

Get Me to the World on Time

excerpted from DIS

Bob Proehl

CONNECT ONE

We are all Aabam Sallah

Video of peace protester Aabam Sallah being brutally tortured in police custody. Please repost. How much longer will we allow the Bakamar government to torture its citizens, even while the government's policies keep her people poor? Today it was Aabam Sallah. Tomorrow it could well be you or me.

July 24 at 7:23pm · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

We are all Aabam Sallah

A Khandaqi who is almost 60 years old has cut his hand veins today in front of the High Court. He works for the government and he earns 67 Khandaqi pounds a month (about 12 dollars a month) and he has not been paid by the government for four years!!! Some corrupt Khandaqi government officials own whole islands and have millions of Khandaqi pounds. Khandaqi government corruption has no limits.

July 24 at 8:07pm · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

We are all Aabam Sallah

Very Important: We will be doing a FULL live coverage of protests in Khandaq and all other protests that are taking place worldwide to support Khandaqi protests today Tuesday 25th. Please follow me on Holler (#aabamsallah) and on the InterEm page here. If you haven't already invited all your friends, please do this now. 25th July is our big day.

July 24 at 8:13pm · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

We are all Aabam Sallah

Now: Groups of youth are walking around the area shouting slogans: Freedom and Bread are every Khandaqi request.

July 25 at 5:25am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

We are all Aabam Sallah

Large crowd in front of the High court in Shiruta now

July 25 at 5:45am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

We are all Aabam Sallah

Three marches have started now from: Shiruta Univ Bridge, Magra residential district and the central police station, all towards the city square...

July 25 at 6:01am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

We are all Aabam Sallah

Protesters at the High Court break down the Police siege and run towards Shiruta square. Our reporters say: Amazing scenes there.

July 25 at 6:23am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

We are all Aabam Sallah

E&F V.X

Protesters moving to opera house from Shiruta square. Their number is well over 1000.

July 25 at 6:38am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

We are all Aabam Sallah

Very large crowd. Police cordon is broken and police are now surrounded by protesters for the first time in Khandaq's history.

July 25 at 7:02am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

We are all Aabam Sallah

If you are in Shiruta and you were waiting for something real to happen for you to decide to go to the protest. It's happening. Time now to join protest.

July 25 at 7:33am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

I.

There was work that needed to be done. This, Aaron had learned, was the fundamental truth of running a small business. He imagined once a business became larger, this was no longer the truth. He imagined Eric came into the office once a week, only to boost morale and check some report that informed him how much of the world he'd taken over. But as the single employee of DIS, there was always work that needed doing.

But something was nagging at Aaron. He knew he should be archiving four years of blog entries by a self-taught canning enthusiast in Pittsburgh who'd lost a battle with leukemia the week before, and there were the InterEm and ShutterBug albums of a New York City bike messenger who'd been blindsided by a UPS truck, which Aaron had been contracted to catalog and send to the messenger's mother in Denver. But ten minutes after he should have been at the office, he was buying coffee at Filter, one of the few cafes in Chicago that still bothered to have public computing terminals.

The coffeeshop had once been housed in the knifepoint of a flatiron building that stabbed into Wicker Park, but it had lost its lease to a Bank of America branch several years ago and moved into an old appliance store with unreachable ceilings crisscrossed by the heavy metal vents and pipes that remained a necessary vogue in Chicago design circles. Left over from the former incarnation were electrical outlets in the floor at radial intervals approximately the length of an electrical cord. Filter was a paradise for laptop users. Every seat at every couch, carrel or table was within reach of a recharge and the wifi signal was strong enough to pick up in your fillings.

In a retrograde move, Filter also maintained two pairs of public terminals: two Macs and two PCs. None of them were the sexiest models on the market. They were dated and dowdy compared to some of the pretty young things the clientele brought in, the weightless and cloud-based. But they were serviceable and difficult to trace. Aaron bought an Americano and two hours of access. He was relieved to see the PC in the furthest corner was unoccupied and set up at it. He tucked his coffee just behind the screen to cool and pulled a silver Walkman out of his messenger bag. He placed it on

the table next to the keyboard and fed it a tape of the Sonics, a sadly short-lived garage band from Portland in the sixties. He plugged a pair of dated headphones, foam gripped around low-rent speakers, into it and started the tape. The Walkman had developed a sped-up quarter turn every fourth time the pins made a turn, but Aaron had learned to incorporate this into his listening experience.

Aaron took a second to scowl at the Graphic User Interface, the agreed upon mediator between the person and the machine. Most people only felt annoyance with GUIs when they aggressively asserted themselves as talking paperclips, idiot puppies or condescending install wizards, but like most programmers and hackers, Aaron despised GUIs from the moment they presented themselves. The closest correlative he'd been able to come up with was the Latinate mass. GUIs were full of ceremony and spectacle while they obscured the real goings on from the common user and simultaneously assured her she was in full control as she swallowed the body and the blood, the file and the folder.

He rebooted the computer and before the startup could kick in, bypassed to command line with a series of finger contortions that looked like complicated piano chords. Here was communion. The blinking white cursor on a black screen greeted him. From here, it said, anything is possible.

With a simple *whoami* command, Aaron made sure no other users had access to the terminal. It was virginal white. He set up a triple reroute before accessing the internet through a simple telnet program: Filter's wifi linked to a mirror in San Francisco, remirrored somewhere within a massive server in Russia. Russian servers were notoriously unsecure but saw so much traffic that to find any particular activity would be like finding a needle in a needlestack. Aaron accessed 4Chan, the dark matter of the Internet. It was nearly unobservable but defined the physics of the Internet as a whole. It birthed memes and nurtured them until they were ready to assault the general populace. It spewed virals and antivirals like a geyser. It was the shadow of everything and most people who stumbled on it backed away from its fierce unintelligibility like the site was rabid, which it largely was.

Most of the traffic was pure text, and a lot of the image and video that moved through the site was porn, a statistically aberrant amount of it Japanese in origin and a statistically aberrant amount of *that*

involving cartoon women being raped by octopi or squid. One of the central tenets of the Internet, according to the weird hivemind god of 4Chan was that whatever you could think of, there was porn of it. Another was that if there wasn't porn of it, you needed to make porn of it. There was always some 4Chan user willing to enforce these rules.

Once onto the site through a pure-text portal, Aaron entered a search for Iktomi. He was skeptical anything would turn up, but there was one result. *IkChat*, the screen offered, and Aaron obliged. The system asked him who he would like to log in as. *DUMA*, he typed, using the name of the angel of silence. He waited for a password prompt and got none. As simple as that, he was in the chat room, which immediately introduced him to the rules.

- 1. We are Iktomi, the screen informed him.*
- 2. Iktomi is legion*
- 3. Iktomi never forgives*
- 4. Iktomi can be a horrible, senseless, uncaring monster*
- 5. Iktomi is still able to deliver*
- 6. There are no real rules about posting*
- 7. There are no real rules about moderation either – enjoy your ban*

Aaron had always enjoyed a good set of commandments, and there was something nice and concise about seven. The window showed there were almost six hundred people in the room, all of them with names of six characters or less. Someone going by the name No was holding court.

i vote pizza strike, No said.
cz its 2002 rite? asked REDX
u hate on them cz they fked yr medz, said mmm.
fked yr mom, said No.
no info=no strk, said Kyot.
pstrike needs no info, said No. they r the douche
no info=no strk, repeated Kyot.
Against his better judgment, Aaron entered the conversation.
came late, he typed. who?
duma short for dumass? asked hvncdy.

E&F V.X

bringing pn to bristol myers squbb, said No.
4why? asked Aaron.
4 bing fkers, said No.

best you can do? asked Kyot. In the pauses of this conversation, a dozen others raged, most of them in strings of expletives. But any chat room had its backbone narrative and its chaff, and Aaron suspected this conversation was the one to follow. It had a lower tendency to fall apart after three posts. He was also coming to realize it was Kyot and not No that was in charge, to the extent anyone was.

need info, No posted.
info=yr mom is a whore, posted oe.
info=fked yr sister, added mmm.

thomas.loc.gov/legislatedata.php?&n=Record/hr11785,
posted REDX.

The central conversation paused as the participants, including Aaron, went to the link, which Aaron built another window to read. The link was to a Congressional House resolution that enforced a strict trade policy in southern Africa restricting the sale of a line of generic AIDS drugs, a group of reverse-transcriptase inhibitors that had proven particularly effective in treating HIV, especially if it was diagnosed before symptoms set in. The policy was heavily lobbied for by the drug company Bristol Myers Squibb, who held the patent on the name brand version of the drug: azidothymidine, commonly known as AZT and marketed as Retrovis.

vs.http://en.wikipedia.org/zidovudine#development, posted REDX. The link described how the National Institutes of Health had created a powerful reverse-transcriptase inhibitor, zidovudine, which proved remarkably effective in the treatment of early stage HIV. The wiki entry carefully elided the fact that the government had gifted the patent to Bristol Myers Squibb, but both ends of the story, where the drug was developed and where it ended up, were quite clear.

vs.securethefuture.com, posted REDX to finalize the argument. The linked site was a pabulum from Bristol Myers Squibb about their dedication to the treatment of AIDS in southern Africa. The Secure the Future foundation had been formed by Bristol Myers Squibb three years after the house resolution to promote the donation of AIDS drugs to South Africa.

crt case went three yrs, posted REDX. 3mil s africans dead on bms tab. mils more go fullblown and untreatable. now they are tx brk city for charitable wrk.

fk pizza strk, posted mmm.

fk bms, posted rvr, who had yet to be heard from. A chorus joined in, mostly fucks and yeahs.

fx bom? asked titus. Aaron fondly remembered the days of fax bombing, where you blacked out a sheet of paper with a sharpie and faxed it to someone you wanted to piss off. Done repeatedly, it wasted massive amounts of toner and, on occasion, caused the fax machine to overheat and burst into flames. It was a childish prank, what he'd thought of as a hacker prank, back when he'd drawn a fine line between hackers and programmers and placed himself firmly on the latter side. Back then, hackers were poltergeists. Professional fuckers. Programmers were the ones who cared how things worked. Now hack was simpler slang. It meant the best way to get something done, in program or off.

wek, said mmm.

dds, said No. uge

dds need funds 4bots, said Kyot.

get funds, said No.

get funds, said Kyot. A flood of promises followed, amounts ranging from five dollars to five hundred. Aaron knew this drill well enough from his brief dealings with Yog Soggoth, a hacker famed for his Direct Denial of Service attacks. To bring down a website by traffic overload, you needed a daunting number of computers all making simultaneous service requests. One way to do this was to virally slave bits of unsuspecting computers' attention, so that unwitting users were helping to bring down a site. This was exactly the kind of activity a GUI blinded its user to: pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, even if he happens to be a three hundred pound Scottish hacker. Another was to purchase time on the same massive banks of idle Russian computers Aaron was currently using to reroute his signal. But access to those computers at that scale cost money. As Aaron watched, the money poured in.

Leaning back from the keyboard, Aaron wondered if Agents Strunk and White were somewhere in the six hundred users in the chat room, if they were jotting meticulous notes with impeccable spelling. He wondered how you could prosecute a viper's nest of

righteous anger. Most of these users would have taken even more precautions than Aaron to protect themselves from being traced to their home terminals. After all, he could stand up and walk away from this computer and be utterly untraceable, while their personal IP addresses were at the tail end of whatever serpentine series of bounces they'd set up.

Most frustrating was that none of them *was* Iktomi. Kyot seemed the most likely, but it also seemed Iktomi might be nothing more than a channel for broadcasting vitriol, a way to take anger and collectivize it into something that mattered.

Aaron picked up his coffee, which had dropped below the temperature of the air-conditioned room. He slugged it back, bitter and sharp, and shut the computer down.

II.

Aaron walked into the Real World with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled down over his eyes, despite the heat outside. He needed bars. They provided him with the type and level of socializing he craved. It was a need he'd just as soon be rid of, but needs didn't work that way. Aaron knew how to operate in a bar. Not in the sense of meeting women. The more any interaction became isolated and moved towards something that might result in a sexual encounter, the more Aaron's ability to operate broke down. He worked well on the broad and shallow scale that bars provided; myriad points of light interface, each easily broken off in favor of another. He could move from point to point, gathering or dispensing information. The data that moved back and forth in bar chatter was unfraught, and behavioral expectations were simple enough to figure out. Socializing in a bar was not unlike the web surfing he used to do late at night, back in college and before the internet had become, as a medium, fraught for him. He controlled the levels of interaction, he flitted from one site to another, drawn by information and that thing that lay just behind it: the willingness to exchange. The web gave up its information because it had been programmed to do so. People chose to give up little bits of themselves into the social world, to one another. Partaking in the commerce of these microexchanges, even while hyper-aware of it as a sort of commerce, had a humanizing effect Aaron found he occasionally craved. It was a body need and it

was a comfort to him that he'd found a way to satisfy it in the thrum and rush of crowded bars. And the Real World, as much as he might hate to admit it, was his bar.

The Real World started with the Boom and managed to survive the Fall. Jonathan, the owner, had been a young turk at Apple during their years of high design and was credited as the sole designer behind all things *i*. A heavily tattooed south Londoner with a savant-like palate for gin and a dozen honorary degrees, he'd been wooed to the offices on Infinity Loop with an opportunity to change the world and left the company after more or less doing so. Drunk after last call, he'd complain bitterly about the way he'd been treated there, but at the back of each elbow, tattoos of the ubiquitous logo glowed an angry red.

The days when InterEm was barely a company but was adding a hundred thousand users a day were during the beginnings of the Fall. Call it the Stumble. Many of them knew they'd passed the tenable point a couple websites back, but the push forward was uncontrollable, even if anyone had wanted to control it. Bloggers were treated like Hemingways, designers touted as Picassos. Looking back on it, Aaron thought of Poe's Masque of the Red Death and wished he'd been around when the first overnight CEO saw the initial spots on his hand, the sign the fete was over and there was nothing left but to bleed out.

The Real World was different from most of the bars that sprang up during the Boom in that it was geared mostly towards techies. The grand opening invites had been sent as flawed bits of code, indecipherable to layout experts and content providers. With a series of deft fixes by the recipients, the code opened into an elaborately designed invitation. The bar felt sleek and sparse until you needed something, at which point you realized it had been close at hand the whole time. The seating was comfortable and gave groups of any size the feeling of privacy, the acoustics of the room keeping conversations focused in on themselves to prevent eavesdropping, while still creating the low thrum of a lively bar even on slow nights. The lighting was chosen to balance out the wan skin of the patrons, imbuing hollow cheeks with healthy glows. Most importantly, drink service was ruthlessly efficient, with cocktails mixed to perfection and poured into glasses that fit in the hand like the hand of a lover. The Real World took on a sort of mystique within the community

and managed to maintain it long after unemployed bloggers and busted dotcom entrepreneurs had decided the web was financially done for, and darkness and decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

Aaron and Alice frequented the bar during their time together, and the tech head clientele treated Aaron like a cross between a celebrity and a prodigal son. Everyone knew his story and everyone took his side. He was one of them. The Real World welcomed him with open arms.

Aaron ordered a grain alcohol, neat, and Jonathan graced him with a healthy pour.

“Alice around tonight?” he asked casually, as if he didn’t ask the same question every time he came in.

“Haven’t seen her,” Jonathan replied. Aaron shrugged and gazed deeply into his drink before thanking Jonathan and turning away. In a corner, he spotted his objective for the night: Takashi, hunched over a table fiddling with something, sweat already beginning to bead in his dark hair and trickle down the collar of his pressed shirt. Aaron started towards him when he collided with a woman a foot shorter than him. Through a series of deft motions, he managed not to spill his drink and took a celebratory sip before looking down at the pixie grinning up at him, pigtails striped bright blue and green.

“Hey, Aaron,” she chirped, touching his elbow. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Yeah, Ganesha,” he replied, “I’ve been super busy with work.”

Ganesha was a few years younger than Aaron and carried the spark of a freshly-escaped undergrad. There was no weariness about her and she crackled with an energy and a righteousness. Her generation within the hacker community had adopted a pirated middle management fashion aesthetic, a storm front where professionalism and punk crashed. Ganesha’s khakis were cut off, the legs at different lengths, and ragged bits of her chambray shirt’s sleeves had been used to tie up her hair. It seemed to Aaron that generations lasted about three years, and though he’d been left confused when youngsters like Takashi had abandoned tee shirts and torn jeans for Brooks Brothers and Paul Smith, he was comforted when Ganesha and her cohort began taking scissors to their All-Cotton Dockers and spray-stenciling profanity onto Geoffrey Beene ties.

“What you working on?” Ganesha asked. She kept her eyes fixed on him, the irises so dark as to make the eyes seem cartooned, perfect black circles floating in white fields. Aaron had determined she was of Southeast Asian descent, somewhere humid. The fact she never seemed to sweat, even as Chicago’s heat index crept upward, was his chief evidence. He imagined if he touched her skin it would be cool as a clay pot.

“It’s nothing. Paying bills.”

“Really? I kind of assumed you were...all set. Bills wise.”

Ganesha had gotten subtler in her lines of inquiry, but it always amounted to the same thing. Since the moment she’d learned who he was, she’d been determined to get Aaron’s story. She’d once offered to sleep with him in exchange, an offer he’d politely declined but which had been the subject of numerous fantasies, especially since his breakup with Alice. Ganesha had appointed herself the official scribe of the Internet, claiming this was possibly the first major advance in human communication that could be documented as it happened.

“When all those cave paintings went up in Lascaux,” she’d explained to him, “no one was around to say, *Holy shit, we just made some cave paintings. No one’s ever done that before. We should totally write down how we’re feeling and why we decided to do this.* Or like, when Gutenberg made his printing press, Channel Zwei News didn’t show to say, like, *Hey Steve, how’s it feel to change the face of human interaction for all of history?*”

“I’m pretty sure it’s Johann.”

“I’m pretty sure that was a joke. But here we are, totally cognizant of the fact that we’re altering not just the way we communicate, but the way we cogitate. We are the Gutenbergs and the cave painters. And it would be criminal if our stories weren’t told.”

And when she said it, Aaron realized it was a central tenet of the Internet: the criminality of an untold story, the felonious nature of a feeling or thought undocumented. Ganesha didn’t see her questioning as invasive; she saw his evasion as an affront to the nature of culture.

All this Aaron was thinking now while blatantly looking down her shirt.

“Can I get you a drink?” she asked. “I had a question to ask you about InterEm’s shift in privacy policy. It’s pretty draconian, don’t

you think?"

"I don't know anything about InterEm's company policy," Aaron said curtly.

"But you must have had some say in policy when you were there."

"When I was there, there was no company. It was just me and Eric and Jaime working out of a shitty little apartment."

"But you've got to admit the way the site is built makes certain assumptions about privacy."

"The way the site was built makes certain assumptions about how the site has to work," Aaron said, getting truly annoyed at this point. "As for assumptions about privacy—"

She cut him off. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm in reporter mode. Permission to treat the witness as non-hostile. Let me buy you a drink."

"I've already got one," he said.

"Aaron, I'm really sorry. We'll have a drink, we'll talk. Regular people, no interview." She smiled at him and he found himself smiling back.

"Can I ask you a question?" he said.

"You can ask me anything," said Ganesha. Her fingers brushed his arm lightly.

"Have you ever heard of Iktomi?" This did not seem to be the question she was expecting and she drew back her hand to scratch her head.

"Hacktivist collective," she said. "Started up around 2004, seems to go back to a couple chat rooms. Anarchist leanings, from what anyone can tell. Mostly harmless, although they've pissed some people off."

"But it's not one guy?"

"No, they're headless horsemen. Global brain stuff. Anyone could be Iktomi at any time." She waved her fingers in front of him in a spooky motion. "Even me."

"Not me," Aaron said.

"Do you have a minute to chat?"

"I've actually got to catch Takashi real quick," he said. He might not even mind a bit more interrogation; yesterday's run-in with the FBI had taught him there was a comfort in using Raymond Chandler novels as a conversational plug-in script. Under interrogation, he

might not feel as anxious around Ganesha as he did right now.

“Tell you what,” she said, putting her hand on his arm again, just above the elbow, “I’ll buy your next drink.” Aaron was unused to being touched and slightly pulled back from it before allowing his arm to relax against her hand.

“If you can find me,” he said, a weak attempt to flirt.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find you,” she replied, a much stronger attempt to flirt. She slid away as if on rollerskates, brushing up against him in a way that had to be intentional. Aaron wondered how bad it would be to tell his story, whether a few hours of baring his soul wouldn’t be worth a few hours of bare Ganesha. He even wondered how truthful he’d have to be to get her into bed, how much of the story he’d have to give up. He told himself this new surge of prurience would be eased by the application of marijuana and continued across the bar, intending to test his theory.

On the way, he was jostled again as someone bumped into his arm. He turned to look accusingly at the man in question, with stringy blonde hair, thick-framed glasses and a Ramones tee shirt.

“Fuck off, Angel of Death,” the Ramones fan scowled at him. Shocked, Aaron’s jaw worked soundlessly for a second.

“What did you—” he started, but the Ramones fan had already turned and walked away. Flustered, Aaron strode across the bar and crashed into a chair, a thing of plush velvet and plastic that was Jonathan’s personal tweak on Saarinen’s womb chair. Takashi, decked in a midnight blue pinstripe suit that made Aaron self-conscious about his own standard and somewhat slovenly attire, looked up at him through glasses that gave the impression his head was cocked to one side. One massive circular lens in a tortoiseshell frame and one small rectangular lens in an imperceptible wire rim made Takashi look as if one eye was wide with alarm while the other squinted skeptically. Before he’d moved to Chicago, Takashi had been based in Buffalo, running a cell of the Ephemeral Technology Application League, or ET AL. A collective half-artist, half-scientist whose credo was an inversion of Clarke’s Third Law: any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology.

Takashi had spent much of his time in Buffalo working with spiritual metallurgists to build radio transmitters out of scrap metal from abandoned factories that, Takashi insisted, still vibrated with a spectrum of emotional frequencies they’d picked up during their

time of use. If correctly stored, certain metals carried a form of hope and trust in the future that was near impossible to find in metal produced post-Watergate. He'd gotten his start in ET AL building a network of these radio towers, located at specific locations chosen by a group of cartomancers, who Takashi referred to as "the scary map kids", which linked together to blanket the country from Utica to Detroit with a loop of the chorus of the Velvet Underground's "Rock and Roll": *despite all the amputations, you could just listen to the rock and roll station, and it was all right*. The signal showed up on the fringes of other radio signals, like static in the pattern, but Takashi insisted it was also resonating constantly in whatever metal people in the blanketed area carried with them. Humming softly in their car keys. Whispering to them through their fillings. He scanned Aaron quickly over whatever he was working on at the table and then snapped off his glasses as he did whenever he made a point.

"You need drugs," he proclaimed.

"You don't even know," Aaron replied pleadingly, rolling his head back in relief.

"Finish your drink and come on. Noob!" he called to a chubby kid with bad skin and an ALL YOUR BASE ARE BELONG TO US tee shirt. "Watch this." He pointed to the device on the table in front of him. "Don't touch." The chubby boy snapped to attention and moved to a seat closer to the device. Takashi pulled Aaron out of the chair, which had begun to absorb his weight, and dragged him to the men's room, brightly lit and extremely well ventilated.

"That kid totally wanted to fuck you," Takashi said, once they had established the men's room was empty. "He wanted you to pop his noob cherry."

"You're off it," Aaron said.

"You're like ultra-leet. You sweat leet. Half these dough-facers come in here on wet dreams of talking to you. They want to catch your kung-fu like it's the clap."

"You're disgusting," Aaron said.

"I'm a *poet*," Takashi corrected. "I also haven't had sex in like a decade. The libido bubbles up into the syntax. What's up with you and Ganesha anyway?"

Aaron cocked an eyebrow at him.

Takashi began rifling through jacket pockets excitedly. "She

wants to fuck you. Leet or not. She's pretty leet herself, you know. You want smoke or something more...nuanced? I've got something here that'll take that knot out of your neck."

"Smoke," replied Aaron. With one hand, Takashi produced a bag and a pipe, and with the other a small vial of pills.

"You don't mind if I?" he asked, rattling the vial gently. Aaron shook his head and Takashi dry-swallowed an indeterminate number of pills. "Brain food," he explained as he set the pipe on the onyx sink, packed it, tamping it down with his thumb, and handed it off to Aaron.

"Light?" Aaron asked. Takashi produced one from another pocket and Aaron lit up. He took a deep hit, filling his lungs with heat. He blew the smoke in the general direction of a vent and passed the pipe to Takashi.

"You ever deal with a hack called Iktomi?"

"Aunt Nancy?" Takashi asked, throat clenched to hold in his inhale. "Everybody knows the spider. He's no hack, though. More of a...an info junkie. Practically a journalist, really."

"So you know him?"

"Never met him. Can't think of anyone who has. Yog Soggoth, maybe." They both shuddered at the mention of the name. "I hear he sits at the Emperor's right hand."

"Who's the Emperor?" Aaron asked. Takashi swatted this question away.

"But Aunt Nancy holds the world record for FOIA requests. Some of the Et Al folks think he can't be one guy, cause he's logged like a million of them. And he's put some information in our hands that's maybe not declassified. Tech, pharm. Some military."

"You guys are dealing in military tech now?"

He shrugged. "If we can get our grubby mitts on it. Tech's tech, man. Why do you want to know about the Spider?"

"No reason," Aaron said.

The pipe passed back and forth in silence, hidden once behind Aaron's back when another patron came in, even though smoke rose obviously from it and the smell, which would dissipate minutes after the two were done smoking, permeated the room. When it was cashed, Takashi handed the dime bag off to Aaron, who pocketed it quickly, and the two went back to their seats.

"You've got to come to this show tomorrow night at Lincoln

Hall,” Takashi said as he sat down. “This guy is using a bit of tech I built. You’ll love it.”

“Is he leet?”

“I love it when you try the slang thing,” Takashi said, grinning. “You’re like a rapping grandma.”

“I don’t do shows,” Aaron said.

“Do this one,” Takashi pleaded. “Think of it as me showing off.”

Aaron gave him a shrug. “How could I resist?” he asked. Relaxed now, he leaned forward to look at what Takashi had been working on. From this angle, it looked like two slabs of mahogany hinged together like a book.

Takashi turned the device on the table to face Aaron and he realized it was a sort of laptop, its casing made of oak, its screen glowing behind a green tinted glass that reminded Aaron of old Coke bottles, wavy and uneven. Its keys were an odds and sods collection of old typewriter parts.

“What is it?” Aaron asked, resting his fingers lightly on the keyboard.

“Don’t be thick, man. Use it if you want to use it.”

“It works?”

Takashi grinned at him. “I’m showing off for chicks, man. I wouldn’t bring it if it didn’t work. I call it the Lightning Box.” Aaron typed in a web address, the keys clacking with authority, a sound passing out of cultural hearing, like the scrape of needle on a record label. The page loaded instantly, graphics and type swimming in a sea of green.

“Every component has been struck by lightning. The casing? From a tree out in the burbs that was hit in that big storm last year, split right to fuck in half. All the glass, all the silica?” He chuckled to himself. “Fulgerite. This friend of mine, he’s a lightning harvester. Goes out to the beach during storms, shoots arrows into the clouds. Very Lear on the Heath. He attaches the arrows to metal filaments he grounds in the sand, so when the arrow hits the cloud, the lightning runs through the filament and bang: glass.” A waiter showed up with another drink for Aaron and one of whatever Takashi was drinking, a deep red cocktail that involved an infusion of beets. Looking over, Aaron saw Ganesha smiling at him in a way that was slightly predatory and not unattractive.

“I’ve got someone who blows it for me for the screen,” Takashi continued. “She needs a bit of practice. Chips and processors I’m making myself. They’re not where I want them to be, but they’d be on par with, say, Intel couple generations back? Pre-Pentium.”

“So, um, why?”

“See, this is where all those sci-fi guys, your Gibson and Stephenson, led everybody wrong. Everyone wanted this virtual reality thing, which was going to be like the real world only shinier. Sharper edges, higher res, higher def, whatever. All holodecks and light-up goggles. They thought the digital world was going to be phenomenal. Not in the sense of awesome. But literally: perceivable through the senses. We were going to strap on these prosthetics you could touch and see to access a whole other world you could touch and see.

“But what happens is, the digital world is based not on phenomena but on numena, right? Perceptions wholly other. It’s not held together by physics, it’s held together by concepts. Networks and memes and code. The hardware’s only the access point, but what it accesses is a numinal world. So it only makes sense to try to build numinous objects to access a numinous world.”

“I know you’ve told me this,” Aaron said, taking a long drink and thinking Takashi had only gotten him stoned so he would sit through this conversation, “but what is a numinous object?”

“Varies. Like you have certain things that are important to you. Lucky whatever. And they get imbued with this other energy and the energy stays in the object. And you could, you know, charge an object up with it or something. When someone gives you a gift, or brings you something from a trip? It’s all forms of resonance, right?”

“So lightning?”

“I’m not totally sure lightning is the way to go at it, but what else can you think of that bridges numena and phenomena at once? You can see it, right? You can see what it does, the houses ruined, the whatever. Wasn’t there that show where someone got hit by lightning and ended up with a streak of white hair?”

“It turned Barry Allen into the Flash,” Aaron nodded.

“Exactly, right? But have you ever been fully convinced it’s caused by differences in electrical levels between clouds and the ground? Doesn’t Zeus chucking bolts off a mountain make more

sense, Occam's razorwise? Has static shocking your little sister by rubbing your socks on the rug ever not been the coolest magic trick?"

"It is pretty cool," Aaron said, nodding slowly.

"The ultimate interface is direct. It's USB ports behind the ear and shit. Do you know the raw bandwidth of your optic nerve? Only about a hundred kbps. It's the encode/decode rate, the software, that's amazing. At some point, we'll be able to feed directly into the brain at a rate higher than the optic nerve could handle. But until then? Until the physical end of things is further developed? Shouldn't we try getting into a world of pure thoughtform with devices that have been touched by the gods?"

"What the fuck did you take anyway?" Aaron asked him at last. Takashi leaned way back in his chair, blinking his eyes rapidly as if to clear them. He took off his glasses and shook his head back and forth.

"I don't know. I think they were purple maybe?"

III.

"Hello, Aaron."

"How'd you know it was me?" he asked. He was propped up inside one of the last working phonebooths in Chicago, which was about to teeter off to one side, never to be repaired.

"The number from that payphone's been in my cell under your name since the day you left."

"So I've lost the element of surprise."

"That's what happens when nothing changes."

"Nothing changes? Payphone's fifty cents now. That's double the last time I called you from here. It's a brave new world, Alice."

"You should join it sometime."

"*Still love my parents,*" he sang, "*and I still love the old world.*"

"Modern Lovers or Richman post-breakup?" Alice said.

"Lovers. Well done. Are you alone?"

"None of your business."

"Salt-N-Pepa," he slurred.

"Cute."

"You wouldn't have answered if you weren't."

“So why ask?”

“To hear you say it. Say you’re alone.”

“What were you doing in the Real World? Run out of weed?”

“Jesus,” he winced, “not on this line.”

“Christ, you’re so paranoid.”

“Is that what they’re all saying about me?”

“That’s cute,” she said, and Aaron imagined her grinning on the other end of the line, wearing maybe an old flannel of his she’d never gotten around to returning. “How’s Takashi?”

“Takashi says I’m leet.”

“What does that mean?”

“*Elite*,” he said, overpronouncing the *e*. “Hacker slang. Opposite of noob.”

“Well, I’m very happy for you then.”

“He wants a USB port installed in his skull.”

“Don’t we all?”

“I don’t.”

She sighed. “Honey, you still cringe at the sight of nose rings. I’d hardly expect you to jump into cyborg-level body mod.”

“Have you ever read Freud on the prosthetic man?”

“I was an undergrad too, honey. *I* actually graduated.”

“It gave me nightmares.”

“We’ll file you under ‘discontents’ then.”

“Not all technology is to be trusted is all I’m saying.”

“Even pharmacology?”

Aaron held the phone away from his ear and scowled at it as if Alice could see him. “I medicate.”

“Booze and weed don’t count.”

“Booze worked for Hemingway.”

“Yeah, right up till the end.”

“I don’t want my pain taken away! I need my pain!” Aaron said, deepening his voice.

“Honey, you can’t take your whole philosophy on antidepressants from *Star Trek V*.”

“The underratedness of the film doesn’t invalidate the sentiment.”

“We’re not going to have this argument.”

“Plus my Shatner’s getting better.”

“Passable.”

“What argument would you like to have?”

“That’s what I’m saying, Aaron. We don’t have to have arguments anymore. I can hang up and there’s no repercussion.

“You haven’t.”

“I should.”

“I’d be sad.”

“You’d be sad regardless.”

“We could have something else. Something...other than an argument.”

“Was that supposed to be a double entendre?”

“Not even close?”

“No.”

“People are calling me the Angel of Death, Alice.”

“I’m surprised it took this long to catch on.”

“I think people in the World know it’s me. Some of them I’ve interacted with during notifications. I think someone figured it out.”

“Did you tell anyone?”

“Not even Takashi. Only...” He trailed off. Some names were best not spoken over the phone.

“Yog Soggoth wouldn’t tell anyone,” Alice assured him. “A secret’s worthless if everyone knows.”

“I don’t know. Something’s wrong. I feel like the beginning of a Hitchcock movie.”

“*Rear Window*, maybe?”

“I’m not that close to your place. Plus I left my long lens at home.”

“Maybe *The Birds* then.”

“But I’m closer to yours than to mine.”

“You aren’t serious.”

“The El’s done and I’ll never catch a cab from here.”

“You could call one.”

“This was my last quarter.”

“Quarters.”

“Exactly. Who carries around a full buck in change?”

She sighed again, more defeated than exasperated.

“I’ll leave the front door unlocked. You can have the couch. You so much as crack the bedroom door, you’re on a park bench for the night.”

“I wouldn’t dream—”

“I’m serious, Aaron. You’re out before I’m up. I don’t want to see you.”

IV.

As he let himself in, Aaron wished the apartment were less familiar. After the break up, he’d rearranged everything in his apartment, switching the silverware drawer, moving the stereo to the other side of the living room, so if Alice happened to come by, she’d be disoriented, unable to find her way around the place on memory alone. But, still, every now and then when he went to get a fork, he was gobsmacked by the memory of Alice delicately removing a pair of forks from that very drawer when the Chinese had been delivered, neither of them quite as nimble as they’d have liked to be with chopsticks, or Alice naked at the turntable, dropping the needle on the A side of the *Zombies’ Odyssey & Oracle* one more time.

Alice’s apartment hadn’t changed a bit and it made Aaron think there weren’t enough memories of him floating around her apartment that it felt cluttered to her, the way his did to him. The same tapestries, maybe a little more sun-faded, hung on the walls, the same drug paraphernalia and bric-a-brac scattered on the coffee and end tables. Her CD collection, still in no apparent order on the wall. Her students’ drawings and paintings on the fridge. On the couch, a hounds-tooth pattern picked up on a curb in their college days, were two pillows and a folded set of clean sheets. With as much grace as he could muster, Aaron made up the couch for himself and plopped down onto it, taking in the room with his chin resting in his hands. At one point, a sliver of light shot out through the bedroom door, disappeared after a second. Aaron stumbled over to the CD rack and scanned, finally finding a *Zombies* disc between James Brown’s *Live at the Apollo* and the first *Tori Amos* album. Somewhere else on the shelf was the one they used to dance to, whiskey bottle in his hand resting against her back, but this one would do. Careful to turn the volume way down first, he put it into the CD player and started it up.

Alice came into the room immediately.

“You’re a real fucker,” she said.

Alice’s hair was violent red, shooting out from her head in

corkscrews at all angles. She was as tall as Aaron and by modern standards big, although proportioned in a way that made most men wonder what they'd ever seen in the waifs that paraded across TV screens and magazine covers. She came out of the bedroom wearing a faded Who tee shirt, his, that showed off an ample length of leg. Aaron sputtered.

"I'm sorry, I usually go to sleep with music on, you know."

"I know. I thought maybe tonight you'd pass."

"I was feeling nostalgic."

"Yeah, no shit, Aaron," she said, rolling her eyes. "Are you sober enough to have a drink?"

"Probably."

"Well, at least I don't have to drink alone then." She went to the kitchen in long strides and took down two glasses and a bottle of bourbon. "Hope you don't mind," she said insincerely while she poured.

"No, that's fine. Takes me—"

"Fucking stop with it, Aaron. Please?" She handed him a glass and sat down on the couch. "So what's the problem?"

"There's no problem," he said. He sat too.

"There must be one or you wouldn't be here. Knowing I wasn't going to sleep with you."

"Maybe I didn't know."

"I'm not."

"Oh."

They both sat in silence, staring down into their drinks.

"Two FBI agents showed up at my office yesterday," he finally said.

"What?"

"Something's wrong and I'm not sure what it is."

"The FBI showed up at your office and you're worried someone at the bar called you a name?"

"It's connected. I know it is. Something I can't see yet, but it's there already."

"You can ask, you know."

"I don't believe in that stuff."

"You're here and you're tap-dancing around asking so I'll insist on it. I'm not going to, Aaron. If you want me to do it, you're going to have to fucking ask."

He hung his head, lifted it to finish off his drink and said:

“Will you throw cards for me? And can I have another drink?”

She pursed her lips and thought about it. “Yes,” she said, “and no.”

Alice opened a wooden box sitting on an end table next to the couch and took out a deck of oversized cards, which she passed to Aaron. “You remember the drill. Think about what you want to know and shuffle the deck, then hand them back to me.”

Aaron furrowed his brow, trying to cut through all the smoke and booze and concentrate on the dots he was sure connected somehow. He shuffled one half of the cards into the other, then, trying to bridge them, sprayed most of them onto the coffee table.

“Should I start over?” he asked sheepishly.

“No,” she said, “pick them up and keep going till you’re done.”

Aaron gathered up the cards and continued shuffling until he felt like he’d reached some sort of endpoint. He handed the deck to Alice, holding her eye for a little longer than either of them wanted. Alice cleared a little space on the table, then turned her attention to the cards. She dealt out one and then another across it, half obscuring it. Then she dealt out a card above, to the right of, below and to the left of the first two cards.

“I’m only doing a six for you,” she told him. “You’re too drunk for a ten card spread anyway.” Lowering her voice, she pointed to the first card, the one mostly covered by the second.

“So this is your present situation. The Moon. It’s the path between two towers, a point A and point B. It’s waxing towards the right. Towards its goal. Generally taken to mean it’s gaining in mercy. I don’t know why. Matter of direction. See the two dogs there, howling at it? Actually, one of them is a wolf. They’re fears. They try to subvert the path. But the biggest thing here is this.” She pointed at what looked like a blue lobster, crawling out of the water at the bottom of the card and up a path that intersected with the moon. “It’s something coming out of the depths, something unexpected. From the past, maybe? The other cards might say.”

She pointed to the second card dealt, laying across the first. “Eight of pentacles. The trophy maker at his work. Your employment is the most immediate influence on you right now. Which is fucking hilarious, really. But not necessarily in a bad way. Craftsmanship is going to be related to your path from A to B.

“Your goal,” she said, pointing to the card above the first two, “the Hanged Man. Huh.” She paused. “Interesting stuff. Major arcana. Waite and Crowley disagreed on it. There’s a rumor even Levi didn’t know what to make of it. Check him out. He’s hanging, but by a foot, not the neck. The tree is living, you can see the leaves, so it’s not a cross. A lot of people think this card is about martyrdom, but look at his face. He’s not in pain, he looks comfortable. It might mean stasis. Contemplation. He’s also the card between Justice and Death, so there’s that to think about.

“The Two of Wands,” she continued, “for your distant past. Makes sense. He’s a king of some sort, looking out on his kingdom, but also contemplating a small globe. It implies having riches. Losing riches. Accepting the loss. Maybe even preferring it. See how really he’s looking at the globe and not the kingdom?”

She looked at Aaron. “That’s you going to the mountain. After everything with Eric. That’s you leaving it all and never wanting to come back.”

She looked back to the card below the initial two. “Ace of Swords,” she said. “Your recent past is marked by excess, the hand out of the cloud holds the sword, thrusts it upward until it pierces the crown.” Aaron crooked an eyebrow. She glared at him for a moment. “I’m still not going to sleep with you.”

“But it’s in the cards,” he said meekly.

“It’s in the cards as excess in your recent past. The sword crosses from that past into the future. Not the future of tonight.” She glared at him again. “Did you fuck Ganesha?”

“Of course not!” he replied shrilly.

“Huh. You probably should.” She turned back to the cards. “The last one is future influence. The Seven of Swords, the thief. Another one that’s pretty disputable. He’s carrying off five of the swords, but the camp is close, there’s the implication he’ll get caught. Plus, he leaves two of the swords behind. Could mean a couple things, especially in this spot. Either you’re the thief, and whatever you’ve planned is going to go south. Or you’re in the camp, in which case the two swords left are what’s important. Let’s try something.”

She dealt three cards face down, then one face up, being careful to place it to the upper right of the others. Once she saw it, she nodded slowly to herself. “That’s what I thought, although it doesn’t make much sense for you.”

“So what is it?” he asked.

“It’s the Two of Swords, the two left by the thief. She’s blindfolded and balancing the two swords, with the water behind her. There’s a lot of water here, by the way. All over the spread. You’ll be traveling soon. If it were a different suit, she’d stand for trust, tenderness, intimacy. But the swords don’t always mean anything good. They might mean all of those things will be subverted. End in harm.”

“So what spot is that in?”

“That’s your final destination.”

V.

When she was done, she went back to her room, closing it loudly and clacking the lock. Aaron lay down on the couch. He dreamed he was suspended off a post on Navy Pier by his ankle, Lake Michigan lapping coolly at his forehead and a woman on the pier polishing a sword.

The next morning, the coffee grinder woke him. Alice was in the kitchenette, already dressed for work in one of the brightly colored dresses that bounced the sun onto her pale skin and gave it a pastel glow.

“I’m making you a cup to go,” she said as he sat up. “I’m running a little late. Do you mind locking up when you leave?”

“No,” he said, “of course not.”

“Aaron?” she asked, staring rather intently at the coffee maker. “Don’t get yourself hurt, okay? I won’t be there to pick up the pieces of you this time.”

She snapped a lid onto a travel mug and left the apartment, the smell of fresh brewed coffee bright in the air and the tarot cards still spread out on the table.