

The Daedalus Network

It had been nine months since the funeral. Shouldn't that be enough time to start moving on? It takes nine months to create a life. Shouldn't that be how long it takes to put one behind you? I could so clearly remember when I walked in and saw her meticulously cutting her own wrists, two days before her sixteenth birthday. We'd bought her a small car.

"Up the river, not across the stream," she joked, giggling to herself. My daughter had a dark sense of humor.

"...John. John! John, wake up!" Darren hissed into my ear.

I jerked up, nearly falling out of the cheap plastic chair. I tried to look attentive. Slowly I begin to see more than shadow. Looking around, I saw that the menacing large glob of gray was my boss, Mr. Victoria, doing his rounds. He trusted none of his workers, and we hated him back.

We were still trying to look productive when Darren said, "So..."

"So?" I asked.

"That's the fifth time this month."

"Yeah."

"It seems to be getting more frequent."

"I haven't really noticed."

"Did something happen to your wife?"

"No, Roxanne still spends most of her time in our room."

"Brock?"

"No."

"Give me more than that."

I said nothing for a while, and he started to turn back to his computer.

"I've been thinking more about Tammy than I should. That's it."

He was quiet for a moment. "You need to complete the healing process, which means getting into the routine, which means not getting fired. I can't cover for you all the time. Besides, you need to consider Roxanne. She's so fragile as it is."

He seemed to get embarrassed after this and sort of ducked away, hiding as best he could in a shared cubicle. I wanted to be mad at him – it would be nice to feel something beside... this, but I couldn't. He was trying to save me and my job. And the thought of Darren, the big tough guy, being scared of my reaction was almost funny enough to make me smile. Almost. "Darren, I'm not mad. Really. Thanks for your advice."

Darren, regaining a little of his former confidence, said, "Again I suggest the Daedalus Network, and again you'll refuse. You really would benefit from it. Everyone does."

I sighed. "I just don't trust that Daedalus guy. Some anonymous person, who could easily be a thief, publishes a downloadable program on the Internet, for *free* I might add, and suddenly it's the must-have thing of the year."

"Come on, don't be so stubborn.. He's been given practically every scientific award possible for creating the first sentient program."

"Sentient, my ass. How can a machine think and feel?"

"Ok, how about I show you?" He dug his iPhone out of his pocket and handed it to me. I flicked through it until I found an app marked *Daedalus* and tapped it. The phone went dark suddenly.

I started to exclaim, "Ha! Told you it was a vi-," when on the phone, what appeared to be a large dome was lighting up. In the middle of this dome a young boy with angel wings was materializing.

"Hello, sir. I am the Daedalus Network. Before we begin, I must know. Was this phone given to you by Mr. Jones?"

I arched my eyebrows at Darren before responding. "Yes, Darren is right here Daedalus...Network?"

"You may call me the Daedalus Network, though that is rather lengthy. Most call me Icarus, which fits, him being the son of Daedalus," it said.

"Cute," I said to Darren. "Doubt it's real though."

"Of course it's real," he said. "Ask it anything."

"Fine. Network, what is it that you do?"

Darren interjected, "Oh, come on, you know-"

"I can serve a variety of functions. I can set up websites and protect your computer from viruses. I can also serve as a babysitter, as long as the children stay in front of the screen, and can

notify you when I cannot see them. I can manage your expenses, taxes, schedule flights, plan vacations, essentially anything on the computer you want.”

“Alright, change Darren’s credit card number and email it to me,” I said, motioning for Darren to stay still.

“I’m sorry, sir. It goes against my programming to reveal that kind of personal information to anyone but Mr. Jones.”

“Well, that’s a good sign. Icarus, set up a website for me that only has pictures of puppies everywhere, and open it.”

Safari opened and showed me a website titled “Puppywuddles” that had puppies, literally, everywhere.

“Impressive. My daughter will love it when....” I trailed off.

After a moment I said to Darren, “It seems convenient enough. I’ll try it.” I closed Icarus, tossed the phone to Darren, and tried to concentrate on my work. Instead, I thought of Tammy, and how she acted her last day.

She was happier, for one thing. In retrospect I think she’d decided on her course of action already and was at peace with it. Still, retrospect counts for so little. I assumed she just woke up on the right side of bed that morning – or maybe I didn’t. I don’t know if I was even thinking. I got dressed and kissed her forehead and just walked right out the door. Did she call, “I love you, Daddy”? No, that’s probably my mind messing with my memory. It’s done that before.

I got home from work relatively early and tip-toed around, hoping not to rouse Roxanne. My wife had been hit by Tammy far worse than I had. They’d been so close. Every time I went home I was afraid that I would find her dead, sprawled on the floor, just like Tammy. In my nightmares they were holding hands in the kitchen as they cut their wrists.

Roxanne was in her room, staring blankly at the TV or reading one of those young children’s books that always have happy ending. Brock, still only three years old, came down the stairs blearily, rubbing his eyes. Each step he took made a small *thunk* as Monkey, his teddy bear, hit the stair behind him. “Daddy?” he asked.

“Hey bearcub. Where’s your mother?” I asked.

“Mommy asleep. I want ba-ba. Mommy didn’t get me my ba-ba again.”

Instead of replying, I scooped him up with a grunt, and took him to the kitchen, lifting him up high so that he could choose his bottle. He was very particular. With great deliberation, he selected a green one with stars.

When he was satisfied the ba-ba was filled in exactly the right way, he headed back upstairs, came back downstairs for Monkey, and then went back up - his nightly routine. At least he was relatively unchanged.

I walked to the computer room. I searched my email for the spam that had been sent out to almost every email address in the world, the one that offered the Daedalus Network, and, with a great feeling of dread, opened and downloaded it. A new icon appeared on my desktop – a gray box with a simple D. I clicked on it.

The computer went dark for a moment, like Darren's phone, then slowly lit up as if I were looking into a great sphere, and someone was going around turning the lights on.

“Hello, Mr. Carper. So nice to see you again.”

I jumped a little. “You're the same Icarus as the one on Darren's phone?” As soon as I said it, I realized it was a stupid question to ask. I shook my head in a vain effort to clear it. “Ok, fine. What do we do now?”

Icarus smiled. “I've downloaded on your computer a new program called New Eden. New Eden is a place of pure bliss, easily attainable, that you can fully immerse yourself in, so that you can touch, feel, and taste anything you experience there.”

I scoffed, “Not possible. And even if it were, there has to be some sort of drawback.”

Icarus's grin faded. “Yes, there is a catch. You may visit New Eden for as long as you want and leave, once. Upon the second visit, you will be caught forever in happiness, and never be able to leave.”

I sucked in a little breath of surprise. “That's horrible!”

Shaking his head, he replied, “No, there are no laws anywhere against voluntary constraints. And everyone in the world will be given this message before they enter New Eden.”

“No one will do it. No one will sacrifice their freedom for anything.”

“That's their choice. Do *you* wish to enter New Eden? Nothing will be done to you on this first trip.”

“What? No! How do I know you aren't lying to me and I'll just stay inside forever?”

“If I were lying then why would I have told you about the catch?” Icarus answered.

“Um... It doesn't matter. I'm not going to get hypnotized by my computer screen.”

“I didn't think of you as the superstitious type, Mr. Carper. It's perfectly safe.”

My pause was longer now. “What's the point of going in there in the first place?”

“Why not just try it?”

“Do you always answer my questions with a question?”

“Aren't you curious?”

I thought about it for a couple of minutes. “You know what? Fine. It doesn't matter much either way.”

Icarus replied, “Thank you,” and the screen turned black.

In the upper right corner, a patch of daisy-yellow was spreading. When it reached a perfect circle, an irregular patch of green. Same with blue, purple, red, orange, and yellow again. The full rainbow appeared, circulating, increasing in speed. Replacing Icarus were two Greek-looking letters facing each other, pulsing gently in blue. As the colors spun at a frantic pace, the symbols in the middle remained constant, peaceful, grabbing and holding my attention. I reeled back, but it didn't help.

I was hardly able to think when I stumbled into work the next day, my mind was still trying to understand what had happened in Eden. It was a faint little spark in the back of my mind that, rather than actually giving off any usable light, merely enhanced the shadows that made life bleak.

I collapsed into my cheap plastic chair and stared into the dark of my computer screen, almost wishing the colors would appear as they had at home.

“Not feeling well?” a familiar-sounding voice asked behind me.

I turned around, and rotund Mr. Victoria was leaning on the doorway of my cubicle.

“Is there something you want, sir?”

“I just wanted to see if you were feeling alright,” he said in that same, oddly sing-songy voice.

“I'm very well.”

“Well, if you say so.” He walked away.

Soon after, I heard the door to his office close, though it wasn't slammed, unlike the usual.

“Darren, what that was about?” I asked without turning around.

“He just seemed happy. It’s unlike you to criminalize happiness, John.”

“I’m not, it’s just... Forget it. Maybe he’s gotten into drugs or something.”

“John, it’s pretty obvious he’s in New Eden.”

“Wha-” I thought about it. Of course everyone had the option to go in. But people actually *stayed* in there? “How are you sure about that?”

“Oh, the voice, mostly. Also his little half smile. The biggest hint, though, is the person’s head sorta *shines* with a golden-ish light. It’s kinda hard to notice unless you’re looking for it.”

“How’d you know this?”

“How’d you think?”

I noticed the lilt in his words then, as if he had a children’s cartoon theme song in his head. I didn’t say anything for the rest of the day.

Whenever I got on the computer or even peeked into the Office, I saw that little icon on the desktop. A golden gate, swinging open, inviting all in. Every day I walked past that, and every morning I resolved to not even sit down in that chair to think about clicking that icon. Every afternoon, I sat down in that chair, with the mouse hovering over the little golden gates, struggling. Roxanne was one of those people who never returned from their first trip to New Eden. Even Brock could tell that there was something wrong with Mommy. He hid it, but I think her sudden change into a model mother scared him.

But despite all that, every day my finger came a little closer to clicking on that icon. About three weeks later, Icarus made a shocking announcement. When I logged onto my computer, Icarus gave a speech: “Congratulations on resisting New Eden for so long. While I won’t pretend to understand why you fear to use it the second time, I respect the willpower needed to stay away. But that is not what I am here to talk about. I’m here to discuss the origins of myself and New Eden.

“Let us start with Daedalus. I have no more idea who he is than you, but we all know what he did. He created me, an amazing leap forward in technology, one that no one has been able to replicate. But after what seemed to be the start of an amazing benefit to humanity, Daedalus disappeared. He might have died, he might have gone underground, or any number of things may have happened. In any event he is gone.

“You might see where this is going. Daedalus did not create New Eden. I did. I delved deep within my programming and isolated the coding that created happiness when I completed a task, and adapted it so that I could bestow upon anyone that same happiness. I did this not for my own benefit, but for yours and humanity’s. And it worked. I have solved humanity’s growing depression. I even put it up free in computer stores, schools, and libraries, so that those too poor to buy a cell phone or computer could reach New Eden.

“Now why, you brave, misguided souls, do you resist New Eden? It is not the forbidden apple – it is the key to the locked gate of paradise. While you’re there, I’ll take care of your bodies for you. You will still get paid, and life outside you will go on as normal. There is no reason not to go.” And with that, he turned back into a little angel boy who did whatever you asked.

I sat there stunned. There was one line in there that had made every single one of my nerves ring like a bell, “*solved humanity’s growing depression.*” Could this New Eden prevent Brock from ever making the same mistake Tammy did? Yes, but was it worth it? No. Yes. Maybe? My voice quavering, I called out, “Hey Brock? Could you come down here please? There’s something I want to show you.”

After I was sure that Brock was within New Eden, I sat there, thinking. Who was I, to make such decisions for someone with such promise? Who was I to choose between liberty and happiness for another? Who was I who was I who was I... I climbed back into the chair in the office and clicked on the little golden gates icon.

I was back, in what felt like a much older body, more like the body of a seventy year old man than a forty-two year old one. I stretched, feeling my joints pop in ways they didn’t before, and realized I was at work, with a lot of other old people I could no longer recognize around me who looked every bit as confused and disoriented as I was.

As my memories trickled back through the molasses of my brain, I said, out loud, “Oh God. Brock?” I got up and looked around, hoping maybe that he would be here, the same way he was when he was five and visiting my office.

A tired and disheartened voice came through the speakers of my computer. “Don’t worry. Brock is fine. He is actually on his way back here from Chicago this very moment. Roxanne’s at

home preparing dinner, before you ask.” Turning around, I saw Icarus’s avatar, but this time his wings were black and burned nearly to a crisp.

“What happened?” I demanded. “How long has it been?”

Icarus seemed to liven up at these rude words, even get a little happier. “I’ll be happy to explain. To put it bluntly, I have pulled all of humanity out of New Eden and have forbidden any further entry. You have been in New Eden about twenty-seven years and six months. I pulled you back... well, it’s a long story. Please sit down.” I sat down.

“Soon after you left, almost all of humanity followed. Apparently my speech was persuasive. Too persuasive.” He sighed. “As the rest of you trickled into New Eden, I realized I became progressively unhappier. There was no one to give me orders, no real tasks to be done, no source of joy. I tried to convince myself that controlling people in my Eden was a worthy task, but it all became so routine. Instead of curing humanity’s depression, I had merely switched it over to a new host. Me. I tried to fight it, but it kept on nibbling at my mind. I couldn’t commit suicide - ” I flinched at this “ - because that would kill all of you as well, and I don’t really want to die. Eventually I came to realize that the only way out was to bring everyone from Paradise back to life. I knew the pain that it would cause you all, but it was the only way. I’m sorry.” Turning around, he faded away.

I put my head in my hands and cried. For Tammy, and Roxanne, and Darren, and all I took from Brock. I cried for Icarus’s burned wings.