

The Enigmatic Mr. Shoe

By

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The office lay in long morning shadows, its gritty air stale and tasteless; a hangover waiting to happen. Stark with the morning sun shining low through unshielded windows it was still quiet here, still early. A cathedral of nothingness with light filtered specs of dust the only movement around a room whose fragrance was an alluring mixture of antiseptic floors, and strong percolated coffee.

The receptionist gave me the coffee, a foul tasting reheat, as though I'd won a prize. It was too hot, the office too cold and in front of me the secretary now chatted quietly on the phone. Freed from attending to my needs she acted as though I didn't exist.

In my camera-eye, the Bio-Tech device in my head, she lay naked on her desk while a man trailed fingers over bare skin, her body moving to the rhythm of his touch, outstretched arms upsetting pens and crumpling paper. The shadows were artificial in this recorded reality, products of a sole desk lamp, a single source of light that lit this same room with shadows and tiredness.

Timecode for this recorded-reality put it at yesterday evening, quite late too, and I wondered if this moment of passion was planned or spontaneous; a meaningful relationship, or just good-old fashioned lust.

Real-time secretary flashed me a look - a quick '*is he okay. Does he want anything look*' - a practiced gesture that today left her puzzled at the smirk on my face. I watched recorded-secretary kneeling down, her naked back towards me, towards the camera, and it was difficult not to smirk. Naked in recorded-time; clothed in real-time. Puzzled in one version of reality; pleased in another.

Typically Preston broke the spell of my split-level voyeurism.

"Wong," his voice called out. He didn't bother coming to the door; he just hollered and expected me to jump. Recorded-secretary was having a great time and it took real willpower to turn her off and walk into the world of Preston.

Preston lived in his office. Oh he had a flat somewhere downtown; a nice one with a nice wife and nice kids, but as far as I knew, this is where he lived. Here amongst the chaos of his day to day. It would be cool to imagine Preston saying 'Yes case 24-15, that's right HERE' and lift a data crystal from the chaos and prove some kind of system was at work. But in reality he never could.

Preston sat clicking at a keyboard. He worked, as always, with two fingers, ponderously tapping away while I found - and latched onto - his office camera. There I could watch a pre-recorded-Preston sitting at his desk typing slowly. It took me a moment to realize I was looking at an hour earlier. Taking the recording back changed little. Sometimes he sat talking to someone, someone sitting in the chair I now occupied, or he was drinking coffee, or eating a microwave meal - occasionally talking on the phone. Same shirt, same tie. Rarely did he leave his chair.

"Tony?"

Preston had been talking to me and I'd phased too far out, leaving reality behind me. That happens to Viewers, people like me. An occupational hazard and one that would eventually send me mad.

I moved the recording back to present time and replayed the last few seconds. Ah... He wanted to know how I was doing.

"You mean," I said. "How I'm doing at not doing 'it'. Right?"

He looked at me for a long moment, his face expressionless and then he glanced in the direction of the office camera and back to me. I replayed the scene and yes, he looked directly at the camera, his eyes focusing on the exact spot. No-one was supposed to know where these cameras were, even though everyone knew they existed. But Preston knew a lot of things he shouldn't. When he'd asked me 'how I was doing' it was probably just after reading my medical log; disastrous reading to say the least.

Preston leant back from the keyboard, a tired gesture that stretched his slack office-worker belly. He looked relaxed enough, but his eyes were worn and lifeless; and perhaps, yes perhaps a little haunted. I

rewound the camera and found no break to his office occupation. He'd worked all night.

"Medic says you are doing okay." He said. "Still some ground to cover..."

"Still addicted they mean."

Preston smiled. Passive, non-threatening. "Everyone knew this could happen, Tony, even you."

"Even me." I said with a smile of my own. A junkie who wants to kick his habit is not a happy junkie. But I was a happy junkie, I liked my habit.

"Medic says," he flicked a key or two on his console; "that you 'might benefit from some light field work' unquote."

"Does it?" It was difficult not to sound ironic. There were no cameras behind Preston and if I knew the man at all there never would be. He could have anything on his screen, I couldn't see it and he knew that.

I watched some replays of Preston from a few days earlier when the secretary from outside was fussing around him, flirting, looking for a favor; an extra holiday. She used her body to great effect. Hell, I would have given her the time off. Flicking back to real-time I found Preston gaze once more on me. Quietly sipping his coffee, patiently waiting for me to return

from wherever I had disappeared, whichever recorded reality that had taken my fancy.

I smiled to show him I was here. Back in the real-world, watching the real-Preston watching the real-me. I could even see me if I wanted to...

...If I really wanted to.

"Light field work?" I was waiting for him to cut to the chase. Since yesterday evening I had been thinking: here it comes; the big operation; the one where they take away my addiction and cut out my soul. No-one had mentioned this yet and there had been no suggestion that they ever would, but my habit had begun to make eat at the darker side of my paranoia. 'Light field work' I hadn't expected. But I still felt uneasy. He knew my problems and my record. He knew what was wrong with my program, he knew...

"Wong?"

"Sorry. Thinking."

Preston glanced again at the camera in the corner.

"No really," I said. "Thinking. That's all."

Again the hard look. The long stare with his watery grey eyes searching my face and looking for whatever it was he looked for in those calm intense moments of his. He glanced down at the console and seemed to mentally

shrug; a defenseless gesture. Picking up a crystal he threw it across the desk and I caught it in one hand. Was he checking? Wanting to see if I was watching real-time or recorded-time?

"The Council has asked for our help on this."

"Don't they have their own Viewers?"

"None are available."

I found that easy to believe. Being a Viewer wasn't easy and of course sooner or later all Viewers become addicted; become useless; go mad. Big disadvantage. Big problem for the Council. My problem too, but not I wanted to deal with. As I said, I'm a happy addict.

"Read it," Preston said indicating the crystal.

"Read it on the Express."

"To?"

"Tibet."

Tibet was familiar. Almost disturbingly so. Just as I remembered it as a child, just as I could see it in my mind's eye. The real mind's eye, my memory one. Not the

artificial device planted into my head, but the one that nestled somewhere down near what was left of my soul.

The open plains and mountain ranges still held that giddy feeling of open exhilaration, as though the force of nature rushed across these vast open stretches to kiss you on the nose and proclaim its beauty. This was all still here and I felt relief that my mind's eye still worked, underused though it was. Even the temples, those intriguing monuments to the past, dwarfed by their mighty surroundings, still looked hauntingly familiar. I was only missing my father and his ever present yellow rucksack bobbing along a pathway; getting ready to climb 'just one more hill' to get 'just one more photo'. All before we had to hurry back to the Express station to catch the very last shuttle home.

The stillness hadn't changed either; a quiet reflected silence that existed only here in these mountains in Tibet. I imagined my father standing there breaking the silence with his laughter, the cackle sound of his voice echoing around and defiling the tender quietness, attracting dark looks from other tourists and making me cringe. And every time I would ask him; "but father, why are you laughing?" and every time he would reply; "because it is too beautiful not to."

I startled myself. These remembered images were so clear, so faithful, that I found myself reaching out and looking for that tentative connection between Viewer and camera. I wanted to rewind and watch my father laugh again, but the memory refused to rewind, refused my mental command and I was left feeling empty, as though a part of my body, a part of my mind, was missing.

"Wong?" I turned to the voice of a young woman.

I was rewinding before I even knew it; viewing the download I had taken from Preston's camera just before I left his office. Force of habit. I was saving the footage for later; something to look at on the Express where the camera in the Fast-Shuttle viewed the internal compartment with all its boring regularity.

I could have saved myself the time. Preston's office held little of interest - if only I had saved the recording of the secretary - but there had been a recording of this frowning young woman that now stood in front of me. She had appeared twelve hours or so before me; spoke to Preston for a while and then, just like Preston had, she looked directly into the camera. Directly at me.

"Hi," She said as I emerged back into reality.

"Sorry I didn't meet you at the terminal. Things have been, well busy..."

Her eyes tracked down to the row of transport-carts lined up on the road ahead. Bodies were being brought out by robots with caterpillar tracks for wheels and long metal blades for arms. The shiny metal caskets they held hid the bodies but their coffin like dimensions passed on the message anyway. Here was death.

She turned from the scene, her face drawn. No laughter here today.

"I'm Sheila Moon."

"From the report?"

"Ah good you've read it." Her voice sounded more relieved than impressed. Obviously tales of my addiction, my lack of focus, had traveled far and wide.

"On the Express," I said and thumbed a gesture back towards the terminal. God knows why. She must have known where it was.

"The report was just a preliminary one," she said. "I have to revise the death count. There appear to have been more people here than we initially realized."

"Oh," I said struggling to focus on what she was saying while playing with the recording of Preston's

office. She came in, gave a crystal to Preston, they talked a little bit about the case, nothing I didn't already know, nothing personal, no secret exchanges, nothing out of the ordinary. Then, just before she left, just as Preston was calling a transport vehicle to collect her, she looked straight at the camera; green eyes looking straight into mine with a look of...

What? Curiosity? Pity?

I faded into real-time and real-time Sheila's eyes looked at me with exactly the same level of indefinable penetration. As though she wanted to see right into my head and watch the wheels turn. The look was unnerving and I found myself reaching out for the nearest camera-link so I could retreat away from her stare.

There were no links. I was out of range or the walls of the monastery were blocking the signal. How old was that temple? A thousand years? The walls were probably meters thick. With a feeling of isolated disappointment I returned to real-time to find the green eyes waiting patiently for me.

"No cameras here?" I said. She knew I was a junky. Why hide it? But as I said that her tongue touched her lips, a quick gesture, snake-like and non-erotic, almost

an open gesture of disappointment. Of something else too, but I couldn't see it.

"No," she said turning and walking towards the coffins being piled into refrigerated vans.

I jogged a few steps to catch her up and then matched her slow stride up towards the vans. One was being closed up; the human attendant sealing the door with a stamped metal clasp. He nodded at Sheila Moon before jumping into the passenger seat and the van hummed away.

I watched the slow moving vehicle move down the mountain trail towards the bulbous shape of an Air-Transporter, then turned away to find Sheila staring once more deep into my soul.

"Something wrong?" I said.

She jerked slightly, a naughty girl caught with her fingers in the cookie jar. Her cheeks reddened.

"Sorry," she said. "It's just difficult to know when you are really 'here' and when you are not."

"Sometimes it's difficult for me too," I said and smiled. The smile wasn't returned. Long day. Lots of dead people. Who could blame her if she felt a little tense. "How many more dead are there?"

"We found another 35 in the basement." Her voice wavered slightly.

"Like the others?"

"Far as we can tell, yes."

"All suicides?"

"Apparently."

"Apparently?"

"What do you want me to say?"

She tensed, defensive, as though she expected me to do or say something that she wouldn't like. I watched her on the office tape, watched her pick out that camera like a guided missile. Looked up, looked into it. She didn't search she just found it.

"Wong?"

I had her image in freeze frame, looking directly into the camera; directly into my eyes. I felt the sensation of motion-sickness when I focused on her real-time image and she moved, a fluid motion that span her hair in a dark circle and framed by a setting sun that spun reflections across the metal backs of the rolling robots.

"Did you hear me?"

I smiled, not an apology, just a mental shrug of guilt, and shook my head.

"I said we should go inside."

"Okay."

Inside it was cool. Not cold or damp or even unpleasant, just cool. A thousand years of simply existing seemed to have left the temple at just the right temperature, the exact level of humidified comfort. Of course that didn't explain the dead people all around me.

The room we entered was a long walk into the monastery, up and down stone stairs, past sparsely furnished rooms and down depressingly bare corridors. The candle infested room we finally ended up in was however truly majestic; even with all the steadily stiffening corpses.

They lay on a recessed stone floor worn smooth by the millennium of Monks who had walked across it. I took a few step across it, following Sheila towards one of the dead, and noticed the smoothness was interrupted by a fine layer of sand, a dusted covering that gathered in the warn cracks and the lines between the slabs. It was into this slivery sand that one of the dead monk's had scrawled some barely legible words, presumably before he died.

"I can't make it out," I said squinting by the light of the candles. "What does it say?"

"Wegen der Tiere," Sheila said. "It means 'Against the Animals'."

"Which means?"

"Linguistics are working on it."

I looked at the dead man. His face was a mask of peace. He could be sleeping, except he wasn't breathing. He was dead and the impersonal horror of breathing air that he no longer needed had me reaching out again, searching for an up-link, a camera or a recording device. Anything so I could escape the dead reality around me. Again there was nothing. Pivoting on my heels I turned my body, tilting my head, fine tuning my search for the faintest of sources...

"There are no cameras here." Sheila's voice brought my tracking to an abrupt halt.

"None?" My palms were sweaty and the air now felt clammy. The next Express was in 30 minutes and after that I was here for the night. A long night without a camera to link to and only the recordings I had stored in my head.

Sheila looked at me again, seeming to read my thoughts and feel my addiction.

"Come with me," she said.

We picked our way amongst the dead and moved back towards another corridor identical to all the others except that it suddenly led back into the 23rd century. Opening one door moved us from Monastery to a modern office and the comfort of normality, the recognition of the familiar gave me hope once again of finding a camera. I searched, found nothing and frustration bit down hard.

"I don't get it," I said. "There are no cameras here either. Nothing at all. Why the hell did the Council send me here?"

Sheila moved to a wall, flicked a switch and a recessed panel rose to reveal a wall-safe. She played with the combination, swung open the heavy metal door and then I understood.

"A Memo-gram." I said looking at the dull grey box barely fitting inside the safe.

"It's an MV40," Sheila said pulling it out and placing it on a large office-desk. "And as far as I can tell it's very nearly full."

I laughed; a bark of disbelief. "Do you know how much material it would take to fill one of these? How many millions of hours?" I said. MV40's don't get full.

They're designed to compress and conserve space storing a hell of a lot of archived camera material. No one had ever filled one up.

I watched her leave the MV40 on the desk and step away.

"How did you find it?" I could hear the wavering in my voice and feel the inner tug as my addiction pushed me to turn on the MV40, to connect and retreat from life. To get my fix. I pulled back from the brink of surrendering for long enough to realize that Sheila had not answered. Instead she stood quietly boring her way through my skull with her ever probing eyes.

And then I realized.

I was getting slower, relying too much on analyzing film and not enough on analyzing life. I replayed the scene in Preston's office. She looked up, right into the lens, right into my eyes, straight at the damn camera.

"You're a Finder." I said.

Her smile was weak and there was nothing in the eyes. "You read the report?"

"Yes."

"That's in the report."

Shit: "I didn't read it all."

"Obviously."

"Look I realize that I'm..."

"An addict?" Green eyes; hard stare; no contest.

I smiled trying to defuse the situation. So I was an addict, so what? I looked at the MV40. The unit had been turned off but the activation switch was tantalizingly within reach.

"So we're a team then?" I said.

"Were a team." She said. "I found this. Now the job is yours. I head back on the Express tonight. If you'll excuse me I imagine you are keen to hook up."

She was away from the desk before I could say anything. I looked at the Memo-gram and hungered, but I wanted something more from her. I had never met a Finder.

"The MV40," I said and noted that she hadn't stopped walking towards the door. "It wasn't activated when you found it?"

"No." The answer came from over her shoulder.

"How did you find it then?"

That stopped her. I watched her hand tense around the brass handle of the door, warm skin leaving a frosted remembrance on the cold metal as she dragged her skin around it without pulling, without actually opening it. With her back to me she said; "I can see latent

images. Even if the device is off, I can still detect it."

Finders were a curious breed. Bio-Tech enhanced like me; trained to a similar level of control and yet all they could do was *find* a camera - or in this case a recording device. They couldn't access it, couldn't look into the recordings. Just find the lens and then presumably try to imagine what it could have seen.

I would hate being a Finder.

She was gone. I didn't even see her leave. I'd faded into my comfort zone of recorded images from Preston's office, thrown or forced there by the mere thought of not being able to; or at least of someone else not being able to. I listened for her footsteps outside, but there was only silence.

Silence and the MV40 in front of me.

The metal casing was cool under my hands, its smooth surface the feel of a long lost love. Almost by accident my fingers arrived at the activation switch and paused there, tweaking and teasing it like I would a woman's breasts; like I had before everything I needed came pre-packaged in a recorded reality.

A full Memo-gram. This was going to take time, but I had plenty of that. My finger flicked the switch

almost without a conscious movement, my need stronger than I gave it credit. There was a pause as the machine took a second to initialize, then I was inside my need and outside reality.

People. Moving; talking; sitting...

Airports; Express Terminals; shops; cafes; squares...

Walking; running; standing still...

A slide show of humanity.

Happy; sad and afraid...

"Tony?"

Cold; miserable; jubilant...

Inconsolable.

"Tony Wong?"

A myriad of different states for a myriad of different souls. Before me they gathered. A gathering of souls.

A purgatory of souls?

Now where did that image come from?

"TONY WONG!"

I stopped the recording and opened my eyes. Sheila stood in front of me with her arms crossed, lips turned sour and eyes set to bore mode.

"Didn't you leave?" I hadn't meant to sound unfriendly; it just dropped out of my mouth and morphed her face from sour to grim lines of disappointment.

"I came back," she said, clearly unwilling to talk about it. "Couldn't you hear me? I've been calling your name for nearly half an hour. I almost gave up."

"Sorry. Busy."

The look came from her again, but with more sympathy than loathing. She uncrossed her arms and sat on the edge of the desk. Reaching past me she flicked the MV40 off.

"Hey, I wasn't finished."

"I want to talk to you." She said and carried the MV40 to the wall-safe. A second later and the Memo-gram was locked away. She turned with what appeared to be a base attempt at a smile. "Come on, I'll buy you lunch."

Buying me lunch turned out to be showing me the canteen for the forensic workers. This was little more than a tent set up outside that teemed with scientists dressed in white coats. We found a table far from this madding crowd.

The meal was re-hydrated 'something or other' with a thick gravy that reminded me, perhaps unsurprisingly, of clotted blood. Sheila had chosen the vegetarian 're-hydrated something or other', which reminded me of a cow-pat. She forked the mess into her mouth and chewed it with an expression that said it tasted as good as it looked.

"The reason I've been sent back," she said, "is the Council wants me to liaise between you and them."

She pointed with her fork at an older man who was surrounded by white coats of the younger variety and a clutch of oddly customized robots. The old man was saying 'No' over and over again in Japanese while banging the table to emphasize the point. He snatched a report from a terrified looking girl, tore it into pieces and threw it back in her face. The girl left the tent sniffing back her tears.

"Could be fun," I said and improbably Sheila laughed. A small noise at first, then a released woof of laughter that momentary silenced the other dinners arguing. Although only momentarily.

Sheila wiped away a sudden tear from one eye and took a breath. She looked like a woman standing with her finger in a dyke of emotion, struggling to hold it back

while it poured over her head. Then without warning she gave in and the laughter flooded out of her in one quick burst, seeping into the floor and vanishing as though it had never been.

"Why are you really back?" I said. "There must be a hundred people here who could 'liaise' with me and them."

She looked down at her plate as though the question had never been asked.

"Ahh I see," I said. "They want to make sure I am in the real-world and only a Finder can see whether the MV40 is off or not. I could still be looking at recorded material. I can store an awful lot of film you know. I could watch that."

I was trying to bate her, but she wasn't biting. Instead she took a sip of water, her hands steady, but her eyes did meet mine.

"I can tell," she said finally meeting my stare with her own.

"You can tell if I'm linked?"

"I can tell if you're playing back." She said quietly and I felt my world, my dirty little secret, become small and claustrophobic.

She put her fork down. "Listen this is supposed to be classified but seeing as you are a..." she stumbled on the word.

"Viewer."

"Right and I'm a ..."

"Finder."

"Yes," she said and shot the scientists a dark look. "And considering this really isn't really a normal day."

"Fifteen hundred monks suddenly all kill themselves on the same day for no apparent reason you mean?" Irony is easy when you don't know the dead people.

"Exactly," she said pointing at me with her thumb across the top of her fork, her face composed and serious, either failing to hear my irony or choosing to ignore it. "Exactly." She paused to look around, a conspiratorial gesture. "When you 'View', I can see that."

"How?"

She put down the fork and leaned in close, her voice low; "every Bio-Tech device gives off an aura, whether that's a camera, or a Viewer or an MV40 that's not even turned on, the aura is there for me to see."

Different actions, off, record, play, give different levels of intensity."

"I never knew."

"It's classified."

"But I have access to classified material, hell I am classified material. Why keep this part a secret?"

She shrugged. "Science Council decision."

I frowned. All these years and I had never known I could be spied on. I wondered if my therapist was a Finder. If he had seen my lies everyday of therapy when I said I was okay. I thought about the way Preston looked at me, looked at the camera. Was he a spy too? I felt dirty, exposed and naked. I realized having a habit wasn't as much fun when anyone could see me getting my fix.

More loud thumping on the table jabbed me from my guilty sulk. I looked round to find the same older man tearing a mental strip from another of his young assistants.

"Doctor Ying," Sheila said. "Head of operations here."

"Is there a Doctor Yang?" I tried keeping my voice as steady as I could.

"Unfortunately not. See her?" She pointed to a young girl sniffing back tears. "She is either deeply devoted to the good doctor or madly in love with him."

"Is that so? Does your Finder ability let you see that? Or is it simply the awesome powers of female intuition?"

A smile froze on her face and her eyes lost their sparkle again.

"Awesome powers of female intuition," she said. Then; "Get over it Tony. I can see you doing it, it's a fact of life, you'll just have to get used to it." She tried taking another bite from her plate but put down the fork with a look of defeat.

"I can't eat this shit," she said. "You?"

"I can eat it," I said. "Just not sure how long I can keep it down."

She laughed, a little grunt that lifted some of the mood between us.

"Come on then," she said. "Let's go upstairs. There's an automated kitchen I'm sure it can't be any worse than this."

We left unobserved.

"What gets me," Sheila said as she closed the tent door. "Is that they eat this filth without even noticing how crap it actually is."

"Must be a scientist thing," I said and was rewarded with a genuine smile, brief, but at least it extended to her eyes.

By the time we had retraced our steps back to the office I was a calmer individual. Like all good junkies I had rationalized the problem pretty quickly. Sheila might be able to see when I linked up, she might not even be the only one, but she couldn't stop me. Everyone knew I had a habit, it didn't really matter if I could be caught doing it. Not really. Not in the long run.

Get over it, the Sheila had said. Sounded like good advice. Back in the elegant room, and back near the MV40 I even relaxed as far as small talk.

"You have an odd accent. I can't quite place it," I said watching Sheila struggle with the automated kitchen. She had the ideas; she just lacked the language

skills. All the controls were in Sanskrit which had been fleetingly fashionable a few years back with rich bored people.

Sheila glanced back at me with distracted frustration. "What?" she shouted over the clanking of something deep within the machine. "Look hang on a sec, I think I've just figured this bloody thing out."

"South African?"

"What?"

"The accent, I thought I heard some Africana in there."

"New Johannesburg," she said moving away from the noise. She opened a fridge and pulled out a bottle of white wine making big eyes at it. "Want some?"

"Why not."

She opened several cupboards before she found a bottle opener sitting next to the toaster. It whirled quietly and soon I had a glass of fruity wine and a plate full of sardines sitting in front of me. Sheila's plate was piled high with steaming vegetables and she transferred a few of her potatoes across to my plate.

"Hey not bad," I said as I dug into my meal. "You sure know your Sanskrit."

"That's what you think, I ordered Pot Roast for you."

"This isn't Pot Roast?"

We shared a laugh, a tension breaking laugh; the laughter of polite manners and strangers who are looking for some excuse to relax.

"What about you?" She said. "Where do you call home?"

"Singapore."

"Rich kid eh?"

"Used to be." I said and Sheila's expression changed. A sad, intense look. One that said, Oh yeah I forgot.

"You have a very expression-full face." I said and surprised myself by meaning it.

"So I've been told." She lapsed into silence. Then; "sorry, it's just that, well I don't know how you cope knowing that one day..." She trailed off, her fork playing with her food but failing to find a target. "You do know don't you?"

"That one day I'll go inside my head and stay there?" I took a sip of wine to wash down the salty taste of fish. "Yes I know that."

"But you still agreed to the operation."

"You did too."

She stabbed a tomato and the juice squirted away across the table landing on the back of my hand.

"Sorry," she said and dabbed at the juice with a cloth. "You know it's not the same. My operation I mean. I was in security and this... Ability seemed like the next step forward."

Ah, so that's how she lived with finding cameras but not wanting to see through them. She didn't want to know what could be seen, she just needed to know if anyone could.

I sat and ate as she told me her story, how she jumped at the chance of an operation, the chance to know for sure if a room was clean of visual and audio devices. She could see both apparently. I'd never met a Listener (Sheila had) but I heard they went mad too, but a different madness, one that had them holding hands to their ears trying to block out voices that could never be blocked out.

Sheila told an interesting tale; a nominal amount of anecdotal stories and a smattering of her private life, and the odd reference to the World Council. I got the idea she was connected, but not overly so. For a start she hadn't wanted this job, certainly she hadn't

wanted to baby-sit me, but someone had pulled rank and here we all were happy as sheep in shit.

"I can tell you my sad story too. If you want?" I said. "But it's not very interesting."

Sheila paused, a lock of her hair falling to one side of her face and remaining there for a second before a practiced gesture swept it aside. She poured wine into both our glasses and sipped, quietly watching me. The lights had dimmed and all we had to see by were the lights of the automated kitchen. Sheila seemingly more aware of this than me shrank back into her own shadows, waiting for something.

"Ah, you already know." I said and she nodded. Slow and deliberate, her eyes never leaving mine.

"I know you were on death row," she said. "And that you accepted the operation a year before your sentence was due."

"Not entirely true. My sentence was accelerated. Seems some kid had a heart problem, I had the right blood type and the kid had an allergy to Bio-Tech organs." The rest of the equation must have seemed simple to the Judgment Council.

"In the whole world, you were the only one with the right blood-match?"

"In the whole world I was the only one with the right blood-match AND on death row, and the kid needed it straight away."

And so I became a Viewer and I got to live a little longer. I never asked what happened to the kid. I was just grateful that the Science Council pulled rank on the Judgment Council.

Sheila looked somewhat shocked by my story. Some were, some didn't believe me, some asked me 'what did I expect' when I broke the law; when I killed 187 people by designing just the wrong type of fuel cell. Corporate murder was still murder whichever way you looked at it and three others in my department went to death row with me. I was the only one who made it out.

I try not to think about the others too much, about who got their organs, their skin and their hair. In fact I try not to think. That's where being a Viewer can be the honey of my bitter life; buried inside other people's lives, other people's actions, and all in the past tense, nothing real-time, everything recorded. Everything's predictable when it's played back and watched over and over.

"Had the operation, did the training and," I sipped at my wine for dramatic effect. "And now I'm waiting to go mad."

"Isn't there treatment?"

"Nothing that works. At least not yet."

"But there's hope."

"There's always hope Sheila."

The phone buzzed, making us both jump. Sheila picked it up, listened for a few minutes and then dismissed the caller with a single 'Yes' spoken in Japanese.

"I have to go," she said with an air of genuine regret. "There have been some developments that I need to listen in on."

"Well thanks for the meal." I said. "Who knew Sanskrit could be so tasty. I'll get back to my job and leave you to the wacky world of science."

"Right," she said. "I'll let you have the MV40 back."

"Thanks," I said, trying to sound neutral but Sheila caught me with a look. She knew, and I knew, that getting back to the MV40 had been on my mind since the moment she locked it away.

They teemed through my mind. These people who lived in the real-world, the world I used to live in. Fast forward images of pretty young women; dangerously obsessive men; innocent children and watchful parents. Drifting souls and a harmony of something greater, something that even I could not see from my god-like view point.

Something that was wrong.

I stopped the tape. The images were jarring me. Something wasn't right here. The recording felt in some way corrupt and my fix tasted...?

What?

Artificial?

I came out of the MV40 gradually, soaking up the real-world first, coming to grips with the feeling of being somewhere I couldn't control, couldn't rewind. The sense of smell was always the first thing I noticed coming back, and yet the longer I spent in recorded-time, the less I missed it. Like heat on my skin or wind in my hair. None of it seemed important because the first thing I missed when I came out was the lack of

control. Recorded-time was mine to do with as I liked; real-life was not. It really was that simple.

"Tony?"

Sheila stood over me a glass of water in one hand, a sandwich in the other. She was staring right into my eyes and for the first time I realized she was checking to see if I had disconnected.

"Thanks," I said taking the water. Viewing always left me dry. The sandwich was cheese and lettuce. Not my favorite, but what else could I expect from a vegetarian.

She perched on the edge of the desk.

"The Council has been in contact."

"Have they?"

Her tongue darted out again, touching the tip of her lips, staying there for the beat of a heart before retreating, as though she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. Or perhaps she simply didn't trust me enough. Speaking out against the Council was allowed, within certain recognized limitations, but it paid to be careful.

"They still don't buy this mass suicide theory."

You couldn't blame them. Fifteen hundred monks was a lot to suddenly decide they wanted the world to stop so they could get off.

"Did you find anything?" I said. "More notes? Last words scribbled in the sand. Perhaps in Sanskrit?"

Her face soured. "Not funny Tony. I've just watched 250 bodies being loaded onto a ground lifter and we have twice that many still to get rid of."

"Sorry, forgot." Real life just wasn't my specialized subject anymore.

She pushed the plate towards me. "Eat your sandwich and come with me. Dr Ying wants a progress report."

I ate on the move. Without the MV40, without any kind of link I became restless, finding it hard to focus. Doing more than one thing at a time helped, so I walked and I ate; listened and talked; was honest while I lied.

All the time the jarred images from the MV40 nagged at me like the answer to a question or the name of a forgotten friend, something seemed to be missing. Something that I could see, but not clearly. Something that didn't quite fit...

"It's a fake," I said when my mind had finally worked it out.

We were in a small conference tent outside the monastery. Doctor Ying sat on the chair to my far left, Sheila to my right. In front on me a sea of young inquisitive eyes. None of them seemed to understand what I said.

"Are you saying the tapes have been doctored?" Sheila said. The question had come from the Doctor beside me but he asked it with an impatient flick of a pencil and a low expressionless grunt from the back of his throat.

"Yeah, I'm sure of it. Someone has edited these recordings." I said. "Look I can feel the difference between raw footage and something that has been sliced together. This one is good, but still, I can tell. I know I can."

"Excuse me?" a hand in the audience had shot up. "But how can you tell? We have detected there are many millions of hours stored in the MV40, is it possible..."

"That I have made a mistake?" I said. "No. I've watched too much recorded footage not to be able to tell. Besides this one is giving off a subliminal message. I wasn't sure at first but I can see that now."

There was a small rumble amongst the crowd and a lot of scribbling. A small face, the tear stained girl

from yesterday got to her feet and almost wilted under Ying's glare.

"Excuse me Mr. Wong, but this does not seem possible." She risked a look at Ying who granted her a small nod of approval.

"I know," I said. "But there is no doubt in my mind; this recording has been slanted to give whoever views it a message."

There had been surveillance scenes of open public areas. Years of it. Nothing exciting; nothing voyeuristic; nothing even remotely interesting. Just played out scenes of people doing ordinary things in ordinary ways. But it had been wrong; I was an expert, an addict if you will, and I could tell when my fix was wrong. A watered down manufactured version of the real thing.

"And that message is what?" Sheila said.

I shrugged. "I can't tell yet. Too early." An audible slice of disappointment wafted around the room. "But I can tell you that the word 'soul' crops up a lot."

I meant it as a flippant comment. A throw away line to get a laugh. It silenced the room and Ying came alive, talking rapidly while young fingers scribbled

frantic notes. About half the room disappeared in a flurry of movement and upturned chairs.

Calmly, as though nothing had happened Ying said; "Good, very good." Then; "Please Mr. Wong, tell us the details so we can decide if this information is unimportant. You should not."

"Well I never said..."

"Please Mr. Wong, time may be important."

His words were like ice, sobering my humor and freezing out my resistance. I became aware of how serious the atmosphere had become.

"Indulge us Mr. Wong."

Indulge him? But where to start. The avalanche of people and places; I couldn't even think about it without fading away and logging back into the record memos I had made.

"Why the word 'soul' Tony?" Sheila said.

Explaining data extraction to non-Viewers was a headache. The truth is I mined for data and sometimes the logical output was something that even I did not understand. But this time my conclusions had been forced, this wasn't data I had discovered on my own. This was data I had been given, data that had been forced down my throat. The real advantage a human Viewer

had over a machine was imagination, interpretation and inspiration - my real third 'I'. But this word 'soul' had been thrown at me and it felt like finding a rattle snake in my salad.

"Why is it so important?" I said but Ying snapped a single Japanese word at Sheila who blushed slightly.

"He said we can go," she said, presumably giving me the less rude translation.

I tried to give Ying a look, but he had disappeared inside his clique of students freezing me out and we left.

"That kind of ended suddenly," I said.

"Your question was unpalatable to Ying." She said starting the long climb up towards the office, my temporary home.

"Why?"

"Because..." She said, her voice lifting slightly as though the heavy irony she spoke with was for someone else, someone who wasn't here. Ying perhaps. "Because... of the enigmatic Mr. Shoe. You do know who Mr. Shoe is, don't you?"

"Yeah sure," I said frowning to remember an element of life outside of Viewing. Mr. Shoe was a figure from the recent past. I had run across his name a couple of

times in various Council cases I worked on. "Isn't he some sort of harmless nut?"

"Mr. Shoe is the man who organized the mass suicide."

Not so harmless then.

I had some news reels stored, highly compressed, they were little more than voice recordings with blurry pictures. I kept them in my head to cut down on research time, to help fixate and coordinate my own data searches.

"Shoe," I said. "Right they called him the *Soul Man*."

Mr. Shoe was a believer in the end of the world, but rather than being content with standing on the corner with a placard declaring so much, Mr. Shoe went on a world tour. The advantage he had over an ordinary nut was being a billionaire.

He also had a unique form of madness. While the rest of the world agreed the gradual decline of the animal kingdom, not to mention the plant kingdom, was due to pollution and over hunting, Mr. Shoe came up with an alternative theory.

We were robbing them of their souls.

The billionaire was a great believer in reincarnation. A Buddhist by choice rather than birth he had - he claimed - discovered the gradual decrease in the world's animal population was simply due to there being not enough souls to go around and that mankind was in some way stealing them.

Trouble was, he didn't know how. He had the theory - or at least half of one - but he didn't have the facts, or even the other half of the theory. Which as far as the Media were concerned, made him a nut; even if he was a rather rich and enigmatic one. They branded him the 'Soul Man' and to a barrage of media fuelled ridicule he faded from public view.

"He ended up here," Sheila said. "He founded his own specific brand of Buddhism, recruited scientists and other wealthy individuals and then yesterday organized a mass suicide."

"But he didn't leave a note to say why?"

"No."

"It kind of ties in though doesn't it, I mean with the scratches in the dirt?" I said. "What was it '*wagon das tiere*'."

"Wegen der Tiere." She corrected. "Linguistics came back with a 100 interpretations for it. *Because of the*

animals or maybe *Save the animals* are the favorites. It all depends on context, trouble is..."

"No one ever heard a suicidal monk use it."

"Exactly," She paused at the door to the office.

"So the context is vague to say the least."

"Ying must really love me right now."

Sheila nodded. "It doesn't make much sense, but it's all we have to work on. It seems as though we weren't meant to find even that message in the sand. The monk was lying on it when the robots turned the body over."

She opened the door and walked over to the kitchen.

"Can I get you anything?" She said. "I couldn't help noticing you didn't seem to like my sandwich."

"Not enough meat." I said.

"Well," she said trailing her fingers across the keys of the auto-kitchen. "I could try and dial you a burger, but my Sanskrit is still a little rough. You might end up with maggots on toast."

"At least it would be meat." That got me a smile and she turned to tap experimentally away.

I found myself standing next to the MV40, mental fingers slipping out against my will and looking for the contact. Sheila had turned it off. I don't even remember

her doing that. I toyed with the idea of turning it back on, reaching out and flicking the switch, but as I raised my arm the kitchen went Ding. Shelia reached into the hopper and pulled out a plate, a look of disgust on her face.

"Fish heads," she said, holding the plate away from her.

"Fish heads is good."

"Fish heads is never good."

I ate and Sheila drank some more wine and the mood was light. She seemed less oppressed than when I had first met her, less worn down by the sight of so much death. There was still a look to her, a guarded something or other that surfaced whenever our unguided conversation faltered. It wasn't always there, but then neither was I.

She caught me a few times, logging into the downloaded material in my head, trying to sneak away from real-life to the images of recorded-time. She wouldn't say anything, she'd just look sad and I would take the hint and drop back into the reality, which by and large was at least diverse sitting in an old monastery with the brethren downstairs getting cold and stiff. And in-between time I was having a conversation

in real-time, for the first time in a long time, and I was even enjoying it.

"Tell me what its like," she said after she had got a little too drunk.

What's it like? Question 101 for Viewers.

It's like being in someone else's life, like being an actual part of their life, almost a part of them. It's like being able to choose which life, which part, which best bits you want to enjoy. It's like staring in the best film you've ever seen, being the sexiest diva, the smartest character. It's like being wrapped in a visually stimulated comfort blanket that gets too cozy to emerge from.

"It's okay," I said.

"Just okay?" Sheila almost exploded. "You can see anything that happens on these cameras, download any of it and view it at any time, over and over. And that's just... *Okay?*" she gestured with one hand spilling wine onto the white linen table cloth.

"Shit," she said dabbing at it with a serviette.

"First time I did it," I said and watched her attention snatch round to me and away from the lazy spreading stains. "The first time I tuned in on a camera

- outside of a training area I mean - I became so ill I nearly swore off it for life."

It had been in my father's shop, a small restaurant in downtown Singapore. Not exactly a rich area, but you could leave your personal-transporter outside without having the fuel-cells stolen. The place seated maybe thirty, crammed in against a full length window that displayed the harbor down the road rather than the gritty street outside.

It was my first night away from training, my first night out of the hospital since the operation and effectively my first night of freedom since I had been arrested. My father was overjoyed to see me, crying openly in front of his bemused customers.

Of course I had to eat, to stay and to explain; or at least try to explain what I had become. What price I had paid for my life.

Pretty much the first week on death row I had a visit from the Science Council telling me my DNA was so and so; and this meant such and such; which had to do with something or other. Which made me a rare individual. Or at least a rare individual on death row.

They made their offer and I rejected it. I had heard of Viewers, even seen one, almost stupefied by his

lack of concentration, his unfocused stare looking through everything and everyone. I knew what happened to them and preferred my chances with the Appeal Council. My case was good and given enough time I might have been sent to a life prison instead of being processed. But time ran out when a small child somewhere in the world needed my heart.

For my father these were just details, unimportant facts in the seemingly miraculous restoration of his son. A resurrection of sorts. He had not been allowed to visit me since death row and he had so much to tell me, so much he needed to say.

Somewhere in the middle of it all he told me how bad the business was, how hard it was to make money and how much he thought his staff stole from him. He'd even put in a camera to catch "the sneaky bastards" but he bemoaned; "I do not have time to watch it, I am too busy, I thought perhaps the camera would make the thieves think twice, but they are bolder than ever."

"I can do it."

The words had been out of my mouth before I could stop them. A small sound on the edge of the world that only sounded like my voice; sandwiched between the rice I ate and the air I breathed. I explained again to my

father what I had already explained before and he had shaken his head as he had done before.

"I must pay my workers," he said. "Sit here with your wine and help if you can. But don't go away, tonight we do not sleep. Tonight belongs only to talk." Then he picked up a bottle. "And to fine alcohol too," he said and was gone.

The camera was over a door and looked inwards across the kitchen. It could see the meat locker, the spice drawer, the knife block. All with a slight curvature, a fish eyed view of the world. It was a pretty cheap camera. Sound wasn't that great, quality was blurry. You get what you pay for.

"Did you catch him?" Sheila said. Her face was relaxed. I was telling her a story, she was enjoying it. I wondered if she would enjoy the next bit.

"Yeah I did," I said. "It wasn't hard, took me about an hour to run through a month's worth of material..."

"So quick?"

"So slow. In those days I was just a rookie, I didn't know my own capabilities." I reached for the bottle and filled both our glasses.

"The thief was my father's best worker." I said. "He'd been taking a cut from the best meat, stealing some of the more expensive imported fruit, then - as I found out later - he sold it to another restaurant. One that didn't have the same connections as my father."

I had been able to tell my father all this once the doctors had worked to save my life.

I thought there would be no difference between linking to my father's camera and the endless exercises I had been forced to endure in the hospital; the hours of repetitive training.

It hadn't been anything like that. The moment I linked in it was as though a part of me fell into the camera leaving me grasping at the sides of nothing and spinning, sliding right out of my body into that tiny space above the door of my father's kitchen.

I had struggled to control myself, fell back into my training and then I was there: replaying the movements of the kitchen in all its steamy repetitiveness. I could play, rewind, pause, zoom in, play again, watch, and rewind. Absorbing changes, noting differences, feeling patterns, watching emotions and seeing the lies...

This was the Viewer's world, a world of total observation. I was master of it all. Nothing escaped my gaze, the smallest action, the slightest look, the quietest word; it all lay before me like a floor plan to the truth.

And I could see it all - every damn thing.

When my father found me I was huddled on the floor, shaking, my eyes closed and a pool of vomit on the floor beside me. He panicked, turned the camera off and the neural feedback almost killed me.

"I woke up in hospital with my father next to me."

"A worried man?" Sheila said, her own face pale as though she had been there herself, seen me lying as near to death as I had ever been.

"A man full of guilt." I said, "He blamed himself for it all."

I stopped talking, remembering his narrowed expression, his white beard in disarray. And also the look of unfamiliarity in his eyes, a look I would see in many eyes of those who once knew me. A look that said; 'who are you? What have you become?'

I can see that look whenever I like. I downloaded it from the camera in my hospital room and it's archived in a part of the machine inside my head, safely tucked

away like a memory. Except after I die it will still be there and others can view it and perhaps wonder on the implications of that evening.

"Did he believe you, about the thief, his best worker?"

"No. But he set a trap, an old fashioned sting and caught him anyway."

"Do you still see your father?"

"I don't see anyone anymore."

Sheila's look swung between shock and pity and I saw the implication of my own words. I was, sooner or later, going to die from this. I kept forgetting that it wasn't easy for some people to accept that.

Not as easy to accept as apparently I found it.

People.

Endlessly teeming through the world.

Believing they made a difference.

All the time looking for the next meaningless distraction to waste away the time between birth and death.

They danced in my view.

The tape speeding now as I watched months progress past in moments.

A blurred vision of humanity being more palatable than a focused one.

Then it changed.

I slowed the recording to watch something I had never seen, a green glowing imagery, a swirling mass of color that hovered across the screen. It took me a moment, but then I saw that nearly everyone had a ghostly green shadow attached to them, an invisible cloud that moved with them, entered and left the room with them. As though it were attached.

A green cloud of what though? I have never seen anything like this before.

I stopped the MV40.

There were white coats all around me as I emerged from the Memo-gram. They worked in silence, tampering

with books, running complex looking instruments up and down walls, obviously searching for something. I sat up in the chair and reached for a glass of water I'd placed there before entering the device. The water tasted stale. I'd been in longer than I thought. The movement attracted Sheila's attention and she came straight over.

"How are you?"

"Okay, tired maybe. Hungry definitely. What's going on?"

Sheila looked around while she breathed deeply. She was sweating slightly, her hair an untidy mess and her clothes wrinkled as though she had slept in them. Her eyes were... Worried.

"Sheila?"

The sound of my voice pulled her round to me again.

"Did you find anything in the MV40?"

I looked back at the Memo-gram. Sheila had again managed to switch it off without my seeing. It was a short reach away, but she was nearer. I could guess she wouldn't let me back in again - not so soon.

"There is something here. Some kind of message. But I still can't see what it is."

Some of the dates went back a couple of decades, right to the very beginning of Viewers, Finders and

Listeners. Right back to the invention of Bio-Technology, right back to when it had all been made possible.

I could see the clues but the message was alluding me. Some of the footage was obviously illegal, publicly accessible cameras are encrypted against Viewers, but someone had hacked it, or stolen the encryption method. Either way it was difficult to see why anyone would bother just to watch people going about their daily, ordinary lives. Most of the footage was taken at an Express Terminal. Probably the one I had used the day before.

"Tony?"

"The last set of images was taken about 10 years ago. They were different. Not something I've seen before."

"Different? How?" Sheila sat on the edge of the desk and refilled my glass.

"Not sure, some kind of latent imagery seems to have been laid over the recorded footage."

She looked suddenly flushed.

"Come," she held out her hand as though sensing I wouldn't stray far from the MV40 without encouragement.

"Let me show you what we found."

She led me away, the warm comfort of her hand in mine such a novelty that the endless cold grey corridors bothered me less. At the end of one Sheila pulled back some plastic sheeting and we entered a sterile area of metal and plastic, a complete contradiction to the rooms we had passed through.

"This is a private operating theatre. We've looked back through the records and it seems that Mr. Shoe used it for some very serious operations."

Mr. Shoe. I had almost forgotten him, but there had been no clue to the Viewers identity in the Memo-gram, no letters being looked at, no-one calling out his name. I had a small section stored in my head, about 6 months or so. I played it back in fast-forward, comparing scene for scene.

I tried to play it again and Sheila shook me.

"Tony," Sheila had me by the shoulders. "Don't Tony. Don't. I need you here."

"Right," I said. "I'm here now."

She let go of me but her eyes bored into me, checking on me. I avoided her gaze and looked behind her at something lying on an operating table and covered with a green surgical sheet.

"And this is?"

She pulled back the sheet to reveal a male body, one with the top of his skull removed to expose his brain.

"This is Mr. Shoe. We found him today. Also suicide."

"Suicide by cutting the top of his head off with a saw?"

"Suicide with a knife through the heart." She didn't laugh. "This is the autopsy." She moved around to the top of his head. "Look at this, you'll find it interesting."

I had my doubts, but I went anyway, peering into Mr. Shoe's mind with the help of a light Sheila swung into place.

"See here," she pointed to a slivery network running over and into the brain, a criss-cross of fine lines that I might have missed had they not reflected in the shining light. "You recognize them of course?"

Of course. Before my operation they had shown me the equipment that would turn me into a Viewer. See, they had said, it really is so small, and you really won't notice it at all. I think the million pain killers I've taken since then would argue with that theory.

"Mr. Shoe was a Viewer. Presumably a private operation? That's a lot of money."

"Mr. Shoe had a lot of money. Or at least he had a lot of rich sponsors." She moved the light across to his face so I could see both eyeballs had been extracted and hung down across the dead man's face.

"And see here?" She pointed at a set of silvery lines running around the cortex of the eye.

I felt bile rise in my throat as she poked the eye with a pen so that I could see the wires more clearly. This was utterly revolting, but I looked anyway.

"This doesn't make sense," I said.

Viewers didn't need their eyes wired up. Everything that came from a Bio-Tech camera was analyzed by the mind and stored electronically; the eyes were closed to avoid too much 'feedback' as they called it in training. Or the vomit rocket, as I liked to call it.

But Shoe had wires. A cheap operation then? A bungled one, an illegal attempt to create a Viewer outside of the Council's control?

"I recognize them," Sheila said and waited for me to catch up.

"He's a Finder?" I said and peered with more interest at the wires. I pulled back when the smell of

the corpse hit me. "But that doesn't make sense; he wouldn't need to be a Finder if he was a Viewer. He could just tap into a camera to find out where it was."

"Then he must have needed it for something else?"

"What? I just said..."

"I heard what you said." She looked as though she wanted to say something else, but stopped herself. "This operation is not only difficult but very painful, I should know. The eyes are actually replaced with Bio-Tech versions; the old eyes have to be surgically removed. There is always the risk that the subject can go blind."

Subject. She used the word as though she were talking about a far off theoretical experiment rather than something she had gone through herself.

"Can we assume then Mr. Shoe was out his mind?"

"Crazy? I can't believe the explanation could be so simple."

"Well the facts kind of speak for themselves," I said. "Mr. Shoe killed himself, so we can assume he was not a happy bunny. He also had two operations, at least one of which was unnecessary. Unless he became a Finder first and then a Viewer?"

"No, Ying says the scars on the eyes are new, probably a few years old, whereas the Viewer operation was at least a decade ago." She lent on the table, a tide of exhaustion seeming to envelop her. "Tony, the answer has to be in the MV40."

Silence.

"Sheila," I said. "Far as I can see the MV40 is simply a promotion of his ideas. 'The Stolen Soul theory' or what he understood of it. I really don't think there are any answers in there."

"Damn it Tony then look again. Look harder." Sheila smacked her hand down on the operating table making the corpse shudder. One eye rolled over the cheek and dangled in free space by its connecting wires. "You are supposed to be the best; you must be able to find something."

"I can't find something that's not there." I reached out a hand for her shoulder but she pulled away, turning her back to me and standing stiffly with her arms crossed. There was something wrong here, something bigger than Shoe and his dead friends. "What's going on Sheila?"

"I don't know," She turned; a tear trickled down her face. "I have no idea. The scientists won't tell me, they just want me to get information from you."

I walked over to her taking her hands in mine. They were cold and pale, the veins standing out on the back of each trembling limb. She took her hands gently from mine and wiped the tear away.

"I've heard rumors," she said walking to the door. She checked outside then came back in. When she spoke it was with a low voice, one ragged with emotion. "They lost contact with the Council sometime today. Total communication black-out. The cargo lifter that flew out yesterday hasn't come back to collect the rest of the bodies. No explanation and no-one knows what's going on."

"A communication black-out. Doesn't sound so sinister."

Her hands screwed up in frustration. "It's more than that. There were plans to move you to Zurich. The Council wanted you, and the MV40, yesterday. They were supposed to be sending a transporter straight away. We lost contact about that time."

"And no one knows why?"

"Something is going on Tony, and the answer is upstairs in that office and we have to find it. We have to." She bit her lip. "The green images you saw, you understand what that is?"

Ah, I'd missed that clue. It was too new, to altruistic, I hadn't been able to see it but the look of apprehension on Sheila's face was the last clue to slot into place.

"This is what a Finder sees? It's what you see isn't it?" I said. "The green that I could see are the latent images that you can detect."

She nodded.

"But how can you live like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"The images from the MV40 were so overlaid with green that I couldn't see the detail anymore. I mean if you are seeing through a sea of green all day how do you..."

"That's not right." Shelia looked at me and then to the dangling eyeball of Mr. Shoe. "I don't have a sea of green. I just see the latent images. It looks like a ghosting, yes, in green but not nearly as severe as what you're describing."

"Perhaps the combination of Finder and Viewer in the same person has side-effects."

"Perhaps," Sheila said but without conviction.

The office was in a greater state of disarray by the time we returned. Holes had been banged into the walls, channeling and electrical wiring exposed until eventually they had discovered...

"A camera," Sheila's voice was a mixture of surprise and shame. "But why couldn't I ..."

Ying was nearest to it, extracting the camera like a rotten tooth. He showed it to her and her face went slack. I'd seen one before, in a book, not surprisingly my job led to a certain fascination with cameras and I even started collecting them, but one of these beauties was way beyond my pay-packet.

"Mechanical antique," Ying said pulling leads out of the back and unscrewing a tripod from the base.

"Found with a metal detector. Good, very good."

He gave it to Sheila who turned it over in her hands staring deeply into it. Sheila raised a questioning eyebrow at me and another white coat approached with a box full of old fashioned tapes. Each one must have been worth a fortune, yet these were piled in a box like they were nothing.

"10 boxes, 87 tapes," Ying said.

"You know I could look at these." I said and Sheila's lips parted as she prepared to rebuke me then realized what I was getting at.

"Loop the camera through the MV40," she said half a question. She had already taken the camera back from the scientist and walked over to the desk where the MV40 lay. "Can it be done?"

"We can connect it, no problem." The young assistant said; "If we speed up the mechanism and," she broke off as Ying shouted at her in Japanese. "We think maybe four hours."

"Wake me then," I said and walked away from the fuss of white coats that had begun frantically trying to follow Ying's instructions. I opened a door leading to a bedroom and then closed it gratefully behind me.

The bedroom had Mr. Shoe's personality printed all over it, chairs stood in one corner dating two centuries

back while an utterly splendid four poster bed dominated the rest of the room. I didn't much care for antiques, the price made the feeling mutual, but I could appreciate the comfort this bed gave me. I had slept here from the first night, claiming it as my own for practical purposes. It was probably only Sheila that suspected I didn't like to be too far from the MV40; even when it was off; even while I slept.

The room was tainted now; the delicate flowered wallpaper ripped by the efforts of the scientists to uncover any hidden secrets. I had lain here for hours on the first night with sleep evading me and the thought of being just a door away from the Memo-gram. With nothing better to do I had catalogued the detail of the room, tried to guess its value and failed in the attempt. One thing was for certain though; the enigmatic Mr. Shoe was a very unusual Buddhist.

The room of course had its own luxurious bathroom with white marble, gold taps and a wonderfully refreshing shower. I used it to blast away the lingering smell of Mr. Shoe's corpse and when I stepped out it was with a feeling of being drained, the second-hand worries Sheila had gifted to me dogging my thoughts and clouding my mind. The steamy air began to be pulled away by

ceiling fans and as I dried myself a partially misted mirror gradually revealed a naked me.

It wasn't a pleasant sight.

I'd never been fat, perhaps in my years sitting behind a desk I had got a little pot belly, but by and large I remained short and skinny. Pretty much as I had been as a kid. Now I was a skeleton. A walking diagram of bones with only skin to keep it all together.

'Don't bother x-raying him nurse, just hold him up to the light.'

Being a Viewer - being a full time addict - left precious little time for anything else. I ate when I remembered, drank when I was thirsty, and slept when I was tired. But none of that happened when I was Viewing.

Then nothing disturbed me; nothing at all.

I wrapped a robe around the image in the mirror and washed my face in the impossibly white sink. While shaving, I stared into hollow eyes and black rimmed sockets, and at some point it became too much and I retreated back into my downloaded memories, watching my father beside the hospital bed, watching Sheila look at the camera in Preston's office, watching the scenes of people on people on people from the MV40.

Watching anything but me.

I felt cold water trickling on the back of my hand and stopped viewing. Sheila stood beside me; the bathroom cold, the mirrors clear of steam and the fans above my head silent.

"How long?"

"You've been in here nearly an hour," Sheila said.

"I thought I'd better check."

"Thanks."

"Will you be okay?"

"Yeah I think so," I said wiping down my hands and stepping out of the bathroom. "You?"

She shrugged. "Dealing with that lot is always stressful, but I'll cope."

"The scientists?"

She nodded.

I walked over to a small table, Persian perhaps - ah hell it could have been from Mars - I had no idea, but on top was a small coffee maker, a modern easy to use one. It would seem Mr. Shoe's love of antiques knew some limits.

"Coffee?" I asked a simple question but my voice sounded hollow and alien; a false note that betrayed the exact nature of my question. What did I want from this woman? Was it conceivable that I wanted anything at all?

"Tony?"

Her voice broke my thoughts and I looked into green penetrating eyes.

"Thinking," I said. "That's all. I wasn't..."

"I know."

"Right, sorry I forgot." I actually had.

"Tony..." Sheila stood by the door her gaze now anywhere but on me. Then her eyes locked deep into mine, perhaps checking if I was playing back - perhaps even hoping that I was. "Look... I'm not sure I can do this."

Her words fell flat in the room; a silence that died and shriveled as it grew and breathed.

"It's only coffee Sheila, it's not a marriage proposal."

"Not funny."

"Sorry, I just..."

"I'm sorry too." she turned and pulled open the door.

"Do you really find me that revolting?" The words dropped out of my mouth before I could stop them, exhaustion pulling the venom from the tone but leaving the bitterness intact.

She half turned. Half looked in my direction, her face showing pity mixed with shock...

...and then she was gone, leaving me to stare at the shadows and the past.

Sheila was markedly different after that incident. An edge of intimacy missing, she wasn't openly hostile and that at least made working with her bearable. For the most part the scientists either didn't pick up on the atmosphere between us, or choose to ignore it.

"Contents are transferred," Dr Ying's assistant said. "But this is a simple data dump. There may have been loss of video quality."

"Okay," I said. "Will I still be able to control the film through the MV40?"

The doctor himself appeared clucking like a hen. "Yes, yes, good, very good. But no sound."

"Why not?"

Ying flicked a finger in the direction of an underling who scampered through some pages to find her notes. Eventually she found the right page and with a sigh of relief read it out.

"The data consists of a dual spectrum sound on broadband frequencies... these lift together in modulated fused wave band that..."

Ying tapped on the table with one of his bony fingers and snarled a few short commands in Japanese. The girl's face reddened and she flicked past the next few pages.

"Which means the systems are not fully compatible," she said and folded the note book away.

So no sound then. My, that was going to be boring.

"Good," Ying said pulling his bottom lip over his top one to presumably increase his air of importance. "Very good."

The room cleared while I sat and made my mental connection to the MV40. For a second nothing happened, the data dump must have re-initialized the device, but eventually the image in my head began to clear from black to white. Not really much of an improvement. My mind reached for the controls to push the recording forward, but I found none. An error on the download? I tried initiating a fault finding program, but again there was nothing to latch onto. This was damned odd. My mind reached to disconnect when an image shifted, like a ripple in the wind. The movement enveloped the

whiteness, twirling it until the shape of a small child appeared from the twisting mass of nothingness.

The pale Caucasian girl, perhaps 12 years old with braided blond hair spilling across the shoulders of a pretty blue dress moved towards me. Her image grew in my mind's eye until her face closed on mine. Her eyes were shut and I could see now the lashes were coated with congealed blood, and when they snapped open I stared into gaping sockets, holes filled with a mass of squirming maggots.

The girl grinned.

"You're all going to die," she said and behind her white shapes flared like a supernova, blinding my mind's eye and I fell forward into unconsciousness.

The room swam into focus with Dr Ying standing over me, a dripping syringe in one hand.

"Good," he said as I opened my eyes. "Very Good."

He got up and walked back to the desk. There three members of his team were pouring over the MV40, a small

computer was plugged into the side and a lot of frantic discussion was going on. Dr Ying silenced them with a single word. The conversation continued at a more orderly pace.

"Here," Sheila said appearing over me with her ever present glass of water.

"What happened?" I took the glass and stood unsteadily, shaking with the effort and collapsing gratefully into a chair.

"There was some kind of protection program. Ying thinks we activated it with the data dump. Tony, it was designed..."

"To kill me, yes I know."

"Tony this isn't funny."

"Trust me, I'm not laughing."

Ying came back to us with a notebook, a trail of colleagues dancing around at his elbow.

"Good, very good," he said and pointed at his assistant.

"The feedback loop has been isolated." She said and placed the MV40 on the desk in front of me.

"Thanks, I'll get back in and..."

"Wait a minute," Sheila said. "How do we know this is safe, the damn thing almost killed Tony last time he connected."

Dr Ying looked affronted and his assistant was quick to intervene.

"It is an isolated incident," she said. "We are sure it is no longer a problem."

Sheila looked as though she might have problems with this so I cut her off.

"It's okay Sheila, really it is." I said.

She looked from me, to the Memo-gram and back again to Dr Ying. Her face was set in stone.

"Fine," she said and clicked the activation switch, staring into me, green eyes boring deep into my head as if in an attempt to see any more traps coming.

This time the transition was smooth, though odd. The film kicked in and responded to my commands like it should but the quality was terrible. Cameras that I normally used were built around Bio-engineered parts, effectively a DNA copy of the human eye. It was how all Bio-engineered parts worked. The image I saw through Bio-Tech cameras were as good as looking through my own eyes, from quality to depth perception. It was all there.

Here, seeing through the optical camera was unlike anything I had experienced. Colors were washed out, pigments stained and unrealistic, motion when it occurred either blurring or jerky. Perhaps to a normal person, someone who wasn't a Viewer, it would have appeared as a high quality optic film, but to me it was the worst kind of facsimile. A burning representation of how good Bio-engineered parts really were.

I forwarded the recording, splicing together details and building up a picture, the 80 odd tapes they found were easy to scan and I soon had a broad idea of what was going on.

"Lots of meetings," I said after I emerged from the MV40, much to Sheila's obvious relief.

"Plenty of people, lots of agitation."

"What kind of agitation," Sheila said.

"Not sure, without sound it's difficult to get a clear idea, and I can't zoom either without the whole picture breaking up into pixelization." I really suffered with these limitations; it had been no fun at all. A poisoned and corrupted version of my drug.

"I did see a lot of high profile faces," I said. "Council members, a few high profile scientists. The others looked familiar but..."

I watched Sheila and Dr Ying swap a guilty look. Something I wasn't being told here. Sheila raised an eyebrow at Ying who gave a reluctant nod.

"Tony this is classified," she said. "But nearly everyone down there... The dead... They were all highly prominent people with extremely delicate positions in the Council and... And Council operations."

"I thought they were all monks?"

Sheila stopped short of making another remark, her sidelong look at Ying seemed to make her hesitant about saying what she really thought. "You're only telling us what we already know, isn't there anything else that happened?"

"Yes, they found something; or rather they seemed to find something out. Something important." I said. "They were showing the MV40 to the rest of them and then they saw something that made them all very excited. Appalled perhaps, too. In fact many of them seemed shocked."

"Could you see what it was?"

"No, the screen was away from the camera." I said. "Let me review and then I'll come back out."

I linked back in. Rewound. Re-scanned. Re-saw it all. I did it again for good measure, searched the parts

I thought were most relevant, looking for more clues, analyzing the data over and over and over...

Eventually I emerged.

"How long?" It was always my first question.

Actually I didn't care anymore; it was more a force of habit. The time I spent in the box was less important to me now than the time I spent outside it.

"A few hours," Sheila said, she gave me a towel and I realized I was sweating heavily. Probably a side effect of analyzing optical film.

Sheila stood waiting patiently for me to speak, Ying had no such intention.

"You have found something?" he said. "Good, very good."

"Can I have a glass of water? Thanks," I took the cool tumbler and sipped a little. "There is something in the MV40, something I have not yet analyzed. Something important, possibly something that explains the suicides here."

"Will it explain why we still can't contact the Council?" Sheila said and earned herself an instant rebuke from Ying. She shot a single word back at him that made several of his assistants blanch. It was all

in Japanese so I missed the content although from the looks they swapped I could guess the meaning.

"I don't know." I said as honestly as I could. "I have to go back inside the MV40 again. I have to explore all of the recordings there."

Ying nodded. "Good. Very good." He said.

Sheila sighed and looked at me with hopeless resignation.

"You'd better get on with it then," she said flicking the switch and walking away.

I dived quickly into the machine in order to avoid watching her go.

A flood of light. I gulped air while struggling against hands that held me down. The room swam into focus. I lay on the floor, the hard wood pressing uncomfortably against my poorly insulated bones, Sheila knelt over me her hands pressing into my thin wrists. Beside her Ying was shining a light into my eyes.

"It's okay Tony, you're okay. We pulled you out. You'd been in there too long."

How long, I tried to say but my tongue was a dry rock in my mouth. My head span as I sat up and small stars erupted behind my eyes.

"Drink this," Ying said handing me a beaker full of something yellow, sweet and sticky. I tried to swallow and gagged the liquid spewing back out of my mouth and down my shirt.

"Take it easy Tony; you've been in there 18 hours..."

Eighteen hours! My God. It had started. This is how they said it would be, me lost forever in recorded reality unable to find my way back out. But the MV40 had been like a bottomless lake, one that I had to explore to its very depth in order to find its secrets.

"Dr Ying used an adrenaline solution to jump you out. Sorry Tony, but I didn't know what else to do."

"Help me up." I managed to croak allowing the doctor's surprisingly strong arms to pull me to my feet.

I made a second attempt at swallowing the sweet drink and was a little more successful. Gradually the room stopped spinning, the glass emptied and both the doctor and Sheila stopped looking worried. Or at least

'so' worried. There was still an air of tension, an indefinable scream that had yet to occur.

"What happened?"

"It's the main power-grid, it's being turned off."

"That's not possible." I said feeling shocked and surprised that she could even say such a thing.

"Tony, go clean yourself up, I need to talk to you about what you've found."

Clean up? I looked down at myself and realized my trousers were stained with urine. Clean up. Right. My shower was brief and the clothes I wore badly fitting, a dead monk's robe. Great - with the unshaven chin and the red eyes I looked like an Asian version of Rasputin.

I came out to find Sheila alone.

"He's gone now. They all have."

"What the hell is going on?"

"It started a few hours after you entered the MV40. The power just started to go. I had no idea what it was, but the scientists," Sheila raised her eyebrows.

"They're smart guys, they knew straight away. Of course no one wanted to admit it, no one wanted to face up to the facts, but it was the only explanation. Someone has started to turn the world Power Nodes off."

"That's not possible," I repeated aware as I said it how pointless my protest was. "The power grid protects itself; it's supposed to be self-repairing. Isn't that what the damn Council is always telling us?"

Sheila was silent. I could see she was close to despair, to panic. I could see I wasn't helping this. I tried again with a slightly calmer voice.

"What did the scientists say?"

"They said..." She choked before the words could come out. "They said it's the end of the world."

I had awoken into a bad dream. Just as bad as the dreams I had seen interweaved in the imagery. No Power Nodes meant no anything. It was that simple. Even the weather would return to normal. That transformation alone would be deadly to millions. To billions.

"Tony was there anything..." she looked towards the MV40 but I could see there was no real hope in her eyes.

"I'm not sure," I said and the pit of my stomach sagged as I watched her fold up with disappointment. "There is still this green latent image I can see but..."

She jerked on the hanging end of my sentence, grasping it like a drowning man.

"The latent images you see," I said carefully. "They are a ..."

"Ghosting," she said. "A green tinged ghosting, they always point towards a Bio-tech device."

"Any Bio-tech device?"

"Theoretically yes," she said. She couldn't see where this was going, that much was obvious and she was becoming impatient with me. "For God's sake Tony, if you know anything then tell me-"

"-I don't know," I said. "Really I don't. There is something in this MV40, a message, there are clues it is giving me, but..."

"What?"

"Perhaps it's a concept, or a conclusion. Something that I can't understand." Or didn't want to understand.

Sheila walked unsteadily to the fridge, picked out a bottle of wine and poured a generous helping into a glass. She gestured at me.

"No, I have to go back in."

Her glass slammed down.

"I have to Sheila. I don't know if there is an answer in there, but I don't see we have a choice. If the Power Nodes go off line then..."

"The weather patterns will return to normal, cities will fall to the ground and civilization will collapse,"

she said. "I know; the scientists painted me a very pretty picture."

"Actually I was going to say, 'then we'll never know'."

"Not funny." She finished off a glass with a single gulp and poured another.

"Sheila, the MV40 pulls power from the main grid like everything else, if that goes then the MV40 will be gone too and with it any answers it might have."

"Is that the truth? Or are you just looking for one last fix?"

I sat back, stunned by her words. By the sudden viciousness of her manner, but then when I thought about it, maybe, just maybe she was right.

Then she sagged visibly, as though the explosion of anger had drained what little energy she had left.

"Tony, I'm sorry... I..."

"It's okay," I said and she nodded looking away.

"Before I do go back in, take me down to the body," I said staggering to my feet. "Let's go talk one last time with the enigmatic Mr. Shoe."

She looked blankly at me for a second then put an arm around me so that I could walk. Leaning heavily on Sheila I managed to move sluggishly through the inner

chambers until at last we reached the operating theatre. Mr. Shoe still lay on the table, still covered by the blood stained sheet. I pulled it back and examined the eyes.

"Is it possible to connect these to a visual device of some kind?"

Shelia shrugged. "Yeah sure, they have a test diagnostic bed over here, but what are you going to find there?"

"Not sure. Connect it up and perhaps we can see how mad I really am."

She worked fast. But she was calm, if not a little shaky with the scalpel. I didn't offer any help, I tend to be a bit squeamish about things like that, blood guts and optic nerves really don't do my stomach any favors.

She slipped Mr. Shoes' eye into a small metal holder and screwed this into a machine with a large monitor to one side. A flick of the switch and I could see myself on the screen courtesy of Mr. Shoe's dead eye.

The image quality was terrible. Mostly the screen was a wash of patterns and colors. Between this mess I could make myself out. Disturbingly I saw my head as a

big glowing ball of green light, a single aura that pretty much washed the rest of the screen out.

"Is this really how you see me?" I said.

Sheila came round to the screen and screwed up her face. "No," she said. "Not at all." She moved some sliders about and flicked a couple of switches, nothing made any difference.

"Far as I can tell," she said reading from diagnostic screen; "the tolerance levels for detecting Bio-engineered devices have been greatly enhanced. I would imagine he would need his eye power packs boosted once a month at this setting."

"When do you boost yours?"

"I never have."

I looked again at the big swirling mass of green orbiting my head. So that's what I looked like when I was in Standby mode. I would love to see what it looked like when I was connected, but of course if I connected I wouldn't want to look at anything else.

"The answer is here somewhere," I said. I moved out of the eye's view and beckoned to Sheila. "You stand in front of it."

Sheila moved away from the controls and stood self-consciously in front of the dead man's eye. The image

clouded for a second before displaying the swirls of color and texture I had seen before, but this time the green aura rotated around her eyes. And also around her chest.

"Well that's odd," Sheila said. "It's detecting my lung. I had one replaced a few years back, smoking, but I've never been able to detect it."

She closed in on the camera to look at the aura more closely.

"Why does it swirl like that?" I said.

Sheila bit her lip, adjusted a few controls, frowned and adjusted a few more.

"I have no idea," she said at last. "But then I have never seen this level of tolerance being used. Is this what you saw inside the MV40?"

"Yes."

She looked into the screen; staring inside the image with the same intensity I had seen when she was scanning me.

"Why are all Bio-Tech organs giving off an aura?" she said. "I don't understand."

But I did.

"Take me back up." I said hoping that I was wrong.

The swirl of color was somehow easier to cope with now that I knew what it was. But it was still sickening to watch as Shoe moved around hospitals where the green aura rose about him like phantom beings, floating sometimes in bottles, radiating from Bio-tech transport cartons and lying beside patients that were being operated on.

Then... Normal service was resumed.

A new viewer looked out on the world and focused on the face of the enigmatic Mr. Shoe. The Soul Man himself. Even with the top of his head intact, and both his eyes where they should be, I recognized him. He leant forward and stared me in the eye.

"By now you, whoever you are, must know," he said.

"You must know the truth. Watch now and learn more."

The screen blurred into green again, displaying a wash of people walking about with green radiating from all over their bodies.

"Those who would live forever," Shoe said.

These were the rich and the super rich; I recognized a few faces and remembered the newspaper columns talking about their private Bio-tech transplants that kept them alive. Gossipy stories that became less frequent as the practice became more common. These people were awash with green swirls. They were probably less human than they were Bio-Tech. The camera focused on an elderly woman whose body was totally obscured behind the collected auras.

Without warning the screen dissolved to show a different room full of younger men and women. They too had a variety of glowing green auras covering their bodies but they were isolated to one area of the body and no two people had the same bio-tech organ.

"Those who endanger themselves." Shoe said.

I saw a familiar face. A man I went to university with, he had lost a foot to frost bite on an ill-fated mountain climb, the students union had paid for his Bio-tech replacement. He sat in a room with others, some I

recognized from media reports. Danger and thrill seekers to a man. All had a tell-tale green swirl somewhere.

The image slid again, showing horses galloping for the winning post, green aura flooding the screen from all over their rippling bodies.

"Those who we would enhance."

The view returned to Shoe.

"You suspect," he said. "But first you must learn."

A map depicted the location of Bio-tech factories. A graph showed animal kingdom population decreasing. The areas were the same, a bubble of expanses. The bigger the Bio-tech plant the bigger the bubble; it grew exponentially until the bubbles from neighboring factories touched.

Shoe again. "We steal something so precious," he said. "Something of enormity. Something irreplaceable. And we do it, simply because we can."

My mind span as the images flooded across my view. Aura, population figures, green swirls, enhanced animals, glowing babies, spinning figures. Charts with figures span on a background of facts, scientists appeared with explanations, speaking, arguing, persuading.

I would have found all of it, and this conclusion that Shoe force feed me, too unpalatable, had I not already worked it out for myself. It all stopped and Shoe appeared back in my view, back staring into my eyes.

"Bio-Tech steals these souls," he said. "Then it destroys them. Removes them forever from the chain of life, the sacred ring of reincarnation. Every soul that is stolen is one less for the world to use. One less life-force."

Shoe pulled out a folded paper. He held it up to the viewer. It contained names and places; times and objectives. My mind had memorized it before I knew that I wanted to.

"This is my plan," he said. "This is how I will turn off the Power Nodes and how I will reduce humanity to the basics it needs."

He folded the paper away.

"This is how I will save the animals," he said.

The view returned to the old rich woman whose body was aglow with stolen, condemned souls.

"You can use this information to try and stop me," shoes voice said. "To stop us. But before you do, you must ask yourself one question. Should you?"

The MV40 came to an abrupt halt. I had reached the end of the recordings and reluctantly I disconnected and emerged into the real world.

Sheila sat on the floor by the kitchen cradling the empty wine bottle in her arms. Her face was pressed into trembling hands and her body rocked slowly backwards and forwards.

As I reached over to switch off the MV40 for the final time my fingers trembled and tears filled my vision. The machine had been almost out of power and now it would never have enough to be turned back on again. For me, my addiction was over, permanently, but I knew the longing would never end.

Sheila sat oblivious to my personal sacrifice and to my sacrifice of humanity. She was a heap of emotional flesh, a tear stained memorial to the passing of the human race. She probably didn't even know I was there and that was all I could really hope for.

How could I tell her? I had the answer that could stop Shoe's plan, which could save humanity from being all but wiped out. I had all the answers now, right here in my head.

But I did nothing and I said nothing.

Then because enough humanity remained in me, and enough remained outside of Shoe's subliminally injected skepticism for all of mankind, I took her shaking body in my arms and quietly soothed her with whispered words of nothingness.

And all the while I waited for the end.

I waited to save the animals.

THE END

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