



PEBBLE ON THE BEACH

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There. Something white, tumbling and foaming in the water. Visible for a moment, teasing to the surface, then lost again inside the folding waves. The sea was shifting and restless, brief brocades of spittle-white darting where the angry turquoise of the water broke back upon itself or crashed down onto the hard pebbled beach. Its mood was driven and cuckolded by the sharp north wind and the ceiling of dirty, pregnant cloud.

Gould had been about to turn, ready to leave the beach to the tide and the wind, but now his curiosity was roused. He watched, seeking the object, that ghostly glimpse of something precious amidst the heaving sea. He watched, but there was no further sight. It was lost, another victim of the ocean, no longer rising and falling. The wind taunted him. Armed with the salt spray it streaked his face, tugged at his long hair, knotting and twisting. He waited a moment longer, hoping to see the object in the water once more, yet there was nothing but the sea.

Disappointed, he turned away, turned his back on the waves and the driving edge of the wind, and walked slowly back across the beach to the irregular castanet accompaniment of the pebbles. He was cold. His suit jacket was back in his office, placed over the back of his chair, a deception to suggest he would be back soon, that he had not wandered far. And instead he had been out here for what? Over three hours? His clothes brine-soaked, his shirt clinging tight, chill and heavy. “So what?” he thought, caring nothing for what others might think. In a lifetime

of work, of days spent from dawn to sunset working, planning and helping his employer grow ever larger profits, he was owed at least three hours out.

He crossed the deserted promenade and entered the marble-floored, glass-fronted, air-conditioned, “design-winning” foyer of International Digital (ID). It was hard to recall how impressed he’d been the first time he entered the building. How, those twenty-something years ago, its smart, orderly and efficient, almost clinical, persona had meant everything to him. An interview with ID had been a boost to his young ego, an indication that he was top grade material, capable of going all the way. Out of all the new breed of resource-efficient hi-tech companies, everyone knew ID was the best – and that it took only the best.

His shoes squelched as he crossed the foyer, leaving a snail film of water for the self-cleaning floor to tackle. The receptionists regarded him with disapproval, exchanging frowns as their hands hovered close to the button to summon Peace and Serenity (formerly known as Security). But Gould’s pass was still clipped to his shirt pocket and the front door had opened to admit him, so he was legitimate. “What happened out there?”, their expressions seemed to ask. What had made him want to go outside? The security-circuit TV, one of ID’s own designs, tracked his progress, matched his dishevelled image against his human resource record and made a critical addition to his data, noting this breach of conduct.

In times past, in the age when people had been naively regarded as any different from intelligent computers, this function had been called “Personnel”. But since the breakthroughs of the late twentieth century they had been redesignated “Human Resources” to emphasise that people were a replaceable commodity like any other, to be deployed and swapped out with better models in the same way as computers and coffee machines and other ephemeral business equipment. ID had been among the first to recognise this change in corporate behaviour, helping it take a lead over its competitors. Emotion and sentimentality had no place in the lean, efficient companies of the future. They were profit-negating influences, illegitimised by the Charter 97 edict of the Accountancy Federation, the pioneering thinktank which in return for a suitably large fee had identified human factors as the weakest link in sustaining the new age of hyper-efficient, world-class corporations.

Gould stepped onto the hovering elevator platform, and a moment later was identified and transported to his office, a room precisely 2 by 2 metres, long recognised as the optimum work-productivity environment. Its walls were a polymex derivative, so clear it was impossible

to see until you touched it. Row after row of identical offices stretched in equidistant ranks. On each floor the pattern was repeated, the fabric of each floor the same polymex derivative so that all employees were clearly visible from any point within the human-resource complex. “Transparency is progress,” as one of the company mottos said.

As Gould sat behind his desk, pushed back his hair so that the sea water dripped down his neck and curled down his spine, the in-wall communicator morphed to reveal the familiar and not entirely unexpected figure of John, Gould’s human resource co-ordinator.

‘Peter,’ the voice greeted, the fleeting smile (number five from course HR1/C) waved briefly across his face. ‘Do we have a problem?’

‘You tell me. Or us, perhaps?’ Gould replied, tiring of John’s use of the plural.

‘Er, Peter,’ the face continued. ‘You’ve been absent. I’ve no record of an appointment. And your appearance. What’s happened to you?’

‘I went for a walk.’ Gould looked away to his personal terminal and saw several e-mail holograms marked ‘Urgent!’ had arrived in his absence.

‘A walk? I’m not sure I understand, Peter. What do you mean, a walk?’

‘Oh, you know,’ Gould replied easily. ‘You put one leg in front of the other and locomote. It’s very easy. I’ll show you some time.’

‘I don’t like your tone, Peter. Perhaps you’d better come and see me.’

‘Perhaps I had,’ Gould smiled. ‘And perhaps I hadn’t.’

He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a pebble from the beach. Now it was dull, grey and lifeless, deposited with a flaking skin of dry salt. But on the beach it had sparkled, shone with the kiss of the sea. He was disappointed. It was a souvenir for his desk, a reminder of the passion and beauty of the beach to subdue his colourless office, but now it was nothing, as dull and flat as the ID environment.

‘Peter? What is that you have there? It looks unhygienic. Has it been through Sani-Control?’

Gould shook his head and smiled to himself. Nothing was real, nothing could be experienced, admitted near to people until it had been audited and examined. So now he had broken another rule. What of it?

The pebble turned in his hands, hard and alien, something real, unsanitised in this plastic world of soft and psychologically-adjusted objects. He slipped the pebble back into his pocket,

stood and stepped out of his office onto the small disk of the linear lift and was carried up towards the office of the Head of Human Resources. As he walked into the interior, a button was pressed and the walls clouded, masking the interior from outside view. Transparency is not, after all, always progress.

‘Hello Peter.’

There was no handshake, no warmth in the greeting. Personal contact was unhygienic, a risk to health. And his appearance was a further risk, a sign of imbalance, of a mind where thoughts and actions were crossing a border they had been trained to resist. It would not be acceptable for the Head of Human Resources to be seen condoning non-normative behaviour.

‘Please, take a seat.’

Gould smiled and sank into the seat, relaxing as it contoured itself to his shape and started to give him a massage.

‘Now, perhaps you can tell me what happened to you today.’

Gould stared at the stranger behind the desk, the suited, smiling face of a man who knew nothing about him other than what he had accessed on the computer system. And now he wanted to behave as if he was Gould’s friend, that he could be trusted, could be a confidante, a father confessor who would put him back on the path of corporate righteousness and conformity.

‘I went for a walk,’ Gould stated. ‘Along the beach’

The Head of Human Resources drew in his breath and sighed. ‘Now why did you do that, Peter? You know better than that, don’t you? What seems to be the problem?’

Gould felt his irritation slide into sympathy. This man knew nothing, had experienced nothing other than the dehumanizing training, the professional specialisation which had isolated and refined him. What else could he be? What else could the Head of a Human Resource operation become other than the ultimate resource himself, a shallow cipher whose sole purpose was to ensure efficiency and commitment from the company’s human elements.

‘Yes, I know better than that.’ Gould repeated the words aloud. He smiled. ‘Have you ever been to the beach?’

John stared at him and shook his head slowly. ‘No, Peter. I haven’t. You know it’s too dangerous. The contamination of the oceans is too high. The risk of disease and infection too great. I suggest you visit Biological Maintenance. You may have become contaminated.’

Contaminated? In a way. But not in the sense John intended. No, Gould was contaminated because he had stepped outside his world, outside the rule set, the instruction set he was meant to follow. And he had displayed that breach clearly, had made the contamination visible by stepping outside the building, a deeply symbolic act in which he had stepped outside the warm, controlled embrace of the company's office.

He slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out the pebble. John was surprised, a frown flickering across his forehead.

'Peter. What's that? Something from the beach? This is unacceptable. You know the risk.'

But John's words were obscured, masked by a wave of pure emotional energy which washed over Gould as he squeezed the pebble between his fingers. Images danced before him, pictures of an age when the beach had not been isolated, when humans enjoyed it without concern. He saw the wash of an earlier, cleaner sea biting at the beach, children and adults laughing and swimming and playing in the water, the swoop and cry of great white and grey gulls. The pebble had become a transmitter, a witness to past events, narrating scenes and times outside Gould's knowledge.

But then the images flickered, fading like an early morning mist, and he saw John sitting before him, leaning forward as if he had just asked a question and was awaiting an answer.

'Are you all right, Peter? You're very quiet.' John did not like what he saw. Gould had lost control, had snapped and broken. He had seen it before, when a resource ceased to function as it should. There could be many reasons. He would request Neural Maintenance to give Gould an evaluation. It might not be too late. But if it was, the prospects were not good. The company did not tolerate resources who malfunctioned. Self-indulgence was a weakness: it had no role here.

Gould stood and paced restlessly up and down the room. 'Haven't you ever felt this?' he asked. 'This feeling that there's more to this life than ID?'

John spread his hands on the desk and shook his head. 'No, Peter, I can't say I have. ID gives me everything I need. This is everything that previous generations fought for. I count myself lucky. So should you.'

‘Should it?’ Gould stopped pacing and leaned over the desk towards him. ‘Well, maybe that’s right. Maybe you’re the lucky one for not seeing things for what they are. But I don’t think so. I think I’m the lucky one. And you know what?’

‘What, Peter?’

‘I want out, John. Out of ID, out of this office, out of this life.’

‘Listen to yourself, Peter. You’re talking nonsense. You know there’s no kind of life outside of ID. Only the street-bums and winos live outside the hyper-companies. You’re better than that. You owe yourself, your family, so much more than that. Have you discussed this with them?’

‘No. Not yet. I don’t want to. This is my decision.’

‘That’s not good, Peter.’ John leaned forward in his chair, his face adopting the most concerned look he had yet mastered. ‘Any crazy action like this would be very bad career decision. It’s not just yourself. You have to consider your family. Think what it would do to them. ID is their life too.’

‘Maybe it is, but it’s not mine any longer. I’m out of it. Right now, this very moment. I’m going to walk out of this building and out of this company.’

‘I can’t let you do that, Peter.’

Gould moved towards the door. John jumped from his chair with a surprising turn of speed and hurried round the desk, clamping a restraining hand onto his arm.

‘Don’t do this, Peter. You’re dysfunctional. This isn’t you at all.’

Gould tried to pull free from his hold, but John was strong, his grip was certain. Another image flickered wildly through his mind, a primal image of an ape raising a long, hairy arm above its head and bringing it crashing downwards. And in its hand it held a stone, a pointed, arrow-head of rough rock. Gould looked down at the pebble in his free hand.

Could he?

He pulled again, but John’s grip had strengthened. If Gould did not act soon, John would call Peace and Serenity and there would be no chance. Neural Maintenance would correct his ‘faulty’ circuits as part of their supportive nanny service. After all, they knew what was best.

‘Let go of me.’ It was almost a whisper. He could hardly control himself to speak at all and the words came out reluctantly.

John shook his head. ‘No can do, I’m afraid. You need help. Don’t fight me Peter.’

Verbal thought blanked from Gould's mind. Something stronger, more immediate took control of him and he thought only in image and action. A powerful, visceral compulsion flowed through him. He raised the pebble and brought it down hard on John's head. John's grip weakened and he held up his arm, a puzzled expression on his face as he felt the blood. And then Gould repeated the blow, twice more until John weakened his hold on his arm and put both arms up to defend himself. This was one situation his Human Resource courses had neglected to teach him. Violence was not part of the ID culture – well, not direct, physical violence that is. They preferred the more subtle, neural-based approaches. He shouted something, but Gould heard nothing. He was remote, a spectator watching as John finally fell to the floor and lay there motionless. Gould looked down at him and wondered idly whether he was dead. He felt distant, as if he were viewing himself via ID's security circuit TV. It didn't seem real. He saw his own trousers had become speckled with flecks of blood.

He stepped from the room and onto the linear platform, directing it down to the foyer. His progress was monitored by the Peace and Serenity scanners, zooming ever closer to examine the strange liquid on his clothing. But by the time Peace and Serenity realised that it was human lubricating fluid (of the internal variety) and that John lay dead or unconscious behind his desk, Gould had already stepped from the building. ID Peace and Serenity rules confined their resources to the interior of building. The outside world was viewed as too dangerous. Tracing Gould was now a job for the federal police, for the underpaid street-wise coppers deployed to do society's dirty work, the only ones prepared to take the risk of living outside.

Gould stepped down onto the beach, staggering and uneven in his stride as the pebbles shifted and moved below him. And there it was. Near the water's edge he saw the white shape, rolling and dancing in the water. As he stepped nearer, stepped deeper into the water and let the pebble fall forgotten from his hand and into the waves, he could now see what it was. A skull. A grinning, bleached-white skull which turned and tumbled in the water and laughed at him as he stepped deeper and deeper into the waves, surrendering himself to their cold embrace.