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The B Side

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Library Talk

"There ain't much new under the sun," Quigley commented, shifting the wave frequency on the mother board -- adjusting the patterns manually to green so the client's neuro-axiom vermis intersect aligned. "And what *IS* once was. And what *WAS* will be again. Cause there ain't no new under the sun."

As a senior immersion technician with the Stratford Library, and one of the few bridging the gap between sentient brain mapping and digital interface, Quigley's talents were hard to replace. As was his insistence on passing down his knowledge. Especially among the younger, more AI-dependent lads graduating from the academy. Quigley could trouble-shoot fourteen positions during active perfusion along the Introvertis Pod Download Units --all while his clients remained in deep stasis with the vermis intersect intertwined around their corpus collosum -- and still ensure an uninterrupted download. Not one of the new techs could master more than five. So Quigley felt it important to stand in the gap and teach them. Which, to them, came across more as hubris than the benevolence Quigley imagined.

The Stratford knew this too and, as a sign of the times, recently implemented full system upgrades catering to their more pliable, AI-dependent, tech lad hires -- shifting client-production integration values to direct stream capacity, while systematically eliminating all download requirements in the process. Which, Quigley suspected, once completed, would result in his termination as well.

“There, that’ll do it. Mr. Trellinger is back online and comfortably on his way. But next time,” Quigley mentioned to Tommy John Bentis, the newest library tech apprentice, “don’t administer the dialectic infusion till you’re absolutely sure the client’s beta and theta waves have synced with the broadcast band reader. You have to physically look at the sensory display on their forehead to make sure -- not just rely on the panel reader’s summary. That’s one reason why we have dual redundancies.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you Mr. Weston.”

“Quigley is fine.”

“Thank you Mr. Quigley. I’ll make sure to physically check next time. Will there be a causality report filed?”

“No. As far as I’m concerned, no harm, no foul. Just a slight interruption to Mr. Trellinger’s pre-data load input.”

“I’m afraid the algorithm metrics will show an un-scheduled pause up to four points.”

“Sure, but Mr. Trellinger didn’t experience any complications – so no worries. I doubt admin will take exception.”

“Thank you, Mr. Quigley. A mark against my employment status wouldn’t be good. I’m still on probation, you see. And I was already docked for an error last week.”

Quigley sympathized. It wasn’t easy learning Stratford’s Living Book Integration and Immersion System. Or overseeing the thousands of book downloads for the Brahmin and Kshatriyas classes of Western Konepal when you were Shudra. But Tommy’s willingness to seek help was commendable. Not many did. Most of the new, cocksure hires coming out of the academy – those being taught “slippage” was part of the profession, with client losses acceptable up to three contact points – wouldn’t have. They’d have halted the procedure at three, filed a report blaming the all too avoidable

mistake on their client's fragile psyche, and shipped Mr. Trellinger off to the nearest medical realignment clinic to repair his impacted receptors -- along with a serious migraine and an added bill for his troubles.

Quigley tried to show them a better way, but most didn't take kindly to his suggestions. They believed their A.I. integration intelligence inculcations, housed within state of the art Helix-7 quantum-assay computer chips embedded in their own cerebral cortex, were far superior to the antiquated MRI sensors Quigley still employed. As far as they were concerned, what could an old dinosaur like him teach them in the face of such splendid modern technology?

"What were you reciting just then?" Tommy John asked. "That thing you were saying. I never heard it before. Nor does my Dewey-Decimal LLC catalogue seem to recognize it."

"It's a quote from the Bible. From a book called Ecclesiastes. I was using it as a reference point, reciting it to help me concentrate and stay calm."

"The Bible huh? I have notations about those in my LLC describing them as a "life-rules" history book from the Holocene period of early Anthropocene, like, from a really long time ago. But my LLC doesn't show any current copies available for download. And all tertiary copies have been expunged. How can that be? I thought libraries didn't burn books anymore. Not since the 451 riots. I thought they just shelved them away in the vaults."

"Most books they do. But those deemed potentially dangerous enough to imperilment national leadership are still eliminated. And the bible definitely has something to say about the principles of leadership."

"Are there any copies left?"

“Sure, a few. The Stratford Library has one, believe it or not. Not one of the Orange Ecumenism translations, mind you. No. Those were swept up long ago by the Italian courts and locked inside their Vatican Codex vaults. And all the King James and American Standard editions were collected by the Mormons more than fifty years ago and promptly burned. But the Stratford did rescue an English Standard Bible from a missionary burial site in Yakutia. I was a young tech back then -- barely older than you are now -- when the bible came to us and Librarian Almqvist tried to have its narratives formatted into downloadable content. But unfortunately, the powers that be shut his project down pretty quickly and deleted all the downloads. He did manage to save the physical copy -- though how, honestly, is a mystery. After that, the book was shelved downstairs in the vaults. Although Librarian Almqvist used to let a few of us techs go down to peruse it -- if we'd done all our work and knew how to read, that is. He was a good man. And it was a very interesting book to read. Life changing, you might say.”

“Wow! You're Shudra and you read? Even the Vaishya no longer read. They just download their content direct nowadays.”

“That is true.”

“So, you read then? Like really read the words printed on actual pages made of actual paper fiber? I heard a rumor you could, but I thought it was just gossip. You know, techs talking. Making fun of your, umm, senior age and such. Sorry, no offense meant.”

“None taken.”

“But you actually know how to read and don't need your cerebex AI interfaces to do so?”

“Yes, I can read direct from print.”

"Wow! Read? Really read? You can really read! With your eyes only and no interface."

"I can. I wouldn't say I do it extremely well, but I can. I learned when I was a kid."

"So how do you? I mean is it really possible? I hear it's unbearably slow. And the language retention rates are barely twenty percent. Even less if you factor in the crude exchange of primitive cortex sensory input to its imparted output realities."

"You're right, it does take longer. And it does require a certain amount of discipline to quiet the mind. And no, the book narratives aren't imparted directly by cerebral cortex link. But the interface between manual reading to mental comprehension stimulates the brain in a way no download can. It's less visceral, but somehow more immersive. Like picturing a dream in your head. Do they not teach the experience of reading terrestrial books at the academy anymore? It used to be a required class."

"No. I mean, yes, they still have the class, but no one takes it. It's a dead language skill that most everyone thinks is a waste. Even the professors. I don't know why they keep it around to tell you the truth. No offense. I'm not trying to be disrespectful or anything."

"No, of course not."

"What's it like though? Does it really take years to read a book cover to cover, as they say? How do you actually do it? Can you explain it?"

"Well, you look at the letters imprinted onto papyrus, solely with your organic eyes mind you, till your brain recognizes them as words. Then the organic brain translates those words, organized into sentences, till pictures appear within your conscious thoughts. Those pictures, in turn, are adaptively translated into story through sequences, called chapters, which are sequentially patterned till the end of the book is

reached. Which, at the reading's conclusion, imparts a certain comprehension, and allows the reader to assimilate what the writer was trying to communicate through the narrative. Then the hippocampus, in the medial temporal lobes, translates that exchange into an integrated fusion of book narrative and reader understanding --within a relative framework of esoteric and emotional based reality comprehension. It's almost magical really."

"It sounds like an overly drawn out process for a not very efficient system. Especially compared to the current capabilities we have nowadays."

"I've heard that as well."

"Which, I just realized, well...once the new integer streaming systems are in place, we won't be even downloading anymore. We'll tap directly into the library feed without having to be put a client under neurological stasis. They'll be experiencing the narrative concurrently in real time. Which will be amazing. But, won't that make your position here obsolete, Mr. Quigley? I mean, not you, but your job, right?"

"I believe that will be the case, yes."

"What will you do then? Return to the academy and get an upgrade implant?"

"Maybe. But I doubt I'll choose that path."

"What will you do then? You won't become Dalits, will you? That would be shameful."

"No. There will still be a need for book downloads in the secondary market among the Vaishya class – mainly because it'll take time before future tech replaces their older systems modules. So, it's reasonable to assume they'll be using their download pod hardware for at least another decade. I figure I can work in Vaishya libraries down in

Polvere or over by the Byangee docks where the last of the used book stores still ply their trade.”

“Won’t that be a huge step down though? In pay for sure, but also in professional prestige? I mean, why suffer such indignity? Especially at your age? Why not just retire? Wouldn’t that be more honorable?”

“Young Mr. Bentis, if you’ll indulge me, I’d like to offer you two pieces of advice. Something you might find useful and might serve you well in what I am sure will be a long career for you.”

“I’d appreciate any advice you can offer.”

“Where you work, no matter how “prestigious” it may be, isn’t what bestows honor. Nor what you do. It is *HOW* you do a thing that is honorable, when done honorably, regardless of where it’s done. “

“I see.”

“And two, a man’s value should never be determined by others – not those he works for nor those who have more than him nor even those who would set themselves above him, socially and politically speaking. A man’s value comes from his faith, his ability to walk in faith honorably, and his willingness to serve others honorably as a steward for their well-being. To be useful to all, even when that favor is not returned. That’s where real dignity and honor lie. Long ago it was called ‘*the Golden Rule.*’”

“I see.”

“And so, where I work won’t be the issue. I’ll still do the work. And be glad I have access to all these wonderful library books. I may even gain access to a few not so available here. Maybe even an actual hard copy of literature to read again.”

“Sure, I guess. I mean that all sounds very doable. I’m amazed at how calm you seem to be about it.”

“Well, I try to remember another quote from the bible that helps me not to worry. I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.”

“I see. I mean, I don’t quite know if I understand, but it does sounds very comforting.”

“I believe it to be, yes. I can share more, if you like. Librarian Almqvist still allows me to visit the vault once a week, for no more than thirty minutes, to read. If you’d like, you can meet me down there tomorrow morning in the east corner history room and I will read you passages from the bible. You might find it helpful.”

“Thank you, Mr. Quigley. For your offer and for helping with Mr. Trellinger. But I don’t think I can. Please don’t think me rude if I say no. I don’t want to insult you, but the others wouldn’t look favorably upon me if I...well, it’s more like I still have to focus on my system integration studies right now so I can pass probation and keep my employment. You understand, right?”

“Of course, Mr. Bentis. I do. But the offer still stands. For as long as I am still employed with the library. I’m afraid, after that...well, I’m not sure there are many left who read who can take my place.”

“No, I suppose not. I guess progress can be...well, a burden for some.”

“Well, that is not your concern, Mr. Bentis. You have your own career to think of. Which is my cue to take my leave now that Mr. Trellinger is back safe in your capable hands.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Mr. Quigley. And goodbye. It’s been illuminating.”

Quigley gathered his tools and headed off the library floor, clocking out and heading back to the employee lounge for his lunch break. Thinking the whole time, *Oh Lord, I*

have done this work my entire life. Since I was young and full of potential. Even forgoing family and friends, a home and hearth of my own, and all the comforts wife and children could've provided. I did it because I once read your book and was inspired to serve You with the best skills and devotion I could bring to the task. But it has become abundantly clear to me I have aged beyond cultural relevance or need, with little to show for it. I am a Lion in Winter. Succumbing to the long attrition of fallow fields. Which is unfortunate because my heart is still willing, and I have learned so much under your care. But what value can I offer beyond my aging bones when I am rendered obsolete? All this time, my whole adult life really, with little else to show – I am nothing but a speck of dust. So am I to accept the dying of the light now and take my place among the fallen? Surrender to this new generation, as my predecessors once did for me? Or do I still have a chance to apply all I've learned and go out on my shield? For did you not say, What IS once was. And what has been done will be done again? Because there is nothing new under the sun?

The End.