

Preservation

Forty-five new messages choked his inbox—plus 1,900 languishing unread—when Sean Harris woke up at the Franklin-Riverside Hyperloop station. The chip at the top of his spine itched, which meant another trip to Dr. Ramanujan, another twelve grand down the toilet. He rubbed the back of his neck but the damn thing was implanted deep in a place his fingers couldn't reach.

But whatever. There was still daylight left and if he got home in fifteen he could take Bear and Pete to the park at the end of the cul-de-sac. Who knew, maybe even steal a kiss or three from Jen before dinner. The messages could wait until tomorrow. That was why they'd moved out to the suburbs, right? Sean Harris was a family man, now.

As the maglev rocketed off behind him Sean sprinted across the parking lot to his car and double-tapped his right temple, whispering "Unlock doors, engine on."

He sped to the station exit, cutting off fellow commuters who'd arrived earlier that morning and were thus parked closer to the gate. He ignored their honks and waved, as if apologetically, through his rear-window – though he wasn't remotely sorry – then touched his thumbprint to the reader. As the boom lifted, he took the Changan-Ford off autodrive. He loved Thursdays because it meant tomorrow was Friday and then 48 hours with his family. Maybe he'd even call in sick on Monday and stretch it into a three-day weekend. It was like a stupid pop song, but it was true: Pete was growing up so fast. Hell, there was only one more week of summer, and, like Sean's father had said, upon donating a modest nest-egg to Pete's future elementary school and canceling his hemodialysis appointments, you can't take it with you.

Inside every other car, the passengers were looking down at something electronic, while only Sean and one other dude (mid-twenties, backwards hat, skeleton-jaw balaclava – a virtual look-a-like of

Sean fifteen years ago) had their hands on the steering wheel, cars on manual, trying to enjoy the thrill of driving fast. Not that it mattered. A decade ago, every streetlight in the country had sensors installed that automatically ticketed you for speeding if you tried. *Soon you won't be able to take a shit without asking permission*, Sean's father had railed, but road accidents did indeed fall dramatically in the weeks that followed. Was it the reduced speeds or the automated driving, that was still in question—though Congress would never repeal the Safety & Surveillance Act, so it was moot point. But still, you could weave, you could pump the accelerator for a second or two, faking some semblance of freedom in this world. And you could shut off your Assist, if you *really* wanted a thrill—but nobody really had the stones to do that. Mute it during sex, perhaps—but never completely off.

The first thing Sean noticed on entering his house was a warm, fragrant breeze coming in from the back door. Jen was scared of bugs and wasn't the type to leave the screen door open, but when he glanced outside, the porch was empty.

He called out his wife's name.

No answer.

“Jenny?” Nothing. Sean closed the door and shrugged. Maybe they were already at the park and he could surprise them. He dumped his smartcase on the couch and vaulted up the stairs, two at a time, to an immaculate master bedroom, where there was no hint of anyone having ever lived in the house.

The bed was made, carpets vacuumed, furniture dusted. Even Pete's room was spotless, not an errant toy in sight. Tanya could indeed make miracles. She'd washed the freaking walls, looked like. He double-tapped his temple and whispered “Add twenty to Tanya's tip.”

It was one of their differences, his and Jen's, that required a weekly, two-hundred-dollar compromise; in order to concentrate on her writing she required a tidy, almost antiseptic living space,

whereas he enjoyed a more lived-in, chaotic world. *I make order from disorder*, he'd said, but she just smiled like she didn't buy it and said he was trying to justify laziness. In reality, it was that he felt guilty paying someone to clean his house—something his father would *never* do—but marriage was about compromise. Thus Sean secretly sent Tanya an extra tip each week.

He kicked off his shoes and pants, threw on a pair of camouflage cargo shorts and slid into a pair of blue Pumas - a newish pair but the exact same style he'd been wearing since high school. Jenny enjoyed ripping on his cargo shorts, but three years ago Sean informed her he was a dad now, and this was acceptable fashion—nay, costume de rigueur—for the new job.

You're using those words wrong, she'd replied, but she was smiling when she said it. How he loved that woman.

Back downstairs, Sean opened the fridge and upended a can of sparkling water in one long, frothy throat-irritating bubbly gulp. He desperately wanted one of the Tsingtaos in the back of the fridge, but Jen would smell it on his breath and give him The Look.

On his way out he glanced once again into the backyard, on the off-chance Jen hadn't heard him and they were all back there, frolicking in the grass, perhaps reclining sleepily on a blanket in the summer evening air. He'd called her twice that afternoon, in between meetings, but she hadn't picked up, which was unusual. But Bear would've been barking his head off already if they were back there, because they both knew Bear loved Sean *just* a little bit more than Jen. Strange, it hadn't even registered with Sean until now, the absence of his beloved mastiff's gruff roar. There also seemed to be a huge dead raccoon or something floating in the pool. Gross.

He ambled down his block towards the little playground, hoping to catch them before the sun went down and Pete needed to eat and go down for the night. "Look up exterminators," he said, double-tapping his temple.

“There are three exterminator companies with five-star ratings in the area,” his Assist replied. He’d set it to an Australian accent years ago and was too lazy to change it back. “Would you like me to call the first?”

Sean thought about it. Was it an exterminator he needed, or a garbage disposal company? “What kind of company gets rid of dead animals?”

“I’ve looked up ‘what kind of company gets rid of dead animals,’ and the answer is pest control or animal control. I can call Critter Ridder for you. They have a five-star rating. Your contact Henry Flynn reviewed them favorably in May. Would you like me to read you their review? There are two other options available. Would you like me to call Critter Ridder or hear other options?”

Sean reached the edge of the playground, and it was empty but for a couple of teenagers, a girl being pushed on the swing by a boy.

“I’ll do it,” he said, watching the kids enjoy their youth. It was Hudson, his neighbor’s rather awkward kid, who’d babysat Pete a few times. Skinny, nerdy, shy. The kind of kid Pete used to pick on when he was that age. Good for him to have a girlfriend.

Instead of calling Critter Ridder, Sean called Jen as he meandered back to the house. He suddenly missed her, a lot. And something nagged in the back of his mind. He didn’t want to imagine it—but was it possible she was cheating?

In his cabinet was a prescription for anti-anxiety pills that needed refilling, a battle he’d been waging against paranoia his entire life.

Jen’s phone went to voicemail as the first purple fingers of dark massaged the the horizon.

“Hey babe, where are you,” he said, trying for a light tone, “It’s almost eight.”

He touched three fingers to the chip in his right temple to shut off the call, and felt his legs begin to pump more diligently as he walked home, a speed and purpose for which he wasn’t quite certain.

Jen Harris opened her eyes and looked at a slow-twirling ceiling fan. The ambient pan-flute nature sounds had lulled her to sleep, all reverbed bells and sweetly-echoed tones and hooting owls and crickets, and she felt a pleasant fog in the back of her brain. She took a deep breath.

“Have a nice nap?” a voice said.

“I think I did,” she replied, lifting her head. The heavy white towel was warm around her body, as was the heated bed beneath her. She did not want to get up, but the hour of treatment was finished.

“I’ll meet you up front,” the masseuse said softly. “Take your time.”

Even the gently closing the door was relaxing.

She waited until her car was driving itself on the highway to take her Assist off Do Not Disturb. She touched her finger to her left temple (why her parents had chosen the lefty gene when the world was made for righties would always be a mystery), and immediately felt a pang of regret as three missed calls and two messages from Sean dinged in.

Rather than listen to his voicemails, Jen called him back. They couldn’t really afford the luxury of a spa, and she knew she’d get chewed out for breaking the bank when they should’ve been saving for Pete’s pre-school (*Twenty-nine thousand dollars? Really?*), but sometimes, after all the client crap she’d suffered for the past two months, she needed to splurge on herself. Retail therapy, self-care, all that middle-class post-capitalist first-world nonsense. Her parents barely knew how to use modern technology and they were born in the 1990s.

“Where have you been?” Sean said.

“Hi to you too,” Jen replied. “What’s up?”

“I asked you where you’ve been.”

“Excuse me? Don’t talk to me like that.”

“I called you a million times.”

She hoped he wasn’t falling back into his old jealous ways, the insecurity, the surreptitious tracking of her coordinates by GPS. She’d had to cloak her Assist for months during their separation, the year before Pete came into the world and saved their marriage. “My phone wasn’t working.”

“Bullshit.”

“I was in a meeting.”

“With who?”

“What is this, twenty questions? And it’s with *whom*.”

“Where the fuck were you, Jen?”

Jen dropped her new purse on the floor of the car and gestured futilely with her hands into the air, like she was casting a magic spell. “Fine, Sean! I was shopping! Okay? I bought a purse, and then I got a massage. Okay?”

“Goddamn it, Jen. You know we can’t afford that shit.”

“I knew you were going to say that,” Jen said.

“Whatever. Did you get Pete a little baby massage, too? I heard they do that now. Or is there a daycare for the moms to unburden themselves of their charges for an hour while they pamper—”

“Wait what do you mean?” Jen’s stomach dropped. “I thought Pete is with you.”

“*Me*? I just got home twenty minutes ago. He’s supposed to be with you.”

“No...”

Suddenly Jen couldn’t see straight. She was *sure* it was Pete’s night to be home early... that’s why she hadn’t gone home after work. “Where are you?”

“I’m walking back to the house. I thought you were with Pete at the park.”

“Why would you – he must be with Chelsea.”

“They weren’t here when I got home. That’s why I thought you had him.”

“I’ll call Chelsea now, see where they are.” But Jen knew Chelsea didn’t come on Thursdays – she had, like, a summer session or something.

“She’s not supposed to take him anywhere without telling us.”

“Did you feed Bear?”

“He’s not here either!”

“What? Where is he?”

“I don’t fucking *know*, Jennifer. That’s why I’ve been fucking *calling* you, and you weren’t *picking up*.”

“First of all, calm down. Don’t curse at me. I’m sure they’re probably all down at the...ice cream store, or whatever, eating ice cream.”

“The ice cream store? What ice cream store? The hell are you talking about, Jen?”

“Just calm down,” she said, and hung up while he was still screaming. She rarely drove on manual anymore, but right now she wished she could just fire it up and fly home.

“Go *faster*,” she said, banging on the steering wheel, but of course the car obeyed the standard algorithmic driving protocol, which was just slightly lower than the speed limit, and very conscientious of bystanders and intersections.

“Call Chelsea Tanner,” she said. The phone went straight to voicemail. “Chelsea, it’s Jennifer Harris. Are you with Pete right now? Call me back as soon as you get this, please.”

She hoped her voice didn’t sound as manic as she felt.

She turned on the radio, then shut it off. She selected a true-crime show, then shut it off before it began. She watched the suburbs crawl by, aching slowly.

As she reached the main intersection in town she heard the siren wailing, and a few seconds later an ambulance came screaming past her on the left, in the direction of where she lived. She realized, for the thousandth time since Pete was born, why her own parents seemed worried all the time.

Sean was about to unlock the front door when he thought he heard barking.

“Bear,” he sang-yelled, walking towards the side of the house. As he turned the corner, the brown shaggy beast bounded into him.

He knelt down. “Hi Carebear baby-bear. Where have you been?” He rubbed his hand along Bear’s furry back and scratched the spot, right in front of the tail, that Bear loved so much.

“Chelsea?” he called out, as he walked to side of his house, Bear in tow. “Are you back?”

No answer.

He pressed his thumbprint on the side door and it opened. “Chelsea,” he called out again. “Are you here?”

But he knew she wasn’t, because her car wasn’t there. He looked down at Bear. “Where’ve you been, you little buster?”

Bear raced into the kitchen, barking, then raced back to Sean, then back into the kitchen.

“Are you hungry, you dirty monster? Do we not feed you enough?”

Bear twirled in circles, as if chasing his tail, and then barked and scratched at the back door.

“You want to go back out?”

Sean opened the door and stepped onto the porch. Bear fairly flew down the steps and into the backyard, barking at the pool. It was nearly dark. Bear was probably barking at the floating raccoon in the pool.

He flipped on the porch light from inside the house, then looked down at Bear, screaming at the object in the pool.

His brain shattered into a thousand pieces.

Bright red and yellow flashing lights punctuated the darkness ahead of her, and Jen took the car off automatic and floored it to her house. Her heart was pounding and she prayed, *please don't let it be my house, please don't let it my house*. Did Chelsea have an accident with Pete? Did Sean have a heart attack? He was only thirty-nine.

Her neighbor had come out of his house and was standing on the front step, looking over at Jen's house.

Jen's house. The ambulance was in the driveway, parked behind Sean's car.

She stopped the car and ran up to the front door.

There were paramedics, she could see, and a cop, yes, there was a cop car with lights on as well in front of the house. She was screaming and crying before she even realized it, she couldn't quite grasp what happened, even though she comprehended that someone was trying to tell her something.

Sean ran down the steps of the porch, almost tripping on his feet, and dove into the pool. *No*, his mind was screaming. He swam to the body. It was lifeless. He lifted it out and brought Pete to the side of the pool and placed him on the cement. He pulled himself out of the pool and pounded on Pete's chest. He was shaking uncontrollably, he realized, and could hardly see through his tears. His Assist should have already called the paramedics, simply based on his elevated stress hormones and pattern recognition algorithms, but he only heard silence in his mind. So he did what he saw in the movies –

mouth to mouth, pounding on the chest – but he didn't really even know what to do. He knew there was no hope. Pete's body was cold, his lips blue and his eyes open and unseeing.

Sean was seated on the couch in the living room, his head in his hands. Jen sank to the floor when she saw him.

He stood up and came over and embraced her. "Jenny, Jenny."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," he said. His face was a rictus of agony. "I couldn't help him."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I knew you were on your way back. I didn't want to tell you over the phone."

"Where is my son? I need to see him."

It wasn't until a while later that she felt the throbbing pain in her knee, which she realized had banged hard against the linoleum tile of the hallway. "We have so many calls to make," she said. "What do we do?"

"We don't need to call anyone," Sean said.

She dreaded the confrontations, the judgments, the conversations. Her own parents, would they be helpful, or contentious? Sean's mother... she was going to blame Jen, of course. *Always knew she was a bad egg.* And why was that even her worry? What did it matter how Sean's mother felt? Strange how the mind worked in times of struggle.

"They said they're going to get us a grief counselor," Sean said.

“It’s strange,” Jen said. “I can’t get ‘The Song That Never Ends’ out of my head. Pete had just learned it and had been singing it constantly.”

“It’s a process,” Sean told her. He wasn’t sure of the process, however.

“I just want the song to stop.”

They spent the next year following every lead possible to determine what happened. Sean was initially a suspect – foul play, criminal negligence – but it was easily proven he’d been at work all day. Chelsea had been at school. Jen was at a client meeting, then straight to her spa appointment. Tanya hadn’t come that day—Jen had cleaned the house herself the night before. Sean hadn’t even noticed.

They blamed each other. They had both been at fault.

Had they *both* forgotten about Pete that morning, before work? How was that possible? With all of the security programs they had, the reminders the alarms the artificially intelligent personal assistants, this sort of thing was supposed to never happen. Pete had left first, because his morning commute was longer. He figured Jen would take care of Pete. Jen had left second, and assumed Sean had already taken Pete to daycare. That’s why Pete’s door was closed and there was no sound. She’d been in such a hurry, so harried with deliverables.

If only Pete had an Assist, Sean thought, then we could’ve tracked him, given him a call. But the law was that nobody under five could be chipped, and, even then, only parents or family – or anyone given special access – could call the chip until the child turned thirteen.

Each week they met with a very sober-looking psychiatrist, with a deep sonorous voice, a veteran of the slaughter in Indonesia. Two tours in Sudan.

“The main thing,” he told them, “if I can impart any wisdom, is to make sure you don’t turn on each other.”

His office smelled of vetiver and bergamot, and was unnervingly quiet, save for a soft purring every now and again coming from a calico cat that seemed to resent their presence on his couch. “You understand? You only have each other, now. You must remain honest, open, caring, for each other. You must remain loyal. You must watch each other’s backs. That is the key to surviving this.”

“We only had him for three years,” Jen said. She found that she couldn’t stop watching a video – just two minutes long – of Pete playing with a set of toy blocks. There were hundreds of hours of video on the cloud she could watch, all taken whenever her chip was on Record mode – but many of them, she found, were sequences of Pete or Sean interacting with screens or other digital equipment. There was no *life* in them.

Another video she liked was of Pete running in their backyard with Bear, falling flat on his face, standing up, and just as he’s about to cry, Bear knocking him over. Pete forgets to cry and instead starts laughing. “That’s not enough time.”

“I just can’t accept that we’ll never know what happened,” Sean said.

“That is a fact of reality whether you accept it or not,” the psychiatrist said.

“The world is so overprotective,” Jen said, “yet we couldn’t even keep watch over our boy.”

Despite everything, they were unable to heed the psychiatrist’s advice.

Five years passed. Their lives were lonely, boring, and consumed with work. At night Sean routinely drank himself to sleep, just like his father had, and Jen did herself no better with an ever-increasing dose of TetraZan and Epidermitol.

Bear was gone, soon, too.

It was just the two of them, and their careers, which they both found rather meaningless. They rarely socialized with friends or saw family, and had even, in the past year, stopped sharing their cloud accounts. Jen could no longer see the videos Sean had captured of Pete, and vice versa. And they never even bothered to bring it up with each other.

Then one night, in the dark quiet of the new living room – they had moved a year after it happened, taking a giant loss on the house – Sean put down his Digisheet.

“Jen,” he said. She looked up from her own Digisheet – she was watching an old movie, it looked like, but he couldn’t tell which. “Do you want to…” Sean couldn’t even look at her. “Do you want to try again?”

“I keep wondering what’s worse,” she said. “Losing him, or forgetting what it was like when he was here.”

“The second one.”

“I don’t,” she said.

“Don’t what? Don’t remember?”

“Don’t want to try again. I want to get divorced.”

Sean finished his bourbon. He showed her his Digisheet, on which was an article about a new biotech startup that had its IPO.

“There’s so much they can do in the world,” he said. “Can you believe? They’re uploading brains to the – to the cloud. It actually works. They’ve actually done it.”

“They can’t bring him back,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “It’s fine. It’s done. It’s over.”

They moved to different cities, on opposite sides of the country. Jen took back her maiden name, Acker, and published several award-winning papers and essays, then books, and she became famous. They didn't speak.

Then, out of the blue, she got a note from Sean, from an archaic, old-fashioned email address:

Why did you shut me out?

Jen tried calling his chip immediately, but it had been either de-linked or decommissioned; which, if the former, meant he was either in prison for a felony or a covert spy deep under cover, something like that...and if it was the latter, well...it meant he was dead. And he apparently wasn't dead. So she wrote an email back. The process of typing with her fingers was unfamiliar: **Where are you?**

Are you okay?

No response. After a week she wrote, again, one line: **You shut me out first.**

She wondered if Sean had spent the past decades under a false misunderstanding, the *she* was the one who'd blocked his access to her chip first, rather than the other way around. In her memory, it was Sean who'd done it first.

But memories were fallible, even in the age of omnipresent digital veracity.

She didn't hear from his again for years, despite writing to that address a hundred more times.

Sean emptied his accounts and sold everything he owned to obtain passage across the globe to an isolated, private island nation where laws were virtually nonexistent and the technology bleeding-edge. A techno-libertarian paradise, purchased by a cadre of Silicon Valley technocrats, South American cartels, and African warlords who formed an uneasy alliance through mutually-assured destruction.

He was, besides the pilot, the only human on the plane.

He'd been looking for a solution to his problematic memory and intolerable grief. He'd learned Jen was remarried, and was glad for her. But for Sean, that was never a possibility.

On the island, he had his liver replaced with a lab-grown one. He placed a bet on the victor of a coup in Eastern Europe, and won. He accidentally killed a child with his car and nobody seemed to care.

Either wipe my memory or bring him back, he told anyone on the island who would listen. *The technology to wipe your memory doesn't yet exist*, they told him. *But you can always just kill yourself*. One CEO, however, of the company Regrowth Reversys, said they were working on a confidential, controversial experiment with human cloning.

At great personal cost Sean signed a contract and under cover of night brought a representative from Regrowth Reversys to where Pete was buried.

When the colonies on Mars first started sending their nuclear warheads raining down on each other, Sean was a very old man, slowly losing his life to cirrhosis. He was older than anyone in history had ever imagined a human could live. People simply didn't die anymore – at least, not from diseases of organs that could be replaced – but he insisted to the doctors that he didn't want to be healed. He finally understood his father's decision, to rest.

Jen had finally located him and visited him in the hospital. She looked barely older than fifty, yet she had two great-grandchildren who had died up there, in the colonies.

When she saw his frail, skinny body, she cried, because she still had warm feeling for her ex-husband, even though they'd ceased regular communication over a century before.

"Let them help you," she said. Her voice was slightly metallic, processed from the throat vocalizer implant.

"I'd rather they didn't. It's done."

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Sean closed his eyes. “Life is not so precious, my darling. It’s not always worth...the price. It’s all attachments, and so much suffering.”

She closed her hand over his, kissed him on his yellowed, pockmarked forehead, and left.

The creature that Regrowth Reversys developed from the DNA extracted from Pete’s disinterred bones was not Pete. Sean had been both devastated and relieved. The ethics of his actions, the deceit, the desecration of Pete’s memory, it had driven him to the brink.

Defeated, regretful, and full of shame, Sean died believing what the representative from Regrowth Reversys had told him decades earlier: that Pete² would be destroyed.

But it was not. Instead, it was studied, and Pete³ through Pete^{300,000,000} became work slaves. It was their labor, in fact, that helped humanity establish colonies on Mars in the first place.

The clones were human and, at the same time, not human. They had lacked a Spark, that was the only way to describe it, an explanation that scientists and technocrats found very unsatisfactory. But they had to agree, it was true. Religious people, when the heinous truth was exposed to the world, called it a Soul, and a horrific war was fought over it. Ironic how many souls were extinguished over the definition of the word itself.

Still, the technologists won, and the clones remained.

For a time. Because the main issue with the clones, people learned, was that they were susceptible to diseases that had been eradicated. Nobody could explain why their artificial bodies wouldn’t respond to vaccination, or why they were perfect breeding grounds for viral and bacterial mutation. Entire colonies were wiped out after a single clone developed variola, or pestis.

And so, after nearly a billion humans and clones died in the violent debate over whether clones should exist, it was universally agreed that they shouldn't; that they were, in reality, an unnatural and spiritual abomination, unfit for the universe, and were systematically exterminated from every human-occupied settlement in the solar system.

People wrongly assumed that Kopex⁴⁵⁻¹ Ack-R was responsible for releasing the deadliest pathogen in Federation history into the air. They weren't. Kopex⁴⁵⁻¹, great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great grand-descendent of Jeniv-R Ack-R, was a Steward of Science, a caretaker of experimental infection-agents in the Center for Defense in Luna's New Mumbai, and was dedicated to the preservation of life. But because they could trace their heritage back to a real Earth human, they were both universally admired and hated, feared, even, by the general population. They were, therefore, an easy scapegoat.

After both Luna and Mars's populations were decimated, as well as those of all space stations and other colonies (for the synthetic virus was transmitted off Luna by several shuttles before it was quarantined), Kopex⁴⁵⁻¹ Ack-R was rounded up with all other TrueDNA bodies and sent to Earth. Fortunately for Terrans, the organism – now called the Kopex Plague – could not survive long in Earth's atmosphere. Kopex⁴⁵⁻¹ Ack-R was given a short trial and sentenced to execution in the traditional way of the Solar System Age for those with a demi-soul; that was, to be taken up in a HypoPod and released, naked, into the vacuum of space, destined to float, lifeless, in an orbiting ring of convicted felons, a spectacle people mistakenly thought could deter crime.

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