

TO LEARN HOW

Chapters 10-12 of 12

C. Bird, July 1990

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Chapter 10

Escape

So now I know what I am. A walking, talking database of useless information. Maybe I could get a job at the A&P in the Willerton Mall. Or perhaps I could begin a rewarding career in the restaurant supply business. Who in the world thought of creating an array based on a supermarket inventory listing? I ask Ned about it.

"Who in the world thought of creating an array based on a supermarket inventory listing?" I ask.

"Well," replies Ned, "It was easy to pull the data from one of those zebra stripe readers you see at the stores all the time. Those machines are hooked up to computers which list every product the store sells and lets the owners know when it's time to reorder."

"But if the computer is already doing it, why was it turned into an array? Why would you need a human doing it?" I inquire.

"You don't need a human doing it. Like I said, the data already existed. We didn't need relevant data, just a lot of it to see how much we could fit in one place. The array is raw information. There was never an interface built into it. That's why everyone experiences different effects from it."

"What does it do to you?" I ask Ned.

"I can't write. Everytime I try to write something down I start to put together letters of products. Like A-L-L, the laundry detergent."

"Thanks a lot, Ned," I say as the entire battery of wash day essentials zooms in. The box of Tide is a very bright orange and seems to hurt my eyes. I bonk myself in the brain a few times, but his time I use the side of my head. My

ear starts bleeding again but the detergents go away.

Ned is alarmed and gets up. He says, "Wow! Why did you hit yourself like that? You're bleeding!"

"It's the only way I can seem to make them go away," I tell him. "Make what go away?"

"The images. Whenever there's a mention of a product, I get visuals. They're a bit overwhelming. I eliminate them by hitting my head."

"Jeez, how did you ever drive up here? Let me get a towel for your ear."

Ned goes into the sanitized Holiday Inn bathroom and comes back with a damp towel which has been rinsed in warm water. He puts it on the side of my head. It feels real good.

"We've got to do something about you," he says, "I didn't think you were so badly affected."

I get a pleasant feeling. It's nice to have someone caring about me. It seems like a long time since I've felt this way. I ask, "What can we do?"

"I'll have to call some people," he says, "I don't know if you noticed, but there was an accident at the complex and we've had to move most of the people involved with the Advanced Studies Lab to this Holiday Inn."

I ask, "What kind of accident?"

"One of the lab guys was working late and the inventory array began to affect him. He thought the lab equipment was doing it to him and decided it was best to destroy it all. He used some gasoline which he siphoned from his car and burned down Building D. Some of the other buildings were damaged when the chemical tanks exploded."

"Was anyone killed?"

"Surprisingly enough, no. There were very few people around at two in the morning. Listen, I'm going to try to reach one of the doctors here to take a look at you.

Ned got on the telephone and dialed. I thought about the situation. The lab where the arrays were created is gone. There's a bunch of people wandering around with supermarket inventories in their brains. I'm more affected than most. Ned is getting a doctor to come look at me. The future is very uncertain.

Ned hangs up the phone. "There should be someone here in a few minutes. When did you start noticing something was wrong?" "This morning when I woke up. I thought there was a garbage truck backing up outside."

"The beeping. That's the array signaling to link up with an interface. When there isn't an interface it just keeps beeping. It goes away when it links up with something. For me, it's the alphabet and writing. For you, it must be the visual center of your cortex."

I liked that. My visual center of my cortex. We both sat in silence for a minute, listening to our beeps. Then there was a knock on the door.

Ned got up and opened the door. "Hello Doctor Gerston. Thanks for getting here so fast."

Doctor Gerston was a short man wearing a brown sweater. He was carrying a little black bag, just like doctors used to do when they made house calls. It made me feel nostalgic.

"So what seems to be the problem?" he asks me.

"My ear is bleeding," I tell him.

"When did this start?"

"This morning."

"Do you feel a lot of pain?"

"Not in the ear, but in my head."

"Has this happened to you before?"

"No."

And so forth and so on. The usual doctor interrogation. He had me listen to some tuning forks through my head and my bones. He had me look at an eye chart. He used his instruments to look into my ears and eyes. He took my temperature and blood pressure.

"Well," he says finally, "It looks like the array really had to fight to set up an interface with you."

"You mean it had to do damage in order to find a place to rest?" I ask.

"Exactly. You should be all right. It was only the initial exposure to the array that injured you. My guess is that it tried to establish an interface with your hearing center but was unable to do that." "So where did it go?"

"I suspect that it's very deep in your visual field, judging from what you've told me. You'll just have to wait for the effects to go away whenever they appear. Please don't keep hitting yourself in the head or your ear won't have a chance to heal."

"You mean I just have to watch as the stuff floats by?"

"I'm afraid so. In the meantime, you can't leave here until we find a way of eliminating the array. It's communicable, you know. We're setting up temporary labs in some of the rooms here at the Holiday Inn to work on the solution."

"What do you mean I can't leave?"

"We'll get you a room. You'll be well taken care of. The elevators don't work unless someone unlocks them for you."

The situation has gotten much worse than I ever thought possible. One of my worst fears has been realized. I'm being held prisoner in the Willerton Holiday Inn. I look over at Ned. He raises his eyebrows and shrugs. I look at Doctor Gerston. He doesn't look very apologetic. "What about George Bush?" I ask.

"You didn't touch our president, did you?" blurts the doctor He's real worried now.

"George Bush is his dog's name," Ned explains.

"Has your dog been acting strangely?" asks Doctor Gerston.

I think for a moment. I realize that if I tell them he's out in the car they may take him out and perform some horrible experiments on him. I say, "No, he seems to be all right. I guess I'll need to arrange for someone to take care of him for a while."

"At least until we get this situation under control," says the doctor as he walks over to the door. "You can use the telephone whenever you need to. Just don't say anything about the array to anyone. See you folks later." He opens the door and exits.

Ned and I are staring at the door as it closes with a very efficient thud. It's the way Holiday Inn doors always close. Just in case you forgot your key.

"I guess I'll call to get you a room," says Ned as he picks up the telephone.

"Wait a minute," I say, "You can't be serious about this. I can't stay here. I hate this place."

"I'm sorry, but this is the only facility ElectroBiotics could procure to continue the work which needs to be done."

"What about clothes and stuff? What about my sanity?"

"ElectroBiotics will provide you with anything you need. But I'm afraid they can't do anything about your sanity. They're already in enough trouble as it is."

Ned dials the telephone and talks to someone about a room. I can't believe this is happening. A corporation involved in dubious research activities infects me with a brain modification experiment gone haywire. Then they treat me like a convict at one of America's best known hotel establishments.

"All right," says Ned as he hangs up the receiver, "You're right down the hall from me. Wait right here and I'll go get the key."

He leaves and the door thuds. I'm sitting in Ned's dark room at the Holiday Inn. Next to the telephone is a pad of paper with lots of phone numbers and notes written on it. It looks like a woman's perfect cursive. I know Ned's handwriting and this handwriting is not his. I see Frank Adams' number. I see Dr. Zikes' name and his number. There's also the number for the Ogden police station. I wonder how Sergeant Miles is doing?

In the margins of the paper are some child-like scrawls. These must be the things Ned is trying to write. One of them says Ajax. I almost keel over as someone opens the cabinet under the sink of almost any American kitchen, and the huge variety of cleaning products that people store under there comes spilling out. Lysol. Spic N Span. Pine Sol. I can even smell their fragrant chemical odor as they waft past my field of vision. I want to hit my head but I don't. It seems to take forever for them to fade away. I stumble over to the drapes and open them. It helps a little bit to get some light into the room.

Ned comes back just as the Air-Wick Solid is evaporating. "You're in 542. I'll bring you over there. You can rest a while and make a list of the things you may need."

We go out into the hallway. It's empty except for the maid cart. I notice a set of keys on top of a pile of towels on the cart. I ask Ned, "Is there anyone else

on this floor?"

"Yes," he responds, "The more severely affected victims are on the seventh floor. They're under constant observation by the doctors and attendants. The people on this floor just need peace and quiet." He gives me the key. I open the door.

"Use the telephone to contact anyone," says Ned, "But please don't mention anything that's going on here. The press knows all about it, but we want to keep this Holiday Inn confidential. I'll call you in a while to see how you're doing."

"Thanks, Ned," I say.

I shut the door and wait for him to go away. I hear his door close. Then I open mine and sneak over to the maid's cart. The keys are still there on top of the towels. Very quietly, I pick up the keys and go to the elevator. One of the keys is obviously for the elevator. One of those squarish things with the different teeth. I turn the key, trying not to jingle the rest of them. It works. I see the lights at the top of the door going up. The doors open and I step in.

The doors are about to shut and in runs the giant maid.

"Hey!" she shouts, "Gimmee back my keys!"

The elevator doors shut as she barrels into me and knocks me against the back wall. I go into a panic. This woman is huge. I've already dropped the keys, but I guess she still thinks I have them because she's wrestling with me. She has her beefy arm around my head and she's trying to break my arm as I try to reach for the elevator control panel. I just want to get out.

"You gimmee back them keys! You ain't supposed to be in here!"

"Gaa, goda, gurgle," is all I can say, which loosely translates to, "They're on the floor".

I guess she understands this, because she lets go of me and picks up the keys. The elevator doors open to the main lobby. I'm on the floor lying on my stomach and the big maid is straddling me holding her keys. I look up and see Pat with the hair like a hat and a policeman leading someone into the elevator. To my complete horror, the person is the crazy Belgian, Mr. Wissing. He recognizes me and his eyes turn into brilliant pools of fire from hell.

"Eeeet's heeem!" he screams, "He did thees to meee!"

I do my best to put my arms over my head. There had to be a reason for

teaching me how to duck and cover when I was a kid. Now I'm finally putting it to use. But this could turn out to be worse than a nuclear bomb.

The Belgian starts grunting and kicking me in the head and arms. Pat screams. The maid tries to pull me away from the crazy Belgian. The policeman tries to pull the crazy Belgian away from me. There's a cigarette butt caught in the grating of the elevator floor. I can read it. It says Merit. I pass out as the entire A&P cigarette counter materializes before my eyes. I never realized that there were so many brands.

Chapter 11

Journey

It's dark outside when I wake up. I'm lying in a Holiday Inn queen-sized bed and there's an IV bottle suspended next to me with a tube coming from it which is inserted into my arm. There's a light on across the room. It's very quiet except for the beeping. I feel like I just spent the night inside a cement mixer set on extra fast. You know, the setting they use for those quick pour-and-go patio jobs. I remember trying to escape from this place and meeting up with the crazy Belgian. I remember blacking out when he started kicking me. I move myself around a little bit to see how much damage he might have done. My ribs ache, but otherwise I'm all right. I wonder who stuck this thing in my arm. I wonder where everyone went.

Suddenly, I think about George Bush. I'm not quite sure how long I've been in this bed and I begin to get worried. I strain to get up and forget about the IV bottle. It falls over on the bed. I pick it up and try to figure out what to do with it. Someone once told me it was very dangerous to remove an IV needle from your arm by yourself. I take the bottle off the metal stand and hold it on my shoulder as I leave the room.

The hallway is the same as any other Holiday Inn hallway, except that there are gurneys all over the place. It must be real late at night, because there's nobody around. I meander to the end of the hall and look out the window. It's totally black out there. No stars, no moon. I can make out some lights in the distance. Perhaps it's the mall.

I'm staring out the window and the door next to me opens. Tillie is standing there, the owl-like person from Ned's documentation department. She's wearing a nightgown and has wires attached to her head. She looks like some kind of electrified rastafarian owl. "I'm so glad you finally got here," she says, "How could you have taken so long?"

"I don't know," I answer. For some reason, she's been expecting me. I wonder how she remembers me.

"There are so many things we need to order," she says

I figure it out. She's using her array as a shopping list, and she actually thinks I'm some supply person or something. Tillie is obviously trying to take this inventory thing into reality as far as she can.

"Let me get my list," she says and disappears into her room. I take this as an opportunity to get away from her. I don't feel ready to play along with the game. I wander down to the other end of the hall, carrying my IV bottle with me. I pass the elevator and decide to give it a try. You can push the buttons but they don't do anything.

I'm about to stumble back into my room when a woman in white hospital garb comes out of the door right next to me. At the same time, Tillie is running up the hall with her list.

"Hello," I say, "I'm not who she thinks I am."

"Wait, I've got it all right here. Please help me," says Tillie, waving and insisting.

She's got this pad of paper with hundreds of items listed on it. The list goes on for pages and pages. She rifles through the stuff. "I'm afraid both of you must go back to your rooms," says Ms. White Hospital Garb.

Tillie persists, "But some of this is considerably important. We're running very low on several items."

The Ms. replies, "It's late and you must rest. As for you, sir, it's very dangerous to be roaming about with an intravenous device in that manner."

I try to look ashamed. I don't think it works because she takes me by the arm which is not hooked up to a bottle and leads me back to my room. Tillie tries to follow us. She hovers.

Just then we hear a scream from the other end of the hall. A door opens and Drac the security guard comes running up the hall completely naked. Two men in suits are trying to catch up with him. "Argggghh," bellows Drac, "They can't be here! They're not authoriiiiiiiiized!"

He gains a lot of speed and when he gets to the end of the hall he takes a flying leap through the window. I've seen it lots of times in the movies, where someone does a swan dive through a sheet of sugar. But this is real. Drac

must be very upset. Taking it all a bit too seriously, I suppose.

Tillie and Ms. Garb follow the men in suits to the end of the hall. They all look out the window to where Drac must have gone. There's some shouting outside. I go into my room.

I put my bottle back on the stand and lay down trying to figure out what's going on. It's pretty obvious that I'm on the floor with the more disturbed folks. Some of them are really out there. And they all seem to be people from ElectroBiotics. I speculate as to whether they'll be compensated for what's happened.

What's more disturbing than any of the array effects I've seen is the fact that ElectroBiotics has created something that they don't know what to do with. There's no telling how many people are affected with the array. Eventually, everyone could be. It strikes me that the people taking care of the victims up here don't seem to be experiencing any effects. Perhaps the company hires them, lets them get affected, then replaces them. I wouldn't be surprised.

George Bush is out there in the parking lot. He's probably looking real sad by now. I truly hope that he hasn't been found by anyone. I feel extremely angry when I think these thoughts. I wouldn't put it past ElectroBiotics to remove a small dog from a car and proceed to take it apart. There's no question about it. I have to get out of here and take him, and myself, away.

As I'm thinking about George Bush, I notice that the beeping stops. It's as though the thoughts I'm having are pushing the array out of the way. They're very emotional thoughts. They follow no order and hold to no pattern. I suppose the array can only operate in a very structured environment. Drac and Tillie are good examples of this. Their minds are so structured that the array can totally take them over. When the structure is interrupted, the array disappears. The door to my room opens and in walks Ned. He looks real bad by now. But at least he got out of his suit. I wonder what I must look like by now.

He says, "You really caused a lot of trouble, you know."

"Sorry about that," I respond, "You know I only wanted to get out of here."

"Unfortunately, you ran into the wrong people trying to do it." "No kidding."

"If you try it again, you'll have to be locked up."

Great. Now ElectroBiotics is allowed to put me in a padded cell where I can live with my array forever. Happily ever after. What Ned is telling me is truly sick.

"I won't try it again," I lie.

"Now, if you'll just stay put in here for a few more days, I'm sure we'll come up with an antidote. They're already finding some ways of eliminating the effects of the array by layering in another array."

"Sounds terrific, Ned," I lie again.

"All right, then. Please be patient. Get some more rest. I'll see you again in a little while. When it's light outside."

I nod, feigning agreement. Ned smiles at me. Not a real smile, but one of those things you do in an attempt to instill confidence in someone. Poor Ned. He's just about had it.

As soon as Ned gets out the door, I jerk the IV needle out of my arm. It hurts, but there's not much blood. I look at the drapes and the beds. Let's see now, that's two big heavy drapes, two big but lighter drapes, two bedspreads and four sheets. About a hundred feet, I'd say. I begin to tear the drapes down and realize that there's also some chains and rope I can use. This should do just fine.

As I tear out the screen and throw out the tied together sheets and drapes, the sun is beginning to rise. The sky is a dark blue flecked with stars and there's a faint glow of orange along the horizon. I climb out the window and begin to make my way down the side of the Willerton Holiday Inn. It's actually very easy. I just have to hope that nobody sees me.

I reach the ground and feel like kissing it. I'm out of the prison from hell. Now I just have to get away from Willerton forever. I run over to the parking lot. My car is still there. And there's George Bush wagging his tail and marking up the window with his nose. I reach into my pocket for my keys and realize that they're not there.

"Hey, man," says a voice, "That's a real cute dog you've got there." It comes from the van which is parked next to me. There's a couple of long haired bearded guys sitting in the front seats smoking a joint.

"How come you leave him locked up for so long? I'll bet he really has to go to the bathroom."

I'm finally lucky for the first time in my life. These guys might be able to get me out of here.

"Hey," I say, "Could you give me a lift?"

"Sure," the hairier one says, "We were just getting ready to start out. Got to drive all day to catch the Dead in Broadville tonight."

"Great. Just let me get my dog."

I pick up a rock from the grass on the side of the road and throw it through my passenger side window. The glass shatters into tiny, safe fragments. The dead heads in the van start laughing. I open the door to my car and George Bush jumps out.

"All right, let's go," I say.

They start up the van and slide open the side door for me. I'm about to get in when George Bush decides to take the largest bowel movement in beagle history right in the Willerton Holiday Inn parking lot. The dead heads start laughing even more. George Bush and I get into the van and shut the door.

"Where ya going?" they ask.

"Broadville sounds fine to me," I say.

We leave the parking lot and I watch out the window as the Holiday Inn recedes into the distance. It looks so normal from the outside. Who would ever guess that it's filled with victims of erratic microelectronic arrays.

"What's your dog's name," asks one of the guys as we get onto the interstate.

"George Bush," I respond.

This really makes them crack up.

Chapter 12

Starting Over

It doesn't matter where I am. I hope I'm never found here. I'm now living on a very small island. Actually, it's not an island all the time, since you can walk to it during a very low tide. But most of the time it's an island. I'm the only human here. George Bush, some mongoose, a couple of pelicans and various other wildlife live here also.

On the side of the island I live is a bay with a small beach. That's where I

keep my raft. On the other side of the island is the ocean. There are cliffs there and you hear the surf crashing against the rocks all the time. The island is shaped like one of those brown rubber doorstops, with the ocean at the high end. I live on the part that you stick under the door.

I have a little house of plywood with a thatch roof. The plywood is painted white. It's one room. There was originally a stone fort here that the British built. It was a place for them to keep watch for enemy ships and greet them with cannons as they entered the bay. There are little brackets on top of the structure for the cannons. My house is built on these brackets. The cannons are long gone.

So actually, I have two rooms. A penthouse and a wine cellar. The wine cellar is cool and damp. George Bush likes to stay there during the hot part of the day.

I teach geography two days a week at a parochial school in the nearest town. It takes me two hours to walk there. I teach the kids where the countries are and we talk about what the country is like. Sometimes we draw maps of the countries. Sometimes we just talk about all kinds of stuff. I make twenty dollars a day.

On the way home I buy my food at roadside stands. I get bags of rice and vegetables and fruit. Nothing at the roadside stands has a label. I appreciate this. Sometimes you have to ask the toothless old ladies what something is, but you can't understand what they say. In the morning when the sun comes up I swim and eat breakfast.

Then I take George Bush in my orange inflatable rubber boat with the little motor and we get the fresh water for the day. We go across the bay to where James lives. He and his family own most of the land in this area. They have lots of goats that they let graze all over their land.

James is a person that I entertained when he visited America. He was part of a group of educators that came to visit the school where I was working. I thought of him while I was at the Broadville airport trying to decide where to go. James helped me get set up on the island. He also got me the job at the school, which he runs. I owe James a lot.

George Bush rides on the very front of the raft as we speed across the bay. When we're about forty feet from the shore and I'm slowing down, he takes a flying leap and swims to the beach. Then he shakes off and waits for me to tie up the raft to a tree.

We climb up the hill using a goat trail. There are no roads around here. It's a big hill and it takes a while to get to the top, where the water is. There's a

shack with a hose hanging on the outside. It's used to fill up the troughs the goats drink out of. Usually there's nobody around, and it's like that today. The goats are always scared of us and run off as we arrive. We hear them bleat.

I use the hose to give myself a shower. There's a bar of soap that I have to leave on top of the shack so the goats don't eat it. The water is cold. It feels good after the long walk up the hill. After I bathe I sit with George Bush and dry off. There's a constant breeze here and it doesn't take long to get dry. We look out over the other hills and enjoy the view. I can see James' house far away on the other side of the valley. I see the bay on the other side of the hill below us. When I'm dry I fill up my plastic water jugs and head back home with George Bush.

Today is not a teaching day so I involve myself in a bit of home maintenance. I've decided to build steps to my house. I've been using a ladder to get up there, and it gets a little difficult when I'm carrying things. Plus, if I ever have a visitor, I want the place to be respectable.

The steps will be made of stone. I have to go over to the ocean side of the island to choose appropriate rocks. I walk up the incline until I can see the ocean. There are rocks all around me. I sit down on one and try to figure out the best way of utilizing the resources available. I note the shape of each and decide where it will go. How they will all fit together. Which ones I'll use for the bottom. Which ones I'll use for the top. This takes most of the morning.

As I'm pondering this I think back to the time almost a year ago when I was the victim of a terrible experiment. There's no longer a beeping sound in my head. That went away after about three months of solitude. I suppose I've changed my thinking patterns so drastically that the array has given up on me. I had to change the way I was thinking in order to live here. It's much different. There's no television or anything.

But the array must still be inside me somewhere. Unless I've pissed it all out. Sometimes I get a little worried about it coming back. I wonder what it would do. Perhaps I would start teaching the kids at the school about all the wonderful things you can buy in America.

I speculate as to what ElectroBiotics is doing now. Or if they even exist any more. I wonder how my friend Ned is doing and all those poor people who contracted the array. Who knows whether they got things under control eventually? Even if they did, I'll bet there are a few cases which spring up once in a while. I really don't care. It's over. Someday I'll leave here and see what happens to me. But for now, I have more important things to do.

I go back to contemplating the rocks. I've got them all arranged in my mind and know exactly where each one will go. Then I spot one that would look

much better on the bottom steps. I start over again from the beginning.