

WORLDS APART

I was in deep shit. I don't usually use that kind of language, but there really was no other way to put it. After all, I *was* strapped to my own operating table in my own operating theater and the metal pipe that I'd slipped through the two door handles to prevent the constabulary from breaking through was not as stout as I'd hoped. From the thunderous thuds against the outside of the door and the contorted bend in the pipe, I figured I had less than two minutes before they gained access and thwarted my plans to sync with Mae.

I'd hoped I'd done enough to get a good head start so I could double check my coding and allow the neural cartography machine ample time to complete at least one scan of my brain long before the constabulary showed.

With a final thud the metal bar slipped out of the handles, clanged against the concrete floor, and I watched five large constables rush through. I had not done enough. With no time left, I had no choice. I held a remote in my right hand, felt the 'enable' button under my thumb and pressed it.

I had pressed this same button thousands of times, but there had always somebody else strapped to the table. I was the neural cartographer, they had been the clients. Now, I was both. The only thing I could do was lay still and let the sedative take effect and hope against hope they wouldn't figure out what was really going on and wouldn't turn the cartography machine off, that perhaps out of an abundance of caution, they would wait until a scene commander arrived before they touched anything. For all they knew, it was already a crime scene and that just might buy me enough time to complete my plan.

I felt the effects of the sedative, warm and tingly, spread like a fuzzy blanket inside me which brought to my foggy mind how many of my patients had told me after I'd performed their mind mapping that they'd recalled seeing their life flash before their eyes. That was one side-effect of the neural cartography process and as it turned out, they were right; kind of. Slipping from the shores of consciousness, I saw not my entire life flash before me, but rather saw only the events of the last several months that had led me to this moment. The first thing I saw flash across the screen in my mind....

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...Watching patient number 861 trundle along the conveyer system toward me, I felt derision churn in my stomach. Although I'd come to expect this feeling, despite numerous attempts using a myriad of techniques offered by my therapist, I've never been able to successfully block it from occurring in the first place. Being one of the best neural cartographers in the business, I know the importance of maintaining professional distance at all times, but I just can't seem to come up with the right combination of techniques to ward off these feelings of ill-will.

Completing the journey from the pre-op area, I listened with shameful glee as 861 was unceremoniously deposited onto my stainless steel operating table with an audible thwack. I could have prevented this by slowing the conveyer speed, but I didn't.

Watching the auto-alignment plates slide and adjust him into proper position, the derision began to roil before I finally recalled the advice my therapist had given me.

"It's okay to feel your feelings." I repeated aloud. "Feel them and then let them go."

I gave up trying to thwart them and went ahead feeling my feelings, focusing all my unadulterated hatred on this specific representation of the Elite, who through no fault of his own, brought to life how very different they are from everybody else that isn't. People like me. History books taught me of an age when skin color, education levels, political and religious beliefs, even sexual orientation had once been the lines of demarcation that divided society. That had been centuries ago. Now, there was only one thing that divided people and it wasn't some invisible line that nebulously cut a swath through society. No, the only remaining line was nauseatingly quantifiable. You were either an Elite or you were nobody.

Stripped of their luxuriant clothes and fancy ornamentations I could always tell, within a few hundred thousand credits, just how wealthy each client was based on how supple and luminous their alabaster skin was. That's the thing about the Elite, I grumbled in silence, they have no need to ever feel the harmful rays of the sun; ever. They live a life of protection, literally and figuratively.

It was obvious patient 861 was very wealthy indeed. His skin seemed to glow from an inner radiance I'd not seen in all my years of performing neural cartography. By my estimation, he was the wealthiest client I'd ever had on my table, the elite of the Elite. It was clear not a single cell had ever felt the harmful radiation that most of us have to endure from our binary suns. Protection, even of the lack luster variety, was expensive and with little atmosphere, most of us had to endure, to some degree or another, the harmful effects of the UV rays that passed unfiltered from Alpha sun. 861's skin, by contrast was flawless. Ironical how skin color still divided people, I reflected.

“Let see if your mind is as pure as your skin,” I asked rhetorically already knowing the answer. Regardless of the protections afforded by lead-lined roofs, jackets, umbrellas and luxury vehicles, there’s nothing that can stop melanoma-like thoughts, cancerous ideals and poisonous beliefs to infect the mind. Not even those belonging to the Elite. Regardless of what they tried to make you believe, nobody can buy themselves out of an uncontaminated mind, at least not without assistance.

That’s where I come in and I’m the best in the biz. I map the mind and where directed I polish and buff out any or all of their dents and imperfections. Despite being very good at my job, I hate it. My therapist had, at one time, suggested my hatred was rooted in jealousy coupled with an inability to do anything to change my station in life. I disagree. My hatred comes less from jealousy or impotence and more from the fact that my job, which had held such promise for curing all manner of mental illness, had with the failure of the economy on this fledgling world, become a service for the Elite to scrub the errors they’d committed throughout their life.

Neural cartography had evolved from a life saving to a life modification practice. In a single day, I’d been forced to stop referring to people as patients and instead had been forced to call them clients. Where I’d started out curing schizophrenia and Alzheimer’s I was now forced to be a janitor, cleaning the dirty minds and digitally preserving everything so it could be uploaded and stored to our trademarked computing network.

With their neural network digitized, their less than ideal synaptic pathways scrubbed and sanitized, all that was left was to save it and wait for their physical bodies to keel over. It was then only a matter of pulling up their neural map, click the enable button and the cleaned up

version of each client would spend eternity “living” in whatever paradise program they saw fit to live in, or could afford.

I’d like to think that if I had the means to have my mind mapped and could afford to live in a digital paradise, I’d elect to have my most authentic self preserved, warts and all. Elect to not have it scrubbed clean. After all, I’ve always believed it’s the scratches and scraped surfaces that reflect the most light in a kaleidoscope of life. It’s the patina of the soul, digital or otherwise.

I depressed a large button set in the floor with my foot activating the surgical theatre microphones. As soon as I did so, the professionalism came to the fore and all the loathing that had burned white hot immediately dissipated.

“Patient 861,” I transcribed aloud with a detached timbre, “Date: June 2nd 2119. Time: 9:12 am. Patient is a male Caucasian, aged 49 years. Terminus date: June 27, 2119 plus or minus two days. Commencing initial neural cartography session, Dr. Valentine Viggensen attending....”

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...After several hours, the cartography machine was operating on auto-scan recording all the neural pathways and connections and assimilating the data into digital files. These files were then collated into images that would enable me to visually scan, much like leafing through a photo album of the mind.

Unlike most of my colleagues, I prefer to start my image review from the beginning of a client’s life and work toward the present. Although this approach takes more time on the front

end, I've found I'm able to produce a more detailed and accurate mind map and spend less time on the revisions on the back end. Besides, the memories that are encoded from early childhood go relatively quickly.

No surprise, 861 had lived a privileged life but had also been forced to live a relatively isolated life as well. The first thing I learned was his name, Heathcliff. Before that moment, I only knew him as 861.

"Hello Heathcliff." I said aloud. From this point on, despite my previous feelings, he ceased to be a client number and became a person. While I was there to simply map his mind, I felt there were equal parts science and art when it came to creating a map of a mind. Heathcliff was more than just a collection of memories, he also had a soul and that soul is what I was really hunting for, what constituted the cornerstone piece needed to capture and create a fair and detailed digital model of not only his mind and memories, but of his personage. That's was made my work stand out and why the Elite paid such a high price for my services. Not that I ever saw much of it.

I watched the pictures of his memory play out on my monitor; some blurry and fuzzy, others crystal clear. I voyeuristically watched as he learned to ride a bike inside the protective covering of a lead lined auditorium and noted his fear and insecurity. That tarnish would be something to buff out. The Elite, I've learned over the years, spend an inordinate amount of time trying to combat both fear and insecurity using their wealth as a shield of misinformation to try to convince others their not afraid. I wonder if they have any idea it's themselves their really trying to convince.

I watched as he was coddled and nurtured and cared for, watched as he grew and became more and more insistent that other do things for him instead of doing things for himself. I marveled, as I always do, how unaware he became of his needs and focused singularly on his wants, which were never denied.

By age 22 I watched him discover love, plaintive as it was. The Elite, like Heathcliff, were few and far between and love was less about romance and spontaneity and more about arrangement, convenience and of course necessity. Without the complexities and strife that are all too familiar with 99% of the population, there was less mess for me to organize and it was relatively easy to compile a detailed digital model of him.

Within two hours I'd made it through most of his life and watched as Heathcliff progressed through the arranged relationship, the wedding, the consummation, the birth of his daughter. I stopped the review; time stamped it, bookmarked the stopping point and looked at my display to see if the cartography machine had completed its initial sweep. It had. I then looked at the timeline readout, did the arithmetic in my head and realized his daughter had been born 15 years ago and would be only a few years younger than myself...

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...I had watched Heathcliff's life progress and looked with increasing interest as his daughter, Mae grew and matured. She had captivated me from the first moment I saw her. She was a willful, intelligent, inquisitive, and daring child. There was one memory image that had perfectly captured almost all elements of her personality.

Mae had been only 3 or 4 years old and was sitting in a highchair, clad in a red onesie, leaning her brunette head on her right arm, while her left arm rested across her tiny belly. Her face bore a smile that radiated the beauty of her soul and eyes that sparkled with such warmth and love. I knew upon seeing that image that I'd lost my professional distance and knew I should've stopped the review right then and there, recused myself, and asked another cartographer to complete the review.

I rationalized that if I broke my long held procedural rules and instead of quitting I would skip ahead to the most recent memories that Heathcliff possessed I would be less interested in Mae's progression and would therefore be able to refocus my attention on what I was there to do.

I fast-forwarded the memory plates to the most recent memories and watched in reverse. Initially my plan seemed to be working. The most recent memories that Heathcliff had did not involve Mae. Instead, I watched the vacation he and his wife took to the far side of Vega Plura, and then continuing in the reverse, watched the diagnoses of Heathcliff's terminus which prompted the vacation to Vega. I bookmarked that memory plate for deletion. I felt myself settling back into my familiar professional pattern, then I saw her again, only this time she was grown, mature and all the more compelling.

No, compelling is not quite adequate a word. She was spectacular. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Never before had I been as captivated as I was when looking at this woman about whom I knew almost nothing about.

Therein the war began to be waged inside me. I wanted to find out everything there was about her and wanted to use Heathcliff as that instrument to help me, but I couldn't! I can't! I bolted from my chair fearful that proximity to him would compel me to head down a path that I

knew was better left avoided. How would I be able to finish the mapping without rousing suspicion?

There were protective measures in place to prevent the theft of ideas locked inside one brain and made known to another. After all, I have free access to everything contained in each clients mind: passwords, account numbers, net worth, you name it. I possessed the keys to the kingdom. To ensure I, or any other neural cartographer didn't use or share this information for illegal purposes, at the end of each day, all of our data was reviewed and compared to our verbal transcription. The computers were highly sensitive to a number of parameters and if it was determined you were withholding information or not being honest, you were required to have your own mind mapped where any nefarious thoughts would be rooted out and if found the punishment would be swift and brutal.

I knew I couldn't and wouldn't probe Heathcliff for information about Mae, no matter how badly I wanted to peek. I went back to work, resigned to the task at hand and picked up where I'd left off. I watched his and her life develop, noting that there had been no matches for her and no plans to wed. She was single....

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...I'd gotten through his entire life in pictures, transcribing in emotionless tones all manner of facts and issues to be corrected including the fact that Heathcliff and Mae had an ongoing argument regarding her reluctance to remain isolated. She had a penchant and a love of exploring and was curious about the world and about people. She would sneak out, dressed as a commoner and would frequent a particular brew house pretending to be one of them going so far as to color her face to conceal its true alabaster hue.

The only thing I did do was make a mental note of the place she liked to frequent. If I was stealing information, I figured this was, at the most, petty theft. This woman, who by my estimation was the daughter of the richest client I'd ever seen, was nothing like any of the Elite I'd ever come in contact with and I wanted to meet her in person, wanted to discover and learn about her naturally without any influence or aid.

With my initial review now complete, I finished up my transcription, saved all the data that I'd accumulated and sent Heathcliff off to the post op area. I submitted my data along with my transcription to the computer for analysis. If all was clear and the computer detected no aberrations, the door to the surgical suite would unlock.

Seconds ticked by, then a full minute. I was beginning to panic, but kept a board disinterested look on my face knowing I was being recorded. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the door lock beeped and I walked out...

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...The brew house was dark and crowded. I stood just inside the entryway for a moment allowing my eyes to adjust trying to contain my anxiousness. I had no idea if she'd even be here. I only knew she liked to come here.

As I'd made my way there I'd told myself a thousand times she wouldn't be here, after all, her father was likely just now coming out of the pre-op and able to see family members after his procedure. It didn't matter, I knew she liked to come here and I wanted to get a feel for the place, get a feel for her if only by proxy.

“You’re some creepy stalker.” I whispered under my breath as I walked toward the counter. After ordering a cold Octavian brew, I made my way to the back of the place where I could put my eyes on all those coming and going when I stopped dead in my tracks. There she was, sitting with a tattered hooded shawl draped over shabby looking overalls that were likely made to look worn and used, but were anything but. I could tell from the thickness they were likely woven with the highest grade of nano-lead which provided not only lightweight but were most effective in shielding her from the harmful UV rays. They were also exorbitantly expensive. But you’d never be able to tell.

I stood with stunned disbelief. She sat alone, nobody paying any attention, none the wiser where she’d come from or who she really was. I’d been very careful when finishing my review of Heathcliff to only pay attention to why he had disagreed with her motivations for her wanting to integrate with the lowly ones, ignoring the motivation itself.

“Mind if I sit down?” I said pointing to a chair opposite her that had, by providence, just been vacated.

“Sure, go ahead.” She answered dismissively.

I held her gaze until she broke her eyes away and went back to her tablet. I watched her eyes intently looking for the telltale back and forth sweeps one does when reading words left to right. There were none. She was just staring at the tablet. I couldn’t hold back any longer.

“I’m sorry for interrupting but do you mind me asking what you’re reading.”

“Fahrenheit 451.”

“Wow, an ancient classic written by Ray Bradbury. That’s one of my favorite books.”

She placed the tablet in her lap and looked at me long and hard. Her brown eyes were simultaneously warm and intense. They cast campfire warmth that soothes and comforts on a chilly mountain night, while also warning that if you venture too close, they would burn. I fought the urge to look away.

“You know Ray Bradbury?”

“Well, no, I don’t know him,” I quipped, “I mean while I suspect I’m a little older than you, I’m not a thousand years older than you to have known Ray. Besides, I was born here on Proximus, not on Earth. You?”

She paused for one beat, then two, before she finally laughed.

“I’m Val.” I said noting the melodic sound of her laugh. “May I buy you a refill,” I paused hoping she’d volunteer her name. “I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“Mae. And yes, I’d love a refill, Val. I’m drinking an Octavian Brew.”

Huh. “One Octavian brew coming up.” I said as I almost seemed to float on a cushion of air back to the counter....

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...The brew house was closing up, most of the patrons had gone long ago, but Mae and I had stayed the entire evening talking, laughing, exploring and falling in love. She was nothing like her father, or like any Elite I’d ever come across. She was grounded, balanced, and all together interesting. I found her to be quirky, strange, funny, and intelligent. She was even more amazing than the glimpses I’d stolen from the eyes of her father.

“I supposed we should get going,” I suggested not trying to hide the disappointment in my voice.

“Yes, I suppose we should.”

“Can I walk you home?” I probed.

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary. But I’d very much like to see you again.

“Yes,” I said too quickly. “I’d like to take you out. On a proper date, how’s this Friday look for you?”

“That’ll be fine.”

“Shall I pick you up?” I prodded further.

“No, I’d rather meet you. Where would you like to meet?”

So far she’d parried any probing questions into where she’d come from and in all fairness I’d parried what I did for a living telling her vaguely it had to do with maps. “How does Bentley’s sound? Say 6:30?”

“Oh, I’d love to! I’ve never been.”

“It’s a date then.” I rose from my seat and held out my hand. She placed hers in mine as she stood. I noted how she’d applied a coat of makeup to her fingers and the back of her hand to give them a darkened hue, and from a distance you’d never be able to tell she was an Elite, but holding her hand in mine it was almost impossible not to notice the whiteness of her fingers contrasted against my deeply tanned and sun damaged hands. Then again, deep down I knew

what to look for. She withdrew her hand quickly and shoved them into the front pocket of her overcoat.

“Well, then. This has been most delightful, Val. Thank you.”

“Yes, Mae it has. Thank you and I’ll be very much looking forward to seeing you on Friday.”

I watched her go and waited, waited, waited until there, she turned back to look at me one last time and I knew she too was falling for me as hard as I was falling for her...

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...That first Friday Date Night had been one of the best nights of my life. That had been months ago. Mae and I fell hard but the unavoidable truths were upon us. Up to this point we’d both skirted around the critical topic of who she really was and what I did for a living and how I knew about her before I’d met her. It was weird to think about. I mean to say, “I knew of you before I met you” is awkward to say the least. However, we both suspected the other knew of these truths but to this point it hadn’t been vocalized and discussed.

“Val, I need to tell you a couple of things,” she started out, her voice shaking and her eyes starting to fill with tears. I wanted so badly to put my finger to her mouth to silence her, to tell her that I already knew where she came from, tell her that it was okay she was an Elite. The love I felt for her compelled me to save her from going through the agony of telling me, but that same love imbued me with the awareness that to stifle her now would be disrespectful of what she needed to do.

“Sure, Baby Doll. I have something I need to tell you as well.”

She closed her eyes, steeled herself, and opened them as a single tear slid down her luminescent cheek.

“I’ve been diagnosed with cancer, the same type as my father. I don’t have very much time left.”

I heard the words. The sound waves concussed against my ear drum, the electrical impulse had been received by my brain, but I didn’t register what she’d said. I sat gob smacked. I wanted to say something, but was paralyzed. How? I mentally ran through the mapping session with her father. Certainly if he’d known, I too would’ve known which meant either he didn’t know or this was a diagnosis had come after his mapping.

She picked up my thoughts. “Val, I know who you are. I hadn’t told him. As you’re well aware he was dying himself and I didn’t want to burden him in his final months, so he didn’t know.”

Again, shock waves reverberated through me. How? How could she have known who I was?

Once more, as if reading my mind she answered, “I was there at the neural center the morning my father was there. I saw you. Knew it was you who’d been assigned. We’d done our homework and knew you were the best there was. I also know you didn’t use any information to your advantage other than where I like to procure my brew.”

She reached out and grabbed my hand her mottled skin looked frail instead of luminous. I felt sure if I squeezed too hard, she would shatter like a porcelain doll. Instead of being full of curiosity, life, laughter and love, she was filled with sickness and death.

“I need you to say something.” She prodded.

“How long do we have?”

“I’ve been given a terminus date of October 10th.”

Terminus. I immediately felt hatred toward that word. I understood the need for it, medically speaking, but it carried such finality to it. “That’s less than three weeks away.” I whimpered despite the frustration, anger and unfairness that flash boiled inside me.

“Yes, I want you to map me. Will you?”

“Of course, of course,” I answered automatically not really understanding what I was agreeing to.

All I recall for the rest of that night was how tightly we held each other and how mournfully we wept...

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...As I watched Mae enter the operating theatre, I was not filled with derision, dread, or sorrow. I was filled with optimism, buoyed by joy. Somewhere between that awful night and now, Mae and I had hatched a plan and today constituted the first step in the execution of that plan.

With all previous clients, I’d had to fight to keep my professional distance because of hatred. Now, for the first time, I had to swing the needle to the opposite pole and keep my distance because of love. I marveled once more at her radiant skin as she was adjusted and fitted to my table.

I depressed the microphone button with my foot and began...

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...With a final glance before my eyes slid closed, I saw the five constables standing around not knowing what to do. This just might work. With only seconds left before I slipped into unconsciousness, I heard the familiar whirl of the neural cartography kick into gear and then there was absolute nothingness...

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...I felt cold. I came to looking into an azure sky punctuated by fluffy clouds that drifted lazily by. I sat up slowly and looked down at what I thought was grass. I'd never actually seen real grass. I'd only read about it and saw pictures of it.

My other senses came online and I heard a soft lapping sound and turned to locate the source. I was sitting on the shore of a lake, tiny waves curling and splashing onto it. I looked across the lake and saw mountains of granite rising majestically from the far shore and into the sky. A gentle wind blew and I could faintly smell honeysuckle.

"Val?"

That was the sound I'd wanted to hear. I turned around and saw her. Mae, in all her radiant beauty ran toward me. "Val!"

I leapt from the ground and ran toward her.

We met, almost knocking each other down from the collision as we came together. We held each other with fierceness and with such intensity in the knowledge that our plan had worked. “Mae,” I whispered into her ear. “We made it. We’re here.”

She responded by squeezing even tighter. We stood in that meadow of grass for the longest time. When we did finally break I looked into her brown eyes and kissed her deeply. It was exactly as I’d remembered it.

Breaking away, Mae looked at me. “What is this place? Where are we?”

I looked around and marveled at this world I’d digitally created for us to live forever. I’d looked through all the history books, poured over countless volumes of text to assimilate all the necessary data.

“Mae,” I said with pride as I swept my arm around. “This is Earth. This is where our ancestors came from. This is how it was before we left millennia ago. This is Earth, before it was spoiled. Earth, the way it was supposed to be and how it will be for us...now and for always.”

The End