

All the Childhood You Can Afford

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POSTHUMOUS PARENTHOOD ISN'T THE WORST THING. I CAN'T imagine having to see my parents every day. Sitting through their stale advice in birthday vids once a year is annoying enough.

Not long ago, it was economically feasible for most children to live at the same time as their parents. That's one of the few things I learned in history class, and it's hard to believe that ever worked. Unlike today's reproductive service providers, back then your parents couldn't be fired for breach of social contract. Parents were permanent.

I guess they're still permanent. Their poor decisions, at least.

I definitely blame my parents. It's because of them I couldn't afford to be born for 86 years. The social stigma of *freezer burn* stays with you—travels in your file.

Why couldn't they have diversified my portfolio? That's basic. Everything would have been so much easier. Beebo says they were young when they set it up—barely in their 40s—but if you're going to freeze a kid, for fock's sake rent a clue. Retain a life advisor or something.

Then again, I could've had it worse; my dorm mate's older brother has yet to be born—probably another decade to go at least (too much bond exposure).

On the flip side, my little sister, Lily, lucked out when her Sipria stock blew up. She was born 20 years before me—mid-30s now—and worth a fortune. I see her tagged in gossip feeds from time to time. She

can afford childhood for the rest of her life.

As for me, I'll be lucky if I'm not forced to declare Chapter 7 adulthood before I'm out of my teens. I have a bad feeling that serious responsibilities are coming my way—and soon.

DON'T GET ME WRONG: I COULD PROBABLY QUALIFY FOR A SCHOLARSHIP if I applied myself, but a budget school curriculum tests patience, not intelligence. Boring repetition. I don't see how that prepares me for any life I want. I can't concentrate on this stuff anymore. I want to learn the one subject they don't teach here.

It's selfish of me, I know, but I wish our parents had opted for a commingled fund. Instead, they chose compartmentalization—hoping at least one of their kids got to live the good life they never had. Swinging for the fences, dear old Mom and Dad were. All or nothing. What's the worst that could happen? If we went bust, we'd never be born in the first place.

Worked out for Lily, anyway.

Sitting in Beebo's office, I couldn't help thinking about my parents—though I seldom did elsewhere. Mom and Dad. Forty years dead now.

Only the rich could afford to have children during life. The rest had to procreate on the layaway plan. Freeze an embryo and a nest egg to go with it. Let compound interest work its magic for a few decades. If the ratio of account balance versus cost of existence ever converges, bingo, your contracted service provider retains a surrogate birth mother, and if all goes well, nine months later you are born.

The legal and financial instruments were all very complex. That's why you needed a reliable service provider and a good life consultant. To keep track of everything. To make sure the contracts were followed and that your burn rate didn't reach an event horizon before you grew up and got an education—or at least a mortgage on a used arm.

Like I said, it's all very complex, but the general terms are laid out in promoganda vids. Your fate was decided by how much money your parents could pair with your embryo and how well the investments they chose for you performed over time.

Your birth worth determined which childhood plan you wound up in.

Diamond kids (like my sister) got the best non-legacy schools with the best facilities. Most people landed in platinum or titanium plans.

I probably would have wound up in platinum, too, except that I was born with cystic fibrosis. They had to use CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing in vivo to fix me—a nifty bit of tech that corrects sequencing errors. Getting edited cured me, but it also cost me. Expenses like that early in life have a big impact on your portfolio balance years later.

Now, if my parents had had more than just the minimum nest egg, those genetic edits could've been taken care of beforehand—what's known as a *legacy edit*.

Genome surgery is standard stuff in legacy packages. Pricey—I hear about 20 diamond childhoods' worth. In vitro gene editing where the lab techs regulate gene expression with siRNA gold nanoparticles, scouring your genome sequence for errors and omissions. They can also boost a few traits here and there—give your kid purple eyes and blue hair, if you want. If your parents could afford it, you'd be like another species. You'd be smarter. Live longer. Healthier.

But then, you were a scammer target, too. Elite life brokers were always enticing the rich to remain in perpetual childhood. There's more money to be made off childhood.

Existence can be a costly business. As the saying goes: life begins at conception—because so does the billing.

SO YEAH, THERE ARE WORSE THINGS THAN POSTHUMOUS PARENTHOOD. All this advanced tech made it possible for John and Jane Public to have 2.5 kids—even if they would never live to see them. When it comes to procreation, there's no room for sentimentality.

These days it seems like pets have taken the place of live children for most people. It's the pets who would be there to give and receive emotional comfort, and pets had evolved fast to meet this need.

It wasn't random luck that had cats walking around with a sock on their head. There had long been an evolutionary basis for cuteness: fierce creatures were destroyed; cute ones got the warm spot on the couch and generated billions in retail sales. It was an inexorable, insidious process. One of the most interesting classes I ever took was about

the “Cute Industrial Complex.”

That’s how cats had become almost lethally adorable. There were recorded cases of people suffering psychic breaks with reality at the sight of certain breeds (Scottish folds were tightly regulated now). “Cuteness overload” was an actual psychiatric condition listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—right alongside “Pringles fever” (psychogenic isoflavones were outlawed in the ’90s, but a word to the wise: mass-spectrometer your leisure foods).

But as usual, I digress.

There’s been ample time to ponder all this while I’ve been waiting here in Beebo’s office. Apparently he’s been lecturing me this whole time. About what, I don’t know.

Beebo had a bad habit of staring out his office window while talking. So it was easy to ignore him. Occasionally he’d stop and creak his chair around to check if I was still there. Disappointed, he’d creak back toward the sunlight and resume pontificating.

“Your poor life choices are beginning to take their toll, Gavin.”

He said that a lot.

My life counselor: Beebo Burjori. A man who hadn’t so much as changed his jacket in the six years I’d known him. Beebo’d been with me ever since my previous life counselor OD’d on stims. I was 10 at the time, but even back then I knew what everyone knew: bad things happen on a budget childhood.

“Beebo, I need to send a payment to my birth mother.” An annual pain and suffering bonus was customary.

“Your birth mother can wait. Your *biological* parents financed your existence. If they want to send a greeting on your birthday, then you’re going to wait there quietly until it arrives.”

I held up my transparent shard. “Can’t I at least study while I’m waiting? I’ve got a bio-economics exam.”

“You stay off-net. Parental messages as old as yours are unpredictable.”

I drummed my fingers on the disposable origami chair. This one was wearing out. “When does the message drop?”

“When it drops, that’s when.”

“Do I really need to be here?”

“Viewing is *compulsory*, Gavin.”

“So? Screens know who’s watching.”

“Most screens didn’t know who was watching back when your childhood contracts were drawn up. Yours says ...”—he read from his shard—“a licensed life counselor must ‘bear witness.’ You know what ‘bear witness’ means?”

“That wildlife is going to testify?”

“Ha ha, Mr. Funny Man. Keep joking and see where that gets you.”
I fidgeted on purpose. “I don’t get why the birthday vid would be late.”

“Who knows? It could be a rounding error. I’m not the one conceived eight decades ago—so you can imagine that I dislike waiting around for this message even more than you.”

I mumbled something—not even I was sure what.

“Speak up, boy.”

“I said ...” (only then deciding) “you *chose* to be a life counselor. This is your job.”

Beebo’s weary eyes turned away again. *Creak*. “Nobody sets out to be a life counselor, Gavin. It’s the trap that catches you as you spiral down society’s drain. My wisdom comes from a lifetime of making poor decisions. You can—.”

“Go to school on your mistakes. Yeah, I know.”

He was still looking wistfully out the window. “Well, it’s true.”

A moment of silence between us. The sound of distant students playing sports.

I gazed at the hordes of 3-D-printed tchotchkes covering every surface of Beebo’s office. Every shelf. Every windowsill. Lifelike statuettes of a lost youth—selfie scans with long-gone friends during their halcyon days, old toys, lost memes—useless bric-a-brac. There were hundreds of them.

Compulsive 3-D scanning/printing was common to Beebo’s generation. Their lives followed them around like a rummage sale. Too precious to melt and worthless to anyone but themselves.

“Doesn’t it depress you to look at all the fun you had?”

“I wasn’t supposed to wind up here.”

I’d heard just about every story Beebo had at least 15 times. That

happens when you've got mandated life sessions with someone every Tuesday. The way the stories changed was always interesting—a window into Beebo's mood. Rewriting the same story every year for the rest of his life. The harried protagonist in his own interactive epic.

"I had a decent birth worth. In my day you could actually raise yourself on three million."

"That's less than I had."

"Yes, but yours is 40 years later. Do you see my point? Net present value of money—or something ... I forget. But three million wasn't crap in those days. I didn't go to an awful school like this. I was raised platinum. I had opportunities. But I am the victim of my choices. And with your terrible grades, you're squandering your much more limited opportunities."

"This is not uplifting."

"Life lessons *aren't meant* to be uplifting. That's why they're lessons. Lessons teach you what to avoid."

Beebo really was a crap life counselor. I'd gleaned better advice from decorative pillows. But then, that's why he was *my* life counselor.

He turned back to the window. "If only life were straightforward. I'll tell you this: never trust happy people. They're always up to something."

A tone sounded, and Beebo turned to his shard.

"Ah, your birthday greeting has finally arrived. Now we can get this over with."

"Put it up."

A window glowed to life nearby. Nothing fancy. Just a grainy vid ported into a two-dimensional hologram. Something from a bygone era, sporting an out-of-fashion gauzy filter. There were Mom and Dad, looking gaunt and tired—strained smiles on their faces. Same old virtual set, different background. They probably recorded most of these in one day. I'd only ever seen this single day of their lives.

They looked to be in their 50s or 60s. Hard to tell, and I'm not allowed to know.

"Hi, sweetie!" Mom held up a birthday cake with candles alight—same cake as last year but with another candle added.

Dad held up a closed fist in some odd bumping gesture. "Hey, sport.

Happy 16th birthday.”

Both of them singsonging: “Happy birthday!”

Mom gestured. “We hope you get a wonderful cake just like this one.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’ll never understand this cakes-on-fire thing.”

Beebo peered close. “Setting cakes on fire was how they baked them.”

On screen my dad held up some sort of brown, swarthy glove—like what orderlies might strap onto a kid prone to seizures. Dad held the glove close to the lens. “We want you to have this. It was my grandfather’s, and my father passed it down to me. Now it’s my turn to pass it down to you.”

A screenbot tagged the object with an on-screen callout: *1936 Joe Gordon Marathon Buckle-Back Baseball Glove*.

“Great. Another installment of Antiques Stream.”

Beebo paused the video and glanced at his shard screen, reading. “Regrettably, the glove your father refers to was confiscated back in ’03. Licensing issues.”

“So, no glove?”

“Fraid not.”

“Was it a collector’s item?”

“Ah ...”

“Any residual value from the sale?”

Reading: “It doesn’t say there was a sale. Just that it was confiscated back in ’03. MLB licensing problem.”

“Don’t rip me, off, Beebo. It sounds like real cow leather—pre-Uprising.”

“You mean pre-*Transition*.”

“Fine—‘Transition.’ But if it was worth something, somebody could pay the licensing fee for me and we could split the profits. Confiscation makes no sense.”

“Do you know how many pre-Transition baseball gloves are rattling around the system? Dead people never throw anything away. The market’s gluttoned.”

I gave him a look. “You seem to know a lot about the market for antique baseball gloves.” Beebo was a poor liar.

He pointed at my parents on screen. “They’re told not to send physi-

cal goods to their children. You know the drill: we can't be responsible for loss or theft. Even if it survived the Uprising, Childe Services Incorporated is not responsible. In accordance with your contract, only digital heirlooms may be transferred to progeny."

"What about storage insurance?"

"Do you remember your contract class?"

"I flunked contract review." I preferred to think my talents lay elsewhere.

"Good thing contract fluency is not part of the common core."

I leaned back in my dangerously flexing chair. He probably used my glove to pay off a gambling debt. Not the first time. "Just play the rest of the vid and let's get out of here."

"It was barely worth anything anyway."

The video resumed. I sat through the rest of it somewhat numb as my parents smiled, their eyes darting. Talking about events and places I had no idea of. Who were these people? Their mannerisms and expressions were bizarre. Mom said something vaguely threatening about noses and grindstones before she kissed her own hand and waved.

"What the hell are they talking about?"

"I can't imagine. It's even worse when parents try to be funny." Another glance. "Ah! All done."

The moment the system cleared me as 'bearing witness,' I bolted. Beebo didn't stop me.

So, yeah, I was 16 today.

JEREMY BENTHAM SECONDARY SCHOOL WAS A CHILDE SERVICES campus and housing facility. We also called it PanOp (I don't know where the nickname came from). Budget childhoods require budget schools, and none was cheaper than Bentham.

I made my way down the ad-lined corridors on a hall pass code. The towering promoganda screens in the atrium played ultra-res vids of beautiful students casting come-hither looks at each other, showing how wonderful life could be if you spent more money. Right now, so close to the end of the term, the ad mix was thick with post-maturity childhood brokers, votech schools, and down-market colleges.

It's never too late to choose childhood.

The childhood you want at a price you can afford.

Continue your childhood at a world-class university ...

I was careful to keep my eyes focused straight ahead. Bad news if your pupils dilated at the wrong moment. They had you then. You'd be dodging the same ad for weeks like a jilted lover.

When I got to class, I dropped into an aisle seat near the back and opened my shard. Of course, shards made it possible to monitor class from anywhere, but schools had been sued in the past for turning out socially inept citizens with weak immune systems. And so—*technology be damned*—into class we went, packed in like lemmings.

PanOp had the usual low-end teaching layout—50,000 or 60,000 students attending smaller remote instruction classrooms like this one. A hologram-projected “live instruction” teacher paced up front—beamed in from a titanium school where students actually sat in the studio audience. Hard to believe, but titaniums had a real human teacher right there. The pupils could afford to ask questions, too.

Instead, we directed our questions to *naytas*—that is, “narrow AI teaching assistants.” Turing-trolling the naytas was great fun—asking them double entendre questions and laughing at their unintentionally hilarious answers. However, sooner or later their endless patience wore out even the most dedicated smart-ass. I should know.

To call PanOp a factory school would imply they made something useful here. Most of these students were buying time until they went on to votech schools or low-end colleges. The astrology club was very popular, if that tells you anything.

But what could I expect? I was paying for a crap education, and here you definitely got what you paid for. Most of the surveillance equipment was dedicated to making sure you didn't sneak in useful learning on your own.

That's where I'd had the most trouble. What I wanted to learn—the machine languages that made computers run—was the one thing PanOp refused to teach. As I looked around me at the information and surveillance systems, it seemed obvious that it was the most important thing a human being could know.

But there were still benefits to attending class—particularly when people like Xin Liu existed. I casually glanced where she always sat, and there she was with her friends in the front row—on the far side of the curving amphitheater.

Xin Liu. I studied her long silken black hair shimmering under the lights as she tapped at her shard. She was fashionably sloppy. I, on the other hand, could only afford a crisp default school uniform—a badge of poverty.

She looked up suddenly—straight at me. Flustered, I glanced down, trying to appear busy, changing my shard's orientation, which was ridiculous. After a couple moments of frenzied adjustments, I couldn't resist another glance, only to see that she was laughing. She leaned to one of her friends and whispered.

I felt a hot wave of humiliation.

Xin was one of the most popular girls in Bentham. Beautiful, active in sports and theater, entrepreneur club president, member of the student council. She'd definitely get a scholarship. She was going places. I was not.

I tried to concentrate on the lesson. Beebo's advice kept coming back to me: *your poor life choices are beginning to take their toll*. My grades were crap. Of course, it was cheaper to get A's, but I'd been spending my time studying other things after hours. Illicit things.

I needed to concentrate. I needed to pay attention to the core curriculum. My future depended upon it.

Up front, the holographic teacher looked to a classroom we could not see. *"After the Transition, what grew out of the continuity of Western markets? Financial instruments such as ...?"*

Silence. At our tuition level it was a one-way channel, but nobody in the titanium audience was answering either.

"Okay. What prevents everyone from staying frozen until they're born rich?" She picked a student.

A titanium student answered. *"Waif laws?"*

The teacher shook her head. *"No. Waif laws are what govern you if you go insolvent prior to maturity day."* She picked another student: "Louis." (The teacher actually knew this guy's name!)

Lucky Louis responded. *"Birth controls."*

"Birth controls. Correct. Parents are legally prevented from leaving their progeny in cryo for centuries in pursuit of a high 'birth worth.' Why?"

A random student: *"Because if everyone did that, no one would wind up being born."*

Our teacher nodded. *"To avoid the likelihood that no value would be created to grow the economy. The State requires a stable living population and moderate average 'birth worth.' What's known as ..."* She wrote the next part in mid-air, where it immediately transformed itself to ghostly type: *"census velocity.' What other exceptions are—."*

This stuff bored me to tears. Don't get me wrong: I could follow it, but the whole thing seemed to ignore the obvious:

HUMANITY WAS STUPID.

This groaning monstrosity of a civilization, with its eons of accrued economic baggage, was being kept afloat by supercomputer algorithms that could balance the logistical and financial needs of society on the head of a pin. The advances that could have charted limitless horizons were being used to keep the sclerotic, impossible system running. It took a billion trillion processing cycles just to keep the lights on.

The Transition, my eye.

"The Transition," "The Uprising," "The Troubles"—all euphemisms for the unrest that rocked the industrial world in the mid-21st century. Widespread automation in every service and industry caused human employment to crash. In the span of a single lifetime, five billion people found themselves out of work.

Most folks had stopped calling it the "Robot Uprising" (sci-fi historians used that to describe something much cooler). No, in the real Uprising it wasn't the robots that rose up. It was people—rising up against automation. Like Luddites—except they used technology to fight technology, throwing malware and network disruption at the machinery. Fighting big data with bad data.

After a decade or so of "transition," it finally got sorted out. It's not like robots were going away. Humans were just too frail and slow to compete with high-precision, high-speed industrial robots and soft-

ware algorithms. But if no one had a real job, then no one could buy the products the bots produced.

So as usual: technology caused a problem that another technology solved ... which created another problem ... which another technology solved. Technology made a compromise possible, even though the economics of life had skewed dramatically, making it impossible for middle- and working-class people to afford children. But then, technology solved that, too.

These solutions papered over systemic problems. Our approach to fatal memory leaks was to keep adding memory. A reboot was apparently out of the question.

Just then I realized students were getting up and leaving. Class was over. I hadn't caught any of it.

Your poor life choices are beginning to take their toll, Gavin.

I cast one last glance at Xin Liu—who didn't even notice I was alive.

LUTHER KNELT IN THE DIM LIGHT OF A SERVICE TUNNEL TAPPING at an ancient physical keyboard while Nero and Tan perused the tattered pages of an old hacking journal called *2600*. Luther spoke without looking up. "Gavin, how'd your vid-day go?"

Tan glanced my way. "Oh, right. Happy birthday."

I sighed. "Yeah, yeah." One year closer to adulthood.

"So? How'd it go?"

"Like usual: awkward."

"Biological parents are always embarrassing, aren't they?"

"Beebo sold my birthday gift again."

"That corrupt a-hole. When are you gonna report him?"

"I don't need the management scrutiny." I sat cross-legged across from my friends. We were an unofficial evening study group of sorts and regularly convened in this crawl space where service tunnels converged. Graffiti covered the concrete walls—forgotten names and obscene messages from decades of students. Pre-biodegradable packaging was strewn in the corners.

"The Pipe," as it was known, was a blind spot in the surveillance system. Places like this existed in the dim recesses of every dorm com-

plex, and students had found every one of them over the years. Their existence passed from graduating class to graduating class like the inner mysteries of strange religions.

The Pipe had been passed down to us by Charlie Hafton and his crew of seniors, who'd since graduated. Privacy was a luxury we relished, though we knew our faces would be missed if we stayed here too long. If you went undetected for longer than an hour, it would set off fines. Oh, and they might come looking for you, too.

Students used surveillance blind spots like this for everything they couldn't normally get away with, but Hafton and his crew weren't interested in shooting stims (transcranial direct current stimulation devices). Nor did they have much luck with the ladies. Neither did we. Maybe that's why Hafton took pity on us and let us in on this place.

Nero—who was starting to bulk up post-puberty—did pull-ups on a nearby conduit. “I don't know if I'm ever having kids. Who wants to look like a donk?”

“You think we'll look just as stupid to our kids?”

“Sixty years from now? Without question.”

“Ninety years for Gavin.”

“Shut up, you.”

Nero dropped down from the conduit. “Think about it. They'll probably have superbrains by then, and we'll be like swarthy toddlers.”

Tan shrugged. “My parents stopped pinging me years ago.”

“So they're *dead* dead.”

“I suppose.”

“I hear the last message is always heavy.”

“No special message that I remember. They just stopped.”

“Maybe your parents got run down by a tram or something.”

“Or bored.”

Luther motioned to me. “Come here. Check it out ...” He tapped the old keyboard.

Nearby, an ancient black-and-white maintenance terminal came to life with a dancing ASCII animation—a stick figure raised a stick sword and sliced the head off a stick enemy. Droplets of X's splattered, filling the screen.

“Ha! You finished it.”

“Took for-fucking-ever. I can’t believe people actually programmed like this back in the day.”

I picked up the ancient paper book that Hafton’s crew had left us. The copyright page had been torn out, but the aged parchment looked to be at least a century old. The cover depicted a strange animal crawling beneath the title: *21st Century C*. The dog-eared pages were still legible. Incredible how durable printed material was, and no one could track what we did with it. Or delete it.

I looked back up at the retro maintenance terminal as Luther typed changes into the code.

Hafton had shown us that low-level, century-old code could be compiled and run on these maintenance terminals. Gaining access through the diagnostics port was Hafton’s doing, but he’d bequeathed us the old programming book as well as the hacker journals—most of which didn’t make any sense to us. For instance, the last page always had photographs of huge phones—some of which you actually had to *crawl into* to use. Insane.

But people back then also seemed to know a lot more than we did.

Luther recompiled his program and launched it again. It immediately returned an out-of-bounds error. “Ah, shit.”

Tan shoved him aside. “Base zero, idiot.”

DAYS LATER, I FOUND MYSELF ENTERING THE OFFICE OF A SCHOOL manager—a stylish older woman with a severe expression. Her office overlooked the campus and a residential skyline from the 50th floor of the administration building. I’d passed a dozen offices similar to hers on the way down the corridor—all empty. Probably hourly rentals.

There were two chairs in front of her desk. My life counselor, Beebo Burjori, occupied one. She motioned for me to sit in the other.

I couldn’t help noticing Beebo’s dire expression as I lowered myself into the puffy chair.

“What’s up? My shard is locked.” I held up my device, displaying a modal message instructing me to report to this office.

The manager said nothing.

Beebo took my shard away. "That's because adults don't have school shards, Gavin."

I shot looks at her and Beebo. "What do you mean? I've got two years of school left. I'm applying for a votech scholarship."

The manager shook her head. "I'm afraid childhood is a luxury you can no longer afford."

"No, no, no. I've got a balance of over a million in my account. I'm—."

"Your illicit activities have knocked you into Chapter 7."

"Illicit activities? What are you talking about?" I looked again at Beebo.

He wagged a finger theatrically. "You've been studying titanium subjects, I hear."

"No, I haven't."

The school manager stared at me. "Do you deny that you're learning dead computer languages?"

"I—."

"Tuition theft is serious enough. Do you want more fines for lying, Gavin?"

I felt dizzy. "I don't understand."

She aimed at the air nearby, and a holographic screen materialized, clearly showing my face viewed from the front as I tentatively typed computer code. An inset screen showed the little "Hello World" program I was typing into the maintenance terminal. My first program.

"Coding. Studying programming books. Simple knowledge theft."

"I don't—."

"Knowledge theft is a Class 2 infraction, and your contract states that each Class 2 infraction is a \$1,000 fine. And then, of course, there's the matter of tuition."

"A thousand dollars?"

"Each infraction. Plus tuition."

"What do you mean, 'each infraction'? The video shows one infraction."

She shook her head. "One hundred and thirty-seven infractions. Plus \$507,000 in tuition for the knowledge you gained."

I fought back the shock. "That's insane."

“Your contract states that we are within our rights to charge you market rates for all academic knowledge you acquire while in this facility. And you decided to acquire titanium-level knowledge—one of the most expensive types.”

“It’s an obsolete computer language!”

“We charge for history class, don’t we? You wouldn’t argue that history is obsolete.”

“If I knew that you’d fine me, I wouldn’t—.”

“Have continued stealing. Correct. But then, you already know the rules. And if you’d read your contract, you’d know the penalties.”

I lowered my head into my hands and felt my pulse pounding. I glanced up. “It was my idea. No one else was involved.”

“You’re referring to your friends?”

“No. They weren’t involved.”

“We have proof otherwise, but don’t worry: your friends aren’t being charged.”

I switched immediately to outrage. “Wait a minute! How come I’m the only one being punished?”

“Because your friends still have a significant investment to make in this school system. You, on the other hand, are finished.”

I felt numb.

“This fine will put you in Chapter 7—below state-mandated balance requirements for continued childhood services. Which ends our contract. On the bright side, it also allows us to sell your spot to another paying student.”

“What about the tuition I already paid?”

“Nonrefundable. You really should become more familiar with your contract.”

I stood up and wandered like a zombie, looking out the window. The wide world was out there. Now I was going to be summarily ejected into it.

Beebo didn’t even look at me as he leaned toward the school manager. “The new student will obviously need a life counselor.”

She glanced through several screens. “I see that you’ve presided over a number of students who’ve fallen into Chapter 7, Mr. Burjori.”

“But on the whole, I’ve helped Childe Services better monetize school facilities.”

“Indeed you have.”

I couldn’t listen anymore. I headed for the door, but two uniformed security officers blocked my path.

I heard the manager’s voice behind me. “Gavin, one more thing.”

The security officers turned me around.

“You’ll need a mentor to help you transition to adulthood. It turns out you have a living cousin—17 years older than you. He’s already agreed to take you on.” She held up a blocky electronic device with all the appeal of a brick. “You’ll find your cousin’s contact information on this government assistance phablet.” She tossed it at me.

I caught it with my stomach. “A cousin?”

“Yes. And he’s in your new line of work.”

“What line of work?”

“Factory work, of course.”

“COUSIN!” MORT GRABBED ME IN A HUG AND SLAPPED ME ON THE back as I stepped off the auto-shuttle. I’d been coursing around the city for an hour as the minimum-bid passenger. Every time a new fare got on, I got outbid, but then I’d been hoarding what little cash I had left. It was starting to occur to me that adulthood was going to be series of similar inconveniences.

After one more slap on the back, Mort released me and looked me up and down. He was a slim guy with longish black hair but a carefully trimmed beard. He wore retro eyeglasses and a cloth jacket—with the sleeves oddly rolled up, revealing Asian-character tattoos. I didn’t see any family resemblance, but then I’m not sure how I’d know. I barely recalled what my own parents looked like.

Mort grabbed my duffel bag. “I can’t believe it. Living family. How great is that?”

“Then you haven’t met my sister, either?”

He made a face. “Naw. Her handlers don’t let anyone in. She’s in her own world.”

We stepped around a maintenance robot cleaning the sidewalk.

Mort slapped it on its side. “Good to see a union brother getting work!”

Puzzled, I followed him. “You live nearby?”

He gestured. “Right around the corner. Can’t wait for you to meet Marcy.”

“Marcy is ...?”

“My wife. She’s got a living brother, too—in the Industrial Robotics Union, but what are you gonna do?”

I gave him a blank look.

“We need to get you settled.”

I walked along gazing up at the unfamiliar skyline of residential towers. Few people walked the streets, and there was only the occasional whir of a vehicle passing.

“How much did those bloodsuckers leave you with?”

“Who?”

“The school. Childe Services. How much of your own money did you manage to escape with?”

Again, I burned with humiliation. My net worth had been a life-long source of embarrassment—one that followed me even down here.

Mort put a hand on my shoulder and stopped us. “Hey, Gavin. Don’t be embarrassed. I left childhood with barely a quarter million. Neither of our parents were financial geniuses.” He slapped me on the back again, then hooked an arm around my neck. “You’re gonna be all right. Trust me. It’s not so bad working for a living.”

Oddly, the roughhousing made me feel a little better. He actually looked happy to see me—which was more than I expected.

“You just need to be careful with the rest of your money. First thing you’ll need is a good used arm.”

“Used? Not a new one?”

“Don’t be a schnook and go buy a brand-new light industrial that won’t be able to earn you a decent living. Start with a midsized Honda or a Fujitsu—a couple thousand hours on it at most. Two or three years of warranty left. Not too specialized. You’ll want it to be eligible for a lot of different work. I know a good broker. Marcy and I financed all our industrial arms with him.”

“All your arms? How many do you have?”

“Union credo: ‘Two Strong Arms.’ And they don’t mean human ones.” Mort turned so I could see the large union seal embroidered on the back of his jacket. It showed two arms entwined—one a muscular human arm, the other robotic. Whether they were arm-wrestling or clasped in a show of brotherhood was unclear. The text along the edge read: *International Brotherhood of Robotic Labor, Local 229.*

“Your robot needs to go union.”

“I hadn’t really thought about it, but—.”

“You want management working your robot into an early grave?”

“No.”

“Okay, then, conversation over.”

I’VE NOTICED TWO SALIENT FEATURES OF MODERN LIFE: 1) NOTHING is easy, and 2) nothing is cheap. You always feel like you’re on the brink, though you don’t ever seem to actually go over the edge. Maybe teetering on the brink is what adulthood is all about.

Months of navigating robot and apartment brokers, insurance, permits, tax forms, union contracts, and a hundred other life-changing decisions I can’t recall eventually found me trudging down a factory gangway alongside Mort.

We both wore union blue IBRL jumpsuits, work boots, and networked helmets. I glanced through shatterproof glass at the assembly line below. Blinding stabs of light and showers of sparks punctuated the line as hundreds of robotic arms performed a tightly choreographed manufacturing ballet. Half-finished products moved down an assembly line between them, taking shape from components that other robots brought to the floor. The entire process occurred at speeds difficult to perceive, with my faceplate automatically tinting out potential welder’s flash.

Mort halted and looked down at one particular section of the line. Then he checked his visor’s AR display and pointed. “There it is: 42-T-A93.”

I followed his gaze toward a Fujitsu R-9000 Mobile Utility Arm. An orange stripe ran down its length. The code “42-T-A93” hovered ethereally as a call-out in my visor. The robot unloaded circuit boards into racks for a much larger circuit-welding bot to use in its work. Its hop-

per empty, the R-9000 zoomed away, orange warning lights whirling.

My robot.

It was a mid-sized clean-room logistics series with only a thousand hours on a complete rebuild. Two years remaining on a comprehensive warranty. The broker wanted \$890,000. Mort talked him down to \$837,000—\$200,000 down and \$7,321 a month for 10 years.

It was the first time I'd seen my robot in action.

Mort slapped me on the back. "Congratulations on your first robot's first job. This is a big moment in every worker's life. You're now *officially* an adult."

I hadn't pictured my rite of passage quite like this, but I still couldn't help but feel proud. I'd successfully navigated one of life's more insidious hazards: childhood.

I studied my robot as it took on another full rack of circuit boards. If I was lucky—and if Mort's experience bore out—my robot would be doing jobs like this every minute of almost every day for the next decade.

"So I just trust that they'll take care of it?"

"Trust?" Mort snorted derisively. "Hell, no!" He pointed at a union man and woman ahead on the gangway, poking handheld devices as they perused the assembly line below.

"Auditors. They spot-check the code executing on union robots, monitor running hours, things like that. Union techs approve code images for each machine. We don't let management load code onto our robots."

I remembered how much C programming it took just to make a tiny animation run. Then I looked out at the vast factory of machines running complex synchronized tasks. I knew this was repeated in a hundred thousand factories straight around the world, and in autonomous vehicles, computer networks—in short, everywhere.

"Who writes all this code?"

"I don't know about elsewhere, but here management proposes work code."

"But you said—"

"They don't get to *load* work code. They *propose* code for a factory full of robots—X many robots of X many types performing so many tasks to meet production targets."

“That’s how they know what robots to hire.”

Mort nodded and pulled me along down the gangway. “Union programmers meet with management programmers to review code, line by line. They call the meeting room where it happens ‘Checkpoint Charlie.’”

“Was that someone famous?”

“Not a person, a place—where opposing sides meet. Remember this: never trust management. You hear me? You gotta watch them like a drone, or they’ll try to slip in code to up production speeds, product weights, servo voltages—a whole host of shit that can shorten the life or void the warranty of a union robot. You gotta watch these bastards, I tell ya. And they gotta be reminded that with a single command, union robots will manufacture their own strike signs and hold them up to the surveillance cameras, and stop the line dead.”

I’d remembered seeing old vids about that. “Does that ever happen?”

“Nah, not in decades.” Mort nodded to the union auditors as we passed by. They nodded back. “But I’ll tell you what *could* cause a strike: you heard about this ‘Bits and Atoms’ bullshit?”

I shook my head.

“Get this: like a century ago some egghead comes up with the idea to skip industrial robots altogether and have products *manufacture themselves*. Can you believe that? Well, they finally perfected the tech; it’s called ‘digital self-assembly’—a bunch of milli-motein bots that assemble to become just about anything. They can self-repair, resize themselves, change form—even after the product has left the factory.”

“That sounds amazing.”

Mort cast an angry glance at me. “Do you realize how many union robots would lose their jobs if that happened?” He knocked me on the back of my hard hat. “Get your head straight!”

He stomped down the gangway, and I followed. As we exited the factory, we fell in alongside three workers wearing union jackets. They each carried slim black cases. I recognized these as mobile workstations and realized it was the first time I’d seen union coders—the people who negotiated process code with management. What they did amazed me.

Mort seemed to know one of them, a calm, elegant woman who smiled and exchanged a handshake with him. “Hey, Claire. How’s Rashneesh?”

“He’s doing well. You catch that Dragon Age Symphony down at the arts center?”

“I don’t go in much for the classics.”

We walked along for several moments before she looked over at me. “This your new apprentice?”

Mort grabbed my shoulder. “Nah, this guy here is *living family*—my cousin, Gavin.” Mort gestured to them. “Gavin, meet Roz, Vick ...”—a pale young man with a red beard and a bald-headed African man nodded—“and Claire, union programming lead. She’s the only smart one in the bunch.”

Claire laughed and shook her head. “If that’s true, we’re in trouble.”

I nervously nodded in greeting, but I looked longingly at the portable workstation Claire carried in its sleek black case. What must it have felt like to know how to use it? And how much more advanced than the old maintenance terminal we stole time on back at Bentham?

Roz, Vick, and Claire actually knew how to make machines do what they wanted—which seemed like something akin to magic.

She noticed my gaze. “You interested in computers, Gavin?”

Was I interested in what made the world run? Hell, yeah. Then again, I barely knew how to write a program that would compile. Compared with her, I was an idiot.

My throat felt clenched. “Uh, well, I taught myself a little C back in school.”

The others chuckled. “C?”

Vick looked across at me. “The man programs in ancient Greek.”

Roz added, “Good lucking hand-coding 400,000,000 lines, kid.”

They laughed again.

Claire cast a look at them and then turned to me. “C, huh? I learned a bit of C myself back in school—before I went broke.”

The others fell silent.

She grew wistful. “C. Now, that was a pure language. Close to the metal. No AI-constructed process nodes. You had to do everything by hand.”

No one said a word.

Claire let a slight smile escape, and then she produced a shard from

her jacket. "Guys, I'll catch up."

Roz and Vick nodded and kept walking as she halted and tapped at the shard screen for several moments. Then she smiled, passing the device. "Look ..."

I carefully took the shard into my hands. It was much higher quality than anything I'd ever held.

The holographic screen of the device displayed a rudimentary animation—ASCII text depicting a manga tiger with big eyes jumping over a field of O's.

It was amazing. I could understand how she'd done it, but it was still impressive.

I smiled and looked up at her. "This must have taken you forever."

Claire gazed at me with a look that implied a much deeper understanding between us. "It sure as hell did."

I passed the device back to her, and she slipped it into her jacket. We resumed walking as she put her arm on my shoulder.

"I don't know about you, Gavin, but I think childhood is overrated." ❏