TRAVESS SMALLEY

23 APRIL 2015 TO 30 MAY 2015

Bloom
by Travess Smalley

He looked over at his plant and the small glowing light at the base of its pot told him data was being transferred and copied within the microscopic DNA lattices that made up its small red flower. No one really talked anymore about how strange Bloom was. Not even his friends around his same age and older, who had all grown up with old-fashioned disc and chip-based data storage. The transition had been gradual. Bit by bit, people had begun outsourcing their unmanageable, ever-growing terabytes of data to corporations, to be stored in remote server farms in the far north. Out of sight and out of mind. Cloud storage advertising campaigns soothed away worries of data loss and promoted an attractive lifestyle of simplicity and minimalism.

Controlling and storing your own data became a hobbyist pursuit, like collecting records or using film. He was one of those hobbyists. People like him bid against each other online for rare hard drives, screens, and keyboards long out of production. Winning a vintage computer part in good condition sent him into paroxysms of relief and joy, and the results littered his apartment. But it wasn't just a fetish for the equipment. There was no other choice if you wanted to continue physically possessing your own data.

And then, without much notice, came bio storage.

It had begun with some briefs about data stored in vials of unspecified grey biomatter, and from there blossomed to data-storage pet mice and bonsai and of course, most popularly, flowers. Bloom was the leading brand. Orchids, geraniums, begonias, Christmas cactus. Bloom came in a dozen death-free varieties, and grew with its user. Each leaf carried backups of backups of information, and over the course of one's life a unique and radiant flower emerged, one nourished by the data it was fed.

He looked away from his Bloom and back towards his pixel-pocked screen, recognizing the old interface. This is what he did when he couldn't sleep. Three columns across the top half of the window read *Genres*, *Artists*, and *Albums*. Among the four hundred genres, he picked "Spiritual." It contained only three songs. "I Want To Thank You" by Alicia Myers and two chants from Alice Coltrane. Carefully balancing the broken keyboard, he held his breath and pressed a combination of buttons. "Rama Rama" began. As the sitar set in, masking the stutter of the failing hard drive, his eyes closed and he remembered the light filtering through the plants and on to clean sheets from an apartment he'd long since left. He could smell the coffee and see the orange afternoon light falling on his old bedroom.

The integrated music apps popular now had at least ten thousand songs tagged spiritual, with subsections of southern gospel, jazz, and chanting. He was familiar with these mass networked databases, but his music library was different. His was personal. It stored songs and sound files he had downloaded, or been gifted, or transferred from old CDs and records. He enjoyed the compression of his versions, the soft echoes in the treble. Listening closely to the backing chants in Alice Coltrane's "Er Ra" he could hear the phasing of the voices, an effect that made them sound underwater. The ghostly aquatic artifacting was a treasure. A subtle difference that he relished.

Returning to the awkward touchpad device, he navigated back to a playlist he'd made some thirty years earlier. A few of the songs were clearly labeled while others had decayed into an

indecipherable jumble of unicode characters. Clicking on the first line — **NOV20_001001_BACKUP_MP3FOLDER_UNTITLED** — he recognized the tune almost immediately. Opus III's "Evolution Rush"… the arpeggio chords built slowly, hissing through the speakers and filling the smooth white dome of his apartment. As he input the correct artist information, song title, genre, and year for the track, his Bloom swayed slightly on the windowsill. The vocals came in, and the singer's trills tugged him back to his youth in the city many years before. Humid sweat and smoke dance parties in long-vanished lofts, and dawn walks home across the steel bridge, when being up that late was something exhilarating and new… an alien feeling now, but pleasant to recall…

He was jerked out of the hazy memory when the song abruptly stopped. A moment later the whole program crashed, bringing the ramshackle emulated operating system down with it.

"Shit!"

Data deterioration. It was inescapable and numbing, an every day fact of aging. But unlike wrinkles and synapse depletion, no one seemed to be focused on eliminating it. He'd had his traumatic information losses over the past forty years, like everyone else. Hard drives and storage devices packed with photos, songs, and programs had become corrupted and restored, backed up and transferred to newer devices more times than he could count. With each migration the data chipped away byte by corroding byte. The result was a fragmented trail of corrupted data extending all the way back to his childhood. Cloud computing was supposed to offer a solution, but the horror stories of millions of terabytes of data inexplicably wiped yearly belied the utopia the companies promised, and he knew enough not to trust it.

His oldest data, and one of his earliest memories of his digital self, was the first website he ever built. He'd done it for a computer class assignment in middle school. Every few years since, he'd visited it, as if stopping by a house he used to live in to see what the new residents might have changed. But the website never

improved. Like an abandoned building, it only decayed. All that was left of the original website was a neon blue background with small blinking stars and incomplete data tables of empty image containers that were now only expired links. Attempting to parse the fragments had the beauty and poetics of deciphering Sappho.

The dance music playlist had ended and a softer comedown mix had begun. Shuggie Otis' "Inspiration Information" from 1974. After checking to see what song was next, he returned to the nested folders of backup data from dozens of personal devices that had once held fragments of his life. Each backup had been stored and migrated repeatedly to newer and newer storage devices, but now he had no software that could interpret his ancient, and most definitely corrupt, backups. In a moment of despair, he'd paid a technician to retrieve his unreachable photos, but all the tech had been able to rescue was a series of images no bigger than thumbnails. Enlarging and sharpening the photos was futile; the computer could only guess what was hidden in the pixelated blocks of color. The image processor's enhancements were just as vague as his own memory of the photos taken. The computer's results were soft and blurry, and spoke more to an amnesiac attempt at remembering than an actual scene. The reconstructed images showed granulated versions of long-ago outings to the park, pictures of his lover sleeping in bed, photos of himself in the bathroom mirror smoothed out and strangely anonymous. He had to make up the detail that has been lost and try to call into being an original fidelity.

Failed attempt after failed attempt at perfectly fixing the image led him to accept that these memories would only ever be 150 pixels wide.

As he looked at his Bloom sitting peacefully on the windowsill, he contemplated the sheer volume of information he possessed and the impossibility of ever visualizing it all. How do you sort through millions of photos or emails? No wonder there were so few people that bothered to maintain their own data. With hardly a murmur, millions had surrendered themselves to the corporate server

farms, vast unexamined warehouses of user data. His generation was a network of minds with little control of their own memories. If memory is identity, each person's identity was becoming a set of alterable files. What was left was a society of people living in a fractured present, with data only accessible in corporate controlled fragments.

He reached for his pen and began to draw his Bloom. Transferring the image from his eye to his hand, he followed the contours of the stem with no gestures toward filling in the form. The bloom was contained in only three lines. There were leaves missing and the pot was not drawn at all, but the drawing still felt complete.

FOXY PRODUCTION