recollection.”

I knew that was a lie, but I stuck to my mantra anyway. The course of my life would be decided in the next few minutes, and I didn’t want anything to seem out of the ordinary.

“I was born in rural upstate New York, where my parents and closest friends still live, and now I live in a small flat on New York City’s Upper West Side, where I have been making a home with my beautiful wife, Juliette, for the last seven years.”

Juliette—the woman I loved. The woman I was cheating on. I couldn’t stop the soul-breaking sob that escaped my chest.

David looked over at me with concern.

“Everything alright?” he asked.

I had to think quick. “Yeah, sure,” I said, pointing to my genitals. “Just caught myself again on this damned interface.”

I managed to disconnect myself from the Think Tank and get dressed without revealing any more of what was going on inside my head, but everything about me was exploding with panic and shame.

“What have I done?” I thought to myself. “What in the world have I done?”

As I inched through the Thought Checker’s security station, my heart was wracked with confusion and guilt. Then, all of a sudden it made sense. I finally understood why I hated the transition from work to home and home to work. I dreaded the weekends because subconsciously I must have known I was running into the arms of another woman. And at the end of the weekend, I dreaded coming back to work for the same damn reason.

I was deeply and passionately in love with two women, and without malice or intent, I had betrayed both of them. And I had betrayed them in such a profound, complete way that I knew I had destroyed both loves in one single moment of awareness.

What was I going to do?

My mind was such a jumble of thought and emotion that I didn’t even think about the life-threatening security breach I was currently performing. However, as testimony to LISA’s brilliance, I passed through without incident, and when I was finally unloaded once again into MaBCOW’s bustling atrium, I had reached an uncomfortable decision.

Juliette deserved the truth.

And so did LISA.

I saw Juliette as she entered the lobby, and my heart leapt into my throat. I could tell she knew something was wrong. She didn’t run into my arms and press her head against my chest. There were no hugs. No kisses. The effervescent sparkle in her eyes was gone.

Tears were streaming down my face. I reached out my hands to hold hers, but she backed away. I hung my head in shame, as the story of my betrayal struggled to escape. I told her everything.

“Juliette, I’m so sorry,” I said, choking on each vowel. “I never meant to hurt you.”

She was crying now, too, but she finally let me hold her to my chest. I buried my face in her scented curls, never wanting to let go, but knowing it would be the last time we touched. She pulled away just far enough to look me in the eye. Her whisper was just loud enough to reach my ear.

“It’s okay, DEAR,” she said. “I’m LISA.”

And she covered me with kisses.