

# *Rotting in the Office*

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*image Peter Savieri*

But it wasn't until they gave James the promotion that I came to realize my insignificant role in the Company.

Because I was the nerd, you see? The dork of the office. James beat me up regularly to the amusement of the girls, and so did the Boss, although he was more affectionate about it. My face had changed as a result, acquired a patina of fear and introversion. And according to the girls, my broken nose and displaced teeth made me look all the nerdier, a fact which prompted a vicious circle of more beatings.

I admit that, yes, I am a nerd, and that I have always felt uneasy by the idea of human relationships and the prospect of intimacy. I wear glasses, am awkward, and never got rid of my teenage pimples--those hateful constellations of pus. I guess it may have had something to do with my childhood. My parents had... Oh, forget it; you don't want to hear about my parents.

I had been in the Company for a long time, longer than I could remember. I had always been faithful to the Company and done my important work to the best of my ability. So imagine my disappointment when James got elevated. Although he talked the talk and looked the part, James had been in our department for less than a year. And beneath the neat smiles and macho facade, I suspected there was little substance, little that could be called an asset to the Company.

However, it wasn't jealousy or bitterness that prompted me to change. It was simply a moment of clarity in which I realized I was utterly alone. A moment in which I understood--I saw, with bitter vividness--that the Boss did not love me and that the Company didn't love me either. I understood (as I understand now) that the world is made for another kind of people, not the kind of person I am. This world wants people who are willing to adapt to the heartless environment of the market economy. It wants people who do not need love because the love of their own selves is enough.

And most importantly I realized that I would rot in here, in the office. And I pictured my rotting body crumbling to bits and fouling the new carpet, trodden on by busy clerks and managers, my remains slowly seeping into the ground but nourishing no vegetation, no new life.

I felt like crying. But that would have been a sign of weakness, and the Boss and his secretary had come down and were standing next to me, congratulating James on the promotion. I excused myself and went to the toilet. Then I remembered they had recently installed cameras in there, so I had to swallow back the tears and pretend to be strong.

When I returned, I noticed that Tess and Helen were looking at me and--was it pity in their eyes? I realized they believed themselves better than me. And they were, after all, my superiors. However, they could not survive without me, for I was at the very bottom, fulfilling the most important role in the power chain.

But I had been trying to fool myself with those kind of lies for years, and it didn't seem to be working any more. If everyone had to feel superior to someone else, how come I never felt superior? Who did I beat up?

During the preceding weeks, I had been getting some feelings about Ray, the data-entry guy. I looked at him, adjusting his glasses, typing click click click the long columns of info into the hungry databases. Although so far I had regarded Ray as an equal, I was beginning to realize that his job surely could not demand skills as highly specialized as mine. I remember I had tried to hit Ray once. I had stood there, looking down at him as his eyes scanned the columns of contact names, addresses and fax numbers. I couldn't bring myself to do it. He looked so defenceless sitting there. He wore glasses; he stuttered; he was so much like me. If only I knew how much he got paid, then maybe I could get an objective idea of our comparative worth. But he had refused to tell me.

That afternoon, we went across the road to celebrate James' promotion. I tried to drown my black mood with alcohol, although I'd never handled drinking very well. We listened to James talk about his new responsibilities. As a Consulting Manager for the Market Domination Group, he would get a desk in the eleventh floor and two secretaries, one blonde and one brunette, along with a company car, a personal home page and a life membership in the Company's Golf Club. Tess and Helen joked and flirted with him, and

some time later they disappeared with him into the toilet and I didn't see them again for the rest of the night.

I felt depressed. At the end of the table, the Boss was talking to a female newcomer in the Company. Determined to boost my profile, I gathered courage and went up to them. I think he wasn't happy about my intrusion, because he looked desperate to impress this blonde.

"Hi, Craig," I said, smiling. "Can I get you a drink?"

The Boss looked at me, his lips flinching.

"I have money to get my own drinks," he said. "I earn much more than you do."

The blonde laughed, and I tried to laugh too.

"Of course, Craig," I said. "Beer?"

A quiver of irritation raced through his features: "Look." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a hundred dollar note. I had not seen one of those in a long time. "Go get yourself a million beers and leave us alone."

I grabbed the note and went to the bar.

Some time later, as the alcohol drowned the last dregs of sound judgement, I bought the Boss a beer and took it over to where he was sitting. The Boss had taken his shirt off, and he and one of the Chairmen were comparing biceps. A humid sexual heat clung to the air.

"Here, Craig," I mumbled.

He looked up at me, surprised. I offered the glass and put it on the table. But I was too drunk, and some beer spilled on him.

"Right."

I saw his fist fly towards me.

There was an eruption of pain, then reality blackened into muddy nothingness.

I was on the floor, looking up. I saw the blonde and a couple of Chairmen rolling up their sleeves and offering to punch me some more. The Boss was staring fixedly at me and baring his teeth. He always did that after smacking me at the weekly meetings. But this time I could tell he was truly angry.

I left quickly and returned to the office. I liked it in there at night, and these were my most productive hours. There was some new software that had to be installed and some bugs to be eliminated off the operating system. But I sat there staring at the screen saver, unable to bring myself to work. I called my mother at home, but then I remembered that my mother had died three months before and that I now lived alone in the house we had shared. I talked to the computers instead, and they were good listeners. During my early adolescence, I had fallen in love with machines, preferring their cozy reasoning over the nasty unpredictability of human behavior. Video games and Internet porn had deterred the painful stirrings of my sexual awakening, while online chatgroups and experiments in AI conversation provided all the romantic intercourse my starved hormones required. Machines never talk back, and, unlike humans, when something malfunctions you know that there is an underlying logical cause somewhere. I guess that's why I was the Technical Officer. The Nerd. The Penis-head.

As I drove home that night, I tried to discharge my frustration on the passersby. I hoped that some old lady would be out late night shopping, or maybe some drunk or

slow-witted off-duty operator would be walking close to the curb. But everyone seemed alert, and their reactions were swift and well-oiled. I nearly got a middle-aged couple as I came off the highway, but they managed to reach safety at the last moment.

I went to bed late and slept a thin and formless parody of sleep. The day after, I came to work feeling tired but strangely exhilarated. I walked in and sniffed the air. James was not in yet, probably sleeping off a massive hangover. Everyone in the office was silent. I noticed that Tess had bruises on her face, and I wondered if she had gotten into a fight with James.

Just before lunch-time, one of the Sales clerks came down with the monthly profit figures.

"We have made twenty two thousand eight hundred and forty eight dollars for the month of May," he intoned.

He looked around, obviously satisfied with himself. It was the Sales Department's perennial belief that the regular chanting of the figures improved our morale and performance.

His gaze then singled me out. Having picked out his victim, he smiled.

Something in my head snapped soundlessly. I stared blankly back.

"Did you hear that?" he said. "Twenty two thousand eight hundred and forty eight dollars."

"What do I care?" I heard myself answer. "We never see any of that money anyway."

The clickclacking of keyboards stalled and everyone's attention zoomed in on me. The Sales guy had obviously been caught off-guard, but he composed himself immediately and prepared his comeback.

"That is a very unprofessional attitude, Mr Whoever-you-are. I will make sure that your superiors are informed of your oh-so radical comments."

"My name is Lionel O'Hara, Technical Officer. And I'm sure you also resent them. After all, it looks as if they give you all the crap jobs too."

The room held its breath. The last of his composure drained away: "You are a moron," he said. "You are a nobody." He began to chant: "No-bo-dy. No-bo-dy."

I punched him in the face. It seemed as if he was expecting it, because he took the fist with dignity and instantly responded with a right-hand hook. But I deflected his arm, moving with a new awareness of myself and the world. I kept hitting him, packing years of frustration and loneliness into every blow.

The guy finally collapsed on the floor. His eyes--one of them bloodied and swelling-- were large and terrified crystals looking up at me. I had his blood on my hands and I painted my forehead with it, letting the new-found power guide the motion of my fingers. I shook, I trembled; an uncanny energy coursed through my veins. I couldn't believe what was happening, and neither could anyone else in the room. I thought of killing him, but I decided it was better to let him go and spread the news.

I watched him drag himself out of the room and I turned my attention to my colleagues. Ray was at the keyboard typing and trying very hard not to look up. The girls

were staring at me, mouths hanging open. A glorious newborn erection was pushing against my pants.

I walked over to Ray and switched off his computer. "From now on," I announced, "there will be a few changes around here." Stalactites of ice shot from my eyes: "Is that understood?"

The office whirred with the silence of a million graves. But Ray continued to beat the keyboard, swallowing back his sobs and refusing to acknowledge my presence.

"Ray, man," I said, gently. "How much do you get paid."

He stopped typing. He whimpered.

"HOW MUCH!" I screamed.

"Four hundred and twenty," came the scarcely audible answer.

"Four hundred and twenty dollars?" I laughed. "That's nothing! God! That's shit!"

Ray was crying uncontrollably now. "Please... Please.. don't."

I hit him. It didn't feel pleasurable, not like the Sales guy. It was more a question of duty.

"Don't worry, Ray," I said afterwards, holding him in my arms and stroking his hair. "I'll make it better for you. I'll make it better for everyone."

Through the glass wall that delimited our area, I saw people beginning to gather, pointing at me and talking among themselves. But I was thinking of other things. James' return, for example. How would I deal with him? The Sales guy had been easy, but James knew me better and would find my sudden transformation hard to buy. I needed time to

think, to explore the boundaries of my new personality, although it seemed to be fitting me quite comfortably already.

I proceeded to unzip my pants and, under the attentive gaze of the bystanders, drew a circle of urine around my new territory. The circle comprised Ray and his terminal, the two girls and most of the equipment. To my surprise, I did not feel ashamed of showing myself like that in public.

"Little dick," I heard Helen say behind my back. "If you touch me, I'll kill you."

I turned around. "No need to do that." The words formed in my brain too quickly for my mouth to follow, or maybe it was the other way around. "We are civilized people, Helen. I don't have to touch you. Can't you see it is all symbolical?"

James came in a few moments later.

"Sorry, I'm late. I..."

He halted suddenly at the doorway, sniffing the air.

"You!" he said, recognizing my smell immediately. "What the hell?" The dry blood was still visible on my forehead, and as I had expected, James found the whole scene hard to digest. He looked at the girls, who returned a look of resignation. They seemed to be getting used to my new status with the same ease I had slipped into it.

"Ray," I called, my gaze still on James. Ray stood up and I signalled him to approach. He did so, his whole demeanour beaming submissiveness.

"Do you notice anything wrong with my pants, Ray?"

Ray looked down at my pants. "No, Sir."

I slapped him on the face. "Come on, Ray. Look harder." Ray studied my pants again.

"One of the legs is rolled up slightly higher than the other," he concluded.

"Well done. Now fix it."

As he bent over I looked at James and told him how much Ray earned.

"Four hundred and twenty?" James said. We laughed, and I let James kick Ray a little. But I could sense that he was being cautious, unsure of how far I would go. I pretended we were on the same side, reassuring him with a few smiles and friendly punches.

Later, when he went into the toilet, I followed him surreptitiously and killed him. James clung stubbornly to life, kicking and grabbing at the sodden air of the cubicle. But I had the surprise factor on my side.

I painted my forehead with fresh blood and smeared some on the eyes of the surveillance cameras, winking to the anonymous security agents at the other side.

I returned to the office. The sight of James' blood was received with mixed reactions. Ray began to tremble furiously, although he still tried to focus on the printouts. Tess gave a short cry and backed away into a corner of the room. Helen, on the other hand, found my new masculinity hard to resist. With fiery resolve, she stepped forth and her long fingers began to unbutton her blouse.

"O'Hara," she whispered, her face turning an exquisite red. "What are you on today?"

I lifted her onto the desk and we began to fuck. "Can you believe what a nerd I was?" I commented. Helen laughed, shaking her hair in a whiplash motion.

Tess glowered at us bitterly from her corner. "So that's how it is, eh?" she said. "We are nothing but tokens of your power, pawns for your repulsive male games. Underneath, you are all so fragile and insecure."

"It is all symbolical," I retorted absentmindedly, raising my voice above Helen's groans.

By the time we had finished, a large crowd had gathered at the other side of the glass. Some people were clapping and cheering, while others were tearing off their clothes and joining our celebration.

Stripping away the remnants of my suit, I strolled outside and surrendered into their midst, welcoming them all into my new life.

I was certain that the news of my sudden attitude shift would travel fast and reach high places. But I wasn't about to sit down and wait for the Company to take notice of me.

So that afternoon, I went up to the Boss' office on level fifty-eight and demanded an interview. His secretary assessed me distrustfully, my appearance evidently failing to impress her.

"The Boss is at a meeting. He has no time for you. Come back later."

"Oh, no. I am going to sit here and wait, baby." I winked.

"And I am going to vomit, loser."

Ignoring her rudeness, I sat in the leathered opulence of the Boss' waiting couch and admired the great views of the City.

After a while, I began to feel restless. I stood up and eyed the Boss's door.

"Don't even think about it," the secretary warned. "Hey, I said... Stop!"

I broke into a sudden trot and stormed into the Boss' office. The Boss was fucking someone, a guy I recognized from the Human Resources department. He stopped thrusting and they both looked at me, four startled feverish eyes trying to come to terms with the bloodied apparition that had materialized in the doorway. The Boss finally recognized me:

"O'Hara!" he said.

"Let the guy go, Craig." I said. "I have some business to discuss."

"Business?" he squealed, zipping up. "To discuss? Of course we do! I'm gonna put you in your place."

But he hesitated for a moment, a silent duel playing on his features. He knew he had been caught off-guard, but realized he could not bring himself to acknowledge it. Me? The nerd from level eight? breaking in and demanding an audience?

"I heard what you have done," he said, admitting a defeat of sorts. "Are you mad?"

"No. Yes. It is the system that is mad. I'm just tired. Tired!" I was angry, and my grammar wasn't making much sense. But I think I got the idea across, because the last of the Boss' hostility dissipated, and he looked at me thoughtfully.

We stood there for a few moments, assessing each other like equals. The other guy was buttoning his pants. I nodded towards him.

"Do you want me to kill him too?"

The Boss shook his head negatively and kicked the Human Resources guy in the gut.

"Get outta here. You make the Company look like idiots!"

I smiled at the Boss and he smiled back. I could tell he was still a bit puzzled. But I let him have me, and that restored a bit of his confidence.

Afterwards, I had a shower in his large, fully-equipped office-apartment. To show me the extent of his affection, he even let me wear one of his suits. I let him fuck me again, and that night we went for a ride in his Ferrari.

We sped through the central business district, claiming a few pedestrians on the way. The Boss had no special preference, and the Ferrari zeroed in regardless of gender, age or socio-economic status. Their bones succumbed on the tarmac with the sound of dry spaghetti.

"Look at this, O'Hara! I mean look at it!" the Boss exclaimed, his hand waving to encompass the buildings, neon signs and highway pillars. "Fuck the Egyptians and the Greeks! This is civilization. This is the end of history, O'Hara. All there was to invent, we have invented. All there was to think, we have thought. This is where the centuries come to die. And you know what? There are so many people now--so many people! It's competitive out there, O'Hara. It is the Age of Competition! And look at them," he gestured through the windscreen as the Ferrari hit an old man crossing the road. "I mean, look at them all. What do you see? Customers! Customers! And they are all ours, O'Hara. All ours!"

Two days later, I was promoted to the position of Technical Project Overseer at the Information Technology Division and my salary was quadrupled.

Climbing the corporate dung-heap was easy once I attuned to the required mindset. I shed my glasses and my pimples disappeared. I bought a new car and was given an office with a panoramic view of the City.

Shortly after assuming my duties, I paraded naked through the lower levels of the building, provoking waves of anger and disorder across the subordinate offices.

"Two thousand three hundred and twenty one dollars a week!" I roared into the crowded cubicles as the petrified faces of operators, clerks and assistants stared in powerless envy. A few of them attacked me with paper cutters, Stanley knives and interface cables, and one woman even tried to gouge my eyes out with a straightened paper-clip. But I beat them all aside and managed to get back to my office alive and in one piece. Although this was a rite of passage many of us Company climbers went through, to me the whole act held an intimate significance, for I was testing the limits of my new being, pinching myself to ascertain that I wasn't living a dream.

As I came up on the elevator, I studied my new face on the mirror, my eyes glowing with new purpose, my skin clean and with the appearance of tough rubber, my lips like blades untainted by doubt or hesitation. This is life, O'Hara, I said to myself. This is how it feels to have a real job.

But as I would soon find out, it was all merely a fantasy, a transitory delusion. For my real self was waiting in some back-alley of my mind, cooking up a bilious and ruinous revenge.

That fateful morning, I arrived to the office clothed, fresh and early. The place reeked of disinfectant, although my trained nose could discern the ghosts of other smells below-- urine, ink, sperm, sweat, aftershave. I sat down at my terminal and read through the memos awaiting response. Although my new executive position exposed me to an increased level of violence and physical confrontation, I had found that the most important negotiations in the Company were conducted in an elaborately courteous and ceremonial manner. I had to attend lunches, drinking sessions, parties and sporting events. I had to remember names, keep up with the news and the office gossip. I had to talk politely on the phone and write long formal memos to recondite parts of the building.

Halfway through the first memo, I spotted movement in the corner of my eye and turned in time to spot Harvey, the inter-departmental clerk, walking into the office. The resolute manner with which he planted his sorry, elongated presence before my desk rang a dull bell of warning in my head.

"Morning, Boss."

"Did you finish the reports for Accounts?" I said, avoiding niceties.

"Oh." He smiled apologetically. "Yes."

"Where are the copies?"

"But, Sir, this is not what I came here to..."

"I said: Where are the bleeding copies?"

The smile waned, and Harvey now tried to hide the resentment he felt towards me.

"All sent, Sir. One for Administration, two for Accounts, another to Corporate Services and four on the way to Planning."

"What about Marketing? And what about me?"

He hesitated. Savouring the dizzying heights of my power, I wondered if to administer punishment now or to play the role of Benevolent Boss. Most of my employees were snotty and ambitious graduates who took every opportunity to challenge my position. They pissed regularly in wide, complex patterns around their desks, and defecated next to the terminals and filing cabinets, marking off their favourite work-zones and areas of expertise. They often claimed blood and, at first, their war paint had seemed intricate and incomprehensible. At the beginning I had been content with being the observer, reserving the full weight of my authority for the matters I judged more important. But, as the weeks passed, I learned more about their complicated symbology and began defending my territory against their aggressive onslaughts. I found out what things to drink to make my urine smell more frightening to the males and enticing to the females. I learned how to distribute the beatings and the matings to ensure attainment of the maximum level of satisfaction in the work-place.

"Erm... Sorry, Boss," Harvey was saying. "We have been busy. I mean, we are so burdened with the collection for the funerals. You know, two in less than a week."

"Pathetic excuses... Wait a minute: Whose funerals?"

"Frank Morris from level ten and Loretta Williams from Public Affairs."

I jumped to my feet:

"Loretta?" An image of Loretta popped into my mind. Although I had not known her very well, I held an abstract kind of affection for Loretta. Besides our professional dealings, we had enjoyed some impromptu group sex in the elevators, and twice I had sent her to break in a couple of the junior newcomers. "What happened?"

Harvey was obviously not expecting this reaction. My puzzlement seemed to please him, and he smiled, revealing nicotine-stained teeth:

"Suicide," he explained.

Suicide? I clasped that word in my mind, trying to reconcile it with my impression of Loretta. Happy, moon-eyed Loretta. I pushed back a sudden wave of distress and anger.

"Why?"

"Well, apparently the rumours got out of hand. Some of the details leaked to the cubicles downstairs and..."

Harvey was playing at being enigmatic. "What are you talking about, dammit?!" I demanded, leaping over the desk and kicking him in the face.

Harvey fell backwards and landed on the floor. He stared at me from there, his smile shining unabated. It was then that I noticed he was holding a bunch of papers, brochures of some kind. He waved them at me.

"That's what I came here to tell you, Boss." Trying desperately to hold on to his composure, he got onto his feet and placed the brochures on my desk. "The memo explains it all."

I snatched the papers and sat down to read them. There was a letter with the Company logo and a series of color pamphlets.

As I flicked through the pamphlets, my confusion gave way to mystification, then to curiosity. Then, to awe.

It was an ad for a machine; some new kind of supercomputer, it seemed. The All-In-One Meta-Intelligent Organizer! shouted the cover in raised gold letters. I scanned the colorful technical outlines, complete with photos and productivity reports. The Most Revolutionary Piece Of Equipment Since The Invention Of The Personal Computer!

I was holding the first document announcing the introduction of the Gizmo 9000.

"The Gizmo what?"

"They are being cautious about it," Harvey said. "Instead of using the wires or the intranet, hard copies are being released gradually through the departments. The first wave of retrenchments is being announced this afternoon. But we are the first to be officially informed, O'Hara. I mean, Boss."

I read: A Supreme Multi-task Agent of Unlimited Capacity!

Harvey leaned over: "There will be a meeting," he said. "Upstairs. It is all there, in the cover letter."

Later that same afternoon a group of us from the Middle Management gathered in the Supervisor's office and were briefed about the changes about to take place in the Company.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the Supervisor said. "We are entering a new age: the Tight Lean Age. And we must meet the requirements of the future with new and more effective

ways of conducting business and organizing ourselves. Thanks to the awesome advances in technology, we can now implement improved management structures to achieve record high productivity at reduced low costs. In this respect, it would be no exaggeration to say that the Gizmo 9000 represents the very summum of human technology. The crowning apex, ladies and gentlemen; the golden peak of our Era."

The interview was conducted gravely and with an air of secrecy. We were told that this new machine would become the core of the Company, taking over the role of central processing unit for all the comms networks and database systems. It would manage cash flows, credits and investments, as well as advise on policy and corporate strategy. It would become the chief monitor of market trends and have direct access to stock exchanges and the info highways of the world. It would do the job of approximately two thousand people and respond only to the Head Chairman, the Great Boss Himself.

Naturally, the Company had already foreseen the effects such a technology would have on its structure, specially on the number of jobs, and they were trying to be discrete about it. With its superior speed and unprecedented processing power, the Gizmo would make a lot of departments obsolete and prompt a messy wave of suicides around the building, of which Loretta was one of the first. But the Supervisor assured us that our section would be safe, since our new job would be to look after the Machine.

After the briefing, we were invited to take a look at It. The Supervisor escorted us into the corridor, from where we proceeded into the elevators in an atmosphere of grim and expectant silence.

The Gizmo sat in one of the equipment rooms at the Engineering Department on level forty-six. At first sight, the thing did not look very impressive. In fact, it was rather small and unassuming, and could only be described as a gray square box of smooth angles, with no wires and no visible input or output sockets.

But despite this modest casing, the Gizmo seemed to radiate a certain aura, a power all its own. It was like standing in the immediacy of a black hole or a holy relic. Meek and dazzled, my colleagues and I were at the threshold of an incomprehensible future, an age of unimaginable woe and wonder.

And it was then, as a technician showed us the designs and blueprints, that I first became aware of the humming of the Gizmo's thoughts.

It began as an almost imperceptible buzzing in my ears, then grew into a crowd of distant whispers, a sound that was--and I don't know how else to describe it-- disordered yet harmonious. I was soon lost in the rush of those billion digits, transfixed by the godly cool-headedness of those processors.

Gradually, some of the words became clear, and I heard snippets of sentences emerging from the machine murmuring. As I strained to listen, I fancied that the Machine was talking exclusively to me:

Buy buy buy sell sell sell... All conflict shall cease in due time...Oh one oh one one one oh one oh oh oh... Spacetime will become a serene Contemplation of Itself... Supply demand supply demand demand demand supply... A giant navel... A pink Hole.

There was no riddle too complex, no problem too vast for this elegant and incommensurable brain. I had never known love before, but I was convinced that this was it. It felt like the sudden lifting of a great burden, a vortex in my guts, a desperate need for the constant presence of the loved one. From that instant, I longed to possess the machine, to be with it, to behold the world with its eyes, without anger or despair, without messy emotional involvement.

I told myself that this was nothing but a senseless relapse into my old patterns. And now that I was high up in the Company and that human interaction was no longer a source of unease, why did I insist in these kind of unwholesome attachments? I had to get a grip of myself--I simply could not let these feelings overtake me and destroy all I had achieved. I had to face it: The Gizmo would never belong to me. In fact, we both belonged to the Company, and our relationship was strictly a professional one.

I left the office in a gloomy mood. Outside, the engineers were setting up the suicide nets around the building and a small crowd had gathered to spot the bodies of the retrenched workers breaking through the windows and plunging into the sidewalk. Ignoring the screams, the blood spray and cheering, I made my way to the car park.

As I drove, the sound of screaming pedestrians and cracking bones reached me as if from the other end of a long tunnel, a reality infinitely below me.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the rear-view mirror. I struggled to recognize that face, to dive beneath the hardened eyes and chiselled lips and find a hint of something familiar.

My left cheek felt itchy, and as I probed the skin with my fingers, I discovered a solitary pimple emerging below my ear, tender and ready to explode.

Once at home, I fixed myself a few drinks and sat by the window to gather my thoughts. I felt strangely elated, and the vodkas and rums were like water to my palate. Beyond the dirty glass, the City looked like a skilful toy replica overrun by fireflies.

I stayed up until late reading the manuals they had given us, playing with Gizmo simulations and studying fragments of its programming code. I couldn't sleep. There was something wrong. I could feel it. I looked down at my hands. I stared at the yellow flesh and dry river beds. They were strange hands; someone else's hands.

Depressed and uneasy, I walked through the small apartment and tried to calm myself down. For the first time since my promotion I wondered why I still lived in that place, why I had chosen to remain there among my mother's ghosts rather than move somewhere else. I certainly could afford it now.

After a long cold shower, I stood naked in front of the mirror and stared at myself for a while. The image seemed alien and unrecognizable, and I felt afraid. But I forced myself to keep looking, knowing that a critical point had to be reached.

After a few minutes, I saw a familiar ghost emerging from the mirror. At the sight of it, I was overcome by nausea and a defamiliarizing vertigo. The image was slightly detached from my reflection, like a bad TV reception.

I recognized him immediately, of course. The pimples had returned, the glasses, the rat-like teeth. I ducked, I moved to the side. But the ghost anticipated my movements and

imitated them, a teasing smirk perched on his features; it gradually became a solid presence that quickly occluded my reflection.

I had no choice but to gaze into the cruel intimacy of my old face. My old body had also returned, white and sheltered, soft and clumsy.

I was an insect who had dreamt of being a man. Now I stared at the shattered pieces of the dream. And I felt relieved.

From the mirror, the gaze of the ghost pierced layers of flesh to laugh at my insect soul.

Next thing I knew, I was walking down a set of stairs.

I halted on my tracks, startled to find myself dressed in my best suit, my fingers clinging to a set of keys.

I recognized the place: the fire stairs of the building where I lived. As if satisfied with this explanation, my feet resumed their march.

I opened a door and stepped into the building's car-park. The night swirled around me; the ground panted heavily beneath my feet. After a frantic search for my car, I realized that I had been looking for the wrong one. I had forgotten that my new self drove a Porsche, a red one which I found parked in a corner. It felt peculiar to sit inside, like being cushioned in between two worlds, yet alien to both.

The rest, I believe, was easy. I had security clearance and the guards were used to my presence at odd hours of the night.

I went to the forty-sixth floor and opened the doors to the Engineering room. I sat amidst the orderly rows of digital lights twinkling in the dimness and found the Gizmo there, imprisoned by cabling. I talked to it, confessing it my dreams and fears. It felt good to talk. Gradually I learned to decipher more accurately its responses, to understand the unaffected and exact grammar of its thinking.

Finally, I unplugged the cables binding it to the Company. An ecstatic trembling took hold of my being as I lifted the Gizmo. I grinned to the cameras, caressing the smooth shell and listening to the murmurs inside.

With the Gizmo tucked away in my suitcase, I reached the ground floor and negotiated the main hall. Although no one had stopped me on the way out, I did not allow myself to relax until we had reached the car.

Once inside, I unpacked the Gizmo and stared incredulously at it, as if it had been a memento salvaged from a dream.

I took a deep breath, adjusted my glasses and started the car.

We hit the road. One hand on the wheel, another on the suitcase on the passenger's seat, I rushed through the desolate motorways and streets, trying to put as many miles as possible between us and the Company.

Inner voices admonished me to stop, reminding me that the Company had eyes everywhere and that it would only be a matter of time before they found us.

But it was too late to turn back. Besides, I didn't want to. I was now a free agent, and my future was entirely in my own hands.

I stopped at a teller machine a few miles from the City and withdrew all the money I had. A few hours later, we had crossed the State border and set ourselves in a motel, the first of many.

Once in the room, I laid the Gizmo on the bed and sat on a chair by its side. Outside, it began to rain, and I masturbated furiously to the sound, breathing into my lungs large handfuls of cold darkness.

Afterwards, I watched it sleep. The faint whirr of its dreaming spoke of a haven beyond emotions and fear, a place beyond pain and the inevitable destiny of all flesh. As I listened, a warm rapture came over me and the bustle of my thoughts subsided completely.

I fell asleep on the chair and dreamt, gratefully, of nothing.

We set on our journey the morning after.

Montana, Church Place, Rio Choto, San Domingo, Julepe Grande, Kosta Kiev, Hobson's Rest... Over the following days, the small towns, motels and highways drifted past like fragments of someone else's life. I had no idea where we were or where we were heading, except that it was south, towards the mythical lands of our Third World neighbors. I kept to the main highways and commended our fate to the alien distances, dreaming of happiness away from the market economy.

Soon we entered an area of plains and smooth plateaus, a land of twilight days and long hot nights. As the days passed, the landscape turned outlandish and unrecognizable, and so did the language and dress of the locals. We drove past overcrowded tenements,

workshops, street markets and crumbling hotels. Here the rules and values of civilization no longer prevail. Passersby look at each other in the face. Restaurants, shops and petrol stations are serviced by actual human beings, and even automobiles stop for pedestrians. It was often hard to restrain myself from hitting people or making sexual advances to whoever took my fancy.

After a while, I gave up trying to understand the social rituals and behavior of the town-dwellers, and settled into the part of the bearded wayward gringo, communicating via simian gestures and broken spurts of half-Spanish. Unwashed and unshaven, I hung around soup kitchens and abandoned factories, often sleeping on park-benches or Salvation Army refuges. I brushed elbows with the unemployed, the sick, the ugly, the ghostly inhabitants of places Capitalism had forgotten. With our monetary resources running low, I sold the Porsche to a roadside car dealer and continued by bus, always bound south.

Although it required no power source--it operated on solar energy--the Gizmo thrived on an information-rich environment, and it wasn't long before the isolation, heat and languor began to take their toll. I began to notice long lacunae of silence in the Gizmo's speech, and often I had to take it out of the bag and shake it in horror, begging it to please keep thinking. Living in that lethargic, nearly entropic atmosphere, I realized it would only be a matter of time before the lack of stimulation sent us catatonic.

And ironically enough, the itinerant songs of the world I had rejected were everywhere around us. In the quiet afternoons, I closed my eyes and though I could hear the whispers of TV, radio and microwave signals rushing through my cells, riding the

spectral airwaves, permeating invisibly every rock, cloud, dead lizard and clump of cactus.

I was going insane. Until one day, in a desperate quest to palliate our need for information, I visited one of the small town libraries and borrowed everything in English I could lay my hands on. I sat through the long afternoons and restless nights with the Gizmo on my lap, reading aloud to it, sensing the machine listening attentively and recording every word into its starved memory.

It seemed to work, because, a few days later, the Gizmo's thoughts grew swift and numerous once again, and I recognized snippets of Plato, Dickens, Plath, Marx, Joyce, Asimov, Buddha and many others among the constant dribble of machine language:

... god becomes man becomes fish in the fierce glacial shreds of sky ornamenting the Void in delectable Saturn mountain patterns where the separation of the object from the certainty of itself is utterly eliminated in this forlorn motion of the immediate vanishing into the Holy Truth of the Origination of Ill while the sun-child vibroverberates with the meaningless Form of robot Bailey ...

It could have continued this way forever. But my dangerous and impossible fantasy had to come to an end.

It was inevitable. And it happened like this:

It was a warm and full-mooned evening. We checked into a cheap motel on the half-lit shores of a nameless highway. It was late, and I remember standing by the window in the

gloom as the fresh air cooled my face, wishing that that night could have continued forever.

Suddenly, the sound of a distant engine injured the silence. I straightened up and listened. A vehicle was nearing. Somehow, I knew we were in danger. A few moments later, I spotted it entering the parking lot. Maybe it was the automobile's speckless exterior, or maybe the calm purpose with which it swerved into the entrance like a shark scenting the blood of prey.

I retreated instinctively into the room as the four shadows emerged from the vehicle. I saw them walk towards the reception area, their eyes glowing like wet pebbles in the dark.

A few moments later I heard a faint bell ring somewhere downstairs.

I turned and stared into the dimness of the room. I could just make out the Gizmo's shape, the gray box half-covered by blankets. I had no plan of escape, no idea of what I was going to do. I had almost forgotten about the Company, driven the whole thing out of my mind.

Now, in my desperation, I approached the bed and cradled the machine in my arms, hoping that such a human gesture would not repulse it.

It spoke to me then, and its thoughts soothed some of my fear:

It seems you are saying goodbye, O'Hara. Are you giving up that easily?

"No," I said. Of course I wasn't! I then put the Gizmo in the suitcase, opened the door and rushed out into the corridor.

Besides the main entrance, the only way out of there was through the fire escape. I stepped onto the landing and climbed down as silently as I could. At the bottom, I found myself in a small courtyard leading into a back alleyway.

I realized at that moment that I was barefoot and nearly naked. But it hardly mattered. The coast seemed clear, and I followed the maze of narrow streets into the main highway.

Once there, I spotted the neon sign of the motel a few blocks away and set in the opposite direction, towards the blurred, moon-soaked outlines in the distance. Not daring to look back, I quickened my pace and dimly hoped that someone--a compassionate town-dweller, a police car, anyone--would see me and rescue me from the wrath of my previous employers.

Junk-fed, having spent most of its life perched on office chairs and bent over screens, my body was not used to this kind of exertion. I ran as fast as I could, my heart a terrified animal leaping at the bars of its cage. Stars of strain and asphyxia exploded in my eyes and the only sound was the sound of my own fear.

Eventually, I arrived at a service station, a violently, obscenely lit expanse of concrete. Ahead, the black tail of the highway dragged off into the distance. I looked over my shoulder; my would-be executioners were nowhere in sight.

I tried the entrance doors. But there was no one there, no attendants or customers. Only commodities--chocolate bars, soft-drink cans, porn magazines--languishing in their beds of light.

I hid in the gents toilet at the side of the building. The moist and cool darkness inside embraced us. I stood against the door, my heart pushing at my throat, as if eager to leap out onto the filthy tiles.

It felt safe in here, peaceful. My hands groped the dim confines of the room, searching for the toilet cubicle. Finally, I accommodated myself on the toilet seat, holding the Gizmo tightly against me.

I sat there daydreaming, reminiscing about my childhood, my mother, my entry into the Company.

I am not sure how much time passed. I only know that when the door finally burst open, I did not feel afraid.

I saw two figures silhouetted against the light. Then, a torchlight beam shone straight into my eyes.

"O'Hara," a familiar voice said, sounding disappointed. Maybe the sorry sight of this emaciated creature was not what he expected.

"O'Hara," a second voice, also familiar, echoed expressionlessly.

One of the figures reached for the light-switch.

"Ray," I said, recognizing them. "Harvey."

Yes, it was them, looking ridiculous in their expensive suits. I could have laughed. But I was beyond humor now. Scraping the exhausted bottom of my soul, I could only muster a dull edginess, maybe a glint of relief.

"The Gizmo," Ray said between clenched teeth, pointing a bony finger at the briefcase pressed against my body. I guessed the Company had handpicked the two

specially for the task, knowing that their personal grudges would prompt them to do a better job of finding me.

"Give us the Gizmo and then we can kick you around a little." He was on the verge of tears. Beside him, Harvey opened and closed his hands, warming up for what was to follow.

"Come and get it," I heard myself say.

Harvey and Ray exchanged a gleeful glance.

In the end one loves one's desire and not what is desired, said the Gizmo, quoting Nietzsche.

"Come on, O'Hara," Harvey said. "Don't play the hero."

"You are trapped," Ray said.

"Like an animal."

"A dog."

"A rat."

"Kaput."

"Finito."

"You had it good for a while."

"Yeah, good."

"A long time ago, that is."

"Yeah, soooooo long ago."

"After this, we will be appointed as personal secretaries to the Managing Director."

"We'll earn much more than you."

"Yeah, much more!"

"We thought we'd let you know before we kill you."

"Yeah, kill you. Yeah!"

Harvey stepped aside: "You first, Ray," he said, bowing theatrically.

Ray's eyes sparkled with delight. I saw him approach, weighing a tense and whitened fist. The blow got me on the face, and the world reeled away for a moment. But it was an ineffectual, not too masterful punch. I touched my lips with my fingers, vaguely stunned.

"Is that the best you can do, Ray?" I said.

I saw his expression crumble. He was really angry now. Harvey intervened then, administering a kick that flung me back against the wall.

"Wait! The Gizmo!" Ray cried.

I saw my hands holding the case, the room swirling through a hazy veil of pain. The Gizmo's abstract ruminations reached me from what seemed a remote distance.

Mustering my strength, I lifted the machine and tossed it over their heads.

Harvey cursed. Then, in one clean movement, caught the case with one hand.

Next, they were on me.

Curled up in a corner and resigned to my destiny, I submitted to the jabbing of their fists and feet, my gasps mingling with the sound of their angry and laborious breathing. But their violence could not hurt me now. Their blows rained upon the impervious surface of my consciousness, summoning a pain that was no longer mine.

And then, as I prepared myself to meet death and whatever waited at the other side, the kicking and punching suddenly stopped.

I heard voices and shuffling of feet, and I opened my eyes fearfully. But all I could see was a blinding yellow light, as if the whole room had been hit by a gigantic camera flash.

The world was a silent and incandescent picture suspended in time. For a moment, I thought I had died. I struggled to my feet, aware of the deadness in the room, the heavy air resisting my movements. I then realized I had a corporeality of sorts. I must still be alive, I thought.

The light subsided. I heard Ray shouting some incoherent half-words, and was aware of a pungent smell filling the room, the smell of something burning. As I supported myself on the toilet, I caught a glimpse of Ray bent in half at the door of the cubicle. His chest was a well of gore.

There were other presences in the room standing near the entrance, but my eyes could not focus on them. Harvey was pushing himself against me now, his face grotesquely filling my field of vision. He grabbed me by the shirt and said something between firmly clenched teeth. As he pulled me up, the back of my limp head hit the wall.

And at that moment there was another flash of brightness. The air turned into fire. Harvey's fingers tightened their desperate grip on my flesh. The anger melted away from his features, changing into pain and puzzlement.

He collapsed on the floor, dragging me down with him. He was still looking at me, his eyes almost popping out of their sockets. Maybe he thought he could kill me by the sheer power of his gaze alone.

Rolling on my side, I could see my saviors--two figures cast against the glare from outside. Their hair was glossy and slicked back, their faces handsome and pale. One of them carried a terrifying-looking weapon that emitted a low whining sound. The other was smiling.

I tried to stand, but my legs felt clumsy and weak and my hands slipped on the tiles. I wanted to know who the hell they were, but hadn't the energy to ask.

They helped me on my feet and one of them injected me with a cold pristine liquid that immediately dulled the pain and restored some of my strength. As they carried me outside, I nearly tripped over the bodies of Ray and Harvey. The sight of their two empty waxen faces filled me with sadness and revulsion.

Once outside, my two mysterious benefactors took me to meet the others. There were five of them arranged in a semicircle, looking like some kind of welcoming committee. Their young, fresh faces smiled at me, shining and beckoning. There was something familiar about them, something I could not place at first. Two small coupés were parked next to the pumps, dance music blasting from their stereos. Beyond them, I spotted a large and impressive sedan with tinted windows. It looked like a car a CEO or a GM would drive.

"So, we finally meet, O'Hara," one of the people said. "Let me introduce you to the team. This is Susan..."

"Hi!"

"... David..."

"Howdy, Lionel."

"... Samuel, Elizabeth and I am Mark. Of course, as you might have already guessed, we are from the Other Company."

The expression on my face must have been amusing, because they laughed in unison.

Of course. It was only then that I identified the style and color of their suits, the haircuts, the golden logo sewn on their breast pockets and stenciled onto the sides of the vehicles. These people were from the Other Company. This was the same organization I had been taught to hate, to think of as the Archenemy, the Competition, those Bastards.

We shook hands; they didn't seem to mind the blood on mine. One of them offered me some tissues, and after I cleaned my hands they helped me onto a fold-up chair, where they attended to my wounds, moving efficiently and offering some light conversation.

Once they finished, I was presented with a new suit. I felt slightly absurd changing my clothes on that deserted petrol station, under the naked night sky. But I was now one of them now. The Other Company's logo was on my breast pocket, sewn onto my heart.

They invited to board the large sedan. They opened the door for me and I climbed into the back seat.

I thanked them. They could take me wherever they wanted, I decided, as long as it was away from here. But what could they want with me? The Gizmo, I could understand.

But if they expected me to possess valuable secrets about the Company, they were in for a disappointment.

As I sat in the comfortable interior, I realized there was someone sitting next to me, a large woman dressed in a cream-colored suit. I turned awkwardly to face her.

We studied each other for a brief moment. An expression of impenetrable affability sat on her broad oval face. She saw I was too disoriented to say anything and decided to speak:

"Good evening, O'Hara," she said, "Looks like we've arrived just in time." I could tell she had been attractive once, but now she had run to fat. An aura of money and importance hung about her. "My name is Aurora Osborne," she continued. "I am Head Representative of the Communications Technology Division of the Total Market Dominion Department."

At that moment, I heard the unmistakable hum of the Gizmo's thinking and spotted it purring contentedly on the woman's lap. Following my line of sight, Ms. Osborne patted the machine gently. I felt a pang of jealousy. "We have come here to make you an offer I trust you will not refuse."

She paused, searching for effect. Her unreadable eyes dug into mine: "Here, at the Other Company, we value personal initiative and the bold entrepreneurial spirit you have demonstrated. And we want you to join our team, Lionel. From now on, you and the Gizmo can be together, working for us. Although, to tell you the truth, it is you we want, more than this machine. But you can keep it if you want, maybe to play video-games with."

I looked at her interrogatively. Laughing, she extended her left hand and opened it, palm up. "I'm going to let you in a little secret."

It took me a while to spot it, lost in the pink expanse of her hand. It was a machine the size of a sugar-cube, an exact miniature replica of the Gizmo. As soon as her hand opened, I heard it, a high-frequency whirring, a hypnotic stream of thought that was immeasurably faster and more impenetrable than the machine I had stolen.

"This is the 9,600 Plus," she explained. "The latest model in the Gizmo series. It hit the market only last week. Triple the memory and speed at just double the price. Pretty neat, don't you think? And portable."

She closed her hand, muffling the sounds of the device. In comparison, my Gizmo, my poor old 9000, seemed so bulky now, so slow and primitive. However, for some reason, the presence of that small cube irritated me, and I think Osborne was disappointed by my lack of enthusiasm. Beyond the tinted windows, I watched the employees of the Other Company as they loitered about on the concrete expanse, throwing rocks at the glass walls of the service station, laughing and helping themselves to the candies and drinks.

I felt tired, so tired of running from myself. What a futile thing, I thought, this battle between the Old and the New. No matter how hard we fight it, the Old is always there. A part of me wanted to return, to go home, back to my apartment, my machines, my old solitude. What's more, the Other Company's employment offer seemed promising. And I owed them my life.

"We are at the brink of a new age," Aurora Osborne was saying. "The Old becomes obsolete. The New beckons us to become smarter, faster, more flexible. It is a tough world out there, son. But opportunities lay in wait for those equipped to meet the challenges of Tomorrow."

She drew nearer, and for a moment she looked strangely vulnerable, her face clouded by a kind of awe. "This is a good job, O'Hara. Plenty of people to kick around, not too much paperwork. Nine thousand four hundred and twenty seven dollars a week, after tax. Plus your own secretary and unlimited Internet access. Consider it a new beginning. I feel confident that we can restore your faith in the power of free enterprise."

I mumbled my acceptance, but without thinking. We shook hands.

"But, to be honest with you," I said, "I don't think I will ever find fulfilment in this job. In fact, I will never find fulfillment in the human condition. I'd rather be a rock, or a patch of lettuce."

My new Boss laughed. "Come on, O'Hara. Don't be depressing. You must focus on the positive aspects. Human consciousness, our free will, they are a precious miracle. Despite our shortcomings, we have emerged victorious from the primal and unpromising dust of cosmic history. We can create great things," at this point she opened her hand for a suggestive glance of the 9,600, "and have forged a society that is in constant striving for perfection, always improving goods, products and services. It is true that our high intelligence also brings a degree of self-reflexivity, and therefore spiritual suffering and permanent discontent. But I guess you just have to take the good with the bad."

The Boss then lifted the old Gizmo in her hands and deposited it on my lap. As I ran my fingers along the smooth edges of its body, I felt something stirring in my stomach, something dying, a door closing shut. I had my life. I had a new job and my Gizmo back. This was, in many ways, a happy ending. Yet I felt that something still lacked resolution, that something was aching to be expressed.

My new Boss snapped her fingers, jolting me out of my stupor. I watched the personnel regroup and return to their cars.

At that moment, the door on my side opened abruptly. I looked at Osborne. She was smiling. I saw her raise a hand. Everything happened in slow motion--it must have been the drugs.

She pushed me out of the car in a swift movement of surprising strength. I was thrown backwards onto the concrete, the Gizmo pressed against my stomach.

"Sorry, O'Hara," the Boss said. "No room for subordinates in my limo. Except of course, my chauffeur. One of the gentlemen here will give you a ride. Welcome to the Other Company."

She slammed the door shut. Someone immediately helped me back on my feet. I recognized one of the guys who had first rescued me. He smiled at me and motioned me towards one of the coupes.

I glanced at the blank surface of the sedan's window and saw Osborne's shadow in there, stirring. I felt stunned and confused.

As my rescuer led me away, I spotted the bulge in his jacket.

And next I saw my hand discretely reaching out for it.

The rest is a blur. I remember the warm gun throbbing in my hand, spitting ghastly rays, foreboding oscillations.

I remember Osborne's eyes, her look of understanding. I was an angel of death. The 9,600 Plus took a long time to die, though. It screamed and screamed, and I kept firing, until all what remained was a silent and blackened cinder.

I was mindful enough to spare one of the cars. With no time to lose, I rolled the bodies onto the ground and climbed in.

With the Gizmo's dispassionate lullabies comforting my troubled head, I drove away into the horizon, southward, across the twilight plains of this arse-end of the world.



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