

Futures

Don't worry about your data

A meeting of minds. By Sita Narayan-Dinanauth

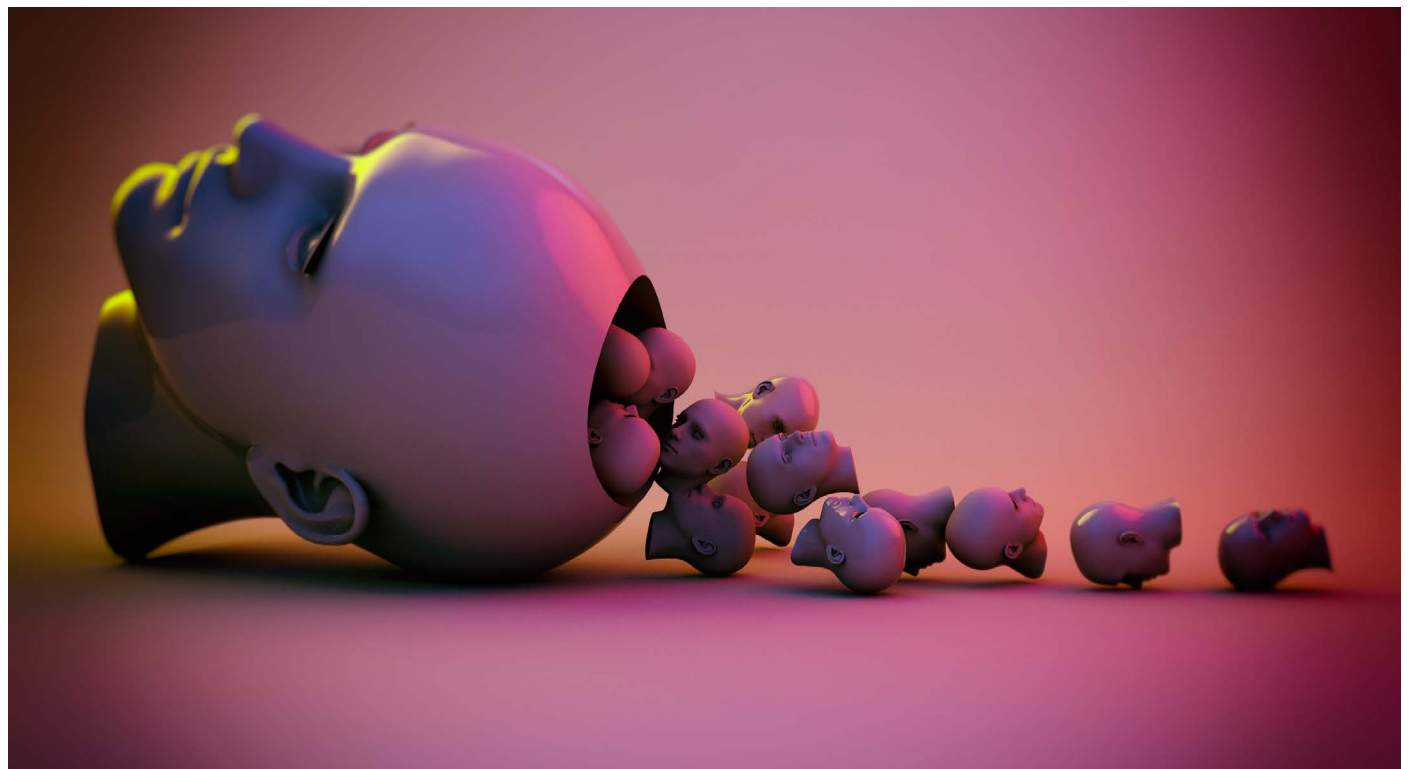


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Despite my genetic anomaly, they let me live. Maybe it was intentional. Or maybe it was chance that dealt me the best hand of 2060. Few people know that biological matter is capable of this. Everyone is worried about digital data. It's the only thing anyone uses any more for everything from credit checks to potential childbearing partners. But these data can lie. What I see doesn't.

A new bot delivered the cash today. No need to count it. The cash is there. It's always there. Delivered in disguise because only criminals use cash now. I set my sunscreen to caramel-cinnamon as my iris deepscans a photo of the next target. What have we here? The Chancellor.

"His data are cleaner than usual. Even for a Chancellor."

Danye's looking at the same photo with his lenses. Suspicious.

"Let me check the Vantablack."

If there were any purged data that could be found, Danye would find them in the darkest

corners of the cloud.

"Someone's been there before us."

He takes off his lenses. No one becomes Chancellor any more unless their data have been cleansed.

"I'll give you seven minutes."

Danye left me to do my own mining.

My eyes roll back into my head; it feels like a drug high. The images. The emotions. The words. The conversations. The names come thick and fast.

Guilt. A rejected child. He was 23 and the baby's genetic profile was undesirable so they erased her identity and released her. His current wife was complicit.

I open my eyes. Not enough. I close them again. Let's go a little deeper this time. I ask the Ether. It always shows me exactly what I need.

Interference. A carcinogenic drug disguised as a hormone infusion. An opponent had to pull out of the race. The Chancellor was told it wouldn't turn into a terminal illness but it did.

My eyes snap open. You can purge your data but you can't delete your thoughts or your

memories, Chancellor. I go into someone's brain to see the real colour of their soul.

"Worth pursuing?"

Danye never knows what I am going to find. He just profiles potential catches. They're always billionaires. Some famous. We learnt early on that the famous have more to lose than just their family if their secrets get out. And of course, they are willing to pay twice what we are willing to accept.

"A child auctioned for genetic anomaly and infusion-poisoning of an opponent."

"Hmm."

Danye never judges: his genes don't allow it. It never thrills him to find out people's hidden shame.

"There's a swarm around the Chancellor that we need to penetrate without them tracing us."

He smiled. It was time for strategy. He loved this part.

There are others out there – telepaths who can cross the threshold of the skull. One day I was curious so I searched. I sent a broad message into the Ether to find out if there

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were any more like me. Turns out there are 32 on a planet of 10 billion. I expected there to be more and I admit, it made me feel pretty special. Before finding out their names, I felt someone else in the Ether – someone was about to home in on me so I disconnected. I didn't stick around to find out who was watching me, but it was a galactic trespasser. I can't risk being found out. So I never tried it again. I've tapped into heads of state, leaders of secret societies and their most sophisticated security guys, and none of them ever had more than an intuition we exist. They don't just need proof – they need names and locations. So the others must be hiding too and covering their tracks as cleanly as me.

Danye taps away. He is figuring out how to get my extortion letter, the one I will write, to the Chancellor without anyone else seeing it.

I lean back and look at my warm legs starting to turn caramel-cinnamon. Today was easy. I close my eyes, relaxing.

My eyelids flicker open. I feel a flash of anxiety.

I sit up in my chair. Something's wrong.

Startled at the jolt, Danye looks at me.

Someone's here. I send the message from my brain to his, something I only do in emergencies.

Where? Danye thinks, jumping to his feet.

"Right behind you," says a cold voice.

We both spin around.

The girl is younger than me. Blonde. Something synthetic about her skin. I look at her brown-green eyes. Nothing. Nothing. I am getting nothing from her brain. I can't penetrate her skull at all. That's never happened to me before with a living, biological human.

She steps forward and holds a piece of paper up to my face. Beneath every printed name is the secret we used. Danye knows what the list means. We both know. How did she know – of course ...

"I know threats to expose your identity are wasted here."

She states it, doesn't ask.

She's right: we have everything we need on standby, including skin-growth facial

transformation masks.

"But you may care about these ..."

Another list. This one has nothing to do with Danye.

I feel a flutter of something in my heart area. I haven't felt any feeling in that area for decades. I haven't seen the people in the photo for years. An image of them is projected into my mind. Suffering.

I don't need to see more. This feeling of someone trespassing into my mind can only be described as dirty. Invasive. Worse than any data harvester.

A few minutes later she is leaving with the cash. She doesn't even count it before she leaves. It's there. It's always there.

Sita Narayan-Dinanauth has a PhD in structural biochemistry and is a full-time creative writer for big pharma and their global campaigns. She spends her days looking at data and her spare time thinking about whether a telepathic cyberpunk criminal on the run would ever start a Twitter account.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Sita Narayan-Dinanauth reveals the inspiration behind *Don't worry about your data*.

In a future where data define our destiny, are there still ways in which nature can elegantly outsmart technology? This was the main inspiration behind the telepathic outlaw in this story. The idea of someone born with the ability to know secrets without electronic devices was appealing for many obvious reasons.

I wrote this when the COVID-19 lockdown first hit and the boundaries between professional, private and intimate disappeared. Confidential business video calls with colleagues from living rooms and bedrooms with children wandering around became the new normal. I was in the garden with my laptop and wondered whether I could just set the colour of my sunscreen to the colour tan I wanted in the future. This was followed by a thought about tanning in the sun while having a video call with a colleague – what would it say about me? Would it say something different if they saw me in the garden rather than just heard my voice and imagined me at a desk working?

We've reached a point where so much of our lives is recorded or converted into data that if someone wanted to use this extreme digital footprint to define us in a court of law, they could. In the future, of course, there could be a big market for data 'clean up'.

Is there anything more intrusive? Yes. Someone reading your every thought. Ironically, the telepath in this story is a criminal who ruthlessly exploits the powerful, but she understands a dimension to intelligent life that data experts around her are blind to – primal instincts, reasoning based on memories, unspoken feelings, emotions leading up to a decision, doubts, hesitance and even unconscious drives. All of these reveal things that can contradict final actions. They capture a large part of the unseen that data can't (yet)!

