

WHEN EVERYONE'S A VIRTUAL REALITY SLAVE,
WHO CAN FREE THE HUMAN SOUL?

THE
CLOUD

A SPECULATIVE FICTION NOVEL

ROBERT RIVENBARK

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*HISTORY IS A NIGHTMARE FROM WHICH
I AM TRYING TO AWAKE.*

—JAMES JOYCE, *ULYSSES*

*GO, GO, GO, SAID THE BIRD:
HUMANKIND
CANNOT BEAR VERY MUCH REALITY.*

—T.S. ELIOT, *FOUR QUARTETS*

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Quotations from the poetry of T.S. Eliot are from *T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1991. Print.

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AS THE 7:00 A.M. BULLET ROUNDED A CURVE IN THE ELEVATED track, Blaise glimpsed the Santa Monica coastline, where a two hundred meter dyke barely held back the Pacific. Everything he'd worked for was here. He was the best virtual reality programmer at Mythoplex. He had a brilliant future ahead of him. But despite these reassurances, the urge to see his city drowned lingered at the edge of his mind like the laughter of a lunatic god.

The bullet jetted over a sleek, hatchet-shaped bridge. He glimpsed the abandoned I-405 freeway, long given up to tumbleweed, then a blur of blonde foothills where the towering Mythoplex logo, which had long since replaced the Hollywood sign, glittered against a pristine sky. Then came Mulholland Drive's ridges and North Hollywood's terraced canyons, crammed with live/work/play pods offering upscale condos at staggering prices. He'd never want one of those bloated monuments to vanity. Even if Cherry and his daughter Mei had survived, Blaise aspired to the simple life of a workaholic VR storyteller. Surely his grief over their deaths would dissipate with time.

His mind drifted back to the possibility of a flood. Although the Cloud Monitor never mentioned it, he knew from covert server searches that the Pacific sea wall, which stretched from Tijuana to Vancouver, had failed at its extremities. The Baja peninsula, much of Mexico and southern Arizona, British Columbia, and Alaska had long since vanished beneath the insistence of engulfing tides that made the antediluvian age a distant rumor. But he wasn't supposed to remember that. So he raised the volume of his neurofeed to distract himself.

Neurofeed played relentlessly in his head like a schizophrenic monologue. You could try to ignore it; you could lower the volume or even switch it off for

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short periods. But it was life's inescapable soundtrack and sightscape, and the Cloud Monitor considered any lapse of attention outside working hours unpatriotic and punishable by death. From a bank of Hong Kong AI servers, a female voice with the reassuring cadences of the North Am Midwest delivered propaganda and holographic imagery to all Class II through IV professionals 24/7. "Cloud life is full life, Cloud life is full light," was her signature sign-on for exuberant reports about the ever-rising standard of living, the latest victories against the Caliphate, and sultry intros to titillating VR series. Blaise ground his teeth at the Monitor's saccharine cadences. He had written her monologues before his promotion to Class II games planner, and he knew she was bleating pure fiction. But he had to listen and pretend to believe just the same.

The Monitor couldn't read thoughts, per se, but its AI servers had encoded a vast library of traitorous brainwave patterns. Any departure from a quietly optimistic state of mind could bring instant termination. Like everyone else, Blaise had learned how to control his emotions, thoughts, and physiology to keep his EEGs within acceptable ranges as the Monitor crowed about how the Cloud oligarchy had created a corporate utopia, free from the corrupt national governments that had plagued the past. The relentless repetition worked so well it placed people in cities as diverse as Shanghai, Sydney, and San Francisco on an identical footing of mental compliance.

Sitting across from Blaise, a couple of commuters in maroon jackets chatted. The man wore a silver bracelet that projected holographic images at eye level. It was obvious from his furtive glances and over-confident tone that he was trying to impress the woman.

"Nothing can touch *Viral Empire*," he declared.

"No way. *Glider Kill* rocked my world."

"Not even in the same class. *Viral Empire's* sex-slaughter index is off the charts."

He spoke into his silver bracelet. "Episode seven, jungle scene."

A naked man and woman in coitus appeared and floated before the couple at eye level. The young woman shrugged, unimpressed.

"I'm into girl-on-girl vids."

The man looked distressed, then grinned.

"Here's something you've never seen." He spoke into the bracelet again.

"Mantis release 4.0, test footage."

That attracted Blaise's attention. He scrutinized the couple as they watched another holographic display and glimpsed a pair of round, red, faceted eyes on stalks. He focused instead on the look of abject terror spreading over the woman's face.

“Where’d you get that?” she gasped.

The man apparently didn’t realize what he was risking. “We’re re-coding it,” he answered with pride. “Enhancements.”

“It’s horrible! What if the Cloud Monitor caught you? Or SWAT?”

How’d this idiot get access to—that? Blaise wondered, his heart pounding with fear for this couple, who could be terminated for sharing forbidden images. Anyone riding the bullet might report them.

The young man blanched as he noticed Blaise’s burning glance. He spoke hastily into his bracelet. “End display.”

The images vanished. Blaise felt some relief, followed by a yearning to escape before he got ensnared in the couple’s predicament. He repeated his mantra internally to calm himself.

At Wilshire Station, Blaise’s car disgorged a horde of lean, fit Class II and III VR men and women wearing varying grades of silk or spandex cutaway jackets, shrink slacks, shrink-skirts, and diaphanous blouses with colorful Chinese patterns. Everyone’s foreheads were stamped with K-Spot neurofeed implants over their third eyes, and each of their faces was set with square-jawed determination.

A woman in the crowd shrilled with laughter at a colleague’s remark. That brought back the shriek of a lasered female commando under Blaise’s command that he had been forced to leave behind in a firefight eight years ago.

Don’t leave me out here, lieutenant!

He tried to outrun that scream by shouldering through the crowd, reassuring himself that eventually, he could somehow forget his hallucinatory stint as a Cloud army lieutenant fighting the Caliphate in Nigeria, where blood lust had pulsed in his temples and balls on mosquito-infested nights before firefights; and the stench of lasered flesh and screams of villagers his platoon slaughtered had magnified his urge to kill. He ached to forget that period of his life, but the images were cauterized in his memory like a frozen bolt of lightning.

He passed under the red and yellow Chinese arch into the blazing heat of a July morning. Average temperatures had risen appallingly over the past decade. The commuters yearned to escape the merciless glare, which would superheat L.A. by noon. They surged into a long, air-conditioned plexiglass tunnel that climbed up a low incline. Ahead lay pseudo-green space running up to the Vessel, a knock-off of an identical structure that once stood in Hudson Yards, destroyed in the Caliphate dirty bomb obliteration of New York City: a six hundred ton beehive-shaped tower with over a hundred and fifty flights of stairs and twenty-four hundred steps, built to encourage controlled interactions between citizens, with intricate bronze-colored stairs climbing and descending to

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nowhere and no purpose. Behind the Vessel loomed Mythoplex tower, a glittering needle in a spiny landscape of polycarbonate, glass, and steel. Over its entrance doors, the name and logo appeared:

MYTHOPLEX PERFECTING THE METAVERSE

Anxious to begin his day in the only place where he could push the world's confusion and chaos from his mind, Blaise hastened into the cavernous lobby. There a holographic mural loomed, showing against the backdrop of Shanghai's Yuyuan Gardens the historic handshake between Chairman Mao Zedong II and U.S. President Brent Cadwallader III, the last independent politicians to join the Cloud board in Hong Kong. Beneath the mural a legend read:

OUR CLOUD FOUNDING FATHERS

It's a man's world again, echoed a sad voice from his childhood: his mother's. She'd been a published novelist before VR entertainment replaced books. After Blaise's father had abandoned them, her career had collapsed. Her only relief were childcare payments, cheap wine, and memories of a misty golden time that had been totally eclipsed after the Caliphate had dirty bombed Western capitals and the Cloud corporate patriarchy seized power.

"The Cloud calls it progress, but it's devolution," she had cried bitterly when she was drunk, and he had pretended to grasp her meaning to please her. She was a slender brunette with limpid eyes and beautiful pale skin. He had loved her scent of cinnamon and cardamom, the way she had caressed his hair and spoken to him in a maternal voice saddened by sorrows inexplicable to his eight-year-old mind.

Saddened by his memory, Blaise hustled with other VR professionals toward a translucent elevator car. He noticed, in a seating enclave with maroon couches, a girl around eight or nine, who cried softly, thumb stuck in her mouth. The sight of her pierced Blaise's heart, as always happened when he saw a girl around his dead daughter Mei's age.

He approached, knelt, and took the girl's hand.

"Hey, hey. Easy now. Where's your mommy? She work here?"

The girl nodded and sniffled. Blaise shook out a pocket handkerchief, dried her tears, and wiped the snot from her nose.

"Where'd she get off to?"

The girl pointed to an alcove at the lobby's edge.

"The ladies room? Why'd she leave you out here?"

The girl shrugged and sobbed loudly.

"OK, OK. Shh. Shh. We'll find her."

He walked hand in hand with the child to a female receptionist in a pale linen jacket, blouse, and skirt, who studied a holographic screen behind a counter below the enormous patriotic mural.

"Didn't you see her?" Blaise demanded.

The receptionist barely glanced at the child. "I have no authority to intervene."

Blaise rapped the counter hard enough to startle the receptionist. He pointed to his cutaway blazer lapel, studded with a gold sun disk containing a blue K-Spot.

The receptionist turned pale. "Sorry, sir," she replied in a quaking voice.

"Your name?"

"Anne Boleyn IX, sir. Really, I'm so sorry."

"Not half as sorry as you'll be if you don't take her to the ladies room and find her mom."

The receptionist hustled around the desk to the girl, who eyed her with suspicion and refused to let go of Blaise's hand. The receptionist knelt and gently dislodged her, whispering shaky reassurances as the girl eyed Blaise with hope and fear in her eyes.

Satisfied when the receptionist led the girl away, Blaise pressed into one of the crowded lifts, where an inner floodgate burst. Memories of happy moments with his dead wife Cherry and Mei flooded his mind. His heart churned with longing for those early days, when he had hoped with all the yearning his heart could muster that the sanity and security of a wife and family would make him forget his violent past. But the wartime memories were coiled in his gut like a colony of tapeworms. The sweating nightmares had returned night after night; the flashbacks had haunted his days like furies tormenting him for unforgivable acts. Cherry had struggled courageously to help him for as long as her hope and love had endured. But his PTSD was like a storm tide repeatedly crashing against a coastal column of rock. Eventually, his long silences, his refusal to discuss the war, and his sudden violent tirades over trifles had worn away her capacity to care. Mei, for her part, had come to look upon her father with fear and hatred. Blaise responded by burying himself in his work. Awards and recognition had followed, and coding new VR series became his oxygen in an arid, airless world drained of all meaning.

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Blaise tried to imagine meeting another woman like Cherry—or his mother, for that matter. Not likely. The Class II women he worked with were as hard, relentless, and ruthless as the Pacific that surged against the L.A. sea wall.

In the lift he tried not to inhale his colleagues' personal pheromone scents or notice how many had paid for prosthetic surgery to make themselves look like VR stars. He was particularly careful to avoid locking eyes with female colleagues. Mythoplex management forbade flirtations or romantic relationships between employees; everyone was expected to have VR lovers through their entertainment subscriptions.

At floor 103, Blaise hastened past a security checkpoint with SWAT cops in black uniforms. In his lofty office, he slid the door closed so he could code beyond the reach of jealous eyes and acidic gossip. He reduced his neurofeed to the soft murmur permitted during working hours. His wall of holographic awards testified to his prestige as the creator of *Viral Empire*, the most popular VR series three years running. On one wall, the recursion formula expressing the fractal process identified by his namesake, the first Blaise Pascal, pulsed with electrical surges. Blaise loved fractals, those infinitely complex patterns repeating over and over in a feedback loop driven by recursion. For him, the equation didn't express chaos theory, as mathematicians claimed; it symbolized the worlds within worlds springing from his imagination.

He booted up his holographic deck and voice-coded part of a new module for *Gilgamesh V*, his new series set in ancient Babylon. This thundering epic featured hordes of gods, goddesses, kings, queens, soldiers, blood-drenched battles, and a bastard pretender who, with his high priestess, angled for a tottering city-state's throne. It was the perfect subject matter to support the historical inevitability of patriarchal rule.

He had dictated several hundred lines of code when Mitsuko breezed into his office—a familiar and unwelcome presence signified by an effluvium of jasmine-scented disapproval. A Class I executive games supervisor, she wore a blue silk cutaway jacket and blouse, her long, flawless legs wrapped in a navy-blue kimono skirt accented by black high heels. Regal and erect, she never tired of reminding colleagues that despite her father's lackluster status as a Beijing business magnate, her mother was a direct descendant of the twenty-second Japanese emperor.

Technically, Blaise reported to Mitsuko; and he despised her because she had sent the Mantis to murder two of her predecessors—both friends of his and fellow veterans—and he was certain she planned to terminate him at the first opportunity. But Director Minsheng Lu had entrusted Blaise with many special projects, and had given him his own team of assistant programmers. For now at

least, Blaise was free to vent his spleen on her for her constant attempts to undermine him.

“The first quadrant?”

Blaise refused to glance away from his wall-sized holographic screen, which featured an ancient Babylonian throne room with frescos depicting rows of golden lions, running below tessellated slabs of black obsidian, bordered by blue and gold arabesques encircling stylized stands of date palms. Male courtiers in sumptuous robes, spear-bearing guards, and noble ladies with black-braided hair and colorful gowns watched a Babylonian king with a beard and gold conical crown orate from his throne. A tall, muscular, naked warrior with flowing black locks, Gilgamesh V, crowned by a lion’s head and pelt, rushed in with a band of warriors. Gilgamesh hacked his way through the courtiers, mounted the dais, and ran the king through with his sword.

“I asked you a question.”

Mitsuko would go on breaking his concentration until he responded. He spun around toward her in his floating cockpit chair. “There’s no need to repeat yourself. I ignored you precisely the first time.”

“Answer me. Without sarcasm.”

“I’m going to keep making you look brilliant. I’ll have the first quadrant laid in by next Friday.”

“Vidracom wants it to air in ninety days.”

“Oh, darling, go buy yourself a personality, won’t you?”

“How dare you call me. . .”

“Sorry. Thought you’d prefer that to fuck you, bitch. As for *Gilgamesh V*, they’ll have it in sixty days with a little luck.”

“I’m not interested in luck. Only results. Is that clear?”

“Last time I checked, I haven’t missed a deadline in seven years.”

“Rising so recently from the barbaric North Am military class, you lack perspective. That makes you over-confident.”

“Whereas you, Mitsuko, are descended on your mother’s side from Japanese Emperor Seinei, who was born wise, with white hair. I understand he had only adopted sons, which makes your claim to be his descendant a bit bogus, no?”

“How dare you!”

“Sorry for the mean, awful, accurate things I say.”

Mitsuko approached Blaise until she was so close her belly nearly touched him. He pushed away in his cockpit chair to avoid the heat and scent of her.

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“A Class III junior games planner will help you meet that deadline.”

Rage surged up in Blaise’s face and lips like lava that threatened to erupt with lethal force. He repeated his mantra internally to keep himself from attacking her physically, which would mean his immediate termination.

“Minsheng gave me full authority to finish this series without interference,” he replied, measuring his words carefully.

Mitsuko’s lips curled into a grimace. She was probably monitoring his EEG and knew she had gotten to him.

“Your character arcs are slipping.”

“This from a woman who hasn’t coded even a porn vid in four years.”

“Your protagonist’s crises are not physical but emotional, and may The Cloud preserve us, psychological. Subscribers want action heroes and heroines, not advanced neurotics.”

Her critique infuriated Blaise, but he tempered his rebuke. “We both know you’re wrong. So why don’t you go away?”

A dark flame of rage showed in the folds of her epicanthic eyes. She clenched her dainty fists, but managed to restrain her explosion.

“When your incompetence finally shows, remember I gave you this chance to hide it. Progress report at week’s end.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

“You’d better meet that deadline. Or your honeymoon with the director will come to a fatal end.”

“Do underestimate me, Mitsuko. That should be entertaining.”

She issued a grunt and stormed out. He heard the clacking of her high heels diminish down the corridor like a bad memory as his door slid shut. He enjoyed insulting her, but every victory was short-lived. He kept his neurofeed at low volume rather than silence it because she might upgrade the Cloud Monitor’s EEG surveillance on him from random to focused and perpetual. Dread prickled his spine like tiny electric shocks. Perhaps soon, very soon, the Mantis would materialize to fry his brain, despite his relationship with the director.

But wasn’t he safe from the Mantis, after all? His coding impressed Class I executives, who relished the profits from VR subscribers addicted to his cunning plot nuances and character subtleties. He was a Shakespeare among games planners; his groundlings wanted blood and lust, and he gave them plenty. Still, it wasn’t enough to guarantee his safety. Not with Mitsuko hovering.

Blaise distracted himself from such thoughts by coding intently all morning, relishing his escape into a world built from his blackest obsessions, sublimating

his angst in his characters. Twice, as he coded dialog and played it back, a high-pitched woman's voice in the series reminded him of Aisha, the wounded female commando's plea from eight years back, so he pushed himself harder to finish the next block of coding.

His new series would cost Class I, II, and III subscribers a hefty percentage of their annual salaries, but everyone would eagerly pay it. *Gilgamesh V* was sure to have mass appeal thanks to Blaise's programming breakthrough: algorithms that radically intensified the experience of living inside a VR protagonist's body, to the point where pain was felt as sharply as pleasure. The fantasy deeply affected the body's physiology, so Blaise had to code special safeguards against actual organ failure.

Blaise had set his epic in the sixth century B.C., when the city of Babylon, with its hanging gardens, ziggurats, and friezes of winged lions and bearded kings, was fading under the sway of the Persian Achaemenid Empire. King Marduk-apla-iddina II had seized the Babylonian throne, but had ruled only nine months, giving Blaise's *Gilgamesh V* time to plot his own bloody coup with the high priestess at the annual Akitu Temple New Year festival. Blaise had spent days coding the festival's dazzling procession of gods and goddesses, their statues in sumptuous robes atop bejeweled chariots that processed through the Ishtar Gate, a forty-eight-meter passage inlaid with carvings of open-mouthed lions, bulls, and dragons. On their way to the royal palace, the soon-to-be-assassinated king, with his courtiers and priestesses of Ishtar, had navigated broad avenues and gardens shaded by tamarisk trees and date palms. The city was scented with aromatic plants and dominated for miles by the ziggurat of Etemenanki, dedicated to Marduk, which reached for the sky in eight recessed terraces. Street mobs, drunk on mead and wine in honor of Ishtar, gorged on ample fare in the street markets, while the men crowded the goddess's temples to visit Ishtar's holy prostitutes, who waited, almond-scented, with open legs for any who came to honor her.

At noon Blaise's door slid open. In walked Harper, a Class III assistant games planner in a yellow linen jacket. Harper was a lanky black Alabama girl who hadn't quite lost her drawl despite living in L.A. for years, though she had picked up the sunshine smile and depressed angst of the City of Angels. Harper had deluded herself into thinking that Blaise, a fellow Southerner, would advance her career. Like every other leech in the games planning department, Harper's only chance for advancement lay in sucking up to a master mythologizer like Blaise. But Blaise found her a painful reminder of a dim past and stagnant culture he longed to forget. Nothing existed for him now but L.A. and the virtual universes he coded.

“Hiya, Blaise. Circular sushi today in the commissary. Ya hungry?”

“I’m kind of in the zone with this.”

“Yeah, know,” Harper replied. “Hey, no problem. I’ll just head on down, then.”

Harper’s hurt tone reminded Blaise that it wasn’t wise to snub a subordinate; it might create the impression you were antisocial. With Mitsuko coiled to pounce on his first exploitable mistake, Blaise decided to take the higher ground.

“Know what, I could use a California roll right about now.”

Harper studied his face. “Hey, you OK? You look kinda stressed.”

“Her royal highness was just in here, spreading her slime.”

“Bitch on wheels,” Harper agreed. Then her face brightened. She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a credit chip. “Almost forgot. Kiley asked me to give you this. You won the soccer pool this week. Nice spread you gave for the L.A.-Sydney playoffs. Paid off big time.” She pushed the chip into Blaise’s hand. “Buy us all a couple rounds at the next game night out.”

“Thanks, Harper,” Blaise agreed, though he had missed the last two game nights, a risky strategy since failing to show team spirit could arouse the Cloud Monitor’s attention. But Blaise couldn’t bear hanging out with sycophants who dreamed of one day replacing him. He had told them he had to code late on a special project for the director, an excuse that brought awed respect.

Harper sauntered beside Blaise down the corridor past colleagues whose jealous glances relieved her, for a few minutes, from the twitchy fearscape of her thwarted ambition. She and Blaise took the lift down with other Class IIs and IIIs and caught bland scents from the commissary’s healthy all-organic fare; their neurofeed announced the menu accompanied by circling holographic beauty shots. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling commissary windows, the aquamarine towers of the L.A. skyline stretched into the distance like the curvature of a dream. A few executive hovercars streaked between scrapers.

The board had long ago eliminated smog by moving manufacturing to unflooded areas in Mexico Quadrant and by restricting road traffic to rechargeable autobots. And autobots were rare now that Class IIs, IIIs, and IVs took the bullet train alongside Slags, who used it to get to their drudge work.

“Snagged the ultra-VR Gal Gadot package,” Harper bragged over her sushi. “Classic early twenty-first century. Always did love Wonder Woman. Now I got ninety days of Gal sucking me senseless at a steal of a price.”

“Great stuff, Harper,” Blaise yawned, recalling that he himself had coded the CereFuck promos for the VR lover models so popular now that biopics set in the early twenty-first century were all the rage. Tom Hardy, Bradley Cooper, Ryan

Gosling, Cillian Murphy, Lady Gaga, Jennifer Lawrence, Emily Ratajkowski, Karlie Klause, Kylie Jenner. All hot sellers. Dead divas and hunks for deadheads like Harper.

Harper gave Blaise a swift sidelong glance. “Seen Tolsen’s new series?”

“I don’t follow Mitsuko’s coders.”

“VR effects were bland as dirt. The storyline? Pathetic. I can code circles around that Okie.”

“Harper, you’ll get your shot at a series. When you’re ready.”

“I’m gonna explode, Blaise. Second unit code-correcting Tolsen’s fuck ups? That’s rookie shit.”

Blaise and Harper made a great show of enjoying their sushi, aware of the hundred or so colleagues pretending not to eye Blaise with envy. He picked up a few warning pings in the reactive beat of his heart. He sensed tension in the air, an effluvium of jealous anticipation, expressed in furtive glances as people whispered to companions, a few even daring to gesture at Blaise. Icy needles of fear pierced his heart. Was something afoot? A rumor making the rounds about him—perhaps concerning yet another hot project the director had in mind? Minsheng’s special projects could bring unimagined rewards or abrupt termination if the results were unsatisfactory. This all-too-familiar angst precipitated one of Blaise’s mood swings. *I can’t bear much more of this shit* flashed through his mind: the jealousy, the relentless competition, the urgency to create VR series everyone would forget in a month or a year; the endless coding, the pseudo-life in a faux live/work/play pod with no one for company but VR lovers; and his relentless nightmares and flashbacks. Blaise suppressed these criminal thoughts beneath the iron discipline of his mantra. He repeated it until he was convinced his thoughts were pure alpha waves.

His conversation with Harper attracted a couple of Class IIIs, moths drawn to Blaise’s flame. Tolsen was one of them; he pretended he hadn’t heard Harper’s insults earlier. He and the other Class III, Phuong, took two just-abandoned seats and congratulated Blaise on his new series. They asked for details, and had to settle for his reply that it was classified and none of their business in any case. Disappointed that they couldn’t steal anything of value, they tried to impress Blaise with the latest Slag jokes.

“Hey Blaise, what do you call a Slag girl who can outrun her brothers?” Tolsen snickered. “A virgin.”

Tolsen and Phuong howled with laughter.

Blaise rolled his eyes to feign boredom, though he resented this kind of humor. He had a soft spot for Slags, who reminded him of the poor blacks he had grown up with back in Atlanta.

“I got a better one,” Phuong blurted. “What’s the difference between a Slag baby and a pizza? A pizza doesn’t scream when you put it in the microwave.”

Blaise looked Tolsen and Phuong up and down.

“The first time I heard those, I found them mildly offensive,” Blaise rejoined. “But hearing you repeat them, I realize that light travels faster than sound. That’s why people like you appear bright until they speak.”

Tolsen and Phuong, clearly embarrassed, excused themselves, saying they had to get back to work. As they were leaving, Phuong whispered some quip to a Class III assistant programmer, and she shrieked with laughter, prompting Blaise’s nightmare from the night before to rush back with the force of a plunging sword. In it, he was belt-beamed to a seat in a bullet train that was clearly out of place in the arid Australian outback he glimpsed outside. The scene shifted, and he saw his daughter Mei tied to a bed, weeping, surrounded by thugs with blackened teeth, unkempt beards, and greasy hands as she whimpered like an animal with its leg caught in a trap.

The nightmare had had the sharpness and clarity of VR feed, and Blaise had suspected, when he woke from it, that perhaps it was something Mitsuko had cooked up. Remembering it now impressed on him that Cherry and Mei were dead, dead, dead, and he found himself aching to be with them. He applied his mantra to blank out his emotions, but Harper’s clichés and suck-up stories, designed to impress, rushed to Blaise’s brain like a drug and drove him over a precipice into the void. In the crystalline purity of his despair, he felt he was bursting from his body like a bug through a withered pod.