

THE DREAM

A Project EDGE short story by Rodrigo Abreu



He is flying. That is how it always starts. The dream.

Free and weightless as he stares at the horizon. Dawning sun painting the sky gold, filling his heart with hope as he closes his eyes and feels the warmth on his face. That is when he realizes there is no motion going forward, only down. He is not flying but falling. Eyes wide open looking down at the ground. Despair creeping in as he approaches the inevitable extinction. That is when he wakes up screaming. That is how it always ends, with him screaming.

His heart rate still speeds up he sits on the bed; motion sensors inside the bedroom capture his movement and open the window to a beautiful morning outside. As the sunlight floods the space, a 7 by 10 foot room with a double bed in between two small wooden night tables, he grabs an earpiece and the smartphone laying by his side. As he puts on the earpiece and turns the smartphone on a woman's voice greets him.

"Good morning, Auditor," said a familiar female voice through his earpiece, an artificial intelligence assistant named Aurora, "you have 12 files queued."

"Morning, Girl," he murmured while scrolling through his smartphone, smiling as he saw Lia's text to him: "Love you, silly man." He remembered the old days when people would text each other. The voice in his earpiece was proof that times have long changed.

"You also have 2 messages from Bryan," said Aurora.

"Hit me," said Jack while getting up and walking out of the bedroom.

Bryan's voice came on the earpiece.

"Hey Jack, I got one. Some guy in Alabama plotting a school shooting. The nerve of some people! I flagged his ass, he's in for a surprise when Uncle Sam's wrath knocks at his door. Anyway, want to check on you. Call me."

"Good morning Auditor," said the voice thru his earpiece, an artificial intelligence assistant named Aurora

Aurora started the next message as he went to the bathroom to begin his daily routine.

"Hey Jack, I got your text. What the hell, man, stop sending texts. Talk like a normal human being for a change. The answer to your question is **hell no**. Just do your job, please."

Jack smiled while brushing his teeth, pulling up the text he sent Bryan the day before. It read: "Hey, B, how's it going? I am not having any luck with Aurora's file selection these days, any chance I could do something else?"

He sat on the toilet bowl as part of his routine. He got lost in his thoughts for a few seconds, still sleepy from a not well rested night he yawned loudly.

"Sorry guys," he shouted, certain that someone was listening in. He raised his hand in the air apologizing in case someone was also watching, "alright Girl, where were we?"

"Playing the first file," said Aurora's voice in his earpiece.

As he finished his morning ritual Aurora played a series of audio files for him. An unidentified man's voice with a thick accent, talking on the phone about some personal issue for almost ten minutes. Jack was leaving the shower as the next audio clip played. The same voice, now recorded through some far away device, again talking about personal issues, something about his friend's attitude costing him his wife. The voice on the recordings mentioned many times that she would kill him if she found out.

"Clear this one," said Jack. "There's no crime here, Girl, only a figure of speech. Is the next file on the guy's wife?"

"Yes," answered the female voice.

Jack made a "continue" gesture with his left hand near his smartphone while getting dressed and another series of recordings started playing for him. A selection of phone calls, personally recorded messages, public and private conversations. All mentioning flagged words like "kill" or "murder". It was up to him to figure it out if the threat was real or not. This time it wasn't.

By the time he finished washing his dishes from breakfast, he was still on the second file. For most of the last recorded call, he zoned out, stuck on that hopeless feeling from the dream. In his ear, two women loudly discussed a cheating husband's fate.

"Stop," he said out loud and the recording stopped. "Give me Lia's apartment live feed."

"OK," said Aurora's voice.

The loud recording stopped and was replaced by silence. Jack closed his eyes and listened closely. He could hear soft typing noises on a keyboard. Lia's long fingernails, usually painted red, accidentally scratching some keys. He couldn't help feeling envious and simultaneously at peace. He stood there listening to her morning routine; until she left. When he heard the apartment door closing the audio quality changed for an instant but continued playing.

"That's enough," said Jack "let's go back to file number two."

The bickering continued in his ear as he lowered the volume using his smartphone. He walked back to his bedroom and opened the night table drawer. Inside laid a 9 millimeter Colt Defender resting inside an IWB Holster (Inside the Waistband) connected to a power charger.

"Stop," he said out loud and the recording stopped. "Give me Lia's apartment live feed."

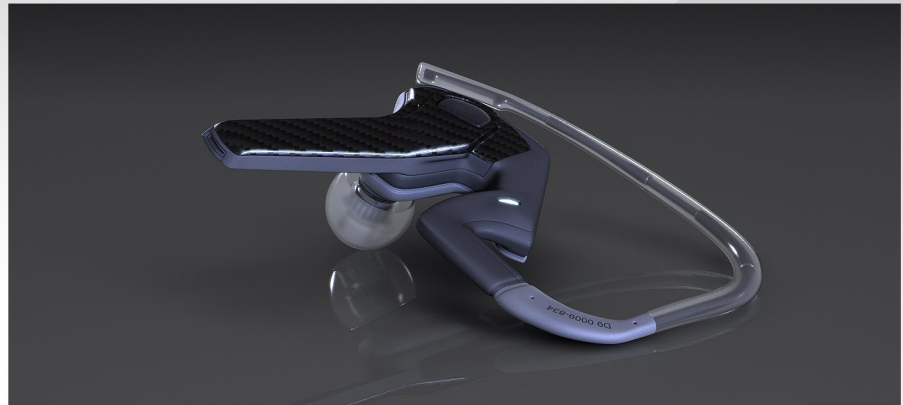
"OK," said Aurora's voice.

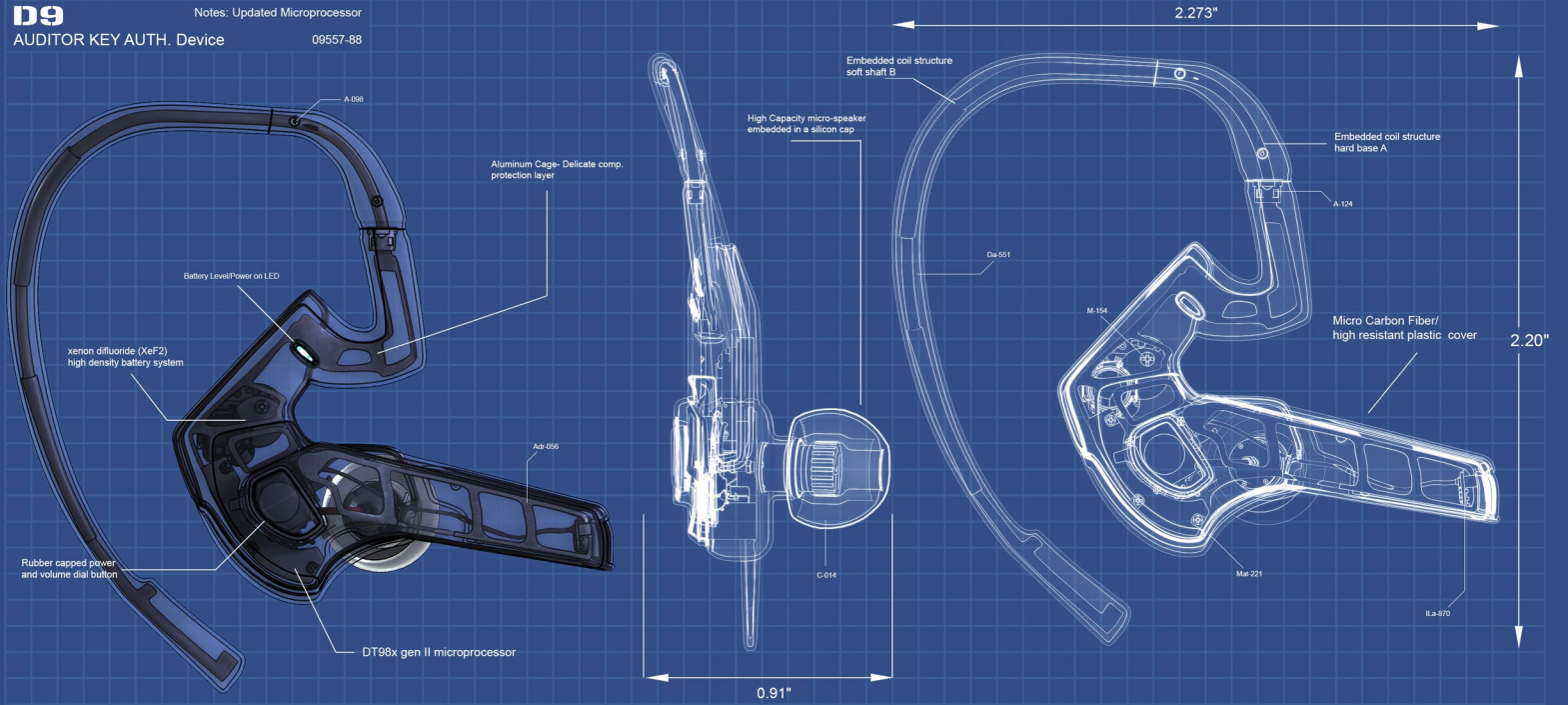
Under the gun's hammer, he could see a small, blinking red light. He reached for the weapon and as he touched it, the light turned green.

On his phone, a Colt APP opened and he heard a male voice on his earpiece: "All systems ready. Good morning Jack," said Arbiter, the artificial intelligence responsible for the weapon.

He stood there looking at the gun, wondering how things would have turned out had he not worked on the Arbiter program. No real way to find out now.

It all started with cars. They were the first ones to receive autonomous AI that would not only work on autopilot mode but also keep the driver from breaking traffic laws while maintaining the driver and pedestrians safe. Soon enough, deaths by car accident dropped to zero and it became law; every car was now required to have an AI.





At the same time, the country was divided by immigration and gun laws, with terrorism and acts of mass violence threatening the nation. That was when Colt came up with the idea to implement an AI on its weapons. The goal was to avoid more legislation against gun ownership while keeping gun misusage from happening.

The AI would be the ultimate gun safety device. Soon other manufacturers followed suit, and the dawn of smart weapons took place. The majority of the American population embraced the change when the violence numbers started to drop like never before. In the beginning, Arbiter worked only when the owner touched the weapon, collecting audio and video feed from around the gun using sensors along the body of the weapon.

It then judged the information and released the weapon for use or not. It didn't take long for the system to become a network of information and work even when the weapon was not being held. The gun manufacturers released APPs for smartphones so that people who would not want to carry a weapon but wanted to contribute to the surrounding safety could do so.

The APP would record the user and, after reviewing the data, flag him "safe", locking all nearby weapons to use against him. It also got integrated with law enforcement and cops were capable to disable weapons remotely. At the same time, every action was recorded and any misuse by any party was quickly punished.

Soon guns became a more integrated part of civil society and both crime and acts of terrorism involving gun basically vanished. Gun-related suicides became a thing of the past. Arbiter proved its value and for the first time in countless years, Americans felt safe again. The only gun deaths were those that happened in defense of life and property, and these were largely celebrated in the media.

Critics insisted that the loss of privacy meant a loss of freedom as well, but all it took was a country exhausted from mass shootings to force its lawmakers to take action. It became illegal to manufacture, sell or buy weapons without Arbiter. It also became illegal to tamper with sensors and/or alter Arbiter in any way. Only militia extremists remained armed with what many referred to as “dumb weapons”—they were the new terrorists.

Jack was 24 years old when he started working on the Arbiter project, mostly coding. Now, at 45, he lived in a completely new world. He watched in disbelief as Maajid Nawaz’s movement to reform Islam gained momentum throughout the years and resulted in the current form of the religion, with the more radical passages of The Coran being completely rejected by the majority of muslims across the world the same way Christians do with passages of The Bible. Jack saw the rise of corporations as the power of the government shrank forcing the armed forces to create the United Military Division even absorbing NASA for military purposes. As technology progressed, biology tried to keep up. New drugs flooded the market with the promise of enhancements and bliss.

As the attention span dropped, long-form text started to disappear from the day-to-day. Everything became audio and as it happened to text when Jack was younger, speech started to become abbreviated. A new dialect was born called Urban English Vernacular (UEV). Some of it was hard to grasp for an old-timer like Jack.

It became illegal to manufacture, sell or buy a weapon without Arbiter

He ejected the Defender's magazine. Instead of the usual eight, it held seven bullets, all encoded not only to the gun but also to him, sharing space with a very powerful computer smaller than a bullet. It was a marvel of engineering and a clear sign of a new era, one he helped create yet was not comfortable with.

Lost in thought, he missed most of the audio blasting into his ear, it was only background noise now. He put the magazine back into the pistol and safely returned the gun to its drawer. Arbiter was running on his phone and that was enough to appease his employer. All Division Nine personnel had to use Arbiter at all times. He had just turned forty when he got the job offer; the money was great and the timing was perfect. His wife had left him and half his life seemed gone, and not only financially. He felt alone in an ever-changing world.

Verging on the edges of depression, he managed to work as a freelance coder for a gaming outfit, which kept things afloat for a while. Bryan, a long-time friend who had also worked on the Arbiter program with him, was the one who told him about the job. UMD was recruiting past Arbiter programmers to work on the development of a new AI called Aurora. A few weeks following their conversation, Jack got the call from UMD. After a few days of interviews, tests, and signing non-disclosure-agreements, he finally joined Division Nine.

Later he learned that the name “Division Nine” was an homage to the head of the CIA, Michele Richter. During the worldwide implementation of Arbiter, privacy became a concern after rumors began spread amongst programmers that the CIA was working on data gathering using Arbiter. A Senate hearing was held. During the hearing, Ms. Richter was asked if the system could ever be exploited and the citizens possibly spied on, to which she replied with a straight face in her native language: “Nein”.

While she was lying to congress, Aurora was being deployed to handle all the data collection and threat finding. Soon after all other data collected via third-party programs like PRISM, X-Keyscore, BULL-RUN and many others were united through Aurora. The AI started to look for possible threats monitoring citizens in real time. To help the system distinguish real threats from more nuanced communication, UMD hired human teachers and thus the Auditor program was born.

In the beginning, most of Jack's work consisted of coding a search module for Aurora. After a couple of years, he applied to join the enigmatic Arsenal project, but unfortunately he did not qualify. He kept coding for Aurora and late last year he got promoted to Auditor. Now instead of writing codes and reading results, he felt like a prisoner of his earpiece and it's constant barrage of noise. Spending most of his time listening to and watching other people's lives.

The second file finished playing as Jack exited through his front door.

"No flag, she's just angry," concluded Auditor Jack.

"Ten more files to go," said Aurora, programmed to sound optimistic. "Two of which have video files."

"Yay," murmured Jack sarcastically. "I'm on my way to the office where I will revise those. Play the audio ones for now." He paused for a second while getting inside the elevator, "but first hit me with Lia's live feed again, please." Loud voices were replaced by silence with some low background noises once again.

He rode the elevator down while listening closely to the sounds coming in from his earpiece. She was at work; he could hear her typing away and distant voices of her co-workers discussing a piece on Takashi's new TR-300 units. Lia worked for an online publication called USA NOW, one of the few digital outlets still writing long-form text pieces for the web.

"I tell you what doesn't feel right. You spying on Lia. That is the definition of wrong!"

Jack got his phone from his pocket and typed a message for her while still listening in as he walked out into the streets.

"Hi sexy, want to meet me for dinner tonight at 7:00pm? We could try that new place downtown-Toro."

He hit send and almost instantly heard Lia's phone vibrating through his earpiece, followed by the clicks of her nails against her phone screen as she typed. Soon a reply came in text form, it read: "Sure, it's a date."

Jack got inside a public automated car parked near his building; he simply said aloud the address he wanted to go to and he was off on his way. His mind wandered back to the dream, that feeling of despair still lingering. His phone rang, it was Bryan.

"Hey B, how's it going?" asked Jack, trying his best to sound happy.

"Good," replied Bryan with a clearly dismissive tone. "What's up with you man?" he sounded concerned.

"What do you mean?"

"Really? Where do I start?" Bryan paused for a second, "Well, for starters, you've been avoiding me, which is kind of a dick move. On top of that, you haven't been doing shit at work."

"I'm sorry man," interrupted Jack with a heartfelt apology. "It just feels wrong. You know? All this crap about listening in to other people's lives."

"Wrong? You have the opportunity to save lives, to protect our country and its people!" he stopped for a second to try to keep his calm.

"I don't know man, it just doesn't feel right," replied Jack, finding it hard to articulate how he truly felt.

"I'll tell you what doesn't feel right. You spying on Lia. That's the definition of wrong! And why, man? Cause you want to get us both fired over a woman you think is cheating on you?" Bryan stopped and waited for a second to see if Jack would say anything and continued, "how many different levels of disgusting do you have to be to spy on the woman you say you love?"

"It's not like that," Jack started to speak.

"She's not, I repeat, she is not cheating on you. Just stop! I can't keep covering your ass man, seriously."

Jack remained silent, thinking about the dream, about how miserable he felt.

"I'm not really happy," murmured Jack, "maybe I should quit Division Nine."

"Happy? No one is happy at work, Jack!" shouted Bryan. "You think I'm happy? No! Being happy is not the job, finding the bad guys is. Have you forgotten our history? The mass shootings, the bombs, the planes flying into buildings? You have a chance to make a difference, to keep it all from happening again and what do you do? The bare fucking minimum." Bryan stopped to take a deep breath.

"Maybe you're right but still, I don't know, I feel—"

"I know you feel like shit, I supervise you, remember? Maybe you feel like shit because you don't do shit. You don't even try."

Jack kept listening.

"We're friends Jack, and frankly, I'm tired of seeing you throw away your life. You have got to do something!" his voice trembling. "I'm not mad, I'm just frustrated. I know you can do so much more. It's like you gave up and now falling off a cliff"

"I'm sorry, B. I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything, just, for the love of God, try and give it your best shot for once. For me! And if you still don't like it, then fuck it, quit!"

Jack stood in silence once again, thinking about his actions. Bryan broke the silence, "Just do me a favor, Jack. When I die, make sure you carry my casket so you can let me down one last time," he laughed.

"Screw you!" said Jack jokingly as Bryan ended the call.

On his way to the office, Jack could not shake the feeling that Bryan had a point. He had made up his mind, today would be different.



Jack was no longer concerned with violent threats; he was trying to teach Aurora to look for ideas.

At the office, a highly secure location in the heart of downtown Atlanta, lied a highly surveilled encrypted terminal that only he could access. He plowed through the remaining files the best he could, and when he was finally done, he really started to work.

First Jack wrote a search code to check the full range of Aurora's potential. While that ran, he wrote another algorithm to cross-reference data from different media marking events on a virtual timeline. Jack was no longer concerned with violent threats; he was trying to teach Aurora to look for ideas, anything powerful enough to cause true disruption.

He set Aurora to look for scientists, entrepreneurs, writers, artists, and dreamers. He taught Aurora to search for "goosebumps" in people, teaching it to hunt for powerful new concepts. That's where the real threat lied.

When he finally got all his code up and running the sun was already setting outside. He still felt anxious, but it was a different feeling than before, he was excited to see if his idea would work out. He wanted to stay in and watch Aurora learn but he had a date and he knew he was already running late. He texted Lia; "I'm running a little late, be there in thirty." He was about to text Bryan when he decided not to, instead he hit the audio message and recorded:

"Hey B, you were right... not about Lia. That you were wrong about... it's not jealousy, it's more like envy... anyway, sorry I suck at this audio message stuff... but like I was saying, you were right, my friend, guess all I had to do was focus on something else. Anyway, just wanted to say thanks for having my back. Later!"

As the message was sent, he got a text reply from Lia; "Sorry lost track of time here at the office, be there in a few," followed by a smiley emoji from the good old days. That was enough to put a grin on Jack's face.

He arrived at Toro, a small Japanese restaurant they both wanted to go to for quite some time. Jack was the first to arrive and the place was mostly empty. He walked in and got a small table by the window.

"Hey B, you were right... not about Lia. That you were wrong... it's not jealousy, it's more like envy..."

As soon as Lia arrived, he instantly got lost in her smile as she walked towards him. Jack kissed her and they both sat down as the waiter approached.

"Welcome to Toro, how are you this evening? My name is Martin," said the waiter.

"Hey Martin, sorry to interrupt you but we will need the printed menu," said Jack. "She is deaf," he pointed at Lia.

Lia kept smiling and just nodded to the waiter who smiled back and then left to get the menus. She signed to Jack, "You look tired. Another rough night?"

Jack started signing back and accidentally dropped his chopsticks. As he bent over and looked at the floor, his mind wandered back to the dream. Perhaps we are all helplessly free falling into our demise. There is no parachute for life, no way to avoid the incoming floor. A hand touched his shin and gently pulled his head back up. He was eager to look at the horizon again, to feel free and weightless with the sun's warmth on his face. From across the table, Lia smiled at him, her eyes embracing his heart in pure silence. And just like that, he was flying again.
