The Heart of It

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Chris Cimorelli
I’m not sure when this project actually started. Perhaps I can mark it back to a morning this past November when I ashamed that I would be meeting Bret Lott later that day with nothing to give him, then in a desperate hurry I wrote a single page, and the words “John Frazier glanced over his shoulder at the cityscape from his office on the eighty-sixth floor” just fell from my fingers. More likely it all started in my early adolescence when I began writing and picked up my own copy of Nineteen Eighty-Four and became swept up in the dystopian nightmare. Designating the starting point depends on your opinion of when a story really begins – does it start when it begins stewing in your mind, or in that first moment when you set pen to paper?

I had been telling myself for a long time that I would write my own dystopian novel. I deceived myself for a long time into calling myself a writer when I hardly had anything to show for it, besides the title I had artificially adopted when, at twelve years old, I had nothing better to do than sit at my parents’ computer and write stories from the wildest corners of my imagination. Then this year came along, and after all that talk of writing a dystopian novel at some point in my future, that moment finally arrived.

If you ask me if it was difficult, I will probably tell you “no,” because I never remember how difficult things were in retrospect. I won’t tell you how one week my writing assignment was just to write down all my fears because I had no idea what was inhibiting me from writing this book. I won’t tell you how I dropped a class my fall semester in order to make more time for writing, which I still found myself unable to do. I won’t tell you how I dived into poetry as an escape from the fiction I was too scared to
write. I'll probably just show you this manuscript and tell you that, somewhere amidst the stumbling twists and turns, it happened.

The question remains, why write a dystopian novel? What sort of efficacious result, if any, does it bear on the world? How is it better, or worse, or any different than other modes of fiction? Lott was asking me that first question all year, and I must thank him for taking this project up with me, despite his hesitation toward “genre” fiction. Let me be clear – what you’re about to read is not a piece of “genre” fiction, which relies on premise, setting, and plot to move the story forward. It is literary by its merit of characterization and conflict, the merits of a good story. Sure, it is set in the future, and yes, there’s a lot of technological jargon that may encourage many of you to label this as “science fiction,” but that debate really isn’t what’s at stake here, and that wasn’t what was at stake for me when I was writing this.

I was never trying to justify the dystopian genre, or operate within its confines, or conform to its precedents. I was just trying to tell a story, a story I believed needed telling. It just so happens that the dystopian nightmare has a unique ability to frighten us into awareness of phenomena within our own present which, if we let things get out of hand, will be the death of us. We are rapidly approaching the technological singularity, that moment when as humans we will become so reliant on technology that there will be no turning back. The human race and technology will become one without separation, for better or for worse. The justification of this project lies in the conflict – if the conflict seems real or relevant to you, then I did my job.

The most important question Lott asked me all year was, “What is at stake for you in this project?” I'll answer that question here. I don't pretend to believe that this book, or any
single book, will save the human race. I do believe that having these conversations – the ones writers have with their audience as readers interpret the text and discuss the ideas presented therein – produce an effect in the universe that, once started, can never be undone. Neither I nor my book is the arbiter of any change – we're merely small pieces adding our voice toward that conversation of what it means to be a human being. And that discussion is important. We need to consider our existence and the meaning of our existence as we enter a terrifying new world that breeches the unknown. I'm just trying to do my part.

—Chris Cimorelli
I.

John Frazier glanced over his right shoulder at the cityscape from his office on the eighty-sixth floor. The flashing red and blue lights of a squad of cloud patrol flying passed his window had caught his attention just flown passed his wallscreen. He did his best not to look out the window too often due to his fear of heights, but curiosity struck him. He noticed a traffic jam due north a couple miles away on one of the eastbound airways heading out of Manhattan over the Hudson River.

“Zoom in,” he spoke to the wallscreen, and the projection focused in on the airway at the front of the traffic jam. He couldn’t get a clear view of the source of the problem, but he saw “E. Houston Airway” printed on the electromagnetic panels encasing the lanes. The squad was heading in that direction to survey the scene and clear up the traffic. It seemed a bit peculiar, he thought, watching a thin line of aircars backed up over a half mile down the strip of airway. At first glance it appeared all they had to do was raise their altitude above the electromagnetic airways and continue their path through the open sky. Except it wasn’t really open. The sky was strictly regulated.

He pressed his index finger against the upper right-hand corner of the wall screen, and dragged his finger against the surface toward the bottom left. “World News, New York, Manhattan, traffic jam on E. Houston Airway,” he spoke to the screen. His view of the cityscape zoomed back out to its previous setting and glossed over into a projection of the
World News logo. A status bar was registering the progress of the upload, with the words “processing request...” shining in translucent red letters.

A bird’s eye view of the city appeared on the screen, and quickly zoomed in on E. Houston, about twenty blocks from John’s office in building 1WTC. “Volume on,” he told the screen, and the telemonitor’s voice entered mid-sentence, her light hair and fair-skinned face visualized on the top left corner of the screen. “Volume up,” he said, and listened.

The telemonitor spoke: “—have yet to determine how the subject fell from its aircar, but authorities are suggesting that suicide was unlikely. The subject’s D.N.A. is still being processed by the Mainframe, and we will have information for all our viewers shortly. Traffic has been momentarily halted heading north on Pearl, and cloud patrol is working to open another lane for traffic.” John watched as the camera zoomed in to a close-up of the point on the highway where the body made contact. A black square, approximately fifteen by fifteen feet, enough to block out the aircar, covered the area. He had only seen maybe four other cases of digital incineration in his life. Accidents of this nature were rare nowadays. Probably just a glitch in the system, he thought, although he was anticipating information on the subject’s background and any potential conscious motivation for her ejection from the vehicle.

The face of a young brunette woman materialized in the center of the screen with her information listed below—Jenise Lawrence, age forty-four, five-foot-seven, student, NYU, lesbian, partnered. The voice of the telemonitor continued. “We’ve just received information on the subject downloaded from the Mainframe. Jenise Lawrence, age thirty-four, a PhD student at NYU who was in the second year of her dissertation on linguistics. Based on electric currents transmitted from the subject’s brain, we can determine that
while the subject was heading home she navigated too closely to the edge of the airway, and the subject's vehicle received an shock from the electromagnetic charge. This blast appears to have blown off part of the left door of the vehicle. It seems that the subject jerked her vehicle to the right after the initial impact, lost control, and fell out of her vehicle from the opening of the blast.” The screen zoomed to an image of the aircar, hovering off the right side of the airway. The side of the aircar was charred, electricity sizzling out of the hole blasted in the door. “The data suggests that the subject had illegally disengaged her seatbelt while operating her vehicle.”

Another telemonitor appeared just below the woman and began to interject. He had short hair, a thick jaw, and a blonde mustache. “Viewers are reminded that such illicit behavior is regarded as criminal activity subject to a fine of five-hundred nanodollars and a temporary loss of privileges such as recreational speech, relaxation, and dopamine intake. On a more uplifting note, tell us, Rachel, how long has it been since we've had a reported case of D.I.?”

“Well, Gene,” Rachel, the female telemonitor, responded, “on February third at 7:48A.M., just over three weeks ago, we had a case of a forty-eight year-old male subject by the name of Jacob Riswauld in Bangkok.”

“Has it really been three weeks, Rachel? That seems like a pretty substantial period of time, doesn't it?”

“Very true, Gene. Cases of D.I. have been down. We noticed a fifteen percent improvement in 2041 from the previous year, and it looks like 2042 will close out with even better statistics. Researchers suggest that we'll be down to about twenty-two
incidents this year, as compared to twenty-nine and thirty-four from the two previous years.”

“And Rachel, is there any advice you give our viewers watching us today about what they can do to help reduce the number of cases in the future?”

“Yes, Gene. Viewers are encouraged to download the latest update of SmartPilot, a program available only on all 2042 aircar models which automatically operates your vehicle so you don’t have to.”

“What are some of the benefits of SmartPilot that our viewers may not be aware of?”

“In addition to the convenience of an efficient and effortless means of getting to your next destination, SmartPilot is safe and secure. For a limited time, those who purchase the newest software will receive a free three-year warranty. If while operating SmartPilot you suffer from a collision, SmartPilot will reimburse you for up to two-hundred thousand nanodollars on any damages to your host body or your vehicle, including free consciousness download and upload.”

John rolled his eyes. He didn’t own an aircar, nor did he ever plan on buying one.

“That sounds like a great deal, Rachel,” said Gene, “thanks for sharing that with us.”

Rachel smiled and applied a soft laugh. “Well, that’s it for today,” she addressed to her audience. “Thank you for joining me for your two o’clock news report. My name is Rachel Harbinger, and this is WorldNews, your one and only stop for everything you need to know.”

Rachel’s face de-materialized, and Gene’s face slid up the projection on the wallscreen to replace her spot at the top left corner of the wallscreen. “Thanks to Rachel Harbinger reporting your two o’clock news. I’m Gene Devonte with your three o’clock
afternoon news. While cloud patrol is working on clearing up the scene on the E. Hoston Airway in Manhattan, let’s jump over to the west coast where—”

“Volume mute,” John said to the wallscreen, and Gene’s voice went out, though his lips continued moving. He appeared to be reporting on a storm developing off the coast of northern California, but John wasn’t interested. He had just had a mandatory 3:30 meeting called around noon, so he was just stalling until then, filling his time with remedial tasks.

He looked back out the window at the traffic jam a couple miles away. “Jenise Lawrence,” he said aloud, sounding the victim’s name on his tongue. He figured that by this point her consciousness had already been uploaded to the Mainframe, the collective consciousness where all information was stored and secured, so he decided to check if she had been assigned to him. Perhaps he could help the poor soul find a host match before his meeting started, he figured.

John spun back around in his chair and faced his desk. He placed the palm of his right hand flat upon the surface, and the panel lit up beneath his hand, signaling that the skin-recognition software was detecting his authorization information. To the left of his hand, the screen of the nanocomputer lit up upon the desk, and the words “Welcome, Mr. Frazier, File Number 16947823061” became highlighted with several options listed below: *boot up computer, request an update, erase all files*. He tapped *boot up computer* with his index finger and the screen flashed the words “initializing setup.” The screen was replaced with a virtual display of a keyboard, and a digital projection of a computer screen arose perpendicularly from the glass panel on the desk.

He remembered the first time he had seen a D.I. incident – of course, he hadn’t really seen it, but rather had seen it televised, although he remembered it as though he was
actually there. He had the ability to control the angle from which he viewed the scene, unless controls were temporarily disabled in order for the global population to focus on the essential details from a particular view that would otherwise be missed. It was in 2025, when the airways first opened for public transportation. The subject’s name was Danielle Caldwell, a full-time nanny who had taken one of her kids, Melanie Hurtz, out for ice cream, or something like that—John couldn't readily recall, and he didn't feel like searching his memory bank for such a trite piece of information.

It was the first-reported case of D.I., and nobody quite knew what to expect if an individual fell out of a moving vehicle while traveling on the airways. Would they fall through the sky and land upon the ground, possibly upon pedestrians walking their dogs? Would cloud patrol suddenly swoop down and rescue them before impact?

The actual outcome hadn't been expected. When the world watched Danielle and the child fall to their deaths, the electromagnetic current of the airway opened up, like some portal in the sky connected to another dimension, and the two of them didn't fall through it, but fell into it, vanished. In their place a black two-dimensional square occupied the space on the airway track, covering the spot where their bodies had made impact.

John hadn't been sure if this is what actually happened, if the black square really did appear, or if the camera had edited the visual information, blacked out the gruesome scene in order to censure the minds of viewers from the horrific event. He wondered if the bodies were sitting upon the tracks of the airway, charred and blackened and smoking amidst the burning flesh. There were no eyewitnesses—at least, not anymore, since that data had been deleted from the Mainframe shortly thereafter. Instead, substation-memories of a televised
projection of what happened were quickly installed. John remembered it accordingly as two people falling into a black perimeter of nothingness.

What exactly happened when you were incinerated? What exactly became of Danielle Caldwell and the child? Where had they gone? These were the questions on everyone’s mind.

Before the airways opened up, they were first synthesized with the digital Mainframe, creating a direct line of communication between them. All the documented information about every person was available on the Mainframe – who they were, what they did, who they did it with. All this information could be easily accessed by a quick scan of the subject’s D.N.A. or their installed nanochip, otherwise known as the VeriChip. When these subjects suffered a fatality such as falling into the electromagnetic current of an airway, their physical bodies were deleted, but their consciousness was uploaded and saved from their most recently registered state—that is, the moment right before they were incinerated. John could remember Gene Devonte’s face as he consoled a frightened public about the whereabouts of the two subjects. He had said, “Melanie Hurtz and her nanny, Danielle Caldwell, have indeed lost their bodies. However, we have not lost their minds. They have been successfully uploaded to the Mainframe, where their consciousness and their D.N.A. are safe from harm. They have not, and will not, be forgotten.”

Nobody was quite sure what to make of this explanation at the time, but it was the response that the public needed to hear. In the wake of new technology that had opened the world up to a digital, not to mention transportational, revolution, the worst thing that could have happened would have been to implant fear in the minds of people that this new system could kill them. Sure, there had been collisions with the paved roadways of the late
twentieth and early twenty-first century, but somehow those hadn't seemed as frightening or horrific as the concept of being incinerated and downloaded into some digital limbo.

But wasn’t this the eternal fear, John thought, the uncertainty of life after death? They were coming closer to a solution to the problem, and immortality suddenly seemed possible, even if it only existed in electrical currents transmitting behind the veil of the human eye. Danielle Caldwell and Melanie Hurtz’s D.N.A. and consciousness were stored on the Mainframe, the most secure database in the history of computer technology. There seemed no reason to be concerned. They were safe.

John had learned not to focus too much on the ramifications of scientific achievement. He often found it an impediment for progress, and at the very least his job performance. When the questions crossed his mind he found that they would disrupt his work, so he just did his best to block them out.

He was employed by Mainframe Enterprises, the corporation responsible for the daily management and distribution of data on the Mainframe, which held virtually all the world’s documented information. As a maintenance and systems technician for the Department of Information and Processing within M.E., he monitored the functioning of the massive-internet system behind the Mainframe, helped keep everything in working order, addressed any glitches in the system, and did his best to erase any trace that such defects had ever occurred. This duty granted him the privilege of uploading and processing new data and cleansing inaccurate data, according to assignments received from his supervisor, Victor Whirlgood. With this privilege came administrative access to most information on the Mainframe, with the few exceptions of data designated as “highly classified.”
John opened OneSearch, the browser on his nanocomputer which navigated the Mainframe, and typed “Jenise Lawrence” into the searchbar. The browser opened a list of thirty-seven registered people by the name of “Jenise Lawrence” and he selected the file with the most recent update. “Open file-number 18034872391” he said, and the nanocomputer registered his command. The file opened, and a full-profile photograph of Jenise appeared at the top of the screen, with all of her information listed below. John browsed through the details. Age, forty-four. Graduated from West Jefferson High School in 2016, graduated from Princeton with a degree in history in 2020, and had enrolled in NYU’s PhD program in linguistics in 2040 after working for several non-profit organizations during the interim. “Scroll down,” he told the screen, then “Stop” once he had looked down the page. At age seventeen Jenise had received her first speeding ticket after going twenty-one miles per hour over the posted speed limit. That was in September of 2015, about ten years before the airways even opened. At age twenty-two she was arrested for public intoxication for exposing her bare chest outside the back window of a motor vehicle, also on a paved highway. “Open video for public intox,” he said. A window popped up on the screen, and a visual display appeared of a woman hanging out of the back seat of a car, screaming and waving her arms with her large breasts taking to the wind. He could sense that he was beginning to grow aroused, but his VeriChip fired a charge to the left anterior cingulate cortex of his brain, inhibiting the response. Now the image of the drunken girl just looked silly. “Close window.”

He returned to her profile. At twenty-four she was arrested for failing to comply with the mandated implementation of her nanochip. He chuckled, scrolled down. Under sexual history there was a list of all of her partners, two men and seven women. She
identified as lesbian and apparently had been in a relationship with a Bethany Halter at the
time of her death. The dates and time of the duration of their relationship was listed. March
6, 2040 at 20:07 through September 21, 2042 at 17:54. The Mainframe had already
updated her file to indicate the extinction of her physical body.

“Scroll to 'consciousness,'” he said. The screen scrolled up toward the top of her
information, where the words “Consciousness uploaded to Mainframe at 17:54.63,
September 21, 2042” were listed just below her birth and death dates and times. Next to
this information was her status of consciousness. “Pending registration.”

One of John’s functions for the department was to sort through potential vessels,
hosts, or bodies for uploaded consciousnesses. The process usually took approximately
seventy-two hours, from the loss of the physical body through consciousness upload to
consciousness installation within a new vessel. It took a couple of days to select a suitable
vessel with a similar age, sex, and build in comparison to the original model. Proof of
insurance also had to be checked, if the subject didn’t have enough to afford a new body.
Sometimes mistakes came from his end—one time he had accidentally implanted a male
consciousness inside a registered-female vessel, but the process was easily reversed, and
the instance was deleted. Finally, vessels had to be prepped and equipped with slight
cosmetic alterations – often enlarged buttocks, smaller breasts, deactivation of
reproductive functions.

John usually preferred to talk with his files before beginning the process of finding a
match for them. He communicated with them through a program called Portal, through
which disembodied files could communicate via binary code to M.E. employees responsible
for conscious upload, or, in the case of files who didn’t qualify for the privilege, store them within a deeper folder inside the Mainframe.

John clicked the link for Portal and waited for the program to boot up. A black rectangular box appeared on his nanocomputer screen, with indiscriminate binary code flashing chaotically in white numbers. He typed a series of keys, which caused the binary code to regulate, then finally stop. It was the equivalent of giving a sedative to a rabid animal.

“Jenise. Jenise Lawrence.”

A series of zeros and ones appeared on the screen: zero one zero one zero one one one zero one one zero one one one one zero zero one one zero one one one one zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero one zero one zero one one.

“You’re inside the Mainframe, Jenise, don’t worry. Do you remember what happened?”

More numbers: zero one zero one zero one one zero one zero one zero zero zero one zero zero one zero one one one one zero one one zero one one one zero one zero one zero one zero one zero one one zero one zero one zero one zero one one zero zero one zero one one one one zero one zero one one one zero one zero one one one zero one zero one zero one zero one one zero one one one one one.
“My name is John Frazier. I work for the Department of Information and Processing and I am working to find you a new body. I just wanted to log on to inform you that everything is being taken care of and that you’re in good hands.

More numbers: zero one zero one one one zero zero one one one zero one one zero zero one zero zero zero one one zero one zero zero one one one zero zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero zero one one one one zero one zero zero one one one one one zero one one zero zero one zero one zero zero one one one one one one zero one one zero zero zero one one zero one zero one zero zero one one one zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero zero one one one one zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero zero one zero zero one one one one one one.

“Your consciousness has been uploaded to the Mainframe. You’re going to be like this for a couple of days until I can find a match for you. Now, I have a few questions I would like to ask you about your preferences—you know, for a new body and such.”

At this moment the sedative wore off and the binary code reverted to a berserk sequence of numerals. John interrupted, saying, “Jenise, I’m going to give you some time to work through this. Just know that everything is alright. We’ll be in touch soon. Goodbye.”

He closed Portal and returned to Jenise’s profile page.

Based on years of such encounters, he had learned that it was best to give the files some time to accept their new condition. He had explained the situation—it was her turn to
come to terms with it. He realized there wasn’t much he could do to communicate with her at this point. Psychologically, it was like experiencing your own death. There was a reason why human evolution had disengaged us from experiencing our own post-mortem processing. This was a kink they were still working out in M.E.

Near the top of the screen was an icon with the inscription “match with vessel.” Without glancing at the keyboard, he pressed the enter key, then a verification message appeared on the screen asking if he wished to complete this command. John told the system “Yes,” and the system responded with a status bar and a message saying, “Processing request,” then, “This file has been deleted.”

He looked at the words closely. There must have been a mistake. A processing error, perhaps. He closed the message indicating that the file had been deleted in order to access the previous message. Then he realized what it was. The verification message read “Are you sure you wish to delete this file?” He hadn’t checked his key press before engaging the command. How could he have been so careless? Was he just not paying attention? Had he just grown numb to performing the function countless time before?

John, in his fourteen years working for M.E., had never deleted a file before. He thought there must be a way to undo the mistake, surely. He searched through his recent history on OneSearch, but could not find a trace of the deletion. For a moment he considered the ramifications of erasing the remnants of a human being’s existence from the Mainframe, thus forfeiting her chances of continuation. He had never been taught how to respond to a deletion during his training for this position. It was just the kind of mistake you didn’t make. After all, these were human lives you were dealing with. You just didn’t
toy around with that. Yet, it seemed like such a simple mistake, so simple that it must be plausible to undo an action so prone to human error.

John decided whether he would contact his supervisor about it at work the next morning, or even after the meeting that had been called later today. That may, however, result in another strike against his record that could result in termination, and M.E. was one of the last organizations anyone would want to be terminated from. He had already received a strike early on during his employment due to repeated lateness. Sure, he had regulated his sleep cycle, so now that was no longer an issue, but still, a strike was still a strike, and that shit stayed with you. Victor had warned him that termination from M.E., as with any employment in a classified agency or corporation, would result in a memory swipe of any classified information that John had uploaded to his personal memory databank during his employment. It was procedure, to eliminate the neurological associations connected to all the classified information that M.E. employees contained in their databanks. Sounded harmless in theory, almost relieving to never know you made a mistake, but the cleansing had a risk of significant brain damage. Of course, such malfunctions were adjustable. He also contemplated sweeping the erasure under the rug, but he figured that Victor would probably receive notification of the error nevertheless, so it would be better just to admit the mistake in-person.

He realized it must be getting near the meeting time, so he glanced back at the wallscreen and checked the clock in the bottom-right corner. 3:23:48p.m. Time to get going. He logged out of the Mainframe, closed the projection on his nanocomputer, grabbed his coat and exited the office.
II.

The meeting was scheduled to take place in a conference room on the eighty-fourth floor. He walked toward the four elevators in the hallway and noticed a sign displaying the logo for his company – a giant oak with hundreds of small 0s and 1s standing in for leaves. He walked passed a few of his associates huddled around the digiporters, waiting to de-materialize to the lower floor. The stairwell was just down the hall, so John went in that direction instead.

When he arrived in the conference room, there was chatter all around, everyone discussing what they thought the meeting had been called for. It was rather short notice, after all, just a couple hours indicating that an urgent, mandatory meeting had been called.

When John took his seat at the table, the front door opened, and Victor Whirlgood, Executive Director of the Department of Information and Processing, entered with the remaining members of the department. The room grew quiet. Though neither fierce nor intimidating, Victor was a man who commanded the respect of his staff and whose presence demanded strict attention.

Victor motioned with his hands for everyone to grab a chair at the long conference table. He spoke as soon as everyone took their seat.

“First,” he began in his low, steady voice, “I would just like to say welcome, and thank you for assembling here on such short notice, all of you.” As he spoke he walked the
length of the table. He preferred to walk and talk during his meetings. He was rarely a man to be seen seated, unless he was in his office.

Victor crossed the center of John’s line of sight. He was wearing one of his suits with the double-breasted jacket, this one burgundy, the lapels giving a little over his barreled chest. He was a large man, about six-foot-two, with broad shoulders and dark, black skin. He kept his head shaved, though it may have been bald, since nobody knew quite how old he was, and he wore a soul-patch beneath his lower lip, like the point of a dagger piercing the flesh of his thick chin.

He continued. “I’ve called you all here today to inform you of the latest project our department will be undertaking.” He had the entire room fixated upon him. “For several years now we have been uploading and indexing all the information we acquire in our daily walks through life. The Mainframe stores this information, housing it from the fragile grip of our memory. We provided a solution to the problem which plagued our species at the turn of the century. How do we accommodate the fact that the world of knowledge keeps expanding as our brains continue to shrink?”

John nodded. He rather admired his supervisor’s rhetorical skills, his ability to take charge of a room, to say everything in one sweeping stroke of eminence.

Before Victor proceeded, a projection rose from a small lens in the center of the table, featuring an illustration of Victor’s next talking point—one arrow pointing up, another point down, side by side.

“We began to notice an inverse correlation between information and the acquisition and retention of information. Knowledge in the world increases as ability to store this knowledge decreases. The human brain, for all its complexities, has its limitations. It can
only hold on to so much information at once, and as more information becomes available, more information gets set aside.

“Toward the end of the second decade of the millennium, we found a way to harness the power of the internet and use it to expand the limited space of the human mind.”

The projection suddenly transformed into an image of a cylindrical shape with two distinct sides like a medicinal pill, both transparent. The one half appeared to have electronic components like a computer chip. The other half contained some kind of organic matter pulsing red with the deep tinge of blood.

“But of course,” Victor continued, “you all already know that. And as you're all aware, this is the apparatus which enabled us to make this endeavor possible—the VeriChip, a radio-frequency identification device which transmits electromagnetic signals between us and the Mainframe. We each have one implanted in the skin between our thumb and forefinger on our right hand, according to international law.” As he said this he held up his right hand, gripped the flab of skin with the thumb and forefinger of his other hand. “Before the development of this technology we had to connect to the Mainframe through the use of an external device—computers, laptops, mobile devices. Countless bits of information were available at our fingertips, yet somehow that was still too far away. With the VeriChip, we were able to cut out the middleman, granting us access to the Mainframe through our cranium.” He pointed his right index finger toward his head.

John glanced at his right hand. He had been unconsciously fiddling with the indent where the VeriChip jutted out against his skin with his thumb and forefinger. The thing hadn’t been properly installed inside his hand, or so it felt. He was always aware of it whenever he shook someone's hand, or pressed his hand against the steering wheel of
his '27 Chevrolet. Sometimes he thought he could see the shape of the device dark inside his hand as he held it up against the bright Sun.

He suddenly became aware of himself staring at his hand on the table, then shot his eyes over to Victor. Poised with his arms folded on the opposite side of the table, his eyes fell right on John as he continued speaking. This was another of his defects—drifting off when he was being addressed. Sitting up straight in his chair with one leg crossed over the other, he resumed his focus on Victor.

“And that,” Victor said, “is how we have brought the world together with nanotechnology. The digitalization of the globe has brought us together in ways once unimaginable to our fathers.”

A few chuckles followed that last bit. John joined along, releasing a false guttural sound from his belly. The reference to their progenitors, of course, was an ironic jab at the fact that there weren’t really fathers anymore. He was perfectly mindful of the fact that he was among a small minority of the natural-borns in the room, belonging to some ancient ideal of parentage which believed that copulation should result in reproduction. Some people, like his parents, still did things the old way, behaving like the animals evolution programmed them to be. Most everyone else nowadays came from the tubes.

“Our goal is full incorporation, and we're getting close,” Victor resumed. “There is virtually nowhere on the map that we cannot reach out and grab ahold of through the mainframe. Every second, millions of pieces of information are uploaded to the Mainframe—visual, kinetic, and other basic sensory data is indexed, in addition to basic emotional frequencies like happiness, fear, joy, sorrow. And the Mainframe assembles that information, filters out the unnecessary details, and transmits it back to our VeriChips.”
John glanced back at his right hand. Was it really a hand? Or was that just the Mainframe telling him *this is a hand*? He realized he was drifting again. He quickly returned his attention back to Victor—

“Yet, the deep recesses of the mind for a long time have eluded us. Emotions are easy to detect. Those can be measured by facial recognition, the degree of electricity in the brain, chemical adjustments in the body, all perfectly calculable. Thoughts, however, have proven us quite the challenge, since for so long we didn’t understand the operations of the mind. And the mind—is it housed within the brain? Is it some metaphysical entity separate from our neurological functioning? Is it made out of cheese, or pencil shavings?”

A few laughs resounded off the walls, John’s included.

“We’ve all been through this debate before, countless times—all of us anticipating the moment we can finally unlock the secret, find out just where all those dirty thoughts are hiding.” He paused to take a glance around the room. “Today, I believe we’ve found it.”

The door at the front of the room swung open, and in walked a man dressed in a white lab coat, a shirt and tie poking out at his lapels.

Victor walked over to the newcomer and held one hand out to him. “I would like to introduce you all to Dr. Michael Conrad.”

The assembly welcomed Dr. Conrad with applause. John followed suit.

“Dr. Conrad has been involved with the cognitive sciences for over twenty-five years. Some of you may be familiar with his research. I have invited him here so he can give you a demonstration of his latest work.”

John was near the opposite end of the table from where Victor and Dr. Conrad stood. He wasn’t a complete stranger to the doctor’s work, but he wasn’t necessarily any more
than a household name to him. Dr. Conrad, in person, didn't seem the same semblance of a man as he was presented in the media, with slicked-back greasy hair and a dark brow that could frighten the blood cold. He stood nearly a full foot beneath Victor, although John considered that Victor could make any man appear smaller by means of comparison.

Victor relinquished the floor to Dr. Conrad with a smile, and the doctor returned the look.

“Thank you for having me,” he said, taking a step forward. His voice was small, John noticed, lacking the sort of commanding presence his supervisor imposed. “So, before I begin, can I have a volunteer?”

Nobody initially raised their hand. John felt himself sink slightly in his seat, and hoped it wasn’t noticeable.

Dr. Conrad pointed his finger across the room and let it fall on a man three chairs down from John, who took a deep breath.

“You sir, what's your name?”

“Richard Bennett,” the man replied.

“Would you care to participate in our demonstration?”

Richard held both his hands up, indicating for Dr. Conrad to continue. John wasn’t sure if his gesture said I don't know or Go right ahead.

“Wonderful. Now, if you'll all point your attention to the center of the room,” Dr. Conrad continued, “let's pull up a digital display of Mr. Bennett’s brain.”

The image of the VeriChip suddenly evaporated, and from the lens emerged a projection of the human brain, presumably Richard Bennett’s brain. This sort of physical and structural information was easily and instantly accessible on the Mainframe. Revolving
in the center of the room, the display was flashing different luminosities of a translucent shade of blue, representing the active and inactive parts of the brain.

“This is a live update of Mr. Bennett’s brain. The lighter shades indicate areas of his brain that are active. The darker shades represent areas not as active.”

John leaned forward against the table, staring into the projection. He noticed that some of the bright areas seemed to be shining independently of the other areas, while some seemed to be casting light to and from each other, as if they were communicating directly.

“From here we can sort of generally map out the electrical activity in the brain, but we can zoom in on other areas to get a closer look. Show me the frontal lobe.”

The projection shifted to a forward-facing display of Richard’s brain, so that everyone around the table saw the image as everyone else saw it, the frontal lobe staring right back at them.

“This is where we believe thoughts reside—the frontal lobe, the realm of higher-order thinking, short-term memory, fixation, and other such functions.”

Dr. Conrad quickly slammed his hand on the surface of the table, catching everyone’s attention for the moment, but they were suddenly turned toward the live reading of Richard’s brain. It had flashed a very bright blue at the moment Dr. Conrad’s hand made impact.

“A brief demonstration of the fixation function. A novel stimulus, in this case the sound and vibrations of my fist on the table, catches our attention, as you can see it caught Mr. Bennett’s attention through the highlighted regions in his frontal lobe. The question we’re here to ask is how we determine what he was thinking in response to that stimulus. We can pretty easily determine he was startled. It’s also safe to assume he’s a little annoyed
at being made a guinea pig.” A few voices chuckled, including Richard’s, playing the good sport. “But we can figure all that out at the anatomical level. We can make an educated guess as to what he’s thinking based on these chemical emotions, but from this approach we can never exactly penetrate the depths of Richard’s mind. What we can do, however, is take a look at all the information we are collecting from Richard’s brain.”

A second lens activated, this one toward the back of the table, near where John was sitting. From it was cast a series of letters, symbols, and numbers. Computer jargon he was relatively unfamiliar with. He could pick out a phrase here and there. It was a language he held intermediate proficiency in.

“Some of you are better at reading this information than others. But I’m not here to give you a lesson in solving riddles. What I want to do is show you what happens when we convert this to binary code.”

The letters, symbols, and numbers dissolved into a series of zeros and ones running down the projection.

“Now, watch what happens when we remove all of the known information which we understand how to interpret – sensory stimuli, emotional processing, etc.”

Most of the numbers dimmed to a soft gray, while the remaining numbers stood out with a brighter luminosity.

John could sense the atmosphere of the room changing. Everyone’s attention was firmly captivated on the projection of binary code shining at the end of the table, like they were all fully aware they were about to witness something never before seen.

“This suggests the Mainframe has been picking up information all along that we haven’t been indexing properly, because we haven’t been able to interpret it. This is a
program my team of researchers has been working on that separates interpretable information – that is, data we’ve known how to read – and uninterpretable information, that foreign muck that’s been eluding us for some time.

“Of course, all we have to do now is convert the remaining binary code to text.”

At that moment, John felt as though the air was sucked out of the room, the breath out of his lungs and his neighbor’s lungs and everybody's lungs. The remaining numbers had transformed into letters – not just letters, but words. Words crunched together, void of space, but held together with structure and syntax, forming sentences and ideas and complete thoughts. That’s just what they were, John realized – thoughts.

“And there you have it,” Dr. Conrad concluded. “What are these words, you ask? The truth is, we don’t exactly know. To call them anything would be a leap of faith. It’s highly theoretical. They’re something, obviously. But, I think Mr. Bennett can answer that for us.”

All eyes turned to Richard. He was shaking his head in amazement, eyes wide, hand reaching to mouth.

Everyone scanned the words on the projection.

_Why me? Why me and not the guy next to me? I’d like to object, but I don’t want to act as though I have something to hide. I don’t have anything to hide. That’s silly, everyone has something to hide. Can I pretend that I don’t? If I believe it will it become true? That’s my brain. That’s what your brain looks like when you’re thinking about thinking. This is what it’s like to be naked in public. Sometimes I have my dirtiest thoughts when I’m under a lens. I don’t enjoy making love to my wife anymore. I’m only thinking this because I’m trying not to. What happens when I stop resisting? I’m scared. What is he doing? Are my thoughts secure?_
Will they too be subject to scrutiny? What will they do if they see that I’m thinking this? Will they understand I’m just nervous? That I don’t actually – I don’t know, it’s just stage fright, I think. Surely they’ll understand. Does my brain know it’s looking at itself? Right back at me? What is it thinking? Wait, Richard, it’s thinking whatever you’re thinking, you imbecile. It looks like it’s firing really fast. This isn’t normal—

The words continued like this down the page.

“Of course,” Dr. Conrad spoke over the silence, “we can scroll down to see the rest of this dialogue.” The projection began filing up, revealing the remaining text. The words went on like this for some distance.

John looked over at Richard, who had become especially rigid and tense in his chair, his gaze affixed on the projection, as if he was hoping it would suck him up and rescue him from the looks of everyone around him. The other people in the room began to stir as they read down the list of Richard’s thought. John re-directed his attention back to the projection.

I can’t let them know what I’m thinking. Just keep talking. Thinking, whatever. Don’t stop thinking. What am I supposed to think about? What is it that I am not thinking about I can’t pause to think about what it is because if I do then I will know what it is I’m not supposed to be thinking I don’t love my wife I’ve said it before she’s a dirty rotten scoundrel I’ve said it before I don’t believe it’s true it isn’t true I’m just saying that thinking it what do you call trying to block something out is it repression when you know what it is I have to keep thinking this is a room and there are people in this room and if I don’t stop thinking there will
be people in this room and the people will be inside the people I'm running out of thoughts to
think you can never run out what are you talking about I'm running out of thoughts I can
never run out a running faucet dripping patient waterfall on pavement pastures run back the
wave wish wipes the washed out running water wasn’t the the the the the the the the
why didn't you save me I can't keep doing this I will do it forever I will be forever I love the
Mainframe I want to be it I want to be one with it I want all of it inside me—

Victor and Dr. Conrad stood toward the front of the room, calmly surveying the scene. John also found himself sharing an exchange of glances with the people around him. Their eyes spoke to him. Shock. Surprise. Intrigue. Embarrassment. Sympathy. Amusement. Wonder. Confusion. Fear—the strangest of all. He wondered what would have happened had Dr. Conrad selected him for the demonstration. Certainly everyone would have discovered his mistake in the office just before the meeting.

“Stop it!” Richard screamed out. He was facing Dr. Conrad. He flung his arm out to the side and shouted, “Just stop it! We get your point!”

With that, John was convinced that Richard had sealed his fate. Victor's gaze had turned to Richard, and if John didn’t know better, he would have expected him to dissolve into dust before his very eyes.

The rest of the room was still silent. Even the projection had deactivated, either by Victor or Dr. Conrad’s design. Everyone was aware of the unspoken cord between Victor and Richard, a line that would snap if anybody made a sound. Nobody more than snuck a quick glance to check if Victor's eyes were still locked on Richard.
“Mr. Bennett is correct,” spoke Dr. Conrad. “I think you all get the point. Based on the rather chaotic syntax from the lines you read on the screen, and how they don’t follow the conventional rules of formal language, we suspect these are a reflection of thoughts housed in the mind, if not the very thoughts themselves.”

One of the other men at the table raised his hand. Dr. Conrad nodded in his direction.

“How are you proposing we use this information?” the man asked. “What purpose does it serve?”

Dr. Conrad’s expression grew into a cold smile. Victor took a step toward the table, his look still affixed on Richard, then responded to the man’s question instead. “You suggest that we should have a reason for acquiring this newfound information? Did the yolk of your youth not instill in you a search for knowledge for its own sake?”

“Knowledge is power, my dear sir,” Dr. Conrad interjected. “It exists for its own purpose. Why should it need to be efficacious?”

“The doctor is correct,” Victor replied. He faced the large circular window overlooking the center of the table, touched his finger to the edge, then swept it across. Its transparent surface suddenly changed into a refracted image of a tree, a giant oak, branches spreading out toward the edge of the picture’s perimeter, the iteration of leaves replaced by innumerable digits, zeros and ones reaching outward through the air.

The tree of life, John thought, immediately embarrassed by the notion.

Victor continued. “Mainframe Enterprises was founded with a single concentrated goal—to provide us with instant and perfect access to all of the world’s information. Everything available at the touch of a button, the flip of a switch, the firing of a single
synapse. The more we learn, the stronger we become as a species. The world is at our fingertips. Soon, the furthest reaches of space. Eventually, the corners of the universe.”

John looked back at the image of the tree, focused on the border. What lay at the edge of the universe? Would they find it? Was it important?

“We are on a quest for ultimate perfection,” said Victor. “I believe Dr. Conrad has helped us locate the next step.”

The room grew quiet, pensive. Fingers folded on hands, arms crossed on tables. It was best to respond with neither complete adulation nor total aversion. Better to just nod and comply.

Victor swept his hand across the glass surface in the opposite direction. The picture of the tree dissolved into the gray light of day refracted through the window, the tops of Manhattan skylines standing in contrast to the horizon floating on the sea.

The view from the conference room provided John with a glimpse of the general direction of his apartment complex. He knew he would return home after this meeting. It was too much information to take in without some rest. The meeting had altered his mood about admitting his mistake to Victor, who seemed much too pleased to appreciate one of his inferior’s screw-ups.

After a few other questions concerning logistics and time, the meeting adjourned. John briefly returned to his office to grab his briefcase, then began the trek down the eighty-six flights of stairs. He finally finished his descent down to the ground level of 1WTC. He approached the security door and walked through the sensor which read the nanochip of each individual who walked through it. The security door became a recorded projection
of a security guard whom said, “Goodbye, John Frazier, file number 16947823061.” The door opened and he exited the building.
John Frazier pressed his right hand against the palm reader outside his apartment complex. A visual reading displayed these words: *Welcome, John Frazier, File # 16947823061 – do you have any guests?* He responded, “No,” and the glass door swung upon, permitting him to enter. As he walked in, the door closed behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and noticed his reflection staring back at himself through the door.

The lobby was a hall of mirrors. On the other end stood the digiporters which delivered tenets to their respective floors. Walking past the digiporters, he opened a door at the end of the hallway leading into the stairwell. He was in the habit of taking the stairwell up to his apartment, one of his unusual customs. Another one was the ’27 Chevrolet he used to drive to work via the old transportation networks, which were still around, back from when they used to pave the ground in gravel and paint lines to distinguish the lanes.

He lived on the sixth floor of the apartment complex. After climbing the one hundred and twenty steps (he had counted several times before), he reached the sixth floor landing and stood before the large steel door that opened up into the hallway. They had never bothered to renovate the doors leading in and out of the stairwells, since nobody really took the stairs anymore. Of course, that was one reason why he liked them. But the main
reason was because he was afraid of the digiporters. He tried to avoid using them whenever possible.

From the open stairwell, John’s apartment was the thirteenth door on the right. He had to wrap around the dimly lit hallway twice, which brought him to the east side of the apartment complex, facing Manhattan. When he reached his door, he pressed his hand against the palm reader, above which was a digital insignia which read 627, his apartment number. The reader flashed green and made a beeping sound, indicating he was authorized to enter. The door swung open.

John lived in a one room studio apartment. Despite its small size, it had everything he really needed, or even wanted – a kitchen area flush with the entrance, a dining room table for four opposite the kitchen counter which partitioned the two areas, and a living area in the back right corner with some sofas wrapping around the wall, facing a rectangular coffee table. Across from the living area facing the front wall was a twelve-step staircase that led up to an open landing, which contained a full-sized bed, a nightstand, and a beige lamp.

Between the dining and living areas on the back wall rested a large, three-tiered window which extended for most of the vertical length of the wall, equipped with an open view that cut across the city into Manhattan. It was early evening on a Wednesday in March, and the visor in the sky was finishing its daily rotation. The dome spun around the earth in a twenty-four hour cycle, so when the Sun would have been at its meridian, the dome was out of sight, and when night reached its peak, the dome sat upon the earth like a fisherman’s hat. At least, that was the analogy he made up in his mind. He thought he should come up with a new one. After all, fish were all but extinct. He could see the airways
in the distance cutting across the sky in the downtown, inner-city, not to mention the airways hovering overhead, just south, leading into the city.

The most noticeable structure was the immaculate 1WTC tower, poised and perfect, rising in the distance amongst the other skyscrapers. Glimmering in all its brilliance, it was meant to serve as a beacon of the new world they lived in, so its radiance was enhanced after The Shading, not diminished. It was the fovea, the centerpoint, one of the few highly-detailed objects left in the world, its texture preserved as a statement toward its eminence.

There, on the eighty-sixth floor, stood the central office of Mainframe Enterprises. It was hard to believe he had been there fourteen years. He came on board just about a couple of years before The Shading, when the world digitalization was already underway, in the stage of being processed and inputted into the Mainframe.

John stood in the window, looking out over the city. It was as much his creation as anyone else’s. He crossed his arms as he focused on 1WTC. His thoughts returned to the conference room. An update to the server. More space for more data. New memories, more memories, different kinds of memories that they hadn’t been able to index before. It was just another expansion. They’d been through several before. But this was going to be different. It was going to be bigger. Victor said he didn’t even know how big.

And he thought about Richard Bennett. The wild look in his eyes when he’d seen his own thoughts displayed for the world to see. That feeling of nakedness that washed over the room. That underlying question, what if it had been me?

Staring at the tower, John imagined himself in that chamber, and considered what might have happened had Dr. Conrad selected him and not Bennett as his demonstration. He knew that at any moment Richard would cease to exist inside his memory. Any trace of
him would be wiped from the database, and the erasure would filter through his mind like
the sea washes the shore anew. It may be before he went to bed, or sometime in the middle
of the night. Surely by dawn tomorrow Bennett will never have been. It wasn’t that
Richard’s thoughts were illegal in accordance with any law or doctrine. They were just
problematic, like a budding virus that may or may not begin to sprout. Perhaps they were
nothing more than the seed of a benign tumor, but why take the chance?

John chuckled. It was a bit like seeing the future. He knew what was coming. Of
course, he couldn’t do anything about it. He wasn’t running the show, he didn’t call the
shots. He just did his best to stay in line and hope he wouldn’t be the one pulled aside. The
spotlight could have just as easily have fallen on him. There was a moment when he felt his
eyes connect with Dr. Conrad and he feared inspection. Aside from deleting the file, he
didn’t really have anything else to hide, as far as he knew. There weren’t any deep dark
secrets that could implicate him for treason against the Mainframe, which was the most
pervasive issue. None that he knew of, at least. Even so, there was the lingering suspicion
that maybe, just possibly, something unknown even to him may root up if he was placed
under inspection.

It was silly to think about. John was fairly certain there was nothing inside his head
to be afraid of.

His stomach growled. At such moments he often wondered if his brain was sensing
this hunger, or if the Mainframe was implanting this perception in him. Not that it really
mattered. He ate enough to keep living, apparently. The fact he wasn’t dead was proof
enough of that. But even so, he wondered what might happen if the perception suddenly
deactivated. Some glitch in the system. Would he forget to eat? Would he have to operate
on assumptions of when his body probably needed food, based on the programmed routines of his daily functioning?

His stomach growled again. Enough thinking for one night, he decided.

John usually made his own meals, but he was hungry enough that he decided to order in. He searched his databank for places from which he had eaten recently. Metalocini’s. The Grab & Bag. The Monza Mansion. Based on his calculations, he decided he was more in the mood for oriental cuisine, so he decided to order from Mama Joy’s. He walked over to the centerpiece of the three-tiered window and slid his hand along the glassy surface. As the digital image began to display, he said, “Call Mama Joy’s,” although the telescreen had already processed his request – not because it read his thoughts, but because the calculation of desiring Mama Joy’s was exact, based on his salivation, his synaptic vesicles, etc.

“Thank you for calling Mama Joy’s,” spoke the face that emerged from the screen. It was a generic Asian face, unspecified regional assignment, wearing a white cap with some obscure Japorean lettering. As far as algorithms went, this one was pretty basic, nothing like Gene or Rachel from the news, who were deliberately designed with more sophistication. But the food was superb.

“I’ll take the Kung Pow Chicken with Fried Rice and steamed veggies. That’s it.”

The face appeared to be calculating the request. Then, “Your order has been received. Please place your VeriChip against the scanner to confirm your order.”

A scanner appeared at the neckline of the asian face – a standard barcode representing some numerical combination. John held the palm of his right hand against it. The scanner beeped and flashed green, indicating that the transaction was approved.
“Thank you. Please specify the coordinates to which you would like your food to be delivered.”

John gave the coordinates for his dining room table—quadrant Z3.97.H1429.41.

“Your order shall be delivered momentarily. Thank you for choosing Mama Joy’s. Goodbye.” Before the face vanished, a review of the order appeared on the screen for his convenience. Kung Pow Chckn w/ Fried Rice & Steamed Vegs, 15.63 nanodollars. This enabled him to visually verify that there had been no lapse in communication between the algorithm and he. Not that this ever happened. Save the occasional hiccup or loose wire in the system.

Now that the visual display of the Asian person had disappeared, the view of 1WTC returned into John’s perceptual registry. It was funny, watching the tower appear and disappear like that. There one moment. Gone the next. Of course, he knew it was only an illusion. A mirage. Defect of the mind. Or even a fault in the body, since sometimes his initial reaction to seeing the tower vanish and re-emerge triggered a bodily reaction of the heart, what he understood to be adrenaline pumping. It reminded him of the towers falling. The old ones, that is. The ones that came before, that paved the way for the construction of 1WTC.

He had a lingering memory from his childhood of watching the towers fall on television. He hadn’t been born when the thing actually happened, but he distinctly recalled the first time he watched the first tower fall in a television review on CNN. He must not have been any more than three years old. Even now, looking out his apartment window at the tower rising in the distance, he still saw in his mind’s eye the two towers that used to be there, even though he had never actually seen them in his life.
John reached inside his coat and pulled out a small book and a blue ink pen. He opened it to the first blank page, uncapped the top of the pen, and began to write. He always kept his handbook tucked within his inside coat pocket, held over his breast, along with an ink pen. He had a collection of pens left over from the '20s and '30s. It was just how he learned how to write, so it came more naturally to him that way. There were a lot of things he didn't want to learn over again. After awhile he just got tired of all the change. Handbooks they still made. Pads and paper of all kinds. They had to find some way to get rid of all the trees, and for some, these tokens were nice memorabilia. Which was convenient for John. Nobody would think he actually wrote stuff down in one of these things.

He looked down at the ink pressed against the paper of his pad. It read, *Two must fall so one may rise.* It seemed to encapsulate the vision in his mind of staring out his three-tiered window at the tower. He often wrote such things down, silly words and phrases that were meaningless or didn't make sense, that were based, loosely at best, to the world of fact. Writing them down, for him, was like extracting a cancer from the belly, excreting fecal matter from the bowels. It was better to just get such nonsense out. An odd impulse, uncomfortable to resist, so he just let it happen.

He turned to the next page. Scribbled down the name “Richard Bennett,” felt the texture of the pen pressing against the paper, listened to the sound of the needlepoint tip scratching across the surface He glanced at the written name. It wouldn't mean anything to him tomorrow. He'd wonder why it was even there.

He capped his pen, closed the book, and slipped both back into his jacket pocket, sealing it by buttoning up the triangular patch that fell over the opening. He walked over to
the foot of the staircase, took off his coat, and hung it up on the iron coatrack that stood nearby.

There was a problem, John suddenly realized. Not with the new project, not with the Mainframe, but with Victor’s logic. He said the amount of information we can hold onto decreases as knowledge increases. But that wasn’t exactly right. He knew from his schooling that the brain is capable of forming countless neurological associations, synapses connecting to dendritic spines connecting to neurons connecting to synapses to infinity. It was the internet that made us stop forgetting. We didn’t have to remember anything anymore. All that information was available to us, and we knew that. Our minds knew that, so they let go, relinquished their control to a more suitable server that could index and process this information faster than they could. It had nothing to do with the amount of information. It was about the way we stored it. He knew the illustration of the two arrows wasn’t exactly correct. One pointed up, representing the increase in knowledge in the world, and the other pointed down, representing our ability to store all this knowledge within our human brains. Victor claimed the technological revolution had made it so both arrows pointed up. But that didn’t make sense to John. He saw both arrows pointing down.

He placed the palm of his hand against the window, staring at where his hand and his reflection met, as the dim outline of himself stood in opposition, staring back.

Was he supposed to know all that?

In his peripheral vision, he saw something begin to materialize on his dining table. He glanced in that direction as the thing began to take shape. A ceramic bowl appeared, full of fried rice and vegetables, with a saucy chicken decorating the surface. His food had
arrived. He removed his hand from the window, turned away from his reflection, sat at his table and began to eat.
John awoke to a warm vibration in his right hand. He tossed his bedcovers off his body, swung his legs over the side of the bed, then walked over to the ledge and descended the ladder into his living area. The vibrating sensation wore off after about a minute. He had his customized to a mild setting. He knew some people who preferred a jolting vibration that was as hot as they could stand it, and even an electric wiring noise that resembled the sound of large, metal gears turning. John, however, wasn’t exactly a heavy sleeper. Since he was required to have the thing, he didn’t want it causing him any more annoyance than necessary.

He grabbed his nightgown from off the coatrack at the foot of the ladder and tossed it over his body. His apartment was a little cooler than usual for the morning, so he also donned his coat from the night before. He felt the indentation of his notepad slightly pressing against his ribs. He reached in, unbuttoned the pouch, and took it out. On the last page was written the name “Richard Bennett.” He had no recollection of who this was.

A metal panel in the ceiling began to lift into the shadow. From the darkness emerged a dimly lit red flashing light, a small orb imbedded in the back side of the ceiling tile. “Good morning, Mr. Frazier,” spoke the device in a feminine voice from the ceiling. It burnished a deeper red with the utterance of each syllable.
He tucked the notepad back into his jacket pocket. “Can we raise the temperature in here a little, Minda?” he asked his telecom.

“What temperature shall meet your satisfaction, Mr. Frazier?”

“Just raise it five degrees or so, but not above seventy-three, alright?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Frazier. May I do anything else for you this morning?”

“Can you pick me out a nice outfit for work, Minda? I’ve got a meeting with the boss today.”

“What shall I pick out for you, Mr. Frazier?”

“Something professional, preferably dark, but don’t let me look overdressed.”

“I will do my best, Mr. Frazier.”

He had Minda installed only a couple weeks ago, with a specification to only assist with his mornings unless otherwise requested, since he didn’t like being bothered when he came home from work. He was still warming up to the system—and it him, he reckoned.

The temperature began to rise in the apartment, so John removed his coat and set it back on the rack. He placed his right hand against the bathroom door, located just underneath the lofted area where his bed rested. The door opened for him, and when he walked inside he hung the nightgown on the towel rack on the opposite side of the door.

Inside the bathroom, there were four glass panels placed symmetrically in the center of each wall. They didn’t reveal the outside, and they weren’t even windows in the strictest sense of the word, but they emitted a translucent luminescence which cast an atmosphere of early morning over the bathroom. In the center of the bathroom lay a large egg-shaped pod which stretched from floor to ceiling, with glass panels decorating the
exterior. The shower door released from the pod when John placed his right hand against the surface, then closed after he stepped inside.

A soft, steady mist of water began to spray from all the lateral sides of the pod. He suddenly felt his body splattered with soup. Then, water began to rise from the floor and filled the pod up all the way to his neckline. He dipped his head under the water for a moment. Once his head emerged, the water began to drain back into the base of the pod. After it was empty of water, the interior fans activated, blowing his body dry.

He touched his right hand against the inside of the shower door and it opened, releasing steam into the rest of the bathroom. He grabbed a towel off a nearby towel rack and rubbed his hair dry, then walked over to one of the window-like glass panels and switched it to mirror-mode. As he examined his reflection, he contemplated the appearance of his body. He was of average size and height, his shoulders neither too narrow nor wide, his stomach neither flabby nor defined. He personally didn't have much problem with the way he looked, but realized he could use an update, if for nothing other than professional reasons. Downloading it just wasn't at the top of his agenda, since those ran for several hundred nanodollars.

Minda addressed him as he exited the bathroom, still drying his hair. “Your clothes have been set out on your bed, Mr. Frazier.”

“Thanks, Minda,” he replied. “And stop calling me ’Mr. Frazier.’”

“What would you like me to call you, Mr. Frazier?” it responded as John ascended the latter to his bed.

Minda didn’t immediately respond to this comment. John glanced at his clothes on the bed. Minda had gotten the “dark” part right, but the pants didn’t exactly match the black shirt it had selected – they were more navy than black.

“Minda, these colors don’t go together,” he said and held the shirt and pants in the direction of Minda’s red eye. “A bit of contrast is fine, but it needs to be distinct. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Frazier,” it answered.

John held his arms down, set his clothes back on the bed. “Why are you still doing that?”

“What am I doing, Mr. Frazier?”

“That! Calling me ‘Mr. Frazier.’ I want you to call me ‘John.’”

“I am programmed to address my master by his professional name.”

“You’re also programmed to do what I tell you to do. So quit calling me that.”

This conversation had been going on for a couple weeks, since John had installed it. He opened the closet adjacent to his bed and selected a dark green shirt and striped tie to go with the pants Minda had selected. As he began to dress himself, he asked Minda, “Do you telecoms get self-conscious?”

“I do not understand your meaning,” it replied.

“For example, when I step out of the bathroom naked, does that bother you?”

“Should I feel bothered, Mr. Frazier?”

“There’s no should about it. Do you?”

“I don’t feel anything, Mr. Frazier. I am programmed without an emotional frequency device.”
“Fair enough. No, there’s nothing wrong with it. I was actually just curious.”

John tied the knot of his tie into a double windsor then descended to the floor level of his apartment. He removed a light brown jacket from his coat wrack, then transferred his notepad and pen from the jacket he wore yesterday. As he walked toward the kitchen counter to grab his briefcase, he noticed a plate of scrambled eggs and toast and a steaming cup of coffee resting on the dining room table.

“Did you do that?” he asked Minda as he gestured toward the food.

“You usually instruct me to prepare your first meal, Mr. Frazier. I assumed you had just forgotten and prepared it anyway.”

“You assumed correctly,” he replied and walked over to the table to eat his breakfast. “Surprised I forgot to ask you.” Interesting, he thought, that Minda had learned his behavior enough to do something without him needing to ask. He knew that the telecoms were installed with a processing artificial intelligence, but this was his first time really experience it from scratch. It was kind of like conditioning a dog, except Minda was a machine, though not in the strictest sense.

When he finished, he picked up his dishes and placed them in the kitchen sink to take care of them later, unless Minda decided to take care of them itself. He grabbed his briefcase and headed for the front door.

“Have a successful day serving the Mainframe, Mr. Frazier.”

“Likewise, Minda. See you next morning,” he responded.

“Yes, Mr. Frazier,” Minda replied as the door closed behind him.
John took the stairwell down to the ground floor and walked the length of the hallway to the main door of the apartment complex, his reflection growing in stature as he approached the mirror on the back side of the door.

His truck was parked two blocks down 2nd Street in the nearest zone permitted for ground parking. He drove a '27 cherry Chevrolet to work, the same vehicle he had driven for the past twenty-four years. As he approached the vehicle, the sensors detected his presence through his microchip and released the locks, and the driver’s side door folded up into the interior of the truck. The ignition started when he placed his right hand on the steering wheel.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t drive an aircar. He just wasn’t allowed. He hadn’t passed his authorization exam due to a lingering fear of heights that had followed him into adulthood, but he didn’t really have a problem with driving his truck. His vertigo aside, he actually preferred land vehicles, especially nowadays when so few of them occupied the old roads. Most everyone nowadays drove their aircars on the airways, so most of the traffic was up there and not down on the ground. Down here, he was the king of the highway.

He pulled onto Christopher Columbus Dr., and after four blocks turned left onto Martin Boulevard, passing 6th Street, 9th Street Park, then eventually turned right onto Lincoln Highway and crossed into the Holland Tunnel which carried him under the Hudson River into Manhattan. After crossing into the city, he turned onto West Street, passed the 1WTC complex on his left, and parked on Liberty Street, about three blocks from the tower, since he wasn’t allowed to park his outdated vehicle within two blocks of the tower, due to security reasons.
It took him about ten to twelve minutes to walk down Liberty, up Greenwich St., then onto Fulton St. from where he could enter the tower.

He entered the lobby of 1WTC and approached the security door. “Welcome, John Frazier, file-number 16947823061,” the projection of the security guard announced as he walked through the sensors. He checked the time on a nearby wall screen and realized he didn’t have enough time to make it up the eighty-six flights of stairs to his office without being a couple minutes late. Although he preferred not to take the digiporters since they made him nauseated, he decided he didn’t have much option. He walked over to the digiporter station at the end of the lobby, and hesitantly stepped onto one of the circular pads – four concentric circles with currents which broke matter down atomically and restructured it at their destination. “Eighty-sixth floor,” John ordered the digiporter, and he dissolved in space.

After reassembling on the eighty-sixth floor—where Mainframe Enterprises’ offices and personnel were located—he stepped out of the digiporter station and took a deep breath. He had just never adjusted to the things, always had this lingering fear that maybe he hadn’t reassembled correctly, even though this was an irrational concern.

Once he regained his composure he headed toward his office. Most of the hallways, particularly in the office corridors, at 1WTC contained very little activity, aside from subjects walking to and from offices and meeting spaces. It wasn’t a place to stand around and have a conversation – there were designated areas for that. The hallways were wide, about twenty feet, and the floor, ceiling, and walls were covered with industrial gray panels, aside from the wallscreens in between every other door and the glass panels exposing the electrical underbelly running throughout the building.
The room number for John’s office was 9628, on the east side of the building. When he entered his office, he closed the door behind him, then glanced at the clock on the wallscreen. The time read seven-hundred fifty-four hours. He was required to be in his office by eight-hundred and thirty hours each weekday, but he usually arrived a few minutes before eight-hundred. Whenever he arrived to his office, he first dimmed the illumination level on his wallscreen so he was tinted from the outside—for most office workers, this would be illegal, but for the nature of his work at M.E. he was required to keep the outside from viewing the information he had access to. He wasn’t much higher than the level of the airways, after all, and it was a simple task to peer into any open container with current satellite technology.

John sat at his desk and booted up his nanocomputer. He opened his calendar to check his schedule for the day and noticed his meeting with Victor scheduled for ten-hundred hours. Until then he had seven files of recently uploaded individuals whom needed sorting into available vessels. He opened his passageway to the Mainframe and got to work.

He selected the option for “Recently assigned cases.” He was assigned a certain number of case files to find vessels for, along with the other data analysts such as him working for M.E. His first case file was subject Daniel Winters, file-number 17465920689. He opened the file and noticed that Daniel’s consciousness had been uploaded yesterday, September 21st, 2042, at 18:17.43, only shortly after he had left work. He saw the icon “Pending Registration” highlighted on the screen.

He tried not to think about it, the mistake he had made yesterday. How had he been so careless as to delete a file? How was such a simple mistake not easily remedied? He
thought about bringing it up with one of his colleagues, one of the other data analysts employed by the Mainframe. But he didn't want to give anyone a reason to doubt his abilities as a natural-born. Either way, he would have to discuss it during his meeting with Victor, whom John was surprised hadn't already contacted him about it.

Near ten, as he was inputting the seventh case file a message appeared on his nanocomputer. *Supervision meeting with Victor Whirlgood at ten-hundred hours. This is your five minute warning.* He got up from his chair, exited his office, and walked down the hall and took a seat outside his supervisor's office.

A few moments later the door swung open. With neither party exchanging any words, John arose from his seat, paused in the doorway to ensure he was indeed supposed to enter, then sat across from Victor's desk.

“Morning, John,” Victor said, his back facing him as he was typing something at his nanocomputer.

“Victor.”

As a maintenance and systems technician for the M.E., he was required to meet his supervisor every month or so in order to touch base—make sure he was running up to speed, that everything was operating smoothly, that he was performing optimally. Their meetings, however, were never routine. Not the expected *what sort of incidents have you dealt with lately or how can I better assist or support you in your performance.* There was always a sense of pressure to their conversations, like Victor was attempting to unsettle his workers out of complacency, an issue which for natural-born like John tended to be a greater issue. But one never got the impression that Victor wished to stump his employees,
ask them a question they couldn’t answer, or would answer inappropriately. There was an
air of purposeful challenge in his words.

Victor closed his nanocomputer, spun around to face him, and folded his arms over
his lap. He smiled, and the soulpatch beneath his lower lip raised slightly, the dagger sliding
up his face. Until their conversations began, John sat firmly in his seat, relaxing only when
the words let the dagger fall toward the table.

“How long has it been, John?”

“Fourteen years and some change.”

Victor laughed, his shoulders bobbing up and down slightly. “No, I mean since we
last spoke.”

John released a breath with a feigned chortle. “Nearly a month or so.”

He nodded, squinted his brow. “Has it really been that long we’ve had you?”

“Believe it or not,” he said and scratched his head.

“How do you feel a man with your experience in this department should be
performing?”

His eyes left Victor’s stare, slid down toward the desk in between them. “About as
well as anybody else. No, better.”

“Would you say that’s where you’ve been as of late?”

Was he trying to pry it out of him, he wondered? Why didn’t he just say what he was
thinking.

“I’m sure I couldn’t be doing any better.”

“Are you still coming to work early?”

“Every day for the past twelve years.”
“And is that still necessary to adequately complete the tasks you are assigned?”

John paused. “I don’t come to work early because I need extra time. I come to work early because there is nothing more important I could do than work for this company. I’m happy when I come into work early.”

“Happy?”

John nodded slowly, glancing in the bottom-right corner of his field of vision, past his shaking foot, flaying wildly like a fish. “Yes, I enjoy it.”

“Is that what happiness means to you, John? Pleasure? Enjoyment?”

John glanced into the upper right corner of the room. He searched for the proper answer.

“Happiness is going home knowing I’ve accomplished something today.”

“Something? Who for?”

“Some greater good. For others. Least of all myself.”

“And why is that?”

He searched for the answer. “Because there is no self. We validate each others’ existence through cooperation.”

Victor smiled. “So what about when you go home?”

“I wait to come back here, I suppose.”

He imagined he was re-interviewing for his job every time he met with Victor. He wasn’t sure if this was the intended effect. It at least kept him on edge, prevented him from getting too comfortable. He half-thought he should thank Victor, except that may leave him with the impression that he believed his supervisor was manipulating him, which wasn’t exactly the case.
“How much sleep have you been getting?”

John put his hand under his chin and let the weight fall into his palm. “Maybe six hours a night, give or take.”

“Six hours?” Victor smirked, spun around in his chair, his face resuming its stern complexion upon the revolution. “So you go home, make dinner, sleep for six hours, wake up, get ready, come here, work all day, come home, ad infinitum.”

“That’s pretty accurate.”

“So what about those other hours at home when you’re not sleeping?”

“I guess I don’t do much of anything.”

“You do nothing?”

“I re-charge my batteries.”

“For what?”

John made a circular gesture with his arms. “For this.”

“And you don’t find that the least bit inefficient?”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow you.”

Victor placed one elbow on his desk, leaning slightly toward his employee. “It’s a waste of time, isn’t it? Sitting down, doing nothing. A waste of energy.”

“I suppose that’s one way to look at it.”

“There’s nothing else you feel compelled to do?”

“Everything else is just a distraction.”

“And you say you’re happy?”

“Yes,” he replied definitively with a straight expression. His back even straightened slightly as he said it.
Victor nodded slowly, plucking the hairs on his chin. His eyes squinted

“Do you have any questions regarding the recent updates to the VeriChip server?”

He shook his head. “I have no questions.”

“None at all? Nothing you’re curious about?”

John glanced down into his lap. After a few moments, he said, “Well, no, not really.”

“Surely you must be probing something up there. Do you even understand the nature behind these developments?”

“Should I? I mean, do I need to?”

“No,” Victor replied, swiveled in his chair a bit. “Technically you don’t need to. Unless you believe the knowing would improve your work, your incentive for success.”

“I am driven to conduct my job as efficiently as possible.”

His supervisor leaned forward. “So you’re not interested?”

After glancing in the left-hand corner of the room, he said, “I’m only interested if you think there’s a reason I need to know.”

“I won’t go into the specifics. There’s no need if you aren’t going to remember. The update will improve our access and control to information.”

“How will this affect my work?”

Victor released a guttural laugh. “So now he’s interested. Well, Mr. Frazier, you won’t have to know anything different. You’ll merely have even more access to even more data.”

John loosened up, rotated his right shoulder a few times. “I guess what I mean is, will this new influx of information be difficult to navigate? Not become, I don’t know, cluttered?”
“I can't promise it will be easy,” Victor said as he placed his elbows on the table, folders his hands across each other. “And I can't promise it won't require more time, which apparently you aren't doing anything with yours anyway. Basically, once we have updated our servers, there will literally be no limitation to the amounts and types of sensory information we can input into the Mainframe. Everything you say, hear, see, feel, and taste will become uploaded and indexed onto the Mainframe, becoming bits of data that are searchable.”

“Is that all?” John asked.

Victor blinked twice then leaned back in his chair. “What do you mean, 'is that all’?”

“Well, you only listed sensory data. Information that is processed by the brain via our nose, eyes, etc. But what of our thoughts? I understood yesterday that we would be able to begin indexing those.”

Victor chuckled. “I'm pleased to hear you were paying attention.”

John pretended to ignore that comment. “So, how is that going to work, exactly?”

“You remember the demonstration yesterday?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Of course. I mean, I recall Dr. Conrad saying something about binary code and how we can extract thoughts from that.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Victor asked, “What are thoughts, John?”

“Electrical energy in the cortex,” he replied.

“And are we not capable of measuring that?”

He did not readily reply. Of course, this had been an ongoing debate for decades, the origin of thoughts, what they were, what matter, if any, they contained or occupied. By
measuring the electrical signals firing in the brain, one could detect the type and degree of thought, but never the actual content.

“I’m not so sure,” John finally said.

“Well,” Victor replied, “fortunately it is not your job to. Your job is to plug numbers. Mix and match. Keep the world spinning.”

He looked down at Victor’s hands, folded on his desk. Victor turned his chair toward him, crossed his hands over his legs, and looked directly into his face, his smile flattened into a grimace.

“I’m just trying to understand. Sensory input is distinct from cognition. Thinking—it’s more of an idea that anything. It has physical origins, but it’s immaterial. It’s not really represented by anything.”

Victor nodded. “Go on.”

“It’s the difference between perception and sensation. The Mainframe tells us what we’re seeing, even though that’s not actually it. We see everything as we should see it.

His supervisor was silent, which suggested to John that he should continue speaking.

“So, let’s say for example if we look out and see a white city, removed of the details it held before the digitalization of the world—”

“Go on,” Victor replied after John stopped mid-sentence.

“Can we still see those details in our mind’s eye?” he finished.

“Can you?” Victor inquired.

He was taken aback. “I mean, yeah. Sure. I’ve lived in this city my whole life. It’s vague, but I can remember what it looked like. This city.”
“I suspect after we get our handle on the brain’s cognition that won’t be a problem anymore.”

John crossed one leg over another. “No, I suppose it won’t.”

Victor leaned back in his chair, cupped his face in his hand. “You’ve never been inside the Mainframe, have you, John?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t.”

“Well then, I have an assignment for you. I’d like for you to enter the Mainframe. I think it’ll answer some of your questions.”

“How do you suppose we go about doing that?”

“Departmental transfer. We have some people in the other departments of M.E. for exactly this sort of thing—teaching people what it’s like on the inside.”

“And when would you like this accomplished by?”

“Sooner rather than later. We need to get moving—fast. I’ll schedule a meeting for you in the morning to speak with someone about it.”

He nodded his head slowly. “Sounds great.”

A smirk crossed over Victor’s face. “Well, Mr. Frazier, is there anything else you would like to tell me?”

There was a twitch of irony with which Victor said John’s last name. He returned his gaze, staring at Victor’s penetrating eyeballs. “No, sir, there is not,” he said conclusively.

Victor continued his stare for a few moments, then wiped his callous expression away with a grin.

“I’m pleased to hear it,” he said.

“Is there anything else you would like to discuss?” he asked.
“No, it doesn't appear there is.” Victor smiled once more, then spun his chair back toward his desk, facing his back to him. “Good day to you, Mr. Frazier.”

“You as well, sir.”

John got up from his seat, and as he approached the door leading back into the hallway, Victor pressed the door release button, and the electromagnetic door opened long enough for John to pass through. He returned to his office down the long hallway.

He closed the door behind him before sitting at his desk. John wasn’t sure what to make of it. Surely Victor had received a notice of his mistake, that he had deleted a file of a recently uploaded consciousness. Was he waiting for him to open up and admit his own mistake? Was he just toying with him, waiting to use the evidence against him later? Did he even know?

And what about this new assignment? There was a reason he had never been inside the Mainframe. It was the same reason he never used the digiporters and instead took eighty-six flights of stairs twice a day, every day. In the back of his mind he suspected this was something he would have to do eventually, but the reality of it filled him with trepidation.

Later that evening he returned home to his apartment complex. The building was about thirty years old, so its tenants paid a significantly reduced price as compared to other housing in the local area. He himself was rather frugal and didn’t see the point in any more than the minimum for basic needs such as food and shelter. Considering its age, the building was well kept.
He approached the entrance to the apartment complex and placed his right hand against the hand reader. A digital reading above the sensor flashed the words, Welcome, John Frazier, File # 16947823061 – do you have any guests? More modern buildings were equipped with automatic recognition software that didn’t require the touch of a hand, much like the kind that admitted him in and out of 1WTC, but his apartment was still functioning with the old system. The landlord hadn't felt it necessary to update many of the building’s outdated protocols. After all, it still worked.

Once he reached his apartment, he locked the front door behind him—a habit preserved from his youth—and walked over to the window. He touched his right hand against the window, which registered his fingerprints through the chip in his palm. “Change display to 'most recently selected,’” John said aloud. The window registered his command and Minda replied, “Yes, Mr. Frazier” through the speaker in his ceiling. It had learned how to speak without showing itself in the evenings, which he was pleased to see. From the corners to the center of the glass panel, the window transformed into a digital image of an orange sunset falling beyond an ocean’s horizon, palm branches peeking out through the tops of the screen, hovering over a sandy beach.

Living alone was one of the few precious luxuries allotted him as an employee of M.E. Most of the citizens of the North American Union lived with – or were required to live with – children or spouses or parents or friends. When family or friends were an unavailable resource to a tenant, either due to social inadequacy, loss of relationships, or some other genetic malfunction, they were assigned a roommate to hold each other accountable through the Life Department (located thirteen floors below his office in 1WTC). However, as an official of M.E. he was allowed privileges that were inaccessible by most subjects. All
for a reduced price of eighteen-hundred nanodollars a month, of course, discounted from the normal rate of two-thousand and fifty.

Whereas some would find this independence unsatisfactory, John quite reveled in the limited freedom he was allowed from his peers at M.E. and the friends and family he would otherwise live with. He held a natural tendency toward lonesomeness that transcended mere desire, notwithstanding the fact that such a desire wasn’t exactly a practical urge and therefore had been extinguished. His superiors had explained to him that as a naturally-born human being, he was prone to certain defects which had been genetically preconditioned out of the clones. His most noticeable residual trait was his introversion, a condition with which subjects not only were able to exist without the presence of company, but actually functioned better in such states. Despite its inherent flaws, this condition was considered valuable only in carefully-selected specimen who appeared otherwise docile. The celebrated advantage lay in an ability to conduct work timely, efficiently, and accurately without facing defection of the affairs and interests of other people.

Forty-two, alone, stably employed. It was enough.

He decided he would make dinner tonight rather than order in. He reached up into his pantry and grabbed an old pot from the top shelf. As he was bringing it down to the counter, he was disturbed by a knock at his front door. Startled, the pot slipped from his hand and fell crashing to the floor, the metal clang exposing his presence behind the door.

“John, is that you in there?” he heard from the other side of the door. “Open up, it’s Bob!” He set the pot on the countertop and straightened his sleeves. It was his upstairs neighbor, Robert Welton.
Robert Welton lived directly upstairs in a two bedroom apartment with his wife and two sons. They had been something of acquaintances since the Weltons moved in about ten months ago. When they first met, Robert introduced himself to John as “Bob Welton, second generation” and the name stuck like a kernel in the back of the throat. When he asked Bob what he did, Bob explained that he and his family had moved to New York so he could find work as a mechanic – not for aircars, but the outdated models which still found themselves on the paved streets of only the largest cities, where the airways were expeditiously constructed before the populace could make the transition to the new technology. He kept up the acquaintance if for no other reason than to have a mechanic for his ’27 Chevrolet close at hand.

He opened the front door. “Hello, Bob.”

Bob, dressed in the denim mark of his status, held his hand out for John to shake and he received it. “Hi, John, so good to see you. I knocked a little earlier but I don’t think you were in.”

“That’s probably right, I stayed a couple extra hours at the office today.”

“No kidding,” Bob replied with what appeared a sincere grin of interest. “What project do they have you working on now?”

“Mostly just the usual vessel matching. Also got us working on an update for the VeriChip server.”

He glanced down at his neighbor’s right hand, and Bob slid his hand into his pants pocket. Bob had been resisting his and his family’s implementation of the VeriChip for years. They had their apartment outfitted with the old eye-recognition software, which was considered a security risk by most nowadays since DNA leaks sometimes resulted in the
release of counterfeit organs such as eyeballs. VeriChips, however, could not be copied, and therefore there was no risk of sabotage, whereas stolen identity and access into other subjects’ residences and bank statements had been an issue before the development of the device.

“For currently active VeriChip users, that is,” John added. “Actually, I just got home a little while ago and was about to start dinner.”

“Oh no no no, of course, I didn’t mean to bother you,” Bob replied. “I’ll let you go in a second, I just wanted to drop by and ask if you could maybe do me and Edna a favor tomorrow night.”

“Uhm.”

“You see, tomorrow’s our seventeenth anniversary, and we were hoping to go out and celebrate, you know, just for a few hours in the evening. If you could just watch after the boys for a little bit, while we’re out, we would really appreciate it.”

John, upon agreeing to babysit the Welton boys for the first time nine months ago, felt some inability ever since to say no the other four or five times. “Sure, Bob, that will be fine. I can drop by at eighteen-hundred hours.”

Bob’s face lit up. “Thank you, John, thank you, Mr. Frazier.”

“Not a problem, see you tomorrow,” he said, waved him off, then closed and locked the door. He returned to the countertop where he had set down the pot and proceeded to make his dinner.

It wasn’t exactly true, of course, what he had said. Legislation was being passed that would require all subjects without possession of a VeriChip to visit their nearest VeriCorps
and undergo the implantation. The update of the server he was working on was for the purpose of accommodating the sudden influx of VeriChips once the legislation took effect.

John thought it seemed pretty absurd that there were still some outliers like Bob and his family who hadn't registered for their own VeriChips. So long as he was willing to seek employment in the old ways of doing things, and seek landlords who were willing to equip his apartment with outdated security measures, it was fine, for the moment. For awhile it had not really been an inconvenience to the public domain that some had been unwilling to make the switch—the inconvenience belonged to anyone who felt they could get by without their own VeriChip, since most transactions required VeriChip registration on the Mainframe. However, some interpreted their lack of registration as a relinquishment from their social responsibility, the stability and cohesion by which the NAU ran. It was an issue of monitoring – unregistered subjects were difficult to track on the Mainframe, since most of their transactions took place offline and without VeriChips.

VeriChip, a product of Mainframe Enterprises. The prototype was unsuccessfully injected into the public in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but the general public opinion was one of hesitation. Parents belonging to the Baby Boomers and the early members of Generation X influenced their children, and since the internet had only been functioning for about half of their lives, it proved necessary to wait until the next generation took control of the economic and political spheres before the transition could be initiated.

John could remember the year—2018 when his VeriChip was installed into the palm of his right hand. He had been about twenty years old at the time. He could remember the original slogans and headlines.
VeriChip, a New Age of Truth.

That night, as John readied himself for bed, he walked over to the window to change the display setting. He pressed his hand against it and said, “Night sky.” The virtual image of the horizon evaporated and become replaced by the great beyond, the unchartered territories of space, hundred of white and yellow lights pressed upon a black backdrop. The dark expanse of space. Finally, man had replicated the infinite universe on Earth with the Mainframe. The black, hollow reaches of space stretching into eternity, endless highways of data and information plunging past the limitations of man, defying the passage of time and space. They had brought the infinite to Earth.

John lay in bed. As sleep approached him, he recalled his drive home from work earlier in the day. Hovering down the airway, he made a point to eyeball the spot in passing where Jenise Lawrence had fallen from her aircar, plunging into the void of the Mainframe as her body was digitally incinerated and her consciousness uploaded through her processed VeriChip. He was expecting to see the image he had seen displayed on the wallscreen back at his office – a black square censoring the erasure, the fissure between this world and the next.

Recalling it now, he could not remember the black square as he drove by. Was he only just now imagining this? Perhaps they had already sealed the hole.

He got up from bed, glanced at the window, the visual display of the night sky. He could see The Big Dipper, he could see the great bull. Somewhere out there, he knew, was Venus. “Cancel display,” he told the screen. The image quickly evaporated and was replaced with the view from his apartment window.
V.

When he arrived at the office the next day, he examined his agenda. Victor had scheduled him to meet with someone at nine. He was instructed to experience life inside the Mainframe, as assisted by a Douglas Bennington, file-number 20385730989. John opened OneSearch and looked up the information on Douglas’ file. He was a technician for the Life Department, another branch extending from M.E. Age, twenty-five. Build, medium. Height, five-foot-eight. Sexual orientation, straight.

Despite his reservations, he understood why this would all be necessary. Essentially, it was up to him to understand how the Mainframe worked—that is, how it operated from inside the server, and how people like him kept it functioning from the outside. Though he had never had his mind uploaded to the Mainframe before, he understood the theory behind it. The process was rather simple—deactivate the neural pathways in the brain which handled awareness and consciousness, then transfer that energy through the wearer’s VeriChip onto the Mainframe, thus granting individuals access to the digital network. Of course, this service was not available to just anyone who desired it. As an employee of the Mainframe, he was not registered for access into the digitized world of the Mainframe—he merely had access to the nuts and bolts of the project. Access was restricted to paying customers, and employees were instructed to keep their objective
distance. To disobey this order would result in documentation and possibly extermination of employment.

After some time, John noticed a figure through the electromagnetic door standing outside his office. The man’s face was scrunched, looking around like he had wound up in the wrong place. From the other side of the door, he asked, “Is this John Frazier’s office?”

“Afraid so. You look lost. Take a seat.”

The man walked over and sat across from him. Looking around the office, he responded, “No, it’s just, I don’t get it.”

“What don’t you get?”

“It’s just, I was told to come here and explain the Mainframe to someone, then I find myself just treading up a few flights of stairs to another branch of it.” He paused as if to speak again.

“Uh-huh.”

“So why am I here?”

“Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing,” He replied coyly.

Douglas narrowed his glance as he focused on John’s face. “You a natural?”

He nodded. “Surprised?”

A look of recognition appeared on the man’s face. “I see. So you really don’t know what it’s like inside there?”

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “On the contrary, I know it rather well. I know all about it.”

His guest chuckled. “Yeah, maybe you have a theoretical understanding of it, but you haven’t experienced it, so you don’t really know what it’s like.”
John sighed. “Since you’re dying to know, you’ve been summoned to share your perspective on what it’s like to be a user inside the Mainframe. I didn’t decide for you to be here.”

“Fair enough. Long as they’re paying me to be here.”

He reached his hand across the desk. “John Frazier.”

The man received the shake. “Douglas Bennington. So, if you work for these guys, why don’t they grant you special access or something?”

He shook his head. “It’s a company mandate, you know this. Employees aren’t given access.”

“Oh yeah. That always struck me as a little backward.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

Douglas kicked his legs up, resting them at the opposite end of John’s desk. “I mean, instead of actually just sending you in there, they bring me here to talk to you, share my experience, as if it’s similar to actually being there. I just don’t get it.”

He shrugged. “It kind of makes sense. They don’t want me getting sucked up in there. It tends to be somewhat addictive, so I hear.”

Douglas chuckled. “Yeah, maybe to natural-borns.”

John shifted in his seat. Addiction was one defect of natural-borns that was often removed from the genetic material of the artificially-inseminated. Natural-borns therefore had greater difficulty managing their intake of pleasure.

“The whole thing doesn’t really interest me, either way,” he replied. “It would just be a distraction. I only need to know the basics so I can keep doing my job.”

“Suit yourself,” Douglas said and dropped his legs to the floor.
“Listen, I’ve been through a simulation before. I get the idea of it.”

Douglas shook his head. “That’s just the thing. It functions, sure, but it’s not the real thing. That program is a cheap imitation, but you don’t get the full sensory and perceptual rush of losing touch with yourself and becoming an interconnected mechanism of the Mainframe. You don’t get to participate in all the interactions that you can do when you’re actually in the thing.”

“I don’t need to be ‘in the thing.’ I just need to know the layout.”

“What ‘layout?’ You’re talking about the Mainframe like it’s some building or something.”

“Would you prefer the term ‘structure?’”

“Alright, listen, just tell me this – do you at least know what it’s like to be inside there? Like, any basic understanding.”

“For the most part. It’s like you’re a disembodied brain floating around in cyberspace, running through networks and servers until you’re ported back into the physical world.”

Douglas lowered his head into his hand. “They seriously let you manage this stuff?”

“Unless I’m mistaken,” John fired back, “I think you’re supposed to be sharing your infinite wisdom on the system I operate. So, enlighten me.”

Douglas sighed, sunk slightly back in the chair across from him.

“Did your parents ever tell you much about airports?”

“My parents?” John asked. He was surprised to receive this inquiry – the fact of his parentage was not considered appropriate for discussion.

“Oh, wipe that stupid look off your face. Parents, yes, we know you’ve got them.”
John settled back in his seat. “Alright.”

“So, did they?”

“Yeah, I suppose they did.”

“Told you all about the terminals and the takeoffs and the landings and the security?”

He nodded. “Sounds familiar.”

Douglas leaned forward and began talking with his hands. “Well, that’s basically the Mainframe. It’s like a highway floating in space that you can’t see – the roads aren’t clearly marked for our eyes, because, well, it exists kind of beneath everything. And the highways are connected via these terminals, where planes land, unload passengers, reload passengers.”

“I’m not sure I’m following you.”

“I don’t mean literally, of course. But that’s what it’s like. Information is uploaded to the Mainframe, traveling all across the globe, landing here and there, transporting information to wherever it needs to go. But not just information—we can do the same thing with physical objects. Kind of like dragging a file from one folder to another on an old computer model.”

“Your metaphor sounds pretty outdated.”

“I’m just considering my audience.”

John glared across his desk. “So I’m like the captain?”

“Not really. You’re more like the guy who takes passengers’ boarding passes before they take off. If anyone’s flying the plane in this scenario, it’s me.”

“Okay, now explain it to me plainly.”

Douglas paused for a moment. “See, that’s just the thing.”
John cocked his eyebrows. “What’s the thing?”

“It’s difficult to explain.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just, you don’t really see anything in the Mainframe. You don’t touch it, you don’t taste it. You don’t really have any senses to describe it with. Nor do you have any words—your linguistic understanding is severed. Supposedly it’s like these dreams you naturals get, kind of how you don’t know how to make sense of them after they’ve happened.”

“Oh, well if you had to explain it in words, how would you?”

“Well,” Douglas said as he crossed his legs, cocking his head toward the ceiling. “It’s basically like if you remove your sense of yourself. Your identity, your environment, your knowledge of how you fit in to wherever you work, live, sleep, whatever. It’s like a separation of the mind and body. They probably taught you in your school days that you couldn’t separate the two, couldn’t make sense of one without the other. Well, that’s what uploading your consciousness to the Mainframe does. That’s your mind existing by itself, without language, without awareness. Kind of like what we imagine being in the womb is like. Dark, though we don’t really have any understanding of what dark is. A little frightening if we knew better, but of course we don’t.”

“But they’re not completely separated.”

Douglas leaned forward. “Yes, that’s correct. There’s a thread holding them together. The link is your VeriChip.”

“So what about it holds them together? Between this world and the digital one?”

“Gravity? I don’t know. That’s stepping into your domain, Mr. Mainframe.”
“I’m just wondering, is it possible to sever the tie?”

“Probably. Might be like a plane crash. Lost in transit. Might cease to exist entirely. You’re not saying you did that, did you?”

“No, of course not, don’t be basic. I’m just wondering if it’s impossible, and if so, what would happen. Like, if they would be stuck in there forever, a floating consciousness never to reunite with a physical body.”

“That’s some pretty deep thinking for a guy like you.”

He rolled his eyes, sat back in his chair. “So where do we go from here?”

“Well, you’re not quite ready to go online. I don’t think you’re quite ready for the Mainframe, not just yet.”

“Victor pretty much wants this thing streamlined. He said sooner than later.”

Douglas scratched his head. “What do you want?”

John squinted over at him. “Beg your pardon?”

Douglas sat back in his chair, looked up at the ceiling. “It’s pretty scary the first time. Terrifying, actually. You’ve lost all sense of everything. Who you are, what you’re doing. Thing is, you’re still aware, and you’re especially aware that something isn’t right. Something’s different.”

John held his gaze at Douglas’ chin turned up at him and swaying from side to side as he swiveled in his chair. “Have you ever worked with Portal?” he asked him.

Douglas switched his eyes back to the man across from him. “Haven’t. But I know just about as much as you know about being in the Mainframe.”
“Well, leave it to say that what you’re describing sounds kind of like that. Some react more positively than others, but most just lose it. Just a random sequence of numbers all saying the same thing—help me.”

The two men went quiet for several seconds.

“After the procedure,” he continued, “we usually have to wipe their memory of any recollection of being inside the Mainframe. They still have knowledge that they had been in there, that they’re in a new body now from the one they had before, but the in between—we just wipe that shit clean.”

When he finished speaking, he looked back at Douglas. His face was clear of expression. He wondered what he was thinking.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Douglas finally said. “Let’s pick this conversation up next time.”

He nodded. “Sounds good.”

Douglas stood from the chair, turned to face the door, then exited the office.

At eighteen hundred hours that evening, after John had returned from work, he walked up the extra flight of stairs to the Welton’s apartment on the fourth floor. He knocked at the door and moments later it swung open.

“Hello, Mr. Frazier,” Timothy Welton, the youngest of the two boys, said in between taking licks from a raspberry-flavored popsicle.

“Timmy,” John uttered, acknowledging the boy’s presence as he walked through the doorway.

Bob walked around the corner from one of the bedrooms. “John, so good to see you!”
“Bob.”

Behind Bob came Edna Welton, her red hair in a bob and her dress hugging her hips just a little too tightly. She walked up to John, who noticed her thighs rubbing together as she approached him, and placed a kiss on the side of his check. “John, thank you for coming over and watching the kids for us.”

Forcing a smile, he replied, “Oh, it’s no problem.”

“Really, we must make it up to you sometime,” she insisted. “Robert, are you ready?”

“Yes. Thank you, John, see you shortly,” Bob said, patting his babysitter on the shoulder as he and his wife ambled out the door.

Alone in the living room, John faced Timothy and crossed his arms. “Well, Tim, is your brother around?”

“Yeah, he’s in our room,” he replied. Timothy, if John remembered correctly, was eight, which meant Scotty must have been around twelve. The two boys shared a bedroom, which was one of the few arrangements of this family structure of which John approved. One of the few things he liked less than children were children left to themselves.

“I assume you and your brother have eaten?”

“Yes sir, Mom and Dad made us dinner before you came.”

“Alright,” he replied, then waved his hands at him. “Go play.”

Timothy scampered down the hall and opened his bedroom door.

“Scotty, Mr. Frazier is here,” he heard Timothy say from across the apartment.

“Cool,” said a voice from inside the bedroom.

John had never understood the impulse to have children. Frankly, he had never much cared for them to begin with, but the desire to reproduce organically, naturally,
repulsed him. Sure, he had been brought into the world that way, like these two children before him, but the difference between him and them was that his mother hadn't a choice in the matter.

He was secretly concerned for the boys' upbringing, not because he particularly cared about them, but because they weren't being prepared for the new world, the one their parents had yet to enter, which meant another generation of resistance. Scotty was mostly quiet when his parents were around, or so John noticed, but Timothy couldn't help but laud his father with praise for his profession. He found it the most fascinating thing in the world, and frequently reminded his family that he would grow up to be an automotive technician just like his dad.

John took a seat on the couch in the living room. Across from the couch was a television set, one of the old models from before when televisions had been integrated with any and all glass panels. There was a handheld remote resting on the arm of the couch next to him. He picked it up, switched the power on, and flipped to the WorldNews channel.

Sitting on the couch, he glanced over his shoulder into the boy's bedroom down the hall. He overheard a conversation they were having. He could see Timothy sitting on the floor playing with a red toy truck his parents had undoubtedly bought him. It resembled one of those old fire engines which John hadn't seen in over fifteen years.

“Timmy, you don't really want to be a mechanic like Dad when you grow up, do you?” Scotty asked.

“Well, sure I do. At least for awhile.”

He turned the volume up on the television in order to drown out the boys' chatter.

“What do you mean 'awhile'?”
“Just for like a few years or so. I hope I can be an astronaut and go to the moon someday,” Timothy said.

Scotty laughed. “Don’t be such a digit! Don’t you know that stuff never happened?”

“What stuff?”

“The moon landings, Timmy.”

“They did too! Henry’s father told me all about it.” John assumed Henry was one of Timothy’s friends from school.

Scotty laughed. “And you believed that old goat?”

John noticed that Timmy didn’t readily respond. The boy seemed sure in his belief, but was insecure of his brother’s advantage in age and size. Scotty, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy the easy victory of debating with somebody with half his brain capacity.

He tuned into the boys’ conversation, listening from the couch as they argued in their bedroom. He turned the television down a few notches.

“Timmy, that crap never happened. You honestly believe in that stuff?”

“Well, I mean, I’ve never really had any reason to doubt it. I didn’t know anyone thought it didn’t happen.”

Scotty let out a loud sigh. “Timmy, have you ever actually looked up any information on the moon landings?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Well, it was all just one big hoax to give the United States an upper hand in the war against the Russians, which was a pretty big joke in itself.”

“Why would they do that?”
“Isn’t it obvious? American supremacy. It was that country’s way of telling the whole world that they were the best, and convincing everyone that they were super powerful. But it’s pretty funny, actually, to think that anyone believed it really happened, especially since it 'happened' shortly after several failed attempts to even get a rocket to launch.”

“So they didn’t get a rocket to the moon?” the younger brother asked, his voice hovering over a whisper.

“Timmy, it’s a well-known fact that the atmosphere is too hot for the human body to penetrate. We still can’t get through it.”

“But they had special space suits, didn’t they? Didn’t those keep them safe?”

“We’re talking thousands and thousands of degrees, Timmy. The steel in those rockets could conduct the heat, but not the people.”

John noticed Timmy’s gaze sink toward the floor as he rolled his fire truck back and forth two or three times. “So does that mean we’re stuck here?”

“For now, until they find a way to bypass the atmosphere entirely. It’s possible. I think physicists are working on it now, maybe.”

“Mr. Frazier!” Timmy called from the bedroom. He jolted in his seat, and looking over his shoulder in their direction, replied, “Hm-hmm.”

The boys walked into the living room. “Is it true the stuff that Scotty is saying? Did the United States really not go to the moon?”

John couldn’t help but appreciate the fact that Scotty had figured out his parents had been lying to him. Bob and Edna Walton still believed that the United States’ landed on the moon, and that terrorists flew planes into the twin towers, and that JFK’s assassination was just a random occurrence.
“People have their opinions, Timmy,” he answered. “Some still believe that astronauts really did land on the moon in 1969, but a lot of people also don't think it happened. You have to understand, the United States lied about a lot of things, but really it's up to you to decide what you think, since that evidence can't necessarily prove anything.”

This was John's conservative answer. If he didn't have the Walton's social relations to maintain, he would have said outright that the moon landings were a fucking joke and that the citizens of the United States were idiots to have ever believed their government was telling them the truth about it, and that Timmy should realize his parents were fools for holding on to these outdated beliefs that have been, for all practical purposes, disproven.

“Come on, Mr. Frazier,” Scotty said, “surely you think it's true that they never actually made it.”

He glanced at the boy. “You should believe what you want to believe, kid. My opinion shouldn’t matter to you. If you really want to know, ask your parents.”

“Don't waste your time asking them about this stuff, Timmy,” Scotty said. “Mom and Dad don’t know what they’re talking about when it comes to this stuff.”

Timmy had grown silent, his arms tucked together and his vision still affixed to the floor. He looked up at Scotty and said, “Hey bud, why don’t you give your little brother and I a minute?”

Scotty shrugged, said “Sure,” then walked back off to the boys’ room.

Timmy walked around to the front of the couch and took a seat next to John, whose sentiments were getting the best of him, he realized.

“What's got you all beat up, kid?” he asked the young boy beside him.
“Scotty doesn’t think daddy’s telling the truth. Is my dad really lying to me, Mr. Frazier?”

He took a moment to invent an appropriate response. He didn’t want to pretend like these were his kids to raise, nor did he want to pretend to the contrary.

“There comes a time when people need to figure things out for themselves. Your brother is reaching an age where he has to decide between what his parents tell him and what the world tells him. I know you think he sounds pretty certain about everything, but he’s not. He’s still searching for something, whatever that is.”

“So what age am I?” Timmy asked.

John chuckled. “You’re at an age where, to be perfectly honest, you just need to be eight years old and not worry about such matters. You’re not your brother’s age yet.”

He was expecting that to clear things up, but the boy was still looking down into his lap as if something were the matter.

“Is there something else?” he inquired.

“Mr. Frazier,” Timothy said, “is it true you’re a natural-born like us?”

John seized in his seat, felt as if the air had been beat out of him. He glared down at the boy and asked, “Who told you that?”

Timmy answered, “My dad. He told us we could trust you, since you’re like us. You are like us, aren’t you, Mr. Frazier?”

Unsure of how to respond, but aware that the face had already been exposed, he replied with a furtive, “Sure kid, course I am.” Timmy, his face a little lighter than before, slipped off the couch and walked back off to his room.