

The city glittered as the light dimmed in the oncoming twilight. It was just moments before the glow of dusk disappeared and white arcs flashed into the sky creating a false daylight. Ellis scowled at the glare and moved back into the darkened box he called home. The only source of light in the room - a small CRT screen. It displayed a list of food banks and their hours. Beside this sat a stack of ancient and crumbling paper back books.

“Technology will free the masses but it won’t employ them” he muttered. “We’ve made the tools so well they don’t need us.”

He tossed his paper down, as it fell to the floor the headline could be seen. “WORLD UNEMPLOYMENT AT AN ALL TIME HIGH”. It was true, a small handful of people ran everything - coded everything. Those who knew nothing of art “created” paintings from pre-programmed graphic selections, their vision being a conglomerate of all that has preceded them. Movies or Holos were more or less re-arranged chunks of past successes. Actors were stored now - they didn’t age from their prime unless it was required and then it was a digital enhancement. Of course their work didn’t improve either, but they were certainly more dependable and a lot cheaper.

New works were discouraged. It might offend or set a bad example - it would certainly require the services of a “finisher” and the UN/PCA approval. One couldn’t help but believe that there was more humour and freedom during the Spanish Inquisition.

Revolutionaries did lurk, the UPC’s as they were called, but their methods and technologies were so painfully slow or had been so cleverly disguised that when the masses heard they understood nothing. They were considered little more than Gadflies.

Ellis was one of these, he actually owned a manual typewriter. It protected his work as there was no way to access and edit it from the outside. Diaries and journals posted online were always suspect, since they could be re-written. He

also had, if you can believe it, bound books. Of course he lived on the edge of the city's refuse area, it was his job - one of the few that had not been mechanized - watching the discarded items - junk. It also meant a roof over his head and food credits and really *that* was all that he really needed. Food and a roof, pretty basic stuff at least until the night of the Big Scream.

We'd done pretty well, survived plagues, HIV, Corona, famine and pestilence. The air actually crackled with electricity on damp nights. That night, the night of the Big Scream. It had started in India, a high pitched electrical hum. The noise grew, traveling through the atmosphere until the entire planet was awakened by the scream of a banshee. Then all power completely disappeared.

Ellis was startled, the CRT screen had gone dark, the glow of the city was gone and in the starlight he heard cries. . . human cries.

"Can't be everywhere, " he muttered to himself. "That'd be crazy. . . they'll fix it in a few seconds."

Seconds past, then minutes and then hours. Something began to cast a clean bright light. He looked up and smiled, the Moon. No one ever looked for the Moon anymore, even he had forgotten. Scrambling on the floor he found a candle, and a box of matches. The flame seemed incredibly bright in the overwhelming darkness. Carefully, Ellis made his way toward the city.

II

The quiet was frightening. It was broken by the occasional whimpers coming from the darkened buildings. A few people huddled together at corners as Ellis and his candle passed, they seemed to be drawn to follow the light. He reached the public square and slowly climbed the stairs to one of the unnamed government buildings. He turned to face his followers.

"This is temporary folks, it'll be sun-up in a few hours and we can regroup. So relax and they'll get it all sorted out in the morning."

“Who will?” asked someone from the dark.

“The engineers, the techies. . . the ones that run it. “

“How ? “ came an angry reply. “I heard it , I heard the scream. It was the world, the planet giving up.”

Ellis pleaded , “Please, you can’t believe that. Even if it is world wide we can fix it.” He sighed heavily thinking of how few actually knew how. The techies now didn’t plan the grids or design the systems so where would they even start ?

Blowing out his candle Ellis sat down on the steps , his followers just watching him, waiting for some word.

“Just wait for the sun. . . “ he snapped. “I’ll find out in the morning.”

One by one the followers drifted away, and as the sun began to glow in the east all that could be heard was soft sobbing.

III

A single ray of light poked Ellis in the eye. He squinted into the reflected glare. The sun had risen and now the city gleamed brightly. The sobbing had stopped and now the streets were clogged with people looking for some sign of a return to normalcy.

Shaking himself, Ellis looked around the square then stalked toward a building with Power Maintenance posted above the door. He pushed the heavy doors and entered the building .

The interior was dim with only ambient light sources providing illumination of the great empty hallways. Looking at the directory Ellis found a listing - Supervisor General - 40th Floor.

He groaned and searched out a stairway and began to climb. Each landing provided another group of people - all with the same question. All unwilling to continue climbing and waiting for someone else to supply the answers.

“What happened ?” he asked a group of people who appeared to be technicians. The replies were a grab bag.

“We over-extended.”

“China pulled too much power.”

“A fuse blew. . .we just haven’t found it yet.”

“We aren’t sure.”

So he continued to climb, finally reaching the 40th floor. The dim hallway ended with a massive door. Ornately carved figures of men and machines covered the surfaces, more interesting was that light was coming from beneath the door. Ellis pushed it open.

A soft artificial glow lit the room, a room occupied by a very large old desk and seated behind it was a very old man. He smiled a little as Ellis approached.

“The great and powerful Oz, I presume” Ellis hissed at the old man.

“Now how would you know about him ? “ the old man replied slowly, coming around the desk. “He’s been outlawed for years, not on the disks or the drives. Not safe, you know.”

“It doesn’t matter. I know. What does matter is that you have power, and no one else has, and I mean no one else does“

The old man pointed to a large stack of black objects and laughed. “I won’t have it very long, son. Those are old auto batteries. The kind that didn’t work with the newer cars. That’s my power source, but it does appear to be the only one. Haven’t been able to raise anyone else. “

Ellis paused for a moment, battery power !? Could it restore an entire city ? Where were you going to get batteries? Would it actually reduce the creeping panic that would start again as the sun went down ? A very small world and grown very large and distant again and very scary.

Various groups of the UPC's had barriers set up around the junk yards when Ellis and his followers showed up. Bright lights blazed behind them powered by banks of auto batteries.

"You have to share it, " Ellis preached. "You're proving that people have been right all along, that you are just as self -centered and insensitive as those you want to change."

The leader of the group, a scrappy young woman walked forward. "They never shared power or ideas unless they were oh-so-bland and inoffensive. Inoffensive to the point of being Insensitive. I'm not afraid of the dark, but these overly protective, hypersensitives are. Maybe they are afraid of when the lights go out. That they are afraid and fear is not bland and not something you can package. Fear can be real. What are you afraid of ? "

Ellis looked at her and shook his head, "You have a point. People fear they won't be able to eat and sleep in peace. The world they know is gone and nobody seems to know how to fix it. I'm a UPC but I have no desire to live in a stress torn city, let alone a world. Riots are going to break out unless we get some power, so are you going to let us have some of the batteries or not?"

Slowly the other UPC stepped aside and Ellis and his band worked their way through the junkyard. In a few hours they had collected about 200 batteries and were moving back to the city.

"If we find out the whole planet is out we'll let you know . . ." Ellis paused. "When this happened. . . did you hear anything? "

The woman turned to Ellis with a jolt, as if being shaken awake and suddenly realizing that she was still part of the human race.

"Oh yes, " she sighed, " It was like a moan, a wail, a big scream. So very sad."

Ellis turned back and shook her head, "I guess that's what we call it then, the big scream blues. It makes sense."

V

It had taken most of the afternoon to get the batteries working but by nightfall a soft glow was in the central square and a few of the most powerful computers were online and trying to activate communication with other places all over the world.

VI

Life changed. It was mostly confined to small pockets these days . The lands between the city domes had a sprinkling of people but on the whole were deserted. They had tried to contact the London Assembly but there was no answer. The Shanghai and Tokyo Assemblies gave a weak response, but all were suffering.

Ellis walked over to the old man, whose name, oddly enough, was Ozzie. He smiled at him, "So it is world wide. . . ."

"They never considered system failure, " Ozzie said softly. "They reached the information superhighway - 5000 channels of information and communication. It was lovely. Everything was so fast, so accessible, so clean and impersonal. If you could type you didn't need to write and voice activated was even better. There were no more handwritten letters - really it was all electronic."

Ellis grumbled, “ People stopped treating each other as humans should, with kindness, with respect. We’re numbers - always accessible. . . reachable anywhere - or we were. You couldn’t get away to think or create. If it couldn’t be programmed, or hadn’t already been. . . it just wasn’t necessary.”

Ellis looked around , he had come to love the speed and ease of the systems, yet he yearned for the forgotten crafts. The beautiful works of some monks' illumination were turned into a program now, taking mere minutes compared to years to produce. Hand carved statues were mass produced. Everyone could be an “artist” if they desired. Even famous authors couldn’t keep up with the programmed novels and short stories.

Maybe the Big Scream was just a form of spiritual Future Shock for mankind - the screech of humanities worn out brake making man slow down, take a deep breath and listen to the world around him.

Ozzie walked to the window where Ellis watched the twinkling lights of the city. It was a gentle twinkle akin to stars and not glaring artificial suns.

“We just took some time out, son. Some of us have been trying to get that idea, to slow down, through for a long time --- seems mother nature just gave us a hand.”

“It’ll come back though, just like before,” Ellis sighed

“But we’ll know what we’re getting into now. . .”

“I wonder if we will. . . “

“Remember, each Renaissance came out of a dark age. . . only this time we didn’t lose it all. Maybe, we’ll have listened and learned.

The next day there was writing on the wall, and the Mashusita-Guttenberg 4000 was under construction.