

CLEAN SLATE

by

Kenny Kemp

It was a dream.

I knew it was a dream because when it ended—suddenly, with me crouching on a sloping lawn—I was in my bed, staring at the ceiling, filled with tremendous feelings of guilt. It was several minutes before I dared move; I wanted (and didn't want) to remember everything about the dream. But like all dreams it faded, leaving nothing behind but vague images and an aching sense of remorse. I lay there, eyes open, staring at the textured whirls in the ceiling, the guilt finally dropping out of my mind's eye altogether, leaving no images behind, just a heavy feeling of self-loathing.

I think I killed someone in the dream. When it ended I was on a sloping lawn behind a low hedge, trying not to be seen. It was night and the only light was a streetlight at the end of the block. There were two cars at the curb. I don't know what was behind me, a house perhaps. No fans of blue or red light passed across the tall trees—there were no police. Yet.

I sat on the edge of the bed, so weak with anxiety I could not stand. Numbing guilt lay across my shoulders. *You are not who you pretend to be*, came a thought. *You are a murderer*.

“Jesus!” I said, shaking my head and forcing myself to stand. “That's enough!” I walked into the bathroom and stood at the toilet. The wall mirror to my left reflected a small stand mirror, which coincidentally was pointed at me. I saw myself in its tiny round face. As I peed, I steadied myself with a hand on the wall before me, where two bath towels hung. I felt like crying. I wanted to collapse on the bathtub edge, burying my face in my hands like a woman, and gush out all the pain.

But instead I stood there, finishing my business, sick to my stomach, unable to turn back to the tiny orb of mirror, where I would have seen the guilt etched deeply into my face like a smoker's mouth parentheses.

Thankfully, by the time I was driving to work, a hundred other morning inputs had erased the dream. Showering, shaving, dressing, getting breakfast, unplugging the car, affirming the route. Once I was on the parkway, I engaged the autopilot and leaned back, reaching for my tablet. The splash page projected the news above the tablet in an alphabet pyramid, sorted according to my preferences: sports on top (Tokyo Marauders over the Dodgers, 3-2), finance below (MSApple stock foundering on news of a Senegalese chip problem), world affairs cushioning the upper tiers (the last ethnic Greek just died, his country's long negative birthrate claiming its final victim. *It's all Greek to me*, I thought sardonically, pressing down on the info ziggurat, squelching the tablet to darkness.

At work, I sat down at my cubicle and the work station awoke. I opaqued the walls and lowered the lighting, sitting in near darkness, feeling a throb in my head. Maybe I was getting

sick. Allison, two cubes down, had come into to work yesterday with a cold. Though she was reprimanded and sent home, we all looked at each other in dismay and everyone went to HR for shots. I touched my neck and felt a cough rising. If I got sick . . .

“Hey, Mitch,” said someone, passing through the opaque air curtain. It was Alex.

“Hey, Al,” I said distantly. “What’s what?”

“All of it,” he said. “And none.”

He peered at me. “You trancing?”

I laughed and looked back at my display. “No.”

“Well, you look like shit. You share air with Allison?”

I shrugged. “We all did, for a second.”

“What a bitch,” said Al. “Like she doesn’t know better. I saw her coming in, wiping her nose and I lit out. Can’t believe it. She’ll get a reprimand for sure, don’t you think?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care,” I said. “Kinda busy here. Feelin’ pinched.”

“About what?”

“Didn’t sleep well.”

“You need to trance, man,” said Al. “For a tech, you’re a Luddite.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m just not a pharmer like you.”

Al shrugged and left. I squinted into the holo display and touched my neck under my jaw. It felt sore.

I *am* a tech, what we call a synthesizer. Since open-source code became the norm (and the end of the competition between the software giants), everyone with a grad degree in CS (and that’s *everyone* nowadays) is writing device apps and they all have to interact, which is where CrossTalk comes in. We work opposites all day, testing them in every imaginable situation for conflicts. And there are plenty. Linux is rife with bugs, but because it was the original freeware, it has the most programs based upon it. We work in a sort of data cloud in my section, handing off devices when we’re stumped to someone else, and a sort of hierarchy has self-built: I’m the comms app guy; I seem to have more luck sorting out conflicts between programs than anyone else, so I’ve got a dozen devices on my desktop now, waiting to be sussed out.

At lunch I was sitting with Al, who is the closest thing I have to a friend here and so he’s the only person I’ve invited from the company onto my Facebook page. Like most people, I don’t have many “friends” online; I was a kid when the whole FB universe imploded after people started masking porn actors with the faces of ex-girlfriends’ uploaded pictures and posting them, along with voice clips and videos of people with the pasted-on faces robbing convenience stores and baring their genitals. FB suspended operations to clean up the mess, but in the ensuing three weeks, almost two billion people dropped off. When the site came back online, only a few

hundred million people signed back up, mostly from the Third World, where they have no privacy to protect. Almost all Westerners, scared not so much by the “You’re a Porn Star Now!” hack but by the accompanying passcode-breaking, stayed off. My parents, if you can believe it, quit entirely and never returned. We kids called them troglodytes, but I secretly admired their lack of interest in being virtual “friends” with real-world strangers.

Now, twenty years later, most people are back on FB, but no one I know has more than ten friends and no one posts pictures or personal info. We use avatars anyway for surfing the net, so what’s the point?

So when you *do* make a friend—a real friend—you just Facetime him: talk in person. They ruined texting, my mom said, when everyone’s location was GPS-tracked, so no one could lie anymore about being at the library or at work. When the ubiquitous surveillance cameras started syncing with your text messages, showing you walking into the movie theater when you were supposed to be in fifth period MacroEc, what’s the point of even carrying a phone or tablet? I quit carrying mine when my dad started calling me fifty times a day, asking me where I was. As if he didn’t know; they implanted a tracker in me at birth.

Al and I sat in the lunchroom in a kind of comfortable quiet. I didn’t really like him, but I needed at least one friend here in case I needed a favor. He was too devoted to mood alternators, as he called them. “Up and down, like a clown,” he’d say, thinking he was funny. I’d smile. All this just in case I needed a ride home sometime.

“Oh,” said Al, “there’s Steve. Shit, look at him.”

I looked up. Steve was fat—like most of us—and pimply, because Tetra was banned and his parents couldn’t afford gene therapy. But he wore his acne like a badge of honor; it made him stick out, he once told me. “Memorable,” was how he put it.

Steve had a crush on Mayra. No reason she should have thought he was a noodge, and for awhile she didn’t. They went to a movie and a drive along the beach, I heard, and he even bragged that he’d made out with her. Al doubted it, but I didn’t care either way. I wouldn’t mind having a girlfriend if a vacancy came up, but that’s unlikely. Good-looking girls are usually vested in Lifeline, a matching site their parents sign them into when they’re born where they’re matched in a hundred ways to a million guys and over the next fifteen years, their parents zero in on the right one. I never heard of any woman who disliked the guy her parents had chosen for her this way, because though they picked him, the pool of candidates was created using personality profiles that were not under the parents’ direct control. My parents couldn’t afford the membership fee for me in Lifeline (I think they called this a dowry back when), so I was on my own. So far, no luck.

But I wouldn’t have picked Mayra in any case. She was OK-looking, seemed bright enough, but was usually morose and crabby. Probably perfect for Steve, but he blew it.

“He blew it,” said Al, reading my thoughts, looking at Steve, who sat by himself, concentrating on his sandwich doggedly, looking pathetic.

“Yeah,” I said. “No means *no* to a guy like him.”

Al nodded. “He’s lucky they didn’t put him jail. All’s he had was those readjustment sessions and community service.”

“And a restraining order.”

“He almost got fired because she’s the plaintiff and he has to see her every day,” said Steve, looking around. “And this place isn’t big enough for a hundred foot RO.”

I shook my head. Steve was typical of our age: lots of braggadocio outside but a marshmallow inside. Gang-dating his way through high school and college, he’d probably never been alone with a girl until post-grad, because of the unholy cabal of overprotective parents and the nanny state. Mayra was probably the first girl he’d ever kissed and so he had no experience to fall back on when the urge hit him and he started pawing her and she pushed him away. Ironically, it would have been worse for him if she hadn’t tazed him. That gave him some sympathy at the hearing—he was only trying to kiss her, after all—and so he didn’t get incarcerated. But the RO stood and whenever Mayra came into a room where he was, he had to leave—it was like they were opposite poles on a magnet.

No one talked to Steve about this, of course, even though the news holos popped up from our tablets within moments of the verdict. What’s really sad is that no one talked to Steve now, period. He was a ghost.

“We should talk to him,” I said.

“About *what*?” said Al. “What would you say?”

“I don’t know. How’s it going?” I ventured.

Al snorted. “And after he says, ‘Terrible,’ what do you say then?”

I shrugged. What *would* I say then? “You’re probably right,” I said, turning to my own lunch. “Wouldn’t help anyone.”

That night I had the dream again. I was kneeling on the lawn, afraid of being seen, looking around. It was dark, but in my dream I could see everything otherworld clearly. The empty street. Two cars at the curb, one with a mashed fender. Didn’t notice that before. The lawn rolling down in swells. Palms on the parkway, shielding the street light. Beyond the street, darkness. I turned. Behind me, a Spanish-style house with a red tile roof and dark windows. It must be late.

And my heart pounding. I’m sweating. My nose is running. Suddenly I see movement and there’s Allison standing in a window, behind some gauzy curtain. But I know it’s her. That’s when I get the feeling that this is a dream, but the thought gets cut off when I run the back of my hand across my runny nose and it comes away bloody. I taste blood on my lip as I turn my hand over. It’s covered with dried blood, and I know it’s not mine.

My stomach retches and I taste bile. I spit and suddenly I can’t see. I reach up and find my forehead is bleeding. I stand up and look back at the house. Allison is gone. I trot down the

lawn, vault over the car with the lookie-here fender, and slip on the wet pavement beyond into a flying lurch. The far side of the street is a cliff and I tumble into the darkness.

I awoke, not like they do in the movies, where the guy suddenly bolts upright, panting. I just lay there, my fists clenched at my side, my head throbbing and my tongue searching for blood inside my mouth. My lips were parched and my nose was running. Shit. Allison gave me a cold after all. It was still dark and I got up to wash my face. I didn't turn on the lights. The water was cold and when I cupped my hands under the faucet, I started to shake. I did something horrible in that dream. I'd had dried blood on my hands. It wasn't mine, but I was injured. A fight? An accident? Yes. The car fender was damaged. But no one was around. Just me and the darkness, then and now.

"You remember your dreams?" I asked Al as we left work the next day.

He shrugged. "Just the ones where I'm, like, naked in public or late for something. You know, performance anxiety stuff."

"I've had the same dream two nights in a row," I said. "I wake up feeling guilty, like I did something terrible."

"You?" laughed Al, passing his hand across the car window. The sewing machine motor spun up. His Hebei spit out the cord and the driver's door parted slowly.

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm freaking. Feeling guilty about a *dream*." I shook my head. "Stupid."

"Dreams are just our synapses doing routine maintenance," said Al. "At the most, the mind conjures up some scenarios, usually nonsense stuff."

"Allison was in it," I said absently.

"I hope you breathed on her," said Al.

"She wasn't really a part of it, I think," I said. "That was the tip-off—even while I was dreaming, I knew something was *off*."

"Off the chart," said Al, getting into his car. "I think dreams let us explore things we'd never do in real life so we don't end up in a bell tower squeezing off a few at the Allison of the world."

"Pure imagination, then?"

"Yeah. Anyway, why would you take a dream seriously that has Allison in it? That's a sign right there. Your mind was making it up as you went along, throwing stuff in just for fun. But here's a better question: why is it that we take our bad dreams seriously and dismiss our good ones?"

“Dismiss ‘em all, right?” I asked, relieved.

“If I had ‘em, I would,” said Al, putting the car into gear. “But I never remember my dreams—I think it’s the alternators.”

He pulled out of the stall and left with a wave.

I didn’t have the dream that night, and I was relieved. The talk with Al had helped, I guess. It was just a dream. The anxiety and guilt I’d felt as a low-grade fever had abated over the last couple of days till now it was just a dim memory, safely in the past. I had resolved that if I had it that night, the next day I would ask Al for something from the garden he pharmed.

Which isn’t to say I didn’t dream. I’m told we all dream, but some people just can’t remember them. But we can train ourselves to remember by laying quietly upon waking and focusing on the events we were just experiencing. That night I had a dream about a football stadium, but there was no one in it but me. I was sitting in the stands. I had popcorn and a beer like there was a game, but I was alone. The stadium lights were on but there was no one but me there. I was looking at the field and suddenly had the urge to be down on it. I stood up and the dream ended.

I also dreamed that I was riding in a car with a woman I’d never seen before. She had pale skin and red hair that swept down over one eye. We were in a car from some old movie and we were going very slowly along a street lined with palm trees. She was looking out the open window and smoking a cigarette. I’ve never met anyone who smoked and the glowing red tip of the cigarette was a fascination, as well as the way the smoke drifted out of her mouth to be caught by the cool breeze as we moved slowly down the block. She laughed and turned to me, flicking ash out the window. “I’m dead,” she said, tossing her head back and laughing. “And you killed me.”

When she looked back at me we were stopped and I opened the door and fell out of the car onto the wet street. She laughed again and shook her head like it was a joke.

My work was suffering. In the course of my day I have to try to imagine every possible device use and see what bugs fall out. But I spent most of the next two days just sitting at my desk looking at the “vices” (as we call them in our glib humor) and feeling a vague dread of them. Instead of working, I spent hours online learning about dreams: Freud, Jung, and the others. All conflicting, all guessing on most things, except the overall beneficial effect of dreams and how rats die when their REM sleep is disrupted.

So the good thing was I was still dreaming. The bad thing was I was still dreaming.

I thought about going down to HR and making an appointment with the psych doc, but decided against it. He’d just tell me what I already knew, and then he’d probe me for details,

which would undoubtedly end up in my file. No thanks. If I was going to go crazy, I didn't want the whole office to know it until they found me with the gun in my hand.

I had to laugh. I'd never touched a gun and knew nothing about them. I wondered what kind of gun people used to kill themselves with. I didn't even know how to get a hold of one. I was sure they could be had for a price, but finding my way to one would be like programming my car to drive to South Central. It wouldn't do it, not with my profile.

Maybe I'd Pharm-out, like Tracy McAllister did in college, O.D.ing on some exotic Balinese concoction involving hallucinogens and depressants. The whole campus got drug training after that. You were allowed to nuke your brain on whatever substance you could find, but dying was out of the question in our brave new whatever. The adults frenzied and we all got counseled until no one had a thought whatsoever, much less a self-destructive one.

Now, out of college, I have a job, a car, and a debit account, but I still wonder what it feels like to grow up. My dad wears short pants and Nikes. You'd never know he was a genius financial guru. My mom jogs and has better abs than I do. They're not growing up; why should I? I'm afraid, that's all, and my store-bought cynicism about everything doesn't cover this feeling that I am a bad person who got away with something evil. Every time I give myself a minute to think, the sick-to-my-stomach feeling comes back. I got drunk last night and the only thing I could remember from my sleep was standing looking down at a body of a woman in a ditch. Her face was covered with her hair. She was bloody and so were my hands.

Her hair was red.

I went to a clinic. I wouldn't allow the retina scan, but they saw me anyway, used to, I guess, people who want to stay incognito. I went into a cubicle bleaker than my own and faced a heavy black woman wearing a loud print dress. She glanced at my data form and said, "Bad dreams?"

I nodded.

"You want something for them?"

"I guess."

"Make 'em go away, or drown 'em out?"

I shook my head.

"What I mean," she said, leaning forward, "is that we can talk about your dreams or I can prescribe you a mood elevator."

"I'm not sure talking would help. I've been talking with my friends. They say dreams are just our mind working out kinks. Meaningless."

"Some say that," said the woman, whose name was Joyce. "Others say they mask deep-rooted anxieties. What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing, really," I said. On her slight smile, I said, "Just the usual. Money. Women. Life. But I feel guilty all the time now."

“What did you do?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I never do anything. I just feel guilty.”

Joyce looked at me hard, sizing me up. Then she pulled her tablet toward her and started typing on the hologram keyboard that popped up. “I’ll give you something to calm you down.”

“I feel terrible,” I said, watching her type. She was really fast.

“Terrible, yes,” said Joyce, “but what’s really bothering you is pretty rare these days.”

“Rare?” I suddenly forgot my guilt. Allison? What had she given me?

Joyce smiled. “Yes, rare. It’s called an imagination, young man. That’s all it is.”

I took the pills and felt immediately different, though not better. It was kind of like sitting on someone else’s shoulder, watching him go about his day; some sort of out-of-body vibe where I could see myself from a detached position. All my feelings were muted except the good ones, which were unrealistically cheerful, but their very crispness called them out as cheats. Somehow chemists had figured out a way to dull negative feelings while sharpening positive ones, but neither extreme felt real. Life is an all-in-one proposition; no wonderful moment is entirely unsullied by the errant negative thought. It’s the returning to the good after the bad interlude that releases the endorphins. I found myself laughing too heartily at lame jokes and staring listlessly at my tablet at a video of a plane crash. A good follower, I never considered not taking the pills, but I promised myself that after a week when the prescription ran out, I’d let it go and try to handle my feelings on my own.

I dreamed every night, I knew, and had a few good ones, like sitting in a café with Benjamin Corbin, the famous actor, who acted like I was his best friend, begging me to come up to Napa with him that weekend for a party. I also dreamed I was flying, darting in and out of big, fluffy white clouds, using only my arms as control surfaces. I didn’t pull a Lebowski or anything; I just finally touched down lightly on a grassy field and walked away.

Which triggered another dream: standing on grass under a yellow street light next to a curb. A plump palm tree base squatted nearby. The street was wet. The grass to my left gave way to a dark ditch, with a glint of gold down in there. And a red cast to everything as exhaust mist rose in front of a brake light.

The next day I was standing near the printer, waiting for my turn in the queue. Steve came in. “Hey, Mitch!” he said buoyantly.

“Steve,” I said, stiffening, expecting his usual tone, which was defeatism mixed with suicide. But he wasn’t suicidal; in fact, he was hyper-happy. “How’s it going?” I ventured, guessing he was on one of Al’s mood alternators. His eyes seemed normal, though.

“Great,” he said, leaning against the doorway. “I just made a breakthrough.”

I didn't want to get into his can of worms with Mayra, so I just nodded.

"The new allPhone and the Scanpatch? I think I worked out the interface kink. I'm running a test now, but I think I've got it licked." He beamed.

"You've been working on that for two weeks," I said. I had been expecting both devices to end up on my desk any day. I was relieved. "That's good. Really good."

Steve nodded. "I'm gonna celebrate tonight." He leaned in. "Thinking of asking Mayra out."

I straightened. "You sure that's a good idea?"

"Why not? I've seen her looking at me."

"Well, yeah," I blurted out. "You know—"

The printer popped out a bound booklet. "That's mine!" said Steve, grabbing it. He slapped me on the arm as he left. "Wish me luck!" he said, winking.

"Good luck," I said, watching him go, completely confused.

"I think Steve has gone over the edge," I said to Al at lunch.

Al turned to find Steve at his usual location, but he was not there.

"There," I said, pointing. Steve was sitting with two other techs and they were laughing.

"I guess so," said Al, turning back to his lunch. "Never seen him eat lunch with anyone—he must be crazy."

I couldn't take my eyes off Steve. He was talking, animated, enjoying himself as he told his listeners some story—they were too far away for us to hear—and the others were actually *laughing*. Laughing! And not at Steve, but at his *story*. Something was wrong.

"Uh oh," said Al, nudging me.

"Shit," I said as I saw Mayra enter the lunchroom. Both Steve and Mayra had been given different lunch schedules and Steve was supposed to be long gone by now, but there he was, still sitting there. His companions froze when they saw Mayra. Steve saw their reaction and looked over his shoulder. Suddenly, the entire room went dead silent.

Mayra had stopped dead in her tracks, surprised at seeing Steve. Her face morphed from expressionless purpose to shock. Her mouth popped open. I started getting to my feet. Al put a hand on my shoulder.

"Hi, Mayra," said Steve, smiling at her, then turning back to his lunch as if nothing had happened.

Mayra's face flushed red and her lips went tight. She turned on her heels and marched out of the room. Steve's companions stared at her until she disappeared and then they turned their attention back to Steve.

Even all the way across the room I could hear the innocence in his voice: “What?”

A couple hours later, my tablet chirped and I looked over at it. Simons was on the screen. “Got a minute, Mitch?” he said. I nodded. “Come see me.” He clicked off.

Simons was our boss, and he *never* asked anyone to his office. Ever. I was surprised but not afraid. If I was going to be fired, I would have received a packet from HR, along with a list of lawyers I could consult. This was something different, but the butterflies still darted around inside me.

“Have a seat,” said Simons, gesturing at a chair. His office had windows, and a perfect SoCal day was shaping up outside. The morning fog had burned off, replaced by a fierce sun. I took a seat, pasting on a smile but saying nothing.

“It’s about Fletcher.”

I sighed in relief. Steve Fletcher was under me, that was true, but this obviously had to be about the near-miss in the lunchroom. I nodded. “I saw. Close one.”

“Not really,” said Simons, fingering a sheet of paper in front of him. “We could have avoided it entirely if I’d received this in time.” He held it up, but I couldn’t see the writing. “I just got finished talking to Ms. Parker. She didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?” I asked.

“Her restraining order has been rescinded,” said Simons, tapping the paper.

“Really?” I asked. “How’d Steve manage that?”

“He didn’t. The Court did, after he completed his sentencing.” Simons picked up another paper and handed it to me. At the top was a letterhead: CLEAN SLATE.

I read it out loud: “Dear Mr. Simons: this letter serves as notice that Steven Fletcher has completed our procedure and is now free of the memories that occasioned the restraining order (see attached). Please be advised that Mr. Fletcher has no memory *whatsoever* of the incidents involving Ms. Parker. We ask you to closely monitor Mr. Fletcher in order to ascertain that his behavior is in line with our prognosis. Under no circumstances are you to discuss Clean Slate or this letter with Mr. Fletcher. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call.”

“What’s this?” I asked, handing the letter back to Simons.

“Have you heard of Clean Slate?”

I shook my head.

“Word is, it started out as a DARPA project,” said Simons. “In essence, they found a way to erase memories. Because both Fletcher and Parker work here, and neither one had done anything of sufficient gravity to be fired—and believe me, we tried to find something to get rid of Fletcher—the Court ordered him to undergo either treatment or incarceration. It was his choice.”

“So he doesn’t remember anything about her?” I asked.

Simons shook his head. “You saw it, right? I’m told that in the lunchroom he acted like nothing had gone on between them. I just informed Mayra; she’ll have some adjustments, but if the erase takes, we can all relax.”

“So why am I here?” I asked.

“You’re his team leader,” said Simons. “I wanted you in the loop. I want you to keep an eye on him and let me know if he says or does anything . . . you know, *typical*.”

“Too late,” I said. “He told me this morning he was going to ask her out.”

Simon started. “*This* morning? Before the lunchroom thing?”

I nodded.

“Shit,” said Simons.

“I guess you can’t repress physical attraction,” I said.

“Well, try to divert it.”

I laughed. “How?”

Simons frowned and pointed a finger at me. His bald head shone. “I don’t give a shit. Talk him out of it, distract him, whatever! He’s *this* close to getting fired.” Simons held his thumb and forefinger a millimeter apart. “Just keep him away from her. She’s up to speed and will rebuff any advances he makes, if any. It’s your job to see he doesn’t. Get it?”

I nodded, my head spinning. Memory erasure?

I sat down in Fletcher’s cubicle and picked up the allPhone. “It’s heavy, isn’t it?”

Steve nodded. “People like its substantiality; reminds them of the brick phones our grandparents used to use.”

“Yeah,” I said hefting it. “You could break a window with this thing.”

Steve smiled at me.

“How’s the testing? You said it was going pretty well.”

Steve looked at his computer screen, where the progress bars were three-quarters green. “Pretty good, so far. Fingers crossed!” He smiled again. I could not remember seeing him smile this much. But he didn’t *seem* stoned. Maybe it was the erasure residual; maybe they capped off the procedure with an endorphin mash. Whatever it was, he was lucid and happy, and no one on trunks was ever both at the same time.

“Listen,” I said, leaning in close. “About what you said in the printer room.”

Steve was examining a small oscillating graphic on his computer screen. “Hmm?”

“You know,” I said tentatively, “about Mayra.”

“Oh. Yeah,” he answered absently, tapping a pencil against the screen. “She’s cute. Hey, look, this thing looks like it’s gonna glide right through.” He turned to me, nodding.

“She has a boyfriend,” I lied.

“She does?” His smile faded and he shook his head. “Too bad. I thought she’d be fun, you know, maybe to take to a movie or something. Oh well.” He turned back to the screen and said, “Yeah, it looks like we’re out of the woods!”

I stood and put my hand on his shoulder. “Yeah. Looks like it.”

I was standing at the far side of the street. The car brakes were on and red light shimmered across the wet pavement. My hand was wet and sticky. I raised it and squinted. It was bloody.

The body lay in the ditch, the red hair across her face, her top torn. A gold chain glinted at her neck above very white skin. She was a teenager, judging from her clothing—all black.

I looked over my shoulder at the idling car. *My* car. The passenger side fender was already restoring itself, the paint oozing around the scuff marks. In thirty minutes, the damage would be invisible.

I looked across the street, where a sloping lawn rose to a rambler with scalloped eaves and a red tile roof. A car sat at the curb. A black canvas shoe lay in the middle of the street. Suddenly, I knew what had happened. I did not see her dart out from behind the car. Blood spots trailed from the point of impact—I’d literally knocked her out of her shoe—to the curb at my feet. I’d rolled her into the ditch and turned my car around.

Now I was taking one last look. I didn’t have much time. Her implant would register her flat vitals and location, which would draw the police here. I looked around desperately. This was an old neighborhood; there were no street cameras. I looked again at the house above the lawn, peering at the eaves. No cameras there. I looked at the car. I’d had the presence of mind to shut off the headlights, and that included the license plate light. All any camera would take note of was the make and model. And, of course, the man standing next to it.

I pulled my hat down over my ears and looked back at the girl. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “What were you doing, running across the street at night, wearing *black*? Disgust welled up in me and I thought I’d vomit. If I did, the DNA trail would be like neon. I clamped a hand over my mouth and turned toward the car.

Then I awoke. Desperation enveloped me. Every pore, it seemed, oozed acrid sweat. The sheets were wet and my heart was pounding. I placed my palms over my eyes. “God!” I cried. “Jesus!”

Remarkably, I went right back to sleep. I guessed the dream exhausted me. When I awoke the next morning, I'd had enough. Clearly, this *had* to stop. Jung and Freud were stewing my brain and I was sick of it. I remembered a website that promised it could teach you—for just five hundred dollars—how to control your dreams. *Live your dreams!* the ad promised. *As you dream, so you can be!* said the tag line. *The good life is a dream fulfilled!* said the copy, which promised that our dreams are our highest aspirations and that harnessing our dreams would change our attitudes, guaranteeing success. And on and on.

I knew it was horseshit, but harnessing dreams seemed like a good idea. Mine were out of control, stray ideas and storylines culled from too many movies and role-playing games. I'd never seen a street like the one in my dream. The house was unfamiliar. Allison certainly did *not* live there. I did not drive a 1950-whatever Buick sedan and I never wore a fedora in my life.

The dream was just fragments of stuff collected and pasted together without transitions. Though the milieu was riveting, the girl's face was invisible. Wasn't that a clue? Black canvas shoes I've seen everywhere. But the girl's face? My own imagination—notwithstanding what Joyce the social worker said—was so paltry that I couldn't even conjure up a face for the victim.

But most of all, why the guilt? Over an auto accident? At night, wet streets, poor visibility, black clothing? It was an *accident*, for Christ's sake, and so the emotional baggage I was waking up with was completely out of whack.

Maybe the pills Joyce gave me had screwed up my brain. I never took pharms, like Al did. He said he *never* remembered his dreams. What I wouldn't give for that!

As I got ready for work, I promised myself I'd have a little talk with Pharmer Al and get out of this stupid rut.

But Al was sick that day. Turns out *he'd* gotten Allison's cold after all. I still felt fine, physically, if bone tired from the restless sleep and bad dreams. I felt hung-over and languid.

Then I saw Steve. He was standing at the end of the cubicle row, talking to, of all people, *Mayra*. They were laughing, and she gave him a good-natured slap on the arm at the obviously off-color joke he'd just told her. He threw his head back and walked away, guffawing. She started toward me.

"Mayra?" I asked as she walked past my cube.

"Yes?"

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Steve just told me the sickest joke. Disgusting."

"You gonna file a complaint?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"Against him?" asked Mayra. "He was just joking. Besides it *was* kind of funny."

She started to tell the joke but I just looked at her. Suddenly, I knew she had been to Clean Slate as well. I didn't hear the punch line because I was formulating my own plans.

* * *

When Simons went to lunch, I went into his office and rifled his desk drawers. There, right on top of the papers in the left-hand drawer, practically inviting me to filch it, was the Clean Slate letter. But it wasn't the letter about Steve. This one was about Mayra. I was right; she *had* been there and they'd fixed her.

Fixed her. That was how I was starting to think about it. They had *fixed* her, erased her bad memories and now she and Steve were strangers again with no idea of their history.

I left work early, the address memorized.

I must have memorized it wrong, because I found myself standing in front of a dilapidated building downtown on Spring Street. There were many windows in the featureless concrete façade, but most were blacked out or boarded over. The sidewalk was littered with trash. Graffiti was scrawled all along the walls. There was only one large rusty double door, inexplicably free of tags. Examining it, I noted it was the same sort of paint that high-end cars boast: expensive polymers that cannot be painted over. Thus, this one was designed to look old, but because it could not be defaced, it soon stuck out from the rest of its surroundings.

I grasped the latch and hauled the door open.

The vestibule smelled of diesel oil and turpentine, but there was no trace of construction. The ancient marble art deco floor was covered with dirt and trash. Flies buzzed. Heaps of cardboard lay in the corners, evidence that derelicts crashed there at night. An elevator at the far end was enclosed in an ornate metal armature. I waved my hand across the call panel and heard a distant motor whine. After a long time, the elevator arrived. I pulled the scissors door aside and entered the elevator, which was glass walled, ceilinged, and floored, all with opaque glass of muted colors. It was like being inside an ancient cathedral with dirty stained-glass windows.

I didn't touch any buttons, but the doors closed on their own and the elevator started up. I noticed that while the exterior of the elevator was filthy, the inside was perfectly clean.

After what I took to be about ten floors, the elevator stopped and the doors opened. I pushed the scissor doors aside and stepped out onto a green marble floor. The walls were paneled in wood, stained dark and intricately worked. There were a number of old-fashioned chairs scattered around, and a large desk at the far end, behind which sat a beautiful young woman, her hands neatly folded on the desk, and her eyes on me.

"Welcome," she said as I approached.

"Is this Clean Slate?"

She nodded.

"Not easy to find," I said, looking around.

She nodded again.

"That's on purpose, I suppose," I continued.

“Yes sir,” she said.

“I have some questions,” I said. I work at CrossTalk, out in Santa Monica. A co-worker—two of them, in fact—came here to be treated, I guess. If this is your only facility.”

“It is,” said the woman, opening a drawer and reaching into it.

“They had their memories erased. An unsatisfying relationship.”

She was placing a number of sheets of paper on an old clipboard, which fascinated me. Where was the ubiquitous tablet?

She held the clipboard out to me. A pencil dangled from a string.

“I have some questions,” I repeated, taking the clipboard. “Do you erase dr—?”

“We have some questions, too,” she said, nodding. “Please.”

I looked down at the questionnaire, then back at her.

“Please fill out the paperwork and then we’ll try to answer *your* questions.”

I sat in an overstuffed chair and picked up the pencil. I wondered why they didn’t just scan me; all my biometrics were burned into my wrist chip. But the pencil felt good as I scratched block capitals into the blanks on the paper. As I worked, I remembered Steve had tapped his computer screen with a pencil. It hadn’t registered much then, but it did now. I looked at the pencil, imagining tiny silicon chips inside it, registering my heart rate, body temperature, even scanning my DNA.

Or not. Freud said, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

When I finished, I took the clipboard back to the receptionist. She had done nothing during my time there other than sit quietly, her hands laced in front of her on the desk, looking into space. I wondered if she was perhaps an automaton.

“Here,” I said, handing the clipboard to her, looking closely her skin for any tell-tale giveaways. Her skin was flawless, as was the blue of her eyes and her brilliant smile. She was perfect and, thus, human. No one would make an android that perfect. No one would dare.

“Now,” I said, “I was wondering if you can erase a dream.”

She smiled. “I’m sorry, sir, but I’m new here and I don’t really know *what* they do back there.” She nodded at the double doors behind her. “I’ve only been here a few days, I think.”

“You *think*?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “they *do* erase memories, don’t they? Maybe I’ve always worked here and I just don’t remember.” She smiled as if to say, *No big deal*.

I suddenly felt an urge to leave. I looked behind me. The elevator was right where I’d left it, the door was still open. No one had entered the building since I had almost thirty minutes

before. As far as I knew, the receptionist and I were the only ones here, and she wasn't so certain about herself.

I was about to take a step toward the elevator when a white-coated man came brusquely through the doors behind the receptionist. His dark hair was slicked straight back. He was of medium build and had enormous hands. He took the clipboard from the girl and looked me up and down, then extended his large hand and pumped mine. "Welcome to Clean Slate, Mr . . ." He looked down at the clipboard. "Osborn." He smiled. "Come this way."

I looked back at the receptionist, who was also smiling too broadly. I would have turned and sprinted to the elevator, but the big-handed doctor had me by the elbow and was guiding me through the double doors.

On the other side, we walked down a long hallway, passing several small offices furnished only with two chairs facing each other across a tiny, round table. We entered the third room on our right. *Why this one?* I thought as he steered me to a chair. *Why not one of the first three rooms? What's so special about this one?*

He sat down opposite me and began reading the clipboard. I sat there, hands clenched, trying to locate the source of my anxiety. The room was nondescript, with tan walls and a suspended ceiling. The floor was polished cement. The chairs and the table were smooth lime-green plastic. On the table between us was a pitcher of water and two plastic tumblers. Condensation dripped down the pitcher; someone had just put it there; there was no water ring at the base.

What is wrong with you? I shouted silently at myself. *Forget the damn water! What have you gotten yourself into? This place is obviously military and they're looking for volunteers! Are you a volunteer?*

"Mr. Osborn?" the doctor was saying.

"Doctor?" I said.

He smiled and tapped his knee with the clipboard. "I'm not a doctor. I'm the intake specialist. The doctor will be along in a moment. I'm here to answer your questions, if you have any."

"A couple," I managed. I was terrified. The presence of two doorways between me and the elevator was making me panic. "I'm not really sure you can help me. I might have made a mistake. You see, a co-worker—"

"Yes, he's here," said the intake specialist, holding up the clipboard, which seemed toy-like encased in his large hand. "That's how you learned about us. Word gets out." He smiled. "We're in beta now," he continued. "We've hired a marketing firm to introduce us to the world. You may have already seen some ads."

"I don't think so," I said.

"They are subtle," said the intake specialist. "Very subtle. So subtle, in fact, that I'd be willing to bet you're here because of one, though you may not realize it."

"I'm here because of a bad dream I keep having," I blurted out.

“Dream?”

“Yes, a recurring dream where I wake up feeling guilty about accidentally *killing* someone. I’m wondering if you can help me erase the dream.”

“We don’t really deal with dreams . . . just memories.”

I jumped to my feet. “Oh well! Then I’ll just be going—”

Just then, a tall man with close-cropped gray hair entered the room. He was studying a tablet intently, but had his right hand out in a beckoning gesture. The intake specialist got to his feet and placed the clipboard into the older man’s outstretched hand. I sat down, outnumbered.

The man studied the clipboard and a strange look passed across his features. He looked at me for the first time. A small smile appeared on his thin lips. “Well,” he said, extending his hand to me, “Mr. Osborn. How nice to see you . . . *again*.”