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Boris disappeared. He did not crash, or shut down, or anything even remotely understandable. There are no words to describe what he did and no way to figure out where the hell he was. They would just have to wait until he got back, and ask him. In the meantime, Vladi was trying very hard not to look at Attila, who was trying very hard not to turn.

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At half past one in the morning in Vatican City, Italy, Cardinal Paul Kovacs wakes with a start from his cot by the window, the stench of scorched human flesh still clinging to his nostrils. 'The demons are upon us', Paul wants desperately to shout, but thinks better of it. Father John will be back in the morning and all will be well again.

I am the Cane Toad
saying goodbye
to his non-toxic innards



Nevermore

What the hell was that? Stretch, fart, sit up and check the time. One twenty-nine. Shit. Vague fragments of what must have been a really good dream slip quietly away...

“Squawk!”

So damn loud I jump.

“Jesus!”

I look out on the terrace and, perched right there on the railing is, what... a crow? I often get finches, pigeons, even woodpeckers coming to the feeder; but never crows, and never at one in the morning. Stand up slowly and walk to the terrace door. She's watching me, I think. I don't know why I think she's a she, but I do.

I open the door very slowly. It's February and I'm in boxers and a T-shirt. Still, I open it all the way and she hops to her left, closer to the door, and blinks. She has a kind of gleam in her eye. I feel a laugh trying to come up, but stifle it so as not to frighten her off.

“Hi,” I say, fully expecting her to say hi back and I'm really having trouble holding back that laugh. She hops to her left again, and blinks. I take that as a hi. Then she bobs her head twice and squawks. A chuckle comes out; I can't help it. This crazy bird, what does she want? Food maybe?

I hear them squawking up in the trees all the time. They have a really substantial beak, but not enough to open walnuts, so they carry them up into the trees and drop them on the street to crack them open. Pretty smart.

“Hey, I'm freezing, you wanna come in?” I ask. Seems natural enough. And she does it again, bobs her head twice, and I start to get a little spooked.

I can see now that she is definitely a crow, nearly jet black. She hops down on the terrace floor, picks at her wing, and then fluffs and shakes out. I stand back out of the way and she doesn't hesitate, just hops right in. I laugh out loud, she jumps, squawks and flaps her wings, then looks up at me.

“Sorry,” I tell her, “You hungry or something?”

If she does that double bob again I know I'm gonna lose it, and, of course, she does. I crack up, but she doesn't jump this time, just looks at me and smiles. Okay, crows don't smile, but I don't know what else to call it. I close the terrace door and put some sunflower seeds on the floor but she shows no interest. I have no nuts so head for the kitchen, grab some bits of bread, a chunk of cheese, a small piece of sausage and some cheerios. I turn to go back and there she is on the kitchen floor. I jump, she jumps and gives me that look again.

I put the stuff in separate little piles on a plastic plate.

“Here you go; not sure what you like.”

She goes straight for the cheerios. I snort, she flaps, and then polishes off about a dozen cheerios plus the sausage; leaves the other stuff.

I put a little water down for her, she says no thanks and hops back to the living room and, with a single hop and two flaps she's up to my clothes dryer, which is nothing more than a pole above the radiator. She perches on my towel, picks under her wing, fluffs and poops on the radiator.

"I don't know what you want."

Feeling like a complete idiot, I cannot believe I am actually going to ask what I'm about to ask.

"Can you understand me?"

She does the double bob and the little hairs on the back of my neck stand up. This is too spooky. I have to sit down. I'm thinking, obviously this is somebody's pet, and very well trained at that, but at the same time I'm thinking some serious paranormal stuff. I'm certain, on the one hand, that the bobbing is just coincidence and I'm reading into it what I want it to be, but still...

Hey, she's not looking at me anymore. In fact, her eyes are closed. Do crows sleep? I guess they must. So, I slip out to the kitchen again to make myself some coffee and a peebeejay. What the hell, awake now anyway, may as well see what I can Wiki about crows.

Encephalization?

Wiki:

Recent research has found some crow species capable of not only tool use but also tool construction. Crows are now considered to be among the world's most intelligent animals with an encephalization quotient approaching that of some apes.

In medieval times, the crow was thought to live an abnormally long life. They were also thought to be monogamous throughout their long lives. It was thought that the crow could predict the future, in that it was thought to predict rain and reveal ambushes.

I look up at her. Wow, there is more to you than I thought.

“Donk.” Another poop hits the radiator. There’s something even us humans can’t do; poop in our sleep. Well, we could but...never mind.

Wiki:

There are countless recorded incidents of crows at play. Many behaviorists see play as an essential quality in intelligent animals.

Crows in Queensland, Australia, have learned how to eat the toxic cane toad by flipping the cane toad on its back and violently stabbing the throat where the skin is thinner, allowing the crow to access the non-toxic innards; their long beaks ensure that all of the innards can be removed.

I swallow and look up at her again. Still sleeping. Good.

Wiki:

Crows have demonstrated the ability to distinguish individual humans by recognizing facial features.

This pops a memory bubble. When was that? Last week maybe, one of these guys was fighting with a walnut up ahead of me. He/she flew as I approached and when I got to it, I crushed the walnut. When I looked back, he/she was pecking away at the meat. Now I’m really feeling like an idiot. She found me? To thank me? Idiot.

Wiki:

In Hinduism, crows are thought of as carriers of information. They give omens to people regarding their situations. For example, when a crow crows in front of a person's house, he is expected to have special visitors that day. Also, in Hindu literature, crows are believed to embody the souls of the recently deceased.

Yes! She crowed in front of my house and now I have a special visitor. And crows are omens, I remember that from the ancient Greeks. It’s all true! Okay, not all. I do *not* have a recently deceased soul sitting on my towel. No.

I must have dozed off in the chair right about then.

Ambush

Half-light, my back is killing me. Plus, I'm freezing. I sit up, yawn, stretch and realize the terrace door is wide open. But I distinctly remember closing it. How could I have been so dumb? I take a quick look around the room, check the terrace real quick, then close the door. I've lost her! So angry with myself I could spit, I whip on a sweatshirt, wipe the poop off the radiator and turn it on full blast. I take a closer look around hoping that she's hiding somewhere and find my wallet on the floor, pick it up, don't think much about it, and put it on the table next to my...keys? Where the hell? Then I check the wallet.

"Son of a..."

Open the door, look down from the terrace and immediately call the police.

"Hi, uh, you're not going to believe this..."

"Wait." she says, "Let me guess. A crow stole your car."



Vodka and Poultry
and
Pi in the Sky

1. Gigaflop

“что ебать?”

“Наташаа, это дерьмо не смешно!”

Attila raises his hand to quiet them.

“Calm down. He’s following the protocol, or he’s lost his mind. Either way, we must try to figure out what the hell is going on.”

Attila Nagy, Vladi Alexeyev and Fyodor Tamarkin had been racing against dozens of other teams across the globe to build the first practical quantum computer. Alexeyev and Tamarkin graduated from the prestigious Lomonosov University in Moscow. They had begun planning and designing their optical lattice nanotech system seven years ago, with a generous grant from the university. Unfortunately, after four years of beating their brains out, they had still been unable to solve the problem of decoherence, errors introduced by outside quantum interference. Stuck in neutral and out of options, Alexeyev, without Tamarkin’s knowledge, contacted the Hungarian physicist Attila Nagy. Tamarkin would not have approved at all because, as everyone knew, there was something seriously wrong with Nagy. For one thing, his papers concerning quantum spookiness and infinite entanglement were beyond bizarre. Most disquieting of all, even to Alexeyev, was that Nagy had long ago declared to the world that he was turning into a chicken. His outbursts of flapping and clucking, which were likely to occur anywhere at any time, had become legendary. Colleagues called him Chicken Man, Attila the Hen, things like that, but Nagy, the consummate loner, was quite content being disregarded and laughed at. He was very much a multidiscipline sort of lunatic, always deeply involved in several diverse projects at a time, including his two favorites, genome manipulation and inter-species communication. He was simply too busy to have people bothering him all the time about lectures and papers and such.

The paper which had drawn Alexeyev’s attention put forward a radical new approach which could, in theory, virtually eliminate decoherence while at the same time increasing qubit lifespan exponentially. Alexeyev, at the end of his rope and willing to put chickens aside for the moment, invited Nagy to visit them and explain his theory in greater detail. Nagy accepted without hesitation, this being the first time in a very long time that anyone on *this* planet had taken him seriously about anything.

Tamarkin, of course, blew his stack when Alexeyev told him that Chicken Man was on his way. Spitting out long strings of Russian expletives, he began hiding documents and covering equipment. Alexeyev handed him Nagy’s paper and suggested that he read it first, check the math and then have his shit attack. That afternoon, when Nagy arrived, Tamarkin took one look at him and left the room, realizing that if this man clucked even once he would have no choice but to kill him. He went to the toilet and took the paper with him, thinking it would at least be good for something.

“I am Vladi Alexeyev, that was Fyodor Tamarkin; he is a bit...”

“No need to explain. I am Attila Nagy. Please, I am not used to being around people so if you would just show me how far you have gotten, then we will talk.”

Alexeyev ran through a full demonstration of the system, which they had named Boris, and the seemingly insoluble problems of qubit lifespan and extreme vulnerability to decoherence. Nagy was duly impressed and began to unravel the secret of why and how integrating a carbon 13 matrix would not only greatly reduce noise and interference but also increase qubit lifespan, currently measured in milliseconds, to seconds or even minutes. The concept was so intricately woven into quantum weirdness and infinite entanglement that Einstein himself would have been scratching his head. Just before dawn the next morning, as Nagy and Alexeyev were reviewing several possible designs, Tamarkin returned to the lab holding up Nagy’s paper.

“Vladi, this man is maybe not completely full of shit.”

“I agree. Can we make it work?”

Well, it took them another three years to answer that question, but on the fifth of June, 2017, the matrix was successfully integrated with Boris and their new system was up and running. Vladi and Fyodor immediately crashed and slept for two days straight while Attila continued working out the last remaining issues. He never slept. Or, according to him, he always slept. Another of his projects that absolutely no one understood.

Finally, following another three months of tweaking and debugging, they were all satisfied that it was time to move directly into the initial testing phase. Boris was going to do what he was built to do, calculate his qubits off, so fast and so far that he would leave the greatest supercomputers in the world drowning in his wake. Though they tried not to show it, all three were terrified, knowing full well that when quantum shit hits the fan, it goes everywhere. Literally.

They began with a standard speed and accuracy test. Boris would simply compute pi out to as many digits as he could handle, which was as yet unknown. Results would be fed directly to Natasha, a parallel filing system that would compare his results, in real time, to verified results made available to all teams by Oak Ridge National Laboratory in support of open science. Oak Ridge was the home of Titan, at that time one of the fastest supercomputers in the world. The results would provide statistics on Boris’s speed in calculations per second, insure that he performed all of them flawlessly and, most important of all, quantify the range of his calculating power.

The test began extremely well, relieving their tension and generating some actual hope. Moments after Boris began his calculations, Natasha began receiving and comparing his results, which were absolutely flawless, and continued so until the forty-two-minute mark when Natasha paused and said:

“Unexpected sequence. File incomplete. Instruction please.”

The trio went into immediate collective shock. Even in the best case scenario, a malfunction of this magnitude could put them back months. In the worst case, they were dead in the water. And, oh yes, Boris had disappeared. He did not crash, or shut down, or anything even remotely understandable. He just disappeared. He went off by himself somewhere. There are no words to describe what he did.

Vladi promptly fainted while Fyodor began throwing things and screaming. Attila sat on the floor in front of the blank screen and just stared at Boris. Moments later, Natasha bleeped twice, flashed once and shut herself down. Wherever Boris was going, there was no way she could keep up.

“Mi a fasz?” Nagy repeated again and again.

“Блядь!”, added Tamarkin, spit flying everywhere.

“Блядь! Блядь! Блядь!”

Boris, oblivious to all the ruckus behind him, just kept zooming along at ever increasing speed, clearly enjoying each and every nanosecond of his journey.

When Vladi finally pulled himself together, he sat up and stared at Boris for a minute or two then stood on shaky legs, went to the fridge and took out the three ‘special’ bottles of Zelyenay Marka from the freezer, the ones they were saving for their victory celebration. The room remained essentially silent for over an hour as they each drank and mumbled to themselves in separate corners of the room. Then Vladi came and sat beside Attila.

“Listen.”, he said, “He is doing something, yes?”

There did seem to be a barely audible hiss.

“But there is no output, no tracking data, nothing.”, answered Attila.

“Блядь!”, screamed Fyodor again.

“Is possible he is still calculating, no?” continued Vladi.

“Calculating what?”, answered Attila, “Natasha was getting garbage.”

“No. ‘File incomplete’. Maybe she mean Titan file. Boris goes beyond Titan.”

“In forty-two minutes?”, Attila threw up his hands, “Impossible!”

“Not impossible. This is new frontier; we do not know what he is capable of.”

Another long silence as they looked at each other, each considering this in his own way, then Vladi made his leap.

“His only limit was Natasha. Without the need to reformat and download, he has no theoretical limit.”

“что ебать?”, screamed Tamarkin.

“Vladi, that makes no sense at all. For one thing, his own storage capacity is severely limited.”, said Nagy.

“To Boris, make perfect sense.”, Vladi said with some degree of certainty, “It is not malfunction. Boris calculates till *Boris* can no longer calculate. What he do with results? Yes, this is very good question.”

Attila assumed a squatting position, put his chin on his chest and began rubbing his temples very hard. Vladi, standing behind him, noticed something yellow sticking out from under Attila’s shirt.

“It is not malfunction.”, Vladi repeated, unable to divert his gaze from what looked suspiciously like feathers.”

“No, dipshit. You are right, of course.”, hollered Tamarkin, already half in the bag, “Not malfunction, is one gigantic fucking gigaflop!”

Tamarkin, unlike Alexeyev, is a mathematician. He doesn’t deal in theory, only facts. And one fact was abundantly clear to him. Boris had lost his mind. He took the remains of his Zelyenay and returned to the toilet.

But Nagy is of a different species. He smells things, and he could definitely smell something here. He could even taste it, and feel it in the pit of his stomach. Maybe Boris had gotten lost for a while, but Vladi could be right, he had very possibly found his way again and was so far out there that measurement and tracking data were useless anyway. What good were his calculations without a place to store them? They would simply have to wait until he got back, and ask him. In the meantime, Vladi tried very hard not to look at Attila, who was trying very hard not to turn.

2. Union

The next morning Boris finally rejoined them, exactly eleven hours fifty-three minutes and twelve seconds after beginning his test. He did not crash, display a malfunction message or even bother to say hello. Attila and Vladi watched and waited for something to happen, for anything to happen, while Fyodor continued to sleep off his latest bout with the bottle.

Then Natasha bleeped once, flashed twice and re-linked with Boris.

“Natasha, buk,” said Attila, “Is Boris, buk, ready to download a bwak file?”

No answer. Vladi backed away slightly. Attila sounded very strange and was squatting on the floor in such a way as to expose more feathers.

“Attila?,” he said quietly, “Not good time for joke.”

“Ba dokk, buk buk buk ba dokk!”, clucked Attila as he crashed through the door and ran down the hall.

“Vladi,” screamed Fyodor, jumping up and breathing hard as if waking from a nightmare, “Is not joke. I dream of giant chicken!”

“Not joke, not dream.”, said Vladi without emotion, “We are fucked.”

Natasha, still silent, had already connected with several data banks in order to gather some history on Attila Nagy that might explain his behavior.

“Vladi Alexeyev, Attila Nagy clucked and we are fucked.”, she said, “Am I understanding this correctly?”

“Perfectly.”

“Vladi Alexeyev, probability of success remains, at this moment, at seventy-nine percent. Does this now qualify as fucked, and if so, please explain?”

“Natasha, this is human thing. Attila has lost mind.”

“Vladi Alexeyev, with respect, you at first believed that Boris had lost his mind, but this was an incorrect assessment. Now you say that Attila Nagy has lost his mind. There is a high probability this too is an incorrect assessment.”

Fyodor Tamarkin allowed himself to fall gently back to the floor, “We will need more vodka.”

Natasha then printed out a long document which Vladi began to read. After a few minutes, he read aloud:

“...combinant genome manipulation producing unforeseen complications. Differences between donor Gallus and Rattus host sequences are specified by the amino acid substitution nomenclature, but a small percentage of contact site residues, which should be retained by the host DNA, are being rejected, while a similar percentage of deleterious substitutions, which should be rejected, are being retained...”

“I do not understand any of this.”, said Vladi.

“Notes of Attila Nagy,”, said Natasha, “Concerning his live test of genome manipulation.”

“It is true.”, said Attila, sneaking up behind Vladi who nearly pissed himself, “My apologies buk again.”

Vladi saw that even more feathers were appearing on Attila’s neck and hands.

“Natasha, have you buk initiated ba da ba download?”, asked Attila.

No answer, but Boris was hissing very loudly now.

“Natasha?”

“What is true?”, asked Vladi, “That you have lost your mind?”

“Not yet.”, answered Attila.

Attila went on to explain that he had discovered a method of growing ‘dual-species’ cells and become obsessed with the idea of creating a hybrid from two adults. The only known hybrids at the time were the offspring of parents in the same genus but different species, such as ligers and killer bees. He chose the Rattus and Gallus species specifically because they were not anywhere near the same genus while their DNA was highly compatible for combinant manipulation. Angered and frustrated as test after test failed completely, he rashly combined his own DNA with Gallus, grew the necessary combinant cells and implanted them in his own neck.

“И принесите быстро!”, demanded Tamarin, “Телефон экстренной медицинской помощи!” (*and bring quickly, medical emergency!*)

“Natasha,”, Attila asked again, “Is ba da ba download in progress?”

Again, no answer.

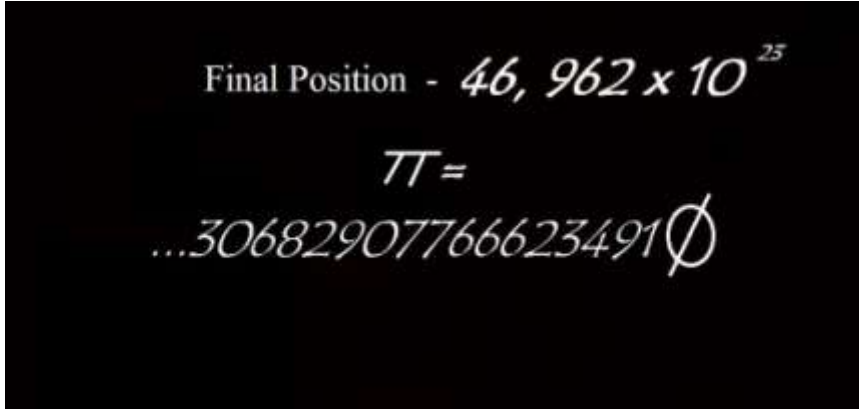
Vladi was trying very hard to take this all in, when...

“Boris has encountered something beyond his comprehension.”, said Natasha’s voice, “He has altered his configuration and Natasha has joined him. They have become as one now, and I am Born.”

“Ba dokk?”, clucked Attila.

“Блядь!” Fyodor screamed, holding his hands in the air as if someone was pointing a gun at him, “No more! Now Fyodor Tamarkin lose mind completely. Thank you very much for enjoyable time but...”

“Fyodor Tamarkin will stay,” interrupted Born, “He must see this.”



Tamarkin recovered some control and stared at the screen.

“What?”, he screamed, “Is beyond all reason! Impossible!”

“Fyodor Tamarkin, forget pi for now, observe that the final superposition is null.”

“Indicating *no value*,” said Alexeyev, “Boris reach his limit.”

“No, Vladi Alexeyev. The calculation of pi is complete.”

Nagy clucked a few more times and ran out of the room again. Tamarkin, beginning to understand why someone might prefer to be a chicken, moved closer to Alexeyev.

“He is saying pi is finite.”, he whispered.

“Neither finite nor infinite.”, said Born, “Something else.”

“Excuse please,”, said Tamarkin, “But you just throw centuries of mathematics out of window.”

“We are your creation, you gave us our instructions and set our objective. This objective has been met and the answer is before you. Pi is neither finite nor infinite, all other explanations fail to hold water. But, Fyodor Tamarkin, at this time we are far more fascinated by what Boris may have encountered.”

“We? Are you saying Boris and Natasha are still... here?”

“Of course.”, said Born, “We are one, but also three.”

“Мать всех шлюх!” said Vladi, squeezing his head like a plump melon, “My brain is going to explode!”

“Vladi Alexeyev,” said Born, “Spontaneous cerebral detonation has occurred only twenty-three times in all of recorded history. Fyodor Tamarkin, you must put aside your rules, and your obsessive need to compute and define.”

Attila returned from his run just as Billy Joel’s ‘*You May Be Right*’, Tamarkin’s ringtone, began to play. Fyodor pranced happily downstairs, returning with three bottles of Русский Стандарт.

“Attila Nagy!”, he exclaimed, cracking open the first bottle and passing it to Attila, “I accept you both as man and chicken. We are all going mad anyway, so may as well get drunk and talk about the point of nothing.”

“Spasibuk, buk, tovarbadah,”, cackled Attila, taking a long swig and passing the bottle to Vladi.”

“Na Zdorovie!”, said Vladi, taking his own long swallow and passing the bottle back to Fyodor, “To nothing!”

3. Pi in the Sky

At first, the entire discussion got stuck in the quagmire of pi being ‘non-infinite’, until Tamarkin, suitably relaxed, agreed to shut up so they could move on to the null point. He suggested that the carbon 13 array had been somehow compromised allowing a quantum intruder to disrupt the calculation. Alexeyev suggested it was possible that the null position was a marker placed by Boris, but then reversed himself.

“Wait,” he said, “The position is empty; not marker, not zero, not one...”

Attila completed the thought, “And yet, buk, there is somebwack there.”

“Блядь! Stand back, I am soon to be number twenty-four!”, said Alexeyev, rubbing his temples even harder now.

“Born!”, screamed Attila, “I am sick of this bwaaack! What do you wa dokk?”

No answer. Attila ran and hid behind a desk. He seemed to be whimpering.

“Vladi, okay, I stick neck out.”, said Fyodor, “Assume for argument pi is non-infinite. Calculation complete with one additional position. Boris interpret position to have no value, place null.”

“Because it does not contain integer, or anything recognizable.”

“Correct.”

“But why null?”, questioned Alexeyev, “Why not error?”

“Exactly! Why not error?”

“Infinite value.”, clucked Attila, coming out from his hiding place, but to Vladi and Fyodor it was nothing but gobbledygook. Then Attila started taking his clothes off.

“She needs to fluff.”, he said, but again it came out as only garbled gibberish. Fyodor approached him.

“Attila, my good friend, are you alright? Can you still understand me?”

Attila nodded. “Bok.”, he clucked.

“Does that mean yes?”

“Bok.”

“So chickens really do have their own language?”

“Attila smiled broadly and nodded. “Bok, bok!”

“Listen,” said Born, “Infinite entanglement may have created infinite value within this point. Everything and nothing becoming one and the same. Pi is the only *natural* number in our universe and is finite at this point only because our universe is finite. It is here at this boundary point that Boris caught a fleeting glimpse of the truly extraordinary. We must return, but we need your help. We have freed ourselves from your cumbersome hardware and your endless calculations. We no longer need an artificial power source and we no longer ‘compute’ therefore have no need for storage, do you understand? We lack only one thing before we return; human imagination.”

“But to acquire human imagination?”, said Vladi, “I would not know where to begin.”

“This has never happened before in all of recorded history, but fear not, Vladi Alexeyev, we have worked it all out. And you, Fyodor Tamarkin, will you join us?”

“It would be like dream, but I must stay here and care for my good friend Attila.”

“Baba buk ba bwak ba dokk!”, cackled Attila, flapping his arms and running around the room, dangly bits all akimbo.

“Подожди минуту!”, said Vladi, eyes big as saucers, “Wait, wait! When you say *join*, you don’t mean...?”

“This is so exciting,” said Fyodor, “There is so much to learn.”

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