



John slowly turned his sweaty neck. Half scared, half curious, and extremely edgy, he didn't quite know where he wanted to be at this time. He wanted to think longer. He wanted to know more. He wanted to figure out what he was going to do before he had to it instead of having to figure out what was going on as life and circumstances walked all over him, leaving scars that seemed irrelevant like the abrasions of a soldier in the trenches. Or maybe like the scratches of a helpless unfortunate slipping and sliding down a steep cliff full of cacti. Right now, there was just too much going on in his head. He didn't know whether he should be keeping his hands steady, or trying to figure out where that cold gust of air that froze the sweat on the back of his neck came from. Was Pierre back? Was Pierre alive? Was he himself alive? Was he hallucinating? Where did that cliff end? Why were there streaks of tears running down the soft scarred cheeks of that lonely soldier in the trenches?

His questions came to an abrupt end suddenly with the slow, deliberate and

perfectly symmetrical splash
of a drop of sweat from the
tip of his nose. He turned
back to his hands just in
time to see a circle of
droplets vanish from the pool
of the drop, like gay
liberated lambs in a pasture.
He focused back to his task.
The computer was still open.
It took him a few
excruciating moments to
retrain his thoughts back to
the computer. Always blow the
dust out from the sockets and
plugs before connecting
anything, he remembered an
instructor instruct. Like a
voice in his head, he went
through the checklist.
Satisfied, he turned his
attention to the hard disk
lying alone by the side. He
turned the lamp on to it and
looked at it closely. Slowly,
he brought his hands forward
to hold it as if he wanted to
strangle it. Too many times
things has gone astray at
this stage. He was barely an
inch away from it when it
suddenly jumped an inch away
and started vibrating.
Frustrated, he got up and
turned away closing his eyes
with a sigh.

He felt the cold air again.
This time it was on his face,
he froze. There wasn't
supposed to be any cold air
in this room. And Pierre was
probably dead. No one else
knew this place existed.
There was no window, no fan,
and it was a desert outside.
He felt some more cold air on
his face, specially on his
closed sweaty eyelids, and
decided there was only one
way to find out. Slowly he
opened his eyes and almost
jumped back in fright as he

saw a CPU cooling fan
dangling in the air by its
power cable, its fan as dead
as a doornail. It swung back
and forth ever so slowly, as
if subtly highlighting its
inanimate state. Its cold
melancholic lynched look sent
a slow cold shiver down his
spine making him want to put
on his skiing jacket, and
snuggle into sleep in the
darkest corner of the room.

Shaking himself out of the
thought, he almost staggered
back to face the hard disk.
Just a few more connections,
he reminded himself. After
that nothing mattered
anymore. The hard disk was
not trembling anymore, just
twitching occasionally. He
decided to let it rest for a
while.

He turned his attention to
the monitor. The joystick was
still protruding from its
tube awkwardly. The monitor
was the first to go, or maybe
it was the only one that
didn't go, and had to be taken
down by the others. He looked
at it solemnly. For a moment
his troubles left him with
his memories and he gazed
around the room. His
emotions, still charged, took
him on a roller coaster
journey across the landscape
of memories that any
24-year-old accumulates after
spending a lifetime
programming a computer in the
same room. Sometimes smiling,
sometimes ponderous, his gaze
shifted from one memory to
another. Most people seeing
the room for the first time
would have probably commented
on the hundreds of feet of
CAT5 network cable and the

old, almost ageless, furniture, most of which was hidden by pieces of computers torn apart so that others may have lived. An unusually large twitch of the hard disk made him turn back to what was left of his computer. The monitor was beyond salvage, but John never gave up on a piece of electronics without salvaging its last capacitor and resistor. He took his small Maglite in his mouth and focused its beam at the sharp edges of the broken tube and then through to its back. He could see a small circuit board at the back and decided to pull it out. As he put his hand into the gaping hole, he felt the static charge pull up the hair on his hand and decided to let the monitor be. The hard disk had stopped twitching now, he decided to give it another shot and put the torch down. His outstretched hand had barely made it halfway to the drive when the torch flew from the table, broke his front teeth, and lodged itself firmly in his throat. More shocked than in pain, John jumped up and grabbed his throat. Struggling to breathe, John noticed the hard disk trembling as he tripped over some wires and fell on the floor. Gnawing at his throat, John noticed some of the wires on the floor moving, coiling, gathering around him. He struggled to his knees, the tightly coiled wires preventing him from getting up further. His hands still free, he gave up on this throat and pulled himself up with the computer table. He was almost on his feet when he noticed the

joystick come out of the monitor, it flew straight for his face. He didn't even make an attempt to duck. The pieces had fallen into place, and he knew what fate awaited him. The cacti on the side of the cliff had ended their reign of cuts and bruises, life was through with its torture, ahead lay only the final helpless stumble over a thousand broken picture frames, the stinging pain of the broken glasses numbed by every snapshot of a notable moment in the past. And the bottom of the cliff now visible was as mysterious as ever with a dark, all absorbing nothingness, and a sad irreversibility. He turned back to see an endless sea of thorns and bushes, a clear path he had raked though it, and decided to simply get up and walk back. He had barely taken his first steps when he felt himself being dragged towards the darkness, struggling he fell on all fours and tried in vain to grab the broken glass, every grip slipping, leaving more and more of his flesh as bloody reminders of a lost struggle. He finally gave up and decided to let the darkness have its way.

Slowly his eyes opened, to reveal the dim outline of the backrest of his chair. With a great heave, he remembered the cliff, I'm alive he thought, that was just a dream! Suddenly a piece of glass dug deeper into his side and he winced in pain. Turning, he saw in shock that half of him was inside the monitor. It wasn't a dream! It wasn't just his

imagination! He started screaming and grabbed at the edges of his table. It felt odd, he had never quite grabbed the edge that way. Struggling, screaming, crying, yelling for help and mercy he turned and writhed in agony. He could still feel his legs, he could still feel himself kicking them, but they were not there anymore. His body seemed to vanish into nothingness just below his ribcage. He grabbed the sides of the monitor and tried to push himself out, his arms buckled. The shock of seeing his arms snap like matches passed him at the speed of his yell. Pierre! Pierre! he yelled. Choking, he could barely scream now, he could not grip anything anymore and felt the monitor sucking him in faster, twisting him to break any last remnants of a grip on life. As his head finally vanished into the monitor, turning briefly in its churning spin for one last look at the ceiling, he saw the cooling fan swing back and forth violently, with the devilish rhythm of a juvenile clapping wildly at a suffering dog, an evil smile persistent smile escaping and permeating the rhythm. John closed his eyes.

Coming next: Pierre's return.
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