

excerpt from *The Neural NightsBridge Resurrection Model*

by Mathew Lebowitz

I'm just getting ready to break down the mossy front door of Jacob's off-grid cabin when he pings me on my mobile. It's not him, of course, can't be since we recently lowered his corpse into a muddy pit on the outskirts of town. But I had the team work up his resurrection model and now I get pinged, periodically, by this composite.

"The numbers, Vance, the account numbers, is it too much to ask?" Just like Jacob, he comes on like we're in the middle of a conversation. "I know you think I'm working some kind of scam here but I assure you, Vance, it's very, very real. I have interested parties, wealthy individuals. I can't say who, don't ask, but let's just say that they are equally as concerned as I am and ready to contribute to the cause. They want. to send. money! Do you even hear me?" He's enunciating slowly and clearly, like he's explaining to a child. Which is pretty much how I feel. The DevOps didn't have much to work with in Jacob's case, him being notoriously tightfisted with his data, his end-to-end encryption, his bounced relays and timeout functions that effectively erased his footprints as soon as he made them, but the NightsBridge engines are

unbelievably powerful. They nailed his tonality, his rhythm and cadence of speech and, most notably, the intense energy that emanates from him in waves that are nearly overwhelming even through the phone.

“Oh, never mind. You’re all the same.” He’s switched to glum and neglected, disenchanted by the world. “I never expected much but I should always expect less. That’s how it is, am I right, Vance? Do it myself and all that. More of the crkkk or crickkk and shht spzz...” His voice is collapsing into distorted strands and whispers, which could be because the signal is weak, out here in the woods, or because the projection model has reached the limits of actionable data. I take the phone from my ear and study it as if it might hold a clue, but all it shows is the photo of me and Jacob from a fishing trip about a year ago when he was on a smooth patch and hadn’t yet descended into this latest hellscape of suspicion and paranoia. “I’ll do it myself,” he concludes. “Just like I always have. Oh, one more thing, Vance?”

“Yes?”

“You don’t need to break the door apart, you goof. There’s a key in the flowerpot in the shed.”

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Sure enough — a key in the flowerpot in the shed. Surprising for someone so obsessed with security. But I don’t dwell on it, any more than I dwell on how the projection engine knew about the key, or knew what I was planning to do without it. Suffice to say these are powerful quantum systems capable of pressing outward with unimaginable brute force into an ever tightening range of probability. They know.

Beyond the padlock, the place is dry and quiet: a kitchen of sorts with rudimentary running water. I turn the faucet and cold water gushes into a metal bin. I turn it off. There’s no

electricity. Hanging above me is a chipped ceramic lantern that probably was his only light. I reach up and give it a push and it sways back and forth, creaking on a metal handle. But that brings to mind other hanging, swinging things and I quickly silence it.

The place is fundamentally bare. Whatever madness Jacob had been concocting here has been swept out or destroyed, probably in the firepit I noted in the side yard. There's no sign of the boxes of documents spilling dusty hardcopy that Shelley had described, the piles of books, or the corporate murder board that took up one entire wall: photos of gleaming technology centers and campuses from around the world and what looked like (to her) grainy telephoto candid shots of politicians and tech leaders that might have been taken by Jacob himself, all of it connected by strands and webs of various colored yarn. "You're on there," she had whispered fiercely through the phone, as soon as she was out of earshot and able to call me. "That place you're working with now? NightsBridge? It's on the list, Vance. Like it's one of the companies he's targeted!"

"Targeted, Shell? Really?"

Our older sister Shelley is practical to a fault, rarely the type to get nervous about anything hiding in the shadows. So to hear her worked up like this was disconcerting to say the least. "I'll tell you Vance, he's convinced there's something after him. He kept peeking out the windows, overhead, like he's looking for a drone or a satellite or the great god of Mars himself to come down slamming down a fist of fury. I don't know but yeesh, Vance, I'm happy to be out of there. You should go visit him, though." I heard her taking a surreptitious hit off her mood vape to settle her nerves. "I've no patience for it."

But the place, now, is innocuous enough. I run my finger over the bare wall where there's still a dust shadow from many pages outlined on the woodwork, a few scraps of torn documents

tacked here and there. I take a breath and roll my shoulders and remind myself: whatever insanity had been in this room, in this cabin, it left when Jacob did.

Last but not least I make my way back to the third room, the “living” room, if you call it that, where the ceiling opens up into an A frame and some big windows let in more of the western view. Here is Jake’s version of a couch and a single chair that has some padding on it. For a moment I picture him there in the late afternoon with a cup of coffee or kombucha or whatever crazy people drink to unwind, feet up, contemplating another day well spent fighting the forces of faceless evil. But, then, there’s that other straight back chair, hand-hewn, and tipped to its side on the floor. In my head I hear the echo of Shelley’s scream when she saw it. The horizontal beam above displays the remnants of a rope with one end wrapped and knotted while the other, more brutal and unforgiving end dangles down, severed and fraying. I promised Shelly I would remove it and so I do, getting a folding ladder and a small saw from his shed and climbing to the beam and hacking away at the stubborn hemp fibers until I’m sweating and cursing and probably moaning as I nick my finger more than once with the old dull blade. But I get it done. And whatever stinging to my knuckle, the blood that trickles down, the taste when I lick it... it’s oddly comforting, like a penance I’ve needed to pay.

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“Happy?” I dump the remnants of the rope onto the seat next to Shelley and climb into the back of the car beside her. It’s a new car, smells fresh out of the box, leased and licensed as a perk from NightsBridge for our budding partnership and I’m not familiar with the climate adjusters yet, and I spend some time fiddling with contextual menus on my admin screen which only seem to raise the chill. “Did you tell it to move?” I ask, checking out the smoked window. Returning from the cabin I had gotten turned around on the overgrown paths and I was pretty

sure I had emerged on an entirely different road than I went in from. But there was the black sedan, waiting for me, idling on the shoulder like a faithful, purring pet. Score one for technology. I get the heat up and sit shivering, my hands shoved deep between my thighs.

Shelly observes all this, critically. “Well? Did you find a note?”

“No, I didn't find a note.” The recoiling part of me wants to get pissy right back at her, suggest if she wants to search the place more thoroughly she's always welcome to do so. But I don't have the energy for conflict. And perhaps neither does she because after a moment she reaches over and finds my hand until I look at her. “It's not your fault,” she says. “He was...” she gropes for the word. “Irredeemable?” That doesn't sit right so she tries again: “Irretrievable? Whatever, Vance. Look, there was no getting him back. Right?”

I nod. But I'm not so sure. Jacob was incendiary, mercurial, excitable, highly impressionable and, toward the end, increasingly lost to an imaginary darkness, but he was also sweet and innocent in his own way. Shelley doesn't know. She was already on the other side of adolescence when we were growing up, on the other side of a lot of things. But I was right there with him. I was his older brother. Wasn't I supposed to protect him?

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