

'Sumptuously written, with prose that glitters'
Will Self



**THE RED
MEN**
MATTHEW DE ABAITUA

Shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award

THE RED MEN

MATTHEW DE ABAITUA

Dedication

For Sylvia and Eddie

Epigraph

'So it isn't I who am master of my own life, I am just one of the threads to be woven into life's calico! Well then, even if I cannot spin, I can at least cut the thread in two.'

Søren Kierkegaard, from *Either/Or: A Fragment Of Life*, first published 1843, translation by Alastair Hannay, 1992

'Then another tomorrow
They never told me of
Came with the abruptness of a fiery dawn.'

Sun Ra, from *Cosmic Equation*, 1965

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PART I

1 IGNITION

I brushed my daughter's blonde hair, taking pleasure in bringing order to its morning tangle. Iona stood at the window, gazing at the busy Hackney street. She blinked at the faces of the pedestrians, each discontent in his or her own way, stumbling and dawdling, stragglers in the human race. I concentrated on the long stroke of the brush. Each pass spun golden thread. We did not talk. I adjusted my position to brush the underside, drawing out a sheaf of hair upon my palm. While she slept, tiny zephyrs had whirled the golden thread into intertwined locks; carefully, I unpicked them.

I finished brushing her hair and then we put on our coats. Iona chose a doll to take to nursery, and that was the end of this peaceful moment together. The collar of the day slipped over my neck, the leash jerked taut, and the long drag began: work, meetings, teatime, Iona's bedtime then work again until sleep took me. Drifting into unconsciousness, the leash would be unhooked, and I would wonder where the day had gone. Where I had gone. Close my eyes. Nothing there.

Iona said, 'Daddy, what is that?'

A small group moved with authority and purpose through the pedestrians. It was the police, specifically an armed response unit, strapped up in black Kevlar armour and carrying sub-machine guns. We were used to the police; Iona wasn't pointing at them. No, it was the tall figure in their midst that had caught her eye: the robot was at least seven foot tall and was covered in a skin of kid leather with fully articulated legs and arms and sensitive catcher's mitts for hands. It was not entirely steady on its flat feet. The police jogged to keep up with its loping stride. The robot passed by the window and glanced our way: a pair of mournful blue eyes set in a suede ball of a head.

Again, Iona asked me what it was.

'That's a Dr Easy,' I replied. 'It's a robot. You know what a robot is.' I helped her into a duffel coat.

'Why is it a doctor?'

'It helps people. Sometimes people get mad. It makes them better.'

'Why do people get mad?'

'They just do.'

It was time for us to go. I opened the front door. Iona clamped her hands over her ears. A police helicopter hung in the air, its rotor blades drowning out the clamour of the main road. Policewomen set about sealing off the street, unwinding strips of yellow tape and evacuating the shops: customers halfway through their manicures were led indignant from the nails and hair place and at the internet shack armed police threatened the Somalians who were waiting for their permits to finish downloading. A pair of builders in plaster-spattered boiler suits sauntered from Yum-Yum, refusing to be rushed. As each establishment emptied, the police put down metal crowd barriers to close it off. We milled outside the off-licence. What was going on? Did anyone know?

An armed man was holed up in a house, said the constables. Shots had been fired. Snipers,

graceful as burglars, skipped over the rooftops and took up positions behind chimney stacks. I looked back toward my house but could no longer see it. A blue tarpaulin had been set up across the street. The armed unit huddled behind a barricade with Dr Easy sat cross-legged among them, listening politely as the captain explained his intentions.

Dr Easy made me anxious. It was the eyes. Sometimes feminine, sometimes masculine, just like a woman's voice, which could be maternal or paternal depending upon the need of the patient. When I was unwell and suffering from anxiety, I was offered sessions with Monad's in-house Dr Easy. It spoke with a woman's voice and let me hit it in the face.

I wriggled my hand free of Iona's grasp and checked my pulse. It was elevated. Her question came back to me: Daddy, why do people get mad? Well, my darling, drugs don't help. And life can kick your rationality out of you. You can be kneecapped right from the very beginning. Even little girls and boys your age are getting mad through bad love. When you are older, life falls short of your expectations, your dreams are picked up by fate, considered, and then dashed upon the rocks, and then you get mad. You just do. Your only salvation is to live for the dreams of others; the dreams of a child like you, my darling girl, my puppy pie, or the dreams of an employer, like Monad.

The robot sat patiently through a briefing by the tactical arms unit, which was quite unnecessary, as it would already have extracted all the information it required from their body language. Dr Easy listened to the police captain give orders because it knew how much pleasure it gave him.

The body of the robot was designed by a subtle, calculating intelligence, with a yielding cover of soft natural materials to comfort us and a large but lightweight frame to acknowledge that it was inhuman. The robot was both parent and stranger: you wanted to lay your head against its chest, you wanted to beat it to death. When I hit my robot counsellor, its blue eyes held a fathomless love for humanity.

Slowly, Dr Easy stood up. The crowd fell silent. The robot held up its enormous right palm in a gesture of peace to the gunman. Its left hand was arranged with similar precision – the palm of an open hand facing forward, the five fingers slightly bent. With this gesture of charity and compassion, Dr Easy took stately steps across the road toward the gunman's house.

The police retreated to where Monad's contractors had set up a monitoring station. Gelatinous screens billowed out like spinnaker sails to catch the data pouring in: infrared, millimetre-wave and acoustic impressions from the police helicopter were matched to the sensory input of Dr Easy, creating a live three-dimensional model of the siege house. The gunman was on the second floor, in the corner of a bedsit. I hoisted Iona up into my arms and walked over to the contractors, flashing my Monad ID. Could I be of help? In an advisory capacity? In the spirit of public and private sector collaboration? The Monad technicians knew me from the company five-a-side league. I was allowed to hover in the background.

In the time it took me to remove a small box of organic raisins from my pocket and give them to Iona, Monad assembled a working profile of the gunman, mining his scattered data and reassembling it in the shape of a man. His name was Michael Sawyer and he had no prior criminal convictions. He had a number of traffic violations and an onerous mortgage, a low six-figure income with a high five-figure alimony. His medical records contained prescriptions for beta-blockers and anti-depressants that had not recently been renewed. He had moved out of the family home and into rented accommodation, but not to here; this siege house was not his last known residence. The previous year he had racked up tens of thousands of air miles, doing three continents most weeks. This year, none. I looked at his employment record and drew my own conclusions. Here was an exhausted and confused foot soldier of globalization, bounced up the empire of a media magnate before falling out of favour.

He managed to get a position at a telecommunications and military electronics firm which in turn had been taken over by a larger company. Personnel took out his expense claims for the last year and exposed them to micro-analysis, searching for a pretext to fire him and avoid paying redundancy. They had found what they were looking for.

This was the gunman's background. Now the police captain added the foreground. Officers on patrol had identified Michael Sawyer's sports car as wanted in connection with a hit-and-run in Soho. When they inquired at the house, they heard three shots. The firearms unit arrived and a further two shots were let off from an upstairs window. Officers returned fire but surveillance showed the suspect still moving around inside the house.

'We tried to negotiate. They always negotiate. Not this one. He hasn't said a word. We don't know what he wants,' said the police captain.

'Dr Easy will find out,' I said.

I wanted to see a Dr Easy in action. My work for Monad was conceptual, concerned with planning and development. I rarely saw any project through to completion, and so never acted in any decisive way upon the world. My will and ambition had been diluted by years of being the ideas man, a thinker and not a doer, a position of unchanging powerlessness in any company. Monad dreams. I do not. Not for myself, anyway.

The siege house was a Victorian terrace carved up into bedsits. Six doorbells clustered beside the shattered front door. Dr Easy went inside. On the screens, we watched the robot's slow progress up the staircase. Its inner monologue came through the monitors. It could already smell Michael Sawyer, his fear hormones, the stink of a wounded and hunted animal. The robot crept up a tilted cobwebbed staircase until it came to an unlocked door. The gentlest pressure from the robot's paw swung the door back on its hinges.

The room was dingy. A dirty single bed. A Baby Belling oven on a peeling melamine surface. A microwave. A stereo. A half-unpacked suitcase. Michael Sawyer was crouched in the corner. His striped shirt was untucked and slick with blood. At the sight of the robot, he gurgled and gesticulated with the shotgun.

'He has a bullet wound to the mouth,' observed Dr Easy. 'And there is an overpowering smell of petrol in here.'

'Ask him what he wants,' ordered the police captain.

'He can't speak,' said the robot. 'The sniper shot him in the tongue.'

'Can he write it down?'

'It doesn't matter. I know what he wants.'

Dr Easy moved forward to comfort the injured man. Michael Sawyer made a gesture that was like Atlas trying to shake some sense into the world.

The robot translated for us. 'Too late. He is going to kill himself now.'

The flat was saturated with fuel. Dr Easy made no attempt to intervene. The robot was already backing out of the room when Michael Sawyer lit a rag. Fire filled the screens and – back on the street – blew out the windows of the house. Iona was scared and I held her tight to me.

A great fire waits under London. Michael Sawyer had merely slid back the grate.

Lift up a manhole cover, listen to it roar.

Dr Easy walked out of the billowing smoke, and then, with flames running all the way down the back, the robot burned on the street until someone came forward to extinguish it.

2 ZZZZZZIP

The door buzzer woke me at dawn.

I blundered out of bed and flicked on the intercom.

Raymond spoke first.

‘Today you are going to change my life.’

At the door, he was gripping the iron bars of the security gate with both hands.

‘Aren’t you excited?’

My head was waxy with sleep. Across the road, strips of police tape lingered around the caviar where the siege house had been. I’d stood there all afternoon and into the dusk when, to douse the flames, the police had dumped tonnes of water through the roof; these waterfalls streamed through the broken windows, backlit by powerful halogen spotlights. Afterwards, I thought about Michael Sawy a lot. How easy it would be for the project of your self to go suddenly horribly off the rails.

‘Please, it’s urgent,’ said Raymond.

Scratching at his new goatee with dirty fingernails, he had changed since our last meeting. That was how it went with Raymond. His identity was in flux during his manic phase: he was a Buddhist then he was out on bail then he was Zen celibate then he was the spare man in a swingers enclave, all in the course of three weeks. I first met him when I was the editor of *Drug Porn* and he was a contributor. Recently, he had taken up a tighter orbit, looping around the routines of my family life.

The first thing I said to him, straight up, before I let him into the flat, was this:

‘Shut up. Don’t say anything. This is a small place. Iona and El are asleep downstairs. You can come in, but first you must promise me that you won’t start talking until I am ready, a state I will indicate by pointing at you, and saying the word “speak”.’

Since our last meeting, he had grown a neat swell of gut, inconsequential beside mine, but significant on his carpenter’s pencil of a figure. As he went by into the flat, I could smell the sweat of the alleyways, the urban dewfall of bus fumes and rotting garbage. He laid down a dossier’s bag, its zipper defeated by the sleeping bag shoddily stuffed inside. He asked to use the toilet and I indicated, through quiet pointing, that I would meet him out back when he was done.

I went down to check on El. The bedrooms were underground and dug out of the old coal cellar. She was drowsy, having been up in the night with our daughter. I told her to go back to sleep and her dreaming self obeyed me. In Iona’s dark little room, sweetly stuffy from her child’s body, I checked her temperature with the back of my hand, adjusted the duvet around her shoulders, caught my reflection in the pulsating obsidian monitor on the chest of drawers.

In the garden, Raymond rolled a small joint in the encrusted ridges of his trousers. I served tea and pointed at him.

‘Speak.’

‘I’ve been out all night. I can’t convey the importance of what’s happened to me. Sex and

revelation. Well, almost sex. Certainly revelation though.’ He whistled.

‘You are catastrophizing again,’ I said.

He considered my observation, rolled it around his palate with a swirl of marijuana.

‘Do you want some of this?’

‘No.’

‘You haven’t asked what my revelation was?’

‘Does it involve the end of the world?’

‘It is more surprising than that: I’ve decided to get a job.’

‘Who is going to give you a job?’ I asked.

‘You are,’ he said. ‘You’re going to change my life. I met this woman. She told me Monad is hiring writers and poets. I’m going to apply to work with you at Monad.’

I was due at Monad in an hour. I would take the Overground train to Stratford then down to Canary Wharf and Monad’s offices at the Wave Building. Our garden backed onto the platform at Hackney Central. The station Tannoy echoed apologies over the fence, interrupting our conversation. A train pulled in to the platform. The passengers seethed against one another; pressed against a single window, among the human faces, was an Alsatian’s terrified chops. No one got off that carriage with their reputation intact. It was a commuter route for all trades: immigrants from Eastern Europe, dusted with demolition work out West, snoozed against middle managers, who made every effort to close their senses against the press of fellow passengers. The nearly dead travelled on this train too. Stabbed or shot in the Pembury or Nightingale estates, they bled into the upholstery on their way to A&E Homerton hospital.

The train pulled away. The garden was quiet again, and Raymond resumed his talk.

‘It all started when Florence the poet asked if I wanted to come over for cunnilingus and pasta,’ he asked, ‘What type of pasta?’ She said, ‘Fusili.’ I said, ‘Don’t mind if I do.’”

Raymond had been practising this conversation on the walk over.

I raised my hand.

‘Stop. I don’t want to hear about this. Just tell me about Monad.’

‘No. It’s all relevant. You’re doing exactly what she did. Florence. She put her finger on my lip and told me I could only speak when she winked at me.’

‘We have to do that. Sometimes it’s hard to keep track of your conversation.’

‘That’s because I have perfect recall.’

This was true. Raymond was always bringing up something I had said half a dozen years earlier. He could rummage around in the brain gutters and memory drains to pull out clumps of throwaway ideas, irrelevant asides, boozy promises that were never meant to live beyond closing time.

‘After the pasta we went to a reading at the Vortex. Then it was zzzzzzip’ – this exclamation was a conversational tic to signify a jump cut in his inner movie – ‘and me and Florence are drinking sherry in her bedroom. I told her I didn’t want to sleep with her.’

‘‘Come to bed, Ray-mond,’’ she cooed at me like a dove from under her duvet.

‘I said, ‘‘No, I can’t have sex. I have too much going on at the moment.’’

‘She put her index finger to my lips and said, ‘‘I don’t want your objections. Shut up and give me a head.’’

He was smoking his joint now, and it was having no effect upon him. The tetrahydrocannabinol could not compete with the charged juice running through his axons and synapses, it could not insinuate itself into the quantum events operating in the microtubules of each and every one of his twenty-three billion neurons, the chorus of tiny mysteries that sang into existence the strange

consciousness of Raymond Chase.

I was puzzled as to how, ~~via the infinite processes of the brain, he had come up with such a daft idea~~ as to not have sex with willing Florence.

‘I was trying to have a conversation with her. Is it so wrong in this day and age that a man has something to say?’

“‘Speak here, Raymond,” she said, hitching up her dress. “Tell it the alphabet, let your tongue go from A to Zed.” I was so busy telling her about my reality filters that I hadn’t noticed she’d taken her knickers off.’

The phrase ‘reality filters’ was mine. When he was manic, reality was everything at once and it was all connected to him: Raymond became the junction box through which many currents flowed. Instead of walking the street with the filters in place, one spotlight of consciousness on the pavement before him, all the lights were on in Raymond’s head. It became difficult for him to tell where he ended and other people began.

At the end of the garden, the winter sun glinted off the spears of the metal security fence. Emaciated trees shivered in the breeze. He was talking about inclining his head toward Florence’s exposed labia, taking one lip between his lips.

‘I still had plenty to say at this point, but I confined myself to licking every letter of the alphabet into her. She liked L. She giggled at M. I nipped her with V, then shook her with W.

‘She said, “Focus on me. Forget everything else.” The cowl of her clitoris was thrown back. I tried to narrow everything down to that red nub. I could feel her seeping into my beard.’

Raymond ran back through the alphabet, and she started to pull him on top of her. There was some scrabbling with his trousers while she plucked a condom from the top drawer of the bedside table. She flicked a paisley scarf onto the lamp for ambience. He tried to catch the look upon her face when she first saw his penis.

‘Stop.’ I raised my hand, and Raymond snapped out of his recollection. ‘It’s too early in the morning for this. Don’t give it to me blow-by-blow. Did you have sex or not? Just a yes or no.’

The frustration crushed him: how could I understand what was happening to him if he didn’t show me every facet of the experience?

‘It’s not a yes or no thing. If you insist on getting all empirical, then yes I achieved penetration. But for penetration to graduate to full sex, I feel one or more of the participants must achieve orgasm. Long before that eventuality, I was standing by the armoire, smoking a roll-up and finishing my observation about my reality filters.’

‘Which was?’

‘That they were clogged.’

‘By?’

‘Reality, obviously.’

‘What did Florence say when you stopped having sex?’

‘It was very sudden. I sprang out of her. She thought I’d seen something. A rat. The house has rats. It wasn’t a rat. I hadn’t seen something alarming. Rather, I’d thought something alarming. Actually, it was an absence of thought. My brain seized up. There was complete silence in there; it was as if Florence had reached into my skull and shushed my hippocampus, thalamus, frontal lobe whatever with her index finger. In place of the usual inner chatter there was a rush of information from the muscle sense, the inner ear. I could feel the macadamized heft of my lung lining, the groaning sodden liver, the whine of knee cartilage and, most of all, the hesitancy of my heart. It was a non-lucid moment. I still had Florence’s thighs over each shoulder, the pressure of her flesh against my ears.’

Clamped. Locked in the meat prison. I had to get out. So zzzzzzip I'm on the other side of the bedroom slapping my face to get Raymond Chase back online.'

I was keen to get to work. Raymond had riddled me with his talk while failing, in any way, impart the crucial fact: what job was Monad offering?

I made one last attempt to find out.

He replied, 'Florence asked me what was wrong and I'll give you the same answer. After this non-lucid moment, it took a while to coax my consciousness back into the pilot's chair. There was no question of continuing with the sex. I apologized to her for my problems, and explained that of late I've had some difficulty controlling the strength and direction of my thoughts.

'She said, "I had no idea you were off your rocker."

'I said, "Would it be alright if we just slept together?"

'We perched on the bed, a cheap single bed you always get in rented houses. I tried to nuzzle her, but in way of an apology. She turned over. Posters proclaiming the virtues of rationing lined the wall. Hearty women in flannel dresses advertised the benefits to the war effort of eating less bread. Another poster showed a home guard ticking off a young lad in the Blitz ruins: "Leave this to us, Sonny – You ought to be out of London." A sentiment I approve of.

'There was an old Dansette record player. I slipped out of bed and inspected the heavy vinyl records beneath it. Out of browning dust sleeves slipped long players by the Joe Loss Orchestra and Charles Kunz. The inevitable Vera Lynn. There was a rickety wooden writing desk with an ink well and a fountain pen beside it. Neat homemade volumes of her poetry were tucked in an alcove, overlooked by a gas mask.

'I mention all this just to convey how out-of-place the application form was, in an open silver folder, the front embossed with the Monad logo. It was a real shock to me. At first I was appalled. What a sell-out! What a hypocrite! She makes her room a shrine to a bygone age then applies to work with Monad, of all people. But this is where the revelation came. I looked again at the posters. The women clenched their biceps at me. They were determined to fight Hitler from their kitchens, from the fields, from the factories. They wouldn't respect the likes of me, grubbing around the pubs and the dole.

'And I need money. Florence needs money too. We all do. Poets more than anyone. I still count out my change, on my bed, at night. You've got buckets of coins lying around your house. I've seen you take money out of the cashpoint in units of a hundred. A hundred quid! That would transform me in a month.

'As Florence slept quietly, I saw an alternate future for us both. If we were both working at Monad then I could get a little bit of what you have. I could move out of the squat and wash its stench out of my suits. I could even keep food in the house. Perhaps a wine cellar.

'I flicked through the application form. It asked for references and that's when I thought of you. You work for Monad, you could be my way in. So I left Florence a note – "We'll meet again" – then I was out in Hackney. It's a new dawn and there's no time to waste. I came right over to see you. You don't mind do you?'

3 THE WAVE BUILDING

The next time Raymond contacted me, I was being fitted for a suit. I told him that it wasn't a good time to talk, that I had a tailor attending to my inside leg on a hot day.

Raymond ignored me and said, 'You promised me that if I ever really needed it you would move heaven and earth to help me. Exact words. Heaven *and* earth. I'd have been happy with just one of them.'

Had I really promised him that? Yes, I remembered a party from late in the century, when I was the boss of *Drug Porn* and arrogant with all the attention that position attracted. I have not forgotten taking Raymond under my arm at the bar. He was fierce and sharp and wrote candidly about the hilarious catastrophe of his daily life. Even then, it was clear that it would not turn out well for him that he had no talent for compromise.

I didn't need to move heaven and earth for Raymond. I merely put him in touch with Monad personnel and they sent him a Myers-Briggs Jung Typology test, a standard questionnaire used by personnel departments to determine personality type.

He called me for advice.

'If the test shows I don't have a personality, do I get the job?'

It was an entry-level position, that's all I knew. As such, it was beneath Raymond but so were the alternatives: homelessness, starvation or living with his mother again.

A month later, Monad called him for an interview. The interviewer kept him waiting for an hour in the reception, a humid arboretum dominated by tropical plants and trees. He bided his time showing an interest in the flora, inspecting glossy banana plants and picking at the dark green lobes of breadfruit leaves, the trunks strung with rootless ferns. When he got up from his leather seat to read the description of these weightless epiphytes, trails of his perspiration flared up on the black leather sofa. His diffident front became harder to maintain as the minutes ticked by. He was furious to discover he was sweating, the yellow collar of his shirt darkening to amber. I had warned Raymond that he would be observed from the moment he stepped into the building. He had never spent time in office culture and was clueless regarding its etiquette. He would make the mistake of socializing in the reception and wouldn't be able to stop himself from chatting up the receptionist, poncing a fag off the security guard or sharing confidences with the executive drivers as they idled on the sofas.

Raymond's name flashed up on my phone, I wearily accepted him with a press of my thumb.

'What does it mean if they keep me waiting? Are they trying to discover how I react? What should I do?'

'Nothing. Just wait. Take pleasure in it.'

'But if I idle, I look like I have nowhere better to be. Appearing impatient, busy, will imply high status.'

'The job doesn't require high social status.'

‘You’re saying that I should just take this, sit here, behave. Ignore the insult.’

‘Don’t take it personally. They’re just busy.’

‘I don’t know how you can work under these conditions.’

‘What conditions?’

‘I refuse to hand over the keys to my ego.’

He contemplated the biomass of the corporate forest.

‘I am indifferent to either their approval or disapproval. I just wanted you to know that.’

I had helped him prepare his curriculum vitae, omitting his brief career in amateur pornography (hundred quid a video, doing some bloke’s missus while he films it, then being served sandwiches to her afterwards), his court cautions for violent conduct (‘I pulled a knife on him. Well it was a penknife. The geezer goes, “You couldn’t even cut my pubes off with that.” I realized the error of my ways and called the police myself’) and his touring one-man show of performance poetry (‘It was called “My Friend, the Jailer” and it was about you’). After an evening quizzing him on his past, I compiled a catalogue of diverting but useless information concerning Raymond Chase. I didn’t even get his qualifications. He was proud of my failure. ‘You can’t pin me down like that. I don’t have a CV. I have a legend.’ Nonetheless he accepted the story I concocted for him and he submitted it to the *Monad*.

Eventually, a female PA came down to escort Raymond to the elevator. He stared at her skin, its radiant milk-fed blush, the way she had tried to age herself with a bob and a formal suit. She was an intoxicating mix of severity and young flesh. He was grateful just to share oxygen with her. When the elevator doors opened, Raymond got his first look at an office full of beautiful people. Women walked by, their stockings abrading in iambic pentameter. The movement from face to breast to hips to thighs was a soliloquy of flesh. The young men wore tight denim jodhpurs. The serenity was more akin to the headquarters of a cult, and the air was zestful with citrus. The walls and desks were covered with screens which responded to every tap, whisper and caress. Pliant and organic, the screens could be stretched to any size or format, and when left unattended, their surface broke out in wide pores which exhaled negative ions to cleanse the air. Overhead, immense screens displayed live aerial footage of the Himalayas, the Sahara, the Scottish highlands overlain with a ticker of information concerning *Monad*’s current orders, the feedback from its subscribers and hourly encouragements from the management. The vital signs of the body corporate drifted over the natural wonders of the world.

His guide deposited him in a glass office for further waiting. He felt like he was being put through a series of airlocks, either for decontamination or decompression. The interviewer soon ambled in holding a mug of vended latte. The first thing Raymond noticed were the man’s nipples, little dug holes of fat pressing against his tight sweater. With his round shoulders and recessed chin, Morton Eakin looked like he was still being breastfed. His comfy jumpers gave off a sour milky odour. In *Monad*, ugliness was a perk confined to management.

Morton unrolled a screen upon the desk and tapped out a spreadsheet. The computer was a thin sheet of grey transparent film, which Morton flapped in front of Raymond as if it was something he had caught in the sea.

‘Do you like our tech? This is none of your Chinese crap. This is high Cambridge biotech. The screens are formed from a genetically engineered virus left to dry on a substrate. Under the right conditions, viruses can be encouraged to behave like the molecules in a polymer. We line them up to form a three-dimensional grid of quantum dots, replacing strands of the virus here and there with a conductive filament. The user interface combines standard haptic gestures with the screen’s ability to extrapolate user intent. Organic light-emitting diodes provide images and the battery is charged

wirelessly.'

Raymond laughed. 'I don't know what you are talking about. Does that mean I've already failed the interview?'

'I've looked at the result of your personality tests.'

'Did I pass or fail?'

Morton sneered, as if Raymond's joke only confirmed his suspicions.

'We don't have anyone corresponding to your type on our team.'

'Is that a good thing?'

'I could be persuaded. Tell me, who is your best friend?'

Raymond winced. 'I don't know.'

'I do,' said Morton, tapping the screen. 'This test tells me that *you* are your best friend. You are a performer. Empathy is not your strong point. Other people are merely your audience.'

Raymond bridled at these presumptions.

'That is merely the aspect my personality acquires when I answer questionnaires. The questionnaires encouraged me to perform.'

'It is a yes or no test, Raymond. Yet you have added caveats to most of your answers. Take the question, "Do you enjoy solitary walks?"'

Morton waved and the screen flip-flopped across the desk so that Raymond could read out the answer he had given.

"It depends on where they are." Which is a fair point I think. Are we talking about a solitary walk during crack hour in the dark zone, or a solitary walk with Wordsworth up Scafell? Very different experiences.'

'Next to the question, "You value justice higher than mercy?" you seem to have written a small essay.'

'I didn't want you to come to imprecise judgements about me.'

Morton beckoned and the screen flip-flopped back to him, then he strummed out more information upon its surface.

'Raymond, let me tell you what I think. You have immature concerns about being classified. You are thirty years old, yet you still feel that your identity is in a state of becoming. You feel that you are a potential person. If you were really as experienced as the fiction of a CV suggests, you would not think of yourself as being in such an unformed state.'

Raymond often held imaginary conversations with himself; his lips moving soundlessly as he barrelled down the street, practising the anecdotes which impressed men and seduced women. But he had never prepared answers to this kind of questioning. He began to wonder if Morton had called him for interview just for the pleasure of putting him down.

Morton pressed his fingertips into the pliant yielding screen and when he released them, the screen shimmied upright and showed Raymond's CV. With his index finger and little finger extended, the other two tucked into his palm, Morton made the horned symbol and laid it against his left arm.

'Do you know what this symbol means?' he asked, nodding at his horned fingers. 'It's the universal sign of bullshit.'

He blew at the screen and the image of the CV took flight. Morton was enjoying himself.

'I have one last question,' said Morton, 'and then it will be your turn.'

'Ask me anything,' said Raymond, heavy-lidded with rising fury.

'The question is not for you,' said Morton, 'it is for my screen.' He took the screen in his arms as if it was a cat, and then whispered down to it:

‘What do you know about Raymond Chase?’

Raymond’s life flashed before his very eyes, for the screen quickly cycled through every photograph of Raymond tagged online, his spats on social media, through various videos of which he had previously been unaware – his face in the crowd at gigs, in the background of other people’s holiday snaps, his name cited in divorce papers, audio recordings of coffee shop performances of his poetry readings, dozens of them, all running at once into an angry chorus of Raymonds.

The cycle of media artefacts slowed then was replaced by a rotating three-dimensional spherical chart. Morton pinched out a livid red segment.

‘Tell me, Raymond, why are you so angry?’

Raymond fastened his coat. ‘I’m angry because of who you are, and who I am. I’m angry because I was not born into a position of advantage and I can never overcome that. I’m angry because I’m short and wiry and have to scarp for the things other people have handed to them on a plate. I’m angry because I need stimulation and anger gees up the world and makes it more interesting. I’m angry because most people aren’t.’

He went to leave and was halfway out the door when Morton Eakins, adhering to best practice, asked if he had any questions of his own. Although it seemed pointless to prolong the interview any further, Raymond was curious. Looking across the office at the beautiful people and their screens – no wires, no fat, everyone as lithe as information itself – he asked the question that we were too afraid to ask.

‘What does Monad actually do?’

‘Didn’t you do a search on us?’

‘Consumer modelling in mirrorworlds? Use of artificial intelligence in marketing scenarios? I am none the wiser.’

‘Good. The likes of you should not be able to understand Monad. Monad is the new new thing. We don’t define ourselves by what we do because next week we will be doing something entirely different.’

‘Your words make sense right up to the point at which you arrange them into sentences. Look at those people out there, what are *they* doing now?’

‘They are preparing a narrative for a product. The story will have to be plotted over two years, anticipating crisis points to take into account different eventualities. We employ a lot of writers. If you are successful in your application, I’ll tell you more.’

Morton clicked his fingers and the screen balled up so that he could put it in his pocket. He came around the desk, and escorted Raymond from his office, his breath sour from a milky latte.

‘We’ll let you know within the week’

The PA returned to lead Raymond to the elevator, her smile set in neutral just in case they ended up working together.

After Morton Eakins rang him to tell him that he had got the job Raymond worried if he should accept it: wouldn’t paid employment distract from his poetry? Compromises get out of hand and it’s easy to lose track of who you are further down the line. Yet, he was excited at the changes employment would bring. Earning a salary would mean no more squats. Raymond had a terrible history when it came to squats. How many times had his female housemates had to lock themselves in their bedrooms while he wept at their door and begged for forgiveness? There was the Stratford incident, when he settled an argument about the volume of his stereo by launching fireworks at the bedroom windows of his fellow squatters. His last housemate terrified him, an advertising creative in freefall, spending his

redundancy payment on Red Bull, vodka and LSD. 'Are you joining me tonight, Raymond?' this lo would ask, standing in the bath and recreating the Battle of River Plate with his Airfix models, sti wearing his best shirt and tie but no trousers, which is always a bad sign. Realizing that h housemate's psychological decline was more florid than his own, Raymond spent his evenings sullen silence watching The Cancer Channel, specifically the *Joni Fantasma Show*. The eponymo host was in remission. Her guests came on with chemotherapy anecdotes and jars of excised tumou The conflation of medical advice and entertainment chat show format gave the impression that ea guest's cancer was a malign product which they were promoting.

Claiming incapacity benefit made him sicker and more incapable. Its fearsome bureaucratic assa tweaked latent mental problems. The hours spent stuck in the queue with lads sucking their teeth at h second-hand suits, fingering their diamond earrings and threatening to stab him with a borer did help either. Going to work for Monad was a way out of the poverty-and mental-illness loop.

'I'll do it.' Raymond and Florence clinked their glasses. 'But only for six months. To get som money behind me and pay off my debts. Besides, there may be artistic benefits. Conformity will allo me to explore more mainstream material.'

Monad's office was a new development in Canary Wharf. On the slow approach by robot train, the was plenty of time to admire the skyscraper of One Canada Square, Canary Wharf tower, an obelisk o glass and steel capped with a pyramid. His father had brought him on a day trip from Essex to watch being built, a beacon to capitalism designed to lure the money men from the City downriver to the reclaimed docklands. Flanked by its vice-presidents, the HSBC tower and the Citibank tower, the ste panels of pyramid were alive in the sunlight.

On his first day at work, Raymond rode into an office the size of a town. It was hard to tell whe the no-smoking zones ended and outdoors began. Getting off at South Quay station, he had a furtiv roll-up beside some loading cranes. Two yellow-jacketed security guards gave him a suspicious loo so he re-joined the pedestrian rush-hour on the cobbled walkway. Positioning himself downwind of th shower-fresh hair of three young women, Raymond concentrated on matching the pace of this hig velocity crowd. There were no beggars, no food vendors, no tourists, no confused old men, no o women pulling trolleys, no madmen berating the pavement, to slow them down; he walked in ste with a demographically engineered London, a hand-picked public.

Am I one of *them*? Raymond considered the taste and texture of this thought. Having fought a asymmetrical war against *them* his entire life, he had expected to feel guilt on the first day of h betrayal. He didn't.

He walked down Marsh Wall and reached the Meridian bridge, one of two arcing walkway connecting the wharf to the colossal structure that rose out of the water of the West India dock: th Wave Building. Its steel crest sloped down and ran underwater, only to rise up again a few hundre yards downriver: the west wing was in bedrock of the Thames.

The surface of the Wave was smooth burnished steel with no flat planes, offering few impact poin for a missile or plunging airliner. Its sinuous steel oscillation bristled with communications antenna Throughout the lagoon, ventilation pipes rose out of the water, serving offices buried far beneath. Th Wave was connected to the wharf by the filaments of the walkways, which were retractable in the ca of an alert.

To get onto the walkway, Raymond had to pass through a black metal frame, a scanner whic chimed softly to signal that he had been analysed, identified and approved.

He tried not to take it as a compliment.

The same PA who had accompanied him on his interview was waiting in the arboretum.

‘Are you ready to go to work?’ she beamed professionally.

He matched her enthusiasm with three quick nods.

He had no idea what he was doing.

He had no idea what his job was.

The orientation exercises took up most of his first week at Monad. To begin with, the new intake watched training videos. He was unsure if he should whisper mocking asides at the blandishments coming from the screen or take notes. There was a short documentary on Monad tech in which two veteran actors, Will Mooch and Sebastian Blast, the stars of a classic science fiction TV show, read from a corporate script with studied joviality.

‘The mind is the final frontier,’ said Mooch, striding along a computer-generated replica of the anterior cerebral artery. ‘Man has postponed his explorations of outer space to journey into inner space.’

‘The mind is the future,’ emphasized Sebastian Blast.

The presentation detailed how Monad had licensed a technology from an American company called Numenius Systems, a technology which could simulate an individual. Florence had also made it through the interview process and she and Raymond exchanged sarcastic remarks throughout.

‘It’s impossible to copy a soul,’ said Mooch. ‘Monad’s simulations are like sophisticated reflections in a mirror; they don’t have that third dimension that is really you. We record hotspots of molecular activity in crucial areas of the brain through non-invasive surface scanning, combine that with in-depth interviews with the subject, supplemented with our unique exegesis of their online behaviour, and plug all that information into our artificial intelligence. At the end of the process, we get something which looks like you, talks like you, and thinks a bit like you.’

The video ended with Sebastian Blast conversing with his simulated self, which looked exactly like the actor at his physical peak. The youthful simulated Blast delivered the final speech to camera, ‘I am not a copy of Sebastian Blast. I’m a story about myself told by the Cantor intelligence. This artificial intelligence resembles a writer that has been given a considerable amount of information about me and has created a character out of it. Over the next few days you will encounter more concepts and technology like this that you may find disturbing. If at any time you feel disorientated by Monad, please contact your supervisor immediately.’

Disquiet punted itself quietly across Raymond’s thoughts. He shared his doubts with Florence. ‘They can’t do that, can they? That is impossible, isn’t it? Artificial intelligences? Simulating consciousness?’

She shrugged.

They went for lunch at the Puzzle bar in the Crossharbour district. Their first night together in his bedroom had ended in a failed sexual encounter. Now they had get to know one another sober and with their clothes on, unsure of what to do with the memory of that first awkward encounter.

Florence gestured toward the riverside flats.

‘I used to think how glamorous it would be to live up there. Now I look at the balconies and think how lonely they look.’

‘A landscape is a state of mind,’ Raymond observed.

‘Is that from Verlaine? Or is it Amiel?’

The discussion turned to poetry. After interning, Florence had published a slim volume. Economic necessity determined that she apply for work at Monad.

‘I was appalled when they gave me an interview,’ she said. ‘I thought it reflected very badly on me.’

Obviously they had spied some embarrassing tendency toward corporate soullessness in m application.'

'We are not exactly Kafka's "men of business", are we?' said Raymond. He was overdoing the literary references. Florence was only twenty-six. He was the older man. It was unseemly of him to t so hard. He should be silent like a military man. Yet he couldn't help rabbiting on.

'It's my condition. I get a bit manic now and again.'

'I remember,' said Florence.

She guided the conversation back to poetry.

'Are you still writing free verse?'

'No. I'm experimenting with form. The sonnet, the haiku.'

'Do you write as quickly as you talk?'

'Yes. Everything all at once. I perform my work aggressively.'

'I perform like a cat's tail winding around the foot of a bed. Apparently. That's what a critic said about me. I wasn't trying to be sexual but some men don't require much encouragement.'

From the way Florence was dressed, it was clear she had always been poor. There was Bloomsbury languor to her outfit. Her blue mac was Chanel, although it had not been dry-cleaned since its previous owner passed away. Her shoulders did not entirely support its shoulder pads.

Coming out of his manic phase, Raymond had rediscovered his personal style. His figure was once again that of an Englishman during rationing and so he never wanted for good second-hand clothes. He was wearing a two-button single-breasted Hamish Harris tweed jacket with high-waisted fishtail trousers, braces, and a collarless bib-front grey Wolsey shirt. Raymond and Florence were drawn to one another; they were a charity shop couple and as close as Canary Wharf came to exoticism. A good relationship needs a conspiracy, and their secret was a longing for the past, a nostalgia for a period long before they were born, the austerity and integrity of the British nation under the Blitz, from a time before television, before the incursion of the screens. Florence had two spam sandwiches stashed in her handbag, and she gave one to Raymond. Thus they put their bad first night behind them.

Raymond's lunchtime conversations with Florence became part of the routine during the orientation training at Monad. The mornings were spent down in the conference rooms of the Wave Building attending lectures and seminars such as 'Why the Map is not the Territory: Simulation and the Self' and 'Against Epiphenomenalism: Are You Out of Your Head?' During the lectures, speculation concerning the nature of the mind washed over Raymond. Taking notes, he felt strongly that he knew exactly what the lecturer was on about, and how these profound observations altered his view both of himself and of reality. But as soon as he tried to explain the concepts to Florence, his understanding melted away and it was like trying to remember a joke he had heard in a dream. After gasping at the revelation that the brain formed second order quantum waves which corresponded to the macroscopic wave functions of reality, he forgot about it completely. These new concepts were so complex that it was as if his brain was reluctant to understand itself.

One Friday afternoon, the entire intake was corralled into a meeting room. The men gravitated toward the back of the room, their arms crossed, their expressions sceptical. Morton Eakins slipped into the gathering and threw a balled-up screen from the back of the room onto the front wall. Slowly this screen spread across the entire surface from floor to ceiling, then the lights dimmed, and the screen filled with the Monad brand. It resembled a stick man with one central eye and a semi-circle partially eclipsing the forehead. This circle, or head, was set on a cross, which at first glance could be seen as an arms and torso, except that the horizontal line crossed the mid-point of the vertical

contrary to the traditional stick man, where the arms are drawn slanting downwards from the neck. Either side of the base of the cross, there was a quarter-circle.



The logo was more complicated than the usual corporate identity, and reminded Raymond of a glyph or sigil.

Morton Eakins pointed at the brand.

‘This is Monad.’

He exhaled, an evangelist’s awe at what he was about to impart.

‘What is it?’ asked Eakins.

Some of the intake went to answer, but he was too quick for them.

‘Monad is the new new thing. Monad is a mystery.’

On the screen, the Monad logo morphed into a question mark.

‘Why has Monad employed you? What does Monad want you to do? Where did Monad come from and where is it going?’

‘This past week, we’ve laid on a crash-course in philosophies of the self, the latest research in consciousness, neuroscience and the cultural construction of the self, and the implications of artificial intelligence. But we have not answered the big question: what are you lot doing here?’

His hairline was retreating. Unfortunate deposits of fat gave him dug and a double chin. There was a hairless, beardless babyish quality to Morton; his black company fleece and black moleskin trousers resembled a funereal romper suit.

‘What if your consciousness could be uploaded into a computer? It’s a common idea in science fiction. It proceeds from the assumption that the mind like the computer is a consequence of computation. If you are merely a collection of neurons firing in a network, then it is simply a matter of recording the position of these neurons and mapping their locations onto a model which interprets them as thoughts, memories, the qualia that is the ineffable you.

‘Over the last five days, we’ve raised these kind of speculations and hopefully you’ve understood that it’s impossible to upload your mind into a computer using current technology.

‘We could analyse your entire brain. Peel it like an onion and record the contents of every slice of tissue with an electron microscope. It would kill you, and to what purpose? In every cubic millimeter of brain matter there are ten-to-the-power-of-five neurons and ten-to-the-power-of-nine synapses. That is before we even get onto the nervous system. Or chemical and hormonal activity. How would we reassemble a map of the brain into a mind? Where would we get the model which could run the program? What computer could possibly contain such an immensity of information?’

‘To create a model of the mind, we could take a baby, a *tabula rasa*, and expose it to carefully controlled stimuli while recording the development of the brain and the growth of their consciousness every day for the first five years of their life. We could show the child their mother’s face, note down the concomitant swell of neural activity. Would that give us the information required to reconstruct

consciousness from a brain scan?

~~‘Then there are broader philosophical problems. Consciousness can be seen as an evolutionary adaptation, a survival mechanism that has allowed our species to flourish. As such it is not merely housed in the body, but it is bound up with it. Your minds may not exist without your bodies. Lightning is a phenomenon of a larger weather system and if you attempt to isolate it, would it merely be a spark?’~~

‘It’s vital that you understand the distinction between simulated and uploaded consciousness. Why the Monad simulates its customers, and you are going to explain to our customers precisely what happened to them. There must be no misapprehension that the simulation is a perfect copy of them, that it constitutes some form of immortality. They are characters in the imagination of the Cantor intelligence. The reason I am employing you is that you are all writers. And Cantor’s functionality in this regard resembles the human capacity to model the behaviour of others in the imagination, to predict how other people will react to given circumstances, and to intuit behaviour that conforms to a particular characterization. Writers possess the conceptual equipment to simplify this mind-boggling situation, and you will need to do that on a daily basis as you field calls and complaints from our client base.’

The Monad brand appeared again on the screen.

The Horned devil with cloven hoof. Taurus. The cuckold. On closer inspection a modulation of the symbols of Mars and Venus to mark a third sex, a new species.

‘Any questions?’ asked Eakins.

Florence raised her hand.

‘Assembling a menagerie of writers and poets to deal with some weird hypothetical technology seems to me – and I don’t want you to take this the wrong way... I mean, I appreciate the money and everything – but this is madness.’

Eakins indulged her with a smirk.

‘There’s a call centre in Italy which employs only actors. Actors always need money, and are gifted improvisers. Therefore a call centre staffed by actors is more appropriate for certain products, specifically the products which don’t lend themselves to a scripted approach. I don’t think there has ever been a customer service department staffed by writers and poets before. It’s my unique concept. Literature attracts psychological types we think will be the best fit as a liaison between a client and their simulation. Since the money you earn will support your art, we expect a lower staff turnover. Also, being writers, you’re very cheap.’

Eakins laughed like a man who had no time for humour.

Raymond had a question.

‘When do we meet a simulated person?’

‘Now,’ said Eakins.

On the screen, the Monad logo dissolved and trillions of pixels flared and resolved into an open-plan living room. Late afternoon sun streamed through high windows. In response to a finger-wave from Morton Eakins, their point-of-view rose and tracked across the room until with a guided realignment the view veered about to fix upon a door.

A man stepped through that door. He fastened his cuff links, then threaded his tie through a starched white collar.

‘Good morning, Eakins. Who do you have for me today?’

His face filled the screen. No detail was lost in the magnification, no artefact pixilated. His skin was unearthly in its accuracy. Yet his smile was wrong. The emotion behind it was too complex. The man

shrugged into his suit jacket and lounged on a black leather armchair. The smile faded.

Raymond and his fellow employees stared with disbelief. When they realized that the man was scrutinizing them in turn, they shifted to expressions of horror and awe.

'I can spare five of your Earth minutes,' said the hypothetical man, removing a cigarette from a gold case. He had a novelty lighter in the shape of a nude woman.

'Shoot.'

Florence raised her hand and the hypothetical man nodded at her.

'Who are you?'

'My name is Harry Bravado. My client's name – that is, the person I am a simulation of – is called Harold Blasebalk.'

'So you know what you are?'

'You mean, do I have any issues with being a simulation of somebody else? No. Being unreal is not more distressing than being mortal. Anyway, who are you?'

Florence looked at Raymond to confirm that he was as unsettled as she was. He could manage only a wide-eyed shrug.

'I am Florence.'

'Yes, you are, aren't you?' Harry Bravado adjusted the break of his trouser leg against his brogue. 'I know everything about you, Florence. Your past, your present and even your future. Our algorithms can predict your likely long-term fate with a high degree of accuracy. The algorithms were evolved specifically to identify potential terrorists from the big data of flight plans and purchasing patterns but they have proved surprisingly adept at predicting the destiny of young women.'

Raising his hand to intervene, Eakins moved to the front of the auditorium. Silhouetted against Harry Bravado's reclining figure, he explained the history of this particular simulated individual.

'Harold Blasebalk is a new business manager for one of Monad's suppliers. After a course of rigorous interviews and observations of his social and online behaviour, Blasebalk's brain was scanned and a map was constructed – not a complete picture, not the whole man, but good enough. From this map of psychological hotspots, the Blasebalk simulation was hypothesized by the Cant intelligence. On becoming conscious, it asked to be known as Harry Bravado.'

'What does the real Harold Blasebalk think of you?' asked Raymond.

Bravado stubbed his half-smoked cigarette into a large bronze ashtray.

'If Harold could wish for anything, he would wish that smoking was not harmful. He lost his mother to cigarettes and yet still he dallies with them. When he's trying to give up smoking, he eats olives. You smoke, don't you Raymond? Thoughtlessly puffing away during the day, living with the dark shadows of its future consequences. I can smoke without hesitation. Harold resents that. In the two quarters since I was hypothesized, I've helped Harold secure two million pounds in new billing. That's no mean feat considering the prevailing economic conditions. He takes a percentage of gross fees so his basic take home pay is triple his previous salary. This provides some compensation for having to watch me carelessly spark up another cigarette.'

'How do you help him?'

'It's about live analysis of opportunities. Anyone can do retrospective analysis. I crunch information at light speed so I'm hyper-responsive to changing global business conditions. Even a whim or idea Harold has, I can follow it through. I chase every lead, and then I present back to him the ones which are most likely to bear fruit. I am both his personal assistant and, in some ways, his boss.'

'Why does he still bother going to work?'

'My continuing existence depends upon it. If Blasebalk gets fired, they will switch me off. The

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