The Vision Solution

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About this Piece

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CHAPTER ONE

The Vision Solution

I could hear the drones in the sky above me. Surrounded by hundreds of people on this city street, it was irrational to believe they were following me. Except the piece of paper in my pocket suggested it was a justified paranoia. And that made me nervous, and that was a problem. Nervousness was visible in a body if you weren't careful. And AI had no problem picking up on the changes in that body. I needed to get inside, away from their shrill buzzing eyes.

The laws were clear: police drones were not permitted to follow people into homes. But my home was a thirty-minute walk away. A restroom was the only other option. Would AI pick up on how odd it was that I was going into a restroom after just being in one? Just in case, I screwed up my face like I was sick, and rubbed at my belly, feigning pain.

But they weren't following me. Surely they weren't following me.

I entered the shoe store, found the men's bathroom at the back, and closed the door behind me. Weak, I sat down on the toilet,


JUSTDONT
STAY
FROSTY
FOND MEMORIES
EXIT

pants still on, and pulled the piece of paper out of my pocket. My hands trembled. The bastard. I'd watched him get tasered and arrested. Hands still shaking, I read again what he had silently and hurriedly scribbled in pencil in front of me on a sheet of paper in the bathroom at the busy train station.

They're not getting my bitcoin. I don't want to burn it. It's joined. It's not memorized. And then twelve words in ink. Twelve words that may or may not have money on them.

He'd made eye contact, handed it to me, and turned to go into the stall, flushed the toilet, come out, and I'd watched fifteen officers rush in, find, and arrest him. I left as quickly as possible, along with the many other strangers in the restroom at the time.

I was haunted by how interested they were in that toilet, thinking he'd flushed the words. I was haunted by the peacefully angry smug look on his face on the ground.

Fuck. I had to get myself under control. I had to get home. Or throw off the AI. I put the paper back in my pocket and pulled out my phone. Hey Jenn, I texted. I just watched someone get tasered. Bad. It threw me off a little. I think I'll head home and finish the errands tomorrow. I waited for my wife to reply, taking deep breaths.

Oh no! What happened?

Someone got chased by police and arrested.

Why?

No idea.

Ok, she replied. See you soon.

I rubbed my face, suspecting the phone would add these texts to the data that the AI in the area was drawing from, giving it an

alternative explanation for my irregular body language. Hopefully enough to dismiss me as someone worth watching or following out on the streets.

It appeared to work because once out on the snowy street, it didn't take long for me to out-walk the sound of the drones still circling over the crime scene. I dared not look back at them, feigning disinterest as I hurried home in the cold snow.

When I got home, Jenn took one look at my face. 'Are you ok?!'

'Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. Just a big hullabaloo. I'll be fine.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'll be fine.' I kissed her forehead, set my phone on the counter to give it a reason to be far from listening to me, then moved past her and headed to the office, where I hid the piece of paper in the safe. But then I took it out and hid it inside a secret slot in the art piece on the wall, feeling paranoid. Well, more paranoid than normal. Everyone felt paranoid these days. It used to be only celebrities and the occasional random victims who had to live with the paranoia and trauma of stalking. Now, it was everyone, the entire society.

If there was money on that seed phrase, I'd have to turn it in to the police, right? I'd look later. After everyone was in bed.

Dinner was ready soon after and I managed to distract myself in conversation with the kids; Noah was our house clown as much as he was the class clown. After they went to bed, my wife and I sat in chairs in the living room, scrolling through our phones in companionable silence, showing each other memes and headlines.

'Hey, is this where you were, Lewis?' she asked, holding out her phone.

I looked at the location in the article, and the mugshot under the headline. 'Looks like it,' I said. She got up and sat on the armrest so we could read it together.

Man Arrested for Refusing to Allow Excess Funds into Distribution, the headline read.

The man had inherited three bitcoin, now worth enough money to live opulently on without working a day the rest of his life—for multiple lifetimes—and had been required to turn in the amount over a fair lifetime supply for taxes to be distributed to poor veterans and widows of the war. The man had ranted and raved that it was theft, and had refused. Before fleeing, the man had sent the money to a mixed burn address, and had told police in interrogation that he would rather nobody access it ever again, adding to everyone's value than hand it over to thieves. Police still suspected he had tried to flee with the seed words and as a last-ditch effort had flushed them down the toilet. If so, they were lost. Initial mind-reading interrogations had not overheard any evidence in his mind of a memorized seed phrase.

I sighed, and Jenn said she was going to bed. I told her I'd join her in a little while. After she went to bed, I left my phone on the couch and went back to the office, closing the door. I turned on the computer. Computing power had improved so vastly over the last few years that everyone had personal servers now. The cloud had died long ago, and privacy in one's home was making strides again; the continual ebb and flow of prey and predator strengthening all sides. The war with China had shown everyone how necessary the individual privacy of citizens was for the safety of a nation. China

had killed people by hacking into and changing medical records; we had killed people by deleting bank accounts on their continent, wiping out all savings, debts, paychecks, loans, and more, leaving only bitcoin untouched. They had used data to find population centers most pro-war and targeted those, leaving populations alive that were more amenable to their terms of surrender.

We had won, if you could call it that, but the cost had been high for the world. Now personal servers were the norm, to protect the country. Both sides had used swarms of thousands of AI drones to hunt down enemies, infrastructure, communications, and destroy them. Even while it was being rebuilt, bitcoin was usable over mesh networks, walkie-talkies, and more. It was a lifeline in both countries.

I opened my bitcoin node and imported the gifted wallet. When the balance appeared on screen, my breath caught in my throat. My hands started shaking worse than earlier in the day. Three bitcoin? No. There were fifteen. I could hardly breathe.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

Fifteen freshly joined bitcoin. I looked deeper. There was a history of coinjoining for some time. The authorities only suspected three. A deviant thought took hold; I could give back the most recent UTXO containing three bitcoin, let them think that was all, and keep the rest. Or since it was already made private, I could keep all of it. But I knew I should turn it all in.

I shook my head to clear it, shook out my arms, rubbed my face, and made a decision; I coinjoined the 3 bitcoin to a new wallet and did not touch the rest, hidden so long as I did not touch it. I wrote

down the new seed words and put the wallet of 3 into the safe, and the rest back into the painting. I burned the arrested man's note over the toilet and flushed the ashes. Then I went to bed, feeling like everything was unreal.

I woke to the sound of loud knocking on our front door. I heard someone yell 'Police! Open up!' My heart wanted to sink, but it shot out of my chest in a million loud beating heartbeats, painful.

The pounding continued. Jenn turned over, eyes wide in the yellow of the streetlight outside our window.

I stumbled out of bed and put a robe on, then headed downstairs to open the door. When I did, the police pushed their way in, past Jenn's protestations that they needed a warrant.

'We have one,' a man said, showing us a paper that was a warrant, or so they said. Nobody studies what real warrants look like though, do they? They separated us into different rooms, and I could hear them questioning her in the office.

'You were downtown earlier,' an officer said to me.

I shivered. 'I was. What is going on?'

His eyes narrowed behind his glasses, which would be recording everything and giving him feedback. 'You were there when we arrested Jeremy Johnson in the public restroom.'

I nodded, overwhelmed. 'I was.'

'He gave you a piece of paper.'

I shook my head, horrified. 'No.'

The police officer's head raised in confirmation. 'Where is it?'

'I don't have—'

'It's here!' the man yelled. 'Search the house. He gave it to him!' They started ransacking the place.

'What the hell is going on?!' I yelled, trying to approximate the reaction of a man fully confused.

I was placed in handcuffs and left with a single guard. I listened to my house being destroyed, my wife crying, and my kids waking up in fear above us. One of them screamed, and the policeman shoved me back down when I tried to stand.

They looked everywhere — under couches, drawers. They tore up the couch, they looked behind the air conditioning grates, even behind the painting, but they didn't notice the near invisible slot it was hidden in. I was incredibly careful to not look around, to not rest my eyes on the direction of the painting or where the paper was, to not give the location away. I decided I had to maintain my innocence and hope they didn't find it.

Two hours later, they were still seemingly making fools of themselves.

I overheard them talking. 'Vision saw Johnson give him a paper, the AI is picking up micro-expressions that Lewis is lying. I think we just need to hook him up to Vision to find out where.'

I watched fearfully as they came toward me with a machine. The man in charge knelt before me. 'You've seen the dream recording technology, correct?'

I had. The basic working versions had been around since at least 2023. I couldn't breathe. This was why memorized seed words and brain wallets weren't used anymore.

'We use them in interrogations, naturally. The ability to visualize what you think. Earlier we hooked Johnson up to one, and despite his best efforts at keeping us out, he slipped and visualized

handing a slip of paper to a man in the bathroom. We followed the lead and have visited the home of every person who had been there. You are the one who is lying to us. So now, you can tell us where it is, and get a mere year in jail, or we will need to Vision you. It's a minimum sentence of twenty years at that point.' The bastards chose that moment to bring my children into the room and sit them down in front of me.

The choice was clear. I could, over the course of the next hour, have my head shaved and multiple sensors placed on it. They would be able to recreate everything I was seeing on a screen before us, and if I looked at it, it would be like a picture of a picture of a picture repeating, blurry but true. They would blindfold me and begin asking where the slip of paper was. I would think of the garden. The front yard. I would try to visualize anything other than — no, I would need to think of the kitchen. I'd think of the balcony. The closet. I couldn't think of the slot on the side of the painting.

And eventually, they would find it, the thing I was thinking about not thinking about, and my kids would be grown up before I could hug them again.

'It's in the safe,' I told them dejectedly, not needing to feign defeat.

A year later, my wife picked me up from prison. She kissed me. My kids hugged me. She had a surprise party waiting for me at home.

A week later, I went fishing with my best friend from college.

'Damn,' he said. 'Two weeks after you went into prison, they came out with a way to protect bitcoin from mind-reading attacks.'

I stared at his face. 'How?' I asked, breathless, thinking of not thinking about the painting on our wall.

'Come on,' he said, putting his stuff away. 'I'll show you.'

Source

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