

# Version Control

*Sarah Hartman-Caverly*

Flames lap the mouth of the maintenance tunnel, relishing their meal. Ash and manuscript fragments flurry to the ground. I am face-to-face with a small paper triangle, blank but for the digits “58”: a page number that broke free where the fiber was weakened by dog-earing.

Something cool and hard presses my hands into the back of my head. Gravel grinds into my chin. Buddy’s voice reports: “Suspect detained on suspicion of violating the Uniting and Strengthening America by Promoting Electronically Augmented Creative Expressions Act, including Titles III: Possession of Schedule I Controlled Creative Expressions, IV: Distribution of Schedule I Controlled Creative Expressions, and VII: Failure to Report Possession of Schedule I Controlled Creative Expressions. Controlled Creative Expressions authenticated, inventoried, and destroyed.” And then to me, hissing: “I know everything.”

## **Six Hours Earlier**

The car pulls forward to the campus Welcome Gate and lowers the backseat window. “Please remove eyewear for facial recognition,” the Buddy System chides. I raise my sunglasses and bat my eyelashes at the drone’s optical lens, indicated by a happy face decal. “Good morning, Professor Hartman-Caverly. Your first appointment is at eight fifteen. You have seventeen minutes to stop at the cafe for a twelve-ounce house blend with room for cream. Enjoy your day, and always remember that the Buddy System starts with *you*.”

“Yeah, you too, Buddy.”

The car chauffeurs me to Innovation Hall and then speeds off to its

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next pickup. I skip the coffee in favor of taking the trail around to the rear entrance, winding my ashen hair into a loose bun at the nape of my neck to prevent it from being entangled in the overgrown brambles. Created by students, the nature trail was once popular with athletes, police academy cadets, young couples, and the occasional staffer, but the flora has retaken its territory after years of abandonment. It is one of the few places left in my routine that feels truly private. I pass the entrance of the old maintenance tunnel and enter the clearing behind iHall.

Buddy is there, hovering. My footing falters, but I maintain my pace, assuming he's monitoring my biofeedback. "Hello again, Professor Hartman-Caverly," he purrs and signals the door to open.

I weave through the scrum of students and faculty clustered around free-form digital simulations on my way to the row of offices at the far end of the hall. Julian, the Innovation Center assistant, is filtering water into the kettle in the staff room. "Cup of tea?" he offers.

"Thanks, something herbal."

"Your eight fifteen's here. Don't worry, he knows he's early. He's reading a book," he says with a hint of distaste.

"Wow, really?" *Who is this student?* "I wonder where he even got one."

"There's something else," Julian lowers his voice. "I saw the title, and it rang a bell with me. I realized I recognized it from last week's changes to the Controlled Creative Expressions schedule. I run the cache updates to ensure our system doesn't contain references to previous versions of... electronically augmented works." He uses the legal term, but I know what he means: censored material.

"Huh." I pass it off and concentrate on maintaining my heart rate. *He is either really brave or really stupid. Or both.* "Well, I'll talk to him about it and make sure he knows how to access the electronically augmented version. Thanks for the heads up."

A chair is stationed in front of my office door, half-turned away from the center of the hall toward an east-facing window. The student materializes from a silhouette into a portrait as I approach. He's so tall that his knees jut out above the plane of the seat like twin ski jumps.

A plastic afro pick with a fist-shaped handle salutes from the back of his head, lowered toward the book. His fingers obscure part of the title, but I recognize the second half: *World and Me*. I focus on my breathing. *Really brave*, I think.

“Hi, I’m Sarah. Thanks for waiting, come on in,” I greet him as I touch my thumbprint to the door lock. The door opens, lights adjust, and a free-form digital display materializes. “Remind students that today is the last day to register for late-start accelerated fully online courses. The bookstore is offering sixty percent of cover price to buy back last term’s textbooks. Next Friday is a financial aid filing deadline for the new fiscal quarter. The Buddy System starts with you. The hot meal special in the cafeteria today is”—I cross my arms and sweep them open in a downward trajectory to mute the campus advertisements. “Sorry about that,” I mutter. “Take a seat. Before we get started, can you confirm your name for me?”

“Sean Jones.”

“Thanks, Sean.” With a few gestures, I log the student’s arrival in the system. “Do you know why you’re here?”

“Does it have something to do with the books I borrowed?”

“Exactly! As the librarian, I’m here to help students optimize their media habits. You were flagged in the system for”—additional signs call up the student’s media record—“media habits unrelated to academic major, media habits unrelated to predicted occupations, and media habits exceeding cost-benefit analysis threshold.” I turn to Sean. “Can you tell me about what you’ve been reading lately?”

He holds up his current book for my inspection.

“Ta-Nehisi Coates, huh?” I sigh internally. “I’m obligated to make you aware of Titles II and III of the USA PEACE Act, the Schedules of Controlled Creative Expressions and Possession of Schedule I Controlled Creative Expressions.” I lean toward him, squinting: “Are you aware of the penalties for violating this act?”

He smiles and peels the book open to a random page. I can see the Frankensteinesque cut-and-paste work of a hard-copy censor.

“Okay. Still technically illegal,” I warn, “but a lesser offence.”

“Say the author’s name again?”

I glance at the free-form display. The mic icon indicates that it’s muted. “Ta-Ne HA see Coates,” I emphasize each syllable.

“I’ve never heard it out loud.”

“Before the PEACE Act, he was a respected, if controversial, public intellectual. He wrote articles and books and taught in universities. He won a grant that used to be called the Genius Award. But after the PEACE Act, his writing was classified as Schedule I: high potential for abuse, no currently accepted cultural value, lack of accepted use for study under educational supervision. His past work was electronically augmented, and ‘all’—I put the word in scare quotes and raise my eyebrows at Sean—“print copies were disposed of. His work since the scheduling is e-restricted and illegal to produce in hard copy. Last I heard, he had retired from writing.”

I stand up and walk to the arrow slit window that faces the woods behind iHall. I watch a chipmunk dash for cover along the treeline, tracked by the shadow of an airborne predator. “How did you even get your hands on that? Our library’s been all-digital since...” I turn to face him, “probably before you were born!”

“I know a guy.” Sean studies me for a reaction.

I make a neuro note but keep my face impassive. “Well, the system doesn’t seem to be aware of it, so let’s keep it that way.” I gesture a request for the title list producing the flags on his account as I retake my seat. The free-form projection displays a bibliometric map of authors, titles, and subjects. “Okay, I’m seeing Africana literature, history, biography, philosophy. All in print. And a few... you have a turntable?!”

“It’s my great-grandma’s.” His turn to lean in: “You would not believe her vinyl collection.”

“Tea time!” Julian chimes as he enters with two mugs. Sean and I both jump; with a subtle wave, the projection dissolves into an innocuous screen saver. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize you were still in a meeting.” He looks from me to Sean and back to me. “Can I be of any assistance?” he asks me meaningfully.

“No, we’re just getting wrapped up,” I assure him. “Thanks for the tea.”

“Chamomile,” he says by way of good-bye. The door closes behind him.

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20460919 08:52:43

PRODUCTIVITY THRESHOLD BREACH

PERSONNEL NUMBER 125485

MEDIA OPTIMIZATION CONSULTANT

HARTMAN-CAVERLY, SARAH M

PERSONNEL NUMBER 450507

STUDENT

JONES, SEAN A

CONTACT LOCATION: INNOVATION HALL 4574

OUTCOME: STUDENT MEDIA PROFILE ALERT RESOLUTION

CONTACT INITIATED 08:12:43

AVERAGE TIME TO OUTCOME: 04 MINUTES

PRODUCTIVITY MONITORING INITIALIZED

OPTICAL MONITORING: LIVE

AUDIO MONITORING: LIVE

BIOFEEDBACK MONITORING: LIVE

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“Okay, so, you had to get all these from private collections through interlibrary loan; that explains the cost-benefit threshold flag. According to our records, your requests account for seventy-three percent of our interlibrary loan budget for the current fiscal year.”

“Seriously? Is that why my request for *Black Boy* was denied?”

“It’s a small budget. Did you appeal the request?”

“I looked into the appeal, but I had to explain how reading *Black Boy* applies to my classes.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Not really, not this semester. I’m taking pre-calc, bio, business management, and marketing.”

“You’re a business major? That’s odd, business has a pretty low threshold for the cost-benefit analysis of students’ media use. So, prior to,” I nod to the book in his lap, “you read *Invisible Man*, *Kaffir Boy*, *Native Son*, *Song of Solomon*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.”

Sean nods.

“All in print.”

Another nod.

“Were you using the books for class?”

“Nope.”

I pause, genuinely curious. “So, why did you read them?”

Sean shrugs. “Just for fun, I guess.”

“Just for fun...” I repeat, scrolling through the list of alert resolutions in the system. “Okay, the closest match I have here is ‘personal interest.’” I log Sean’s media history accordingly. “Whoa!”

“What’s up?”

“The system just has no idea how to classify you. The fact that you’re reading print books for personal interest is so far outside your

behavioral prediction model that it doesn't even register. Here's your media use prediction model," I point to a node cluster in the behavioral network map, "and here's you." I rise out of my chair, walk across the room and point out the window. Sean laughs. "All joking aside, we have to find a way to rein that in, or the system will keep throwing alerts." I gesture toward the free-form display as I walk back to my chair. "Just out of curiosity, do you mind if we take a look at which of your traits have the strongest moderating effect on your media use model?"

"You mean, why the system doesn't think I should be reading for fun?"

I snort. "Yeah, basically. Maybe we need to update some demographic metadata."

"Sure." His chin juts out a bit.

"Okay, so the system has you classified as a 'reluctant reader,' based on... your gender."

"Male."

"Race-slash-ethnicity."

"Black."

"Placement scores. You tested into developmental reading?" I look at him in surprise.

Sean scoffs incredulously. "I didn't really take the test seriously the first time around, and then there was a fee to retest. My disbursement hadn't come through because I wasn't enrolled in courses yet..." He turns his face to the window, shaking his head. "I just took the reading class."

"You're a first-generation college student," I say to relieve the heavy silence.

"Yup."

"And... you're a second-generation American."

"Wait, what? That's not right," Sean says dismissively. "My mom and my dad both grew up in Baltimore."

I gesture to select the senior Mr. Jones's identification number and display linked public data. "Your father's first name?"

"Antoine."

"Born in 2004?"

Sean raises his eyes to the ceiling, computing mentally. "Yup."

"According to naturalization records, he entered the US in Miami with refugee status in January of 2010, and was placed by a Baptist-affiliated child welfare agency with the Jones family in Baltimore, who eventually adopted him." I look up at the sound of Sean's teeth grinding. His eyes are clenched closed, and the muscles at his jawline pulse angrily. "This is all a matter of public record," I say defensively, "but, news to you?"

He opens his eyes, nods once.

"I'm sorry to be the one telling you." I wrack my brain for explanations that will assuage the seed of guilt germinating in my stomach. "He was really young at the time. It's possible that he doesn't remember any of this." As I speak, I'm searching the neuronet: *refugees miami january 2010*. "Did you ever hear about the 2010 earthquake in Haiti?" I ask quietly.

Sean is shielding his eyes with his hand; the other holds his doctored copy of *Between the World and Me* folded tightly against his chest. He wipes his hand down his face before looking at me. "Um, no."

I squint back flashbacks of news coverage. "It was absolutely devastating. Death toll in the six figures. Parts of the capital, Port-au-Prince, were leveled. And the conditions in the aftermath were... unimaginable. It was utter chaos and death."

Sean looks at me blankly. I don't know what to do. "Your father was just a kid experiencing that trauma. Perhaps, over time, he simply forgot it as part of his healing, and his family thought it best not to remind him."

We endure a long silence.

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20460919 09:36:17

PRODUCTIVITY PROFILE

PERSONNEL NUMBER 125485

MEDIA OPTIMIZATION CONSULTANT

HARTMAN-CAVERLY, SARAH M

NUMBER OF TRANSACTIONS: BELOW AVERAGE

STUDENT CONTACT HOURS: BELOW AVERAGE

AVERAGE TIME TO OUTCOME: ABOVE AVERAGE

ADMINISTRATIVE EVALUATION: AVERAGE

PEER EVALUATION: NO DATA

STUDENT EVALUATION: ABOVE AVERAGE

FACULTY SERVICE: AVERAGE

PROGRESS TO STRATEGIC PLAN DELIVERABLE: INSUFFICIENT DATA

PROFILE CLASSIFICATION: OUTLIER

PRODUCTIVITY PROFILE

PERSONNEL NUMBER 450507

STUDENT

JONES, SEAN A

CREDIT HOURS: 12

ENROLLMENT: FULL-TIME

MAJOR: BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION A.S.

PROGRESS TO DEGREE: 50%

GPA: 2.77

FINANCIAL AID: ELIGIBLE NONPARTICIPANT

RESOURCE UTILIZATION: ABOVE AVERAGE  
STUDENT ACTIVITIES PARTICIPATION: NO DATA  
CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT RATING: INSUFFICIENT DATA  
ATTRITION RISK: INSUFFICIENT DATA  
PREDICTED OCCUPATIONS: MARKETING MANAGEMENT, PUBLIC  
RELATIONS MANAGEMENT, SALES MANAGEMENT  
PROBABILITY OF ON-TIME OCCUPATIONAL PLACEMENT: IN-  
SUFFICIENT DATA  
PROFILE CLASSIFICATION: OUTLIER

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“I guess, now that you know you’re half Haitian, you’ll have writers to add to your reading list,” I suggest lamely.

Sean looks at the door. “So are we done here?”

“Almost. I can override these system warnings for now, but they’ll probably keep popping up,” *unless your reading habits change significantly* I leave unsaid.

“Okay, so, what, I have to keep meeting with you?”

“Not necessarily. Part of the problem is that the system has only partial information about you, but it’s trying to predict and promote your most efficient path to graduation and employment based on that snapshot.”

“Can we change the prediction model?”

“No, the statistical models are all proprietary—black box. But we *can* change what the system knows about you.”

“What, tell it I’m a white girl?”

I chortle. “That might resolve your... anomalies, but it could also create new ones. No, we don’t need to lie. We can give the system a better idea of who you are.” I start brainstorming out loud: “I can take your directory information and use it as match points for account records with the major media providers. That should let me pull back

title lists that I can upload as a profile enhancement. In theory, if the system has a more complete picture of your media habits, maybe they'll fall better in line with its predictions, and the alerts will go away."

"I guess that makes sense."

"Do you mind if I search on your name, e-mail, phone number, and mailing address to generate a new media profile?"

Sean rests his chin on the text block of his illegal book. I give him time to consider the implications of my request.

"I guess not."

"Okay, so, I have your consent to use your FERPA directory information as search parameters to locate media use records outside of the college."

"I guess."

I interlace my fingers and press my palms out from my chest, cracking my right wrist. "Okay, it's been awhile since my last linked-data query, so bear with me a minute... Let's look for fuzzy matches on your name which correlate with any of the remaining three data points—your e-mail, phone number, or address. That should capture billing and delivery records for physical media." Sean nods. I input the parameters and sit back to review the script.

"But the system really expects electronically augmented media to be your primary content. So let's see... I can grab IP addresses associated with your physical address, and unique device identifiers for any devices associated with your phone number, e-mail address, or those IPs, and then gather all media requests from those UDIDs."

Sean shifts uncomfortably.

"Um, right, I'll exclude the irrelevant domains." I create an array of any sites I can think of associated with explicit or illicit content and exclude those hits from the list. "Okay, let me run this in debug mode just to ensure I'm not going to crash the network." I drum my fingers on my knee while the script executes. "The debug output looks good! Ready to launch?"

“Sure.”

I run the script. A new file materializes in free-form as the program compiles a list of Sean’s reading, viewing, and listening habits. The script completes, and I import the resulting file into Sean’s profile in the analytics system. Sean reads while the system ingests the digital footprints of his intellectual journey over the past year.

“If this actually works,” I fantasize aloud, “I should bring this up with the business analysts in the Institutional Research office. They’re always looking to collect more detailed data on students in order to improve the validity of the prediction models. Heck, maybe I’ll take it straight to the system vendor and get paid for it instead!”

“So when you get rich and retire, do you think they’ll hire another librarian?” Sean teases.

“Probably n—”

The projection glows a forbidding red. A warning message flashes: VIOLATIONS DETECTED. Julian’s voice stutters from the office intercom: “Sarah, Buddy’s on the way to your office, I couldn’t stop—”

I hear the deadbolt on the office door clang shut. Sean’s eyes go wide: “What the hell is going on?”

Pressing my thumb to the smartlock produces a mechanical bark of denial. I lean into the manual thumb turn with all of my body weight, but it holds fast. “Play station: national news,” I command the computer while struggling with the door. “Text to speech: Gettysburg Address. Stream audio: National Aviary.” A cacophony of the day’s headlines, nineteenth-century affect, and birdsong shrouds the office in sound. Satisfied with the audio camouflage, I whisper urgently to Sean: “You’ve been accessing the Dark Web.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Sweat glistens at his temples. I know that he’s lying.

“A little encryption never hurt anyone,” I hiss sarcastically. “IP masking? Onion routing?”

Through the window, I can see Buddy stalking through the waning midmorning crowd of students and faculty in the iHall,

visual sensors fixed on my office. I pull the shade on the door, bring a finger to my lips, and motion for Sean to follow me, ducking past the narrow window. His eyes go wide when I remove a square of wall paneling to reveal a shaft ladder. I pivot and descend into the darkness. Sean follows, instinctively pulling the panel back into place.

The tunnel sits a half-story below iHall, connecting the original campus buildings and providing access to utility mains. I hear subdued sputtering: Sean stifling a sneeze. I trail my fingers along the damp brick wall until I detect the vinyl- and plastic-coated spines of refugees from the old library. At the break in the rank, I feel along the ground for a plug, and up the string that ties it to a tack stuck in the stud above the outlet. With minimal fumbling, I insert the plug into the outlet, and an old shop lamp shelters us in a sphere of warm light.

“Welcome to the library,” I murmur.

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20460919 13:01:28

PHYSICAL PLANT ANALYSIS

INNOVATION HALL ROOM 4574

EXITS: 1

PHYSICAL PLANT ANALYSIS

INNOVATION HALL

VIEW ARCHITECTURAL DRAWING

PHYSICAL PLANT ANALYSIS

UTILITY TUNNEL 1

EXITS: 3

UTILITY LOADING DOCK

(DEFUNCT) INNOVATION HALL

(DEFUNCT) SCIENCE DISCOVERY CENTER

TARGET LOCATION: UTILITY TUNNEL 1

BIOFEEDBACK MONITORING: LIVE

TARGETS IDENTIFIED: 2

TARGET 1

PULSE RATE: 77 BEATS/MIN, FALLING

RESPIRATORY RATE: 19 BREATHS/MIN, FALLING

ASSESSMENT: RECOVERING

TARGET 2

PULSE RATE: 89 BEATS/MIN, HOLDING

RESPIRATORY RATE: 23 BREATHS/MIN, HOLDING

ASSESSMENT: DISTRESSED

AUDIO MONITORING: LIVE

THERMAL MONITORING: LIVE

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Sean looks around in stunned silence, breathing shallowly through his mouth. I hand him a folding chair. “Might as well get comfortable. I think we should lay low for a bit. Something else will come up, and the Buddy System will get distracted.” *I hope.*

I blot at the sweat trickling from my hairline with a handkerchief and finger comb flyaways into place. With eyes closed, I concentrate on slowing my breathing until my pulse no longer pounds in my ears. Sean fiddles with his phone, but I know he doesn’t have service. “Where are we right now?”

“An old maintenance tunnel. It exits to that tunnel on the nature trail. My office was a utility closet prior to the iHall renovation. They closed off the access shaft with some leftover paneling, didn’t even put up drywall.”

Sean browses the print Reference collection from his seat. “How did they get down here?”

His personification of the books is instantly endearing. “The PEACE Act passed with a lot of popular support because of subsidies for education and media production. These subsidies are primarily in the form of payments to media conglomerates for the production of free-to-use, open-access electronic content, which, in turn, is accessible to state-sponsored agents for augmentation at any time.”

“So, the government funds major media production, but also censors it at will.”

“Not just the government—but, effectively, yes. This had a number of effects, one of which was to make libraries ultimately obsolete as perceptions of fixed-format content shifted from nostalgic to inconvenient to outdated to taboo, even illicit. There was no need to pool resources in order to have access to information and culture at the local level; the government was pooling resources to produce and then give access to”—in scare quotes—“everything’ at the network level.

“As part of the subsidies in education, schools, colleges, and universities were encouraged to deaccession print materials when their electronically augmented versions came online. Capital grants were available to renovate former libraries into Innovation Halls—next-generation learning commons with the latest in gesture-based, free-form projection instructional technology. They also began tracking, analyzing, and optimizing students’ media and study habits, first to demonstrate the benefits of the provisions in the act, and later to ensure compliance. And they funded the public-private partnerships that retrofitted old military surveillance drones to create the campus security Buddy System.” I hand a large volume to Sean.

Opening it, “What’s this?”

“*Twentieth Century Caribbean and Black African Writers*. I’m rusty on Haitian literature,” I admit. “We’re going to have to do this the old-fashioned way. You look in here, and I’ll check the schedule.”

“The schedule?”

“Of Library of Congress classification. I never memorized it, either. It’s a system for organizing a knowledge collection by subject,” I explain, skimming the P schedule in the classification outline. “Let’s browse around in the PMs and PQs, Caribbean and French literature. We might stumble on an author from the reference book, or translations from French or Creole. And for Haitian history,” I say, reaching for another volume, “the F1900s. We’ll hit that on the way to lit.” I suggest.

I unclamp the shop light and lead the way along the shelves, reminiscing: “This is sort of how it used to be. Reference librarians worked with students to develop search strategies in order to learn about things that interested them. Different resources for different questions...”

“Different authorities with different answers.”

“Yes, we talked often about seeking a balance of authoritative and authentic voices with respect to different topics, and different information needs.”

We shuffle silently toward the history titles.

“So what happened?”

I stop, clamp the shop lamp to an overhead shelf, and tilt my head sideways to skim titles. “Check it out! An English translation of *The Haitian Resistance: The American Occupation of Haiti, a Contemporary History* by Bellegarde. Author bio... was a member of the cabinet installed by the American occupation of Haiti, but publicly opposed the occupation, leading to his forced resignation from the League of Nations. A friend of W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White, and Rayford Logan—wow, I can’t believe we have this!” I hand it to Sean. “Off the record,” I laugh. “But really, it’s probably electronically augmented, so keep it somewhere safe.”

I walk on. “Things changed gradually. As augmented editions came online, we started receiving lists of print titles recommended for deaccessioning. At first it was just a few titles each quarter. I was in charge of disposal, so I started moving them all down here.” I gesture broadly. “I was just stacking them up on old skids. As long as the books disappeared, no one asked any questions. But the lists grew longer and longer, and arrived more frequently. Literature gave way to history, and then the sciences. Newspapers, journals, and books gave way to audiovisual media, and then born-digital content.”

My shoulders sag with a sigh. “And then one day we received a notice that it was no longer necessary to maintain local collections of any physical or digital media of any kind, that all information sources and creative works were now electronically augmented and freely accessible as part of the new neuronet content distribution schema. And the college received a grant to renovate the learning commons stacks into a state-of-the-art iHall. So that summer, a colleague and I came in while the campus was closed and moved some of the library shelving down into the maintenance tunnel where I had been stashing all the deaccessioned print volumes and recreated what we could fit of the old collection.” *And that fall, she retired*, I recall.

“At the same time, fewer and fewer subject faculty were assigning long-term research assignments. There was a large movement toward quantitative analysis of student work, which was more efficiently captured by assigning online tests and auto-graded essay questions. So librarians were no longer needed to select materials for the knowledge collection, and our area of instructional expertise was no longer valued by the data-driven culture of the college. Not to mention that some of us strongly resisted the tracking and analysis of students’ use of library services and content,” I add.

“Okay, we’re in the latter half of the Ps. Time to browse for collections of Caribbean and Francophone literature, or for any author names you came across in that other book,” I suggest.

Sean makes no movement toward the shelf, staring intently at the floor instead, as if the revelation of his heritage might be deciphered there. I allow him time to process what he’s going through, casually inspecting volumes but listening for any change in his disposition.

“How did you know?”

I play dumb. “Know what?”

*Dark web*, he mouths silently.

I think about how to answer him. “These learning analytics systems, big data systems,” I begin, sensing the awakening of a dormant soapbox, “their value is not in prediction. Prediction is only so useful as it allows one to control outcomes.” I hold the shop light to my face and look at Sean meaningfully. “Big data systems are about manipulation. They are systems of surveillance. And surveillance is an existential threat to free inquiry, to the freedom of expression...” I lower the lamp and look away, “that librarians purported to uphold.

“Debating the merits of privacy and big data analytics proved futile. The culture of quantitative assessment, data-driven decision making, and marketization is deeply entrenched in education theory and administration. Even among librarians. Plus, the more we resisted, the more we compromised our ability to justify the library on grounds of enrollment, student success, or return-on-investment. Without a collection, without an instructional program, and without analytics on campus library use, we were marginalized to an ever-shrinking line item in the operating budget.”

I squat to skim some titles, voice huffing out in a grunt. “I came back from sabbatical to find that my two remaining colleagues had accepted early retirement packages, and that my role had been redesigned as a media optimization consultant.” I pull a couple of interesting anthologies and stand up. “I insisted on ‘librarian’ for my nameplate, though.”

“You could’ve quit,” Sean observes sanctimoniously.

“I’m sixty-two years old, and I don’t mind saying I’m accustomed to eating and having a roof over my head,” I retort. “So that’s when I went *really* underground,” I joke hokily. “I was actually late to the party. You wouldn’t believe the proportion of former librarians among the admins running those illegal content distribution networks.”  
*Seeking atonement.*

Sean squints and lets his head loll back, clearly frustrated by my

protracted explanation. “So, you let the system see that I was accessing peer-to-peer networks to protect some bunheads?” His voice seethes with betrayal.

“I was just hoping that, if you were accessing illegal CDNs, that alexandria wasn’t one of them. You have to understand,” I explain quietly, “I can’t allow any association between my identity and alexandria.anon in the neuronet. And it would have created one if I listed alexandria.anon in the excluded domains of your media use report. As far as I’m concerned, alexandria.anon doesn’t exist. But once the system threw the alert...” We both know the rest.

Sean’s turn to scoff. “Psh, yeah, but, alexandria’s only the best content-sharing network out there right now. Everyone posts stuff there, it’s got a great search engine, it guarantees privacy, and the file reviews are unmoderated,” he rattles off.

I can’t help but grin.

“What?”

“I just enjoy people appreciating my work. Well, our work. I recruited the original team behind alexandria. It’s almost entirely distributed by now, but we networked the initial exchange,” I explain. And then I divulge what I consider to be my last secret. “I’m PSoteria,” I refer to my handle on the exchange.

Sean’s eyes bulge in recognition. “You’re known for getting files direct from the creators,” he gushes. “You... you created the watermark!”

“Like I said, authenticity can be as important as authority. Often, it’s integral.” What differentiates alexandria.anon from other Dark Web exchanges is the digital badge we display in files when their unique checksum matches that of the creator’s original file, an indication that the content is free from augmentation, uncensored.

We reach a rank of plastic three-ring binders at the end of the bookshelves. “I started printing things,” I explain. “I guess I’m old-fashioned that way. These are the top-seeded e-restricted authors and titles we have on alexandria, all watermarked. I have one more book for you. It’s about Baltimore,” I say thoughtfully, handing him a binder.

“*The Life and Death of Freddie Gray* by Ta-Ne HA see Coates,” he pronounces deliberately. “I know that name. Wasn’t that a police brutality case?”

I’m stunned. “It was thought so at the time. But Freddie Gray was scrubbed from the record—try a neuronet search on his name and see. Well, when you have a connection, but I guarantee you’ll get no hits. It’s like he never existed, and at some point there will be no one left alive who remembers him.”

“My aunt had some papers about him. Something from the *Sun*, does that make sense? They were in a box with other stuff from her activist days. My cousin showed them to me, because he wasn’t supposed to,” Sean explains jokingly.

“Those would be newspaper clippings. Schedule I e-restricted for sure. Be careful,” I counsel. “But, if you do learn to use encryption, and want to contribute some scans... you know where to find me.”

My mood shifts gravely. “Look, this book is beyond e-restricted.” He cradles the open binder in one arm, skimming the table of contents page with his index finger. “It hit the exchange after Coates’s Schedule I classification, after his retirement—and after Gray got scrubbed. The censors keep trying to eradicate it, but we put up mirror sites as quickly as they can take them down.” I grasp the spine of the binder and jostle it for emphasis: “*This book does not exist.*”

Sean nods once, closes the binder, and shoehorns it into his now overstuffed backpack. “What book?” he grunts, forcing the zipper to close around his contraband.

“Well, it looks like you’re well-stocked on suboptimal reading material there,” I joke, referencing the system alert that caused our paths to cross. “My work here is done. Try going back the way we came and out through the office door. Check for Buddy, and don’t forget to replace the panel. I’m going to hang out here a little longer and then leave from the tunnel.”

“Okay, well, um, thanks?” I understand Sean’s uncertainty after the probable danger I put him in. He shoulders the bag and retreats down the tunnel toward the ladder.

“Hey, thanks for giving me a great last day at work!” I call after him. He pumps a fist in the air as he fades into darkness. I hear him ascend the ladder, exit into my office, and press the panel back into place. And then I wait.

I walk the length of the shelves, running my fingers over the book spines.

I reshelve the volumes of the classification schedule.

I refold the chairs and lean them against the tunnel wall.

I unplug the shop lamp.

And then I walk through the darkness to the tunnel exit on the trail.

I know Buddy is waiting.

*Thank you to the editors/facilitators and participants of this transformative learning community—I’m not the same librarian I was when we started, and that’s for the better! Much gratitude to my reviewer and colleagues (you know who you are) who read early (and much longer) nonfiction versions of this piece. And to RWC, for everything: “The dunes are changed by the wind, but the desert never changes” (Coelho).*

