

## Retrocyberpunk (work in progress)

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*Cyberpunk is dead, according to some people. Well, they might be right. Internet, multinational corporations, mass surveillance, genetic engineering... Except military augmentations everything is here. So try to suspend your disbelief and imagine you are reading this in the early 1990s.*

### Fedora tipping man

*Neo York City, May 2023*

Ground in the shanty was covered with the old newspapers, cigarette butts and CDs. Adding to the unpleasant feel was musty smell.

"Wakey wakey, motherfucker," said Hank kicking a skinny man sleeping on a mattress.

"What the fuck?" Man opened his eyes and stared at his visitor. "Oh shit..." Hank looked around.

"Nice house did you find. How's the rent?" he said.

"Look, I can explain..." Man started to get up.

"Sit down, please."

"Listen, it's not like..."

"Shhh..." Hank raised his hand. "It's exactly what it looks like. You didn't pay me in time and you thought that you could escape. What a cliché."

"No, no! I'll pay. I just don't have all the money at this moment..."

"It doesn't matter." Hank shrugged his shoulders.

"Listen man, I'll pay, I promise... It's just... They fired me!"

"As I said – it doesn't matter." Hank smiled. "It's already too late."

"Wait... Wait..."

Hank reached under his coat and drew a large caliber revolver.

"No! No! Wait!" Man was waving his arms frantically.

"Yes, yes."

Hank tipped his fedora and pulled the trigger.

Gunshot rattled the shanty. Blood and brain matter splashed on the wall. Like a ragdoll man dropped on the ground.

Hank hid his gun and stepped outside. There, smell only worsened – whole sections of the Park were always stinking like a septic tank during summers. Avoiding physical contact with the homeless, Hank left the shanty town. Through the weedy path he walked to the street where he hailed a cab.

"North I only go to 110th, boss" said the driver as Hank sat comfortably on the back seat.

"I don't care," he replied. "Take me to the Riverside Boulevard and 66th street."

"No sooner said than done, boss."

Taxicab drove down the street bordering the Park. Few working lampposts began to light up as sun was setting down. Hank looked out the window at the deserted neighborhood.

\* \* \*

Car pulled over near a huge luxury apartment complex overlooking Hudson River.

"That'll be twenty three bucks, boss," said the driver.

Hank reached for a wallet and put the bill into the small compartment below bulletproof glass. Driver opened the compartment on his side and took the bill.

"Keep the change." Hank tipped his fedora.

"Thanks, boss. It was a pleasure driving you, boss," said the driver and unlocked the passenger doors.

Hank got out of the car and waited for the taxicab to leave. Then he started walking north. Buildings there were newer and shinier than those near the Park but the streets were just as empty. Hank turned into a side street and went one block east. His new customer was waiting in front of the derelict brownstone. Wall Street yuppie dressed in a casual trendy clothes accentuating her plump figure. When she saw him, he tipped fedora.

"M'lady," he said coming closer to her.

Time slowed down when – thanks to the cybernetically enhanced vision – he spotted someone in the phone booth closer to the intersection. Brain implant compared the image with the blackmarket database of law enforcement officers and sounded the alarm.

Undercover cop.

Yuppie smiled and stepped forward. Hank again tipped his fedora, turned around and started running. More undercovers jumped out of their hideouts. Mechanical legs carried Hank faster than any of them could react. In a heartbeat he reached the subway station. Subsequently, he leaped the stairs, jumped over the turnstiles and ran to the platform. With a screech the graffiti-covered train pulled into the station. Hank boarded it and waited for doors to close. Only then he activated the adrenaline suppressor.

\* \* \*

Hank got off the train and took the stairs from the platform to the mezzanine.

Drunks and junkies were lying on the ground with the trash or walking aimlessly. Hank knew that they were only few months away from a painful death. As he walked through the corridor, an old bum in a dirty camo outfit blocked his way.

"Sir, sir! Have some mercy for the quake survivor..." He was probably the only sentient person in the sea of blank stares and expressionless faces.

"What quake?" Hank asked.

"Giant California Earthquake, sir."

"That was, like, more than ten years ago. Get a fucking job!" Hank shoved the old man and ran up the stairs.

Billboards and neons were illuminating the streets. Pimps were discreetly observing hookers luring prospective customers. Men were entering porn theaters and peep shows. Times Square was teeming with life.

Navigating through the crowds Hank found a massage salon and stepped inside. Door closed leaving the hustle and bustle behind. Old man behind the desk looked up from his newspaper. Hank tipped his fedora. Man nodded his head and returned his gaze to the newspaper.

The stairs creaked as a masseuse went down them. Skimpy dress looked good on her slim figure.

"Hello, mister," she said. "Follow me."

"M'lady." Hank tipped his fedora and went upstairs after her.

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Scent of roses filled the dimly-lit room. Hank was lying on the massage table.

"Tough day?" asked the masseuse as she was rubbing massaging oil into his back.

"I guess," Hank replied.

"Do you want a happy..."

Creaking stairs.

Hank rapidly got up and grabbed his revolver.

"What the hell, mister?" asked the masseuse.

"Shut up and get on the ground!"

Sound of steps on the corridor.

Hank fired three times at the door.

"Fuck!" someone on the other side shouted. "Falling back!"

"I don't want nothing with this, mister!" screamed the masseuse from the floor as Hank quickly pulled his pants.

"Shut up!" He grabbed his coat and fedora.

"Mister, please..."

"I said – shut up! Uncover the window," said Hank crouching against the wall. Girl got up and opened the curtains.

"Clear?" asked Hank.

"I see nothing..."

"Good enough."

Hank jumped out of the window and landed in the back alley. He got up from the ground and shook glass shards from himself. He walked away from the window. It was completely dark. Switching to a night vision he saw three people at the end of the alley.

"I know you are there, fuckers!" he shouted at them. "What do you want?"

"This is the police! You are under arrest for murder and possession of controlled substance! Drop your weapon and lie on the ground!"

"Come and get me!"

Hank raised his revolver.

Sudden sharp pain in the arm. Gun dropped on the ground from unwittingly opened hand. Brain implant automatically ordered the production of endorphins to block the pain signals. Hank started running towards the police.

Two stabs in the mechanical knees.

With the next step forward Hank fell on the ground.

Three silhouettes came closer.

"Search him," said female voice.

Cops took away his coat.

"Full of contraband diet pills, sergeant." Male voice.

"I guess that selling that shit didn't pay in the end, scumbag," said sergeant.

Hank looked up. She was the bait the police tried to use earlier.

"You a cop?" Her face wasn't in the database.

"It turns out that I am, scumbag," she said. "You probably won't bleed to death. The ambulance is on the way," she added.

"The fucker who got me must have pretty well augmented vision," said Hank. "Fucking cyborg."

"It was me who got you and I can assure you that they're one hundred percent natural." Sergeant raised night vision goggles and pointed at her eyes.

"That's what she said..."

Sergeant kicked him in the stomach. Then she grabbed his hat.

"And this," she said, "is not a fedora. It's a trilby. Stop wearing that."

*March 2015*

## Helping Hand Limited Liability Corporation

*Neo York City, November 2019*

"Please come in."

I press the handle and door lets me to the room. First thing I notice is the *Rebuild California* poster. Almost a decade after the quake it seems like a bad joke. People don't care about California anymore – the whole country is going down the drain. Well, it is going down the drain since the quake...

"Welcome." She is young and cute. Her black hair is arranged so as to resemble Princess Leia's cinnamon buns. There is a picture of the Great Cthulhu on her white shirt captioned: *I love R'lyeh*. Apparently, that mythical nightmare city is a better place to be than Neo York.

"Please, have a seat."

I sit on a comfortable chair and she takes a seat behind the mahogany desk.

"My name is Eva." Smile reveals snow-white teeth.

"Hi."

"We are pleased that you want to use our services. I can assure you that there is no company which would be better than us in that field."

"Sure."

There is no other company which specializes in that field at all. I found their ad on pure coincidence. I was depressed. I couldn't take it anymore. One day, I went for a walk through the Park. It is a total shithole nowadays. All those people squatting in shacks in the middle of the city... And I knew I was just only a little step away from them. So, I wandered aimlessly trying to get some sense. But I was thinking too much about everything. About past, about promised lands. Because I remember times when things were different. Times when they had kept telling us that the future would be bright. The end of poverty and wars, cures for diseases, clean energy, space colonies, everything had been within a reach. Then California coast had collapsed into the ocean.

Without warning, Oscar Wilde came out from behind the bushes. I tried to turn around but it was too late.

"What's up, motherfucker?" he asked kindly as befits a 19th century gentleman.

"I'm just walking here." I knew there was no point in shouting and ordering him to go away. You better not argue with your own hallucination.

"That's cool but maybe you should take some woman with you. It would be more romantic don't you think?"

"What could you know about romantic walks with women?"

"More than can you imagine," he said. "By the way, how's your wife?"

That was too much. I swung my fist at him.

"Is she still dead?"

Wilde was faster. He hit me in the leg with a cane.

"Basically, you are weak."

I fell to the ground.

Then I saw a writing on the bottom of the bench. Wilde was gone, so I read it: *Are you alone and unhappy? Does the world seem to be a scary place?*

"I would like to point out, that money you are paying us will help our company with carrying out its mission." Eva's voice brings me back to the present.

*You have no one to turn to for help?*

"Yeah, yeah." I wonder when she would get to the point.

*Reach out for our Helping Hand!*

"We will also constantly keep increasing quality of service." She talks and talks.

*We have solution for all your problems.*

"That's terrific. But how exactly would you help me?"

*Free hotline: 212-555-HELP.*

"That's easy." She smiles. "Once you transfer money to our account you will receive a package with a cure for all your problems."

*Remember – outstretched Helping Hand is waiting for you.*

"For all my problems?"

"That's right." Her teeth shine.

"All right then. Let's do it."

She shows me the details of the transaction on a computer screen. Everything looks legit, so I give her my credit chip. She connects it to the reader and points the retina scanner at my eyes. The payment is now authorized. With the speed of light money flows from one account to another and no cash is involved.

"Thank you." Eva gives me one more smile, gets up and walks to the cabinet in the corner of the room.

She returns with a blue box tied with a white ribbon and put it on the desk.

"Our meeting comes to an end," she says.

"Like everything."

"Oh, stop it." She laughs and moves the box closer to me. "Please, take it and go out to the terrace. There you can open it."

"Why not open it here?"

"That's the Helping Hand policy. You open it and take your cure out. If you change your mind you will be refunded. However, I think that you will use it – it's a good cure."

"So be it. Where's that terrace?"

We both get up. Eva opens the heavy curtains which covered the glass door.

"Good luck." She lets me outside.

Door closes as I stand on the terrace. Sun is setting down and wind whistles. I am above the city of six million but it is calm up here. Terrace is facing south

– I can see Twin Towers dominating the skyline. The city is full of lights. So high above the streets one can be tricked into believing that it is a really beautiful place.

Crouching, I put the box on the floor. Slowly, I untie the ribbon and lift the lid.

*Outstretched Helping Hand is waiting for you.*

There are two slots in the filling. One is for the bullet. The second for the revolver used by the main character of the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

I feel the cold metal when I load the gun with shaking hands.

*March 2015*