

## ARTEFACTS & UPGRADES

Middle age and mediocrity had crept up on me slowly. I had blinked once and been a mop-headed toddler, again and puberty had assaulted me with a hormonal hammer, once more and found myself in the quiet desperation of middle age. One last blink and I'd be staring at a coffin lid.

Time seemed to be progressing at an unjustly rapid pace, leaping through all the sweet spots and lingering on the grim and grey. I was beginning to grow hungry with the urge to trap my favourite moments of my youth like glow worms in jars, and keep them upon some specially crafted mantle. All the lovers, the drugs, the road trips, the parties and festivals. I'd lived enough for three lifetimes. The problem was, the more I yearned for those fast fading glow worm in glass jars years the more certain I became that I'd never get them back. I'd probably never again party until the sun came up, run naked through the streets on a dare, end up in the back seat of a Corolla awkwardly tearing clothes off some stranger I'd just met. These memories were artefacts of a different era, I'd no more experience them again than I would sail on a Spanish galleon with a bunch of conquistadors.

When Riley came along, I hadn't so much settled down as had my feet bolted to the ground with a pivot driver. Not that I wasn't madly in love of course, after years of philandering no one was more surprised than me at how easily I slipped into the comfortable caress of monogamy. We'd been together eleven years by that stage, and I'd never strayed, not even once. It wasn't the kind of love that they write novels about, but then, they don't write novels about bus drivers or garbage collectors either and the world sure as hell needs them.

Another thing that they don't write novels about is low-level scientists who spend all day staring at petri dishes and filling out spreadsheets, which was precisely what I was doing when my phone bleeped at me. I picked it up and read:

*"I'm back home for a few months. Meet me at the Boundary tomorrow, 8ish?"*

The message was an artefact. Perhaps I would go sailing on that Spanish

galleon after all. I stared back at the cell cultures in the petri dishes for a while, willing them to spontaneously evolve into some kind of vastly intelligent collective consciousness that could provide the answer to all my problems. Instead they just sat there engaged in a slow and indolent process of asexual reproduction, the lucky bastards.

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I'd told Riley that I was going out for after work drinks with some of the lab staff and the lie had felt fat and gawkish in my mouth. It'd come back to bite me no doubt, but for the moment I could linger in those slow, sweet moments between the lie being told and the discovery of its deception. I sat there at the bar sipping cheap red and listened to the sound of the blues band playing downstairs.

I was trying to figure out how to make a recount of the last twelve years not sound like an apology. The truth was, I was embarrassed by who I'd become. I'd always bragged, with the Benzedrine fuelled hubris of my youth, that I would be one of the greats. Up there with Tesla, Curie, Sagan or even Paracelsus. And yet there I was, spending 42.5 hours a week staring at fucking petri dishes and watching nothing happen at an incomprehensibly glacial pace.

I was about to start spiralling down into my perennially popular internal rant about the general public's inability to name more than a handful of scientists whilst being able to recite the entire family tree of most of some white trash reality TV star as irrefutable evidence of endemic societal decay when Sam sat down, smiled at me, and ordered a beer.

I was literally speechless, which, for someone as grievously garrulous as me, is saying something. To say that Sam 'looked different' would be a similar statement to remarking that Hiroshima had 'some minor changes' in 1945. Black tattoos curled and cascaded over skin, piercings adorned ears and nose and lips, hair had been shaved close to the skull. Chains covered clothing, so that each movement produced a tiny jingling sound, like a pounce of cats creeping quietly

through an alleyway.

Sam sipped, placed the beer back on the table, then said, "You know, this is going to be pretty awkward if you leave me to do all the talking."

"Yeah...ah...sorry. You look...good."

Sam laughed and said,

"Is that good spelt 'W-E-I-R-D'?"

"Ha...yeah, I don't know. Just not what I was expecting I guess."

"Well I could say the same about you, you know? You've been with Riley for what, ten years now?"

"Eleven."

"Back in the day you couldn't stay with the same person for more than eleven days, let alone eleven years."

"Yeah, I know. Would it be trite of me to say that things change?"

"Perhaps, but it would also be accurate. How's it suiting you, the deluxe monogamy package with the optional white picket fence and upper mid-range car accessories?"

I kept trying not to look at Sam's face too much, and then felt like I wasn't looking at it at all. I wanted to brush away the tattoos and chains like they were cobwebs and find the friend I used to know sitting there cheekily grinning underneath.

"Ah, you know, better than I would have anticipated. Of course, it's not as though I leap out of bed everyday and sing to the rising sun, but Riley's good to me, which is more than I deserve. Work is...well, 'if work was supposed to be fun they'd call it something else' right? But it pays well, even if I do feel like defenestrating myself every now and then."

"Defenestrating?"

"Ah...yeah, it means to throw a person or thing out the window."

Sam laughed and nodded appreciatively.

"Hmm. I'll have to remember that one. You always were a mean Scrabble opponent."

“Ha. You know, I haven’t played that in years. Riley is more of a poker fan.”

Sam’s hand toyed with a coin left on the bar, pushing it back and forth. Its movements were sticky, like it had been drenched in honey. I watched as the coin spun across the bar and then I watched as it lifted in crude defiance of gravity, seemingly stuck to skin. I dismissed it as an illusion brought on by tiredness and cheap red.

There wasn’t anyone in the bar dressed like Sam, not even close. I mean, this was West End, so of course there were a few barefooted, dreadlocked hippies lolling about the place and one guy even had those freakishly stretched out ears going on, but even he regarded Sam with a warily raised eyebrow before returning to his voluminous diatribe on the merits of a tofu based diet in a post-global economic paradigm.

“Fucking freak.” The comment was dropped casually, like a discarded cigarette butt, it took me a few seconds to even recognise that it had been directed at Sam. The broad-shouldered commentator was walking briskly to the bathroom, the remark had been the verbal equivalent of a drive by shooting.

"What a prick." I muttered.

"Ah fuck that guy, he's not worth it. The kind of guy who abuses random people in a bar? His own life is worse than any punishment you could seek to dish out. It's no big deal. I'm used to it. Plus, to be honest I could have a glowing pentagram on my forehead and it wouldn't be half as weird as you showing up here yammering on about your beloved life partner! I'd have thought you were more likely to run away and join the circus. You used to spend a lot of time bragging about your amorous adventures. Got to be said though, you always seemed to go for quantity rather than quality."

“Well, I was taking a lot of drugs back then.”

“Yes and now you MAKE the drugs. Didn’t Viachem synthesise that new abortion drug?”

“RX84? Yeah, it should be on the market in a couple of years, once they get past the legions of conservatives that would prefer women to have a child that they

don't want or can't afford whilst simultaneously blocking welfare payments for young and single mothers. But they wasn't my division. I'm just a petridishpig." "A petridishdpig? Aaah, I get it. A lab grunt. So, what the hell ever happened to reinventing the wheel and developing the perfect no side effects hallucinogen? I was holding out for that one you know."

"A few things got in the way. Legality. Mortgage. Lack of intellect, or maybe ambition. It's okay, you know. I might not be changing the world like I planned, but I'm still paying the bills."

Sam started playing with the coin again, and I could have *sworn* that it was moving in ways it shouldn't have.

"I remember you had the name all picked out and everything! What was it again, Neutopia?"

"Neuphoria. Someone else already beat me to the name though, unfortunately. They used the name for a steroid variant for musclebound morons like that prick that just insulted you. The concept is still good though, I haven't totally written it off. The trick with neuphoria was going to be to mix a drug that had a basic medical application as a painkiller that could be altered into a transcendental hallucinogen with the simple application of a readily available catalyst. It would be like a legalised drug without the need for legalisation. All the dangers of impurities and sourcing from various underworld suppliers would be completely bypassed. The problem was finding the right catalyst. I tried everything from baking soda to alcohol. I came close a few times, but nothing that would get me TGA approval, and that's saying something, given some of the train wreck chems they've let through in the last few decades. There was a part of me that really believed, and still does, that letting people safely alter their consciousness would be a truly great thing for society. I mean, look at what happened with acid in the sixties when that was still legal. I wanted to make something to help people forget about the grey and everyday and remind them of the, I don't know, cosmic splendour of the universe. Does that sound as ridiculous as I think it does?"

"Cosmic splendour does sound a bit like the name of a Grateful Dead

tribute band."

"Yeah, I can see that. But you know, I just believed, and still do, more or less that the human form can still do with a little tweaking." Sam smiles wryly and nods.

"Remember those Bradbury books we used to read to each other?"

"Yeah. That man was an icon. I swear to god, when he died I bawled my fucking eyes out."

"Bradbury, Asimov, Gibson. God, we couldn't get enough of those guys could we?"

"They were the best. Still are. Except Gibson maybe, he's really been phoning it in for the last few books."

"Remember when we used to make bets on when the technology they talked about would be in the palm of our hands? It always happened so much faster than either of us guessed. Except electric cars, those damn things took their sweet time, and they're still fucking expensive."

"Yeah. I could have sworn by now we'd all have jetpacks and robot butlers. Still 3D printers and robot vacuum cleaners are a pretty decent second place."

Sam nodded, ordered another drink and said,

"I have something to show you. Try and not freak out."

"You aren't going to have to unzip your pants to show me are you?"

"Very funny."

"Well, I guess it can't be any more of a change than the mass of tats and piercings."

Sam smiled and placed the coin down on the table, and what happened next nearly made me spill backwards onto the floor.

"Jesus fucking Christ!"

"Wanna see it again?"

"How the hell did you do that?"

The coin was placed back on the table and once again Sam's hand approached slowly until the coin leaped inexplicably into the air and met that

black fingernailed hand and then...it just sat there. Stuck as if by magic, suspended in the air.

"Just a dumb party trick. Although it's probably helped me get laid once or twice. It's a sub-dermal rare earth magnet."

"Sub-dermal, as in, you had it inserted underneath your skin?"

"Yup. Same place that did my labret piercing. It lets me do that little trick, but, more importantly, it lets me sense electromagnetic fields. I can FEEL them like..."

"What, like sensing a disturbance in the force?"

"Trust you to make a Star Wars reference. I guess it's more like when you leave an air-conditioned house and walk out into the force of full summer heat. It's amazing. It feels like I've only just figured out how to open my eyes. This is just the first, I've got plans for an RFID tag in my other hand, maybe even an intuitive compass in my knee. I'm still doing the research but I should, in theory, be able to FEEL magnetic north, in the same way that you can feel if you are standing up or lying down. You know, when we were at uni, I always hated my body and who I was back then. I mean, what teenager doesn't right? But growing up I saw others work out or dye their hair or whatever to change themselves, and I figured, why even bother with that stuff? After years of reading about cyborgs, a spray tan or plastic surgery just seemed insufferably pedestrian. This feels like a real upgrade. Like I'm more me than I used to be. It's weird, I feel like I have an ever-growing distaste for my own body. It feels more like an inconvenience than anything else. Like having to clip toenails but on a larger, more existential level."

"You don't think that's a little...I don't know...batshit crazy?"

Sam laughed and replied, "You're wearing glasses and a watch, both devices that give you access to improved performance and data access. The only difference is that you can take them off, mine are part of me."

"I don't know, the idea of slicing open my skin, putting some kind of machine in there..."

"My grandfather has a pacemaker and my aunt has a metal hip, what's the

difference? I have a friend who is a former paralympian who uses those new prosthetics, you know the bouncy leg things? People don't always buy new computers because their old model starts spitting smoke, sometimes they just want the best possible performance."

I nodded, unsure of what to say. A few slow moments slid past, time being gradually gulped into oblivion as two old friends sat and said nothing. Finally, the words that I had wanted to ask erupted out of me.

"Sam, you and me meeting up like this...after all this time. Well, there's not going to be any...it's just...I know you always had a thing for me and..."

Sam cracked into a peel of laughter, which was not, by any stretch of the imagination, what I had been hoping for.

"Oh god, you beautifully deluded fool. I like girls. I've ALWAYS liked girls. Did you not wonder why I spent so much time around Tessa back in the day?"

"I just figured you guys were friends."

"We were X-rated sleepover friends you dolt. Just like Angie before and Lisa after. For a braniac who uses words like 'defenestrated' you sure can be a moron sometimes you know that?"

"Shit. Is my face red?"

My phone rang, I picked it up and saw a picture of Riley's face smiling back at me, waiting for me to take the call. I hung up and put it back in my pocket. "You can take that, I don't mind."

"Nah, I think I need a night off. I love Riley but it's just...I don't know. Too much of a good thing, maybe. If it's important that phone'll start ringing again."

"You don't sound too happy about that."

"Well, it's just...right now I'd rather be talking to you than hearing about the shopping list or whatever else."

"Can I ask you something, directly?"

"What, you mean as opposed to all the obtuse questions you've been throwing at me this evening?"

"Yes." Sam touched my hand with those artificially enhanced fingers and



asked, "Are you happy?"

"I don't know. I guess? Is anyone? Are you?"

"Sure. I s'pose."

"You don't sound so confident."

Sam shrugged, waved a hand over the counter. "See where I'm waving my hand? Right there? There's this feeling, like maybe a push of air, or maybe that feeling you get when you're on one of those gravitron things at an amusement park, but not as strong. I can push against it. Put your hand right here."

"I can't feel anything."

"Right. But not feeling it doesn't mean it's not there. It's coming from the microwave. You can't feel it, but it's there. Sometimes happiness is the same."

"That's very poetic."

"Not sure about that. But it fits I guess."

Sam glanced at the clock.

"You thinking of getting one of those installed next?"

"Ha! I shouldn't think so! I sure as hell wouldn't want to know what time it was all the time. I just gotta get up early tomorrow, job interview at this tech company."

"Okay, well then. I'll call you?"

"Sure."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Sam stood up, smiled, and walked out of the bar. I raised my hand in the space of the purported electromagnetic field, waving it up and down, trying to feel some sort of sensation. I felt nothing. And yet I knew what Sam had said was true.

There was something there.