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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Peripheral

Written by William Gibson

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# THE PERIPHERAL

WILLIAM GIBSON

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*To Shannie*

*I have already told you of the sickness and confusion that comes with time travelling.*

—H. G. WELLS

# 1.
# THE HAPTICS

They didn't think Flynne's brother had PTSD, but that sometimes the haptics glitched him. They said it was like phantom limb, ghosts of the tattoos he'd worn in the war, put there to tell him when to run, when to be still, when to do the bad-ass dance, which direction and what range. So they allowed him some disability for that, and he lived in the trailer down by the creek. An alcoholic uncle lived there when they were little, veteran of some other war, their father's older brother. She and Burton and Leon used it for a fort, the summer she was ten. Leon tried to take girls there, later on, but it smelled too bad. When Burton got his discharge, it was empty, except for the biggest wasp nest any of them had ever seen. Most valuable thing on their property, Leon said. Airstream, 1977. He showed her ones on eBay that looked like blunt rifle slugs, went for crazy money in any condition at all. The uncle had gooped this one over with white expansion foam, gone gray and dirty now, to stop it leaking and for insulation. Leon said that had saved it from pickers. She thought it looked like a big old grub, but with tunnels back through it to the windows.

Coming down the path, she saw stray crumbs of that foam, packed down hard in the dark earth. He had the trailer's lights turned up, and closer, through a window, she partly saw him stand, turn, and on his spine and side the marks where they took the haptics off, like the skin was dusted with something dead-fish silver. They said they could get that off too, but he didn't want to keep going back.

"Hey, Burton," she called.

"Easy Ice," he answered, her gamer tag, one hand bumping the

door open, the other tugging a new white t-shirt down, over that chest the Corps gave him, covering the silvered patch above his navel, size and shape of a playing card.

Inside, the trailer was the color of Vaseline, LEDs buried in it, bedded in Hefty Mart amber. She'd helped him sweep it out, before he moved in. He hadn't bothered to bring the shop vac down from the garage, just bombed the inside a good inch thick with this Chinese polymer, dried glassy and flexible. You could see stubs of burnt matches down inside that, or the cork-patterned paper on the squashed filter of a legally sold cigarette, older than she was. She knew where to find a rusty jeweler's screwdriver, and somewhere else a 2009 quarter.

Now he just got his stuff out before he hosed the inside, every week or two, like washing out Tupperware. Leon said the polymer was curatorial, how you could peel it all out before you put your American classic up on eBay. Let it take the dirt with it.

Burton took her hand, squeezed, pulling her up and in.

"You going to Davisville?" she asked.

"Leon's picking me up."

"Luke 4:5's protesting there. Shaylene said."

He shrugged, moving a lot of muscle but not by much.

"That was you, Burton. Last month. On the news. That funeral, in Carolina."

He didn't quite smile.

"You might've killed that boy."

He shook his head, just a fraction, eyes narrowed.

"Scares me, you do that shit."

"You still walking point, for that lawyer in Tulsa?"

"He isn't playing. Busy lawyering, I guess."

"You're the best he had. Showed him that."

"Just a game." Telling herself, more than him.

"Might as well been getting himself a Marine."

She thought she saw that thing the haptics did, then, that shiver, then gone.

"Need you to sub for me," he said, like nothing had happened. "Five-hour shift. Fly a quadcopter."

She looked past him to his display. Some Danish supermodel's legs, retracting into some brand of car nobody she knew would ever drive, or likely even see on the road. "You're on disability," she said. "Aren't supposed to work."

He looked at her.

"Where's the job?" she asked.

"No idea."

"Outsourced? VA'll catch you."

"Game," he said. "Beta of some game."

"Shooter?"

"Nothing to shoot. Work a perimeter around three floors of this tower, fifty-fifth to fifty-seventh. See what turns up."

"What does?"

"Paparazzi." He showed her the length of his index finger. "Little things. You get in their way. Edge 'em back. That's all you do."

"When?"

"Tonight. Get you set up before Leon comes."

"Supposed to help Shaylene, later."

"Give you two fives." He took his wallet from his jeans, edged out a pair of new bills, the little windows unscratched, holograms bright.

Folded, they went into the right front pocket of her cutoffs. "Turn the lights down," she said, "hurts my eyes."

He did, swinging his hand through the display, but then the place looked like a seventeen-year-old boy's bedroom. She reached over, flicked it up a little.

She sat in his chair. It was Chinese, reconfiguring to her height and weight as he pulled himself up an old metal stool, almost no paint left on it, waving a screen into view.

MILAGROS COLDIRON SA

"What's that?" she asked.

"Who we're working for."

"How do they pay you?"

"Hefty Pal."

"You'll get caught for sure."

"Goes to an account of Leon's," he said. Leon's Army service had been about the same time as Burton's in the Marines, but Leon wasn't due any disability. Wasn't, their mother said, like he could claim to have caught the dumbfuck there. Not that Flynne had ever thought Leon was anything but sly, under it all, and lazy. "Need my log-in and the password. Hat trick." How they both pronounced his tag, Hapt-Rec, to keep it private. He took an envelope from his back pocket, unfolded and opened it. The paper looked thick, creamy.

"That from Fab?"

He drew out a long slip of the same paper, printed with what looked to be a full paragraph of characters and symbols. "You scan it, or type it outside that window, we're out a job."

She picked up the envelope, from where it lay on what she guessed had been a fold-down dining table. It was one of Shaylene's top-shelf stationery items, kept literally on a top shelf. When letter orders came in from big companies, or lawyers, you went up there. She ran her thumb across the logo in the upper left corner. "Medellín?"

"Security firm."

"You said it's a game."

"That's ten thousand dollars, in your pocket."

"How long you been doing this?"

"Two weeks now. Sundays off."

"How much you get?"

"Twenty-five thousand per."

"Make it twenty, then. Short notice and I'm stiffing Shaylene."

He gave her another two fives.

# 2.
# DEATH COOKIE

Netherton woke to Rainey's sigil, pulsing behind his lids at the rate of a resting heartbeat. He opened his eyes. Knowing better than to move his head, he confirmed that he was in bed, alone. Both positive, under current circumstances. Slowly, he lifted his head from the pillow, until he could see that his clothes weren't where he assumed he would have dropped them. Cleaners, he knew, would have come from their nest beneath the bed, to drag them away, flense them of whatever invisible quanta of sebum, skin-flakes, atmospheric particulates, food residue, other.

"Soiled," he pronounced, thickly, having briefly imagined such cleaners for the psyche, and let his head fall back.

Rainey's sigil began to strobe, demandingly.

He sat up cautiously. Standing would be the real test. "Yes?"

Strobing ceased. "Un petit problème," Rainey said.

He closed his eyes, but then there was only her sigil. He opened them.

"She's your fucking problem, Wilf."

He winced, the amount of pain this caused startling him. "Have you always had this puritanical streak? I hadn't noticed."

"You're a publicist," she said. "She's a celebrity. That's interspecies."

His eyes, a size too large for their sockets, felt gritty. "She must be nearing the patch," he said, reflexively attempting to suggest that he was alert, in control, as opposed to disastrously and quite expectedly hungover.

"They're almost above it now," she said. "With your problem."

"What's she done?"

"One of her stylists," she said, "is also, evidently, a tattooist."

Again, the sigil dominated his private pain-filled dark. "She didn't," he said, opening his eyes. "She did?"

"She did."

"We had an extremely specific verbal on that."

"Fix it," she said. "Now. The world's watching, Wilf. As much of it as we've been able to scrape together, anyway. Will Daedra West make peace with the patchers, they wonder? Should they decide to back our project, they ask? We want yes, and yes."

"They ate the last two envoys," he said. "Hallucinating in synch with a forest of code, convinced their visitors were shamanic spirit beasts. I spent three entire days, last month, having her briefed at the Connaught. Two anthropologists, three neoprimitivist curators. No tattoos. A brand-new, perfectly blank epidermis. Now this."

"Talk her out of it, Wilf."

He stood, experimentally. Hobbled, naked, into the bathroom. Urinated as loudly as possible. "Out of what, exactly?"

"Parafoiling in—"

"That's been the plan—"

"In nothing but her new tattoos."

"Seriously? No."

"Seriously," she said.

"Their aesthetic, if you haven't noticed, is about benign skin cancers, supernumerary nipples. Conventional tattoos belong firmly among the iconics of the hegemon. It's like wearing your cock ring to meet the pope, and making sure he sees it. Actually, it's worse than that. What are they like?"

"Posthuman filth, according to you."

"The tattoos!"

"Something to do with the Gyre," she said. "Abstract."

"Cultural appropriation. Lovely. Couldn't be worse. On her face? Neck?"

"No, fortunately. If you can talk her into the jumpsuit we're printing on the moby, we may still have a project."

He looked at the ceiling. Imagined it opening. Himself ascending. Into he knew not what.

"Then there's the matter of our Saudi backing," she said, "which is considerable. Visible tattoos would be a stretch, there. Nudity's nonnegotiable."

"They might take it as a signal of sexual availability," he said, having done so himself.

"The Saudis?"

"The patchers."

"They might take it as her offer to be lunch," she said. "Their last, either way. She's a death cookie, Wilf, for the next week or so. Anyone so much as steals a kiss goes into anaphylactic shock. Something with her thumbnails, too, but we're less clear about that."

He wrapped his waist in a thick white towel. Considered the carafe of water on the marble countertop. His stomach spasmed.

"Lorenzo," she said, as an unfamiliar sigil appeared, "Wilf Netherton has your feed, in London."

He almost vomited, then, at the sudden input: bright saline light above the Garbage Patch, the sense of forward motion.

# 3.
# PUSHING BUGS

She managed to get off the phone with Shaylene without mentioning Burton. Shaylene had gone out with him a few times in high school, but she'd gotten more interested when he'd come back from the Marines, with that chest and the stories around town about Haptic Recon 1. Flynne figured Shaylene was basically doing what the relationship shows called romanticizing pathology. Not that there was a whole lot better available locally.

She and Shaylene both worried about Burton getting in trouble over Luke 4:5, but that was about all they agreed on, when it came to him. Nobody liked Luke 4:5, but Burton had a bad thing about them. She had a feeling they were just convenient, but it still scared her. They'd started out as a church, or in a church, not liking anyone being gay or getting abortions or using birth control. Protesting military funerals, which was a thing. Basically they were just assholes, though, and took it as the measure of God's satisfaction with them that everybody else thought they were assholes. For Burton, they were a way around whatever kept him in line the rest of the time.

She leaned forward now, to squint under the table for the black nylon case he kept his tomahawk in. Wouldn't want him going up to Davisville with that. He called it an axe, not a tomahawk, but an axe was something you chopped wood with. She reached under, hooked it out, relieved to feel the weight. Didn't need to open it, but she did. Case was widest at the top, allowing for the part you'd have chopped wood with. More like the blade of a chisel, but hawk-billed. Where the back of an axe would've been flat, like the face of a hammer, it was

spiked, like a miniature of the blade but curved the other way. Either one thick as your little finger, but ground to edges you wouldn't feel as you cut yourself. Handle was graceful, a little recurved, the wood soaked in something that made it tougher, springy. The maker had a forge in Tennessee, and everyone in Haptic Recon 1 got one. It looked used. Careful of her fingers, she closed the case and put it back under the table.

She swung her phone through the display, checking Badger's map of the county. Shaylene's badge was in Forever Fab, an anxious segment of purple in its emo ring. Nobody looked to be up to much, which wasn't exactly a surprise. Madison and Janice were gaming, Sukhoi Flankers, vintage flight sims being Madison's main earner. They both had their rings beige, for bored shitless, but then they always had them that way. Made four people she knew working tonight, counting her.

She bent her phone the way she liked it for gaming, thumbed HaptRec into the log-in window, entered the long-ass password. Flicked GO. Nothing happened. Then the whole display popped, like the flash of a camera in an old movie, silvered like the marks of the haptics. She blinked.

And then she was rising, out of what Burton said would be a launch bay in the roof of a van. Like she was in an elevator. No control yet. And all around her, and he hadn't told her this, were whispers, urgent as they were faint, like a cloud of invisible fairy police dispatchers.

And this other evening light, rainy, rose and silver, and to her left a river the color of cold lead. Dark tumble of city, towers in the distance, few lights.

Camera down giving her the white rectangle of the van, shrinking in the street below. Camera up, the building towered away forever, a cliff the size of the world.