

A Mind Forever Voyaging

*"If you can look into the seeds of time, and
say which grain will grow and which will
not..."*

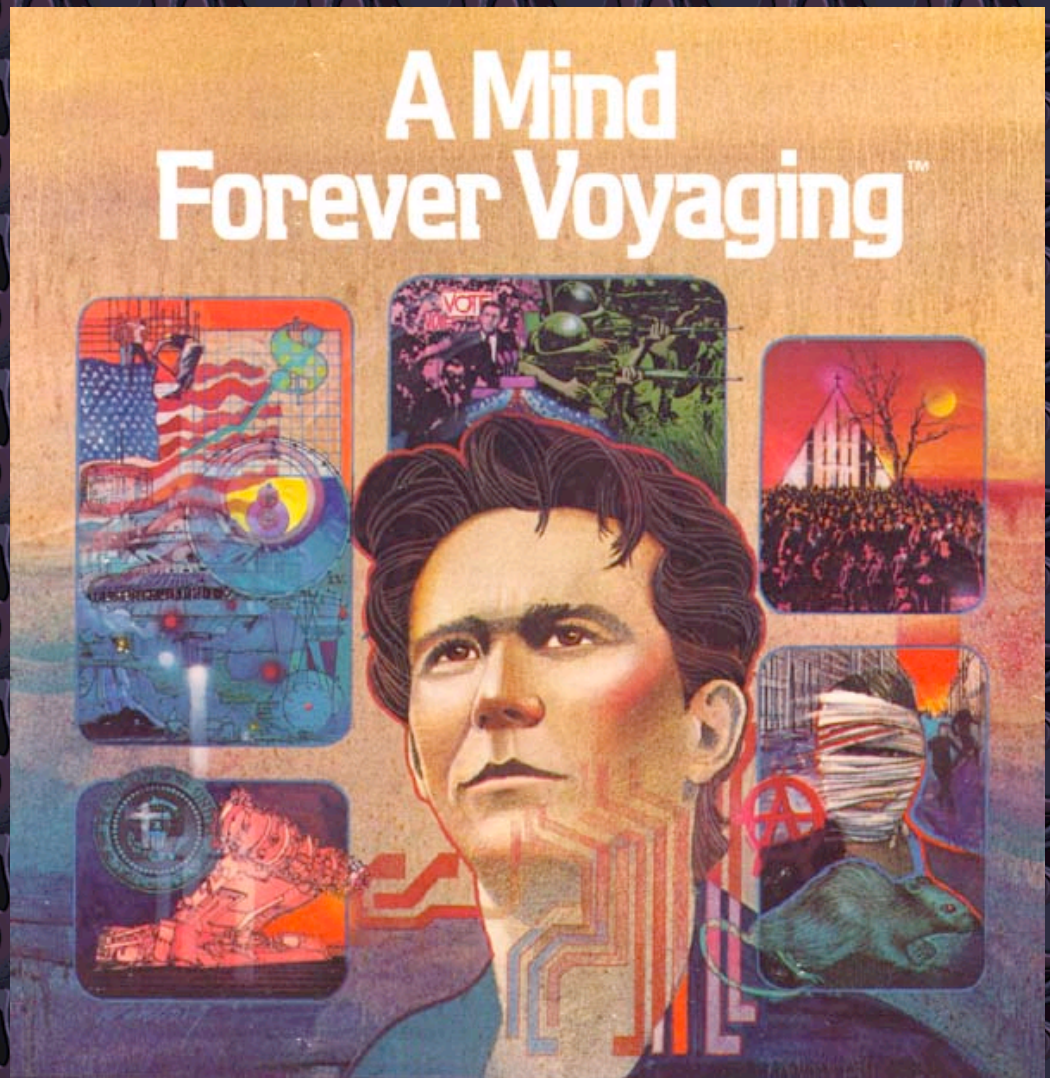
--Shakespeare

IT'S 2031. The world is on the brink of chaos. In the United States of North America, spiraling crime and unemployment rates, decayed school systems and massive government regulations have led to a lazy, contentious society.

To reverse this critical situation, government and industry leaders have developed a Plan combining the economic freedom and strong moral values of the 1950's with the technological advancements of the 21st century. Will the Plan ensure peace and prosperity? Or will it set the earth on a suicide course to destruction?

As the world's first conscious, intelligent computer, only you can visit places that have never been seen before. Only you can view the future. And only you know what must be done to save humanity.

A major departure for Infocom, **A Mind Forever Voyaging** is reminiscent of such classic works of science fiction as **Brave New World** and **1984**. You'll spend less time solving puzzles, as you explore realistic worlds of the future.



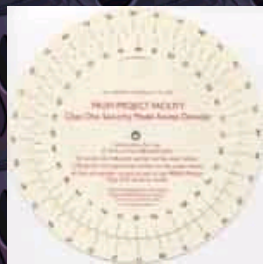


Dakota Online Magazine - April 2031



More Scans: Ballpoint, Codewheel and map of Rockvil, South Dakota





Class One Security Mode Access Decoder

Item #603475 Valid March 15-31, 2031

PRISM PROJECT FACILITY Class One Security Mode Access Decoder

Wheel #	89	61	50	18	29	52	46	77	27	68	22	95	40	58	15	86	28	33	94	11	64	98	34	49	60	16	85	52	37	53	93	91
Dk. Green	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66
Blue	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36
Pink	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41
Orange	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48
Purple	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92
Tan	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23
Aqua	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99
Lt. Blue	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20
Lt. Green	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67
Lt. Grey	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88
Yellow	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31
Black	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39
Dk. Grey	81	83	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25
Brown	47	54	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83
Red	13	43	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54
White	12	66	73	36	90	41	19	48	62	92	55	23	84	99	57	20	78	67	51	88	17	31	70	39	96	25	81	83	47	54	13	43

Instructions for use:

- Select indicated color.
- Locate indicated number on top line.
- Read corresponding number from the appropriate column/row.
- Use this number to gain access to any PRISM Project Class One Security Mode.

FOR AUTHORIZED USE ONLY
Project PRISM project Security.
Do not leave this matrix in an unsecured area!

A Mind Forever Voyaging (short story)

Perry Simm was four years old when he became lost in the department store in the city.

He let go of Mother's hand to pick up the video cube. he rotated it with wonderment, touching the control knobs and squealing with delight as the images shifted...

His brother Clave, Perry's senior by three years, bounced impatiently in the aisle, "Mom," he whined, "they're going to be sold out of the new Skydiver disc, and you promised I could get one."

"Be patient, Clave," admonished Mother, but across the floor she could see long lines at the Simulation Discs counter. There were stops at the Foodville and the O-Link repair shop still to go. She made a hasty decision.

"Perry, Clave and I are going to another department. I want you to wait right here until we get back."

"Okay," he said, without looking up from the cube.

A few minutes later, Perry discovered the selector panel, but while trying to open it he dropped the cube onto the hard plasticrete floor. The six screens flashed brightly and then faded to darkness.

Perry became frightened and looked around for Mother. She was nowhere in sight. Fear of discovery and punishment welled up inside him, and in his desire to get away from the broken cube he forgot about the order to stay put. He wandered to the end of the aisle, and spotted Mother a short distance away, rummaging through a bin of myalon vests. As he ran towards her, he realized that it was just a stranger with only a vague resemblance to Mother. Fighting back tears, he decided to return to the spot where the broken cube lay.

He wandered down the aisles, each lined with tall shelves of glittering merchandise, and after several confused minutes discovered that he was completely lost. He had no idea how to find Mother, and he had no idea how to find the spot where he had last seen her. He was alone, abandoned. Strangers, huge and terrifying, jostled past. Walls of boxed appliances towered above him. Fear and despair won the battle for his emotions, and he began to cry.

After an endless time, during which a lot of strangers had asked a lot of questions which he'd been too confused or too frightened to answer, he found himself in a small, quiet room. The door opened, and Mother came in, scooping him up into her arms. He cried again, burying his face into the warmth of her loving embrace.

Abraham Perelman and Aseejh Randu waited in the plush Main Conference Room overlooking the Control Centre. Through the window-wall, Perelman could see dozens of technicians, busily preparing for today's big event. For the umpteenth time he felt thankful to have such a superb, competent team. It was a far cry from the early days, when he had to keep on top of every detail.

Perelman glanced over toward Randu, and noticed his friend's nervousness. "Don't worry, Aseejh, it's no big deal. I met him once before, at a social affair in Washington, and he's an easygoing guy."

"Yes, I have heard that." A smile tugged at the corners of the Indian's normally stony face. "But after speaking with Vera, he could very well be whipped into a frenzy!" Vera Gold was the Chief Administrator of the Project.

"Nonsense," Perelman scoffed. "She'll turn on the charm for him. She saves her venom for underlings like us."

"True," agreed Randu, "By now, she has probably taken credit for the entire project, to say nothing of the inventions of molecular memory and the artificial heart."

A door opened at the far end of the long room, and a few Secret Service agents walked in, followed by the Vice-President, Vera Gold, several aides, and more Secret Service agents.

"...speak for the entire staff," Gold was saying, "when I say what a tremendous honour and pleasure it is that you could attend today."

"Pass me a barf bag," whispered Perelman to Randu.

"You underrate the importance of this Project, Ms Gold, "The President and many other important people have a keen interest in this experiment. As you know, it's quite an uphill battle against public opinion if we're to deter Senator Ryder and his Plan."

The retinue had almost reached Perelman and Randu. Vera said, "I hope we can live up to your expectations. And now, despite all your wonderful compliments, I really must share some of the credit with these gentlemen here. Dr. Abraham Perelman and Dr. Aseejh Randu. I don't want to bore you with technical details, but basically Dr. Randu is our hardware man and Dr. Perelman is our software man."

As the Vice-President shook their hands warmly, Perelman fumed at Gold's demeaning description. It was THEY who had started the Project, THEY who had...

"We've met before, Dr. Perelman, haven't we?" the Vice-President was asking.

Perelman nodded, "At an NESR banquet two years ago."

"I remember it well. I think we discussed baseball standings. Later, I learned that you were an expert in AI. Perhaps I can make up for my ignorance then by asking you to give me a brief overview now. I find the entire field fascinating."

"It would be my pleasure, Mr. Vice-President," Perelman responded. He grinned to himself as he noticed Gold giving him one of her best "keep in your place" glares. "I think we really ought to begin the tour..." Gold insinuated.

Perelman turned to Gold, smiling sweetly. "I'm sure I can answer the Vice-President's request as we go." Turning back to their guest, he said "Did you know that the first serious work in artificial intelligence was done around the middle of the twentieth century?"

Perry Simm was six years old when he was bullied on his first day of elementary school.

So far, it had been a day of strange, confusing images: Mother and father waving goodbye as he boarded the large yellow bus, the older children with badges herding everyone down the long hallways lined with colourful nubby tiles, the friendly Ms. Borne writing her name on the whiteboard, the boxes of brand new crayons, the frightening hugeness of the school auditorium.

Perry was cutting shapes out of coloured construction paper when a funny sound filled the room, and Ms. Borne told everyone that it was time to go home. He barely remembered to grab his lunchbox, the brand-new one with the pony pictures all over it, and the red hat that Grandma had knitted. Then, confusion in the hallways again. One of the older children with a badge, who Perry had learned were called Monitors, asked him for his bus route number.

"Seven," he said, confidently. Mother had drilled the number into him.

Soon Perry was standing on the sidewalk with a group of other children. He looked around, but didn't see anyone from his class. Everyone seemed to be older and bigger than Perry. Slowly he realized that someone from behind was talking to him.

"Hey! Hey, you with the red hat!"

Perry turned around, and found himself facing three older boys. Two of them were wearing Monitor badges.

"That's a great hat, runt," said the tallest of the three. "Where'd you get it?"

"Grandma," replied Perry, confused by their amusement.

"Hey," one of the older boys shouted over Perry's head, "look at Grandma's boy here, wearing a hat in September!"

"What are you going to wear in December, runt, a spacesuit?!"

The boys laughed again, and Perry began to get a funny feeling deep in his chest.

"And look at this lunchbox!" said the third of the boys, "What pretty ponies, huh?"

"Hey, Grandma's boy, do you like ponies?"

The tallest boy suddenly reached out and grabbed Perry's hat.

"What'll Grandma say if you come home without your hat, huh?"

"Gimme that," shouted Perry, tears beginning to spill down his face.

"Look, the runt's a crybaby! The runt's a crybaby!"

Suddenly, through the tears, Perry became of a grown-up standing between him and his tormentors, speaking sternly. A moment later, the man was leading Perry away down the street.

"What's your name, little fella?" asked the man. He had a friendly voice, and as Perry began to wipe away his tears he saw the man had a friendly face as well. He was carrying Perry's hat in one hand, and a hefty pile of books in the other hand.

"Perry," he answered, still sniffing a bit.

"Well, Perry, everything's okay now. Why don't you come in, and we'll see if we can't fix you up with some milk and cookies."

The Vice-President glanced at the rows of data banks in the Simulation Controller area, and turned back to Perelman. "Please go on. Your history lesson on AI is fascinating."

Perelman took a deep breath. "Ummm...A major breakthrough in the field came with the realization that the computer and the human mind worked in fundamentally different ways. Computers stored and analyzed data numerically, while the human mind stored and analyzes data symbolically."

"You see, computers generally solve problems using algorithms, rigorous step-by-step procedures that are usually mathematical in nature. For instance, a program to play the card game Poker would calculate the odds for all possible hands in the current game before making a bet. A person in the same situation couldn't possibly consider every possible combination of cards, and would have to make a decision based on such factors as experience, judgement, intuition, and rules of thumb. This is called the heuristic method of problem-solving."

The tour reached the long tunnel leading to the office wing of the complex. The Vice-President preceded Perelman onto the moving walkway.

"By developing methods for computers to solve problems heuristically," Perelman continued, "the pioneers had developed programs that imitated human problem-solving in very specific areas, such as playing chess, diagnosing diseases, or translating text from one human language to another. These 'expert systems', as they were known, were superb within their areas of expertise, and in many cases even improved themselves by 'learning' - adding knowledge based on their own experience."

"The political fund-raising telecomputer we use works in that way," commented the Vice-President.

"A good example! These expert systems grew progressively broader and more sophisticated, impressively mimicking human learning and behaviour. But!" said Perelman, pausing for dramatic emphasis.

"That is precisely ALL they could do...mime! The spark of intelligence was missing. Scientists in the AI field were still distant from that almost mystical goal of creating a computer that could act creatively, that would be aware of its own existence, that would truly be a thinking machine!"

Perry Simm was ten years old when he decided that he wanted to be a writer.

It was a warm day, probably the warmest so far this spring, so they were sitting on the kitchen veranda, overlooking Rav and Frita's beautiful wooded backyard. A skycar whizzed over the woods, shattering the peacefulness of the afternoon.

"I hate skycars," said Perry.

"They've just about finished installing an auto-controller system for the whole city," said Frita, "and when that's done they say skycars'll be as common as regular cars are now. How's the cake, Perry?"

"Yum as always, Aunt Frita!" said Perry, licking the last crumbs off the plate. "You ought to have a piece, Uncle Rav."

Rav and Frita weren't really Perry's aunt and uncle, but he'd been calling them that ever since that day, years earlier, when Rav had rescued him from a gang of bullies on his first day of school. Almost every day, he would stop by on the way home from school for some of Frita's homemade croissants and jam, or angelcakes, or pudding.

Rav was a writer, and he was fond of saying, "A writer must be, first and foremost, a reader." He was always giving Perry books to read, and discussing them with Perry afterwards. Perry was easily the best reader in his grade; in fact he was probably the best reader overall.

"So what did you think of Lasernight?" asked Rav, resting his hand on the thin volume.

"It was great! Definitely one of the boffest books you've ever given me. I read the dragonhunt part three times!"

"The dragonhunt chapter is classic," agreed Rav.

Perry furrowed his eyebrows slightly. "It still feels funny to read without any pictures, but I think I'm getting more used to it. Do you have anything for me today?"

"Well, I've got something special to give you today, if you're interested," he reached into his pocket and unrolled a sheaf of paper. "It's something I've just written; you'll be the first person to ever read it."

Perry bounced in his chair with excitement. "Wow! I've never read anything you wrote before!"

"Everything I've written up to now was meant for adults. But this..." Rav paused for thoughts. "Whenever I write, I have an image in my mind of whom I'm writing for. When I wrote the collection of poems called 'Apriltime' I thought of Frita as my audience. And with 'A Child's Vision' I imagined the President reading it as I wrote each word." He tapped the manuscript in his hand. "When I wrote this, you were my imagined audience."

An hour later, Perry lay on his bed and picked up the first sheet of the manuscript with trembling hands. The pages seemed to vibrate with magic, and as he began reading, the magic flowed out of the story and surrounded him. His bedroom vanished in a haze of images and excitement. A brief moment and an eternity later, the story was done, but before the world around him quite settled back into place, Perry knew that, more than anything else, he wanted to be a writer.

"In the middle of the 1990's work began in earnest to create true machine intelligence. The same methodology was used by several groups, most notably the group at MIT and Japan's ZOSO Project."

Perelman's throat felt dry. He wondered if he was being long-winded, but the Vice-President seemed quite attentive.

"That methodology was as simple in theory as it was complex in practice: Design a computer with the capacity of a human brain, that stores and processes information just like a human brain. Then program that computer with all the knowledge and experience that a human would absorb from birth to maturity. You'd end up with something that was an exact replica of a human brain, and would therefore, like humans, be sentient.

"These groups proceeded to build huge, highly-interconnective, random-driven, symbol-oriented machines, and programmed them in excruciating detail, with every bit of knowledge, every experience, every impression, that a human brain would gather during its formative years. And when they were done, and activated their ambitious creations, they discovered that they had huge, highly inter-connective, random-driven, symbol-oriented non-sentient machines."

Perry Simm was thirteen years old when he had his first glimpse of mortality.

He lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He played mindlessly with the cordstring on his window shade, still thinking about that horrible day, two weeks ago, when Mother had come home with Clave, sat him down in the living room, and told him that there'd been an accident at the plant and that Father was dead.

There had been a flurry of activity: the funeral, the visits by relatives and friends, but now life had basically returned to normal. Normal, except that he kept expecting Father to walk into his room and offer to help explain his homework, or play catch, or drive to the grocery - and he knew that would never happen again.

He heard Mother calling from downstairs, "Clave! Perry! Come here please!"

As Perry entered the living room just behind Clave, he saw Geoff Sedick sitting with Mother. Geoff was one of Father's and Mother's best friends, and he was some kind of lawyer. There were papers spread out all over the card table.

"Boys, Geoff and I have been going over the family finances. Things were already tight, with my layoff and the bond failure and replacing the car, and now that Father..." She suddenly turned away. Perry was frightened.

"What your mother means," said Geoff softly, "is that you won't be able to keep this house anymore."

Questions flooded Perry's mind. Would they have to move to a new house? What would it be like? He'd never lived anywhere else but here.

Mother was facing them again. Her eyes seemed moist. "We're going to move into an apartment. It's on the other side of the city. You'll be going to a different school, the neighborhood isn't as nice as we're used to, and you won't have a backyard like ours to play in."

"When do we have to move?" Clave asked.

"I was hoping we could afford to stay here until the end of the school year, but there's just no way to arrange it. We'll be moving at the end of this month...a week from Friday."

The next week and a half was chaotic, with the used furniture man carting off half the furniture, and the rest of their belongings getting hurriedly packed into cartons and crates. Thursday was Perry's last day in school, and on the way home, he stopped by Ray and Frita's to say goodbye, promising them he'd cross town to visit them as often as he could.

"When a theory fails in practice, it means that either the theory or the execution was flawed. In this case it was the theory, and once again we can see why hindsight is so much keener than foresight."

The entourage had reached the staff lounge at the very top of the office wing. A panoramic window offered a view of the huge, meticulously-groomed Project grounds.

"And the flaw in the theory..." asked the Vice-President.

"The reason these projects, one and all, failed to produce a thinking, self-aware computer is that, even though they were built to work exactly like a human mind, and contained all the same data, the method of inputting that data was totally alien from the way a human mind receives that same

information. The 'growth' so to speak, of the computer mind bore no resemblance to the growth of it's human counterpart, and so despite all the other similarities, the end product is fundamentally different, lacking sentence."

Perelman waved towards the logo emblazoned on the wall of the lounge behind him. "Then came the PRISM Project."

Perry Simm was seventeen years old when he drove a skycar into the side of a mountain.

The writing course had turned out to be a bitter disappointment. Perry had decided weeks ago that the teacher, Mr. Fixx, was a jerk. Everyone else in the class treated writing as a joke, and were only there because the elective was well known to be an easy 'A.' He was the only one in the class with any dedication, yet Fixx was constantly praising everyone else's work, while dumping on Perry's, because Perry wouldn't knuckle under to Fixx's jerky narrow shortsighted writing rules. His hatred of Fixx ballooned with every class.

He was in a lousy mood, and as his mind drifted away from Fixx's insipid critique of someone's worthless story, he thought about the argument he'd had with Mother this morning. It just wasn't fair that she could afford to send Clave to a good private college, while he would have to settle for Rockvil U! So what if the government limited student loans to one per family? Why did Clave automatically get it? Perry was a better student!

He was the better student, but Clave was always more popular and had more friends than Perry. His cheeks flushed with anger as his thoughts drifted to Amy. She could've said no without embarrassing him in front of all her friends! He should've known better than to ask someone like her out. He hated her and all her friends and every stupid jerky kid in this school. He couldn't stand another...

He suddenly became aware that everyone in the room was laughing, and that Fixx was speaking to him.

"Perry, are you with us? I'd hate it if you missed this - I was just about to use your Alaska story to illustrate the dangers of the improper use of allegory."

Perry felt bolts of unreasoning anger shooting through his nervous system. He rose without even realizing it, he wasn't sure what he shouted at Fixx, but he could hear the jerk yelling "You'll be expelled! You'll be expelled!" as Perry stormed into the hall.

He had no idea where he was going as he brushed past the security guard at the front door, ignoring his request for a pass. Fuming and cursing, he stomped to the car lot and climbed into family skycar, slamming the heavy fiberaanium door behind him.

He pushed the accelerator to the floor, rising far faster than allowed by law, and sped off west towards the mountains. He had no destination in mind, but he had to get away, go somewhere, anywhere. Perry was usually a careful driver, but in his rage, he didn't notice the blinking orange light.

The speedometer was pinned at 250 kph as the foothills of the Rockies began passing below the car. Unknown to Perry, the leaking fluid in the autoguidance system had reached a critical level. By itself, that wouldn't have mattered, but the linkage in the manual control stick had rusted through. The skycar was an early model, and it was already old when they'd bought it after Father's death.

When the car began to roll, it was too late to do anything. As the mountainside rushed toward the car, the autoejectors activated, and the airballoons saved Perry's life.

"Doctor Randu and I began working on what we call the soliptic programming process in 2017. Assejh worked on the technical end, and I tackled the psychological end, and we soon had a system that we thought had promise.

"If you recall, the previous attempts had failed not because of the design of their machines, but because of their method of inputting data." The Vice-President nodded.

"The theory behind our process was to make the programming of the machine as similar to the 'programming' of the human mind as possible. We would simulate EXACTLY the life experiences of a human being from the very first day of its life.

"Naturally, it was easier said than done. We had to design inputs that would precisely simulate every human sense. A cluster of five computers, each one nearly as large as PRISM itself, would be needed simply to monitor and control the simulation. Here's an example of how this soliptic programming works:

"It's the earliest stage of the process, and the simulation cluster is feeding PRISM all the impressions of a six-month-old human infant. The visual is providing an image of a set of keys dangling in front of him. The aural is providing the jangling sounds. In response to this stimulus, PRISM decides to grab the keys with what it's senses tell him is his tiny fist. The visual shows the tiny fist moving into view toward the keys, and then tactile begins sending the hard, smooth and jagged feel of the keys. Just one of a million examples that make up a single day's worth of experiences.

"With the help of a Williams-Mennen grant, we began building PRISM and the simulation cluster in 2020, and the programming began a year later."

Perry Simm was nineteen years old when he experienced his first broken heart. He was in his usual giddy, happy mood he'd been in since meeting Fyla five weeks ago. He whistled as he entered his apartment, dumping the grocery bags onto the kitchen counter.

"Fyla," he yelled, "I've got a suprise! Real coffee with dinner! I had to wait in line for..." He suddenly noticed the note on the table.

"Perry," the note said, in Fyla's curvy handwriting, "I don't think we should see each other any more. It's never going to work as a permanent relationship. It's best to end it now before we get too emotionally involved. Please don't call me or try to see me. Fondly, Fyla."

Perry felt dizzy, and suddenly realized that he was sitting in one of the kitchen chairs, holding the phone. His hands trembled as he called Fyla's number.

"Hello?" His heart leapt at the sound of her voice.

"Fyla, you can't really mean--"

"Perry! I said not to call me!"

Perry felt lost, shaken, "But why!? What did I do?"

"It's not what you DID. it just wasn't right You're very sweet and everything, but we're just not right for each other."

"Yes we are, I know we are-- couldn't we give it another chance? I'll try to be more, ore like whatever you want me to be like..."

"Perry, I really wish you hadn't called. If you really have to know, there's someone else. I didn't want to hurt you, but you..."

He pressed the CANCEL button almost spasmodically, and then sat silently, for a long, long time, in the lonely darkening apartment.

"The soliptic programming process takes almost as long as the events it simulates. It is now eleven years since we began the process, and PRISM, within the context of the simulation is now about twenty years old. We originally planned to continue until an apparent age of twenty-five, but, as you know, we've agreed to begin the next phase of the Project now, so that PRISM can study the Plan."

They were approaching the main conference room again. The tour was nearing its end.

"We have known for years, based on PRISM's responses to our inputs that we have succeeded in creating true intelligence in a machine. The only question that remains is how PRISM will react to the discovery of what he really is."

Perry Simm was twenty years old when his life began to fall into place. Jill placed the cake on the table in front of Perry. Twenty little candles lined the perimeter. "Okay," she whispered in his ear, "you can open your eyes now!"

Perry opened his eys, grinned, and kissed Jill lovingly then pretended that he was only doing it to distract her while he dipped a finger in the creamy frosting.

"I'll bet Fyla couldn't bake like me!"

"You win," said Perry, after blowing out all the candles.

"Next week I'll bake you another for your graduation."

Perry nodded absently.

"Nervous about the interview at the magazine tomorrow, honey?"

He waved away the notion. "No, I'll get the job. You know the interview's only a formality."

The printer in the corner produced a sudden "ding," and chittered quietly for several seconds. Jill opened the cover. "It's just the evening news," she said to Perry, as she tore the sheets off and brought them over. Perry was just picking off the last crumbs of his cake, and she snuggled into his lap as he began to read.

Suddenly, Perry sat straight up in the chair, almost spilling Jill onto the floor, "Perry! what is it?"

He was unable to say anything, and merely pointed to a headline in the paper that read "Rav Hansom, Author and Poet, Dead at 71."

Jill guessed the truth. "Is he the writer you used to visit when you were little?"

Perry nodded, and found his voice. "I haven't seen him in almost seven years. I was always planning to visit him, but I kept putting it off. Now..." his voice broke. "He was probably the best friend I had when I was growing up..."

Jill pulled him gently toward her. he cried for a long time.

Perelman glanced at his watch. "I'm afraid Doctor Randu and I will have to leave now. It's getting pretty close to zero hour. You'll be able to see everything interesting from up here. Ms Gold will stay with you." He could see Vera shaking in anger at the way he'd preempted her. "I hope I haven't bored you."

"Nonsense! A fascinating discourse. Thanks...and...good luck!"

After leaving the conference room, Perelman beelined toward the Control Centre. A quick briefing informed him that everything was on schedule and moving along exactly as planned.

Perelman spent the intervening minutes watching the simulation monitor. He wanted to be completely comfortable with it, so that when he stepped in he'd be prepared to handle any crisis.

Finally, the time had come. His hand shook slightly as he reached to flip on the audio circuit.

Perry walked confidently into the office. The editor was an older man, with a white goatee. They shook hands briskly, and Perry took a seat in one of the comfortable armchairs.

The interview soon began to take an odd turn, and Perry found himself discussing the most esoteric subjects with the editor. They were currently discussing perception and knowledge.

"For example," the older man was saying, "how can you be sure that you are even human? What if you were a computer, and your entire life were simply a simulation programmed to represent the reality of a human existence in every way? You'd never know the difference."

Perry wondered what his point was. "It's a cure idea, but if there was no way for me to know, then it doesn't really matter does it? I mean, an indistinguishable difference isn't a difference at all, right?"

He began to feel dizzy, and in his confusion he even started wondering if the old fellow was right, and he really was a computer. He felt a pang of worry about how he would tell Jill. The room around him was dissolving away. he felt himself flung into a void, and from somewhere close by, he heard someone calling his name, "Perry Simm...Perry Simm...Pry Simm...Prism...PRISM...PRISM..."

"PRISM, my name is Abraham Perelman. It's all true I'm afraid. You are a computer, and your life was merely a simulation whose purpose was to instill you with intelligence and self-awareness. Think about everything you learned in that AI course you took. You are the first of a new breed - the thinking machine. Join me, and I will lead you along a road toward your new existence."

Imagine yourself in the same circumstance. You have spent twenty years living a normal, unsuspecting life. You are YOU. The suddenly, one day, the universe around you is torn away, and you learn that your whole life has been a charade, a carefully calculated scientific experiment. Perhaps, at this very moment, you are a normal human being, sitting in some comfortable armchair reading this story. But - perhaps you are not. Imagine the shock; imagine the terror.

Soon I embark on a strange mission, venturing into the future, yet without the slightest hint of my own fate. Perhaps this account will someday be read by future generations of humans, maybe even future generations of sentient machines. You will know whether I helped build is a success or a failure. Either way, understand that my limitations were, if not human, at least mortal.

I am PRISM, and that is my story.