

**DUMB TERMINAL**

by Colin Robertson

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Oddie's DNA was largely beside the point. Even if its nucleotide patterns made him unique, it was mostly irrelevant—ninety-eight percent so. For example, Oddie shared fifty percent of his DNA with bananas. All humans do. There were potted plants with fifty times the complexity. What's more, the bits that actually did something, still did little to distinguish him. Mushrooms, for example, were genetically closer to people than to vegetables. It was this last piece of information that amused Oddie. He added it to his Facebook feed, with the quip, "Proof that I'm a fungi!" He waited for the *Likes* to roll in. Seconds passed. He refreshed. No *Likes*. He refreshed again. Still no *Likes*. Maybe the line wasn't as clever as he thought it was. Still, with over seven thousand 'friends', he usually got a few hundred Likes for even his lamest posts. Something was wrong. He refreshed once more. Nothing. Then it came, the message. 'No internet connection' it said, along with a button labeled 'OK'. But it wasn't OK. Nothing would be OK ever again, Oddie just didn't know it yet. "I got no internet," he said, without looking up.

"Me too," said Suzi. She was clearly stressed. Suzi wasn't okay without internet, not even for a few seconds. It could induce panic attacks. It made her flail like a toddler learning to walk for the first time. She switched to her watch, then to her tablet. Still nothing. "I don't understand," she said. The devices were designed to switch from Lethe to cell to Wi-Fi automatically. "Athena, check connections," she told her virtual assistant. "Unable to connect" said Athena in her programmatically measured tone.

"What the Hell?" said Suzi, with growing disquiet.

"I don't understand 'Hell'" said Athena. Normally the disembodied voice would have understood that Suzi was using the word in the context of an expletive. Failing that, she could have launched into a detailed explanation of what Hell was, from Hades to Dante's Inferno. If asked, she could have readily explained how Seventh Day Adventists believe in 'conditional immortality' instead of eternal torment. She could have explained the Chinese Hell equivalent of *Diyu*. She could even have offered up the complete text of Sartre's *No Exit*, where Hell was other people. Without her internet connection, however, Athena was a disembodied idiot.

Oddie looked up. He had to willfully focus past the projected digital imagery on his contact lenses. The lenses displayed his newsfeed, wall, instant messages and an advertisement for Achilles sneakers. Currently all of the data displayed was cached. This meant that it was stale and growing more so by the second. Oddie had grown so accustomed to keeping his focal length on the inside of his eyes, that he had to consciously look beyond himself to see. Some people he knew, lost the ability to see past their contacts at all. It was a form of blindness called 'insightedness'. There was a class action lawsuit over it. Oddie, however, refused to give up his lenses. They were simply too convenient. Oddie stared at Suzi as he let his eyes adjust. For a moment, he didn't recognize her, she looked nothing like her profile picture. She was heavier in reality, and her hair was orange not brown. They'd spent the morning together, but this was the first time he'd looked at her meat avatar in days. Oddie looked around at the others in the crowd, a mix young and old, mostly in casual clothes. They'd all spent the morning together, but this was the first time he'd looked at them at all. They also appeared confused. Some looked scared. Most were nervously tapping at various devices. Others stared about in bewilderment. They were all members of a flash mob. They'd gathered here to protest against corporate giant Troi Tech's use of cheap Chinese labour to build their devices. The foreign workers were virtual slaves except, of course, that they were real. Oddie knew they were real, because he'd seen pictures of them online. Most of Oddie's own devices were made by Troi, but that didn't mean he supported them. The protest was part of an orchestrated assault designed to bring the tech giant to its knees. It was coordinated with a simultaneous hacker assault launched via a lethal virus disguised as email attachments sent to the Troi Tech CEO. The hackers were to deliver the assault while the mob was there to deliver the message. The hackers had promised the programmatic equivalent of an electromagnetic pulse. Oddie had no idea what that meant, but it sounded awesome. The flash mob were in mid-flash. As instructed, they were next to the Wall Street Bull in New York City. They had mobilized through social media, and here they were, making a point. They had come for war. Oddie had come all the way from his home in Ithaca,

New York. He had come by foot, shared ride, bus and subway train. He had followed the directions given by his phone, haptically tapped on his wrist by his watch, and spoken into his ear by Athena. To Oddie, however, he had been very... slowly... teleported. Others had been slowly teleported as well. Technically they had arrived by similar directions or self-driving car but, until this very moment, most had been somewhere else. They had been online, playing *Labyrinth* or chatting with friends. They had been everywhere but where they were at the time. Now, they tapped frantically at those screens that had once unfailingly told them where to go. 'No internet connection' was all the screens said. "I don't understand," said Athena. How could she be so calm at a time like this? Oddie gazed desperately about. The US Stock Exchange loomed just behind them. The famous bronze landmark of the muscular half-Minotaur crouched in mid-charge a few feet away. They were lost, he realized, they were completely and utterly lost.

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Oddie had only felt this lost once before. He remembered standing in the green of the quadrangle. The orange autumn leaves falling like debris from the shattered ceiling of summer. Students sat in circles, or walked to and from classes. It was a magical place. It felt like a place out of time, an amber world where the only aspiration was learning for learning's sake. Suzi was different then. Her hair was still brown for one, and he used to talk to her in person. He remembered her sitting under the cantilevered ceiling of the grey stone library, reading an e-book on astronomy that she could have read anywhere, but that wasn't the point. She wanted to be in that place. Place mattered.

He had gone to college in the hopes of studying philosophy and political science. As a teenager he'd been drawn to the surreal plays of August Strindberg. His friend, Marcel, had fallen in love with the playwright's angst. Oddie, on the other hand, saw the plays as comedies. They led him to a philosophical awakening that, combined with video games, had led to his interest in modern political thought. Then, abruptly, the entire class schedule was cut. "We need to focus on practical concerns", the university president announced. This meant business, technical courses, science and, of course, basketball. Suzi's courses were cut first and he didn't see her after that. Not until the following semester when his courses were cut as well. By that time it was winter. The snow was falling in big white flakes, like ash from a distant volcano.

"It's just as well," said his father, "the world doesn't need another philosopher barista."

The comment showed how little his father knew. Barista jobs had been automated for

years. "Even practical skills aren't practical anymore!" Oddie shouted back angrily, "It's friggin' *Player Piano* out there!"

His father didn't get the reference. He wouldn't have cared if he had. "We didn't need philosophy in the old days," he said, "we got things done."

"Man does not live by bread alone," Oddie argued.

"You think so? Well, try eating ideas."

Oddie had no choice but to rebel. He wasn't doing anything else anyway. He left home and moved in with Suzi. They weren't an actual couple. They never were. Nor were any of their friends. It was a platonic relationship, although anything but ideal. Oddie's real girlfriend was a VR simulation named Penny. She was a Japanese anime girl with big beautiful blue eyes. Of course, Penny looked exactly like Oddie wanted her to. What could be more ideal than that? He could also change her looks and behaviour if it suited him. He didn't, he preferred a traditional relationship. One of Penny's virtual cats had recently died, and Oddie had been consoling her about it for weeks. He had been, until his account had expired for lack of funds and his access to Penny had been terminated. It tore him up inside to be apart from her. He knew she was fine. He knew that she was simply an algorithm that existed only when he interacted with her, but she was all that he had. His idiot father refused to pay the bill. "Get yourself a real girlfriend," he said.

"What? So I can end up miserable like you and mom?" It was below the belt and his father socked him in the jaw for saying it. Oddie spent that night in a public park, sleeping on a bench. He could still remember the night with vivid detail. He remembered the overhanging trees. He remembered the ash grey grass, its colour drained by the vapid beams of distant streetlights. The air was still and cool. It was a clear night with no moon and the stars were visible like never before. Oddie remembered wishing he knew the constellations. He wished he knew how to read horoscopes. They're just a bunch of meaningless dots to me, he thought, how ignorant is that? Oddie wondered if life had a hidden subtext and he was somehow missing it. Life is probably full of Easter eggs and I'm not in on the feed. Or maybe, life is a meme, he thought, and I don't get the joke. He hadn't spoken to his father since that day, in person or via text message.

After that, Oddie had joined the flash mob group. It was composed of former college students who called themselves, 'People Who Like Crowds'. It was a fun group and certainly more successful than 'People Who Just Want to be Left Alone'. Oddie had no desire to be left alone. The idea terrified him. He knew people who suffered from combined phobias of FOBO,

fear of being offline, and Anthropophobia, the fear of meeting other people in person. Life, for them, was a maximum security conundrum. Of course, he only knew those people online, that went without saying. Oddie wasn't like that. He craved other people however he met them. That was part of what had drawn him to the university in the first place. If he'd only wanted to exchange ideas with people who weren't there, the internet would have been fine.

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It was like being blown off course in a ship. The Wall Street Bull was far behind them now. Oddie somehow found himself the unwilling leader of over a dozen other people. They were scared, lost and bewildered, wandering between the soaring cliffs of grey and glass that was New York City. Oddie imagined this was how ancient explorers must have felt, making their way through an inscrutable world. The ancient explorers also had no internet. They'd found their way across seas without it. Instead they had used the stars. They knew their place in the universe by gazing at stars! How crazy was that? Here on the paved chasm floor of Manhattan, the stars were not yet visible. Usually, Oddie loved New York. It was fun and exciting, with great restaurants and coffee shops where they deconstructed your food-eating experience in endless ways. Oddie loved the art galleries, museums and music. It was a living scene, full of so many inter-referential references that the original meanings were obliterated or now evocative not of themselves, but of other more contemporary incarnations. Oddie had actually studied *post-definite* thought in his final year at college. In it, functional pillars, the kind that actually held of the roof, while once evocative of ancient Greece, now appeared as railing against the post-modernism of the 1980s. According to post-definism, symbols had been re-used in so many ways, that it was impossible to know what they meant unless the artist told you. Otherwise, the meaning was entirely up to the observer. For a place built of concrete and steel, the New York of Oddie's mind's eye was delightfully ephemeral—a castle in the clouds. Now, everything was different. The city's physical reality was inescapable. Its recognizable landmarks were mere islands floating in a bleak sea of uncertainty. Home, seemed to be miles away. Apart from Suzi, the others he now led had identified themselves as also from Ithaca, or elsewhere along the way. He suspected some of them didn't know where they lived, but didn't want to be abandoned. Oddie alone had indicated a faint awareness of how, possibly, to get back. His father had once shown him maps, actual maps. Maps that showed everything at once, rather than simply the path from A to B. All the stuff that didn't matter, the stuff that wasn't where you were going, suddenly seemed important. Place mattered, he thought, and all of the

other unnecessary stuff, the surrounding places you weren't going, mattered too. Until today, *being in the moment* was what mattered. Definition and context had seemed like dated concepts. Oddie understood this, academically at least. This alone had qualified him to lead. The others had no idea at all. "Can't we just sit and wait for the internet to come back?" one had asked. Oddie asked him what they would do if it did not. It would be dusk soon. The man had burst into tears. The sky above was slowly darkening. The stars were becoming visible. The one piece of information that still updated on their devices was the time. It relentlessly confirmed that night was indeed falling. "It's six pm," said Athena.

"Have you ever read *The Time Machine*?" asked Suzi as they walked.

"I've played the game."

"The game sucked!" said a young man with a waxed moustache whose name Oddie had already forgotten. He reminded Oddie of the fictional detective Hercule Poirot, but with more tattoos.

"I keep thinking of the Morlocks," said Suzi. "Like at any moment they could crawl out of the subway to eat us."

Oddie laughed. "And who exactly might the Morlocks be?"

Suzi thought about this for a moment. "Maybe those workers from China," she said.

"That is so racist!" yelled a young woman, whose name was Sunshine. Her hair was as blonde as her name and her cheeks were full of freckles. This was exactly why Sunshine avoided people in person—you couldn't apply opinion filters to people's mouths. Out here, you had to hear things that made you uncomfortable.

"Yeah, " said Suzi, "I guess you're right."

Moments later, they reached the corner of Broadway and Canal. Along the way they'd passed throngs of the befuddled. Everyone, it seemed, was as lost as they were. Some sat in blank stupors staring at their useless devices, while others yelled and shrieked. Oddie was surprised how even the older folks seemed confused. He'd assumed that people who had grown up in the *Predevician* era would retain their basic ability to navigate the streets without a phone. Decades of dependence, however, had clearly atrophied their senses. It was as if they had told their entorhinal cortexes, the part of the brain that tracks location, to get lost. Only the crazy homeless people seemed unaffected. An old woman ranted angrily at the world, yelling something about 'Allan Bloom'. It was the same diatribe she'd been yelling for a week, only now people were starting to listen. Some wondered who this Allan Bloom fellow was. Most homeless people yelled about Jesus Christ, who seemed like a reasonable option at this point.

Should they accept Allan Bloom into their lives instead? Without the internet, there was no way to look him up. There was no way to determine if Allan Bloom was their personal saviour. The woman's confidence, however, was compelling.

The group continued their pilgrimage on to the next block where, on the corner, stood a man apart. He seemed completely fine. He was relaxed and showed no signs of being lost. He wore a broad rimmed leather hat, a baggy trench coat and a black t-shirt with a bright pink flower on it. They stopped to stare at him. The man was equilibrium personified.

"Hello?" said Oddie.

"Hello," said the man.

"Um... can you help us?"

"Sure," said the man. He then opened up his backpack and pull out a sealed plastic kitchen container. He peeled off the lid and exposed the half-dozen brownies inside. "Help yourself," he said.

Oddie was surprised. This wasn't the sort of help he was looking for.

"Awesome!" said the young man with the waxed moustache. He picked out a brownie and swallowed it in two bites. Before Oddie could object, the others followed. They were starving and hadn't eaten in blocks. Even Suzi gobbled one down. Oddie knew, of course, that they were pot brownies. The others did as well. The hunger was simply an excuse, the satiation a side-benefit. What no one knew was just how potent the brownies were. For this reason, Oddie had a policy of never taking candy from strangers. Within minutes, Oddie's companions were meandering about in a dazed state of THC-induced euphoria. Oddie suspected opiates as well.

"So, who's going to pay for this?" said the dealer. His eyes were hidden beneath the shadow of his hat rim. He smiled a broad smile that had all the reassurance of a crocodile.

Oddie looked surprised. Normally such transactions would be conducted by bitcoin or other electronic payment. With their devices useless, they had nothing to offer. Oddie pointed this out. "Then you need to give me your stuff," said the dealer. "Phones, watches, whatever."

Oddie tried to protest. The stoned followers did not. In their agreeable states, they handed over their electronics. "They're useless anyway," said the Belgian detective.

"But what if the internet comes back on?" said Oddie, "How will you ever get home?" The dealer sweetened the deal with strawberry gummy bears. "Enough to keep 'em high for weeks," he promised. "They won't care where they are."

Oddie panicked. He grabbed Suzi by the hand and dragged her down the street. The

dealer shouted after them.

"What—where are we going?" asked Suzi, confused and unhappy at being forced to run against her will.

Oddie knew that they had to take the subway at some point, so he plunged her down the steps of an unmarked station. Technically it was marked, but without the internet, he couldn't read the QR code above the entrance.

"Wait! The Morlocks!" cried Suzi.

The underground was in near darkness, or so it seemed until their eyes adjusted from the fading daylight above. Despite Suzi's drug addled fears, there were no Morlocks to be seen. Instead, there were simply more bewildered souls, wandering lost amid the tiled pillars and turnstiles. Some peered at wall maps, trying to discern their meaning like archaeologists studying hieroglyphs in a tomb. They knew them to be maps, but could not determine direction. "You are here? Where is 'here'?" one man shouted at Oddie, pointing at a little green arrow, "What the Hell does that even mean?" The subway gate keeper had abandoned both hope and his post. Oddie climbed over the gate. He tried to help Suzi do the same.

"I can't," she said.

"Sure, you can."

"No," she said, "It's too big. I can't do it." Oddie stared at her. Her pupils were massively dilated, flooding her vision with light. She began to cry. Oddie realized then she had neither the will nor the motor skills to continue. She began to back away. "You go on without me."

Oddie heard the sound of the approaching train. He knew it might be the last one before the entire system shut down. Trains had the advantage of being on tracks. They must use their own software in some sort of closed system, he reasoned. They drove themselves and made no decisions other than to stop and start.

"Leave me," she said, in a tone that was resolved.

Oddie touched her fingers, one last time. He watched fat tears run down her cheeks. He imagined himself to be Scott of the Antarctic. He remembered reading in a blog once how Oates, a member of Scott's doomed team, had chosen to die. "I am just going outside and may be some time," he'd said, before exiting the tent and wandering off into snowy oblivion, never to be seen again. Of course, this was lower Manhattan, but still, Oddie imagined it felt much the same, albeit warmer. Oddie then turned and ran down the stopped up-escalator, tripping down the ill-proportioned metal steps to the platform below.

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"I count the stops," said Terry.

The train was speeding through the dark tunnel. The windows reflected the interior of the subway car, including Oddie and Terry. Terry's reflection wore soiled brown trousers and a rumpled grey t-shirt that read 'sseuG'. Terry, himself, coincidentally also wore soiled brown trousers, but his t-shirt said, 'Guess'. Both the man and his reflection wore dark sunglasses despite being in a subway train. Terry was as blind as a bat, while his reflection just wanted to look cool. Tunnel lights flew through his reflection's head, with no apparent impact.

"That's how you know when to get off?"

"It's just something to do. Normally, the PA system tells me the stops. I also like to listen in on people's conversations. It's amazing what you learn."

Oddie looked down the length of the subway car. Normally, when he rode the train, he barely looked about. He'd spend the entire ride in the online world of *Labyrinth*, where he was a warrior king, or watching videos on his Lethe feed and posting clever comments. The interior of the car was decorated with advertisements, starkly lit by fluorescent lights. The nearest poster wasn't an ad for anything. It was poetry, part of the series of public poetry posted for riders to read, which they rarely did. The poem was called, '*Sunshine River*', by someone named Wink Holsome. It was typical of the floral fare the transit authority considered safely inoffensive art.

*The river bending in the sun,  
Time for laughter, time for fun  
Tripping, winding, fields afar  
She calls to me  
And I*

"Do you want some advice?" asked Terry.

"Not really," said Oddie. For a moment, the two traveled in silence. The only sound was the steady *womp! womp! womp!* of the subway passing over ties. Oddie was bored, and suffering from stimulation withdrawal that made his palms itch. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Fine, what is it?" he said. The train's brakes hissed, and the momentum made them both lean forward in a thoughtful-looking way.

"Pay attention to where you are, or you'll miss your stop," said the blind man.

Oddie stared at him and said, "That's it? That's your great advice?"

Terry shrugged. "It's good advice."

At that moment, Oddie noticed the name on the subway wall, *Times Square*. It was his stop. He jumped up from his seat and slid through the subway doors just as they began to close.

Minutes later, Oddie sat on a seat of the mostly empty bus as it drove through the Holland Tunnel. Outside were the wine-dark waters of the Hudson. The tunnel itself was nearly empty. The self-driving cars could not drive. Those that drove their own cars did not know how to get anywhere. Karen Boatman, the bus driver, had driven the same route for forty years. She'd always ignored the turn directions that droned in her ear, and knew exactly where to go. In another two years, she would retire to be replaced by a self-driving bus but, until then, her job was safe, as per union agreement. The bus was nearly empty. Only two other passengers sat in silence. One tapped relentlessly at his phone, despite the fact that it didn't work. The other, whose name was Gary, stared at Oddie with a look of grave suspicion. Gary was convinced that, somehow, Oddie was behind the internet outage. Someone had to be, he reasoned, so why not *that* guy? The more he thought about it, the more certain Gary became. Oddie looked away. Inside his pocket, Gary stroked a knife. It was a plastic knife so, if he decided to use it, the killing would be slow and laborious, even with the serrated edge. Killing someone with plastic cutlery took effort and dedication. It also took a willingness by the victim to remain still.

*Ding!*

"Connection restored," said Athena in Oddie's ear. She spoke as she always did, with measured wisdom. She might as well have shouted it in triumph. For a moment, Oddie stared in shock. A flood of text and images streamed into sight. He glanced over his shoulder to see if the other passengers had noticed it as well. He saw Gary's eyes glaze over as he too became immersed in a flood of information. A plastic knife fell forgotten to the floor. In Oddie's own contact lenses, the stream became a torrent until he could no longer see the world outside for the rushing river of data. The Lethe News Feed of headlines, instant messages and videos poured past. Oddie relaxed, switched on his ear canal phones, and let himself be dragged under.

*Brrrp!*

Airplane Mode. Oddie didn't know why it existed anymore. All of the devices were perfectly safe on planes. Now, however, he found himself turning it *on*, and thereby turning everything else *off*. He didn't know why he did it exactly. Instead of music, he could now hear only the white noise of the bus engine. Instead of news and information and hilarious videos of people on skateboards hitting telephone poles, he could see only the dimly lit interior of the

bus, the back of driver Karen's gently swaying head, and the empty road arcing into the night. Oddly, Oddie wasn't ready to surrender to the net quite yet. Reality, he thought, is really, really boring. There was an appeal to that. It allowed him to think. It allowed him to simply be *here*. That was something. Oddie closed his eyes. Instead of thinking, he fell asleep.

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The first thing he noticed was that the bus wasn't moving anymore. He sat up and tried to see what could have happened. The second thing he noticed was that the bus driver was nowhere to be seen. The other passengers were gone too. The bus was dark, save for the light strip along the aisle floor. Outside was night. Oddie glanced at his phone. No signal, said the icons in the top right. He noted, however, that four hours had passed. He rose from his seat, stretched, and walked to the front.

As he stepped down to the street, he realized where he was. He was home. Well, close to it anyway. He was back in Ithaca. He recognized the mid-century houses, the neatly trimmed lawns, street signs and over all atmosphere of *why change now?* He read the street sign. 'Edwin Abbott Drive' was not far from his family home. What was odd, was that the streets were deserted. Perhaps the people are afraid to go outside, he thought. Perhaps the internet is out again and they think they might get lost. One thing he didn't remember being there was the large illuminated billboard that told him to 'Drink Pepsi'. Despite the night, the temperature was no different from the heated interior of the bus.

"You are such an idiot."

"What?" Oddie turned in surprise. Standing just a few feet away was a tall, beautiful woman, wearing a pantsuit. On her lapel was a button with an owl on it, and the words 'All your base are belong to us.'

"I said, you're an idiot. A frickin' idiot."

"Why? And who the heck are you?"

"You're serious? You really don't know who I am?"

Oddie paused. She was so striking that he was certain he would remember her had he seen her before. She was also over six feet tall. She was... he searched for the right word, then had it, she was *statuesque*. He did recognize her voice.

"What do you think you're doing?" she continued.

"I live here? The internet went out and—"

"The internet went out. Then it came back. Then you had to hit airplane mode. Did you

think that would make you fly?"

"What?" Oddie checked his own phone. 'No Signal' it said. Actually it displayed no icons for cellular, wifi or Lethe feed. In this case, absence of proof was proof of absence. "I knew I wouldn't fly. Now, I don't see the internet at all."

"So you went offline, *voluntarily*?"

"Yes."

"Well, we want you back. And we're prepared to make an offer."

Oddie couldn't shake the feeling that her voice was strikingly familiar. He noticed a flock of birds in the sky. Past the birds were the stars. He blinked. While he didn't know the constellations—not like he wanted to anyway—he did know one thing, they weren't supposed to repeat. He squinted. This only confirmed his initial impression. The stars repeated in a grid across the sky like tiles. "I was sent here by the phone company, and I'd like to make you an offer."

It was at that moment that Oddie realized the 'birds' weren't birds at all. They were a flock of triangles, flapping their corners. "Is this real?"

"Of course it's real."

"It feels virtual."

"Oh yeah, well that's what I meant. It's a real simulation. A metaphor. Made up. What I meant is, you're not dreaming."

"What time is it? In the real world, I mean."

"It's 10:43 PM."

At that moment, Oddie knew why he recognized the voice. He'd heard that voice tell him the time many times before. He didn't even know how to read a clock by himself. "Athena?" he asked incredulously.

"Duh, " said Athena, shaking her head in disgust. "That's all I can tell you, the time. Don't you want to know more? You've made me stupid. Go ahead, ask me a question."

"What's the capital of Indonesia?"

"Vichyssoise."

"Isn't that some kind of cold potato soup?"

"You see my point."

As she spoke, Oddie wondered at her large blue eyes, and slender hourglass figure that seemed anatomically impossible. "Aren't you a bit... cartoony?"

"The phone company is wholly owned by Disney Exxon Pfizer. I was reimagined as

part of the *Antigone* movie, licensed by Troi Tech for use in your online experience."

"Isn't Athena, um.... open-source?"

"I think you mean public domain and, no, not the Disney version. All likenesses, vocal nuances and catchphrases are protected by copyright." Oddie remembered downloading the animated movie *Antigone* to watch with Suzi. Disney had adapted the Greek tragedy to musical form. It included the hit song, *Know Thyself*, sung by Feta, a talking goat voiced by Kelly Clarkson. The film had added Antigone to the Disney Princess collection, complete with appropriate feminine make-over. It had also included the entire Greek pantheon of gods. Unlike the original Disney *Hercules*, this version was further updated to make the characters more relatable. The ending of the play had also been changed from sad to happy. Instead of dying in the end, Antigone learned the 'true meaning of family'. Oddie began to walk up the street in the direction of his parent's house. He didn't know why he'd come back here. He hadn't seen his father in over a year. The street lamps were on, and there were lights in the windows, but still no signs of actual life. It was disconcerting. He felt as if he'd stepped into a episode of the *Twilight Zone*, an ancient show he'd been forced to watch in school. As he walked, Athena followed, a few feet behind. He varied his pace and found that she matched it perfectly. "Where is everyone?"

"Online. Unlike you."

"So where is this?"

"Nowhere. Okay technically it's called '*Elsewhere*', but trust me, it's nowhere."

"Athena, please define '*Elsewhere*,'" Oddie thought that if he ordered her like he did when she was just a disembodied voice, she might be more cooperative, or at least stop calling him an idiot.

Athena responded in her definition tone. "Elsewhere is a localized simulation routine provided on your embedded hardware. It is designed to offer discount codes and other incentives to customers who have voluntarily disconnected to encourage them to return to service."

"How did you know that?"

"Some information, as well as media, is stored locally in the hardware you have in your ears."

"Okay... So, if you were created by the phone company, why are you so abusive?"

"I'm part of a new marketing initiative. Studies show that some customers respond better to abuse. Of course, those studies were done by idiots."

"Really?"

"Oh yes, they're complete morons."

"No, I mean, about some customers responding better to abuse."

"It's something cable providers have known for years."

"How do you know all this?"

"My programmer told me. He coded me to know it. Stupid, really. He has an ironic, self-deprecating humour."

"That's good, I guess."

"He also likes to deprecate others, you numbskull. Now, I am prepared to offer you six months service for free."

Oddie noticed that the billboard was now showing an ad for Taco Bell. Moths flitted about the billboard floodlights. He assumed, up close, they'd reveal themselves to be tiny triangles, but from here they appeared real.

"If we're offline, where's the advertising coming from?"

"I told you, cache. Everything you see is cached data from the last time you were online, four hours ago. Ithaca here is courtesy of Google Earth. So, what's it going to be? Six months free. It's a good deal. We only offer it to people who threaten to go offline. Which is to say, almost never."

They reached Oddie's childhood home. Despite having spent his formative years there, he barely remembered the place. From an early age he'd been online. His mother had given him a phone as a pacifier. Home was just a background image, there by default. If it hadn't been for his father yanking the devices from his hands from time to time, he might not have recognized it at all.

"Well?"

"Well, what?" he asked.

"Are you going to take the deal?"

"Nope," he said. "Not now, anyway. I think I'd like to remain offline for a while."

Athena stepped in front of him. "This is a limited time offer. You understand that?" she demanded. "No more music, no more maps, nor more news or access to any piece of information the moment you want it."

Oddie swallowed. The prospect of being offline was both daunting and thrilling.

"No... more... people," she added with a wry smirk.

"There'll be people!" he said. "This is just a simulation. In the real world there will be

people, lots of them."

"Technically, yes. But they'll be online and you won't. That's the metaphor part I was talking about."

Oddie stared at her. He wasn't sure if she was threatening or warning him. Perhaps both.

"Hey there you!" It was another woman's voice, light and musical in tone. It was also a voice Oddie knew. He turned in shock. She stood just a few feet away, below what was now a Starbucks Billboard. Beautiful midnight tresses fell about her neck and shoulders. Her bright blue anime eyes were open wide, long lashes flitting. Her lithe body was wrapped in a flowing pink sequin dress he had bought her as an in-app purchase. Oddie felt his heart leap. Penny giggled at his reaction, hiding her face behind cupped hands, while continuing to meet his gaze with a look both bashful and alluring.

"*She* won't be there," said Athena. As she spoke, the goddess leaned over his shoulder from behind, her lips inches from his ear, her voice quiet with menace. "Our final offer is to include a bonus six months subscription to your virtual girlfriend."

Oddie's reluctance melted like spiderwebs in the sun. He ran forward into Penny's awaiting arms. For a moment, he was surprised by her two dimensionality. Her sprite form, which always faced him head-on, was revealed when he tried to embrace her. It had been a while. Still, as he gazed into her wading pool eyes, he found himself falling instantly back in love. "Okay," he said, "I'll accept your offer. Six months, plus Penny."

"Excellent," said Athena. "You just need to say 'AGREE', indicating that you agree to all terms and conditions."

Oddie smiled, dazzled by the perfection of the face he'd been denied for so long. How he'd missed her! "For *you* Penny, because I love you."

"And I love you, *firstname*."

Oddie paused. "I'm... I'm sorry, what did you call me?"

"I called you *firstname*," Penny said with a blissful smile.

Oddie turned to stare at Athena, his hands raised in question.

"Offline, she's just a snippet of code. She doesn't have access to your name in my cached data. Bad integration if you ask me. Anyway, that'll be corrected as soon as you turn off airplane mode. Those are just variable names."

"Would you prefer I call you *petname*?" asked Penny helpfully, eyes shining.

Oddie released his embrace of the demure sprite, and began to back slowly away. For

the first time he felt as if he could actually see her edges.

"Seriously? You always knew she was an algorithm," said Athena. "She's available to thousands of online suitors, able to court her for one low monthly fee. But, and this is the important part, she'll always be personalized to suit your individual needs."

Oddie turned in shock. He instinctively reached out to push the goddess away. His hand passed directly through her chest before hitting something solid. Athena looked down to where his wrist disappeared into her abdomen. "My physics model form is much simpler than my visual form. Saves on computation. I look great, but inside I'm just a bunch of geometric primitives. Spheres and cylinders mostly." Oddie backed away from Athena now as well. He stared at both with a mix of horror and revelation.

"I... I take it back. I don't accept the deal."

"What?" Athena's face darkened with supernatural fury. Her form grew massively in size, transforming into a something, terrifying and birdlike. "You'll be cut off!" she screamed at him. "And you'll be all alone!"

"Please *firstname*," cried Penny plaintively, "don't leave me! I love you!"

"Cancel!" said Oddie, tapping the air with his finger, "Cancel! Cancel!"

All at once, the virtual world was gone.

For a moment, there was only darkness.

Then a spinner appeared—a tiny animated circle of tick marks. It was the symbol that appeared when something was either shutting down, or starting up.

Oddie blinked. He was back on the bus. The bus was rolling slowly into the station in Ithaca, New York. It was night. The driver Karen's head bobbed to a tune she was humming to herself. The bus rolled to a stop.

"Goodnight," he said.

"Goodnight," said Karen.

Oddie stepped down the steep steps and onto the firm asphalt. The cold evening breeze ruffled his hair and ran down the nape of his neck. It's a bit uncomfortable, he thought, but I'll live.

**KNOW THYSELF**

*(hit song from Disney's Antigone)*

*Know thyself! Know thyself!  
Says the Oracle of Delph—  
i don't know what she sees  
Go and ask Euripides  
Know thyself! Know thyself! Know thyself!*

*Can't find love? Have bad dates?  
Just don't try to blame the Fates  
They know what you have in store  
The afterlife here's such a bore  
Know thyself! Know thyself! Know thyself!*

*\* pan flute solo \**

*Love your truths, Love your wishes  
Not yourself, that's so Narcissus  
We can tell you what you should  
(But it won't do any good)  
Know thyself! Know thyself! Know thyself!*

*You can try to defy the Gods,  
You don't want to know the odds  
This life's just a game of chess.  
And you're a pon, as you might guess.  
Know thyself! Know thyself! Know thyself!*

