

Not Enough Stars in the Night

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It was 03:00am and chilly for October, but nobody by the shores of the lake seemed to mind what the temperature was. The weather report for once had been accurate, and the night sky was crisp and clear, the stars so bright it almost hurt to stare at them.

Ken Fletcher sat on a point of land that jutted out into the calm lake waters, sitting with the others who were fortunate enough to live here, listening to their laughs and whispers, waiting with them, waiting for them. A warbling cry from a loon out on the far shores made Fletcher shiver, and he pulled a blanket over his lap.

„Look!“ came the voice of a young girl. „I saw one, right there!“

Fletcher tilted his head back, looked at the wide expanse of stars, and then...

„Right there!“

„Did you see it?“

„My God, it was like fireworks!“

Fletcher held his hands together, checked his illuminated watch. Right on time, and he sat with the group of people as the Leonid meteor showers kicked in, supposedly the best in a hundred years. Fletcher shifted his weight on the quilt he was sitting on, as the people around him stirred and laughed and pointed out the meteors streaking over head. One young boy—Jason, was that his name?—sat next to him and said, „Mister Fletcher?“

„Yes?“

„What’s the difference between a meteor and a meteorite?“

„Well, Jason, a meteor is what you see when it burns through the Earth’s atmosphere. A meteorite is when it doesn’t burn all the way up and it lands on the ground.“

„Oh. Thanks.“ And another voice in the darkness, „See, I told you he’d know. I told you.“

More ooohs and aaaahs. He tilted his head back again, watched the streaks of the meteor trails overhead. Other meteors he had seen before, when he was younger, they were such a quicksilver flash, a blink of an eye and you were never sure if you had actually seen it. But the meteors churning their way through the atmosphere at this early hour, they were leaving thick, bright tails that dazzled the eyes.

He took a breath, smelled the lake water and the pine forests about them. There was no sound of traffic, no drone of overhead aircraft, no dome of orange light on the horizon that marked a mall or highway strip or housing stretch. Just the laughs and exclamations from the small collection of happy neighbours, watching the overhead sky show.

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It looked perfect up there, the Milky Way stretching overhead, the gauzy wispieness making it look like some thin curtain of light had been stretched overhead. No aircraft, no satellites, no searchlights advertising God-knows-what.

There was movement about him, and somebody laughed. „Tucker! Sit down!“

An English springer spaniel dog dropped next to him, carrying a tennis ball in its mouth. The dog rolled over and Fletcher reached over and rubbed its belly. There was nothing there, just for a split second, and then the wiry sensation of the dog hair, the firmness of its skin. He scratched at its belly and there was another shriek from one of the children.

„There! Did you see that? Did you?“

A woman’s voice, behind him. „Is Tucker bothering you?“

He turned and even in the dim light, could make out her long hair, stretching out over a down vest, worn over a cotton nightgown. Marie, he thought. That was her name.

„No, Marie, not at all,“ he said.

„Can I sit next to you?“

„Of course,“ he said.

Marie moved in next to him, and he lifted up the quilt so she could slide her long legs underneath. She shifted her weight so she was close to him, and he could smell her scent. A bit of vanilla in it, it seemed.

„Beautiful night,“ she said.

„God, you’re right.“

„Enjoying it?“

„Yes, yes, of course.“

The children's voices were as excited as before, pointing out the streaks of lights. A few were so bright they reflected in the still waters of the lake. Marie leaned in. „I'm so glad you moved in this past summer. The people who lived in your place before... ugh.“

He managed to smile. „Ugh?“

„Too many parties, too much noise at night, too much of everything. Nobody over there wanted to relax and blend in and enjoy the surroundings. Until you came along. Somebody who appreciated what it's like, living by a lake.“

Cautiously he moved his right hand over to her, grazing her wrist, and then he travelled down and he touched the back of her hand. It was smooth and warm. It felt nice. He curled his fingers around and squeezed and she squeezed back, and she said nothing, just leaned into him, a wind coming up and some of her fine hair tickling his nose.

He breathed in her scent some more and then spotted something off to the west. A bright band of light, rectangular, just above the wooded horizon.

He looked at it and wondered if anyone else could see it, but everyone about him were still amazed at the light show overhead. He stared at the rectangular shape, stared and stared at it, and it didn't move, it didn't vary in intensity, it was just there. Damn it.

He took a breath and raised his voice: „Tango Charlie Charlie, end program twelve. End program twelve.“

It all shifted. The laughter and the call of the loons and the scent of Marie's hair and the faint breeze from the lake and the stars and the trees and the reflection of the meteor trails on the water and the touch of Marie's hand in his... And faded out.

He took a breath.

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The room he was in was small, the size of a one-person dome tent back when he had camped for a while, enjoying the solitude while growing up in a part of Montana that hadn't yet been subdivided. He blinked his eyes again as the tears rushed in, as they always did, when it felt for a moment as if he were a youngster, dreaming he'd won a million dollars, right up to the point when the alarm clock chimed in and shattered everything, just as you had the million dollars in your hand.

Behind him he could sense the noise and the lights and the chatter of the voices as the hatch slid open with a click, and Emerson leaned in and said, „You okay in there, traveller?“

„Yeah, give me a sec,“ he said, wiping at his eyes. The dream gone. Just like that. He moved around and started out. Hands reached to him, to lift him, and he tossed them off and blinked again in the harsh light of the testing room.

Workbenches, terminals, monitors, lots of chairs, a table for eating and drinking and dozing underneath. A large white board taking up an entire wall, filled with scribbles and diagrams. People looked at him, short-termers and full-timers, a couple of them with handhelds, pointing at him and sucking everything in, so he gave his quickie debrief, as good as he could: „Better but not quite there yet.“

„Why the termination?“ Emerson, a tall, lanky guy who was the group leader and still looked like a high school kid, trying to clear up his complexion and grow a beard.

„You were losing clarity on the western horizon. Looked like a damn window was opening up. Quite distracting.“

„You could have kept on with the program,“ somebody said.

„Yeah, but why screw with it?“ he said, irritation growing in his voice. „Everything starts chattering and falling apart. And there were two precursors that the program was collapsing. There was about a half-second delay in touching the dog’s belly before I could feel anything. And there was something wrong with the woman’s scent. The request was for cinnamon. I got vanilla.“

„You sure?“

He walked over to one of the easy chairs, set up in the corner, which was his and his alone. He sat down and let his legs stretch out. „Yeah, I know the difference between vanilla and cinnamon. Jesus, leave me alone, will you?“

Somebody passed over a bottle of spring water, and he greedily drank. More comments were coming in from the crew, cascading over one another, as he sat there and decompressed and tried to take everything in. It was always like this after a test session. Always. And even though he felt dehydrated and irritable and everything seemed too bright and too noisy, he knew he was one of the better testers, one of the more calm testers.

There were rumors on the Net about suicides and test facility shoot-ups from other testers, other competitors, who couldn’t handle the quickie decompression from virtual reality to real reality, but the CorpNews uploaders always managed to squelch those stories. Most times.

He kept his eyes closed, as the chatter continued:

„...told you we needed another processor for that part of the horizon...“

„...it was a kludgy fix and you know it. Care to write the specs for something so confusing? Man, if you knew...“

„...I dunno, this scenario still seems too white bread for me...“

„...why a dog? I’d rather use my cat, he’s better behaved...“

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He opened his eyes, took in the test room. Off to the right was the sim module that he had just emerged from, with cables and output jackets coming off the top like some damn Medusa hair scare. A door leading to the rest of the building was off to the left, locked shut and tight, and with a sign pasted in the middle:

WHAT YOU SEE HERE...
WHAT YOU HEAR HERE...
WHAT YOU DO HERE...
WHEN YOU LEAVE HERE...
MAKE SURE IT STAYS HERE!

Just by the door, on both sides, were coat and helmet hangers. It was a warm day—evening by now?—so the coat hangers were empty. The helmet hangers were full up, with black mirrored V/R helmets hanging there, with the glove inputs dangling below. Another sign to the side of the racks: *V/R Helmets Are Not To Be Worn During Compensated Time!*

Workbenches lined three out of the four walls, with monitors and terminals of many sizes and shapes. He wasn’t sure what they all did, and he didn’t care. His job was to test, to evaluate, and he was glad to have a job so simple in such a time and place, even though he had been practically shanghaied at first.

He knew jokes were told at his expense, about the rural atavistic knuckle-dragger who didn't care or didn't do much with the wired world, but Fletcher didn't care. Well, he didn't care what they thought. He cared about a lot of things and most times, he couldn't talk to his co-workers about it.

He took another healthy sip of the water, then put the glass down and scratched at a mark on his forearm, where he'd been injected an hour earlier. The cocktail of drug goodies was what counted. The whole virtual reality industry had slammed up against the big brick wall of real reality years earlier, when the gamers and simulators and sexers wanted more than just sounds and images. They wanted the full tactile experience, from scent to touch and everything in between.

But always and always there were bugs, and this crew was hard at work, debugging their merry way along, while he got doped up and placed in the module, running this program over and over again.

They talked to each other in acronyms and phrases and short-hand language, spent hours working on the white board, scribbling and erasing, arguing and eating bad food and worse drink. And all the while he waited, sipping his spring water, eating simple and plain meals, as simple and plain as possible in this corporate cube, and then—like the members of some enthusiastic firing squad—they would turn and look at him and say, okay, Ken, time to get buttoned up and start tripping.

And luckily—oh sweet Jesus, the luck he had—the program was relatively simple and plain. White bread. Watching a meteor shower from the quiet and comfortable confines of a lake shore, with children and friends and a drooling dog, playing about, enjoying the quiet night, looking up into the fabulous night sky. Thank God it was so blessed simple.

Half the crew were now by the white board, the rest by a large monitor watching the events of the previous half hour. The monitor was split in two, a fuzzy display that showed the interior of the sim dome, while the other half was numbers and codes. That crew was trying to find the little burp that had caused him problems, while the crew at the white board was trying to guess what problem might crop up next.

Though the crews were supposedly equal, he could tell the difference between the full-timers and short-termers. The full-timers moved slow and true and smiled among themselves, knowing that They Had It Made. Stock options, 401 (k), full med and dental, the whole circuit board. The short-termers—hired for specific tasks—were eager and quick to move, wanting to show that they'd do whatever it took to slide in and become a full-timer.

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The door opened up and a slim guy walked in, looking like an over-sized bug, V/R helmet on his head. He took the helmet off and a couple of voices were raised up:

„Hey, Collins, decided to join in!“

„Collins, what's new?“

Collins hung up his helmet, his short blond hair matted down with sweat. „Man, I almost got nailed in the parking lot. You'd think the pizza delivery boy-o's would know which end of the lot is the exit. Hey, I made the seventh level on Saturn's Rings. Finally!“

He ran his hands across his hair, wiped at his face. „Oh, one more thing. Got a NewsNet flash on the way over here. Saigon got nuked.“

Emerson said, „No shit. What does it look like?“

„Suitcase job, what else? Near the Mekong so it could rain glowing water down on mama-san and papa-san. Nasty stuff.“

„Credits?“

„Two so far. Both Islamic fundie branches. You bet it'll be a dozen by tomorrow.“

A laugh. „And the new Hundred Year's War goes merrily along.“

One of the short-termers said, „Saigon? I thought it was called Ho Chi Minh City.“

„It was until Dell took over. One of the corporate officers had a dad who was a Viet war vet. Changed the name for sentimental reasons. They had bought naming rights when they set up their first assembly lines. Hey, anybody got stock in emerging Southeast Asia markets?“

Another laugh. „Those markets have been emerging for decades. You'd be an idiot to sock away some stuff in there. C'mon, back to work.“

Fletcher finished his water. The new way of the world. Reality wasn't the huddled masses in the Third World and Second World, pressing out from their slums, their apartment high rises, the porous borders. Ships at sea and aircraft in the skies and buses on the ground being hijacked and commandeered by desperate people, trying to get someplace where the phones worked and the lights came on and men with guns didn't come into your home at night, blast you into bloody pieces over some ancient feud. All that didn't matter.

What did matter was the reality in the V/R helmets, the home theaters, the connected Sim Game networks spread across the world. That was the new reality. Everything else was markets and support and raw materials.

He stood up, stretched, felt the tendons and joints creak. He guessed he was raw material, in a way. He had grown up in one of the last wild stretches of Montana, dropping out of school, doing odd jobs here and there—mostly there, since who had money to pay for what passed as an odd job nowadays?—and hunting and fishing and trying to live like the old guys did, like Lewis and Clark. Reading book after book in the free libraries around the county.

Some adventure, until the Montana Highway Patrol picked him up one day, cited him for vagrancy. No real job, found himself on the welfare rolls—even though he had never asked for welfare a day in his life—and he found himself sucked into the Fed database for welfare recipients.

Rules were pretty clear—after assessment and testing, you had to go to where the jobs were, and that's how he found himself here, two years later, on the Left Coast, testbedding a new sim game, complete with everything you wanted in V/R. Hell of a ride. The aptitude tests and screening fitted him into this little slot, and he guess he was more fortunate than some, for he was considered a full-timer, not a short-termer. Which meant those extra goodies every two weeks and the fact that he could let loose every now and then.

Like right now.

Fletcher got up from his chair, tossed the plastic water bottle in a recycling bin. „Heading out,“ he announced to no one in particular. „Gotta go clear my head.“

Most everyone ignored him, except Emerson, who said. „Going to take long?“

„Don't think so.“

„Kay. Make sure it's not more than fifteen minutes. Pager on?“

„Yeah.“

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He unlocked the door by waving his wrist chip at the bulky handle. It popped open and quickly closed behind him, ensuring there was no wasted time in having the door open for prying eyes, and to also make sure that other people didn't follow him out without scanning their own wrist chip. Tailgating.

He was in a long corridor, tiled floor nice and shiny, recessed lighting giving the same level of illumination if it was 11:00am or 11:00pm. The door he had just gone through was marked with a little plate—ROOM 19—all that identified what was going on behind there. Similar doors lined both sides of the corridor; he had no idea what in God's name was being devised behind those blank metal barriers.

He doubted more than a handful of people in the entire Corporation knew exactly what was going on in any of these rooms. One late night he had gone by a room—ROOM 31, he recalled—and was sure he could hear a woman screaming from behind the door. Maybe a sim, maybe reality, but it 'twernt his business none, so he kept walking.

Just like now. He headed down the corridor, to the red and yellow EXIT sign, and another quick flick of the wrist—the first wrist chips were worn on bands around one's wrist, but now they were surgical implants, and if you wanted to make a fuss about it, fine, you didn't get the job—and that door popped open as well, and he was out in the south parking lot.

Fletcher took a breath, and that was the damn thing about it all. The air was clean, the air wasn't choking, the air actually smelled OK. The new hydrogen economy was burbling along, there was an excess of power in most places in the First World, and the pollution and smog and the particulates in the air were slowly going away.

He took another deep breath, felt the cleanness of the air, even though traffic was humming along on the nearby four-laner. Progress laying its heavy hand. He walked out to the parking lot, his wrist trembling a bit. It was just an odd muscle reaction, that's all, for he knew that somewhere in the bowels of the Corporation, some Human Resources type was monitoring his movement. So what. Monitor away.

The parking lot was about half-full and he saw two people, walking away to another cube of a building. They both had V/R helmets on, and they looked like characters from some 1950s cheesy science fiction movie, stumbling around an alien landscape. What was alien, of course, was what was being seen in the V/R helmet.

There were little heads-up displays inside the helmet that allowed wearers to see where they were going in real-time, but NewsNet stories kept reporting V/R wearers walking into traffic, or going off the end of a pier, or falling off a mountain trail. Part of the experience.

Fletcher came to a little island of grass and two real trees in the centre of the lot, where a square brick building ran some sort of HVAC support for the complex.

He'd scoped out the place after he had first been hired—the only place in this part of the Corporation's archipelago that had trees—and at first found some moments of comfort there, decompressing after the first sim runs. Now it was a destination, a place to take some breaths and be away from people.

He ducked under the branches of the oak tree, and went around the brick building to a half-hidden area with a maintenance service ladder there. Keeping

it easy, he climbed up two storeys, probably violating a half-dozen OSHA regs by climbing without proper gear, but so what. The roof was flat, except for some sort of bulky air intake system at the other end, and his feet crunched a bit on the roof covering as he stood up. He looked up at the night sky, shook his head, and went over to the air intake system. Under an overhang he pulled out a blanket roll—protected by a sheet of plastic—and he unrolled and lay down and stared up at the orange night sky.

Progress. Science fiction. A lot of the books he had read in those free libraries in Montana had been old science fiction tales from the 1950s and 1960s. Real hard science stuff, all predicting a world of science and progress, imagining cities in space and colonies on the Moon, Mars and Venus. He wasn't sure why, but those old tales had appealed to him, as he read them in the quiet reading rooms of the library, turning the brittle, yellowed pages. He had liked the old predictions, the old enthusiasms, about what science and progress would do.

He shifted his weight and folded his arms across his chest. Fletcher was no luddite, no anarchist, no flatearther. Hundreds of millions of people lived safe, secure, and healthy lives, all thanks to science and progress. That was the truth, and no amount of hand-wringing could change it. And yet... and yet...

Fletcher blinked his eyes, looked up at the night sky. A couple of lonely stars managed to blaze their way through the orange light of what passed for night. All those wonderful tales of progress had missed the boat. There were no cities on the Moon, Mars and Venus, and the only city in space was the decommissioned hulk of the old International Space Station, waiting to burn up in the atmosphere one of these days. A few probes had ambled their way through the solar system, but that had been it.

Science and progress had turned inward, creating new realities, creating entire new worlds, all within this old globe. And what was out there... Damn it, he'd seen the signs when he was younger, camping out by himself, seeing the glow on the horizon, the lights from the malls and the highways and the security zones and everything else, hounding away the night, making the day's hours stretch and stretch.

Astronomers had complained, and those complaints had been outdrowned and outnewsed by scandals, wars, and the latest V/R stats. So there you go.

But Fletcher remembered. He remembered those nights out in some woodland meadow, hearing a stream gurgle by, watching the great wheel of the night sky whirl about him, seeing lots of satellites and aircraft, sure, but also seeing the occasional meteor streak by. That had been a sight to see.

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His pager started vibrating. Time go back to work, back to Room 19. For yet another night, there had been nothing up there. The orange sky and the few stars, and no shooting stars, no comets, nothing. Just the real reality, obscured by everything that helped support the new virtual reality.

Fletcher got up, rolled his bedroll and put it back in its hiding place, and went to the edge of the roof, knowing that in a few minutes, the drugs would enter his system and he would go to work, help create a program that simulated what it had once been, not so many years ago.

He took a breath, put his hands on the metal ladder, looked up again at the sky.

„Tango Charlie Charlie, end program twelve,“ he said, his voice soft. „End program twelve.“

Nothing happened. The sky was still orange, the stars were still gone.

His voice got louder, almost plaintive in its plea: „Tango Charlie Charlie, end program twelve. End program twelve.“

Fletcher shook his head and started climbing back down.

No. It didn't work. It never worked.

But he always kept trying.
