

Battery Powered

I plugged in for the night and set the CPU timer to two hours. When I woke, I pulled the power cable from the port installed at the base of my skull. No one was sure how long ago the order came down from the Directorate, but since then, everyone's been required to charge each night.

Last week my co-worker, Kat, told me a story about an old man she knew. She said he refused the Install. They took him to one of the centers for social conditioning and reconstruction. When I asked her about him the next day, she'd forgotten. No one remembered anything from previous days. The Port wiped our memories each night while we charged.

The screen in my small apartment flickered on at 4:00 a.m. as it did each morning. One of the Directorate spokespeople stood in front of a podium reciting the annual spiel,

“REFERENDUM DAY IS OUR GREATEST NATIONAL HOLIDAY, A DAY WHICH CELEBRATES THE OVERWHELMINGLY AFFIRMATIVE VOTE FOR THE PORT. THERE ARE MANY BENEFITS TO CHARGING INSTEAD OF SLEEPING. BECAUSE OF THE PORT, PEOPLE ARE NO LONGER SLUGGISH OR SLEEP-DEPRIVED. INSTEAD, THEY ARE ABLE TO WORK LONGER AND SPEND MORE TIME ON THINGS THEY ENJOY. TWENTY-HOUR WORK DAYS GENERATED MORE WEALTH FOR OUR COMMUNITIES AND HELPED STIMULATE A PULSELESS ECONOMY. HAPPY REFERENDUM DAY!”

I left my apartment and walked down the street toward work. I clocked in at the CPU on the wall.

“Good morning,” I said as Kat entered the sliding door into the market. She looked at me like I was handing out pamphlets at the mall.

“Hi,” she said, barely audible, as she brushed past.

She didn’t remember me.

Throughout the day, I tried to work with Kat as much as possible. Whenever we crossed paths, I tried to make small talk, but she was more closed off than usual today. The Port must have given her an update as she charged last night.

After our twenty-minute dinner break, I traded my shift up front for one in the warehouse. Kat was the only other person working in the back. A trailer full of fresh fruit sat open, waiting to be unloaded. She drove the forklift up and called me over to help.

“What did you say your name was?” she asked.

“Ava. You?”

“Kathleen, but you can call me Kat.”

I smiled at her and helped her with the first load. As we drove back to the warehouse, I could tell she was thinking about something.

“You look familiar,” she said. “How long have you worked here?”

“Two years.”

“Huh. I’m not sure how long I’ve worked here.”

She gave the same look as she did moments earlier, pensive.

“Are we friends?” she asked.

“Some days.”

“What does that mean?”

I tried to be careful with what I said next, picking my words carefully.

“The Port does things to people. It changes their personalities. It makes them forget everything deemed ‘unnecessary’...You and I have been working together for two years.”

She didn’t answer for a few seconds while she parked the forklift in front of the trailer.

“But you remember. Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

Kat stared at me, testing my gaze. “How?”

I spoke slowly, methodically. “My CPU short-circuited so it stopped charging and I realized what it was doing... what *they* were doing to us. I started sleeping like people used to, before the Port. And it is wonderful. I feel refreshed, rejuvenated. And the best part... I have dreams.”

“They’ll take you to the Center if they catch you.”

“It’s worth the risk. Try it. Stop charging. Tonight.”

She stared at me again, about to speak...

The owner yelled across the huge warehouse, “Ava, Kat, get back to work! Now!”

We both jumped out of the forklift. Kat immediately started loading the next crates and turned to drive off.

As she did, she looked over her shoulder and said, “Let’s talk after work.”

Later that night, we both clocked out and walked around the corner toward the Unmarried Adults Apartments together. It wasn’t hard to convince her to not charge that night. The hard part would be keeping it a secret.

⇒

Throughout the next day, we had to pretend we didn't know each other. No one at work knew anyone else except for the owner. His Port had been given special memory capacities by the Directorate. Certain people were chosen to receive updates based on their level of importance to the community. His Port allowed him to remember 'work-related' information, such as names and details about his employees.

That night after work, Kat and I met up in the alley behind the warehouse. We were careful to make sure no one followed us. She told me she hadn't charged. She actually remembered me from yesterday.

"We need to tell other people about this," Kat said.

I nodded, looking into her eyes.

"Who?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know anyone but you."

I sighed and looked back toward the warehouse as we walked further away. Behind us, a low roar grew louder. I turned to see the forklift racing down the alleyway. "Run!" I yelled.

Kat sprinted a few strides ahead of me. I looked back every few seconds. The forklift was gaining. A bright droplight we used in the back dangled from the roof of the machine. The beams were behind the driver, revealing only a silhouette. We were only fifty feet or so away from the street at the end of the alley. Kat ran ahead of me. She reached the road and turned left. I followed. The forklift reached the road and stopped as the driver jumped out. It was the owner.

A few storefronts down, we stepped through the door to the entertainment store. Inside, dozens of shelves lined the room, each stuffed full of books, videos, and music. A few customers thumbed through the records section, trying to make their choice for the week. The Directorate

allowed us to watch, read, or listen to anything we wanted, but we were only allowed one entertainment item a week and it had to be returned the morning after consumption. The Port wiped whatever we saw or heard or read so they didn't care what we chose.

The store's only employee sat behind the counter, his face resting in his palm, half-asleep. We ran through the aisles to the back. Swinging doors from an old western saloon led to a room similar to our warehouse at the farmer's market, but much smaller. Piles of more books covered the floor. Behind us, we heard the owner enter. Kat picked up an encyclopedia and stood next to the swinging door. As soon as the owner walked through, she swung to the book and knocked him unconscious.

⇒

Several hours later the owner awoke in my apartment tied to a dining chair. Kat sat across the table. On the way over from the entertainment store, we did our best to avoid onlookers but hurried past those who saw us. We undoubtedly looked suspicious but were relying on the Port to wipe everyone before they built up the courage to inform the Directorate.

When he came to, I stepped forward. "Why did you chase us?"

The owner smiled. "You two are dumber than you look."

Kat stood up and walked toward him, but I held her back. He smiled again, laughing this time.

"What!" Kat yelled, pushing against me.

"They'll take you to the Center."

I released Kat's arm and turned to face the owner, "They don't know what we've done."

“They know everything...They’re in your head.”

This sent Kat pacing around the room, muttering to herself. My eyes followed her for a second as I thought.

“Doesn’t that mean they’re in your head too?” I asked the owner.

“Of course,” he said, still smiling.

“Why is that a good thing?”

“Because I *chose* the Port. I work for them. Their thoughts are my thoughts and my thoughts are their thoughts. I am one of them.”

Kat pivoted back toward the table. “The Directorate?”

Outside my window, beams of light flashed on the ground below. The owner smiled even wider.

“They’re here,” I said, running to the window.

Kat followed me. “How did they find us?”

I stopped her and held her away from the window. “We have to go. Now.”

The owner began to laugh, this time louder than before. “We... Are... Everywhere!”

Kat hit him over the head with another book. He slumped in the chair, his arms still tied behind him. I ran to the bedroom and grabbed my backpack. Kat opened the door and looked down the hallway. It was still empty. When I emerged from the bedroom, I ran past her into the hall and to the stairs. She followed.

Several flights later, we ran onto the roof. The apartments were all side-by-side-by-side. Ours, the Unmarried Adults Apartments, stood the tallest. The others next to it cascaded down, forming a pyramid in the skyline. Each building was perfectly shorter than the last. That was the Directorate’s way. They desired symmetry above all else.

We had no choice but to jump to the lower roof below. It was ten feet below and ten feet away. I could tell Kat was scared. She didn't deserve this--I was the one who told her not to charge. None of that mattered now. We had to jump.

"Be careful to roll when you land, it'll help blunt the impact," I said, trying to act as if I'd done something like this before. "Follow me."

I sprinted and leaped off the building. For a second, I soared. Then, my stomach dropped and I began to fall. Gravity pulled me faster and faster downward. As my feet hit the roof, I rolled. My elbows and knees scraped against the concrete slab, tearing my clothes. I stood and waved back at Kat. She looked even more terrified.

"Come on!"

She backed away from the edge and began to run. When she jumped, she sprawled her arms, grasping at the air. Her body hung in the air, still flailing. After a brief second, her feet hit. Because of her swinging, her shoulder slammed into the ground as she tried to roll. I ran over to her. She stood, but her left arm was limp. It looked like she'd dislocated her shoulder.

"We're gonna have to make a few more jumps."

Kat nodded. I jogged across the small roof. The next building stood the same distance below. We both ran and jumped. Kat held her left arm against her chest, trying to hold it steady. We repeated this once more when we came to the Pre-Teen Habitation Building.

The door on the roof was unlocked. We started down the stairs, but a few flights down, we heard someone enter the stairwell. Kat, still cradling her arm, nodded to the door. I stepped through and peaked down the hallway. It was the infant floor.

The walls, ceiling, and floor were black. Soft red lights ran across the ground. We walked past several rooms. Inside the observation windows, the babies charged. Their Ports glowed blue

A.J. Ferguson

as new information was uploaded and old information was removed. They were being programmed.

Kat's eyes widened as she looked at the children and back at me. "We have to do something."

I nodded and patted her uninjured shoulder. "We have to get out of here first."

We made it across the infant floor and to the opposite staircase. After a few minutes of climbing down, we exited the building.

On the street behind us, several hundred yards away, the patrol lights dotted the sides and tops of the Unmarried Adults Apartments. We continued walking away as casually as possible. A little ways down the road, an old sign flickered. It was a green cross, the Medical Facility.

Traditional healthcare had been made obsolete with the Port. Doctors were unnecessary because the Port didn't allow viruses into its host's body. The only time people visited the Med was for minor work-related injuries.

We entered the little building. The entire room was empty except for a small desk in the back and a few chairs across from it. Behind the desk, the doctor sat, reading a book.

The doctor smiled and looked up. "How can I help you?"

I motioned to Kat, "My friend hurt her shoulder."

"Your friend?"

"My... co-worker."

He looked at us, surveying. "I see."

The doctor lifted Kat's arm as far as it would go before she winced and groaned in pain. He pushed it forward and pulled it back, all the while moving his hands around her shoulder.

"Can you read me the title and author of that book?" he asked Kat.

She looked at the book and back at him. Confused.

“Um... *Paradise Lost* by John Mil--”

She screamed. The doctor had reset her shoulder with a pop so loud that I could hear it. Silent tears dripped off her cheeks and onto the floor.

“I’m sorry my dear. It’s best to be distracted in such moments.”

I realized for the first time, the doctor’s age. He was an old man. His hair was white, forehead wrinkled, hands gnarled. He smiled at us before returning to his seat behind the desk. That’s when I noticed the back of his head. He didn’t have a Port.

“Have you read it? *Paradise Lost*?” he asked as he sat.

Kat looked at me. I nodded almost as if allowing her to speak.

“I can’t remember...” she said.

He leaned back in his chair. “Ah, the Port.”

“I noticed you don’t have one,” I blurted.

“No, I do not. They forced me to stay here instead.”

Kat and I sat in the two chairs across from the doctor. He leaned forward again, placing both hands on the desk each laced in the other.

“What does that mean?” Kat asked.

The doctor tapped a strange bracelet I hadn’t seen before with his finger. “I cannot leave this building... I am a prisoner here. They needed a doctor with a human touch. You see, the Port wipes all ‘non-work related’ memories. My work is caring for people, thus, my memories are *of* people. They couldn’t erase my memory because they need it.”

“Why do they need you?” I asked.

“People with the Port do not get sick, but the Directorate doesn’t have the Port. They need me because they’re dying.”

Kat leaned forward in her chair, still caressing her shoulder, “How?”

“Old age. Like me, they’ll soon be gone, either by disease or the slow decay of time.”

The doctor leaned back in his chair, staring across the room at nothing in particular. Kat looked at me and I met her gaze, but no one spoke. Outside the front window, the neon light flickered. I looked deep into the doctor’s face. He was clearly thinking, torn between two thoughts. Patrol cars sped by, undoubtedly searching for us.

Kat nervously shifted in her seat. The old man’s eyes shifted back to us, noticing how comfortable we looked.

“How long has it been since you two charged?” he asked.

Kat and I looked at each other, she spoke first. “This is my first day.”

“And you?” the doctor asked, turning to me.

“Five months.”

They were both surprised. Kat seemed sad, the doctor empathetic. He understood my pain. He’d experienced loneliness and carried it himself for far longer. The old man reached his hand across the desk and held mine. His palm was rough and scratchy, but his grasp was warm and comforting.

He looked into my eyes, “The only thing worse than ignorance is having knowledge you cannot share.”

“Can you help us?” I asked.

He nodded and handed me his book.

A.J. Ferguson

THE END

(2,641 words)