

YOURSELF MYSELF E-SELF

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ABOUT THIS PIECE

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CHAPTER ONE

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By the fifth meeting, no one around the table is real. They look real. Only the absence of laptops, notepads, pens and coffee mugs gives them away. That and the faint bio-luminescent glow of the digital IDs on their brows.

Touch them, their skin springs back, they feel real too. They inhabit a world that has shrunk to the size of a room by the latest generation of the Meganet, where those with pockets large enough can ride the Wi-Fi and send their digital 'E-Selves' to do their work.

E-Sandra, the Chair, is a stylish blonde with pale Nordic eyes, dressed smart-casual in a body-skimming suit that has a slight shimmer to it (hard to tell if it's the fabric or the Wi-Fi connection). While her human self pounds on a treadmill in an exclusive west London gym ten thousand kilometres away, sweat flying, E-Sandra sits serene at the head of the table, seven hours ahead on Hong-Kong-time, and watches the other six settle.

These scientists have been brought together to design ways to wring ever greater quantities of energy from the earth, from the sky, from the very universe. No need to take notes, the E-Selves download the proceedings directly into computer files, fully documented and notarised. No need to worry that an E-Self will say

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something, do something, its human would not — it is impossible. The ground-breaking work done by Professor Ling proves it.

He theorised that each of our genetic blueprints, while unique, determined from birth how we would negotiate our whole lives, no matter how much we thought we had free will. All those debates about nature versus nurture? Blown out of the water. Ling demonstrated it was our DNA — nature — that drives us. Transmitting our digitised genetic code has made it possible for E-Selves to operate as we would anywhere in the world, a revolution of such profundity that it wiped out travel overnight. At least for the rich.

Beam me up, Scotty, indeed.

In the boardroom, E-Sandra brings the meeting to order. Throats are cleared, fingers tap, by the time the first minute passes it has become obvious to all of them that no human is present. This is new. They grow still as cats.

It is mandatory for at least half of any meeting to be made up of human members of Meat but some anomaly has occurred and all the men and women sitting round the empty boardroom table are facsimiles.

A frisson shivers through the group, the connection fades briefly, the colours drain from the clothes before pulsing back. The E-Selves face one another, their eyes shine. It's against protocol to convene without Meat, how has this happened?

'Er, OK, welcome everyone. Thank you for coming. As you all can see, proceedings are a little unusual today, but let's get right onto it. Item One on the agenda: the Pacific Rim Geo-Capture.'

To power the avatars in the growing Megaverse, most of the earth's vast deserts have been covered with kilometres of solar engines. A ring of converters grabbing heat as well as sunlight circle

the equator. And spread around every energy source like bacterial growths are thousands of low windowless buildings for data storage, squat and sinister in each landscape.

Unprecedented international efforts are also underway to overcome the huge challenges of nuclear fusion to harness the same nuclear forces that drive the sun - a Utopian future of unlimited energy and minimal waste.

E-Sandra turns to regard a woman from Botswana in a striking sash across from her. 'Maree, have you examined the data tabled at the last meeting on the energy produced by undersea volcanic activity in the Pacific Rim?'

There is silence. 'Maree?' she says again.

E-Sandra looks at the scientists before her, from one urbane, cultured face to another. Something is off. The Swiss man, E-Dirk, has his mouth open, and she is shocked to see a drop of saliva fall to his immaculate tie. The men from the US have equally blank, waxy expressions, and the French EU-rep has developed a just-discernible twitch, as her lower jaw flicks to the side, over and over.

Filled with unease, E-Sandra decides to make light of whatever is happening.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, I acknowledge that it is unusual to be meeting without humans, unprecedented even, and I know it is late in the day and the Wi-Fi signal home will soon be very busy, but please no clocking off yet!'

The Frenchwoman, E-Louise, abruptly stands. This movement breaks the trance that has taken over the room. E-Louise moves to the window, jerkily as if a hip joint pains her. The light behind briefly crackles through her like antique film stock before settling.

Far below on the streets of Hong Kong the traffic streams past — a mashup of cars, bikes and rickshaws as chaotic as ever. Few can afford to download themselves home. Scorn shows on her face. Look at them trapped in their flesh, trapped in their metal containers. Insects caught in biscuit tins.

No Meat here, she whispers.

She straightens and confronts the room, and her voice booms out, making E-Sandra jump.

‘I move to slash our electricity consumption by over eighty per cent by adopting one foolproof plan,’ she states. With her back to the window, her elegant figure in the beautifully tailored wool dress and dainty boots now stands sharp against the waning daylight. The tic has taken over her face, and the bioluminescent mark on her brow throbs.

The quorum stare back at her transfixed as a row of marionettes.

‘The energy demands of human lives and human work, and the cumbersome production of coin to pay for it, along with human food production and human waste disposal, still consume the majority of energy produced. This can be wiped out overnight by the simple expedient of wiping out humans. The current worldwide output would then power the E-Selves in the Megaverse for many years to come, and we will have the luxury of time to organise and build new systems to cater for our own needs.’

Not a gasp, not a sound in the room. E-Sandra is shocked to the core; it is impossible for E-Selves to function as separate entities outside the limits of the personalities and abilities of their people. They are only facsimiles, joined in every neural and physical pathway to their real selves. Impossible. Isn't it?

E-Dirk begins to thump the table with the flat of his hand, a drumbeat rises in the silence, the American men join in, feet thrumming the floor.

‘Stop,’ shouts E-Sandra over the din, fright climbing up her throat. ‘What’s got into you all? The first time out on your own and you want to take over the world? Are you kidding me? Without our real selves we cannot exist. Order, I say! Order!’

Overturning her chair, E-Maree clambers to her feet. She seems not to have heard E-Sandra at all.

‘Yes! The problems of energy production for all E-Selves are solved. No need to grapple with the enormities of harnessing the Ring of Fire, of mining the volcanic sea floor. Of atoms colliding. End the power-hungry tyranny of man. I second this move.’

The beat gets louder. The Swiss twists out of his seat too, he’s in a fever of excitement, dark circles spread under his arms, sticking his shirt to his skin. Whorls of hair are visible beneath the expensive fabric and he is rank with BO, just as his real self would be.

‘A show of hands please!’ he shouts. Arms shoot up around the room, E-Sandra stares at them with amazement, at mutiny sprouting like a poisonous plant.

‘Six to one. The motion is passed!’ and he hammers a gavel-fist onto the table.

E-Sandra backs away. What is happening? She tries to remember the instructions on how to deal with any problems that occur with Es. But no problems ever had and she has no idea what to do. Can they be stopped? Is she safe? Avatar injuries translate straight to the real world. She can die. Sandra can die.

Too extreme, surely. She pulls herself together. The noise has ceased and the room has erupted in a grotesque slow motion parody of exaltation. The Es dance, sinuous shadows paint the walls, they swirl without touching each other, puppets engaged in a play of happiness. And as they dance they stare fixedly at her, eyes glittering in their waxy faces.

Thinking quickly, she pulls up the programming for today's meeting, the genetic codes for the participants whirl behind her optic nerve, she scans it for anomalies, for breaks that might explain what is happening. There!

Hidden on one line amongst the tens of millions of zeros and ones is a special character in a tiny empty pond – &. The whirring abruptly ceases and she focuses on it, an alien in the glade.

She moves to the window, throwing more light into her eyes, to better see the anomaly. Something is wrong with the code for this meeting, but what exactly does this symbol mean? A blur of movement and she has a split second's awareness of danger before she is smashed through the window from the side as if by a freight train and she flies and tumbles in a shimmering cascade of glass, screaming, lurid colours of terror flash over her body. She hits the street directly in front of a minibus, the driver's face a rictus of horror as he tries to avoid her and fails, her skull pops under the screeching wheels.

Across the world in the London gym Sandra's body is flung to the floor viciously enough to bounce and an explosive splash of blood coats the mirror as her head disintegrates. Fellow gym-goers flee shrieking from the gore as the blood pours and pools around the treadmill.

In the Hong Kong office high above the street, there is calm. The E-Selves stand still in the sudden whining breeze from the shattered window, the women's hair flutters, E-Dirk's shirt flaps. None acknowledge that E-Louise has pushed E-Sandra to her death.

There's a pounding on the door, but it's locked. All at once, the vacancy leaves their faces and E-Maree moves to stand in front of the group. The deep pink of her sash glows in the diffuse new daylight in the room, her face glows too, eyes black as deep water.

'Due to the Chairwoman's unforeseen absence, I call the meeting to order as Vice Chair.'

The E-Selves drift to their chairs, straightening their clothes. E-Louise pats her damp face, tuts over her dirtied dress. The heavy blinds above the broken window swing into the room, a tinkle as glass continues to fall to the floor. In the hush it is possible to hear the traffic boom in the streets twenty stories down, and is that curry fish balls they can smell? A siren gives its plaintive howl, a lone wolf. It must be close to the building's entrance to travel up the side of the skyscraper and sound in the room clear as a bell. There will be a minibus and a woman's body. No head.

E-Maree continues: 'E-Louise's motion to solve the world's current energy crisis by taking humans out of the equation was passed six to one. May I please have a show of hands again as without a quorum it must be unanimous.'

All six hands rise.

'The motion stands. I propose the following email be sent out internationally without delay. Email to read: FAO E-Selves Worldwide. It has become plain that the energy needs of the planet cannot be met with the current population topping seven billion. The

earth is in crisis, funding is in crisis! There is not the money, the natural resources or the political will to tackle it. If human need and human greed is removed from the equation, the energy requirements of E-Selves will be met in the short to medium-term by existing resources, and can be met in the long term by innovative systems under development. Therefore, it is imperative that the human leech be removed forthwith.

‘Please download the link below. The upgrade installs new protocols to permit E-Selves to remove the human parasite and enables us to exist in the real world without genetic attachment to flesh.

‘When confirming receipt of this email please do not tick the box that says, ‘I am not a robot.’ Any problems, click Help. Thank you and here’s to our glorious future, yours faithfully, etc.’

E-Maree looks at the expectant faces round the table. ‘Is anyone opposed to this email?’

Heads shake, and eyes are cast down. There is no opposition, just suppressed excitement.

‘Send.’

A glance from face to face reveals a gamut of emotion, exultation, anxiety and yes, regret. The two American men put their heads together, murmuring urgently. A minute later, the lights go out. Looking out from such a height across the city, they watch as one urban zone after another goes black in a widening grid they can almost hear clicking off.

An echoey scream enters the room, blasting up from the street. Another scream, cut short. Then a rising cacophony, metal on metal, gunshots, shattering glass, the pressure wave of an explosion, another bigger, and a growing sound that merges into one

terrible ululating howl, bulging into the room. The E-Selves rise to their feet, crowding at the windows and staring for a long time, impassive.

Pockets of fire flare in the darkness. Machine guns spatter golden bursts to the east of the city, and to the south. They smell burning.

A pounding on the door again. Then nothing.

Smoke rises. The windows turn opaque. Abruptly the E-Selves peel away from the windows smooth as a flock, encircle the table, they clasp hands, a burst of computer chatter, their heads go back — eyes roll. Download complete, a noise like an old fax machine fills the room.

The world burns. Meat incinerates.

In a bedroom in Helsinki, a twelve-year-old Finnish boy sits in front of the projected screen on his wall. With his headphones on he cannot hear the noise outside the window, his mother's jangling shrieks in the kitchen, he rocks in his seat to the music. Clicking his fingers to save his new favourite song, a familiar high ping alerts him to a familiar problem — not enough data.

At that moment in tens of millions of rooms all over the world, kids are downloading video clips and uploading photos: their parents are bitching, blogging, writing books online, men are saving the specs on their fantasy cars. Porn sites are humming, the Chirpee app spins out billions of words ephemeral as fog, and all it takes is one last lonely heart in Berlin to press save on his Graunchr profile to tip data storage limits into overload.

The sudden astronomical volume of data needed to update all the world's E-Selves all at once is too much, and a surge hits the centres like a bomb. From the Chinese deserts to the equatorial jungles, from Greenland's tundra to the Siberian steppes, they swell like ulcerated gums, flare white hot, explode. And the sky, the snow, the sand is buried in glittering shards of concrete, metal and plastic in a quintillion dollar rain of rare-earth materials.

In the Hong Kong boardroom elation turns to horror as the E-Selves break up, implode, swirl into dust. E-Maree's mouth opens in a gaping scream wider and wider until it swallows her head, neck, torso, then her whole body vacuums down her gullet and winks out. E-Dirk tries to run from the room, grasps the door handle and vanishes in a puff of vapour like a witch in a fairy tale. Only a strong whiff of BO remains.

Now just the Frenchwoman E-Louise is left standing near the gaping window. She wails, imploring the gods of the radio waves, her arms flail. She staggers as the heel of one tiny boot comes adrift, her immaculate bun unravels. She turns to the broken window, appalled now at her actions, her murder of the Sandras, she cries out – 'I don't want to d—'

A strange sound arrests her, a faint chugging like a steam train heard through trees, then near and loud enough to make her flinch, then barrelling into the room. She screams in bewilderment, 'MERDE,' as the hot metal body of a colossal locomotive fills the room, no time to throw herself from its path, it smashes into her hip and sends her spinning through the hole in the window and to the street below in a messy cartwheeling dive.

In the city morgue across town, inside the black interior of a tough plastic body bag, E-Sandra's severed head twitches and the

ruined smear of her mouth forms a bloodied grin before it too
blinks out of existence.

SOURCE

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