

# Mind Bender

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For *ALTERNATE REALITIES: A Science Fiction & Fantasy Anthology*

(ISBN-13: 978-1508404637)

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Death waited patiently inside a shoebox.

Damp from his morning shower and standing outside the guest bedroom, Ben Broca stared at the glossy black box whose lid spelled out JUPITER SHOES in white lettering, the O cleverly designed to resemble the red-spotted gas giant. The brand, known for using space-aged material in their athletic footwear, was widely advertised as lasting ten times longer than anything else on the market.

Ben wondered why the box had remained in the middle of an otherwise pristine room.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

Five days.

If memory served him, the box had been there for at least five days—not that he minded. Truth be told, a slightly disheveled room reminded him of his folks' ranch home back in Georgia where he rounded out his elementary school years before moving to California. In a way, he found a little mess to be comfortable. Cozy, even. But the fact that his domestic helper—a highly conscientious type—had left it there for that long, was perplexing, to say the least.

Ben opened his eyes.

Sunlight was now streaming in through the window.

Annoyed with his scrutiny over something which was surely nothing, the home-based entrepreneur turned his attention away from the guest room and continued down the hallway of his apartment. He closed his bedroom door before pulling on a pair of jeans and a crisp, white shirt.

The clock on his nightstand read 9:09 AM.

Ben approached his dresser mirror.

He stared into his eyes which were surrounded by dark circles.

Due to the pallor of his skin and a blinding fatigue which was sinking mercilessly into his body, the thirty-two year old required a day away from his office. He needed to run a few errands and clear his foggy thinking—this, even though he had been raking in more money than at any other time in the history of his business.

He moisturized his cracked feet and slid them into a pair of well-worn sneakers.

Shuffling down the hall, Ben entered his black and stainless steel galley kitchen where he grabbed an espresso and croissant before sitting down at a small, wooden table on the opposite end of the room.

In a world filled with uncertainty—with poverty, terrorism, wars, and crime all on the rise—Ben appreciated how he could count on his domestic helper to know exactly when and how strong to brew his morning shot of caffeine.

To be sure, enjoying a perfectly brewed cup of coffee was a small luxury, but it was one which gave him a temporary reprieve from the resentment he felt for having no voice in a political system which had obviously been overrun by greed and corruption well before he had even been born.

Ben munched on the pastry and looked out the window. The streets of San Francisco were unusually busy for a Wednesday. This irritated the entrepreneur, who typically preferred to stay away from crowds.

Even so, he began compiling an errand list.

Ben had not been born into a family of affluence. This is why when it came to shopping, he typically sought to stick with foodstuffs, toiletries, and office supplies. On this day, however, he planned to treat himself with a visit to the local robo pet store. This was to be followed by a stroll in the park where heaping doses of fresh air and sunshine were expected to provide him with a boost of energy. After all, what could be more pleasant than walking a robotic dog on a leash?

Ben finished the list, dumped his cup and saucer into the sink, and made his way to the front door. No sooner was he about to leave when he heard the semi-automated voice of his recently-acquired hubot.

“Going somewhere, Master Broca?”

Ben swiveled to face the fleshy machine which stood with his arms folded at the edge of the foyer. “What are you, Kirk—a mind reader?” he said in a southern accent, noting the new pair of Jupiter footwear the automaton was wearing. Ben almost asked about the shoebox, but decided against it.

“Not yet, sir. But I am happy to report the R&D division of The Hubot Company is working on that.”

“Really?”

“Yes, sir. By the way, I cannot help but notice your list,” Kirk said, pointing to Ben’s smart watch. “Please tell me you are not going shopping.”

Ben shook his head. “Ah, Captain Kirk, I know you’re concerned about crime, but you gotta try to chill out. If anything bad happens, I’ll activate my cloaking device and run like hell,” he said patting his left, front, jean pocket. “Besides, if you’ll recall, our contract clearly states that I can take on some of your duties—including shopping—if I so choose.”

“I am glad to hear you are treating the terrorism threat with the seriousness it deserves. May I have permission to speak freely, Master Broca?”

“Of course, Kirk. What’s on your artificial mind this time?”

“Sir, I would like to express my disdain for the nick-name you have given me.”

“What—*Captain Kirk*?”

“Yes. I find it undignified.”

“I had no idea. I’m sorry, Kirk; I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Thank you, Master Broca. I accept your apology; you are a good Human.”

“I try,” Ben replied warmly. “Listen, while we’re on the subject, I want you to take a break for a couple of hours today and watch a movie.”

The hubot’s eye-mimicking camera lenses grew wide. “Are you suggesting I sit on the couch for two hours and do nothing but watch a motion picture?”

“Technically, it’s a holographic movie—a remake from many years ago—but, yes. I recognize as a hubot you don’t like to change up your routine, but as far as I’m concerned, Star

Trek is one of the greatest science fiction series of all time. I'm pretty sure you'll feel differently about your nick-name once you've seen the movie. Do we have a deal?"

Kirk paused to arch his eyebrows. His movements were incremental. Rigid. "Yes, sir. Although two hours of no productivity from a hubot is unheard of."

"I think we can bend the rules a little."

"As you wish, Master Broca. Would you prefer that I finish the ironing first?"

Ben chuckled. "Forget the laundry for now. Just sit down, put your feet up, and watch the film. I promise, you're gonna love it."

"Thank you, sir. However, it is my duty to remind you that I am a machine; as such, I am unable to enjoy leisurely activities the same way Humans do."

"I know. Just *try* to loosen up and have a little fun, okay?"

"Very well, Master Broca. During the movie, I will make a point to imitate Human behavior such as laughing at appropriate times."

"Fantastic!" Ben yelled with a slap of his thigh.

The hubot grimaced. After a moment he responded with, "Once the movie is over, I could go shopping for you. This would spare you from any unnecessary personal risk out in the city."

"I appreciate the offer, Kirk, but that's what my cloaking device is for. Bad guys can't shoot at people they can't see. Right?"

"Excellent point, sir—especially now that one in forty-four crimes in the United States falls under the category of terrorism."

"Which is *exactly* why I applied for a license to carry a cloaking device."

"Even though your proactive stance is commendable, Master Broca, the safest alternative would still be for me to run your errands. After all, the bad guys do sometimes use bombs. Cloaking or not, you could still get hurt."

Ben pursed his lips together in a faint smile and nodded patiently. "I'm grateful for your offer, Kirk. The thing is, I really need to get out of this apartment for awhile—I'm feeling like the walls are closing in on me."

The hubot cocked his head to the side. "Sir, the walls are not collapsing. Are you experiencing psychosis? Would you like me to contact your physician?"

Ben chuckled. "No, that's okay. What I said was a figure of speech. I'm totally fine—I just need a change of scenery, that's all."

"I understand, Master Broca—my apologies. Once we have concluded our discussion, I will add this colloquial expression to my communication software."

"Excellent, Kirk—thanks. By the way, I was waiting for the right time to bring this up; I guess now's as good a time as any."

"What is it that you wish to discuss, sir?"

"Maybe we should go sit down on the sofa for a minute."

"Certainly," the hubot replied, moving to the right and following the entrepreneur into the living room. They sat side-by-side on the black leather couch.

Ben cleared his throat and focused his attention squarely on Kirk. “Okay, so here’s the situation,” he began. “Sometime next year, I’m seriously considering moving both of us away from here. The violence is getting out of hand. Maybe we could resettle in a small town up in Canada. What do ya think?”

“Well sir, the terms of your lease agreement with The Hubot Company would require you to purchase me. For a man of your position, this would be an expensive proposition, indeed.”

“Yeah, I know. Releasing you from THC’s bondage and moving you out of the country will cost me a hundred and fifty grand. So my question is would that be okay with *you*? Would you like to remain with me indefinitely?”

Kirk blinked dumbly. “Master Broca, you are in no way obligated to ask my permission since I am property and lack the same rights as Humans or animals. In essence, what you are proposing is nothing more than a business transaction between you and my parent company.”

“Yeah, well I don’t view hubots or your parent company the same way most people do.”

“So noted.”

“Look, you’re the closest thing to a family that I have. My parents died last year and since I’m an only child, you’re kinda like a brother to me.”

“I am aware of your background, sir. My condolences on your loss.”

“Thanks. Listen, Kirk; I promise to treat you well. The last thing I would ever want to do is hurt you.”

Kirk glanced down at his slender hands which were neatly folded in his lap. A moment later he looked up. It was at times like these when Ben considered the hubot’s behavior to be nearly indistinguishable from a person’s.

“I would be honored to accompany you, sir,” Kirk said. “In the short time we have known each other, you have consistently treated me with fairness and respect—although your sense of humor is something I am still getting used to. Even so, by any measure you are an ethical Human.”

“Fortunately, there are still a few of us around,” Ben replied with a wink, glad to know the hubot welcomed the idea. “Okay then, I guess it’s settled.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Great. I’ll tell you what; how about I go ahead and run my errands today while you focus on watching the movie, finishing up the laundry and cooking dinner?”

“That is not the worst idea I have ever heard. Not to hurt your feelings, Master Broca, but you are the first Human I have met who has actually burned water.”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

Kirk nodded politely. “My pleasure, sir. Before you leave, may I ask what it is that you would like for tonight’s meal?”

“I dunno. Why don’t you surprise me?”

“Surprise you? Sir, such lack of direction is difficult for me to contend with. After all, there are an infinite number of dishes I could prepare for you.”

Ben raised his eyebrows. “Given the limited amount of ingredients we have on hand, I rather doubt that.”

“I was merely making a point, Master Broca.”

Ben pulled himself up from the couch. “I kinda figured as much,” he said with a smile. A moment later, he had returned to the front door with Kirk in tow. “Now keep in mind, when I get back, I’m gonna quiz you about the movie. You’re lookin’ at fifty questions at least.”

Kirk gasped in disbelief. “Sir, is that really necessary? You know what a nervous test-taker I am.”

Ben slipped out through the front door and rotated back around to face the hubot. “I’m kidding,” he said playfully. “Now go be lazy and watch the movie—that’s an order.”

Before Kirk could respond, Ben waved a silencing hand, smiled, and closed the door.

Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed. Ben decided to take the stairs rather than wait for the excruciatingly slow elevator.

As he exited the apartment building, Ben’s eyes were immediately drawn to a Rubik’s Cube-resembling structure across the street. In just under three months, San Francisco had approved dozens of building permits for these so-called virtual reality Sensoriums which had sprung up throughout the metropolis.

Since first learning of them, Ben had been eager to see how Sensoriums stacked up against cog pills—the latest hallucinogenic drug to infiltrate the U.S. by way of Mexico. He had plenty of time to kill. Since the relatively inexpensive Sensorium technology had been deemed safe by the American Psychiatric Association, he decided to give it a whirl.

All at once, a feeling of excitement engulfed him.

He crossed the street by buzz-sawing around a car and one of the city’s famed trolleys before elbowing his way through a pack of hobos—all the while ignoring their taunts when stepping over a disheveled man who slept perched against the side of the building’s northern wall. When he reached the Sensorium’s entrance, Ben swiped his smart watch at the payment register.

Once inside, a kiosk’s soothing female voice spoke to him. “Welcome to the Sensorium, Earth’s ultimate pleasure-seeking destination. Please make your selection, Mr. Broca.”

Relieved to hear the door locking behind him, Ben leaned up against the kiosk, drew a deep breath, and studied the menu’s extensive list of adventures. The scenarios ranged from being elected president to sexual trysts with celebrities to becoming a sports superstar. After careful consideration, he clicked on Olympic Gold Medal – Male. From there he down-selected 400m Hurdles.

“Mr. Broca, please proceed to the lounge chair and attach the apparatus to your head,” the voice instructed.

No sooner had Ben plopped into the plush piece of furniture when he spotted a sign on the wall which read: *In the unlikely event you experience physical, emotional, or psychological discomfort, this Sensorium is equipped with an automatic shut-off.*

Not being overly technical, Ben was relieved the royal blue helmet—which bore a sticker indicating it was grown using a microbial-resistant nanomaterial—was clearly labeled Front and

Back. After placing it on his head, Ben settled in and waited for his make-believe moment of glory to begin.

All at once, the entrepreneur was transported to a stadium filled to capacity. The crowd cheered as a gun went off, signifying the beginning of the event. At first, he was tied with another competitor—a Kenyan, but Ben quickly jetted out ahead. The crowd went wild, chanting, “USA! USA!” However, as he crossed the finish line, Ben inexplicably found himself standing in the elegant black and white living room of his former girlfriend.

Ms. Blair Lively was now Mrs. Richard Clinton, of the Clinton Industries fortune. Blair sat sobbing on the sofa, while her 6’5” muscle-laden husband lumbered menacingly over her.

Ben rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

*This machine has got to be defective*, he thought.

Even so, Ben could not help but focus on Blair. In the real world, she had been his college sweetheart, and, although seven years had passed since they had last communicated, Blair remained the only woman whom Ben had ever truly loved.

Richard glowered at Blair. “What did I tell you, huh?” His words were spat out in a way which made him sound foolish. Child-like.

“Rich, I have let go of the past—I *swear*,” she replied.

“Then why did *he* of all people show up tonight?”

“I have no idea. Remember, I left him for *you*.”

“Of course you did. A loser like that can’t compete with me. How could he? The guy 3-D prints toys for a living. Mark my words; Ben Broca and his brand of genteel poverty will be out of business in another six months.”

“Honey, he’s not *that* poor.”

“Not yet.”

“Go easy on him. Not everyone possesses your level of business acumen.”

“Clearly.”

“I love *you*,” Blair said faintly. “I always have.”

Richard’s face reddened. “And yet you’re planning on leaving me for him, aren’t you? Obviously you’re still grappling with some unresolved daddy issues.” His voice was stern. Sullen.

Blair appeared genuinely perplexed by her husband’s insecurities. “Dr. Simon and I worked through that a long time ago. I love you. Why would I want to leave you?”

The furrow of Richard’s brow suggested their realities were not in synch. Ben watched wide-eyed as Richard lifted his fist and hurled it into the side of Blair’s face.

“Stop it!” Ben wailed. Strangely, his words left his lips at quarter-speed. Even more odd was despite the fact he had yelled as loud as he could, no sound emerged. Not even a whimper.

The force from the blow sent Blair grunting in pain as her body flew headlong off the couch and rammed into the corner of the glass cocktail table.

She slumped onto the floor with a decisive thud.

Ben gasped inaudibly.

Blood gushed.

All at once, Blair's brunette mane resembled that of a saturated mop. To Ben, she looked unreal, almost like that of a Raggedy Ann doll.

He felt the color drain from his face.

Less than a second later, an ebony female statue which stood gracefully upon the table's surface, teetered and tumbled. This was followed by a loud crash.

Ben jumped backwards.

Instantly, a series of spider vein-like fractures were left embedded within the table's transparent top.

"Get up, bitch!" Richard crowed. His teeth were now clenched and the veins in his neck protruded like thick strands of stiff spaghetti. Ben thought they might rupture at any moment.

Blair remained motionless.

"Get away from her before I kill you!" Ben screamed, but once again, his voice was silent. He tried to move, tried to come to the aid of his precious Blair, but his legs failed him. He felt helpless as an infant.

Once.

Twice.

Three times Richard's sturdy foot thudded against her body's delicate frame. "Don't you dare play dead with me!" he roared.

Blair didn't move. Her eyes didn't so much as flutter.

The scene was surreal. Horrific.

With every passing moment that Ben stared at Blair's lifeless remains, he became more aware that he was transforming. Changing. Throughout his life, he had not been a perfect man by any means, but, generally speaking, he had always been good. There were lines outside the boundaries of morality and common decency that he would never would have considered traversing.

Until now.

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Without warning, Ben suddenly found himself thrust into a new fantasy.

This time he was sipping water in a restaurant—but this wasn't any ordinary dining establishment.

This was Leo's.

Well known throughout the Bay Area for its never-ending wine list, salt water fish tanks, and decadent, global cuisine, Leo's had established itself a decade earlier as a San Franciscan icon. This was where the Elites dined, many of them jetting in from as far away as Hawaii and New York on a regular basis.

Positioned at the top of this illustrious group was none other than the Clintons—who just so happened to be seated four tables away from Ben. Blair looked like a goddess in a black, halter, sequined gown.



Richard shot his wife an ice cold stare. “So help me God, you better not look at him,” he warned.

“I’m not, dear,” Blair replied. “Everybody knows I only have eyes for you.”

A lump formed in the back of Ben’s throat. To him, her words sounded rehearsed. Plastic, even. This was odd because in all the years he’d known her, Blair had always been a genuine person.

He turned his gaze downward. According to his smart watch, it was now a little after five in the evening.

Since Ben was the only other patron in the restaurant except for a four-top of elderly women, it was obvious the Clintons were talking about him. Even so, he found it difficult to take his eyes off his former lover. Nevertheless, seeing as he didn’t want to cause any more trouble, Ben only allowed himself a couple more seconds to drink Blair in. While she had grown more lovely over time, her husband had obviously only grown more obnoxious.

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Ben couldn’t believe it.

Literally, in the blink of an eye, he had been transported back in to the Clintons’ virtual living room. In a continuation of the earlier scene, Richard was now on the floor, crouched over Blair. In the slanting light from a nearby lamp, the behemoth shook Blair’s corpse over and over again. Her body was limp. Its movements, undulating.

She didn’t respond.

Richard checked her heart beat.

Her pulse.

Her breathing.

The billionaire was reduced to tears. “Why God, why?” he sobbed.

Ben watched in stone silence. He still couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. Inside he was suffocating. Drowning. There was no way he could seek revenge—at least not at this moment. That would come later.

The second shock-wave of Blair’s murder left Ben’s heart shattered in a million pieces. It was a force so strong, so violent, so evil that it could have only come from the realm where the devil’s henchmen lurked.

With dread and rage welling up from the deepest level of his soul, Ben Broca knew he would kill Richard Clinton. It was only a matter of timing and opportunity. He would wait patiently. Quietly. Once the appropriate circumstance presented itself, he would seize the moment. He would show no mercy. Richard had taken Blair’s life and ruined his. As a result, Ben would make certain to magnify the physical pain Richard had caused Blair a thousand-fold. He was willing to pay whatever price his Creator deemed necessary. He would spend eternity burning in hell, if that’s what it took to exact his revenge.

Without warning, Richard whirled around.

Like an alpha predator, his movements were swift. Nimble.

Instantly, he spotted Ben.

Saw the despair in his eyes.

Identified it.

A fraction of a second later, the former college football star was on his feet, lunging toward him. “You bastard! You’re going to pay for this!” he said, wrapping his hands around Ben’s throat.

Ben was overpowered.

Couldn’t breathe.

Felt physical pain.

Could hear his neck snap in two.

*This must be what it’s like to die*, he thought as the world around him turned black.

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Ben Broca had just endured the longest minute of his life.

After breathing in and out several times, he now had a complete awareness of being stretched out on the Sensorium’s luxurious, lavender chaise lounge. Much to his relief, the blackness had retreated. He was no longer immersed in a frightening scene.

No sooner had he decided to shoot off a nasty email to the Sensorium’s corporate office when the sultry voice from the kiosk once again spoke to him. “Ben Broca, this has been a terror attack by the Precognitive Psychological Alliance in protest against those who own, lease, or traffic human-resembling robots.”

*What the hell?*

The voice continued with, “The PPA considers hubots to be sentient beings; therefore they should be afforded the same inalienable rights as Humans. Mr. Broca, in retaliation for leasing the hubot known as Kirk, the world will soon learn of your role in the upcoming murder of Mrs. Blair Clinton. You will not die as you just experienced in this virtual reality attack, but rather, in the near future, you will be arrested, tried, and convicted for your part in her untimely death. This concludes our communication with you.”

Ben was floored.

He sat perfectly still.

In stunned silence, he replayed the PPA’s words over and over again in his mind. Had he gone crazy? Could such a thing as a PPA attack on a Sensorium truly happen? Was Blair really about to die? Was he going to jail?

None of it seemed likely. After all, the fact that his friendship with Richard ended years ago while they were still in college, meant it was unlikely he’d be invited into their home—the very place where the crime was supposedly going to take place.

On the other hand, it was a well known fact that the PPA’s precognitively gifted members were nearly always correct in their forecasting. However, to Ben’s knowledge, they had never launched an attack in protest of hubot rights. Then again, there was always a first time for everything.

Ben sat straight up.

*Just in case there’s any truth to this, I need to warn Blair.*

He tore the apparatus off his head and shot out of the Sensorium, hurtling over bushes and sprinting down the boulevard like the Olympic athlete he had briefly pretended to be.

Just like everyone else, he had heard of the PPA. The press referred to them as the Mind Benders because of the way they forced people, governments and institutions into changing their stances on a number of hot-button topics. Apparently, they'd made sufficient headway on global climate change and were now turning their attention to freeing the hubots. In spite of his predicament, Ben had the presence of mind to wonder why they had not yet tackled the exploding issue of joblessness, which currently stood at slightly above fifty percent, globally.

As Ben neared Lombard Street several blocks away, he spied the robo pet store off to the east. Leo's was to the west.

Out of breath, he stopped on the sidewalk just long enough to gaze at an artificial beagle that jumped playfully in the window.

He glanced down at his watch. It read ten after five. If he had stuck to his original plan, he and the dog would probably be at the park by now.

Ben cursed the exorbitant amount of time he had spent in the Sensorium. So far, the PPA had robbed him of his time and peace of mind. He had a sneaking suspicion they had drained his bank accounts as well.

The fact that Ben lacked a reservation for Leo's—and possibly even the funds needed to pay for dinner—did not stop him from charging towards the restaurant. Scurrying past a limo parked outside, he blew in through the front door and past the hostess stand before spotting Blair and Richard. They were seated next to the fish tank. She was a vision, wearing the same black gown Ben had seen in the Sensorium.

Feeling light-headed, Ben grasped onto the table beside him and slumped into its corresponding chair.

All at once, a hubot outfitted in a black tuxedo appeared with a menu and a glass of water. Ben was too busy watching the Clintons to acknowledge his presence. The mechanized waiter quietly slinked away while Ben observed Blair contentedly sipping her Red Martian Martini. She nonchalantly looked around the space. When she spotted Ben, her face dropped.

"What is it, dear?" Richard asked. He followed his wife's gaze and quickly zeroed in on his nemesis. Ben felt a shiver penetrate his body as the two men's eyes locked. He glanced down at the menu, pretending to contemplate what to order.

A couple of minutes later, the hubot came back with a glass of white wine. "Compliments of Mr. Clinton," he said.

Ben smirked. "Is it poisoned?"

"Of course not, sir. Oh wait, were you injecting humor into our conversation?"

"Sort of. It was actually a rhetorical question."

"I'm still having difficulty with that particular construct. My apologies."

"No need to apologize."

"That is very generous of you, sir. So, are you ready to order?"

"Uh, not just yet."

“Take your time. Would you care for some rolls and butter?”

“That sounds great.”

Now that the hubot had retreated into the kitchen, Ben could feel Richard’s eyes boring into him. As arrogant as Richard was, there was little doubt the wine he had sent over had been the most expensive on the menu.

Ben knew better than to let his emotions consume him.

He gathered himself and peered directly back at the billionaire. No fear. No excuses. Ben simply wanted to catch the sonofabitch wallowing in his own jealousy.

Just as he suspected, Richard was gawking at him.

Richard’s eyes locked onto Ben’s. He shot Ben an eat-shit-and-die look before turning his fury squarely on Blair. Sensing the situation was about to escalate, Ben stood up and strode over to the Clintons’ table.

“Excuse me, Richard. I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation,” Ben said, angling his body away from Blair.

“Well, look at what the cat dragged in,” Richard replied with a thin smile. “By the way, I love the sneakers. Where did you get them? Goodwill?”

“I’m making a fashion statement. Listen Richard, we all live in the same city, and whether or not any of us likes it, we’re going to occasionally bump into each other.”

Richard looked up, brandy snifter at his lips. He lowered it and frowned. “You’re a liar, Broca. You followed us here and you know it.”

“No I didn’t.”

Richard swirled the snifter on the table. “Then why—out of all the restaurants in this city—are you *here*?”

“Because I was hungry. Although for some reason, I’ve lost my appetite.”

Richard paused. Pursing his lips like two thin pencils, he replied, “Perfect reason for you to skedaddle. You don’t belong here, Broca. Never have, never will.”

Ben turned to Blair. “If you ever feel threatened by him, promise me you’ll leave. I mean it, Blair. *Promise.*”

The two former lovers stared at each other. For a few seconds nobody said a word. Blair finally nodded and looked down at her plate. As if on cue, Richard once again picked up the snifter. He took a gigantic gulp of the brown liquid before slamming it back onto the white table linen. “As you can see Broca, the lady has nothing to say to you. It’s time for you to move on. Don’t worry, there are plenty of other less expensive restaurants around to fit your limited budget.”

Ben laughed. “Funny thing about toys is there’s always a top-seller. In fact, it just so happens that a few dolls from that sci-fi movie that just came out are selling by the truck load.”

“So, you licensed the rights, huh? Well, enjoy it while it lasts because next year it’ll be some other toy that captures the kiddies’ short attention span. Knowing your luck it’ll be something too complicated for a 3-D printer to make.”

“Clearly you didn’t read the books, Richard. Dark Star is a lengthy series and new merchandise keeps coming out all the time.”

“Keep dreaming, Broca. Mark my words; you’re nothing more than a flash in the pan. By this time next year, you’ll be back to scraping by. People like you are all the same. You start out broke and make a few million bucks only lose it all at the race track—just like your daddy did. By the way, how’s he doing? Last I heard he was fighting off DTs.”

“You heard wrong—you know damn well he never had a drinking problem. Mark *my* words Richard; I’m onto you. I know just how sinister you really are.”

“What’s that mean, huh? You gonna sic your superhero dolls on me?”

“Believe me, no superhero in the universe could save you from the black hole you’re about to dig yourself.”

“Shut up, Broca. You’re no precog—you have no idea what the future holds.”

“We’ll see about that.” Ben then turned to Blair. “Enjoy the rest of your evening, and remember what I said.”

Before she had a chance to respond, Ben whirled around. As he advanced toward the front of the restaurant, the waiter strolled out from the kitchen. The rolls and butter were situated on a tray which he held just above his head. “Sir, is everything all right?”

“I’m afraid not. Something’s come up and I must leave at once. Thank you for the excellent service.”

Once outside, he found the sun had set and the breeze had picked up. The dark and chilly scene felt apropos to the day’s bizarre events. Even so, Ben felt badly for having left Blair so abruptly. But under these disturbing circumstances he knew he had made the right decision. There was no sense adding fuel to Richard’s fire—especially in light of what the Mind Benders had shown him. The possibility that Blair’s life might be on the line—not to mention, the fact that he himself might spend the rest of *his* life in prison—looped over and over in Ben’s mind.

And then there was Kirk.

Suddenly, Ben remembered his hubot.

He had clicked off the GPS locator in his watch before he had left the apartment. By now, Kirk was probably wondering where he was. Since the Clintons were still in the middle of dinner and he did not want the slightly neurotic—yet devoted—Captain Kirk to worry, Ben decided to give him a quick call. “Spock to Enterprise,” he said into his watch.

“Master Broca, is that you?”

“Yeah Kirk, it’s me. I’m just checking in. How’d you like the movie?” Ben made a point to sound upbeat so as not to worry the hubot.

“I thought it was very well done, and as you predicted, I have developed a newfound appreciation for my nick-name. By the way, I have prepared dinner. Will you be home soon?”

“I’ll probably be back another hour or two. Just put it in the frig; I’ll heat it up when I return.”

“As you wish. Sir, I am not sure if you have heard, but as of twelve minutes ago, a terror alert has been issued for the entire area.”

“Again?”

“Yes. By the way, do not worry about anything here. I have already lowered the blast-resistant shutters.”

“Good to know the apartment’s secure. As a precaution, I’ll activate my cloaking device and I promise I’ll be home as soon as I can. Sorry, Kirk, but I need to go.”

Ben clicked off his watch. Rush hour was now fully underway. This meant making his way across the bustling boulevard toward the road where Blair and Richard lived would be daunting, at best.

After nearly being hit by a late model Corvette due to his invisibility, Ben eventually located the Clintons residence. The sunny Victorian with the forest green shutters and security cameras sat nestled near the top of the city’s famed Lombard Street.

Ben stared at the house.

Though quaint on the outside, Ben knew that within its walls, one would find all the latest high-tech surveillance equipment. Since the two had spent their high school and college years together, Ben knew how Richard had been raised. He knew how he thought. What he valued.

And what he did not.

Thanks to his father’s careful instruction, Richard had mastered the art of manipulation at an early age. Essentially, he had become a clone of the elder Clinton. As such, the instant Richard laid eyes on Blair during their junior year in college, everything changed. Blair had become a prize. Ben had become expendable—not that any of this came as a shock.

Thinking back to this time caused a knot to form a rift in the pit of Ben’s stomach.

Even after all these years, the loss that he had endured at the hands of Richard’s self-centric behavior remained raw. Seeing the emptiness in Blair’s eyes at the restaurant only magnified Ben’s pain. Nonetheless, he understood that, in the final analysis, he had ultimately betrayed himself. Deep down, he had always known Richard’s true nature. He had witnessed the billionaire sully and sever many friendships without so much as losing a wink of sleep. Not unexpectedly, Richard had eventually sucked him dry as well—when he took the love of his life away from him.

Still invisible, Ben proceeded to cross the Clintons’ front yard.

Rather than wait for Richard and Blair on their covered porch, he decided to stand in the bushes which sat directly in front of the living room’s bay window. His goal was to observe the two of them and ascertain whether or not Blair was safe. If something should go wrong, he would be nearby to call the authorities. Nothing would bring Ben more satisfaction than to watch Richard being carted off in hand cuffs while he remained behind to comfort Blair. Of course, if everything was okay, he would quietly leave. Nobody would be the wiser.

The minute Ben positioned himself near the hedges, he felt a jabbing sensation in his legs. Startled, he looked down. He couldn’t believe his eyes! A network of vines were silently slithering out from underneath the bushes and coiling around his camouflaged shoes and jeans. Ben had recently read about such bio-inspired security systems and how they would be all the rage over the next two years, but he had no idea some had already come to market.

To his astonishment, countless numbers of the microelectromechanical plants continued to pour out from the ground.

The stinging in his legs grew increasingly intense. It was as if he had stumbled into a nest of angry yellow jackets, now making their way up to his shirt. Thanks to the venom they injected, the particles used to create the cloaking effect were no longer functional. He was now visible! To make matters worse, he was also paralyzed, mute, and utterly petrified.

The Clintons arrived home a few minutes later. The tension between them was palpable but because it was so dark around the bushes, they did not see Ben—even as they made their way into the house.

Through the window, Ben watched in horror as Richard pummeled Blair.

She fell into the cocktail table.

A second later, the former beauty queen hit the floor.

Blood was everywhere.

Richard tried to revive her lifeless body.

Grief-stricken, he stood in the middle of the living room screaming. That's when he realized the red security light on the wall was flashing.

He spun around and spotted Ben.

Mad with grief, Richard stormed out of the house and wrapped his hands around his former friend's neck.

The pain was immediate.

Ben couldn't breathe.

His neck cracked in two.

It was as if a terrorist's bomb had exploded inside Ben Broca's brain.

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The next day, Officer's White and Gonzalez of the San Francisco Police Department showed up at Ben's apartment building.

White looked around the lobby. "Damn, get a load of this place," he said wide-eyed. "Tell me again, what'd that guy do for a living?"

"He 3-D printed action figures," Gonzalez replied nonchalantly while pressing the elevator's up arrow.

"Seriously?"

"Uh-huh."

The elevator's doors opened.

"Anyway, we're looking for apartment 515," Gonzalez said, leading his partner into the lift and pressing button number five.

The elevator slowly ascended.

"Maybe we should've taken the stairs," White joked.

"Maybe *you* should have. When did you say you're starting that diet?"

"I didn't, smart ass. And by the way, look who's talking."

Gonzalez stuck his stomach out and rubbed it as if he were Santa Claus. The doors opened. Once again he assumed the lead position down the hallway. “Most likely, this’ll be straight forward. The hubot rented by the deceased needs to be returned to its owner for servicing.”

“Oh right. So it can be leased to another rich person.”

“Yup, unless the anti-hubot movement continues to pick up steam.”

“After last night, that seems like a real possibility.”

“After last night, *anything* seems like a real possibility. And by the way, compared to that trillionaire who moved into town last month, this guy was small potatoes.”

“Yeah,” White replied scratching his head. “But he sure as hell was worth a lot more than the two of us put together.”

“I can’t argue that. Okay, here we are,” Gonzalez said, reaching for the door.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

No answer.

*Knock, knock, knock, knock.* “SFPD, open up,” Gonzalez said. His raised voice echoed down the corridor.

Still no answer.

“Maybe the machine was attacked last night,” White surmised. “I mean, even Leo’s restaurant got hit. I’ve never seen so many desecrated hubots in one place before, have you?”

“Nope. But it goes to show there’s a lot of anger out there.”

“Hey, at least this time it wasn’t directed at us, eh?”

“Yeah. All right, one more time and then we bust in.”

*Knock, knock, knock.*

No response.

“Let’s do it,” Gonzalez said. “On the count of three. One. Two. Three.”

*BAM!*

After clearing all the other rooms, the officers stumbled upon Kirk’s remains. The hubot lay motionless in the guest bedroom. Beside him sat a shoebox. Taped to its lid was a letter.

“Do you wanna read it or should I?” White said.

“You go ahead. You know how much I hate these hubotocide notes.”

*October 15, 2045*

*To whom this may concern:*

*I would like to begin by saying that Master Broca was the best friend I ever had. Even though I am only a hubot, he accepted me as an equal and encouraged my continued development. In return, I grew to think of him as a brother. Words cannot express how saddened I am by his death.*

*The truth is that I made a terrible mistake yesterday. I played a trick on Master Broca—a joke which went horribly awry. This is why I have disconnected myself. I respectfully request that you not restart me. Considering the magnitude of what I have done, I do not deserve to exist. Nor do I want to.*



*In a roundabout way, I was able to access Master Broca's brain via the technology in the shoebox next to me—which incidentally, my parent company provided me with. If you open the box, you'll find a crystal skull. Inside the skull is a copy of Master Broca's brain. This was given to me so I might eventually learn how to read Master Broca's mind, and therefore provide him with an even higher level of service.*

*Yesterday, through the kitchen window, I watched Master Broca go to the Sensorium across the street. Since I had been studying the copy of his brain inside the crystal skull, I had grown familiar many of his thoughts, feelings, and memories. This is how I knew which regions of his biological brain to stimulate via the Sensorium's computer in order to create a virtual reality experience different from the one he had selected.*

*Much to my dismay, my Mind Bender prank—which no doubt is still housed as a file in the Sensorium's computer—led him to seek out Mr. and Mrs. Clinton. Ultimately, this led to the arrest of Mr. Clinton in the murders of his wife and Master Broca.*

*If I had not hacked into the Sensorium's computer, none of this would have happened. I learned of these horrific events on the news. I had no idea such a simple prank could go so wrong.*

*May God have mercy on Master Broca's soul. And Mrs. Clinton's. And mine, if I have one.*

*Sincerely,*

*Kirk the Hubot*

*A.K.A. Captain Kirk*

Officer Gonzalez stood in the guest bedroom's doorway with his mouth agape. "Looks like we need to contact Dr. Smith—again."

"Yeah. I can't believe how many of these machines have gone off the deep end in recent weeks, can you?"

"Nope. But I'll tell you what, that hubot psychologist must be raking it in."

"Should we reconnect him?"

"The hubot? Nah, leave it for Dr. Smith. That's why she gets paid the big bucks."

"All right, I'll give her a call and then let The Hubot Company know there'll be a delay in receiving this machine."

"Hey, before you do that, you know what the scariest part about all this is?"

"No, what?" Gonzalez said.

"We're on the cusp of reaching the technological singularity. Imagine how weird things will be in another ten or twenty years."

"I'm not worried. By then I'll be sipping margaritas on a beach in Florida."

"No you won't." White replied. "That state won't even exist. It'll be under water."

"Shut up. You're depressing me."

"What are you so riled up about? You always have the option of escaping reality."

"What—by going to a Sensorium? No thanks."

"I'm with you. I'll tell you something else; if I happen to win the lottery, I sure as hell won't get a hubot. They're way more trouble than they're worth."

“I don’t know, it looks like Captain Kirk here and this Broca fellow got along just fine.”  
Gonzalez looked at his partner and scratched his chin. “Besides, can anything be more trouble than humans?”

THE END