

TECHNOLOGY ADDICTS ANONYMOUS

By S. C. Bachus

I – Meeting

The fog had climbed up the tilted flatness of the Sunset district, spilled over Twin Peaks, and flowed with long grey tendrils into Glen Park. It was a thick summer fog and it condensed into little patches of wetness on the young man's jacket as he ascended the BART station's steps. Walking quickly up the street, he reached into the right-hand pocket of his jacket and felt for the rigid flatness of his smart phone. Quickly he dropped it back into his pocket, and with almost military precision shot his arm straight to his side. He smiled, thinking he and his grandfather would have laughed at that, just as they did when they saw *Dr. Strangelove*, whose twisted central character's right arm seemed also to have a will of its own. Pausing, the young man looked over to his opposite arm and the wrist watch resting there, another memory of his grandfather. People today would have little use for his grandfather's old watch. An analog device -- a remembrance of things past that marked time with the endless closed loops of a second hand. The young man had it refurbished and started wearing the watch shortly after going to his Thursday evening T.A. meetings.

The old Hamilton watch indicated he was already several minutes late to meeting. That's what everybody there called it – simply, "meeting" – no qualifying adjective, not unlike some mid-western religious convocation where both folding chairs and salvation occupied the same room. But, this was San Francisco and although there were folding chairs, salvation had long decamped from the shadowed hulk of the shuttered Glen Park church where the T.A. members met. The church's doors had been permanently closed as the church haltingly passed into the second millennium, its parishioners either actually finding their way to salvation or as an interim purgatory, Daly City. Rumor had it that the local diocese was negotiating to sell the parish property to some hot new technology start-up whose plans included converting the church's nave into an open office. By chance, the young man's T.A. coach was Father Jack who was well into retirement but remained attached to the parish, and had been asked by the T. A. regional office to attend each Meeting as a guest facilitator. Jack, as he preferred to be called, held a Ph. D in both philosophy and psychology. Given his training, and because T. A. meetings are non-denominational, Jack carefully and consistently navigated his way through member issues with what he preferred to call a humanist rather than theological compass.

By the time he entered the meeting room, the young man was out of breath but only a bit over five minutes late. Most of the dozen T.A. participants were there, seated in the ever ubiquitous folding chairs organized into a loosely formed circle. Although T. A. meetings have no designated leader, Jack was recognized by most everybody as the group's *de facto* head. All eyes turned to him as the slightly disheveled young man entered the room.

"Well, look what the cat just brought in. I guess we can get started now."

Somehow it didn't sound harsh and everybody could see the smile lines forming around Jack's eyes. He looked directly over to the young man and continued,

"O.K., let's use the LIFA rule here – last in, first at-bat – you get to start."

The young man passed through the circle to an empty chair and hung his fog dampened jacket on the back. He remained standing and, looking at no one specifically, began the required canon:

“My name is Bob and I am a technology addict.”

There was a stilted pause. Bob had been so preoccupied with being late that he forgot to organize his thoughts. When he joined the group a month previously, Jack explained that every T. A. meeting has a certain ritual about it. First comes a short introductory Declaration, which Bob had just completed. This is followed by a longer Preamble in which each member reviews how they have been coping with technology since the previous meeting. After the member’s Preamble is completed, a brief question-and-answer period begins in which the member responds to any questions the group might have. Simply called Dialogue, Jack initially explained that formal T. A. procedure refers to this process as Interrogation, but that the local San Francisco chapter opted for using Dialogue – mainly because it sounded more like Plato and less like the local District Attorney.

But Bob wasn’t even to Dialogue yet, hanging there on the ledge above Preamble. *What to say, what to say...?* Everybody in the circle was waiting in the awkward silence, looking at him, their bodies canted forward with a hint of expectation. *What to say, to say...?* Self-consciously he looked down at his grandfather’s watch, the second hand sweeping him into further embarrassment. *Ah, of course, the watch...*

“Well,” he started, “at our previous meeting we decided to keep track of how many times each day we could substitute a technology-supported activity with one that is not. We agreed that things occurring as part of our jobs obviously could not be replaced, but there were a lot of activities that we could either stop doing or replace with something not driven by technology. And that there are many other things we can at least change to something more old school, like using a wrist watch rather than our smart phones to find out what time it is.”

Bob stopped and held up his left arm, “See, I even found my grandfather’s old wrist watch and started wearing it.” He hesitated for a couple of more seconds, took a breath, and looked around the circle of faces. People had relaxed a bit. He continued:

“As far as texting goes, on Friday after our last meeting I counted the number of times I texted for no good reason at all. Would you believe 103 texts in one day that had no real purpose?” But the good news is today’s count was down to 17.”

The circle broke into applause, everybody was smiling now. The group had gone into what Jack had once jokingly referred to as “full T.A. support mode”.

Bob paused again but before continuing, Jack broke in and suggested “Well, anybody have any questions for Bob?”

Obviously Jack’s god remained a merciful one. Preamble was over and Bob could proceed to Dialogue.

“So, Bob, can you tell us how you came up with those numbers?”

The first question came, as Bob knew it would, from Sandra, the group’s resident cougar. Of course nobody openly called her that, although it was Jack who, after having a post-meeting

single malt with Bob, had furtively proposed the christening. According to Jack, although Sandra was one of those rare female venture capitalists, she had gotten into the investment game a bit late in her career, and only after she had just completed a quarter century that had produced no children and three divorces. She was good looking, deceptively soft-spoken, and enjoyed asking hard questions. Jack often wondered why she had even joined the group.

“Well...” Bob began hesitantly – he knew exactly where Sandra was going with this. “... I used an app on my smart-phone.”

The cougar pounced: “But, I thought the whole idea of T. A. was to get technology out of our lives?” Sandra asked with an almost rhetorical purr.

Bob thought he was ready for it but he couldn't respond. Absolute paralysis had set in. He couldn't say a thing. Everybody in the circle appeared uncomfortable again. He looked over to Jack whose gaze seemed to be absently focused on the leaded glass window on the wall behind Sandra. The stained glass broke the light from an outside street light in an arc that flowed across the color spectrum. From the dark pit of his anguish, Bob let out a stifled cough – a little cry for yet a bit more help from Jack.

“You know, I was just thinking . . . ,” Jack began, keeping his gaze on the stained glass, “. . . that window reminds me of this group. We come here with our different lives reflected by the shades and tints of those pieces of glass. But, we're all leaded together by the bonds of our addiction to technology. Now, somebody please correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't we all agree at our first meeting that the 21st century may truly be the age of technology, and that the humanistic problems that might result from that certainly won't be resolved by a Manichean legacy of black and white standards?”

Bob hoped that the shadow of a smile that had just crossed his face had not dissolved into a smirk. Sandra looked like she was about to say something, but Jack quickly answered his own question, continuing:

“No, I think we agreed as T. A. members that the brave new world of technology is, to use one of its own terms, gray-shaded. Unlike alcoholics, we just can't go cold-turkey. Our environment – the new culture we somehow survive in – just won't permit that classic dualism. Personally, I *believe* we must try to move in and out of the shadows of technology as freely as possible. And, so, I guess that *belief* permits me to excuse Bob for using a smart phone app to count the number of texts he made.”

Sandra's face looked like it was frozen in stone, absolutely no hint of emotion, just granitic features betraying no feeling, nothing. She spoke the words, softly but sharply: “I stand corrected. I'm very sorry, *Father* . . . er, I mean Jack . . . if I stepped on somebody's *belief*”, her voice sounding the words “Father” and “belief” with an acidic downward inflection.

“No problem, Sandra. I'm sure Bob is done with Dialogue. Would you like to be next?”

And so as they did every Thursday evening, each member of the group shared their previous week's experiences -- their little defeats and victories -- in a world that for some was becoming increasingly alien. After about an hour followed by a brief break, Jack led a short discussion on what he chose to call “alienation and technology”. Although Bob had no trouble following Jack's line of reasoning, he felt the older man's remarks might have been maybe a bit more appropriate for a philosophy seminar.

Jack started out with the premise that it just wasn't technology, but rather population growth and urban crowding that had forced people inward toward what he called the "garrisoned self", and that this was exactly what Durkheim was talking about when he referred to the "*alienation and anomie*" pervading post-agrarian societies. In the world of the 21st century, Jack continued, the Internet became a palliative to mass alienation by creating social networks. Jack then proposed that these networks really were a contemporary realization of Bergson's *les données immédiates de la conscience* --a collective consciousness of now global proportions.

Bob looked around the circle. Fortunately, nobody was snoring. Nonetheless, he felt it was his turn to help Jack, and get the group involved in what was so far a very one-sided discussion.

"You're certainly giving us food for thought, Jack, but where is the individual in all this alienation and collective consciousness stuff?" Bob asked.

"Ah, Bob, great minds think alike," Jack responded, "I was just going to say that technology provides us with a mechanism not unlike what Talcott Parsons called *individuation*. To my old mind there is nothing more narcissistic than, indeed, a tweeted selfie. And persist I must with the observation that all this social networking finds its roots in a very popularized and perverted Cartesianism. Remember, Descartes' cosmology, aberrant as it was, postulated that reality was just two little monads circling on a great disk, looking across it at each other. In Descartes mind human existence could be reduced simply to a simultaneous recognition of ourselves in others. Welcome to Facebook."

Mercifully, Jack ended it there. Around the circle some eyelids were at half-mast. "I do have one announcement . . . ," he said, ". . . my colleagues in the diocese have announced that they have come to terms with the I. T. company that plans to buy the church and parish property. I will email you the location of our next T. A. meeting. Until then I hope that the following week will be good to you all."

After the meeting, Bob started the short walk up Munroe Street to his apartment. Jack's parting words were still in his mind. Bob enjoyed T. A. meetings because in the long run they forced people to be good to themselves. Bob had begun to see through his addiction to the possibilities of a universe beyond his own, self-reflective monad. He looked up Glen Park canyon. The mercury vapor street lights along Portola Heights tinted the fog pouring over Twin Peaks a soft amber orange. Rising out of the blackness of the canyon, a grove of old eucalyptus trees lifted themselves above the skyline, gray ghosts against the tinted swirling mist blowing in from the Pacific.

Bob reached the intersection of Munroe and 18th. He looked back behind him. A SUV was coming down Munroe but its blinking indicator light showed that the driver was about to make a left turn on to 18th. Bob stepped into the intersection. He looked again up into the black cleft of the canyon, and in that instant it snatched him into its silent darkness.

II – Multi-Tasking

The young woman, Anne Watson, had flown into San Francisco on a flight originating in the late afternoon in Boston. Her smart phone had automatically adjusted itself to Pacific Coast time and indicated it was 9:50 PM – almost 1:00 AM back in Boston. She was tired after the long flight. There had been an issue with the car rental company at SFO. Anne had reserved a

compact with a GPS unit because she had never been to San Francisco and had no idea how to get to the DigitalBnB where she was staying. For some reason the rental company was all out of compacts. The only vehicle remaining that was equipped with GPS was a behemoth SUV. Anne told the rental car agent that because she was the CEO of a start-up tech company moving to San Francisco, she had reserved the compact using her VIP account status, and that it was due to people like her that the agent could even have a job in today's high tech economy. A truce was declared when the apologetic agent showed her how to quickly get the DigitalBnB address into the SUV's GPS destination.

After that, things got better. The GPS directed her up Highway 101 and to the off-ramp leading to local surface streets terminating in the Glen Park area where she was staying. Anne's San Francisco contact was one of her company's primary investors, Sandra, who suggested that Anne stay near Glen Park, as that was the location of the church property to be purchased by Anne's start-up IPO, and that would ultimately become its headquarters. She had just about a block more to go down Munroe, make a left turn on to 18th, and arrive at the DigitalBnB location.

About a 100 feet from the intersection, Anne's smart phone's ring-tones started up. For some reason the phone hadn't synched with the SUV's Bluetooth system, and she had to take the call manually. She looked around, no other cars in any direction, she could answer safely – no police, no huffy Left Coast types honking because she was on her phone. Besides, Anne knew she was great at multi-tasking. She could talk on the phone, work the GPS, and drive simultaneously. She hit the indicator lever signaling her left turn off of Munroe on to 18th. She glanced at the glowing smart phone screen; it was Sandra.

"Hi, Sandra."

Hi, Anne, good to hear your voice. How was your flight?"

"OK, but a bit tiring."

"I bet ... but I've got some good news. You know that support group at the church that I have been monitoring? Well, that old fossil of a priest just announced that the diocese is going to meet our terms. This changes our agenda for tomorrow's meeting. I know it's almost 1:00 AM as far as your body is concerned, but can you meet me now for a quick coffee?"

"Sure."

"Where are you currently, Anne?"

"On Munroe. I'm just ready to make a left on to 18th toward the DigitalBnB place you reserved for me."

"Look, I'm up on 18th one block in the opposite direction. Can you make a quick right?"

"No problem. I'm doing it now . . . oh, God, oh God, . . . no . . ."

The only thing Anne heard was the small thud of the pedestrian's body as it dropped below her line of vision across the quickly turning SUV's massive hood.

III – Getting on the Blues

The next morning D'Shawn Jamison arrived early for his part-time job at the San Francisco Coroner's office. He had started work there a month earlier at the beginning of his last semester in his senior year at S. F. State. D'Shawn had gotten to work early because this was a really special Friday for him. Yesterday he had gotten his acceptance letter to UCSF med school and he wanted to tell his supervisor, Dr. Beth, the good news.

Dr. Elizabeth Jackson, was sitting at her desk. Dr. Jackson was an A.C. – Assistant Coroner – but she had become something of a special mentor for D'Shawn. On his first day at the office, she told D'Shawn that she preferred to be called Beth. Somehow that just didn't sound right to D'Shawn, and he asked if he could call her "Dr. Beth". She said that "sounded cool" to her.

During D'Shawn's first month at the office, Dr. Beth helped him learn office procedure and all the professional buzz-words that accompanied it. She explained that "TOD" was short for "Time of Death", that she was one of many "ACs" meaning "Assistant Coroners", and that the unfortunate beings that constituted their office workload were "Subjects", or simply "Subs". She told D'Shawn it might help him if he thought of them, not as the people that they might have been, but simply as Coroner office subjects identified by their processing number. "Otherwise," she had looked kindly at him as she said, "you might really get the blues on, when you actually do put on those blue rubber gloves for doing property inventories. It's best to keep the folks who pass through here anonymous."

D'Shawn passed through AC's open doorway. "Dr. Beth, guess what?"

"What, D'Shawn? It must be pretty important to get you in here this early in the morning."

"I got my acceptance letter to med school in yesterday's mail!"

"Oh, D'Shawn, that's just great. Tell you what. We've got a couple Subs that came in last night. After you do the property inventories on them this morning, I'll take you out to lunch and we'll celebrate you getting into med school."

"Thanks, Dr. Beth, I'll get right on them. From what's on my desk it looks like it'll be Subs 15-924, 925 and 26."

D'Shawn put on a new pair of blue rubber gloves and started pulling together the e-docs for Sub 924. The Coroner's Office, SFPD and the S.F. District Attorney shared a common database, ironically if not purposely named by the City and County's I.T. Department, MORBID, short for Mortality Basic Information Database. Regardless of whether or not an autopsy was required, each Sub's immediate personal property such as clothing, jewelry, etc. had to be inventoried and verified using MORBID. The database was electronic but the physical property itself had to be "tagged and bagged". That was D'Shawn's job, along with ensuring that the final inventory matched or corresponded to SFPD evidence lists, if the death had the potential for criminal prosecution by the D.A.'s office.

When D'Shawn looked at the SFPD report on Sub 924, it appeared that the D.A.'s office might end up with the data. His supervisor would want to review D'Shawn's property inventory closely. He looked over to her and announced "Dr. Beth, looks like 924 may go to the D. A.

The SFPD's prelim report indicates the driver probably was on her cell phone at the Sub's TOD."

"Oh, is that last night's SUV-pedestrian incident up by Glen Park?" she asked.

"Yep."

"OK, D'Shawn, you know the drill. Give me a heads-up on any personal property that might be valuable to the D. A.. Be sure to let me know anything that might help us cross-verify the TOD."

Going over to the property sorting table, D'Shawn emptied the Coroner's field property bag into a pile on the left-hand side of the table. He picked up a clean, post mortem property bag and placed it immediately to his right. Then, he brought up the MORBID field inventory worksheet from the laptop directly in front of him. The worksheet, completed last night by the Coroner's field team, listed a gold watch ripped from Sub 924's wrist, probably as a result of impact by the SUV's grill. The Sub's glasses had also been knocked off, and retrieved approximately 15 feet from his body, along with a cap, eyeglasses and business card which he had been holding in his right hand. The business card had the name of a priest on it. D'Shawn wrote the priest's name down along with his email address. The guy could probably help out after Sub 924's next of kin or emergency local contact had been notified.

D'Shawn turned his attention to the watch. It looked really old. The crystal had been broken and the second hand was stopped. There was a little knob on the side of watch which D'Shawn assumed was used to set the time. The hour and minute hands were smashed against the face of the watch at 9: 52. D'Shawn glanced over to Dr. Beth and said "Got something here, Dr. Beth, the Sub's wrist watch stopped last night at 9:52. That should really help confirm TOD."

"Good work, D'Shawn. What kind of watch is it?"

"Well, it says "Hamilton" across the front in old fashioned letters. The watch is gold and really looks old. There's a little knob on the side to set the time, I guess."

Dr. Beth leaned back in her chair, smiled and said "OK, that nails the TOD."

"Why?" D'Shawn asked.

"Well, that little knob on the side is also used to wind up the watch's spring. The Sub's watch is so old it doesn't run on batteries. That little knob on the side not only sets the time, it's also used to wind up the spring every day, so that the watch doesn't stop running. We'd probably been out of luck if it were digital."

D'Shawn carefully picked up the broken wrist watch resting in his blue-gloved hands. He looked at it for a moment and said quietly, "This is cool – a windup wrist watch. Never seen one of these before."