

"How are you?" she said.

They always said that.

They said it ; it was never an actual question. He remembered that – just as he remembered that if he answered it as if it were a real question, it would disrupt their minds just a little. Some would be surprised, others would stall completely. Some would feign concerned interest, others would be mildly irritated. Whatever way it would happen, however, there would always be a change in their eyes, and from that moment on, a change in how they perceived him.

All except the expert ones ; they could conceal their own reactions. Sometimes he couldn't tell that there was a reaction at all. Those were the dangerous ones. The ones that, after he encountered them, difficulties almost always followed. Sometimes within days, sometimes within hours, these difficulties would appear in his life and would require inordinate amounts of time and energy for him to deal with.

That was all he could remember about the expert ones – it was all that was in that file. He did a mental note to reinforce that file. He did it because thinking about it triggered a file that reminded him to reinforce that file – it was important:

'They are dangerous', it said.

He felt another triggered file – it said: 'you are not being paranoid'.

He wondered why that file had appeared.

> THE CORPORATION IS LOOKING OUT FOR YOU <

It wasn't a problem however, he felt certain it was for a good reason. He reinforced the first file again, just to make sure it had emphasis. A slight warm, reassuring feeling lit briefly inside him as he did so.

"Good," he replied to her truthfully.

Another eye-blink of good feeling inside.

"Keeping busy?" the woman said, misreading his eyes.

Oh, yes," he answered, again truthfully. It *was* quite busy – inside his mind. He'd forgotten something . . . he could tell by the microtone of prompting in her voice and the near invisible flare of unfulfilled expectation in and around her eyes and mouth. He noted that she didn't appear to be aware she was doing it.

He felt two files, one after another: 'you didn't auto-reciprocate,' 'counter her now.' Because of her reaction, the counter didn't need to be too aggressive. He fixed her for an instant by her eyes, timing it precisely as he asked:

"Being productive?"

Using a programming cue worked perfectly. He caught a centi-second of surprise, followed by a glimmer-blink of fear – it was on most of her face. Probably a programming reflex.

"Yes, working hard," she said, and immediately added, "always room for improvement."

He saw it was a self-defense reflex.

"For us all," he reassured her.

And there was – so *much* room that none of those like her would ever be able to imagine it. A file opened: ‘They can’t imagine – except shortest range smallest things – they’ve been conditioned not to.’

He sometimes forgot that – which was why the file was there. As for himself, there was ‘always room for improvement’. His file system needed fine-tuning, as well as the constant updating of information:

- about his surroundings and relevant events ; just enough to be unnoteworthy in conversations – to blend in with the mass background
- about his job ; so he could continue to use it
- about his family (the thought rippled an involuntary shudder through him) ; so he could continue to slip ‘round them . . .

Recalling all that circled him back to the woman standing in front of him. Asking himself who this woman was, searching for any recognizable fragment – a face, voice, eyes, clothes, body shape – yielded nothing about her identity ; whether or not he actually knew her. Another overall sensory check showed no indicators that she was dangerous, and no other files triggered, so it wasn’t important. Time to extricate.

No need for a file here – this he had a lot of practice in.

“Please excuse me that I can’t stay and chat, but I mustn’t be late for my shift.” He placed the emphasis just right on ‘please’, ‘can’t’, ‘mustn’t’, and a bit less on ‘shift’. It worked perfectly, triggering an instantaneous sympathy mask and obedience response in her micro-expression – definitely programming. She was just a normal – latent informer potential. There was no wince of discomfort from inside him. Not like he’d experience when a uniform used cues to trigger programmed responses from him. Everything he had said to her was genuine. He always left the house with just enough time to get to the job, and not enough for any socializing along the way.

The woman thought she understood and said, “I know how it is. Have a good day.”

It was pleasing to hear that phrase. They always said it when they didn’t have the slightest awareness of what was happening on any level. It also meant the encounter was ended. He rejoined the current of the crowd en route to work-shift.

> ENHANCE YOUR STATUS – RAISE YOUR CREDIT RATING <

Most opportunities for socializing were to be avoided, since they were opportunities to not react or speak in their way, and so, to be discovered. But, since being asocial would also be noticed, attendance at just enough prescribed group social events was necessary. They were also easier to hide in – what better place to conceal an odd tree than in a forest?

He wondered why he was thinking about socializing tactics. It wasn’t necessary to reinforce those ideas ; they were permanently grafted into his awareness – a self preservation instinct. One of the omnipresent ‘clocks’, hanging just above head height, flashed its periodic emphasis into his field of vision. Numbers. They did not relate. He translated them

automatically into a true clock face with hands – it became real time. It showed him he needed to speed up. Two, three minutes that should have been available – now weren't.

Odd that nothing had happened en route to account for their evaporation.

He hurried, faster than the current of the crowd. Not being late meant appearing normal. Appearing normal meant no extra reports on him, which meant no receipt of a 'health appointment notice' issued by an M.C.¹ – and that meant fewer suspicions or interruptions of his work. It wasn't 'the job' that he was devoted to, of course, it was that portion of his work in which he could engage his true nature. Engage? No, much more – breathe . . . feel . . . fly like a bird of its own mind – all while sitting at the console in his office cubicle.

And all duly sanctioned ; with the requisite checks and approvals of the supervisors and executives above his middle station. Not that any of them genuinely understood what he was actually doing. To notice, and to identify – within the superficial proprieties of 'info-design' – anything artistically subtle and sublime? The kind of thinking necessary for such dimensionality of understanding . . . was not allowed. And one certainly did not rise to supervisory or executive levels by exhibiting any . . . aberrant insights.

> SECURE YOUR FUTURE – RE-INVEST IN THE CORPORATION <

Nor did one retain one's mid-level position by letting slip any evidence of that which he exerted energy each non-working minute of each day to keep hidden. . . from everyone:

The fact that he had been born different.

Born different. He hadn't *chosen* to be this way ; he'd had no say in the matter. And what's more he couldn't change it – at least not by any means he knew of that wouldn't also obliterate his own identity as a 'side effect' of the treatment. Side effect! So. . . even though he didn't quite know how he had managed to survive intact this far into adulthood, his survival reflex somehow continued to exert the myriad nudges – the mid-course corrections – that had protected him from being discovered.

Because in this society. . . what he had been born as, was not allowed.

Precisely for that reason, his 'special' work had to continue. There was nothing else for him in this life. With the sole exception of the 'glyphs' which he created and released into the world, his life was not his own. His so-called family was not his own. His 'friends' were stage props – not real-life. The sole evidence of his identity – its passing through this existence – were the 'glyphs'. His only legacy – his 'offspring' – they would survive him . . . and go on doing their work.

< INTERMETRO * TRANSCONTINENTAL * INTRAMETRO >

Although he couldn't quite grasp why or how he'd raised it, now that he had raised the curtain on these thoughts, ideas started to come to him.

A file triggered: 'focus on these and note them down'.

Obeying it, he marshaled his concentration and mentally targeted them for capture. His feet moved on automatic pilot. As the ideas began to pour in thicker and interact with each

¹ Monitor Control

other, he had to keep repeating the first ones so as not to lose them as he quickened his pace to the tube-rail station. Rifling for his pass-card as he approached the airlock entrance, he barely managed to fish out his notebook as he burst through, and began recording a few cue words before he got to the platform, into its built-in mike, and stepped into the waiting train-car.

Still recording, he opened the book, sat down, sketched quickly to catch all the visual impressions before they evaporated. The e-book's glare-shades hid his arcane pencil and paper pad, which he used instead of a normal touch pad.

As the train moved out, the stream of free-associating thoughts swelled into a swift river. He could feel which ones started to fade first and recorded/drew furiously key phrases/images from them all, jumping from one to another almost off-balance . . .

To the other passengers in the train-car, his behavior didn't appear different from any other overworked lower level office drone.

He had selected his clothing to reinforce their misperception. In and around the house, the stranger that his mental files identified as 'spouse' hated his clothes, and considered the person in them 'the-shmuck-that-paid-the-bills'. His (alleged) offspring considered him an embarrassment, and were determined to spend the money his job brought in, in order to *not* follow his example.

In the office, his co-workers were accustomed to his industriousness, but disdained him as socially inept and unambitious. They usually only invited him to the required social gatherings.

He did not discourage this state of affairs.

Although occasionally frustrating, he'd come to accept, if not appreciate, that it was generally advantageous to him. That those of no depth had no depth perception, and hence presented no threat of discovery for him.

On the train, half of the adverts change simultaneously – flashing the message:

> TIME TO ENHANCE YOUR HEALTH PROTECTION <
> DON'T RISK – DON'T BE QUARANTINED <

Everyone in his car – everyone on the train – reflexively accessed their citizens wrist-berry to input their med-data and transfer the auto-calculated payables from their accounts.

Except him.

The instant the adverts flashed, they automatically activated identical message flags on the screens of the phones or the notebooks people were talking or tapping keyboards on.

Except him.

His computer didn't repeat what the signs said because it was designed not to. Because it couldn't relay adverts, program cues, or connect to the omninet, privanet or infranet ; it therefore could not be 'spied' or interdicted by the MC's safetynet. He didn't know who'd customized the book for him, but a file told him it was secure and untraceable.

So, totally oblivious to all around him, he worked on.

Even if he'd noticed, it wouldn't have mattered anyway – he wasn't wearing his citizens' wrist-berry.

Which was why uniforms had planted themselves at every platform exit at the next station . . . and the one after that, and the one after that. Each of them prepared to scan the

offloading commuters for violations. If there were none disembarking at these stations, other uniforms would appear at the next one, and so on . .

As the train slid to a halt in the station, he was jerked back to real time by a file popping open: 'this is your stop!' He scooped himself together and blew out of the car, the doors just missing him.

Before he noticed how making his way through the commuters turned easy, as they parted to make way for him, he was standing in front of the uniform blocking the exit. . . .

That's when he noticed the green targeting laser showing a spot on his chest. A file opened: 'green laser = use of non-lethal force warning'. That explained the commuters making way . . . the uniform allowed them to slip past.

Most of the multitudinous screens nearest to them diverted from their usual sequence to display:

> BE SAFE – REPORT SUSPECT BEHAVIOUR – BE SECURE <

Fixed on the quarry, the uniform asked with a crocodilian smile: "Are you wearing your citizen's wrist-berry?"

The rhetorical challenge triggered a file of a sequence of responses: "I forgot it at the office." A true statement ; no discomfort.

"That's a moving violation . . .," The uniform poised to write it up.

"Um, yes, but I was updating it about an infraction . . ." Also true.

"That's no excuse." The uniform's smile was replaced by minor irritation.

"In the office – I got the person's ID number." A person recently informed on. The uniform paused . . scanned *his* ID number . . and discovered that he wasn't an low level – but a mid level – inside Watermark.

The nearby screens still read:

> BE SAFE – REPORT SUSPECT BEHAVIOUR – BE SECURE <

The uniform had overfilled the quota for citations – and didn't need another one. But some dirt on someone inside Watermark? That was more interesting – could point to a lead on an arrest . . .

"Well . . .," the uniform punched up a work-shift schedule. "Hurry up then," and pulling out a warning sticker, slapped it onto the back of his wrist, adding more sternly, "but make sure you report it as soon as you clock in."

He responded with just the right tonality and expression ; "Oh, I will – yes – thank you . . ."

The uniform waved him along.

It triggered a file: 'Relax, you have prepared for this.'

Connected to his office console, his wrist-berry had been set to upload data on anyone who had already been reported on by someone at a lower level ; routine internal data that, at his level, he would have access to. As he moved along as ordered, signs resumed to their sequence with:

> BE A GOOD CITIZEN – BUY SOMETHING THIS MORNING <

Emerging from the station, another omni-clock-flash. Translate it into real time . . . now he was two minutes *behind* time. Blast! He could have *sworn* he'd left the dwelling with a few minutes to spare. Where the hell had they disappeared to!?

Good thing he could see the building from the station.

But when he blew into his cubicle on the 103rd floor, there was no auto-scan admonition blinking at him . . . and his co-workers gave no more than a passing nod. That's when he noticed the warning sticker on his wrist. It triggered a file: 'send off uploaded report to sticker address ; set up for a new one ; remove sticker.'

He followed its directions exactly. After doing so, he felt a wave of relief pass through him, which meant that there was no imminent danger. His inconspicuousness had been restored. As much as was possible.

< THE CORPORATION IS LOOKING OUT FOR YOU >

For him, conformity – everyone else's mania, voluntary or medicated – simply was not possible.

Everyone else . . . all of 'them' . . . the normals – above and below his corporate-state sanctioned level – they all did, said, remembered exactly what they were supposed to.

While he couldn't remember anything he didn't consciously focus his will on, in order to specifically retain it.

No involuntary memory. Not even an awareness of the passage of time unless he consciously focused on it.

All the blaring lights flashing noises adverts signs orders of the city screens. The mandatory implants or worn units. The program cues 'randomly' interspersed throughout all of it by Watermark. The ubiquitous surveillance. Not even the 'good citizen booths' blistered into niches, dead-end alleys and shadowed corners of buildings for easy reporting on another citizen . . .

It couldn't oppress him. Because it didn't register.

< GET THAT 1950'S JET-SET FEELING – JOIN THE SPACE-SET TODAY >
< BOOK YOUR EXCLUSIVE EXCURSION >

In moments, even seconds, nearly everything that had briefly alighted on his short-term memory . . . simply faded away . . . unless he deliberately wanted to retain it and created a file that would auto-trigger in response to a singular stimulus. It was like an insanely complicated self-hypnosis ; implanted layers of auto-suggestions. It also meant he couldn't lie effectively. If he even tried, all sorts of alarm files would trigger on how to extricate himself from the situation as quickly as possible. Paradoxically, he didn't remember how, or more importantly *when*, the whole process of the mental file system had begun. He just knew it was there, and had to be maintained.

Periodically, he would reason that it originated with imprinted fragments, mnemonic associations of reminders: accrued over time, forming affinitive links, cognitively resolvable into patterns which could be developed into a clarified technique and system. An evolving process probably dating back from his childhood . . .

He didn't remember his childhood . . . except for a few disconnected images of play . . . and his mother. They always evoked an echo of a warm, safe feeling.

His adolescence was virtually a blank.

There was a file concerning the scarcity of memories from those periods of his life. It stated simply that it was better that way.

One thing that said a lot about him – he never once had considered how intelligent and disciplined a mind had to be in order to accomplish what he had, without involuntary memory.

Certain things did stick – things that were somehow linked to basic existence, as though there were a special circuitry of hardwired responses for that. Also, within that, was a circuit pathway dedicated to the non-discovery of what he was. Apparently the survival reflex didn't need files.

Most important, however, was his unique response to the omnipresent undercurrent of social programming that moved people to conform. The conditioned responses pervading every aspect of their pre-determined lives.

He didn't have any.

The program cues embedded throughout the information that permeated everywhere didn't work on him. There was nothing in his memory to cue. His 'hidden handicap' rendered him immune.

His mind was . . . loose. Floating around . . . untethered . . . unfettered by the programmed imperative to conform its patterns of thinking to those sanctioned by the corporate state. His mind could dream free . . . imagine . . . create . . . with no responsibility to that all-ensnaring web woven through the entire landscape of society . . .

And a mind liberated from the onus of conformity ; actually immune to the corrective restraints made possible by social conditioning . . .

That was definitely not allowed.

> CORPORATE INTERESTS ARE YOUR INTERESTS <

An uncontrolled mind was an intolerable lapse in the fiscal order of society ; a threat to be eradicated, because it contradicted what the corporate state marketed as real . . . and good.

And, of course, the greatest good for society was the strong and smooth performance of the corporate state and its constituent parts:

The sub-levels hoping to be approved for citizenship ;

The citizens striving to be executives ;

Executives maneuvering for a seat on the boards of government.

The flawless choreography of the elections of V.P.'s had replaced the chaotic narcissism of politics.

The 'endless development policy', 'guaranteed growth' and 'upcurve profit-flow' had replaced the 'arbitrary ism's' of party ideologies.

It was these 'enrichment age' strategies and solutions that assured each citizen the 'security and status of maximized credit.'

< PSST >

< PAMPERED, SAFE & SECURE TRAVEL >

< N H CLASS CASINO CRUISES >

< SHORT TERM HOLIDAY CREDIT BOOSTS AVAILABLE >

The greatest good was paramount. Therefore, any premise that there could actually be a different – a non-conforming – way to live, was not merely false, but maliciously subversive. Pernicious heresy. All such aberrations had to be discredited and expunged at their inception, before they could propagate and cause damage.

It was the parameters of thought prescribed by the corporate state that safeguarded its citizens from such dangerous deviancy.

If that were not entirely effective . . . then medications were prescribed by the corporate state doctors to safeguard citizens from other citizens who might harbor thoughts of such dangerous deviancy.
