

Jammed Printer

By: Viji Rajaratnam

George

I am allowed to stare at her for three seconds. I keep her in my periphery, but the flicker of her red hair tempts my eye. She is attempting to pull her hair back into a ponytail, but her bangs protest. They tumble into copper coils that spring with her step.

Siobhan reaches her locker just before three o'clock. She pauses the usual fifteen seconds for her retinal scan. Her irises waver between auburn and sepia as they catch the screen's light. The locker clicks in humdrum recognition. It swings open.

The resulting breeze stirs the sweat that has beaded above my upper lip. She rejects anything sweet, wears a white musk perfume that wafts my way. The smell grows louder. I can taste the twinge of lemon as I inhale, whispered notes of basil and rosewater. It's as close as I can stand to her.

Book bags have gone obsolete, but her aunt's sewing would disagree. Siobhan swings the bag around and rests it on her right thigh. She strokes the slanted 'SO' etched into the corner with her thumb.

Brad's sausage-fingers creep onto her bag. She looks up at him. I know that her pupils are dilating by a fifth of a centimeter. He lingers on her leg as he pulls away.

"What the hell are you doing?" She swats his sweaty hand.

She blows two stray curls out of her face, sending them into a midair dance as they cast wispy shadows over her smooth, velvety—

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" A crease formed between her brows.

She finger-combs the strands that have fallen onto her cheeks. She tucks them behind her left ear. I imagine the reddened tip where she considered a piercing but ducked out at the last minute.

"The hell is *that*?" He gestures at the bag as Siobhan swings it back around and lets out a slight chuckle.

"Yeah, it's my aunt's. She's a bit old-fashioned."

“I mean, my dad’s old-fashioned too, but you’ll never see me lugging around ancient medieval shit.”

“Ancient? *Medieval*? I take it someone needs to retake history.”

“Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

Siobhan breaks out into a fit of laughter, flailing her arms to catch her balance. She sways like tumbleweed thrown to the windy streets. Brad uses these moments as an opportunity to grip her upper-arms, stubby hands moving down her exposed limbs. I focus on cracking my toes to keep from screaming out. Their torsos are pressed together, close enough for him to feel Siobhan’s phone vibrate between them. She answers the text.

“My mom says you should stay for dinner.” She crinkles her nose when she sees him bite his lip, “Really, though. You must.”

I use the last of my three seconds to watch Siobhan saunter off with him. My fingernails dig half-smileys into my palms. I let the afterimage sear into my mind as the scene restarts.

The Prison Guards’ Annual Inspection

Bill started the reboot. The inside of Cell Block A shifted back to its neutral state: a sterilized, whitewashed room.

Bill, at Sector 3, and three other employees were assigned to Cell Block A. The central cell unit was cube-shaped, with an employee-monitored Sector positioned at each face. The outside walls were encased in a two-way mirror that doubled as a touchscreen for each Sector monitor. Decades of fingerprints blurred the surface.

Every reboot wiped the slate clean, so he had to re-enter all the information. He scanned the system’s data banks for the latest entry: George Stieglitz. Sexual assault and murder. Ideal candidate.

// inserting Offender B

frame.terminate (whenInstructed);

George re-materialized into the cell unit. The nodes rooted into his skin sizzled, vibrating in harmony with his flinches and bone-popping screeches. Bill squinted at the Break Room, counting the minutes until lunch.

With his gaze still fixed there, he inputted the victim's preserved memory: Siobhan Walker. Victim. 25, studied Nursing in college. Specialized in physical therapy for geriatric patients.

frame.show ("Victim45061B");

frame.terminate (whenInstructed);

Bill could strain out the bits of conversation coming from his boss's private office down the hall, where Mr. Moneybags was hosting a conference with The Board of Directors.

"A victim retains their last thought for up to 25.3 seconds after death. We extract that imprint and blow it up. We insert their offender into this recreated scene. Our offender-insertion program has generated the most promising results--"

The boss's door read "CRIMINAL CONDITIONING DIRECTOR," the title adjusting to the fluorescent green lighting.

Outside Mr. Moneybags' shut door, mug rims wreathed Bill's control panel. Neglected coffee stains stuck his fingers to the keys as he clacked his ten-hour workday away.

Siobhan's projected memory came into view inside Cell Block A, holograms dancing across the walls. Her wiry hair streaked against the Styrofoam-white wall, ends sparking in rhythmic correspondence to the monotonous coding. She had said her imagined goodbyes over a high-school memory. Bill rolled his eyes. He picked at the stale doughnut flakes wedged in the space where his 'T' key should have been, the chipped glaze coating the tip of his vintage ballpoint.

Bill heard the squeak of Mr. Moneybags' studded loafers as he entered the room.

"...and over here is where our diligent reprogrammers work tirelessly to reinforce recommended behavior."

“Happy Thursday, Mr. Money...Mr. Monet.” Bill coughed to stifle a laugh, spraying the air with doughnut dust. Mr. Moneybags kicked the wheels under Bill’s chair.

“Ahem, we call it corrective reprogramming because it works a lot like giving a child simple instructions. You just really need to *repeat* the message--” he reached forward and tapped Bill’s bald spot with his tablet stylus, “*et voila*, it sinks in.”

Mr. Moneybags leaned forward with his lopsided name tag, imprinting “Mr. Monet” onto the back of Bill’s neck. He hovered over Bill’s monitor, “Huh, so much for life flashing before your eyes.”

Bill’s index finger was poised on the loop button, ready to reboot again if George displayed ‘inappropriate involvement’ in the cell unit.

He regurgitated the restrictions to his waiting superiors, “If the offender makes physical contact with the victim projection, the program will restart. If he talks to her. If he gets within breathing space of her. If he stares at her for more than three-consecutive seconds. Program will restart.”

Mr. Moneybags nodded in approval, “Yes, the program trains serious offenders to curb...eh...how you say...degenerative impulses. Repeated exposure to his victim’s parting thoughts and memories will make the offender sympathize, repent for his crimes.”

“How long will the offenders remain here?” One of the suits asked pointedly, “And how much of an investment return can we expect from each offender?”

“The sentence varies. We implement our greatest resources to calculate the appropriate--” Mr. Moneybag’s voice trailed off as he led the Directors into another backroom.

As the screens fell asleep, Bill entertained himself with reflective flashes of his creased forehead. Next to him, Bob contemplated which nostril was more conducive for nose picking. Right one was winning. Tetris rounds hypnotized the name tag-less intern.

“Aw, shit. Just lost a line of code,” Bob muttered, covering his mouth.

“We’re supposed to save the reboots for direct offender violations, *but...*” Bill glanced towards Mr. Moneybags’ retreating figure, “The bastard probably would’ve done something anyways.” Bill re-started the reboot.

Flickering Office Light

Siobhan has 12 birthmarks. Most of them scatter into constellations across her shoulders, but there is a lucky diamond-shaped one on her right kneecap. It winks at me as she rests her bag on her thigh.

“Hey! I’m talking to you!” I step closer to her, taking in that sweet lemon rosewater.

“Yeah, it’s my aunt’s. She’s a bit old-fashioned.”

Her bag’s strap leaves a red stripe by her neck. Her last sensitive-skin cream provoked an outbreak of eczema. The rash’s persisting scars had instilled a fear of beautification products. She wore makeup twice a year.

“Ancient...” Her voice modulates a half-octave. “*Medieval!*”

I stand behind Brad to get the full blast of her gaze. She is recovering from a two-month-long colored contact phase. The experiment of a violent-grey tinted one has left a slight residue in her eyes. The purplish flecks stand out more when she smiles. Her dimples are so pronounced that they bleed-through her neutral expression. She cannot keep a straight face for longer than a minute.

I see him grab the skinny of her back. I’ve cracked my toes so many times that they furl inwards on their own.

“My mom says –”

I ram Brad into the locker door. I take hold of Siobhan’s upper-arms and kiss her, caress her strong jawline. Her cheeks feel like ice blocks, cheekbones hollowed out. Her eyelashes are sharpened eagle talons that bristle my face. I mix my sweat in with her drywall texture. Her sealed lips refuse to reciprocate. My eyes are closed, but I can still sense the flickering hallway lights. I pull away.

“Tell me you can see me!” I plead.

She gapes at me, unblinking, “*Really*, you must stay for dinner. Din-”

My hands are still in her hair. The strands entangle my fingers like frayed wires. I clutch them to ready myself for the reboot.

“You must. You – must.”
