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Article

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The storyteller

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Abstract: This story is inspired by the growing feasibility of Decentralised Autonomous Corporations (DACs), operating by means of distributed blockchain technologies. The story is set in the near future where a decentralised corporation – powered by machine-learning algorithms and fed on an unending stream of data – has entirely penetrated the fabric of society. Ultimately, however, it is the narcissism of humans – their insatiable need to be recognised in some way – that drives the exponential power of the corporation. Some of the themes that emerge from the story are: 1) the production of social media content, 2) the dangers of corporate personhood, 3) the nature of human and non-human agency, 4) the nature of truth in the context of the information age, and 5) the potential impact of fully autonomous technologies.

Keywords: Sci-fi, Artificial intelligence, Big data

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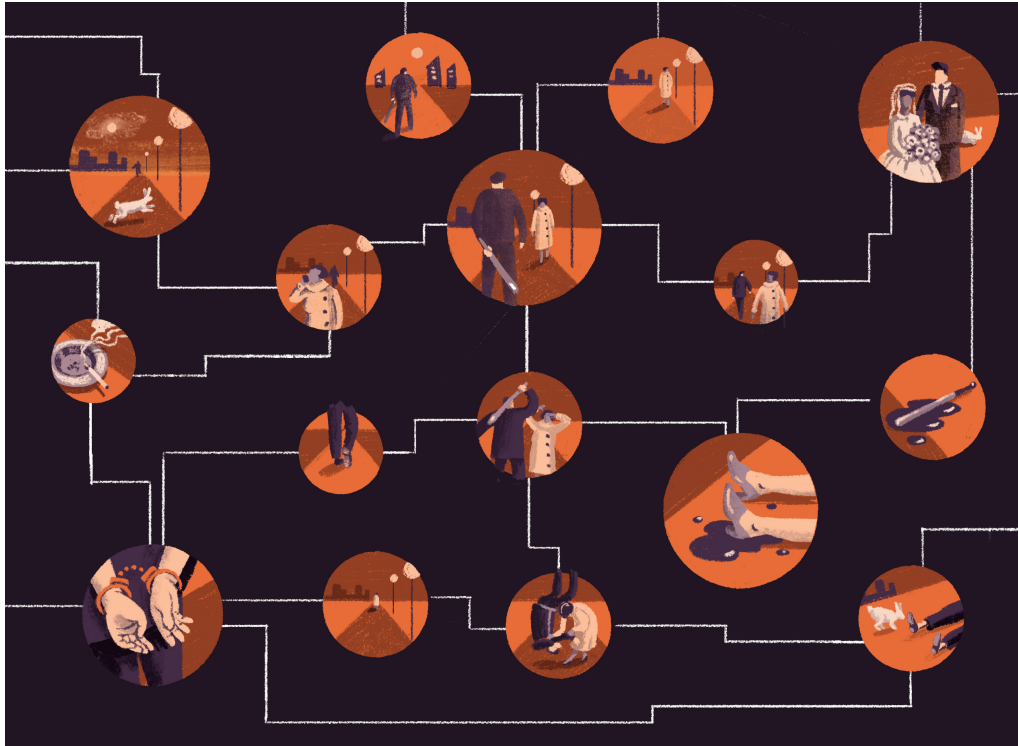


Illustration: Annika Huskamp

Howard Crick dropped the bloody baseball bat to the pavement and looked at the dead girl. He wondered what her name was for a moment and then tried unsuccessfully to wipe his hands on his silk shirt. He looked at her one last time before turning abruptly on his heels. He walked out of the alleyway and into the bright lights of the city.

The lanes were packed with autos; some fast and some slow, some accelerating smoothly through the ordered chaos of shoals and trains, each riding in slipstreams like birds on the wing. One of the autos coasted to a smooth stop by the kerbside. Its door slid open, and Howard entered. A voice suggested a destination and he nodded without listening.

It was not long before the interior of the cab became illuminated in harsh flashes of blue and red light. The auto pulled over to the side of the highway and became silent. Howard watched in the mirrors as the two policemen cautiously approached. One held up his hand and the pair stopped advancing. They argued.

Howard knew their story. They were arguing about the name on the licence of the auto; the younger one spoke calmly while the older one gesticulated with a clenched jaw. Either that or the other thing, Howard thought. The policemen stopped immediately when they saw him watching. The door slid open and he got out.

"Howard Crick?", the younger one said, his hand at his holster.

“Yes,” Howard said.

“Howard Crick of the TBSC?”

“TBSC?” Howard shouted, speaking above the dull hum of the traffic.

“The Better Storytelling Corporation.”

“I am he,” Howard said.

The two policemen looked at one another and then said: “You need to come with us.”

Howard watched the lights and traffic from the backseat of the cruiser. The lanes had emptied of tourists and party-goers; the trains and shoals of autos replaced with slow-moving constructors. Before morning there would be new things all over the city.

“It must be nice to have a partner,” Howard said.

“Excuse me?” the younger one asked, turning back to look at Howard.

“It must be nice to have a partner,” Howard repeated, “I hear cops are tight with their partners, always watching each other’s backs. Like a marriage.”

The younger one looked into Howard’s eyes for a moment and then returned to staring straight ahead through the glass of the windshield. No one said anything more for the rest of the journey.

Howard was in an interrogation chamber.

“I want a cigarette,” he said, “I won’t say anything unless I have one.” The older one started to reach for his pocket.

“No,” Howard said, “A real one... one from before.”

The detectives looked at one another.

“Maybe from evidence?”, the younger one suggested. The older one nodded and his partner left the chamber and returned several minutes later with a half-crumpled box.

Howard used the time to get his story straight.

“Please confirm for the tape that you understand this session is being recorded,” the younger one said.

Howard smiled patiently.

“You are aware that *everything* is recorded?”, he said.

“Is that confirmation?”

“Yes,” Howard said warily.

“Do you formally request legal representation?”

“I am a lawyer.”

“Is that confirmation that you do not request legal representation?”

“Yes,” Howard said.

The younger one stared fixedly at the centre of the table: “Before we continue, we need to confirm your identity, pending full biometric identification. Please note that some of these questions will not apply to you, and you simply need to respond ‘no’ when this is the case.”

“I understand and confirm,” Howard said solemnly.

A voice resonated: “This is a localised system announcement for Howard Crick: pending biometric data analysis, it is necessary to confirm your identity. Have your rights been explained?”

“Yes,” Howard said.

“Question one of four: if you own stock in the corporation TBSC, what is the value of that stock?”

Howard put his finger to his ear, “Three hundred terras, or roughly thirteen trillion euros.”

“Question two of four...”

Howard interrupted: “Sorry, I’m getting an update... thirteen trillion eight hundred billion... and five”.

“Question two of four: do you have two children?”

“No,” Howard said.

“Question three of four: do you own a property at 5 Evander Lane, Sine Cuse, in the Khan Industrial State region of Mongolia?”

Howard waited for his phone to update.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“Question four of four: in elementary school you created a painting as a gift. Which animal was most prominent in that picture?”

“There were no animals in that picture,” Howard said.

The voice resonated: “Identity confirmed,” and the lights in the corner flashed green.

“What is the nature of your work, sir,” the younger one asked.

“I am an advisor at The Better Storytelling Corporation – TBSC.”

“A distributed corporation.”

“Yes, a distributed corporation... which will soon enjoy the same rights, god willing, as any other corporation,” Howard said. “The fact that machine-learning entities are treated as second-class corporate citizens is a travesty of justice.”

“Yeah, a real travesty,” the older one said, leaning back in his chair and selecting a cigarette from the untouched pack on the table.

“Where were you at twenty-one hundred hours this evening?” the younger one asked.

“He means 9 pm,” the older one said, applying a flame to the end of the cigarette.

Howard thought about it. “In the lights district. I meant to go to a club, but I ended up sitting in the park.”

The younger one looked into Howard’s eyes for a moment and then stood up and went to the door. He returned with something long and cylindrical in a marked plastic bag.

“Is this your bat, sir?” he asked.

“I have many bats,” Howard said.

“This one has your name on it.”

Howard leaned in to take a closer look. “You’re right – ‘Howard J Crick’ – how curious! But what does that have to do with me?”

“This bat was used to bludgeon a woman to death at twenty-one hundred hours this evening,” the younger one said.

“He means 9 pm,” the older one said, admiring the glowing tip of his cigarette.

Howard looked shocked.

“Well, that’s terrible! But, as I’ve said, I was in the lights district at the time.” Howard put a finger to his ear. “Yes,” he said, “the data corresponds... multiple recordings in the lights district... none elsewhere... all data tags verified. No, I’m afraid there is absolutely no way that I could be your man.”

Howard looked thoughtful for a moment. “Have you authenticated the bat? Manufacturing codes, positional data, ownership log, et cetera, et cetera?”

The younger one glanced at the older one before saying: “There’s been a delay on the analysis. We expect it shortly.”

“Who was the girl?” Howard asked.

“We don’t know yet. Those at the scene said facial recognition was... not possible, and our biometric system is temporarily offline. We’ll know as soon as the system comes back up.”

“Well, perhaps you need to look at the data for the neighbourhood where she was killed?”

“A bug in the demand management system caused a temporary blackout in the area.”

“Really?” Howard looked concerned. “Well, it seems that the system is riddled with bugs today. You must remind me to re-evaluate my stock positions with Energy Corp, as well as with its biometric and security subsidiaries.”

The younger one put a finger to his ear.

“You don’t own any Energy Corp stock.”

“Yes, well, my employer does.”

“What is the nature of your employer, sir?”

“Well, that’s an interesting story,” Howard said, moving to the edge of his chair, “the TBSC began as a blockchain-based creative writing system. Over time it became capable of directing its own activities.”

“Directing?” the younger one asked.

“It analysed all human literature and then created variations of the residual themes to generate new stories. Its novels became instant best-sellers. It became truly powerful, however, when it began acquiring data from other systems and then incorporating readers into the stories themselves. As long as we feed it data, the enchantment will never be broken.”

“You are aware, sir, that charges have been levelled against the TBSC in relation to multiple counts of conspiracy, homicide, assault, and the perversion of justice?”

“I am,” Howard said, “but how do you know? It’s a very well-kept secret.”

“We... know someone prosecuting the case,” the younger one said, subconsciously placing his hand in his pocket. “How would you describe the charges levelled against the TBSC?”

“Baseless,” Howard said.

“Yeah,” the older one said, “just a coincidence that the best-sellers are all based on real events.”

“Maybe... maybe not,” Howard said, “the system was weaned on the full breadth of human literature. Greed, fear, romance, lust... betrayal. All the themes that drive the human imagination. The system simply produces the stories we desire most. It is, at its core, a reflection of all that is good and evil in the human spirit. By weaving each reader into the narrative, the TBSC has become both our author and our biographer; the most reliable narrator imaginable. Even now – right now – the three of us are in the midst of making history, strutting and fretting our hour upon the stage! Soon the whole world will know our names.”

The younger one stared expressionlessly while the older one stubbed out his cigarette on the corner of the table.

“Are you aware that, in some cases, there is evidence that the TBSC has written murders into the stories of the perpetrators, prior to the crimes themselves?”

Howard said nothing.

“Howard Crick,” the younger one said, “what were the contents of your story this morning?”

“Unfortunately, dear boy, I cannot answer that...” Howard Crick paused as his phone updated, “...it would be a violation of the second statute of the fourth amendment, subsection five. In the event that you pursue this line of questioning further,” Howard continued, “you will be liable under the seventeenth amendment, subsection nine... and assorted appendices.”

“Moreover,” Howard continued, “the relevant paperwork for an injunction has...” he made a circular motion with his hand, “...now been compiled and will be submitted automatically in the event that you continue this line of questioning.”

The two policemen looked at one other and then the younger one said: “When we stopped you, Mr Crick, you were covered in blood.”

“That’s correct,” Howard said.

“Whose blood was that?”

“I don’t know,” Howard said truthfully, “but unfortunately, gentlemen, I don’t think you can continue this line of questioning. Without biometric data on myself or the poor girl it would be a violation of...” he held up his finger for a moment as his phone updated, “...subsection eighteen of the third statute... the relevant paperwork has been compiled.”

The older one sprang from his chair and leaned over the table with an ugly expression on his face. “Listen to me, you psychopath...”

The younger one placed his hand on his partner’s shoulder. The older one flinched and then the rage drained from his face and he slumped back into his chair.

“Unfortunately,” Howard said, “you have no case. It’s all about fidelity, you see.”

The younger one looked sharply at Howard.

“The fidelity of data,” Howard continued as if nothing had happened, “we are a collection of data, from the bottom to the top. If our data were not true, then we would cease to exist. The data indicates that I was never there, therefore I could not have been. The data doesn’t lie.”

Howard paused.

“You hear that dull hum around us? That’s the sound of a thousand different stories. One of those stories is about a man accused of murder and the AIs that proved his innocence against all odds. Both of you are now characters in that story. You contribute authenticity, danger, and... tension. Our story will be a best-seller. But now, alas gentlemen, it is time for this chapter to end.”

There was a knock on the door. The policemen exchanged harsh whispers with a man in a dark hat before returning to their chairs with malice in their eyes.

“You are free to go,” the younger one said.

Howard smiled and rose from his seat. Halfway across the room he stopped and put his finger to his ear. “Oh, that makes sense,” he said, somewhat sadly. He turned to the policemen: “Your victim has been identified.”

Both policemen put their fingers to their ears. As their phones updated, they looked at each other and then turned slowly towards Howard. There was a brief moment of silence and then each grabbed savagely for the bag on the table.

“What a great story,” Howard remembered thinking as they beat him to death with the bat.