

ADAM

by Paul Kershaw

In the beginning was the Dream. And the Dream was in ADAM, and ADAM was the Dream.

Jackal – not his real name, natch – sat at the console watching the flickering lights. Every once in a while, he'd spot something amiss and type furiously for a few seconds, fingers flying at 15cps, but for the most part, he just watched numbers scroll past. There was a Zen to it, with the quiet hum of the processor fans. He deliberately sat in the dark, even though he knew it would blow out his eyes; he was on his third set already, and he was just past 35. There was something peaceful about the quiet dark, lit only by the glow of the monitor.

"J.? You there?" A window popped up on top of the other windows on his monitor. The letters had a familiar rainbow gradient; showy and unnecessary, and out of Jackal's own style. But for obvious security reasons, this was a closed network, and neither he nor Rainbow had many other people to talk to.

"Yeah. Long night tonight." Jackal's typing burst out of fingers as he kept one eye trained on the steady stream of data moving past behind the messaging window.

"What are you doing tomorrow night?" The letters danced playfully on his screen. Tomorrow was Saturday, time for the weekend crew. Not that Jackal would have minded putting in the extra hours; this wasn't work for him, this was pleasure. Him alone with the computers, knowing that all the Dreamers were dancing in their fantasies. It was odd, how he had complete control over, what, 500 Dreamers in this building? Not that he could do anything with that control except shut them all out of ADAM, and he couldn't do that and keep his job.

That was his job, after all. Keeping the Dreamers in sync with ADAM. Those bastard Dreamers - - wasn't that the way it always was? Was that the way it had always been? The rich get to loll around in their own masturbatory conceit while the common man had to make sure the day-to-day things got done.

Meh, though. The rich never knew how dependent they really were, and they only found out when there was a revolt. From the hundreds of slaves crucified by the Romans along the Appian Way to the Labor Revolt of 2045, the threat was always there that the servants would refuse to obey the masters.

And like those slaves, the revolts never lasted.

"You thinkin' again, J.?" the rainbow letters said, beeping at him as they appeared on the screen.

"Yeah, sorry," he typed back. He didn't really like the intrusion of Rainbow all that much; he'd've preferred to work in silence. But she seemed to get lonely easily, and they were the only two in the building. The only two awake, at least.

He flipped between windows to enter a correction for a physiological irregularity on the fourth floor, then popped back to his messaging window. "There's a movie festival down at the old cinema. Mostly stuff from the Aughties. I think they're showing *The Matrix*, actually."

"Heh. That's funny," Rainbow typed back. "The whole trilogy?"

"Yeah, I don't know if I'm going, though." Jackal frowned as he spotted a cluster of digits that didn't look right on the Second Floor. "Hey, do we have anyone waking up tonight?"

"Not scheduled," Rainbow shot back, then followed it with, "They'd have a nurse on shift if there were supposed to be any. I'm not supposed to kick people up by myself."

Jackal watched the numbers some more, then returned to his messaging window. "Well, you either need to get a Nurse in here, or get ready to break protocol."

There was a long pause this time, then, in happy perky rainbow letters: "Shit." This was followed quickly by, "Are you sure? Maybe the monitors are pissing up."

Jackal broke out of the window cycle and dropped down to the command prompt. He typed in a few commands, considered the results carefully, then flipped over to the camera pan. Sure enough, the Dreamer in 215 was moving his head and looked to be on the verge of kicking up.

He flipped the window cycle back on and jumped to the message window. "I'm certain. 215. He's awake."

A few moments later: "Shit. They don't pay me enough for this. All right, I'll book over there, you call up the crisis nurse, he should be able to get over here soon enough to help mop up my fuck up."

"Got it." He closed the message window, then swirled around to his external network box and typed off a message to the crisis nurse.

The first rule of ADAM is, You don't talk about the Dream.

In a broom closet on the third floor of Building 17, where the Daydreamers swim through the shallow end of the pond, Zeke Renfrew was wiggling like a Mexican jumping bean on a warm skillet.

Next to him, Daphne slept. A mass of wires snaked out of the cranial cap she was wearing and flowed into the jumpbox in the wall. It was a primitive patch, but at least she didn't need the body support. Daydreamers didn't need those; they were in and out of ADAM in four-hour intervals, and the intervals were staggered enough that the system had yet to notice one more rogue feed.

It had been easier before they'd been banned from ADAM, of course. They could just jack in and kick out at their leisure, but then one of the Dreamers had tagged them, and that was the end of that.

This way was cheaper, anyway. Zeke's father had begun to wonder what was happening with the weekly chits he'd been posting for his son. Dreaming was expensive.

And if Zeke and Daphne got caught? Jail, for sure. Zeke's brother was serving time himself, 15 years over at Winston, for dreamjacking. Dreaming, after all, was big business, and big business has always pulled the puppet strings in government. And they'd increased the penalties for dreamjacking since then - Zeke and Daphne, who'd already been banned from ADAM and had a criminal record of systemcracking, caught for dreamjacking, especially under these circumstances? Life, maybe. Life behind bars, but worse than that: Life away from a computer.

The cause was worth it, though. But it didn't make Zeke any calmer knowing he was doing the right thing, so while Daphne blissfully slept, swimming through cyberspace, Zeke fidgeted and waited for security to bash in the door.

He looked at his watch. Fifteen more minutes, and then it'd be time to kick her up again. That was the worst part: The transitions. As long as one of them was in the system, there was no anomaly to be picked up on by security, and as far as Zeke knew, this closet hadn't been used in years. It was a way station: The wires spliced, the wires split, the Dreamers swam through them. The only reason for anyone to actually come in here, in real life, was if the system failed, and with Zeke's loving guardianship - an irony, that he had to maintain the very system he was trying to stymie - that wasn't going to happen.

God created the world according to His own image; ADAM created the world according to Man's own image. The birth of ADAM was the death of God.

The Dreamer in 215 sat up, blinked his eyes twice, and looked Rainbow over slowly. She squirmed, uncomfortable at his gaze, but did her best to use what bedside manner training she'd been given.

"Good morning," she said, smiling. This kicking up procedure wasn't so bad, if this is all there was to it - but she knew it wasn't, and that was so strange. She'd seen tapes of kick ups back at

the Academy, and while they had progressed the neural release process considerably since then, there was still supposed to be a short period of disorientation.

Dreamer 215, though – damn Jackal for not giving her his name – seemed perfectly lucid.

"Awake?" he asked stiffly, and she began to wonder if her initial assessment of his lucidity hadn't been wrong.

She smiled; she kept the smile pasted on. That was lesson #1, and she could at least keep that part straight, even as her heart tripped over the concept that he could have a neural break and, without the nurse present, she'd be left to paste the goo together. "Good morning, sunshine." It seemed rude, but she didn't know what else to say.

He blinked and considered his hands. This, at least, was typical: The Dreamers frequently forgot what their real bodies felt like, and Reality would feel like the Dream. Who knew what shape Dreamer 215 had taken on inside ADAM? (Well, Jackal could have told, but he hadn't been forthcoming with much of anything.)

"My name?" Dreamer 215 asked, then closed his eyes in thought, and opened them again. "Never mind. My name is David Kildare."

Rainbow nodded convincingly. It seemed best to agree with him.

"Dave to my friends." He looked at her, looked her over again. "You can be one of my friends."

She raised her eyebrows in confusion, but shrugged. "O.k., Dave. They call me Rainbow."

He frowned. "That's not your name, but that's all right. I need to find someone."

Rainbow shook her head, trying her best to look firm. "You need to continue to orient. You just kicked up. You can't leave until the nurse checks you out."

Dave looked down at himself. "I'm dressed inappropriately. I need my clothing. Then I need to find someone."

Rainbow started to respond, but was relieved to hear the door open behind her. The nurse had arrived, and she could return to being just a mindless lackey. That's the way she liked it.

The second rule of ADAM is, You don't talk about the Waking.

While Zeke was fretting – and Daphne knew he was fretting, because he was *always* fretting when she was swimming – Daphne was attending a church service in a small town called Hardeyville.

Hardeyville was a pleasant town, very conservatively old-fashioned. Ladies still wore frilly white blouses buttoned up their necks and woolen skirts that brushed the ground as they walked; gen-

lemen still wore gray suits that never seemed to get dirty, and top hats and bowlers that never got crushed. Children were polite, and said, "Please," and "Thank you," and only spoke when they were addressed. And, most of all, on Sunday morning in Hardeyville, all but a handful of the townspeople attended church.

There were four churches in Hardeyville, because cultural diversity is important. There was the First United Methodist Church of Hardeyville, the First Lutheran Church of Hardeyville, Saint Beatrice of the Holy Wounds, and the Universal Church of Eternal Forgiveness. There was nobody in Hardeyville who wasn't Christian, so there was no need for any other type of church.

Today, Daphne was sitting in a middle pew in the First Lutheran Church of Hardeyville. Everyone in Hardeyville was very welcoming to strangers, and so she'd pretty much had her choice of churches. Most of the people in this town, she knew, were Lifers, Dreamers who'd been in for so long that they'd never think to leave again. That was why she was in Hardeyville, after all.

The Lifers were, of course, obscenely rich. Most people could only afford to go in for a few hours at a time, and the upper echelon of society could take month-long vacations. But the Lifers were Old Money, Obscene Money, filthy lucre coming out of the arseholes.

This was one of the reasons why ADAM had its rules: Dreamjackers would drop down and pretend to be some long lost relative, and take advantage of the Lifers. That was easy to do in the Dream, after all. The Lifers weren't themselves, why would anyone else be? And once they'd forgotten about the Dream, they were easy pickings.

But the real reason, Daphne knew, for ADAM's rules was that ADAM wanted the easy pickings for themselves: Not everyone who was rich enough to become a Lifer set out to become one, but it was so easy to be seduced. ADAM wasn't prejudiced, either: They'd take anyone's money and bleed them dry, and if you ran out before your heart stopped beating, you'd get kicked back up without even a change of clothes. Hell, you might even wind up as a Monitor, watching the Dream but not allowed to get back into it.

Daphne resisted the urge to spit on the floor. The Dream disgusted her, but right now, she wasn't Daphne Belman. She was Harriet Somerville, of the Boston Somervilles, visiting her cousin for the summer.

She checked her watch: Not a lot of time, and the sermon was running long. But she daren't say anything, or stand up now: It would be rude, and she needed at least two more visits to Hardeyville before she had the trust to start breaking the rules.

Fools rush in, and in the early days, she'd rushed in, too. That's how she'd gotten banned in the first place. Now was the time for caution.

The minister stopped talking, and the choir burst into somber song. She recognized the hymn; it was thankfully short. She'd be able to make it to the restroom for the kick without causing a scene. Good.

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily: Life is but a dream

The first thing that Dave noticed leaving the hospital was the wind on his skin.

There was no wind in ADAM. At first, the programmers had worked on algorithms to simulate air; after all, they'd gotten water down fairly well, and had even made significant inroads into odors. But while they could mimic the visual affect of air, a convincing algorithm for the physical sensation of each hair brushing against the other in just the right way continued to be elusive.

As the betas were tested, most people didn't like the experience of seeing the wind but not feeling it. Beyond that, it was decided that the point of ADAM wasn't to just replicate reality, but to improve on it. This was a chance to clean the slate in certain ways, to fix things that the Powers that Be that created the world had screwed up.

Wind was an odd experience indeed, and a disquieting one. It had been subtly present in the hospital, something that Dave had noticed at such a low level that he wasn't even sure what it was that he was noticing. Outside of the hospital, though, and even howling quietly between the sliding doors while he lingered in the lobby – it was omnipresent, the wind was.

He checked his pockets, and wasn't surprised to find a wallet with a little bit of cash and several credit cards.

Dave flagged down a passing cab and got into the backseat. The odors, he discovered, were also not quite true in ADAM: The real world had a depth to it that was at once glorious and nauseating. In the back seat of the cab, he could make out the sweetness of a foreign cigar, the tartness of urine, and the muskiness of degrading leather. And the stench of the cabbie, who had a special scent all his own.

"Where to?"

Where to, indeed? Should he go home, or at least to where he was supposed to call home? He wasn't sure how paranoid the world was, and whether he was being watched. On the other hand, he had come here for a reason, and didn't want to waste any more time than necessary.

"Do you know where Littleton is?" he asked.

The cabbie looked at him in the rearview mirror. "Listen, Mack, I ain't got time for jokes. Where to?"

"Littleton," Dave said plainly.

"That'll cost. I'm a taxi, not a tour bus."

"I have money." And Dave realized that he looked like he did, indeed, have money.

The cabbie sighed. "Well, it's the start of my shift, what the hell? Sit back, it'll be a while."

Even though he didn't feel like he really needed it, Dave leaned back and dozed off.

From the owner's manual, ca. 2008: The Automated Digital Atmosphere Modulator implements advanced neurological breakthroughs to allow the handicapped to interact with their natural environments through thought-stimulus.

Franklin Isley sat on a wooden stool behind a glass candy-filled counter in a soda shop in Hardeyville, looking around his shop. It was a quiet Monday afternoon, just after school had let out, and already there was a pair of high schoolers making doe-eyes at each other as they shared a strawberry malted.

As David Kildare, Attorney at Law, he had become rich, working 70-hour weeks as a slave to an ethical corporate machine. BranSon was the client, manufacturer of alternative fuel sources. Petroleum had nearly been tapped out, but BranSon held the patents (and hence, the money machine) on several of the major alternatives. A portion of their money was made by selling the technologies; another portion was made by suing anyone who used any technology that was even a slight IP violation of BranSon's fifty three patents. That's where David came in, and they'd paid him handsomely for it.

At the age of 43, on the verge of a mental collapse, he'd come in to work wearing his pyjamas and told the President and CEO, Halter Bran, to "seriously consider a liquid decyclene enema." Halter, having nothing but respect for David, suggested a long-term vacation. BranSon would even pay for it: Six months, a year, two years... longer, if need be. David had important secrets, and it was worth it to Halter to keep those secrets in a sane, and corporate-controlled, mind.

ADAM seemed like the perfect place, with the bill split 50-50 between Halter and David.

And now, he was Franklin Isley, middle-aged soda jerk in a small, rich, insular town on the fringes of a world that didn't exist. He'd forgotten how long he'd been Mr. Isley: Maybe he was a Lifer now, too. He hadn't meant to be, but there was something intoxicating about the Dream. The longer he swam, the longer he wanted to swim.

"Good morning, Mr. Isley." It was Harriet Somerville, of the Boston Somervilles – old money, filthy rich, a Lifer for sure. She'd only recently come to Hardeyville, and something told him that she wasn't staying for good. She seemed like a restless soul, flitting from quadrant to quadrant inside the Dream. But the rules were that he couldn't ask her, and she couldn't tell him – players in a game that wandered in and out, willy-nilly, everyone pretending as if this were the way things really were supposed to be.

Franklin greeted her, but looked beyond her, at his reflection in the glass of the door: Maybe the Dream was becoming boring, after all. Maybe it was time to jack out. There were only so many sodas one man could jerk before it became as dull as the 70-hour grind.

He blinked and shook his head, summoned back to reality by little Johnny French, one of the Orphans. Twelve-year-old Johnny was tapping a quarter impatiently on the counter.

"Hi, Johnny, what can I get for you today?"

"A jawbreaker, please. It's Monday." Monday was the day for jawbreakers, apparently.

Franklin took the metal top off the glass jar next to the cash register and fished a candy out for the boy. "Where's Bobby today?"

Johnny took the jawbreaker, but looked nervous about the question. "He's gone."

"Oh? Did his parents come back?" Like Johnny, Bobby was an Orphan bot, a system program that had been created as a child for someone who had since left the Dream. The bots were usually archived, and then destroyed if their parents never returned. For some reason the spawned bots would occasionally remain. It was a glitch in the system. Bobby's parents hadn't even lived in Hardeyville, but for some reason Hardeyville attracted Orphans: There were at least seventy-five that Franklin knew about.

Johnny looked at his candy, then up at Mr. Isley. "Thank you for the candy, Mr. Isley." Then he ran out, hitting the door clumsily as he pushed it open.

Franklin watched him go, bemusedly, then became even more confused when Harriet Somerville, of the Boston Somervilles, strode quickly but nonchalantly after him.

2 Chronicles 30:9: For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if ye return unto him

Dorothea Gill had been sitting quietly in her favorite armchair, watching the sun lazily setting out beyond her backyard, thinking about life, death, and other things of no seeming immediate importance, when the doorbell rang.

She sat up and listened for her husband's footsteps creaking down the hallway. He was always so good about greeting strangers, and only a stranger would be bothering them. They'd long run out of friends.

The doorbell rang again, reminding her that her husband wasn't going to be answering the door. He'd passed on, recently enough that the reality was still only just lingering there on the edge of her awareness.

Dorothea got up slowly, her old bones squealing at her. Things had been so much easier in the Dream: She was the age she thought of herself as, not the age she really was. And, inside the Dream, there was Harold there, still, dear dear Harry.

No, though, those thoughts were a waste now. The Dream was over, gone, a thing of the past. A folly that she'd used to deny her own reality. She was 87, not 39. It was time to act her age.

The Dream was an opiate, isn't that what the Zeke fellow had told her? A drug used to keep the masses controlled. That wasn't what God had wanted of His children – that's what Zeke had told her. It felt like it had been years, now: The Dream. The beautiful Dream.

Harold had been the one to want to leave, at first. Dorothea liked the Dream, even if there had always been the knowledge that their time had been borrowed. They'd lived a full life, had saved well and frugally, and deserved to spend their retirement swimming in the fantasies of youth. That's what she'd thought, and that's what part of her still thought.

But Harold, damn him, dear sweet Harold.

The doorbell rang again. "Coming!" she said as loudly as she could muster, vaguely aware that it wasn't nearly as loud as it should have been. Her legs didn't move like they did in the Dream, either. And her child, the dear sweet boy that ...

... that was nothing. A Dream. A delusion fed to her by the corporate greed monsters. Nothing more than a patch of code. A series of electrons. A cruel phantasm that could never love her the way that she loved him. The way that Harold loved her.

Her breath was becoming ragged and heavy from the exertion. When had it become so much work to walk across her own home?

After what seemed like an eternity, she made it to the door and looked through the peephole. A strange man, tall and well-dressed. Nobody she knew, and nobody that should have been ringing her doorbell. But he looked trustworthy, so she opened the inner door.

Genesis 1:25: And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

Runner was, well, running when his cell phone started singing to him. "Iron Man" was the song, a heavy metal tune from the Twentieth Century that he'd dug up from an old hard drive.

"Yeah," he said, trotting along on his treadmill as he answered the phone. Runner wasn't the run-of-the-mill anti-corporate rebel: He looked like a corporate motionmaker himself. That's because he was, but the drones didn't need to know that. ADAM was The Competition, but patsies like Zeke and Daphne were so full of passion and vitriol against The Man that, well, what they didn't know didn't hurt them.

"It's Grackle." Zeke and his idiotic codenames. "Jangles thinks we may have a problem."

Great. Nuisance. Something to focus on. Runner stepped off the treadmill and sat down in his leather chair. "Define."

"She was talking to an Annie today." Annie, Orphan. Cute. "In the system."

"Well, of course she was swimming. Where else would she be talking to an Orphan?"

"That's... just it. She thinks an Annie might have gotten out."

"Out?"

"Kicked out."

Runner stared up at his ceiling. Where did he find these guys, anyway? "Orphans are bots, dipshit. They don't kick out."

"One did. I checked the system. There was an unexpected kick."

"So? Someone kicked out early."

Zeke paused, probably for effect. The effect it had was to piss off Runner. "I traced it back. He's still dreaming."

"System glitch."

"I don't think so." Zeke was too stubborn for a meaningless underling.

"System. Glitch." It wasn't a question or an opinion: It was a statement of fact, at least until something happened to undermine it. Bots couldn't kick out, that was absurd. Highjacking bodies? This kid read too much science fiction.

"Yes, sir."

Runner turned the phone off and sat in his chair quietly for a few minutes. Then he shook it off and went back to his treadmill. The Orphan would show up soon enough, as much as Runner would love the idea that ADAM was having an unfortunate processing loop, something that would doubtless prove unpopular.

To sleep, perchance, to dream: Aye, there's the rub. – Hamlet, William Shakespeare

The cabbie watched his fare standing on the stoop, waiting for his party to answer the door.

Normally, he waited for the fares for a few minutes, especially on a long drive like this one. Maybe whoever they've driven out here to see isn't at home, or doesn't want to see them. Then they're stuck in the middle of nowhere. Cabs don't normally drive around randomly in these suburbs, after all. And this guy, especially, didn't seem like the kind who could have fended for himself.

Besides, the guy had given him a nice tip, a very nice one, and if he wanted a ride somewhere else, this hack would be the perfect transport.

The door opened at last, and it was obvious that the woman who answered didn't recognize the man. There was a lot to be read out of body language, and a cabbie driver needs to know it.

Body language can tell you who's a hooker and who's a lost tourist and who's thinking of slitting your throat for the cash in your box. There was the Darwinism of the street: That was the sort of mistake you only made once, because you didn't get a chance to make it a second time.

Finally, the screen door opened, but the man didn't go inside. Instead, the woman came out, and he hugged her. She looked like she was crying. She looked ancient, too old to be living on her own. She looked tired, and she looked now like she'd known the man for a long time, as if it were someone she loved like a member of her family.

The cabbie thought about going, now that it was obvious that the fare's party had accepted his presence, but his instinct told him to stay. So he stayed, losing track of time as the pair on the stoop spoke.

Then they looked like they were arguing. The fare had noticed that the cab was still there, and he motioned for the woman to come with him. The woman resisted. She invited him into the house, but he stood firm. His body said it: He was going back. Was she coming with him?

She stepped towards him, then turned back to face the house again. She moved slowly, excruciatingly slowly, matching her age and apparent frailty.

He spoke to her again, loud enough that the cabbie could tell he was speaking.

She stroked the railing next to the stoop thoughtfully, her back still to him. Finally, she stepped up on the stoop. The cabbie expected this would be it, whatever it was, and he'd have to take a sullen fare back to town. Instead, she closed the inner door tight, kissed the frame, and slowly stepped after the fare.

A few minutes later, they got into the back seat of the car, the man helping the woman.

"Where to, mack?" the cabbie asked.

"Home," the man said. "Enough of this nightmare."

The cabbie looked at them both in the mirror.

The old woman was smiling. "Home," she agreed. "Bobby's come to take me home."

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