

Across the Wall

By Bernard

The advertisement appeared to float about an arm's length from him, momentarily distracting him from his websurfing by its yellow and black broken border. "The Department of Communications Security reminds you to remain alert for magnetic terrorists," it flashed. "Report all suspicions of illegal electromagnetic devices which can be used to damage implants and otherwise disrupt your Service."

Jason looked at the notice with mild unease, but he had seen it many hundreds of times. It quickly faded from his attention as he requested the server for more content and pulled the daily news back into view. A few seconds later, he heard a series of three beeps alerting him of a high-priority message. He noticed that it was from the hospital, sending a brief flash of anxiety through him as he wondered whether his plans for the day were going to survive this incident.

"Dear Jason Orban," it read in a flat but somehow urgent tone. "We regret to inform you that Rose Enterole-Orban has undergone a change in medical condition. It will be convenient for members of her family to visit her during regular visiting hours within the next three days only, prior to her treatment. Attached to this notification are sick-leave credits for you to make arrangements with your employer as necessary." The bottom of the image had a rather lacy design which Jason had not noticed before on the hospital's electronic stationary, and which bore a disturbing resemblance to a sympathy card. The similarity was probably intentional—a gentle hint at details which would not be disclosed over the data channels. He quickly closed the message and put his head in his hands for a few moments while he sought how best to accommodate the event.

After about five minutes, he had reserved a shuttle ticket for the next morning which would allow him to visit the island where his grandmother lived. The island, which was used for housing the elderly or otherwise disabled residents of the city, was only a few kilometres from the land. Unfortunately, it was only accessible by shuttle train or on foot. None of its residents were allowed to operate personal vehicles, and the restrictions on transportation also helped to deter undesirable "migrations" between the island and the shore.

Shortly thereafter, the bus slowed to a stop outside Jason's office building. The ads immediately disappeared to allow passengers easier passage out of the vehicle. Jason reactivated his connection to the navigation service in order to guide his movements while he finished with his morning diversions. He experienced a gentle tingling in his shoulders and feet. The feeling would become more intense if he came too close to the commuters and other obstacles in his surroundings.

"Please confirm your commitment to the Standard of Quality and Innovation," the welcome program recited inside his head. Jason subvocalized the appropriate response, crossing the next few steps down the office hallway while he waited for the recorded voice to return. It always irritated him that the second segment of the entrance ritual would start after a delay of random duration.

“Please confirm your commitment to the Protection of Intellectual Property,” the welcome program chimed again. Jason’s response was somewhat slower this time. He had never liked having his ideas owned by his employer.

Finally, he reached the work room, a secure area inside which communication with the outside world was impossible. Jason never looked forward to entering the work room, but he recognized that it served its purpose very effectively. It helped improve his focus on his duties. More importantly, it eliminated the piracy of information which had seriously limited the use of implants for widespread telecommuting.

Jason obediently took a seat among the rows of coworkers. Some employees were on exercise bikes to fulfill their daily physical activity requirements. The rest sat patiently in apparent silence. After a few moments, Jason connected to the virtual workplace environment and his surroundings were replaced by a simulation. Just before resuming his assigned tasks, he uploaded his sick leave request to human resources. He obtained an approval of his request a split-second later. Along with the approval confirmation was a short message wishing his grandmother good health on behalf of his employer. Jason could not help but smile at the program’s well-meaning, yet meaningless response.

Around midday, Jason wandered towards the employee break room for lunch. The break room was not very different from the work room except that it had rudimentary kitchen facilities and somewhat more comfortable seating. It was also outside of the secure network. This last detail was brought to Jason’s attention once he realized, as usual, that he could not recall what he had worked on throughout the morning. He found a seat in the sparse array of silent coworkers, and then decided to contact Julia. She answered his call after only one ring.

“Hi Julia, how are you?” Jason thought. He never knew exactly what to expect. When the other end of the connection took an extended pause, he became somewhat anxious.

“Don’t you know how I am?” Julia’s melodious voice trickled into his awareness. Jason always felt a small thrill of pleasure at hearing her, although he never believed that her real voice sounded the same. Sadly, her words did not match her timbre this time.

Suppressing a sigh, he started to search for Julia’s various profiles and journals to try and determine why she seemed upset. When they had first started dating, it had been a kind of chore for him to keep up to date on her Mindspace environment. Recently, however, she had diversified her collection of personal media. She would occasionally ask him questions relating to her online postings, making him hunt for answers instead of communicating directly. It was irritating, but she was worth the effort, he thought. His friends had all given her a high rating when he had posted the details of his new relationship status.

About a week prior, he had discovered a “secret” diary which he now hoped would be useful. Julia probably expected him to have found it by now.

“Of course I know how you are,” Jason replied, thinking that some gentle humour might give him a little more room for error. “I know so much about you.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Sometimes I wonder if you are really that interested,” her voice grew quieter and less confident.

“I even know ‘The Hidden Side of Julia’,” he quoted.

“No!” she gasped. The sound was a mix of pleasure and fright –as if he had tickled her. Her surprise lasted only a second. “Then why did you think that you could call me as though nothing was wrong?”

“Um...” Jason started to panic. He was having trouble finding the information he sought, and was running out of things to say.

“You’re not listening to me, are you?” she snapped finally. In a few moments, Jason realized, the conversation could go irreversibly out of control.

“My grandmother is in the hospital!” he blurted. A few seconds of silence passed.

“What?” Julia started. “But she’s been in the hospital for, like, forever.”

“No –I mean, she’s really sick now... I got a message from her doctors,” Jason added quickly.

“Oh,” Julia’s voice softened. “I’m so sorry,” she said softly. Jason let out a breath which he was now aware of holding.

“I am going to see her tomorrow,” he said. “I will let you know how it goes,” he concluded.

“Fine,” Julia said, sounding disappointed. He closed the call. His thoughts turned once again to the pointless effort of recalling what he would be doing upon returning to work.

Having finished his work for the day, Jason watched his favourite television series during the commute home. The main character in the show, an assassin, had special receptors connected to the nerves in his forearms. By placing his arms against walls and other hard surfaces, the assassin could hear sounds coming from the other side, for instance. Whenever the assassin used his abilities, Jason would feel delicate pinprick sensations in his arms. He loved the feeling of living through the character.

In this particular episode, the assassin was searching for the home of their target, passing through the long, shadowy hallways of a large residential complex. The doorways of the hall were passing by on either side in a regular rhythm. As the assassin neared their target, they slowly increased their speed. Jason listened to their rapid breathing and could feel his heart racing in anticipation. The hallway became a stylized blur of brown and beige bands formed by the doors and the surrounding walls. The assassin stopped suddenly and unlocked one of the doors. They were already drawing their poisoned needle as they stepped inside. Jason’s vision went dark. He waited for the shriek that would indicate a successful kill. The shriek did not come. Instead, his field of view was filled with a giant number three. A second later, the three was replaced with the number two. Jason’s mind stalled for a moment, suddenly confused. The show had never resorted to such deplorable ways of building suspense. The number one now floated before him for a second. He experienced an intense burst through all his senses. The feeling could be described as white noise, if white noise could be smelt, tasted, felt and seen at once. Finally, all sensory stimulation vanished.

Rising to his feet, Jason realized that he had been lying on the ground. He could see nothing except blank walls on either side of him, which belonged to two buildings near his home. It was strange that they lacked the yellow outlines assigned by the navigation service. He also noticed that there was an object fixed over his ears and head. He pried it off with some

difficulty. It was a pair of headphones. He stared at them in confusion. For one thing, he did not own any headphones. Secondly, headphones were antique objects that were only worn very occasionally as fashion statements. This particular pair was unusually heavy. It became clear to him that it contained a set of electromagnets. They had now lost their charge, but had destroyed his implant.

Jason rushed into his dwelling, overjoyed that he had heeded the government's suggestion of keeping a basic emergency phone for such situations. Hands shaking, he booted the device. He immediately accessed its address book to request a service appointment for his implant. Unfortunately, while he had been diligent in completing his daily speech exercises, he still needed to repeat himself several times for his words to be correctly interpreted by the reception program. The neurological engineer's office booked him a diagnostic appointment in just under a week, although the replacement surgery would occur a few weeks later. While his employer would be notified of his condition, Jason was still very anxious at the prospect of living for so long without Service.

With the assurance that help would come eventually, Jason then called the city's emergency department, accessing the only other contact stored in his phone. The reception program informed him that the evidence from the crime would be collected from his dwelling for analysis. It rambled on to say that the department was doing everything possible to eliminate all such incidents in the future.

Jason ended the call feeling vaguely as though he had completed a civic duty, and stumbled to a chair. He was suddenly exhausted as his adrenaline rush was now fading. In its absence, the bare walls of the room came to his attention, as did the complete lack of any form of entertainment. Unfortunately, there were good reasons for the terrible boredom that he was about to face. The development of central nervous system implants had eliminated the demand for other personal electronic devices. Furthermore, strict recycling regulations had effectively terminated the production of any items which would not be widely used. More importantly, however, the high rental payments necessary for his implant to receive Service had left Jason with little disposable income.

Feeling pangs of hunger, Jason remembered that he usually had dinner after work. Thankful for the distraction, he walked over to the cupboard and brought out a spoon and a can of soup. The tag read "Comforting Chicken Curry". It was the default setting, he realized, but he could not change the flavour without his implant. Opening the can, he brought the first mouthful past his lips. It tasted terrible. To describe it more fully, he thought, it tasted as though someone had vomited into the can, and had added a compound to neutralize most of the acid.

"Did you know?" thought Jason to himself, "The taste of soup is simulated, not physical." The movements of his mouth and tongue were probably triggers for the delicious sensations built into the program.

While the loss of his implant deprived him of many things, Jason was glad that he still had the ability to visit his grandmother. The trip would at least give the day some purpose.

Therefore, he left his home early in the morning, walked down the long corridor to the street, travelled along the street until it ended at the larger road, and then stood still, wondering which direction to walk. He had been to the hospital many times before, but never without access to the navigation service. Most of the other people nearby were walking to his right, while those on the opposite side of the road were walking to his left. He tried to remember whether or not he crossed the road on the way to the bus stop. Crossing the street seemed to be more likely...

Suddenly, he was nearly knocked flat by another pedestrian who had blindly stumbled into him. As Jason struggled to keep upright, they shuffled to the side and started to move forward again. They were muttering something about unregistered objects on the road. Jason stared after them, only to be hit by another person in the stream of traffic. He thought briefly about retaliating, but managed to calm himself and head towards the nearest crosswalk.

After a few minutes, he found the correct bus stop, which proved to be closer to his dwelling than he had feared. He sat down to wait, observing the commuters passing by on their way to work. One person in particular caught Jason's attention, as they were glancing around themselves rather than staring ahead. As they came near the bus stop, Jason involuntarily made eye contact. It was a mistake, he realized, as the stranger started walking towards him.

"You lost Service, didn't you?" asked the stranger, encroaching upon Jason's personal space. Jason pretended not to notice him.

"Did you know that four percent of the population still does not have access to Service?" the stranger said. An awkward silence ensued for several moments. Jason became aware of a peculiar odour surrounding the other person, which reminded him of a strong cleaning product.

"That's one in twenty-five people!" insisted the stranger. "It's despicable... You know what kind of jobs they reserve for those without Service?" he continued, leaning frighteningly close to Jason, "Manual labour, manual assembly, manual testing... and sometimes –if you're lucky –manual assistance to the elderly and disabled who lack implants."

Jason did not reply. He was finding it harder to look at a spot which was not occupied by the other man.

"Great," said the stranger finally, "I manage to find someone who is deaf and blind, even without their implant."

Jason started to open his mouth, surprised at the insult, but realized that he would only be taking the bait if he showed any anger. There had to be some way to get the other person out of his sight.

"What did you say?" Jason rasped. The stranger glared at him for a few moments, but at last turned away and continued down the road.

The bus arrived a few minutes later. Jason boarded it and then stood near the entrance while he scanned the interior for an empty seat. He heard someone say something behind him, and then whirled around when a hand tugged on his arm. He found himself facing the bus driver, who gave him a long look as though to assess whether he was mentally unstable or simply startled.

"I am sorry, but you need to pay manually," the driver said curtly, having finished her visual assessment. Feeling humiliated, Jason fumbled for his identification.

As he sat down among the other passengers, Jason glanced around, expecting to see the first advertisements pop into view. Naturally, without Service, the virtual messages were invisible to him. He noticed that the bus had curved sheets of plastic overhead, which bore various announcements. One was for “Quick Loans”, while another was a warning about “low-cost Service providers”, who were not licensed to practice neurosurgery. Jason looked at them with the unease of a tourist stuck in an unexpectedly dismal location.

He had two shadows, one on either side, and they lengthened and shortened periodically as he travelled between the two rows of streetlights. Jason was getting tired of watching them, however, and was starting to question why he had chosen to take a public bicycle across the bridge. It had been, for him, an unusually impulsive decision, but at least it gave him a feeling of control.

Shortly after the bus had arrived at the shuttle train station, Jason had remembered that his rail ticket was stored online. With only about fifteen minutes to spare before the train arrived, Jason had wasted about five minutes by standing idle, feeling helpless. He had then wandered aimlessly inside the station. Once inside, he had discovered that there was a manual assistance kiosk. He might have been able to use it to retrieve his ticket, had there not been at least twenty other people waiting in line. Frustrated, he had walked back out of the building and then had noticed the rack of bicycles. He had been relieved at the prospect of avoiding embarrassment over his lack of Service by having his own ride. Now he wondered if the effort was worthwhile.

Jason was just beginning to ponder what would happen if he was caught without a cycling helmet when a large square of blinding light grew upwards about three metres in front of him. Before he could react, his momentum carried him into the apparition. The world around him exploded in a flash of light and heat. Jason gave a startled scream, a surprisingly shrill sound. He instinctively put up his arms to protect his face, losing control of the bike. He tumbled forwards, badly scraping his left knee.

In the past, Jason would have been able to turn off his pain once he decided that it was not a useful sensation. He would also have been able to dim the light so that he could stand its searing brightness. His undeveloped pain threshold was surpassed by an unimaginable extent and he writhed on the ground, screaming without the slightest worry of public humiliation. Finally, after an eternity of agony, he lost consciousness.

Amazingly, Jason’s eyes had almost fully adjusted to the light once he awoke. He started to prop himself up on one arm, his left knee throbbing when he shifted his legs. The dried reddish-brown stain on his pants leg indicated that his wound had probably formed a scab. He was relieved that the cloth had not stuck to the broken skin. With his mind finally able to tolerate the pain, he became aware of his surroundings.

He was outside, he realized. Not outside within the city, but actually outside the city. Behind him rose the featureless black surface of the solar wall, curving away towards a summit many kilometres back. The wall rose out of the shining water of the lake, its wandering

perimeter resembling a range of mountains. Jason could not see the opening from which he had exited the city. In fact, he could not even tell that the solar wall was three-dimensional, as it reflected almost no light. He felt as though he was staring into the blackness of space. The bright blue of the lake curved away like the Earth's oceans seen from far above the planet's surface.

The bridge upon which he was resting was a silvery grating with grey metal guiderails on either side. The grating was supported by a perfectly straight concrete cylinder, which Jason realized was the tunnel for the shuttle train. The structure was otherwise featureless, except for small streetlights which arched over the deck about every hundred metres. Looking over the side, Jason could see the shadows formed far below on the water by support pillars which were hidden from his view beneath the concrete tunnel. Ahead of him, the thin form of the bridge vanished to a point before the black, semicircular hole in his vision which housed the island. Jason could not see any other people on the bridge, something which he had never observed in any public area of the city.

Jason then cast his gaze towards the sky. The air glowed light blue near the crisp line where it met the water, and then deepened to a stronger, more vibrant hue above his head. There were at least three discernible levels of clouds in the sky. The highest were thin wisps which formed a kind of striated blanket near the island. The middle and lower clouds were thicker and rounded. Those near the sun were light grey and glowed brightly at the edges. Those opposite the sun were a soft white with grey undersides. Jason observed that the lowest clouds drifted faster across the sky than the higher clouds.

Far above him soared a flock of birds. Jason watched as they circled slowly, their black silhouettes flickering occasionally when they flapped their wings. Some seemed to be loosely associated, following each other in some sort of incomprehensible avian game. Others appeared content to drift in the invisible currents of air. The birds were likely crows; a species well-adapted to living near human settlements.

"It is so beautiful," Jason thought, unable to phrase his reaction in a more sophisticated-sounding manner. He was accustomed to finding nature neatly packaged for him in the form of a documentary, an image, or a sound recording. These reproductions of the natural world were nothing compared to the experience of venturing outside. Here, it was impossible to be an invisible observer, he realized. Sitting on the bridge, he disturbed air currents and dissipated heat, for instance. All of these effects were being felt by other organisms.

Some people described nature as a perfect system, he remembered. Practically all matter and energy was accommodated in the uncountable number of processes and cycles which composed the biosphere. He looked back at the dark space behind him. It contained many imperfections. It had blinded him to the outside world.

"Why do we even have the solar wall?" he wondered, but then he remembered his lessons. "The solar wall provides power, climate control, and protection from ultraviolet radiation," he whispered, repeating words memorized far in the past.

He knew that there were reasons for everything society had built. The clothes that he was wearing, the bridge upon which he was standing –everything had been designed the way that it

was because of a multitude of human reasons. The solar wall encapsulating the city was a logical outcome of civilization, yet it looked absurd when seen from the outside. He was caught in the interface between two worlds; a place where nothing made sense.

Jason looked out over the lake for several long moments, awestruck at the expanse of water, sky, and blackness. Reluctantly, he went to retrieve the bicycle and continued towards the other end of the bridge.

Rose Enterole-Orban was just beginning to wake up when Jason entered her room, still limping slightly from his accident. As usual, the hospital staff had interrupted her regenerative coma for his visit. Jason thought that she looked in fairly good condition for a person over the age of one hundred forty-five. He was alarmed, however, by the assortment of equipment that was inconspicuously taking over some of her vital functions.

“Jason,” she said, with a thin smile, “What happened to your knee?” She spoke directly, as always, but at least it showed that her cognitive function was intact.

“I fell off of a bike,” he replied tentatively, wondering what kind of response this would elicit.

“Were you wearing a helmet?” Rose asked. Jason slumped a little in his chair, feeling deflated.

“No,” he mumbled, hoping that she would not ask him to elaborate. A few moments passed in silence, and his gaze wandered towards the window. He could see a few people walking along the pathways below.

“I suppose they told you I was getting a bit worse,” Rose said at last. “It was the machine that informed them. It knows more about me than I do,” she lamented. Rose gestured to indicate the slender, predatory-looking device which wound over her chest towards the back of her neck. “I wish that I could talk to it, but they would probably never allow that, even if I was equipped...” she trailed off. It took Jason a moment to realize that she was referring to her lack of an implant. She had never been certain of her decision not to have one, he remembered.

Outside the hospital, but not actually outdoors, Jason reminded himself, there were three people standing together. They were in front of a potted plant which hung from a light stand. The shortest of the trio, a child, reached upwards to run their hands through the cascade of foliage. The other two were standing silently, perhaps thinking to each other. One of them was resting a hand on the child’s shoulder.

“What are you working on,” Rose interrupted, jolting his awareness back to the hospital room.

“Nothing,” Jason answered, “I was just watching some people outside.” His grandmother gave him a look of suspicion, mixed with tired irritation. “I lost my Service,” he added, not wanting to provoke her.

She laughed abruptly, although the sound carried a trace of resentment. “Finally, someone I can talk to,” she declared.

Jason tried to think of a way to defend his behaviour during past visits, but most of the options gave him an unpleasant, deceitful feeling. “I’m sorry,” he said at last.

She gave him a shy smile. “It’s alright... I know it was difficult for you to arrange to come here so many times,” she consented.

“I was living inside a bubble,” he sighed.

“Don’t worry,” she laughed, “I have been that way many times. It’s only natural.”

“But you have no implant...” began Jason.

“Yes,” she said, and paused for a moment.

“What do you mean?” asked Jason. He looked at her expectantly.

“Jason...” Rose sighed at last.

“Yes?”

“Older people will often refrain from telling you things outright. We like to think that people will learn better if they need to work a bit in order to find the answers. You have a lot of time on your hands at the moment. Maybe you can give this some more thought.”

“But what if I don’t see you again?” he said. He blushed at the thought of speaking so bluntly. This visit was so unfamiliar to him that he had dropped his social inhibitions.

“Then I am sure that you will come across an explanation somewhere else,” she replied. “Just being aware will leave you open to further insight. Since I can’t resist the opportunity, I am going to leave you on a cliff-hanger, so to speak.” She gave him a mischievous smile.

“Yes grandmother,” he said, inclining his head in a mock bow. He suddenly felt tired from the emotional exercise that she had caused. She was right, he thought. He did need some time to think.