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Such Technologies, Such Wonders

Entry from *The Glossary of Technological Terms*:

Personal Information Device (P.I.D.): Invented by World Corp. in 2304. The P.I.D. is an internal computer that connects to the brain and spinal cord. The P.I.D. simultaneously delivers images and information to the brain while automating body movement. Use: communication and entertainment device capable of: increasing worker productivity; increasing consumer base for products; streamlining communication between consumer and producer; streamlining communication between citizens.

Entry from *The Green Dictionary*:

mindshow (n): A slang term used to describe the entertainment provided by the P.I.D. Interactive programming allows the user to directly engage with P.I.D. provided content.

(Syn.) TranceState.

Excerpt from Dr. Percy's Journal:

Ah! Such technologies abound. The glory of the City and the P.I.D.! I have visited the Pyramids! I have watched the full moon rise over their peaks! It is something to behold. A new era has begun. It began when I became a part of the systems. It began when I became a citizen. I have discovered the secret; give in to the flow. It is calling me now. I must go back. I must feel the connection again. I need not write in this journal any longer. That era is finished. Off to see the world!

There is a City and there is Town. I live in the City, but I am from the Town. Beyond the Town is the Ocean. My name is Derrick.

In the City, invisible strings connect us. There is nothing we do not know. Computers lodged in our ears bind us. Our thoughts control what we see. What we see controls our thoughts. The presentation is wonderful. The graphics outstanding. There is little need for talking. Our relationships are mirages. Everything is possible, says the P.I.D.

Citizens never war. We work and play between the double-sided veils of the P.I.D. We move about the City automatically. We should never be disconnected from the P.I.D., we are told. We never pull aside the veil. The P.I.D. makes us feel warm. It is always present. We are important. People like us, says the P.I.D. Our lives are good, says the P.I.D. We are appreciated, says the P.I.D. And it feels so good to be addressed. It feels so good to have access. It feels so good to be notified.

I came to the City from the Town. My parents brought me here. The Politkins came

to us from the City in dark suits. They promised it would be better. The P.I.D. is the final move, they said. You'll be at the center of it all, they said. You won't have to work, they said. The wise retreated into their homes when the Politkins arrived. They had seen the smogcloud and the City's jagged skyline. They had seen the buildings sprouting higher and faster. A new building every day, some estimated. The City was coming, they said. Soon everything will be City, they warned.

On an especially bright night I saw a citywoman walking through the woods, her eyes black like a well and the telltale hum of a P.I.D. in her ear. She had gotten lost. A defective P.I.D., the Politkins asserted. They patched the defect.

The City was getting closer. My parents ignored me. No use fighting progress, they said. The City would be ours, they said. So we moved.

Excerpt from Dr. Percy's Journal:

I have been deceived. We all have been deceived. I came out of the TranceState and found my mother dead. It appears she starved to death. She had forgotten to eat. I have been disconnected for seven days and each morning brings new horrors.

I had my P.I.D. removed. Dr. Percy dug it out with a pair of surgical pliers. It had been two years since we moved to the City.

My parents sat on the couch, amused. They loved each other very much. They had been holding hands for weeks. My mother had bedsores so bad the couch was stained in her blood and puss. She wouldn't move. My father hadn't noticed.

I felt like everything was dead. I missed the companionship of the P.I.D. Dr. Percy told me to expect that. But I couldn't look at my parents. When I saw them with unveiled eyes I knew the truth; they were breathing corpses traveling in an electronic grid. They sat on the couch slack-jawed, consumed in themselves by a parade of zeroes and ones. My father's eyes caved. He was watching a program about exotic flo-gliders. I could tell because his feet would jolt as if he was shifting gears. His P.I.D. was humming in his ear. He thought he was on a racetrack in Sudan. He saw it all, a pretty picture in his mind.

When I tied the bed sheet around his neck, he didn't move. When I tightened it and pulled, he struggled. I pulled tighter. He gasped. My mother didn't notice her husband being strangled. She was watching a political debate between two men wearing top hats and bathing suits. She smiled. She enjoyed the mindshow. I held on to both ends of the sheet until my father was dead. Then I put the sheet around my mother's neck and pulled. She died more quickly. I left them sitting on the couch looking better than they had before. They didn't look so stupid.

Excerpt from Dr. Percy's Journal:

At the center of the world is the City—a terminal of connectivity. It is rapidly spreading outward. The Town will be consumed. It will disappear underneath thousands of miles of pavement, steel, concrete, glass, and raging gears. I imagine pairs of tiny feet stepping into an intersection and crossing a street where a river used to be. The Town will become a P.I.D. headquarters: new antennae, new broadcasting stations. A launch pad built in the meadow. Satellite Rockets go up every day now.

I didn't think about my parents. I went for a walk. I wanted to get back to Town. I stepped out of our building and entered a human mass that gathered speed, stopped, and churned, propelled forward by the collective P.I.D. Flo-gliders rumbled in the street, and we marched on wide sidewalks beneath concrete CityScrapers that rose above a heavy blanket of smogcloud that covered the City. I attached myself to this flow.

I was on the street, and I walked within the masses. We were like soldiers in forgotten armies, branching off violently and disappearing into dark doorways, pulled by invisible twine into shops and markets to make purchases, yanked into houses of whores to copulate, slammed into Subtracts to travel, flattened into hotels to sleep, torn from our thoughts to be entertained.

I stepped to the pace of this undulating current and felt the accumulation of energy: electronic hums, blood-filled heartbeats, blank faces, blank eyes. They all marched, and I marched, too. I didn't have a choice. I'd be trampled if I fell. I missed the P.I.D. I wanted it back.

I felt like everything was dead. I had the urge to buy something. I thought about masturbating. I envisioned suicide. I thought about my father sitting slumped on the couch. A girl marched next to me. I thought about what she might look like naked. I wanted to throw her down and rip open her gray blouse. I thought about what to eat for lunch. I thought about red wine and a pill mill. I thought about repetition. I saw gray—everywhere was gray and the City swelled like a wave, stopped and churned, stopped and churned. I felt it would never stop.

Excerpt from Dr. Percy's Personal Journal:

I freed another today. A sixteen-year-old boy named Derrick. He looked so scared when he approached me. I was sitting in a cafeteria and he said, quite plainly, I'd like to kill you.

I could hear his P.I.D. humming. He was frightened. It can be quite unsettling to realize you're not in Italy or Australia or an African Safari and in the middle of a drab cafeteria in a pollution-soaked City.

Your eyes are different—mine are too—your eyes are like mine, he told me. Do you want to kill things? he asked. Against my better judgment, I removed his P.I.D.. I told him to go to the Town. I told him the Town will be his only comfort. I told him I wanted to kill myself. He nodded in approval.

There are more and more coming out of the TranceState. Violence seems to be a natural reaction to P.I.D. withdrawal. Having a P.I.D. removed is like awakening in hell. You couldn't blame the boy for killing. His victims would most likely thank him. It's all heaven above the smog.

I got on the Subtract. It ran beneath the City and could take you out of the City. I had to get out of the City. I had to go to Town. I thought about suicide again. I had the urge to buy something, I thought about taking my clothes off and running in front of a flo-glider. I had to get out of the City.

I sat in the silver speed tube, and we flew through miles of underground track. I sat on a metal bench between two men in business suits. Our knees were touching, but they didn't notice. They stared into their palms. They were transfixed. Their P.I.D.s were feeding them the wonders of information. The man on my right was particularly enthused. A globule of drool fell from his mouth and landed in his lap.

Across from me a little girl pulled on her mother's skirt. She didn't have a P.I.D. Six-year-olds had them now. She was probably five. She looked at me. I nodded. She seemed to understand. She looked back at her mother and then at me again. Her hair was cropped short. She looked as if she had been playing outside. Her knees were scraped, and her white dress had dark asphalt smudges on the front.

She said her name was Ramona. I told her mine.

Derrick is a stupid name, she said.

Yeah, I know, I answered.

I looked to see if anyone noticed we were talking. It would be peculiar to talk to someone on the Subtract.

Do you want to see me do a cartwheel? she asked.

Yes, I'd really love that.

She did it, a little half cartwheel. I wondered where she learned how.

Ramona tugged on her mother's skirt. She wanted her to watch. Ramona looked at me again, and I motioned for her to do it. She did another cartwheel. I clapped. No one looked. The mother was in the TranceState. Her eyes caved into her head. So the girl tugged a little harder on her skirt. She kicked at her mother's shins. Her mother's eyes were still and black. Ramona got down on her knees and bit her mother's calves. I watched her do it. The mother seemed to be enjoying the mindshow. She had a queer-looking smile on her face. The girl bit harder, a greedy bite of disgust.

The mother woke up; her eyes focused. She kicked out a leg. The toe of her boot caught the little girl in the mouth. The child bled and cried. A tooth was knocked out. I saw the blood pooling on the floor. The mother looked at her calves. There were red teeth marks. The child cried. I watched. I wanted Ramona to stop crying. The mother did too. She reached into a pocket and pulled out a candypiece. She tried to put it in the girl's mouth. Ramona bit her finger. The mother got angry and forced open Ramona's mouth by squeezing her lower jaw. The mother forced the candypiece down her daughter's throat.

Ramona was much quieter after that. She sat next to her mother with her mouth open, looking at something that wasn't there. The front of her dress was covered in blood. The Subtract was filled, but no one looked at the pool of blood in the middle of the aisle. It congealed.

The Subtract hissed and stopped. Ramona's mother picked her up. No one looked at her. A man chuckled to himself and stepped in the blood puddle. The girl's arm hung limply from her side. It struck the Subtract doorway as her mother hauled her off the train. Everything was dead. I picked up her tooth and put it in my pocket.

Excerpt from Dr. Percy's Journal:

The connectivity of the P.I.D. cannot be stopped. More people are dying violently. I saw someone throw themselves in front of a Subtract yesterday. A week ago I saw a man buy a muffin and then shoot himself in the mouth. The City is filled with mindlessness. It is getting worse. I will save some. I will try. The P.I.D.s must be removed. The P.I.D.'s power is very strong. Not many of us can recognize its faults. It looks good sometimes, even to me. I know the truth of the P.I.D., but it is becoming more difficult to resist.

I got off the Subtract. I was out of the City. I wanted to be in the center of Town. I wanted to be surrounded by things that were real. I wanted my parents to be with me. I wanted religion. I thought about church and spandex and crucifixes.

I walked up the stairs, out of the Subtract station, and into the Town.

It bustled. The streets were narrow, hedged in by shops and apartments. It looked like a small European village. It was cozy. It was early evening, and the street lamps were beginning to glow. The road sloped downward and curved. People walked on the sidewalks and spoke quietly. It breathed authenticity. It breathed perfection. I missed my parents.

A flo-glider ripped through the streets. A disposal vehicle hissed and stopped. A mindshow projector cast a pop-up advertisement above the road and shone over the street. We

all watched. The display commanded our view. It was colorful:

Young men at a bar. The sound of ice cubes clinking in glass.

"Her breasts were sexualized."

"Sexualized?"

"And I touched them."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

Sip. Sip. Sip. Ice cubes clinking in glass.

The ad disappeared, and the street was awash in lamplight. I was thirsty. Everything felt cozy again.

I walked to Zereldo's Café. It wasn't far. The café sat beneath Highway D on the corner of Old Dixie Street and Keventon Way. I wanted to see the old men smoking cigars on the patio. I had always liked watching them, and they always came. They might be able to tell me what to do.

Zereldo's was real. I was sure of it.

At Zereldo's you could barely hear the flo-gliders humming and blasting on the highway two hundred feet above you. I knew if you closed your eyes the high-pitched traffic of tandem motorcycles and modified-racers on the street disappeared too. I knew that Zereldo's was a quintessential French café: wrought iron tables on the patio, chairs with tan cushions, oak ashtrays, a large glass window with white stenciled lettering that said "Café." I knew a red and white striped awning covered the patio and a cobbled pathway cut through the red brick and led to an elegant glass entryway. Inside, pastries careened into pastries in lit display cases—cream cheese Danishes, chocolate éclairs, apple crumb cakes. The baguettes were stacked on wooden barrels, salami hung from twine, glazed hams roasted on spits, croissants were piled into baskets. I knew Zereldo's smelled like warm bread, and I liked the clink-clink of espresso spoons on the ceramic plates. Zereldo's was a sanctuary, a drop of the Parisian.

I saw three old men sitting around a table. I picked a table next to them. A young waiter approached. I ordered coffee and a Danish. I felt good. I felt at home.

The old men smoked thick cigars. They looked at the young women who walked inside. They stared at their tits. They said hello. They joked about the evening and that they were sharing it together. And they'd poke each other in the ribs after the young woman with the tits or the legs or the ass would walk inside the café. They puffed their thick cigars so the smoke hovered above their heads like steam fog on a lake. The things they might do with a woman like that. Those tits, they said. That ass. Those big thighs—they'd make steaks.

I found it strange that I thought listening to their crudeness refreshing. It was nice. It was cozy. It was clear they hadn't gotten erections in years. They laughed about that too. They were content in their celibacy. They wore it like military uniforms, their jests salutes to their shriveled cocks. That's why the women smiled at them. They understood that behind their

bawdy humor was the virginity of little boys. Those old men, they thought, I'll miss them when they're dead.

I looked at the way they prepared their coffee. They dashed a bit of cream inside the blackness of their mugs—explosions of milk clouds. They hummed old songs. They stirred with their spoons—they stirred with their metal spoons until the coffee was the color of toffee. And they sipped, they sipped—these very old men, these heroes of the café. I was mesmerized; I was disgusted.

The café wasn't right. There was one on every corner. Across the street I could see another red and white awning, another patio—more chairs with tan cushions. It had always been like this, I knew. Zereldo's was a product. I had been to France in my mind. The P.I.D. had taken me there. This wasn't French. It was different. The P.I.D. had showed me the truth. The café was playing the part of a café. The old men were playing the parts of old men. They were missing something.

I thought about the City. I missed the City. Everything was better in the City.

I heard the highway above me. The flo-gliders wailed. The waiter brought my coffee and Danish. I bit into the Danish—sawdust, I thought. I walked inside the café—a coloring book, I realized.

The hams were plastic, glazed in plastic, and had been spinning for years. The baguettes were props. The pastries were delivered frozen, shrink-wrapped and heated in giant microwaves. The smell of warm bread was pumped through vents in the ceiling. I had considered Zereldo's quaint because I didn't know that it was a representation of quaint. I knew what quaint was. The P.I.D. had shown me. The Town was a theme park.

I thought about the ocean. I thought about my dead parents. I thought about mass murder. How easy it would be. I thought about the old men and Dr. Percy. I thought about giving in. I thought about going back to the City. I thought about suicide.

I approached the old men at the table.

None of this is real, I told them.

They looked at me.

The one called Jack said this: Just out of the City, yes?

Yes. But this isn't real. The hams are plastic, I said.

Jack was a sinister looking man. He had a shock of wild gray beard that extended from his chin to the bottom of his throat.

The hams are plastic, he said. Take a seat, kid. Have another cup of coffee.

I sat down, said nothing, and watched Jack's beard move up and down.

They finished one another's sentences, recounting struggles with the toilet seat and the absurdity of their lives. There was something authentic in it. They turned to me suddenly.

Jack looked at me quizzically.

What do you want? asked Jack.

I want to kill you, I said.

When I said it, I felt good.

Jack looked at me. He smiled.

I want to kill you too, I said to Elliot. I want to kill everyone in this Town. That is exactly how I feel, like a murderer.

Kill me then, said Jack.

How would you do it? asked Elliot. He took a puff from his cigar and crossed his legs. I'd beat you to death. With my fists I'd pummel you, I said.

I'd let you, too, said Jack. But you couldn't kill me. You don't have the guts.

I killed my parents, I said. With a bed sheet. I did it, and I don't feel bad. This Town, that City, you pathetic old men, that horrible waiter, this disgusting food, this fake coffee shop, your death, my death—there's a beauty in blood, and I like to see it. I'd kill myself if I wasn't so afraid. How would you like me to do it? I'll do it, too. I'll kill myself in front of you.

I stood up and looked for something sharp.

Jack put his hand on the butter knife that sat in front of him.

You know what I like about you? said Elliot. You're dark.

I laughed. Jack and Elliot laughed.

I picked up Elliot's plate and smashed a passing waiter in the face with it. He wailed on the ground. He was bleeding badly from his cheek. Elliot and Jack rose from their seats and looked at the waiter sprawled on the ground. I picked up a glass and threw it at the waiter's head. It cracked, and the waiter stopped wailing. He bled from two places now. I looked at Jack and Elliot. They looked at the waiter on the ground. They sat down and looked around the café. No one came. Their heads were swiveling. They didn't know where to look. I kicked the waiter in the stomach. He coughed up phlegm and blood. He was choking now. Then a flo-glider zipped on the street; a pop-up advertisement glowed over the avenue; three women wearing short skirts walked into Zereldo's; Jack's and Elliot's heads turned; a waiter tripped; I sat down and signaled for another cup of coffee.

I asked Jack where the coast was.

That way, he said and pointed.

I took a sip of coffee. It tasted like scorched metal.

Excerpt from Dr. Percy's Personal Journal:

The stress of P.I.D. withdrawal is enormous. I am starting to believe that it is useless to try and wrest anyone from its grasp. The aftereffects are almost always violent. I removed a P.I.D. from a woman yesterday. She tried to kill me and promptly threw herself off my balcony. It is getting more dangerous. The Politkins visited my home. They asked me what I knew. I fooled them. But I won't be able to do it for much longer. I am destined to become a martyr, I think. The connectivity spreads. It's everywhere now. I think I will go to the Town tomorrow. But it's just as bad, I suspect. The Town will be completely overrun eventually.

I stole a bicycle. I could hear the old men laughing as I took it. I was cruising. The streets rushed by. They looked different at night. I dodged pedestrians. I pedaled fast. The road led to the ocean, and I rode. I reached the apex of a hill and coasted down. It felt good to have the wind against my face. I rode up and down the hills as shop windows rushed by: Zereldo's, Flo-glide Repair, another Zereldo's, Silky's, Vegetable Dome, Smart Shows, Naked Girls, The Flower Shop. I could recognize the little cultural props all around the Town. Every restaurant, office building, movie theatre, curb, toilet, and sewer spoke to a nostalgia that no longer existed.

Civilization began to thin, and the forest thickened. I began to hear things that sounded like animals—crickets and owls—forest noises. I could hear waves on the beach. I rode my bike towards them. It was good because I could almost forget the insanity of the City and the Town. Everything felt alive in the forest. I rode the bike harder. I wanted to throw myself in the ocean. I wanted to be covered in the water that splashed against the shore. I wanted to be clean. I saw the final hill. I felt what I remembered to be a sea breeze, and I ditched the bicycle when the path ended. I ran up the final sand dune, and the beach was before me. The moon sat low against the horizon. Its white light cast a greenish tinge over the sea that looked so strangely beautiful against the whiteness of the sand. I took off my shoes and stepped onto the sand. It felt good between my toes. I walked to the water. I dipped a toe into the surf. I shivered. It felt good. I looked into the sky. There were faintly glowing stars. At that moment, I wanted to be an astronomer.

I ran back up the sand dune and could see the City and the Town. The City lights illuminated the thick cloud of smog that surrounded it. Towers on the tops of the CityScrapers blinked red and green and blue. The Town twinkled at its base. I could see lights in the windows of country homes and quaint shops. I could see that the City was getting closer to the Town. It was hard to distinguish one from the other.

A satellite rocket burst from the City smogcloud and soared into the sky. Its booster flared red in the black sky. It looked beautiful. The rocket was prettier than the stars, prettier than the moon, prettier than anything. I watched it until it disappeared. I wanted to be on that rocket. I thought about my parents. I was glad they were dead, and I missed them. I reached into my pocket and touched Ramona's tooth. It was sharp, a baby tooth. It made me happy to have it. I remembered her.

I sat down on the sand dune and watched the stars glow above me and fell asleep. I dreamed of a P.I.D. paradise. I dreamed of Politkins. I dreamed of Zereldo's CEO. He was picking out his little girl's hair color. He'd already picked out her height. He wanted her to be tall. Very tall. He liked girls with long legs, and he smiled wickedly and counted my change.

When I woke up in the morning, I was still holding the tooth. The sun rose on the ocean. The sea glittered neon green. For a moment, I forgot about the Town and the City. For a moment I thought I saw Ramona doing cartwheels on the beach. I put the tooth in my mouth. I tasted Ramona's blood. It was salty. I thought it sweet. It was good.