

Natural Causes

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The countdown clock ticked upward.

The little blinking readout in the corner of his vision was distracting at first, and sometimes the flashing of the patented StatusTint prediction indicators disoriented him, made him dizzy. He had been warned of those side effects and told they would pass as his body adapted to the implants. But they had downplayed the severity of the headaches.

He hadn't told her beforehand, so there were a few tense nights full of terse discussions about unrelated subjects while he was home recuperating. She had found him on that first night in the library, looking through old books he hadn't touched in years, and she had immediately sensed his disquiet.

When they did eventually speak of it directly, he was surprised by her reaction. "It's just that I thought we'd talked about this," she said, and though they had spoken of it at times, they had never seriously discussed *if*. But it was true she had not approved of the technology, and had refused to have anything to do with it. "I can't understand why you would do it and anyway, it seems so expensive."

"You're worth it to me," he replied. "For the insurance, not the deadline. So you won't have to worry about me suddenly leaving you in the lurch."

His temple throbbed and he felt as if his right eye were a hard-boiled egg, his skull a fist angrily squeezing it.

"Don't you think I can take care of myself?" she muttered over her shoulder as she walked out. The walls blinked pink for a second and then dissolved into a fading negative afterimage of a garish plaid pattern. Adaptation kinks.

/Updating records./

After a while they rarely spoke of it and he even talked himself into believing she had forgiven him. So convinced would he be, that her reaction would actually surprise him when later she learned he had activated the countdown after all. Again, his deftly constructed illusion would crumble.

/Clear./

He had rearranged his schedule for the day of his enrollment and though he arrived at the facility early, signing in was a chore. For once, he had neglected reading up ahead of time so he had a lot of questions for the guy on the floor, the one they used to help weed out the unserious. He was passed along inside, bundled with a sheaf of brochures and paperwork, and told someone would be with him soon.

He read through the company literature, most of which he had seen before, all of it propaganda. Still, no one had ever reported negatively on Certainty, Inc. -- at least nowhere public, he joked to himself. After glancing over everything, he started filling out the paperwork, growing bored halfway through and pausing to idly gaze at a bit of peeling wallpaper in the corner.

A slick flyer's flashing movement drew his attention downward. He thumbed the shiny surface, activating playback of its advertised video. Orchestral music swelled as the voice-over launched. "In the beginning, there was the Machine," it said. "As the first breakthrough in quantum prediction technology, it could forecast the method of a person's death via a simple blood test. Then along came a brilliant young physicist, Abhyudaya Chandrasekhar, who surprised the world by turning the nascent industry on its ear."

Ah, an historical epic, he thought to himself. Grade school stuff, wasn't it?

"Chandrasekhar's notion stemmed from a single question: if a system could be made to predict what-but-not-when, could one also find a way to predict when-but-not-how? He found his answer in pages of indecipherable equations, and hampered only slightly by the lack of an engineering background, Chandrasekhar set about constructing a working prototype in a makeshift workshop in his basement. This became the basis of the core Service provided to you by Certainty, Incorporated."

He did not possess the high-level maths to understand the technology behind the Machine nor the Service. Even those who did could not fully explain how they worked. He knew that attempts to combine the two methods had resulted in complete failure. Chandrasekhar provoked quite a controversy when he first proved a quirk of the Machine that could result in multiple predictions for a particular individual, with only the latest one coming to pass.

Something about how the prediction engine performed its internal calculations depended upon the current state of the universe, which unfortunately was in constant flux and impossible to measure with complete accuracy. Some claimed that the testing process created a deterministic state, either by an ethereal locking mechanism or perhaps by setting a particular test subject on a path to destruction, as if the cosmos itself abhorred the act of quantum scale observation and

retaliated with inscrutable penalties.

The narrator droned on. "Once the initial builds were proven, Chandrasekhar set about creating a system that could repeatedly sample input to create a prediction stream which would become the foundation of the Service we provide today. With the integration of more conventional sensor apparatus, networking capabilities, and rapid miniaturization of the hardware, Certainty, Inc., was founded to provide for commercial development of individualized insurance options, and has grown from its humble beginnings to become one of the foremost multinational corporations with annual revenue eclipsing the GDP of many smaller countries."

He swiped the stop control and was startled to realize how long he had been subliminally hearing other voices, arguing, quietly at first but now growing louder. Looking for the source, he saw the door opposite him that was cracked open. It seemed as if the other side were dimly lit but even in the shadows he thought he detected movement. He jerked and looked back at the forms arrayed before him, quickly pretending not to have been distracted while straining to listen.

"That's just for the subscription tracking, that form ensures there won't be any problems with missed payments," said one of the voices.

"It's not *just* the invasion of privacy! It isn't natural!" There was a thump, as the second voice grew louder. He wondered briefly how there could be any privacy for someone who'd got the implants. The whole deal depended on the system monitoring you, otherwise how could it make its predictions and provide its warning messages?

"Sure, it is. Check the definitions supplement."

He glanced at his copy of "the supplement" amongst the pile of papers spread before him, itself a mere twelve pages of ultra-fine type. He had already mentally tagged it for later recycling. He'd had an electronic dictionary on whatever device was in his pocket since before he could remember.

"You should be ashamed."

"Look, it's simple. Sell the product we provide you, or find something else to do. But it won't be here."

For an uncomfortable moment, the sound of his pen scratching on the last few forms seemed thunderous. He decided the one entitled "Indefinite Power of Attorney" might have been relevant to the adjacent discussion.

"That's so unfair, Ned. You know I-- my-- fine. Just, whatever." Defeat was apparent in the voice. A throat cleared and he heard shuffling sounds.

The discussion continued, quieter now. He looked back down, ignoring them again, and turned to the final page, the statement of charges. A few years ago, he would have certainly flinched at so many zeroes. But at some point they didn't mean as much anymore, not as much as the guarantee he was purchasing, and even this considerable sum would be relegated to a footnote in his year-end accounting.

The door dipped backwards toward the frame slightly, catching the corner of his eye, and then swung outward as the salesman emerged and took a seat opposite him, dropping a card on the table.

"Save your personal problems for later, pal," he considered saying, still staring at the page. A lot of zeroes indeed, probably more than this guy had made in the last decade. He glanced up to see the man eying him cautiously, no doubt wondering if he had overheard anything.

"Tell me about the peering again," he said to the salesman.

The slight tremor in the man's voice waned as he settled into the comforting cadence of a familiar subject.

"Well as you know, we have several million clients around the world, and all of their implants are constantly monitored via satellite as well as by proximity networking when they come within range of each other. This allows us to predict immediate external factors within a five-nines degree of accuracy out to a horizon of tens of minutes, plenty of time to avoid most dangers."

"I thought it calculated your entire lifespan?"

"Sure, sure, but that processor has to consider every factor available, including the system's own protective influence. There's the blood sensor, nerve graphing, endocrinological sampling, all that stuff, but there's also near-field array and object tracking. Those are difficult to anticipate on large time horizons, but for most run-of-the mill hazards, all you usually need is a few minutes."

"Really?"

"Well, we've come a long way since the original tech was approved for commercial use; the first units could only issue vague reports and required you to go to a testing center just for that. We've been at the forefront of innovation in this sector for years now."

He must have looked skeptical.

"This isn't just a self-contained unit," the man continued, "that only lists your physio data, it's proactive and holistic. The nanonet offers automatic vaccination and repair functionality. Everything is taken into account by the system to compute the countdown timer. Larger crunches are offloaded to our servers -- for an additional fee, of course. Oh, I see you've got the full package here, worth every penny for the global coverage!"

The man flashed a friendly smile, no longer so preoccupied. "Great for the whole family, the peace of mind. You got a wife?"

Peace of mind, maybe she could think of that as a gift; all he wanted was to give her every second he could wring from the universe. A dim memory flickered of his twelfth birthday when his aunt had given him a tennis racquet, even though he had never expressed an interest in playing. "You can come to my lessons with me," Aunt Margie had said at the time, self-satisfied.

He signed the final form and ran his datalink over it to authorize the payment schedule and record the contract, surreptitiously eyeing the business card as he did. "Let's just keep it simple for now, Bob," he said.

It was her idealism that first drew him to her, but what really attracted him was her talent to instantly let go, carefree at a moment's notice with the cool surety of one who has no doubt of her ability to pick up the slack later. He envied that spontaneity, and his attempts at emulating it sadly shadowed her vibrant reality. She made him understand what it meant to animate an entire room just by entering it.

He had managed to stave off his curiosity for almost a month before he activated the deadline display. A month sounded better to him than a few weeks, and even that was rounding up. She didn't find out until he slipped up with an awkward comment, upon which she confronted him point blank.

"Honestly, it doesn't change anything," he said unconvincingly. He couldn't fault her glaring silence. What took him aback was how their home suddenly seemed empty, barren, flat.

"Your father would never have approved," she said.

"He *would* have approved, if he had survived."

"Are you happier now at least?" she asked. "Or did that not change either?" He grunted noncommittally. "You don't smile as much anymore," she continued. "I miss it."

She had always told him that she liked the way he smiled with his eyes, not just his mouth. Must everything be a trade-off?

/Caution: Stressors detected./

The implant procedure was quick, taking less time than it did for the anaesthetic to wear off to the point where the doctors were willing to release him, after signing the ubiquitous forms. An officious looking woman strode up and addressed him.

"Did you want to take advantage of your yearly prediction now, or save it for later?"

"Isn't it the same for everybody?"

The official consulted the datalink she carried and her demeanor softened. "Oh, with the comprehensive package you purchased, sir, yes indeed."

"So what's the point, then?"

The woman shrugged. "Some people just like to have it to look at."

He was ambivalent but waved his assent. A minute later, his datalink pinged from a nearby cupboard and the lady handed him a slip of heavy gloss paper, a barcode and seemingly random string of numbers printed at the top. Under it, his name and a timestamp, followed by the prominent words, "Natural Causes."

"See? There you go," said the woman, cheerfully. "A long, happy life ahead of you. That's our guarantee!" She leaned in a little and winked. "Well, the happiness is up to you but we give you the time to get it right. Here, this is also for you."

It was an oblong silver fob. He flipped it over and back again in his hand. On one side was an engraved lower-case "h" with a bar across its ascender, above a horizontal stroke, with the numeral two underneath. The reverse was a simple mirror into which he stared, noting his own red-rimmed eyes. His temple began to ache and he blinked at a tear, wiping it from his cheek with the back of his hand.

"Oh, don't worry about that," the woman said. "A few days, and you'll be as good as new. Better, obviously!"

As the electronic display strangely altered everything he saw, he gripped the token tightly and gathered the rest of his belongings, anxious to return home.

/Calibrating./

The people who subscribed to the Service rarely discussed it. He only understood why after the procedure. It made you feel like an idiot, having fumbled through life, never knowing how often you nearly missed some or another grisly end until now. It made him question how he'd gotten this far at all, and he had already developed a prior habit of questioning himself.

Not at the outset, of course. At first, it was an elation borne of this fraudulent sense of freedom which overwhelmed him. He rejoiced in testing the bounds of his ability to cheat death. He resurrected mumblety-peg and experimented with juggling more and more dangerous objects before moving on to speculative pursuits, things he had been too afraid to try before - hang-gliding, rock climbing, shark baiting.

He taunted her, teetering precariously along the edge of safety, his vision colored in waves, little warning tingles in his fingertips and toes growing more insistent. He reveled in her short quick breaths as her widening eyes revealed that she still cared for him, even just a little. For a time, when he concentrated hard, he had been able to ignore the danger signals flashing on his retinas. For a longer time, he had been able to ignore the analog ones.

It was when he took it too far that it first struck him, how completely he was adapting, acclimating, assimilating. Yet her apprehension was still real; she didn't understand, never could. He didn't tease her anymore after that but still she slowly drew away from him. He wouldn't admit to himself that he had already lost her. Neither of them would admit that they both had changed.

Though they had still shared their kitten videos and had continued to view their football matches together, their quiet conversations only hinted at the magic they had once conjured, a dark shadow behind two pairs of eyes betraying their slow disengagement from each other.

No one blamed him afterward. "It wasn't your fault, man," said his friend, Dan. "Luck of the draw. Don't torture yourself." Scratch one more off the list of people he might confide in, unburden himself to without having to fear the look of disgust he knew would be the default

reaction, even if one were able to handle the whole truth. Eventually he ran out of list.

/Caution: Blood pressure elevated./

He should have known even before she diffidently greeted him at the departure gate that his plan would have no chance for success. The flight was as uneventful as expected. The Service had indirectly incited a few well-reported stirs when the first Subscribers refused to board certain flights, and then subsequent trouble occurred. Accusations of complicity were leveled, lobbies were organized; it made for a captivating show on the afternoon newsfeeds and was ripe fodder for jokester memery.

Then the first airline purchased volume Subscriptions for all of its flight crew and people settled into the idea that there could be a side-benefit for those less equipped. Other airlines followed suit and suddenly there were no troubles anymore, every flight covered. It was impressive how quickly people as a group adapted to the new reality, where as individuals they might still complain weakly in private.

They arrived in a battered taxi at their destination which, in another time, they might have described as rustic. He had chosen it hoping to evoke those early days, made careful mental outlines of how he would romance her back into his arms, willfully ignored the niggling doubts by distracting himself with useless recitation. "Time waits for no man. Time heals all wounds. Time is an illusion. Lunchtime, doubly so." Too much time on his hands.

With mindless repetition he tried to enjoy his contrivances, themselves modeled after cherished memories of previous holidays. But now navigating the subdued halls of museums left him too much time to think. Outings like their day of sailing made him acutely aware of the implants' constant admonishments. He was driven instead by their unscripted, in-between moments.

"Do you ever wish we'd had kids," he asked as they wandered along the sparsely wooded walkways beyond the courtyard to the rear of their lodging. Golden light from the afternoon sun broke through the foliage to dance a mottled path amongst the surrounding leaves and brush.

"Sometimes, only for your sake. It was never *my* sole ambition, I've told you that before."

"I know, but I always expect more, like I'm missing something that would make sense of everything if I just knew where to look. It's like I'm secretly disappointing everyone."

She shook her head, smiling. "You only claim to look everywhere else for answers. It's just your

way of processing the world."

"So I don't give myself enough credit, is that it?"

She slipped her hand into his and winked. "*No* one gives *you* enough credit."

"Seriously, I feel like everyone has some magic instruction book except me," he grinned weakly. "Chapter One: How to decipher hidden meaning from simple sentence structure."

She squeezed his hand. "Elementary, my dear."

When he startled her in their room after dinner, he compelled himself to accept unquestioningly her denial of her own tears, even as they glistened on her cheeks, reflecting the candlelight. He remembered how his mother had done the same when he was a child, making excuses while shooing him away.

Slipping his hand in his pocket, he felt the now-familiar cold metal. Brushing his thumb over the engraving, he recalled how he had practiced endlessly the art of self-misdirection, emotional prestidigitation. "Come on," he said. "Let's take that hike up the hill. They said the view was supposed to be spectacular and if we start now, we'll catch the sunset."

"Will you find my camera, please?"

He grabbed her camera and hurried himself out. She followed shortly, composed, and took his hand again as they set off to follow other couples with the same idea.

They ascended quietly together and he was lost in thought when they came to the loose mortar. An unfortunate turn of the ankle and she tumbled, her hand torn from his. He reached for her with fingers outstretched and tingling but missed. His desire, his spirit, his heart would have held her if they could have taken physical form. All were ripped away, pulled down with her as she fell.

/Caution: Hazard imminent./

Someone grabbed him from behind, steadying him as he stared down in horror at her broken body. He turned, flinching as he spied the tiny scars near his savior's eyes, the artificial hues fading from his vision even while the true colors of the world also blanched. He recoiled again when the display updated.

/Clear./

The countdown clock ticked upward.

It had been climbing before he lost her and it continued its ascent thereafter, often in fits and starts. Once the Service managed to integrate medical research archives with the existing prediction network, wetsoft updates would arrive sporadically, delivering additional years to the total as one study or another suddenly slotted into place and ratcheted back the actuarial tables. Subscribers took to throwing parties to pre-celebrate their blocks of future birthdays as they were added, scheduling them around the few known update windows.

He distracted himself with his own research, piecing together a narrative web of news stories, random snippets from semantic spider processes, following up on old-fashioned hunches. The Service reported a one hundred percent success rate and advertised greater than that, claiming to have consistently provided all clients with their guaranteed minimum lifespan and then some. Every customer satisfied! But it published very little about inner workings, forcing him to less desirable outlets for the information he sought. For this, at least, his wealth was of some value to him, as a universal crowbar to pry open tightly-kept secrets.

Had no one before him ever unsubscribed? No future risk could be half so fearsome as past regret. Added time held no value if it could not be used to correct the mistakes already made.

The worst part was the dreams, in which he could no longer tell himself the lie that his carefully controlled expression told the world every day. Each night he would feel her slip from his grasp once again, see his vision tint toward the red, feel the artificial tingle as he reflexively pulled back for just too long a moment at just the wrong time.

He would see her face, that face, not the first glance at him from across a room culminating in a half-smile, not the innocent beaming up at him on their wedding day, not even the comfortably familiar glare. The knowing face he saw was full of shock at his own failure, not at what was then her inevitable fate. In his dreams, it hung before him longer than physics should allow. Sometimes all he could see was her eyes, justly accusing.

The alarm chimed as his mail arrived. It happened so seldom, he knew his special order must have finally come, the magic reed through which he could re-enter the glittering world. He checked his bookmarks and pulled up a particular tutorial he had not reviewed for some time. He surveyed his shop as he went down the list of supplies and then set to work.

There was no point to keeping it on anymore, once she was gone. Who would care if he suddenly

met his end? Why would he want so many extra years alone, sentenced to a joyless, mundane eternity? What he did want was a sip from that lost chalice of ignorance, to again only half-know what was and wasn't possible, to be no longer trapped in his own body by these electronically prompted reflexes, protecting him completely while stripping all of the actual living from life. It was an idea long in coming, the slow burn of understanding mirroring his gradual loss of control, then brought to a sudden boil in one unfortunate instant.

Now he felt taunted by the constant, coldly reassuring signals. The status line briefly flashed mauve as he clicked to discontinue the subscription. He had tried this once before but the salesmen nearly broke through his door to talk him out of it, jabbering their technical jargon, clearly more concerned with preserving his particular revenue stream than his "golden decades to enjoy, not toss aside!" They wouldn't leave until he recanted.

This time he employed a delightful hack to bypass the mandatory remorse period, so that he could end the program locally and avoid a repeat performance.

"Are you sure you want to delete this entry?"

Yes.

He sighed and snapped his datalink shut. After all of the preparation, all of the do-it-yourself guides and esoteric gadgetry, it seemed a little anticlimactic. He had expected more. But then the engineers likely had not anticipated his level of determination, assumed it would be done in-house.

He wondered if she would have been proud that in the end he would cast his lot with the vicissitudes of fate. He hoped it wouldn't take as long to come to grips with life without the Service as it had taken to adapt to life with it. He had already decided that neither mattered.

First the StatusTint finished its kill cycle, initiated by a close-all-connections message from the satellite relays in response to his modified bounce, final display reminiscent of those ancient color-barred television test patterns. Then the corner readout followed suit, beginning to fade, blinking its prediction in a final farewell even as it did.

/Clear./

/Clear./

/Clear./

It was a relief when the countdown clock reset, pulsing "000-000-00:00:00." More zeroes, appropriate; closed loops filled with emptiness.

At least that relentlessly accruing total would no longer haunt him, force his continuous recall of the memory of its digits cycling rapidly upward, adding minutes, hours, days, blurringly fast, even while she dropped away from him in that eerie, slow-motion dream state that infects tragic moments. His existence was extended even while he felt his life cut short.

/Paused./

/Subscription terminating./

The word "terminating" pulsed repeatedly and just as it disappeared from view completely, the display overwrote itself one more time. It felt odd to smile again, after so long.

/Goodbye./

His entire field of view winked out. In his confusion it took him an extra few moments to register the words crawling into being in the center of the blackness, before they too dissolved away.

/Okay to shutdown./

He heard a slight pop followed immediately by painful spasms, as if searing needlepoints were being driven into his extremities, syringes injecting gelled acid to coagulate throughout his system before it ate its way back out.

This was more like it; he had almost forgotten what it was to feel. He wanted more. He tried to picture her face, her long-absent smile, but he couldn't focus through the hurt.

His head spun, a swirling maelstrom mixing unrelated moments into an uncanny tableau, revolving faster and faster, the oddest details particularly vivid.

He saw himself as a child, splayed on the floor of the sitting room in his parents' home, playing a video game on an old tablet, decoding meaning from jumbled letter groups. He remembered how disturbed he had been by his mother's visible reaction to the telephone call, foreshadowing his own imminent despair begun that evening, the first time his father had not come home to them. He realized that he had never again seen the blue flower-print sundress his mother had worn that day and so many others prior.

There was the favorite restaurant that had been their closely-guarded secret, an out-of-the-way Italian café where he and she only went together, in which they had bared their souls to each other on more than one occasion, sharing their hopes and dreams with each other, laying blueprints for new ones in concert. He had spilled red wine on his tie and was frantically

attempting to daub it away with his napkin while she giggled uncontrollably behind hers.

He saw their library, him standing in front of a particular row of books, reading from a slip of heavy glossed paper, shocked into stillness. Every digit in the long number sequence under the barcode clearly visible, "140517061013042101181006401931030807." A timestamp, her name, and the spirit-crushing phrase, "Fall from Height." Him hurriedly replacing the slip where he had discovered it in her favorite book, "Pinero's Ghost," just as she entered the room and they began the first in a series of terse discussions about unrelated subjects.

And again he heard the heated argument between two people, saw himself seated at a table examining forms and they behind a door, a door ajar just enough for him to hear every word even over the emphatic hammering. "But they have no idea what they're getting into when they sign this!" The angry words echoed in his head as he jolted with each remembered pound of the fist, imagining it as punctuating every lick of the electric fire that flickered further and further up his spine, engulfed his brain.

He barely registered the wet spray on his face, the taste of copper. The sound of someone shrieking filled his ears. "I had ideas," he cried silently as his body convulsed. "Just always the wrong ones."