

Futures

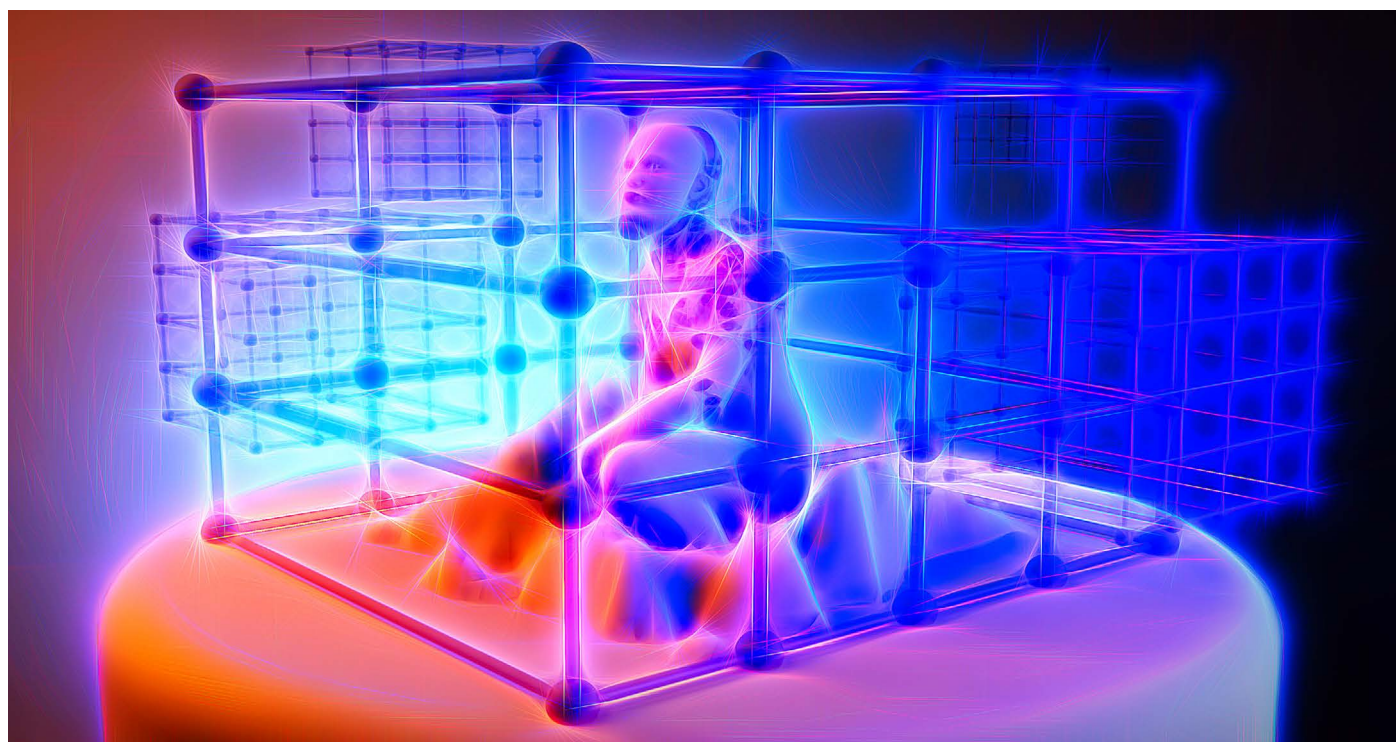


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Your guide to the ever-shrinking solitude on Planet Earth

How to be alone. By Jo Miles

All your life, people have told you what you're looking for is impossible. They've told you it no longer exists. But they're wrong, and with this guide, I'm handing you the proof.

Solitude still exists. I know, because I've found it, and if you're bold enough, you can too.

My search started at the age of six, just after I got my augment. I slipped out of my backyard one morning and kept walking, planning never to stop.

Maybe you've done this. Probably, like me, you didn't get far. I made it less than a mile: not far enough to avoid my parents' pings or the augment's nudges telling me that home was in the other direction, and would I like directions?

The doctors assured my parents that it was normal to overreact while I was still learning to process the constant flow of information

from the network, but that wasn't the problem. I wasn't running away from the network, or from home. I was running towards something. I just didn't know what.

My next attempt came in college. Escape was harder, by then: the network more pervasive, the penalties for disconnection steeper. But for the first time, I met others who shared my passion. Our classmates shunned us, calling us paranoid anti-augmenters, but it was the love of solitude, not a hatred of technology, that brought us together. We formed an odd club: introverts socializing about their wish to be alone.

It took months to arrange it: to locate a remote, closed-to-the-public stretch of Death Valley where the network didn't reach. To plan the logistics. To raise the funds under the guise of a science class outing.

But we did it. We went. In the baking desert

sun, I basked in the emptiness, free from network pings, cut off from every input except my own senses.

It was the most glorious hour of my life.

You've been told the absence of incoming thoughts and ideas is terrifying. You've been told it diminishes you to be alone, that only in our connections to outside ideas do we have value. But in that heat and emptiness, my cramped mind found room to expand. My thoughts grew to fill my own head, then stretched to fill the space beyond. In that deep, primal stillness, for the first time in my life, I found room to *be*.

It was my homecoming to a home I'd never visited before.

One hour. That's all we managed before the network drones found us and flew in to re-establish access, caging us anew with a rush of data. We got fined, and the college assigned us counselling on the civic importance of staying connected.

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Their lectures didn't stick, of course, because now I knew what I was missing. I remembered what I'd lost.

Part game, part quest, I kept seeking out sweet, illicit solitude wherever and however I could find it. Driving into the Australian outback until my car lost its map data and refused to go farther. Sneaking away from a tourist group in Antarctica. Taking a boat out to sea and sitting there in international waters, floating, alone, in violation of every nation's laws.

No matter where I went, agents found me within hours and brought me back online – for my own good, as they assured me every time.

The Law of Connectivity promised us one world, universally connected. But when we pretend the law is for our own benefit, we forget its original purpose: a universal *market*. A good citizen is a good consumer, and a good consumer is a connected consumer. It's your civic duty, they've taught you, to fuel the economy with your own neurons.

They tout other benefits, confirmed by their corporate-funded studies about how connectivity enhances social intelligence and productivity and happiness, but beneath it all is this: they can't market to you if you're not on the grid.

But the corporations won, and the virus of connectivity spread until the whole world bought in. It's shocking how much energy humanity wastes on refusing to let people be alone. Nations opt out of participating in the UN or climate accords or trade agreements, but none has opted out of the International Connectivity Accord.

None except the solitude seekers. We're opting out, each little nation of one. We're reclaiming our right to be alone.

Which brings us to my current, and probably last, attempt: camping in a Faraday cage at Lake Catatumbo, Venezuela, where the unique geological conditions cause near-constant storms, and lightning can strike up

to 280 times an hour. The authorities know I'm here, but drones will stay clear, and agents too, until the storm abates. I'm aiming for a lifetime record: 11 unbroken hours of solitude.

When they catch me this time, after such an audacious and publicized crime, they'll put me in prison for life, where there is no escaping the network. That's why I've written this account for you, and set it to upload the moment my connectivity is restored. As you read this, they'll be tracking it down, deleting it, suppressing it – but they're too late. You've seen it first.

If you too have dreamt of silence, of vast unbroken landscapes, of a sweet, beautiful solitude where you can finally exist as yourself ... if that's you, then hold on to this truth: despite what they tell you, it still exists. And it's worth fighting for.

Jo Miles is a science-fiction and fantasy writer from Maryland, and her stories have appeared in *Diabolical Plots*, *Analog* and more. You can find her online at www.jomiles.com.