

BRIAN STAPLEFORD - Busy Dying

HE COULDN'T REMEMBER whether he'd ever been to that particular spot before, but the open plaza looked vaguely familiar. As he climbed the ugly centerpiece of the fountain, aiming for the pagoda-like roof above the bug-eyed gargoyles, he seemed to be reaching for familiar footholds. They were already shouting his name, but that didn't mean a thing; he supposed that he'd be recognized in any of a hundred cities, in any of four hundred malls. He was quite a celebrity.

By the time he reached his selected coign of vantage a thousand people were converging on the fountain. The design of the atrium was such that the crowds on the second, third, and fourth floors had as good a view as the people at ground level, and the escalators were crammed with excited gesticulators hoping that the moving stairways wouldn't carry them too far before the show began.

He checked his watch. Give it ten, he thought, beginning to count down.

He knew there were a dozen security cameras on him and that anyone in the crowd with a camcorder would be pointing it at him already, but the CNI were probably all ready to go with an injunction against any mall in this or any other city, and you couldn't trust amateurs to produce A-1 footage even with today's technological aids. He figured that ten seconds ought to be enough to bring down a few newsdrones. Even the networks posted drones in malls these days, and not just because of him. Malls were the commercial arteries of the nation, and mallnews was always a big item in the human interest slots.

At five he uncapped the can, and threw the cap into the crowd so that the kids could fight over it. At seven he began to pour, so that he would be ready to drop the can into the rippled pool of the fountain at nine.

Smoothly, with practiced competence, he struck the match with his fingernail. Is that slick, or is that slick, he asked himself. He had always cared about matters of style.

His sneakers were still squelching and the legs of his pants were soaked from his dash across the pool, but he knew it wouldn't matter. The rest of him was soaked with something infinitely less inclined to dampen the spirits.

The flames came up about him with an audible whoosh, and black smoke billowed forth. For a second or two -- but it might have been an olfactory illusion -- he thought that he could smell his own flesh burning.

Wow, he thought.

Wow! Wow! Wow!

When her bleeper went off Margaret Percik woke up with a sudden start, surprised and slightly guilty about the fact that she'd nodded off.

She didn't need to check her wristphone; it was Emily signaling that Walter Murray was recovering consciousness. She hurried, intent on arriving before he removed the skinskin sealing his eyelids, but she needn't have bothered. The monitoring devices had blown the whistle on him but Walter was playing possum. He hadn't moved a muscle; he was probably playing for time while he tried to figure out who and what and where he was. Thanks to him, doctors now knew that death usually caused temporary amnesia, and he had had enough practice dying to have developed habitual methods of dealing with the condition.

As she checked the instruments she felt sure that he was tracking her movements with avid ears. He flinched, though, when Emily checked his waste-disposal tubes. She carefully peeled the skinskin away from his eyes, and he opened them, blinking against the light. He had to close the lids again for a second or two,

but when he could keep them open they focused readily enough on her face: no lasting damage there.

He looked up at her without recognition. Emily moved to the head of the bed so that he could study them both. She and Emily were as handsome as one another but not in the least alike, in spite of the fact that they were wearing severely clinical white coats. Margaret was dark and stem and so comprehensively imaged for authority that she was almost austere; Emily was fairer and softer and decorated. Nobody was supposed to be able to tell a woman's age anymore, but that was bullshit. Wrinkles or no wrinkles, Margaret knew, it was obvious to anyone with half an eye that Emily was an absolutely authentic twenty-one, whereas she herself was fifty-five and then some.

Margaret darted a quick glance at Emily, to make sure that she was paying attention. It was important, according to their agreed procedure, that they both looked at him without the slightest trace of sympathy or admiration.

"Can you remember who you are?" Margaret asked.

There was a twenty second gap before he replied. Finally, he said, "I seem to have temporarily misplaced my name. I'm sorry."

"You were very lucky, Mr. Murray," she said. "If you hadn't fallen into the fountain. . . ."

That drew a slight reaction -- as if the horror of it had hit him like a punch in the gut, although he couldn't quite fathom out why the thought was so horrible.

"What fountain?" he said, in a puzzled fashion. "Murray, you say? Is that my name -- Murray?"

"You shouldn't play with fire, Mr. Murray," said Margaret, as sternly as she could. "It isn't like the knives and the ropes. We can regenerate burned brain-tissue, but not the field-states which inhabited it before it was burned. Try this one again, Mr: Murray, and you might come back first cousin to a cabbage. I guess you already qualify as a zombie ten times over, but this time you were just a few seconds away from being a hundred-forty pounds of fresh meat with vacant possession. As I said, if you hadn't fallen into the fountain. . . ."

"Do I know you?" he asked.

She did her level best to look at him as though he were some kind of insect crawling around the drawer where she kept her underwear.

"Yes, Mr. Murray," she said sourly. "You know me. And you also know Mr. Stepanova. He's waiting for a call to tell him that you're awake. He has some news for you."

She picked up a remote from the instrument-console beside the bed and punched out a sequence; the wallscreen at the far end of the room flickered blue, displayed the relevant codes, and then dissolved into a picture.

Stepanova had been waiting to make the call; Emily had bleeped him at the same time she'd bleeped Margaret. He was looking straight into the camera, as purposefully as any man could. He'd been chiseled for it, but it wasn't an overly impressive job. Every man of a certain age went in for that kind of power-dressing of the features, and it rather nullified the effect.

"You're busted, Murray," said Stepanova, with a bitter wrath he did not need to feign. "This is the end. We've got an injunction from the Supreme Court banning you from making any further use whatsoever of any product manufactured by the

Confederation which is not on open sale. I have a court order requiring you to hand over all the nanotech equipment which you removed from our laboratories. Your lawyers may have built an effective dam against the possibility of your being certified insane and straitjacketed, but this is nice and simple and utterly unbreakable --and to be quite honest, I think your guys are losing heart now that your bank account is in the doldrums. One more suicide and you are under house arrest for ever and ever a-men. You're out of it, Murray --understand? It's over."

"I'm sure you mean well," said Murray, mildly. "But I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. Do I know you?"

Stepanova frowned, as if he suspected that he was being ribbed and didn't like it -- although Margaret had told him exactly what to expect. She keyed the cut-off on the remote, lest Stepanova should start a pointless argument with her patient. Then she handed over the instrument to Murray. He looked at it for a second or two, but then nodded, as though he were glad to find it perfectly familiar. He handed it back. "That I recognize," he said.

"But not me?" she countered.

He shook his head. "I'm Dr. Percik," she said, still straining to be as stem and cold as possible. The theory was that she had to avoid providing any comfort that might be construed as approval, and thus as encouragement to repeat the behavior that had brought him to this; apparently it was still standard practice in welcoming attempted suicide victims back from the brink. Personally, she had no faith whatsoever in its efficacy in Walter Murray's case, but she was under some pressure here from her peers and other interested parties, who were far more interested in making him stop than in figuring out why he kept doing it.

"How am I, doctor?" he asked, flatly.

"As well as can be expected," she retorted, bluntly. After a slight pause, during which she nodded an answer to Emily's unspoken question, giving the nurse permission to leave the room, she added: "Stepanova means it, you know. By the time I've collected my fees you'll be as near to flat broke as you can get. The media won't bail you out this time; CNI have them all tied up in red tape. No one wants to talk to you -- no one who'll pay you for the privilege, anyhow. Your lawyers aren't even going to try to fight CNI's injunctions. You've finally succeeded in cutting off your nose to spite your face. You may be famous, but you've no job, and if you do anything -- I mean anything -- which involves the use of prototype nanotech you'll be off the net for a long long time. Have a little patience, Walter, and you may be able to live happily ever after. Kill yourself one more time, and they'll see to it that you die of old age. I have no axe to grind, you understand -- I'm out of it too. That's the last face you'll ever get from me. From now on, you get your medicaid on credit. Basic treatment, for which you have to stand in line."

"You have a great bedside manner," he remarked. It was impossible to judge how disoriented he was, and how much he understood of what was being said to him. The idea was to get the message across before he recovered his memory and his resistance.

"It's difficult to be polite to a king-sized pain in the ass," she told him. She narrowed her eyes speculatively, and she said: "If you have got more stolen nanotech squirreled away, you'd better hand it over. However you came by it originally, it's no longer legal for you to have it in your possession. Just tell me where you stashed it, and I'll take it from there."

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Everyone's closed ranks, Walter," she said. "We're not going to let you die

again. We're not going to let you destroy yourself. This time, you really have to get your head together, okay?"

He just looked at her, meekly, as if he couldn't understand why she was talking to him that way. She couldn't tell whether, or to what extent, he was putting it on. Perhaps, she thought, it might be best if his memory didn't come oozing back; maybe all he needed was a fresh start. She felt slightly ashamed of the thought which came immediately afterward, which was: But then we'd never figure out just what the fascination was. Damn Stepanova and his injunctions -- there's a mystery here which we ought to be trying to solve.

She tried to look daggers at him one more time, just for luck, and then stalked out of the room.

WHEN THE bleeper sounded again she woke up without a start, filled with a dull sense that there was no escape. This time it was the automatic signal which told her that Murray had activated the telescreen in his room. She had arranged a tap, in the interests of scrupulous medical care.

The face which was staring out of her own telescreen inevitably seemed to be looking her in the face, although it wasn't. It wasn't even looking Walter Murray in the face: it couldn't, because it was a recording, doubtless programmed to call him in the early hours of the morning, when no one was supposed to be eavesdropping.

"Hello, Walter," said the caller -- who wore, of course, Walter's previous face.

"Who the hell are you?" the real Walter replied, his voice slightly distorted by the bug she had placed to catch it.

"I'm your answerphone AI," replied the caller. "Extensively elaborated and reprogrammed by your good self, for exactly such emergencies as this. Don't worry -- you just have a slight touch of amnesia. At least, I hope it's slight. It'll probably all come back to you in a day or two, but I'll give you all the help I can. That's what I'm here for. Mostly I'm just a playback device, but I'm rigged for simple questions and answers. Interrupt me whenever you need to. Your name is Walter K Murray; the K doesn't stand for anything longer, it's a one-letter middle name in its own right. You used to work for CNI -- that's the Confederation of Nanotechnological Industries -- on the Safety Commission. Your official title was Volunteer Subject, but in everyday parlance you were a guinea-pig or a stunt man. You got fired a year ago for excessive attention to duty -- at least, that's your version. Stepanova cooked up a charge sheet which had everything from petty pilfering to reckless endangerment and bringing the good name of the organization into disrepute, but it was mostly false. Are you with me so far?"

"Not quite," said the real Walter, awkwardly. Margaret wished she could see his face, to judge how he was taking it in, but it hadn't seemed worthwhile to plant a spy-eye in a darkened room. The image on the screen flickered slightly as a new subroutine engaged.

"It's okay," said the AI, gently. "Take your time. I guess you really messed up the old brain cells this time. What did you do?"

"I don't know, exactly," he said. "Something about playing with fire and falling into a fountain. My doctor isn't very helpful." He sounded sincere, but Margaret knew that it might be an act.

"You should watch the news," said the AI. "All you need to do is call up the relevant vidclippings. All your suicides are on tape."

"All my suicides? How many are there -- and why aren't I dead?"

"You've killed yourself ten times to date," reported the AI, dutifully.

"Why would I do that?" said Walter, who should have known better than to confuse an AI with a new question while one still remained unanswered. Anyway, AIs were a lot better with whats and wheres and whens than they were with whys -- all he was going to get was more data, not expert psychoanalysis.

"Your duties as a volunteer subject," said the AI, painstakingly, "involved prototype medical nanotechnologies whose purpose is to enhance the body's powers of self-repair. Their function is to assist in the rebuilding of damaged tissue, to promote the healing of wounds and the regeneration of lost material. To put it simply, your job was to sustain injuries of gradually increasing degrees of seriousness, so as to explore the capacities and the limits of the nanomachines that had been injected into your bloodstream. These included anesthetic enems as well as the repair enems. You were good at your work. You liked it better than most -- maybe better than anyone. You were part of an elite group, working with the most advanced prototypes.

"When you first began to exceed your brief the guys in charge were enthusiastic -- they encouraged you. The back room boys were quite delighted with you, and probably still are. The company men were avid to go with the flow, and the CNI let them; they didn't see any harm in the media attention you got. The first time you came back after being certified dead the euphoria was universal. The CNI brass were as interested as everyone else. It wasn't until the fifth that Stepanova stepped in, talking about turning the CNI into some kind of circus. He was too late, but he's certainly tried to make up for lost time. Do you need more detail on all of this? I've got two more programmed levels, if you do."

"No," said the man in the bed, faintly. "I think it's coming back now, a little. Testing the limits. That's what it was all about. Testing the limits. Exploring the unknown. Boldly to go where no man. . . They're trying to stop me, aren't they? They want to stop me."

"Yes they do," answered the AI. "They're trying to stop you, now. But it's okay. You've always been one step ahead of them. Don't worry about a thing. They'll have to send you home in a day or so. Once you're back home, we can sort everything out. Just hang in there, and take it easy. That's all you have to do. Do you want more information?"

There was a long silence before Walter said: "No. Not now. Thanks . . . I mean . . . yeah, that's all. Sign off, okay?"

"We'll talk again," promised the AI. "Come home as soon as you can."

The image cut off abruptly.

Margaret pursed her lips as she lay back on the pillow. The AI was tight; she had to send Walter Murray home once he was okay physically. Amnesiac or not, he was perfectly lucid. There was no way she could have him put under restraint, as Stepanova had more than once asked her to do, even if she wanted to -- and she didn't. That wouldn't be a solution, to Walter's problem or to hers.

She sighed, and lay down in the darkness once again. What is it about dying, she asked herself, although the unanswered question had long ago gone stale, that keeps beckoning him? Why is it that every time he gets his memory back he also recovers all his determination, all his cunning, and all his secretiveness! Just what the hell is going on inside that strangely twisted mind -- and what does it augur for the future, when the products he's been testing come marching triumphantly into the marketplace!

She wondered if similar questions were going through Walter's still-confused mind -- and whether he was finding it as difficult to slip away into sleep as

she was.

Margaret let Walter Murray have a whole day to himself before she went to see him again. She didn't monitor him continuously, but the tap she'd placed in his house-system gave her a summary of everything he'd been doing, and it had all been recorded in case she needed to take a closer look. It was nearly nine in the evening when she showed up at the house.

"Well, Walter?" she said, when she'd checked his physical condition. "What do you think of your past life?"

"What do you mean?" he parried, warily.

"I mean that you're obviously still stragglng with the amnesia. One hour watching your vidclippings might be nostalgia, two might be narcissism, but six is definitely honest enquiry. You're trying to figure out just what kind of a specimen you are, aren't you? You can tell me -- I'm your doctor, remember."

"You didn't seem that interested yesterday."

"That was tactical," she said. "Refusal to pander to attention-seeking lest the behavior pattern gets reinforced. Not that I think your behavior is mere attention-seeking, you understand, but there is a school of thought which inclines that way."

"Are you allowed to keep me under observation now I'm at home?" he asked, ducking the issue. "Among the memories of general matters that I haven't lost I seem to recall something about invasion of privacy legislation."

"I'm your doctor, Walter, and you've certainly been ill. Dead and back again, for the tenth time. I'm allowed to monitor you for your own good."

"Are you also allowed to block my phone so that I can't call out? Are you allowed to see to it that I can't even get through the door of my own apartment?" She wondered whether it was a good sign that he was letting out his accumulated resentment so easily.

"Yes I am," she told him. "While you're not fully recovered, I'm entitled to protect you from nuisance."

"Well, I'm fully recovered now. My arms are a little weak and my fingers need practice, but I'm fundamentally sound. You can lift the house arrest. In fact, I insist that you do."

"Tomorrow, Walter -- maybe the next day. You have amnesia, remember? It wouldn't be right, professionally speaking, to let you loose without addressing your problem."

"I've addressed it. I'm Walter K Murray, known to the tabloid TV vidveg as 'Memento' Murray, though ninety-nine percent of them are too dumb to get the joke. I can recite my entire personal history. No problem. Anyway, I thought you were worried about getting paid. I don't know what you charge per hour, but I'm not sure I can afford house calls."

"You can't afford to be without proper treatment," she told him. "If you want to stop wasting time, why not cut out the hostility and start treating me like the friend I am? I'm your doctor, Walter -- I really and truly want you to get well."

She still wasn't speaking softly, but the edge was gone from her voice. She was brisk and frank and she kept eye-contact the whole time. Trust me, her eyes were saying. Confide in me. Just give me a little help, and we can both reach a better understanding.

When he didn't say anything else, she said: "Did you find out?"

"Find out what?" he countered, warily.

"Why you keep killing yourself. Everyone would like to know--and not just because we want you to stop. We really would like to be able to understand."

"I was rather hoping that you could explain that to me," he replied, with just a hint of an implied sneer. "You're the doctor, aren't you?"

"The problem with ready-made psychiatric explanations," said Margaret, undismayed, "is that even those who seek counseling -- volunteer subjects, I suppose you might call them -- very often resist them. It's always better to guide a patient to the point of view from which he can see for himself what his problem is. Recognition is the first step in recovery."

"Try me anyway," he said.

"Volunteer subjects are screened as carefully as the CNI can," she said, blandly. "They don't want people who have a predilection for injuring themselves, or surgery addicts. They want people for whom it can be an ordinary job -- sensible, stable people. Occasionally, though, someone a trifle . . . exceptional . . . slips through the net. Someone who likes the work a little too much. In the beginning, no doubt, you represented yourself to yourself as an authentic explorer, impatient with the controls the scientists placed on the experiments. You thought that you were just hungry for knowledge, for understanding. After the first time, though, it very quickly turned into a quest for fame. You'd always resented your own ordinariness, and at last you'd found a way to be extraordinary -- a way to make other people take notice of you, even to admire you. You crossed the line the first time you came out of the laboratory and into a mall. When you did that, you blew all your excuses out of the window. From then on, it was showmanship. You've kept on killing yourself because you've convinced yourself that it's the only way available to you to make people see you and take notice of you.

"It's not fame per se that you want, although you probably told yourself that when you got that agent to try to fix you up with a fat contract with one of the networks. Yours is a pettier kind of exhibitionism than that. It's far from unique, you know -- there's a long history of case studies of public self-mutilation. It's just that nowadays, when medical nanotech can fix almost any superficial injury up to and including self-castration, it's far more difficult to seem to be flirting with death. You're the man who proved that you actually have to go there and back to make a public impact. Fortunately, that impact is on the wane. The religious fraternity and the parapsych fringe lost interest when you couldn't bring back any hard information about the other side, and you must have noticed that the news coverage is getting briefer and more sarcastically dismissive. They're just keeping count now, Walter. The whole business has gone stale, and you can't enliven it just by playing with fire."

It all sounds good, she thought, when she'd finished, but is it true! Come on, Walter -- just give me a clue.

"You can't tell me I'm insignificant," he said, defensively. "What about that organization out in California -- the Thanaticists. They seem to be building quite a little pressure group. LICENSE RESURRECTION NOW. WE DEMAND UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO RECREATIONAL DEATH. GOD BLESS SAINT WALTER THE MARTYR. Some banners."

"They're clowns, Walter. You know what California's like -- you still have your general memories, don't you?"

"You're trying to trivialize it," he said, suspiciously. "This is tactical, just like the other stuff. You're trying to belittle what I've done -- but I'm not

just a trafficker in slit wrists and overdoses, am I? I'm not playing with death. I've been all the way, again and again and again. And whatever the religious people say, I have brought back news. They just want to discount it because it isn't the news they wanted. I don't remember it just now, but I trust myself enough to believe what I told all those newsmen." He didn't sound entirely certain.

"I believe that too," Margaret assured him. "There's no Heaven, no miraculous light, no choirs of angels, no judgment. There's nothing. Death is death; when the light of consciousness goes out, the darkness is absolute. Death is a void -- a black hole. We always knew that; we didn't need you to tell us. So why on earth do you keep going back? What's the attraction?"

He was confused; she felt sure of it. He was in a peculiar state of mind, wishing to defend himself but not quite knowing how. So far, most of what he knew about his exploits was information that he'd picked up from the vidclippings. There was a possibility that he was amenable to argument, vulnerable to persuasion -- maybe more so than he'd ever been before.

"You say we always knew it," he countered, uneasily. "But is that really true? Maybe we did always know, deep down -- but how many of us dared to believe it? How many of us dared to confront that knowledge, while we still had feeble hopes to cling to? Did you see me on that talk show with the cardinal and the imam? They didn't know it -- but didn't I show them? Didn't I put a spoke in their wheel?"

"They weren't impressed, Walter," she told him, calmly. "You must have seen that. They have a dozen ways around your supposed proof, and they aren't in the least inconvenienced by your claims. They can always reason along the lines that you're just an infidel anyway, or that God knew that you were coming back here and had no reason to roll out the red carpet and give you a glimpse of Heaven. Then again, some people's idea of Hell is eternal darkness, and if ever there was a man bound for Hell, it's surely you. Suicide is a sin, Walter, and you're the most successful recidivist suicide in the history of the world. Maybe you missed your best chance, Walter. You could have made up a story -- a new vision. You could have founded your own little cult based in your own revelation. It wouldn't have attracted quite as many members as the Thanaticists, but you could probably have managed a dozen disciples."

He pursed his lips in frustration. "I'll remember, you know," he said. "It'll come back to me."

Margaret sighed. "You may be right," she said. "But it might be better for you if you were wrong. You might be saner at this particular moment in time than you've been for much of the last three years. Let me warn you again, Walter -- you really have reached the limit of everyone's tolerance. I want you to get well, and even Mr. Stepanova would like nothing better than to see you restored to sense and sanity. You could still do a lot of good by repenting, and maybe get more media attention out of that than you could possibly get out of one more fountain-climb in one more randomly chosen mall. Think about it, Walter -- and if you happen to remember where you stashed the rest of that stuff you ripped off from the labs, turn it in. Please."

He shrugged his shoulders, but she had no way of knowing what he really felt. "Sorry," he said, dully. "I guess I'm a little off-balance. Thanks, Doctor -- it really does help."

"I hope so," she said. "I'll unfreeze your door and your phone tomorrow, okay? But take it slowly. Whatever does or doesn't come back, take your time about everything. There really is all the time in the world; according to the CNI, we're on the threshold of immortality. It's yours and mine for the taking if only we can wait a few more years. This is no time to be trying to kill

yourself. Next time, you might not be able to get back."

He thanked her again -- but when she got back to the hospital the tap revealed that he'd gone straight back to the AI, plumbing its depths for the most intimate subroutines he'd planted during his previous incarnations.

"YOU HAVE to look at it this way," said the image of Walter's last face but one, delivering a pre-recorded speech which wasn't jiggered for interruption. "What we call 'life' is really death. I mean, we begin to die before we're even born. The single cell from which we grow begins to age before it begins to divide, and it's dying all the time while it's growing, changing, developing. Birth isn't the beginning -- in terms of the total numbers of cell-divisions which are needed to make us what we finally become, nine-tenths of our lives are spent in the womb. An adult is just a baby grown large, a corpse waiting to keel over. Death isn't what people think it is, and insofar as it's a sham it has to be revealed as a sham -- or what the hell is intellectual progress all about?"

Pompous idiot, thought Margaret, as she played back what the tape had recorded.

"The true significance of what you and I have accomplished, Walter," the AI went on, "is to demonstrate how arbitrary that line is which doctors have drawn between life and death. It was always a myth. The body doesn't die all at once, nor does the brain. All kinds of functions carry on after the stopping of the heart, the scrambling of the brain-waves. We can come back from what used to be thought of as 'beyond' --but all that proves is that it wasn't really beyond at all. And what we come back to isn't life . . . it's just a different phase of our long, desperate dying.

"What you and I are all about is challenging people's taken-for-granted ideas. The point of it all is to break down the categories of their habitual patterns of thought, to free them from their simplistic either/or calculus of life and death, being and nothingness. That's why we have to keep going, in spite of all they're determined to do to make us stop."

Us, thought Margaret, wondering how significant the choice of pronoun might be. What kind of man leaves messages for himself which talk about us? Is this really for real, or is it just some kind of joke, planted for my benefit, to make fun of me?

On the other hand, she wondered, might us be entirely appropriate? Could the new Walter feel any real mental kinship with the answerphone AI or the earlier incarnation of himself who had programmed it so carefully to relay this rubbish? Maybe it seemed as weird and way out to him as it was to her.

She was interrupted in her monitoring by a call from Stepanova.

"You let him out," he said, accusingly.

"I had to," she told him, slightly awkwardly. "I'm a doctor; my responsibility is to my patient. I can't infringe his civil rights."

"Never mind his civil rights," he said. "You're his doctor -- you're supposed to stop the stupid idiot killing himself again. Did you find the stuff? Will he hand it over?"

"I recommended to Mr. Murray that if he had any more CNI materials he should hand them over to me or to you," she said, patiently. "I don't have any authority to search his apartment."

"Nor do I, in theory," said Stepanova, "but I can assure you that the stuff isn't there, unless he's found some hidey-hole that even the best searchers can't locate."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Mr. Stepanova," Margaret said, wearily. Stepanova, she decided, was an even bigger pain in the ass than Murray himself. At least Murray was interesting. Stepanova was just gross.

"Don't be so fucking precious," said the CNI man. "Did you explain to him that next time there'll be no way back -- that he can't afford to pay you, and that his medical insurance is worthless? Did you tell him that he'd just be allowed to die?"

"No I didn't, Mr. Stepanova," she said. "I'm not in the business of making crude threats. I want to help him overcome his problem just as much as you do, but I don't think blackmail and bullying would really count as a solution, even if they worked."

"Bullshit," said Stepanova. "Whatever works works, and that's all a solution is. If you don't tell him, I will. One more public performance and he is dead. Really dead, forever and ever. I will personally see to it. It's over. He has to understand that. And he has to give the stuff back; that's not up for negotiation."

"At present, he doesn't seem to understand anything very well," said Margaret. "I don't think he knows where the enems are hidden. It might well be best if he stayed that way. If you start pressuring him, you'll probably make things worse. Threats might only serve to rebuild and reinforce his motivation."

"You don't have the first idea what his motivation is," said Stepanova scornfully, the insult hurting her all the more by virtue of its truth. "You haven't even got close -- and now your time is running out along with his. Personally, I don't care what his motives are; I just want to provide him with a bigger and better motive for staying out of view. We have our own ad campaigns for the new-generation enems all planned, and they don't involve malls, fountains, or human torches. We don't need rumors to the effect that enems which are actually a great boon to medical science have mentally unbalancing side effects. We certainly don't need the kind of delays we'd get if some boneheaded congressman from the backwoods manages to push through a demand for an investigation by congressional committee. I need to be able to tell my people in Washington that it's all over, and I want you to do everything you can to make certain that they won't be disappointed. So tell him to hand over the stuff."

She didn't like the implied threat. "Walter Murray is my patient," she said, flatly. "My only responsibility is to him."

"Your responsibility," said Stepanova, grimly, "is to make sure that he stays healthy. That's all I'm asking you to do. Just make certain that it's over. It's as simple as that."

But it isn't as simple as that, she thought, when she'd signed off. It really isn't.

Once she'd unblocked Walter Murray's systems and set him at liberty the information relayed by her taps became markedly less informative. The AI answerphone had to return to such routine tasks as clocking up various items of junk mail and messages expressing support and solidarity, plus numerous offers of ready cash for any bootleg enems Walter might still have access to. Walter also took delivery of two imaginatively couched death-threats and file copies of seven different injunctions taken out by CNI against him and miscellaneous others, and made a few calls himself--none of them in reply to those he had received. He registered available for employment, checked the state of his asset accounts and his uncollected liabilities, and then filed for bankruptcy.

Margaret could only wonder whether he'd remembered where he'd stashed his illicitly acquired enems -- and whether he might be tempted by the black market

prices they might command. If he were prepared to sell them -- or even to try to sell them -- that would presumably mark an end to his great adventure.

But he didn't try to sell them. And in spite of Stepanova's continued demands he didn't give them back to their rightful owners. He spent the second and third days of his freedom being intensively interrogated by the police about the stolen enems, without benefit of counsel -- as Stepanova had gleefully prophesied, his lawyers were no longer very interested in him now that he was no longer solvent -- but he just kept insisting that he didn't know where they were, or even whether they existed.

It wasn't until the fourth day that he went outdoors for the first time, but once he got back into the habit it became more difficult for her to track his progress. She didn't doubt that he would be followed everywhere by Stepanova's agents, but she couldn't bring herself to ask Stepanova where he went and what he did.

If Walter's memory was coming back he was careful not to show the slightest sign of it. Not that such signs would have been easily evident; after all, he knew enough about himself by courtesy of secondary sources to be able to function efficiently in a world whose general features he had never forgotten. He seemed to be making a fresh start -- but he had seemed to do that before, and it had all been illusion.

After a full week had gone by, though, Walter called Stepanova and asked how he might make amends for his former derelictions of duty. He volunteered to do anything that Stepanova wanted him to do by way of formal public recantation -- and when Stepanova proved more than willing to take him up on the offer he followed through, and spent the next two days confessing his sins to a series of press conferences. He'd never done that before -- but he'd never been bankrupt before, either.

Ironically, it transpired -- as Margaret had suggested -- that there was money in repentance. He was able to sell a few network interviews, and became solvent again. He began hunting through his files and interrogating his answerphone AI, as if trying to find out whether he really did have any enema still tucked away, and -- if so -- where they might be. Given that he must have known that he was under surveillance by several different agencies, Margaret wasn't surprised that the answerphone AI couldn't or wouldn't impart this information.

She didn't see him again until it was time for a routine checkup, and she had little alternative but to play along with him, whether it was all deceit or not.

"Have you remembered why you did it ?" she asked him, conversationally, when she'd checked that he was fully fit in a physical sense.

"I can remember setting myself on fire," he told her. "But it's hazy -as if I were just an observer, watching it happening to someone else. I can only remember the outside of the event, not the inside. I can't remember what I felt."

"Pity," she said. "You can't be sure, then, that your public promise to be a reformed character will stick?"

"I don't see why not," he said. "I'm perfectly sincere. Even if I do remember the reason, I can still keep the promise. I've listened carefully to all my old interviews -- I know how ridiculous much of what I said then really is. I wonder, doctor, whether I might actually have cured myself with the fire -- whether I might have burned away the sickness which was making me do it. Maybe that's what I was subconsciously trying to do all along. Is that possible, do you think?"

What she thought was bullshit! but she had no intention of letting him know that.

"We can always hope," she said.

"What do you think made me do it, doctor?" he said, appealing to her with wide and innocent eyes. "Was I somehow addicted, do you think? Or was there something about the act of self-murder, the sensation of dying, which gave me a perverse thrill?"

"I don't know," she said. "If you knew before, you were careful to keep it a deep, dark secret."

"Not this time," he assured her. "If I remember, I'll tell you everything. Everything I can."

"What about Stepanova's enems?" she asked. "Will you give those back, if and when you remember where they are?"

He seemed genuinely perplexed. "Mr. Stepanova keeps on at me about them," he admitted. "He's really rather angry about them--and I'm not sure that he believes me when I tell him that I really have no idea where they might be."

Margaret wished that she knew whether or not to believe him, annoyed with herself for her inability to be sure. Oh, Walter, she thought. What on earth did I do to deserve you!

Later, at the hospital, Emily asked how Walter was getting along. Margaret gave her a full and frank account of the state of play, not knowing or caring whether it would get back to Stepanova.

"Do you believe him?" Emily asked, as she was bound to do.

"I want to," said Margaret, honestly. "If he is a different man, I can't claim any credit for it -- but if he isn't, I dare say that some of the blame will attach itself to me. I just have to hope that he'll be okay this time -- and that one day, he and I will be in a position to work out what the hell it was all about."

"You might be able to have him put under permanent restraint," she said. "For his own good, of course. That way, you'd avoid the possibility that he's just stringing you along."

"This isn't the twentieth century," Margaret pointed out. "Arguing the case in court would probably do more damage to my image and career than another suicide -- there's a sense in which I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't, unless he really is done with it."

"Do you think we'll ever know why he did it?" said Emily, wonderingly.

"According to his answerphone," said Margaret, "We're all busy dying --he's just been a little bit busier than most. Last time, though, there was another subroutine which went on and on about death being the one great mystery, the primal source of existential angst. If only he could be consistent. . . . Perhaps it was like climbing Everest; perhaps he did it simply because he could -- and now that Stepanova's made it clear to him that he can't, he'll stop."

Her beeper sounded then, to remind her that she had other patients to see, and she had to run. Not everyone had state-of-the-art enems to defend them against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and even if Stepanova managed to avoid the congressional inquisition he was so anxious about, the vast majority of people would never be able to afford them.

As things turned out, she was busy in the theater for the next six hours, and it wasn't until she came out that they gave her the news.

Walter Murray was dead: truly, finally, irrevocably dead. They were calling it an accident. There was no proof -- and she had no doubt that none would turn up -- that it was anything else.

She got to him as soon as she could, but it really was too late. There was absolutely nothing she could do, except for a post mortem.

She called Stepanova immediately afterward, knowing full well that she had to keep her tongue under a very strict guard.

"It's a tragedy," she said. "If only he really had had some of the stuff still hidden away, maybe he could have walked away."

"He'd have had to remember where it was first," said Stepanova, dryly. "Anyhow, if he'd handed it over, his conscience might have been clear enough to stop him stepping out in front of the autotruck." That, she knew, was the nearest he was going to get to an admission that it might not have been an accident at all. Needless to say, it hadn't been a CNI autotruck; that would have been too cruel a coincidence.

"His memory was coming back," she pointed out. "He might have remembered at any time. He might still have turned it over, the way he promised he would."

"Pigs might fly," said Stepanova. "My guess is that he knew where it was all along. He would have gone for it when he thought he'd lulled us all into a false sense of security. All that recantation crap was just a ploy. It was only a matter of time before he turned up dead again --dead for good."

Margaret couldn't help remembering how eager CNI had been to play along with Murray in the early days, when it had all seemed like good publicity for their technomiracles. They had encouraged him then, and given him all the motivational reinforcement he had needed. All it had taken to change their minds, though, was a change in the direction of the corporate-political wind. Once Stepanova had been brought in, there had been no real question of waiting to see, or hoping that things would ultimately sort themselves out. Men like Stepanova had no compunction about going all the way, just as soon as they felt that the moment was right.

"We'll never know, now," she said, hopelessly. "We'll never understand exactly what happened, why he did it."

"To tell you the truth, doctor," said Stepanova, "I don't give a damn why he did it. That's your business, not mine. My job is to protect the corporate image of CNI, and I don't mind telling you that I can't raise a tear at the thought that Walter K Murray is getting his last little flurry of publicity. After all, he's got what he always wanted, hasn't he? He'll never have to do it again."

"No," she said, wondering why she felt so sick, given that she'd learned nothing from the call that she hadn't already known.

As soon as she'd signed off she went directly to Walter's apartment. She still had a means of access, and once she was inside she still had the means to seal all the systems and block any traffic. When she'd done that, she carefully winkled out the taps that had been planted there, knowing that their removal wouldn't trigger any alarms. Then she summoned the answerphone

"Walter K Murray is dead," she said. "He was comprehensively mangled by an autotruck. A check showed nothing wrong with its programming, so it's assumed that the fault was his -- simple carelessness in observing the rules of the road. In all probability, he was murdered."

"This is very bad news," said the answerphone, neutrally. Mourning was way beyond the limits of its programming. It had no imagination to fill it with fear of its own eventual redundancy; no capacity to shed tears or empathize with its maker's fate; no real sense of the great mystery of death.

"It was bound to end this way, sooner or later," she said, as though she were talking to Walter himself instead of to his simulacrum. "Everybody has to die, and Walter sailed closer to the wind than most. But this isn't the way he would have chosen. If his past really was behind him, it's a cruel fate; if it wasn't, he'd far rather have gone out in a very different style."

"True," said the answerphone, which may or may not have understood what she was saying. How cleverly had Walter programmed it to meet the needs of his future selves?

"We'll never know, now, what it was all about," she said. "No one will ever know why he did it. It's a pity."

"It's a pity," echoed the AI, agreeably.

She didn't smile. "And no one will ever know where he hid the remaining enemys, if there were any left," she said, and then added: "Unless, of course, you have deeply hidden subroutines which the taps could never reach."

"Of course," said the AI, once again echoing her thought, as AIs were ever wont to do.

She couldn't remember whether she'd ever been to this particular mall before, but the open plaza looked familiar. As she climbed the ugly centerpiece of the fountain people began shouting at her, but it was surprise rather than recognition. Nobody knew her; she wasn't a celebrity; she wasn't Walter K Murray.

By the time she reached her selected coign of vantage, though, a couple of hundred people were converging on the fountain. The design of the atrium was such that the crowds on the second, third, and fourth floors had as good a view as the people at ground level, and the escalators were crammed.

She checked her watch, and took her courage in both hands. Give it ten, she thought, beginning to count down. There was a certain propriety to be maintained. There were bound to be newsdrones on duty; malls were the commercial arteries of the nation, and mallnews was always a big item in the human interest slots.

She grinned faintly at the thought of Stepanova's probable reaction to the newsvids. It's all your own fault, she thought. If you hadn't made certain that this was the only way I could ever find out. . . .

At five she uncapped the can, and threw the cap into the crowd. At seven she began to pour. At nine she dropped the can into the rippled pool. She struck the match awkwardly on the side of the box. Her pants and sneakers were cold and damp upon her legs and feet, but she knew it wouldn't matter. The rest of her was soaked with something infinitely less inclined to dampen the spirits.

Someone in the crowd was waving a Thanaticist banner, which had materialized as if by magic. SAINT WALTER THE MARTYR, it said. Saint Margaret the Martyr, she thought, and raised a burning hand in salute.

The flames came up about her with an audible whoosh, and black smoke billowed forth. For a second or two -- but it might have been an olfactory illusion -- she thought that she could smell her own flesh burning.

Wow, she thought.

Just for a single fleeting moment, she felt she understood everything --literally everything.

So dear old Sigmund was right, she thought, wonderingly. It's in us all, repress it as we may -- and all it needs is answering, to show us its ultimate reward. What a world you're making, Mr. Stepanova: eternal life and eternal death for everyone. . . . what a wonderful wonderful world!

The thought required little more than an instant, and that was all she had to enjoy the magical sensation. Hardly had the connection been made before she was left with nothing but the unbelievable agony of being ablaze -- and the hope that when she woke up, afterwards, she might be able to recover the infinitely precious memory of the deathwish fulfilled.

It was nothing but hope, but it was something to cling to, something to carry her through.

Wow! she thought, again, before thought itself was finally eclipsed, Wow! Wow! Wow!

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