

Self

He was expecting the communication.

For the past several days he had watched what the media had dubbed as "Humageddon" unfold inside his eyelids. He watched images coming in from all over the world of humans malfunctioning in a variety of ways from the humorous to the tragic. A man was eyefilmed on an Iowa farm eating from a trough alongside a hungry herd of Meishan swine. The man, an investment broker from San Francisco, was reported missing by his wife three days prior when she received the communication that his GPS had been disabled. When the eyefilmer asked what he was doing the man replied "What the oink does it look like I'm doing? Eating, dumbass." In Australia, a teenage girl who was spending her summer volunteering at an assisted living facility was mauled to death by an elderly man who meditech experts are saying was infected with Trojan Rabies. And almost half of all motorists viewed on RoadLook were driving in reverse at high rates of speed.

RAYMOND, READ CAREFULLY AND DO NOT BLINK OUT ON ME. HNN IS ONLY REPORTING A FRACTION OF THE DETRIMENT. THE VIRUSES ARE REPLICATING AT A QUANTATIVE RATE. THE CODE INJECTORS ARE LIKE NOTHING I'VE EVER SEEN. WE WILL NOT SURVIVE THIS WITHOUT YOUR HELP. TOMORROW, THE SPOT, 9 AM SHARP.

Raymond blinked the communication into his recycle bin and shut down his operating system. He smoothed his famous salt and pepper beard with intellectual strokes and thought about his options. Save the world. Or, kill the world. Kill the world. Or, save the world. Save. Save. Kill. Save. It had been so long since he had made up his own mind that the obvious humane choice seemed more like a death sentence than death itself.

"Jesus Christ," Raymond lamented when he rebooted his processor. He googled pros and cons of saving the world... biofuels, cloning, timeshares. Nothing. He blinked in his other option...Brad Pitt, nuclear weapons, malaria. Nothing. He got out of bed, where he has lived for the past three months due to a wicked case of catatonic laziness, and went to his safe to retrieve his most lavish expense. An uncirculated 2015 Philadelphia mint penny, the very last one ever produced. He outbid at a Treasury Department auction for \$4.7 million. The coin is currently valued at a little over twenty dollars.

Heads, save. Tails, kill.

"Damn it."

The Godfather of Geek wanted no part of the so-called humatech revolution other than to live in it anonymously. He resigned from Mango Inc via a tweet in 2014 after *Wired* pronounced the computer dead, "I invented the world's first microcomputer, the Mango 1, when I was eighteen years old. Now toddlers are uploading music to the Cloud so they can access their lullabies at daycare. It's happening too fast. #floatonwithoutme."

The Cloud died three years later when Rick Works, Raymond's former partner and co-founder of Mango Inc, announced at a news conference that he decoded the human genome and introduced the world to Self, the first human central processing unit. The only people who could afford the first generation of Self were politicians and hipsters but by 2021 the global government had mandated that every citizen of Earth be outfitted with Self. Due to the mandate the Self 4 was rushed to the market without the regulated testing on animals and within minutes humans started exhibiting signs of malware intrusion. Patches were created and humans were updating themselves every two hours to keep ahead of infection. Hard shut downs were another way of avoiding viruses but turning the unit off seemed to be more detrimental than infection as

off humans risked losing the ability to make decisions, perform menial tasks, and often became bed ridden out of confusion.

Raymond was furious over Rick's misuse of intellect. He published an open letter to Works in the Times with the headline "Et tu, Rick?" calling his former partner a "sell-out-fake-hippie-government-puppet who would be a milk-scorching-barista living in a tent in some National Park if it weren't for me." There wasn't one Times reader who got past the headline. No one wanted the truth, no one wanted free thought, all of that was too much work. A lonely comment made by a presumably bored troll bookended the headline with "What's his name is just another bitter burnout like that Fence guy who kept making inoperable software long after the PC's death. Mr. Ada, no one wants to read your rants, they're too long. Buy an RV and visit the Grand Canyon or do whatever it is retired people are supposed to do."

So Raymond bought a RV and went to the Grand Canyon. And to Mt. Rushmore. Drove up the coast on State Route 1. Visited every Presidential museum. And stopped at every roadside attraction he could find. World's largest ball of twine. The world's largest garden gnome. A house in the shape of a shoe. He eventually parked in Naples, Florida, turned off his GPS, and waited for death. His days were long and uninspiring. On the days when he felt a wild hair he would drive the RV to Walmart and meet up with a few fellow retirees at the in-store McDonald's for coffee and idle chitchat about the stock market or NASCAR.

Raymond boarded the red-eye to California. He didn't know why he was going. Even if the worthless penny had landed on tails he knew he still would be boarding this plane. Pride, revenge, a good heart. One of those, or none of them. He reasoned he was probably just bored. He squeezed past his planemate a woman in the aisle seat wearing what appeared to be lipstick on her eyebrows and eyeshadow on her chin.

"Excuse me, m'am. I'm the window seat."

"Yes. Yes. Your seat is in the overhead. I'll move so you can jump in. Thank you for shopping at Target, have a nice day. The temperature is 33 in Pittsburgh today. Brrrr."

"We don't have to worry about Pittsburgh's weather, we're headed to San Francisco," Raymond said as he stepped over the woman and onto his seat.

"We're not headed anywhere. Go back to sleep, you're dreaming again. You and that damn Zoloft, always talking in your sleep."

The woman got out a comb and started grooming Raymond's hair. She stroked it once and traded the comb for a magazine, "Oh, a recipe for macaroons. We'll make these for the baby shower."

Raymond glanced around at the other passengers. About half of them were behaving in the nature of this woman. Conversing with confused, non-infected passengers, some were wearing their pants as shirts, some were naked. One guy had a bicycle tire around his neck and kept shouting, "Where are my damn toothpicks?"

Raymond sent Rick a communication.

WE MAY BE TOO LATE. I'M WORKING ON A FIX NOW BUT I FEAR IT WILL BE WORTHLESS BY THE MORNING. WE MAY HAVE TO RESORT TO OPERATION FAIL. I CANNOT BELIEVE IT HAS COME TO THIS. WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

"We are not resorting to Operation Fail," Works said, pushing his wirerims up with his forefinger, "You are the genius, you were always the genius. I was just better with the public. You can code a fix for this. Do it, please. Or hell's going to break loose."

Raymond sipped his coffee and looked down at the Bay, "This is where it all started. You and me, sharing a joint and an idea on this bridge. And this is where it will end. We have absolutely no choice but to employ Operation Fail. Hell has already broken loose. We are past updates. I am not the genius, Rick, and neither are you. We created genius. It has surpassed our intellect, we must kill it. Or we kill everyone."

"But we're testing Self 5 now. It's revolutionary. And completely safeguarded against hacks and viruses. Nothing can intrude on the next generation. I just need to control the chaos for another month or so and then we'll do the news conference to announce the launch next fall."

"Next fall? Jesus Christ, Rick. We may not even have the next hour. Have you been infected?"

"Listen, we kill the OS and start from scratch. It may take another thirty years to get to this point but we have to go back to Mango I prototype and start over. It's the only way."

"And leave humans without any technology? It's one thing to remove the human cpu but to wipe out the very concept of microcomputing? How will we survive?"

"No one will know any better. The patch will erase their memory. It will be 1977 all over again. I just received a blink from the President. We have less than a minute to install, the Koreans just launched the Self Nuclear App. You say yes, I activate the patch. You say no, I'm jumping off this bridge."

Rick pushed up his sleeves and looked Raymond in the eyes, "I say yes and you move back to Silicon Valley and we start over. And we do it right." Rick took out a pen and wrote on his arm "Operation Fail activated on March 2, 2021. Start over. No ego. Wear black turtlenecks."

"Deal."

Raymond activated the patch.

"Whoa, that's some good weed, man," Raymond coughed and handed the joint back to Rick.

"Shit, I'd say. Check out my arm. We activated Operation Fail. We came back from the future, man. And turtlenecks? I am so stoned."

"Me too, brother. Let's go back to the van."

Rick paused, "I've been thinking about selling the van. We could use the money to get Mango off the ground. What do you think?"

"I think it's a great day to be alive."