

Ben woke in dullness: another day of trial. Clothes lay scattered on the bed and floor and oh, it took effort to fish something out. A tatty piece of paper tacked onto the mini-fridge door fluttered in the fan's breeze.

I will be somebody today.

I will do something today.

I choose.

He sighed. Today, like the past few, he could choose to be nothing but a passive puppet facing endless useless questions. At least with the trial he wouldn't have to work writing endless lines of code and at least today he wasn't first up to be questioned but that meant he'd have to watch that skinny Adam brat brag about his relationship with Damien Payne, the hipster prophet.

#

Adam played to his audience, "we were getting ready for the event and Damien was staring into the mirror with... disgust, lust? Boredom, anxiety...

'I'll burn my chip,' Damien said to me.

'You'll re-implant in a month,' I replied; he was on his fifth.

'It's just getting worse all the time, you know... have you seen the originality apps, they're reee-diculous,' he turned away from the mirror to look at me.

'Spaz, Munster...those?'

'Did you read about how they work? They use Google's behaviour database with all the gestures, manners of speech, posture, gait etc, like everything... and then tweak you so that you're just far enough off the average to be noticeably eccentric. The more people upload those apps the more the average will adjust and the database updates. The tweaks will

get more eccentric, dramatic or more frequent, whatever, it will turn us all into super freaks.'

I looked at him properly; he had a semi hard on.

'I just have it for the practical apps,' I said.

He stared bleakly into the mirror.

'And besides,' I continued, 'if you burn and then change your mind you won't be able to afford one at the moment and then you'll be stuck outside with the hippies and vegans.'

He sighed, 'it's all so futile. I mean, I know that's the point, but really... sometimes you *feel* it.'

'It's the zeitgeist,' I said.

At which he laughed, '*I* am the zeitgeist,' he fingered the scars he'd cut across his taut pectorals: long lines from shoulder to lower ribs. Ripped like a wolf's claw. 'I'm a parody of myself.'

'There are one thousand and fourteen new lines under #HipsterProphet. All buzz about tonight.' I slapped him, 'decide what you're wearing.'

'I'll wear nothing. Cover me in dark glitter.'

'It'll be cold on the way.'

'I'll wear a coat. I feel naked so I should be naked.'"

#

The lawyer ordered the video to start.

'I am the fucking gull bobbing on flotsam,' Damien's face twisted passionately above the crowd, 'the sky is futile. I will be seasick, bobbing down until you are above and I am below. I see dead things floating in the waters beneath and the flotsam is my anchor to the surface. We will all be upside down and the sky will only ever be a reflection distorted on the surface. I bob deeper down. Any of you could be me if you would open your eyes in the fiery passionless salt water and see the futility. In the age of cynicism, of no-hope, we fall to hell before seeing light. The sky is gone and only the

depths are illuminated. We see the reflected sky on the surface now only through glimmers that remind us there was something once other than hell. Now we must burn just to see anything at all.'

Damien raised his illegal cigarette to the air and in the silence many imagined the smouldering. He clawed at the skin over his temples with his sharpened nails and brought the cigarette to his chip.

The Lawyer shuddered. He'd seen excruciating documentaries about burning. There was vomiting, fever, disorientation. It was done in torture— enough said. His hand involuntarily rose up to his own left temple and caressed the skin there, his other hand, trembling.

The judge sent reassurances; his eyes snapped to her warm face gazing down like an all knowing mother on the court below. He could feel an attack coming. His whole body was an itch and he felt sweaty and dissatisfied, lonely, angry, isolated and disgusted. Hi, I'm Ethan and I'm an app-aholic. He ached to deactivate the ad-wall that would bring twin disgust and relief. Apps for loneliness, boredom, insecurity, anxiety, futility it was all there just waiting for him, to flood him with warmth and happiness and relief and entertainment and love.

She was looking at him. She didn't even have to send him a message. I know, I know, he sent back instantly. Don't worry; we will win this one.

He needed to win this one. They should have had the last one in the bag. Open and shut case. It should have been. The young man had uploaded two separate apps, one of those life game apps that planted designed elements into your sensory perceptions and gave you a virtual gun or something so you'd walk around the real world shooting imaginary monsters or aliens or something stupid on your way to work. The other app

the young man had uploaded had been one of those embellishment apps that coloured life with your own imagination, transforming what you see into objects more exciting, more fantastic. Well you can guess the insanity, combining these two apps. The young lad had grabbed a kitchen knife and, (probably) thinking the kitchen knife a game knife, plunged it repeatedly into what he (probably) thought was a game creature, really his embellished girlfriend.

With the negligence in the app interactivity they would have finally managed to win the case for a regulatory body for these out of control corporations. The trial of the decade. What could you do? Hi I'm Ethan and I'm an app-aholic. A fuck up. Now this one was going to be the trial of the decade. Forget the last; we'll get them this time for sure.

She was looking at him. Judge needed prosecutor to focus.

They were questioning Ben now. She wanted him to take over the questioning; he asked formally and she gave it to him.

#

Ethan the Prosecutor: Let's start at the club.

Defence Bot: Let's stay at the house first. Did you get up immediately that morning?

God Damn. The defence bot took the questioning straight away.

Ben: No.

Defence Bot: You lay in bed?

Why were they hanging back on peripheral details?

Ben: Yes.

Defence Bot: What were you thinking about?

Ben: It takes me a while to get out of bed.

That's the human condition.

Defence Bot: What were you thinking?

Ben: (Mumbling) nothing. It takes me a while to decide I

want to go about my day.

Goddamn bots programmed as sadists.

Defence Bot: And what did you decide?

Ben: It was too late to do any work but I thought maybe I'd go to The Broken Fish after all, that maybe this would be the time.

Defence Bot: The Broken Fish?

Ben: Club night, once a month kind of thing. Pretty quirky. You have to know about it to know about it.

Defence Bot: The time that?

Ben: The time that?

Defence Bot: You were saying that maybe this would be the time.

Ben: The time that my boring life gets swept away and I run into the sunset holding hands with someone smart and beautiful. I don't know. Why does everyone else go there? To laugh at our own absurdity or something.

Defence Bot: Ok. So what did you do next?

Ben: I sat in front of the mirror for a while.

Defence Bot: What were you doing in front of the mirror?

Ben: Thinking.

Defence Bot: About?

Ben. My stupid fat face. The bombings. Inflation. Declining real wages. The disappearance of a conscious working class, disenfranchisement of society, alienation, general loss of significance. Mostly just my stupid fat face.

Defence Bot: You indulged yourself.

Ethan pulsed a mental trigger. Defence was obviously leading and projecting as well as bullying the poor boy. She gave him the questioning immediately.

Prosecutor: Let's talk about what happened at the club. Did they have any prerequisite apps at the door?

Ben: Yes, I had to turn *wild* on.

Prosecutor: And could you describe *wild* for us please.

Ben: It's a basic disinhibiter, run of the mill.

Prosecutor: Did you have your ad-wall turned on?

Ben: No, they made you turn it off when you enter.

Prosecutor: at what point did you receive your first ad?

Ben: Straight away.

Prosecutor: And can you identify the product?

Ben: Yep, it was *ident-i-kit*

Can we play the ad in the juries receivers?

BE ANYONE TONIGHT. BE EVERYONE.

Prosecutor: And you uploaded the app?

Ben: Yes.

Prosecutor: Can you define it's effects?

Ben: You can flip your POV to anyone in the club or even just see from the security camera perspective. The interface is clumsy. I remember thinking I could have designed something better.

Prosecutor: And do you just see from someone else's point of view?

Ben: It's like an emotional connection, some sort of empathic link. Most of that's probably just projection or contextualisation of a flood of new information. Psychology does the work probably; it's a simple app judging by its interface.

Defence Bot: Ben...

Damn it.

... Do you suffer from any medical conditions?

Ben (shaken): What? Like what?

Defence Bot: Psychological conditions. If we were to call up your medical record would we find any psychological medical conditions diagnosed?

Ben: I'm in the process of disputing that.

Defence Bot: You were very keene to talk about all of your psychological disorders in your own trial. I'm sure we could bring up the records of your own defence bot on how you weren't responsible for your actions.

Ben: I'm diagnosed dissociative fugue.

Defence Bot: And with a high risk of?

Ben: High risk of suicide.

Defence Bot: Oh just one more question, did you accept the terms and conditions for the two apps you activated that night?

Did they really think that was going to work now?

Prosecutor: Ben, did you use the *Ident-i-kit* app to identify with anyone in particular at the club that night?

He nodded.

Prosecutor: Was it Damien Payne?

Ben: It was.

Defence Bot: Ben...

God damn them. If I could take an axe to their flimsy bodies and whatever corporate wanker programmed them.

Defence Bot: Why did you choose to identify with the Hipster Prophet?

Ben: I don't know.

Defence Bot: Why Damien Payne?

Ben: I don't know. He was there, up on the stage like, glowing in glitter. Everyone was looking at him. He was, well. I guess he's just the first person I saw. I've seen him before.

Defence Bot: So you would say there was a sexual element in your selection.

Prosecutor: Can we play the video for an objective record?

"...we see the reflected sky on the surface now only

through glimmers that remind us there was once something other than hell. Now we must burn just to see anything at all.”

Damien lifts his cigarette to his temple.

Prosecutor: Freeze it there. You were linked to Damien at the moment he burned his chip?

Ben: Yes.

Prosecutor: And what did you feel?

Ben: Horrible. It was painful and I was totally inside his head. I forgot who I was – all I had was the pain and I felt like everything I had been feeling up to then, everything from the morning, everything from every morning converged and I wanted to make it stop.

Prosecutor: The pain?

Ben: Everything. I wanted the universe to stop. I wanted consciousness to stop. I... I wanted to stop.

Ben was shaking.

Prosecutor: Ok, that's enough. Unfreeze the video.

The jury watched in silence with Damien bent over, apparently from pain, his head pointed upwards, his eyes shut tight, his lips curled in a savage smile and from the crowd a figure bounded out, leapt over, and landed atop. The jury recognised Ben, his face also distorted by agony and confusion, and they watched as Ben pulled Damien's head up by the hair with his left hand and beat his skull over and again with his right. Screams. The crowd came unstuck but not before Ben landed the fatal blow. The image froze and all eyes turned to the real life Ben weeping in the stall.

Now for the secret weapon and we'll have them by the binaries. Watch their smugness short circuit when we find out why the bouncers weren't there to stop it.

Defence Bot: The man that killed the Hipster Prophet. Maybe our media colleagues will make a movie out of you.

Why had he lost the questioning? He asked for it back.

Defence Bot: There were more than a hundred other people on *Ident-i-kit*, many of whom were linked to Damien Payne but they didn't shove his nose up his brain.

What was happening? She looked at him blankly. *She doesn't know. She can't give it to me.*

Defence Bot: But one unstable human shoves Damien Payne's nose up his brain and the social justice warriors and activist judges and freedom haters pounce.

Prosecutor: What's going on?

Judge: What's going on?

Remain calm. You will soon be attended by representatives of the National Justice Authority inline with the Secured Freedom and Justice Act. Please do not move from your seats, remain calm.

'The Secured Freedom and Justice Act,' the judge rose from her seat, 'can you amplify on that?'

The Secured Freedom and Justice Act was passed and approved at 18:00 today.

'Three minutes ago,' she said.

All registered participants in the national law courts must, on entering any court of law, show proof that all newly required law apps are uploaded and up to date. All entrants to a court of law must pass further security screening tests or be denied entry. Furthermore if any trial be deemed to jeopardise the freedom of economic activity or future profits of any corporate person that trial shall be recognised as a threat to national security. This legislation has been

backdated one month and is in vigil on this trial. Please do not move from your seats, remain calm. You will soon be attended by representatives of the National Justice Authority.

#

The judge looked out over her last moments as a judge. Ben crumpled in his seat; her faithful old lawyer, trembling; the jury, shaken. Her heart was broken and she was moved to speak, 'If what I think is happening is happening then I beg you all to think carefully about the next five minutes. I suspect it will all be over by then. Whatever awaits us, we are about to be taken into the loom of history. This will be no consolation, or justification or satisfaction, but it's bald bare truth so let us comport ourselves well. I beg you now stay sober while we wait because, as Sappho once said, someone will remember us, even in another time.'

The lawyer's head rested back, eyes up to the ceiling and open, his mouth also open. A flood of visuals and feelings wormed through his brain. The sweet relief of app-emotions displaced emptiness; he opened as many as he could. The ceiling disappeared and a starry sky opened up. His body went limp and his eyes closed as his mind retracted into mazes of apps and interlocking apps. Ben looked at him, his jaw slightly open, his eyes glazed over and Ben knew that the lawyer was in another world now, happy in his own way. I could do it too.

He looked at the Jury, stuck to their seats. They didn't know what to do. Their script had been torn and now they had no role but to sit in terror. And the judge, looking at him, looking at everyone. Someone will remember us. Strange words. Comport ourselves well. Odd ending.

Ben could feel the hum of the halogens above enter his veins. The whole room hummed with horror. He felt, with terror, that he was the centre of the universe and that there

was no one as alive as he. In the soulless recording eyes of the bots lining the walls their humanity was captured like an enemy is captured.

Ben could feel the seat beneath, one of those with ridges formed to the human shape poking up awkwardly. It was formed for someone larger than him. He could open up an app to dull the nerves in his buttocks, send the pain away. But then if he did that then why not open another to stop that horrible hum, dim the uncomfortable white light, fade out the disconcerting bots from vision, rub out the nervous jury, transform the courtroom to a beach, replace fear with relaxation or joy, stimulate feelings of companionship, of satisfaction from accomplishment, of joy, ecstasy, unleash the imagination, fly off in a rocket to see the planets, the stars and leave this cold, humming, ass poking reality in tatters.

Ben shivered, nauseous. He hated the chair beneath and that horrible hum but he needed these things right now; they kept him leashed to the world as it was. It's just a body in an uncomfortable chair. A disgusting stupid body that will go home, fall asleep in that tediously dull bed of horrors, wake up, see itself in the mirror and go to work.

Another wave of nausea gripped him. That was it. He didn't want to get out of just this; he wanted out of everything. You cannot just get back into that bed and wake up one more morning there, look into that god damn mirror and go to work.

An idea began working quietly around the creative paths of his brain. I could write an app. They'll let me go; I'm just a witness.

My own soft hands battered Damien to the point where he could no longer function as a human body. He will never say anything new. Like characters carved onto a stone he is set and can only slowly slip away in millennia of wind or rain.

But he can never *be*.

Futility, he used to say. But can you say you ever really tried Damien? Enough? Can there ever be an enough? You know what's going on here. You know what the judge and lawyer were trying to do. Someone will remember us, even in another age. Damn her. She's right. The human spirit should not surrender so easily, it should fight with its claws at that which existentially threatens it. Each toothful bite, cut and tear an affirmation of soul alive. To rise from the flabby mass and say no. I will not be the voiceless *they* eating cardboard and spewing out the same pop-app words day after day. To be alive is to burn, to act, to fundamentally *be*. Not to simper in one's room, cold and pathetic, apped up and off, getting up, getting dressed, working, shitting, shopping, sleeping, surrounded by millions of apped-up zombies doing exactly the same. I live in a horror story. The endless cycle of words without meaning is horror. Horror.

I will be somebody today.

I will do something today.

I choose.

He laughed at his piece of paper fluttering on his fridge.

I could write an app that would change the world – they would call it terrorism. I would have to hide. Leave my flat. And what did you ever really do Damien Payne? Someone will remember us, even in another age. And what will I have done?

Ben was acutely aware that the judge's eyes were locked on him when the doors came crashing open.

#

Adam spotted them in one of the smaller rooms upstairs perched on the window ledge smoking illegally, elegantly, and chatting coolly. Brother and sister. Had to be. Beautiful,

long faces with lovely little noses between flat cheekbones that bounced as they laughed. The brother caught Adam's eye just for a moment.

'There's space in that room,' Adam nudged Tabitha.

She glanced in and replied into his ear, 'The one by the window, no?'

Adam couldn't hold back an embarrassed smirk, 'let's just go in.'

They ordered drinks and stood near the end of the bar, stealing glances and giggling quietly under their breath. The other pair adjusted their postures casually, almost accidentally and yet not, and the focus of their gaze turned more from outside to inside the room. Adam and the brother locked eyes a few times more, smiles playing at their mouths, slightly bigger each time. Adam checked his proximity app, expecting to see a red glowing form of declared interest but there was nothing but the cold cool light of winter from the window. Dark horse. Unplugged. Playing it cool. Playing it organic.

Tabitha whispered in his ear and Adam laughed in response, only half listening – this one was beautiful, really beautiful. Not like all the others here; his face was a mirror in which Adam saw his own fascination.

'Do you need another drink?' the voice sang a quiet song, it's accent reached Adam and confused him, delighted him. Of course. Their faces. It made sense; their elegance; Russians. Not brutal, stompy Russians but delicate cautious Russians, full of secrets, full of song.

Adam looked down at his empty drink and laughed, 'I do!'

The brother raised his hand and made a quick, tiny motion to the bartender, 'four more of these.'

'Why don't you both sit down here next to us,' he said.

'Would you care for a cigarette?' he asked when Adam and

Tabitha had returned with chairs. Both of them shook their heads politely.

'You know you're not supposed to smoke,' Adam grinned.

'But I understand that no one at The Broken Fish is interested in enforcing such rules.'

'I don't know,' Adam confessed, 'I'm here cause my mate is performing. Have you been here long?'

'Sorry?'

'In this country,'

'Oh,' Aslan replied, turning his head back towards the window for a moment, 'a pair of years, yes.'

'Where you are from?'

'What does that matter?'

'I'm interested,'

'I think it's interesting what we make of ourselves now and tomorrow. Not yesterday.'

'But I am today everything that brought me to this point where I meet you,' he delivered with a coy smile.

'That's not true. Today you can do anything, you can be anything and tomorrow even more. What do you want to do?'

'I'm studying philosophy,'

'So you must understand what I mean. You want to be a philosopher?'

'I'm not sure what that means, to be a philosopher,' Adam replied, 'I want to make philosophy.'

'Very good, yes,' Aslan smiled, 'to make, that's good. We should be creators, all of us.'

'I'm in love with Ann Ramm, the Heideggerian philosopher, her work on what it means to be a human in the chip and bot age is incredible.'

'So you know what it's like to decide to be something new, now.'

'But you can't omit your origins.'

The two young men were held together, trapped by the other's face, not smiling, neither unhappy. Adam felt failure loom, 'but that doesn't matter,' he said, 'what's your name?'

Aslan leaned in close to Adam's face, their two cheeks almost touching, 'shall we make up one for me that only you know?'

'There you go again,'

'Where have I gone?' Aslan leaned back, smiling.

'Hiding yourself from me.'

'The past is so ugly and boring. You and I can create something special together.'

'But your name is who you are.'

'If you were to give me a name right now then that could be very special,' he almost winked, his smiling face, hovering closely to Adam's own and Adam could feel the heat from the energy between their two cheeks, between their lips hovering close, whispering, smiling, sharing, giving.

'You will have to give me time to think of one,' Adam laughed quietly.

'The management,' a woman in deep dark trousers spoke from the door of the room, 'would like to inform you all that Damien Payne's performance will begin in five minutes.'

'We can't miss Daymo,' Adam grabbed Tabitha's sleeve, 'let's get a good view,' his eyes went back to Aslan, smiling, uncertain, waiting.

'We will just finish our drinks and cigarette's,' Aslan said, pulling back towards his sister still staring silently out of the window, 'and then we will join you.'

'I'll look for you,' Adam replied.

'I know where they're from,' Tabitha pulled Adam sharply to the side of the corridor.

'They're Russian.'

'You saw how cagey he was about where they are from. They

must be from Chechnya.'

'Surely not! Isn't Chechnya a terrorist country?'

'Well, exactly. Why else so cagey. And Muslims too I bet.'

'But Muslims! Terrorists. My God,' he put his hand to his mouth, shocked, and suddenly, adrenalin filled, blurted 'we must tell someone!' and before Tabitha could say another word Adam had flown down the stairs. She tripped as she ran and she slid to the wet floor. Stupid fucking heels good for nothing I don't know why I bother. Trying to fucking look good in this shitty place. She caught her herself, remembering that she wanted to stay cheery. Checking for muck and bruises she picked herself up. Entering the performance room she scanned a few minutes before catching sight of Adam talking animatedly in the corner. A man raised a finger and bouncers moved towards them. 'What are you doing?' Tabitha grabbed Adam's hand once she'd squeezed through.

'They have to know if there might be terrorists here!' he whispered back, 'they're probably not dangerous but you can't take chances.'

'But we don't know that they are terrorists, just leave it.'

'But they're muslims, like you said.'

'I didn't say bloody go and tell someone about it, I just thought you should know.'

'Don't worry, the club will do the right thing. What if we hadn't said anything and then something had happened. Could you live with yourself?' Adam's eyes were wide, 'just think about that. What if something happened. One has to think about these things.'

'Yes, that's him there,' he said pointing towards Aslan now making his way down the stairs.

'Damien's on stage,' the manager said to the bouncers,

'we don't want any drama. Quietly, quietly, to the back room.'

'And in this scene there is flotsam, gulls and waves. You are the flotsam, or the gulls or the waves. I don't know,' Damien rippled in the light, 'only you know what you are. Become the flotsam if that's what you are because, in the end, it really won't matter. Do not fear because you do not understand nor know what to do. You will be something else in hell.'

#

'Where are you from?' The bouncer asked.

'I've done nothing,' Aslan replied.

And the bouncer took his slim head in his broad hand and slammed it onto the table. Aslan closed his eyes, the room rang; the bodies standing over him were covered in light. He was tired and he wanted to cry out from the pain but wouldn't.

'Get the scanner from upstairs,' the manager ordered, the lines on his gaunt face tightened, his voice hushed, almost worshipful.

'We are free to choose,' Aslan said, 'we choose creation, liberty, love, this category of thing,'

'What the fuck is he talking about?' the manager asked. The bouncer slammed his head back down on the table and Aslan was silent.

The scanner arrived.

'Born: Grozny, Chechnya. 20xx'

'Why is the birthdate corrupted?'

Shrugs.

'You are a terrorist?' the manager asked.

'No, no, I choose love.'

'You are a muslim?'

'No, no.'

'It says here you are a muslim. You're from Grozny.'

'We are free.'

'You're a convert to Islam?'

'No, no.'

'You were born a muslim, weren't you.'

'My family are from the...'

'You are a terrorist?'

'No, no.'

Voices conferred quietly in the corner. What can be done? Call the police? No one will care; the police have to worry about their paperwork. Just deal with it here. Quietly, cleanly.

To Aslan the voices retreated far away. Things had happened before. Many things. Life goes on. The pain doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that his sister would be waiting for him and so would the philosophy student, smiling, both of them waiting to embrace him, take him home. Never come back here. And they would make something beautiful of their lives. Why not. The boy seems sweet. Soon this hard table would not be his pillow. Soon he would not be hearing these voices.

The manager said to the bouncer, 'I want it done quietly, cleanly, no mess and I don't want anyone to know about it. Take care of the body out of the back. Use your contacts, whatever. Do not come back into the club through these doors; leave the Damien performance alone. Come back around through the front doors. I guess that's about it. Thanks for your help dealing with this little problem, I'll see to it that you get a nice Christmas bonus. Alright gentlemen, thanks again, he nodded genially before disappearing to the offices.

The two bouncers, between them, took Aslan's life into their hands.

And suddenly screaming could be heard from the performance room next door. The manager, watching Damien Payne die from the control room, pounced on his microphone, 'flood

them with trauma apps, grief kits, the works, send advertisements out to everyone in the room.'

A winter's wind blew all around, freezing the clubbers as they streamed into the street soon filled with lights, taxis and noise. What can you do, many muttered, the hipster prophet, senselessly killed – all this terrorism. So much terrorism. And the night wind screamed.