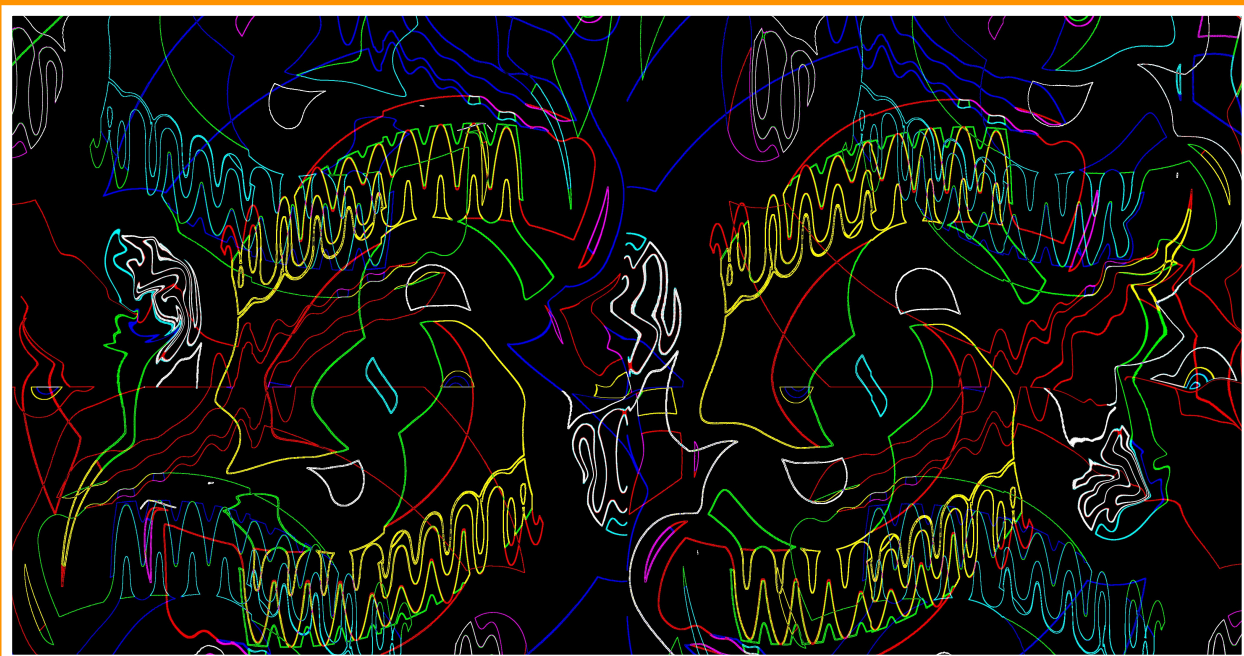


miniMAG

issue202
quandaries





Galaga

Shawn Scott Smith

I am spiteful,
Because they look like they are in love,
Shooting aliens in four colors,
On an old tube television,
In an heavy old oak cabinet,
Coins in pockets,
Neon lights,
I am hopeful,
As their friend comes to join them,
A third wheel?
Maybe I can even out the odds.



Threshold of Action

Teri Fisher

Someone is screaming in the apartment below me. Not cute or playful or sexy screaming. This is raw, desperate emotion being ripped from the bottom of the soul. Some kind of torment, emotional or physical, is taking place in Apartment 607. So, what do I do now?

It is 2:37 am on a Thursday. I got up super early because I am running late on a deadline. Half-smooshed popcorn kernels are scattered across the couch and floor while a half-drunk soda sits at my feet, reminders of my attempt to stay awake. From across the street, the light from the hospital's chapel casts an eerie glow in my apartment as the screaming continues.

Is this real? Am I imagining it or maybe asleep? It's late but it could be a movie my neighbors are watching. I stand up, launching my cat into the air and further scattering the popcorn. As I wander the apartment trying to pinpoint the screams, it becomes all too clear it is not a movie. The screams, and now sobbing, are coming from what would be their kitchen. I know the layout from when my cat got into the vents, and I had to check their apartment.

They—or rather she, I now can decipher—have begun shouting “No, no, oh god why me? Not now.” Something bad is clearly going down, but it has not offered any new context.

It's 2:40am. I need to do something, to help. The person's desperation is evident, and it is so late I may be one of the only ones around who are awake. The caffeine and adrenaline are buzzing through my veins and moving me to act. I start to pace, trying to identify where exactly the screaming is coming from.

Let me think about this. What do I know here? They are in some kind of discomfort at the very least. I know they are in my building and on the floor below me. I don't know who they are or what's going on. I don't hear anyone else but that doesn't mean they are alone.

I have very little information here.

Well, why might she be screaming? She could have received some bad news. She could be mourning someone or a breakup. Maybe she's depressed or having a breakdown... Or someone is hurting her.

I don't hear another person, or worse, persons. But that does not mean she is alone. I cannot be the only neighbor to hear this, so what are others doing? I listen at my door, every muscle tensed, breath bated. There's nothing, no creak of doors or concerned voices or the swish of elevators. It's just me and her.

It's 2:45am. What if this is another Kitty Genovese incident? What if this person is in real trouble and I am just sitting here listening to them moan as their life or integrity is drained away. I don't think I could live with myself.

This is something I have always feared: that I am a coward—always the last to help or join, riddled by anxiety that freezes me in place. When I was in a high school, a few friends and I were sipping strawberry milkshakes in the summer when an older woman tripped over the curb and fell. Her bags flew up in the air like birds finally released. I just looked on, thinking she might be more embarrassed if I helped. By the time I realized the ridiculousness of that thought and that I ought to act, my friends had already made their way over to her. I came jogging up behind them, lagging and lost, clearly following the crowd.

It's 2:47am. What if this is the moment I prove that theory correct, I am too slow to act, too afraid, too cowardly. What do you do with that information? Knowing you are not the hero, and you will let someone stew in their misery rather than offering a hand.

So maybe I should go knock on her door. I could check in and see if she needs help. If a friend did that, I'd call them stupid. I'd say you

need to watch out and keep yourself safe. I take a step closer to the door, anyway, feeling the smushed popcorn kernels cling to my sweaty feet.

Is this really the right thing to do here? What would others do? Well, the consequentialists Mills and Bentham would say that the outcome is all that matters. But I don't have enough information to accurately judge what the outcome could be. But she is still screaming. So, I take another step closer.

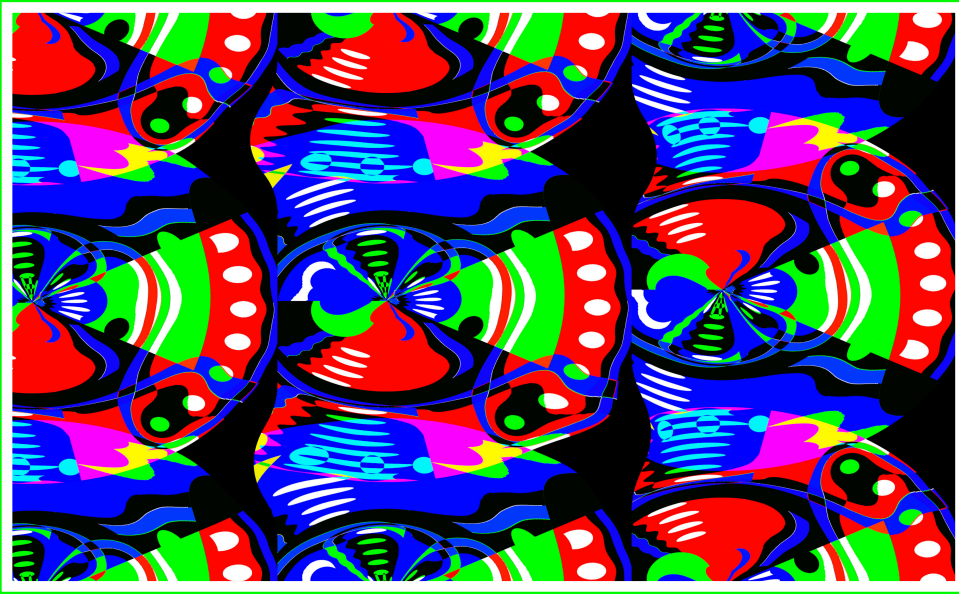
Kant would say it's situational, But he never discussed *this* situation so how would he help? What are the rules for society? Society would probably say I should help my fellow neighbor. But I am also a young, single woman about to knock on a stranger's door.

It's 2:50am. Oh I know. I'll call security and have them check. But what if she is just mourning the loss of her grandfather? Then I'd embarrass her. The more I think about it the more I think I'd embarrass her... but what if she is being hurt? The taste of that strawberry milkshake comes back to me, it's always waiting on the sideline ready to remind me.

It's 2:52am. I place my clammy hand on the cold metal doorknob, screwing my courage to the sticking post. And then the wailing trails off, leaving a gaping silence.

It's 2:53am. I listen and listen, and I listen. But there's nothing.

It's 2:54am. And slowly it dawns on me, after all that overthinking, I did nothing. I open my door, flooding my apartment with the hallway's fluorescent light. I step out and look around; I see nothing. I start to turn back into my apartment, but something moves in the corner of my eye. I turn back and see a flash of white behind the peep hole in my neighbor's door across the way, a strip of light glowing under a door down the way goes out, and a bolt from the apartment next to mine slides into place. We had all heard her screams.



Camel Toe

Sam Lee

He says, “I didn’t notice your ink.”

You capture the intrigue in his voice, slightly warmer than the politeness he’s used to offering. You decide to seize it.

“Oh yeah, it’s a Harry Potter tattoo. DA. Dumbledore’s Army. I got it back in 2020, right after the lockdown in China. You’re familiar with Harry Potter, you know DA kinda stands for educating yourself against the misinformation spread by the government. Painfully relevant I thought. Plus being a teacher I liked the education aspect.”

He nods, “That’s a really good one.”

“You’d think haha. I thought I’d never regret it, until J.K. Rowling became an unhinged transphobe. Well I still like the memory of reading the story as a child. But sometimes these days I tell people DA stands for Downton Abbey.”

He chuckles at this. So your self-indulgence hasn’t bored him.

“How about you? You’ve got any?”

He flips his bottom lip to review a line of inky letters. You move closer to see. “Mou...”

“Mouski.”

“What is Mouski?”

“It’s my nickname in Greek. My grandma gave it to me.”

“Aww, what does it mean?”

“Nothing specific. My grandma says it’s to do with sweet and innocent, maybe.”

“But why would you get it inside of your lip? That must’ve been terribly painful.”

“Ah, yeah it was. But I didn’t mind it. At the time I wasn’t ready to have a tattoo that people could see. But I’d been curious how it’d feel to get one.”

“So you got a tattoo not despite the pain, but because of it?”

“I guess you could say that.”

You think to yourself, what a classic guy move. The thought grazes you with some halfhearted scorn and a familiar stirring.

“I’ve also got a really stupid one.” He says with a smirk.

“Oh really, what is it?”

“It’s a camel.”

“A camel? What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s where I’ve got it that’s stupid.” He’s beaming now, apparently pleased with himself.

“Where is it?”

“I won’t take off my shoes now but I can show you a picture. It’s on my big toe.” He looks at you, smiling shyly and expectantly.

“So walk on a camel? Step on a camel? What’s that? Is that a slang?”

“Ah no. It’s on my toe. Have you heard of a camel toe?”

“No, I haven’t. What is a camel toe?”

Now he looks a little embarrassed, a blush sweeps across his cheeks into his dark sideburns. But his smile remains.

“Let me see. My sister had trouble explaining this to my grandma when she asked.”

“Ouch. Thank you for calling me a grandma.”

You successfully get him a little flustered. “No, that’s not what I mean. Um, camel toe, is like a wedgie, but in the front for a woman, if it makes sense.”

“Ah, I see. A wedgie in the V.”

“Exactly. It’s like a subtle sexual innuendo.”

Of course you didn’t expect your conversation with him to take on this course when you passed by his room after dismissal. You didn’t expect anything other than some perfunctory greetings, lukewarm check-ins that would wrap up under two minutes with a have-a-good-weekend in the end. But now he’s talked about his family, his virile curiosity towards pain, and his “camel toe”.

“Do you use it as a pickup line?”

“Sometimes. On the beach when girls see it.”

“Does it work?”

“It has.”

You realize that you’ve been taking in that smirk of his, bearded and bright, subconsciously aligning it with those from your youth. School

crushes. Now swap school with work. So much seems to have changed. But has it really? Aren't you still tiptoeing to what intrigues him, flinching from what bores him, skirting around self-revelation, showing off your wit and candidness, all the while forbidding yourself to hope? Aren't you still knowingly nursing feelings for someone with a girlfriend? It's morally ambiguous when you don't stand a chance.

What's equally ambiguous is his attitude, you think, when he explains camel toe to you, when he mentions that it's a sexual innuendo. Is he joking around, bro to bro? Or is he being cheeky—not flirty—to a girl at work? You could never ask him, or any decent guy, for they would always tell you that they see you as a woman. They would call you pretty, and never call you again.

So you wonder, when he laughs with you about his camel toe tattoo. And you remember how you've made him blush, by saying "thank you for calling me a grandma". You could almost see an actress deliver that line in a movie. Nice one. You relish the glamour of that banter, until it wears off.



Leaving on a Jet Plane - John Denver

James Kennedy

“Wake up, Jim... we’re out of gas!”

Not exactly the words you want to hear when you’re supposed to be starting your Air Force career. I was headed for my first assignment at RAF Upper Heyford in England, and the only thing my instructors had drilled into me louder than how to salute was: *“Don’t miss your flight or you’ll be AWOL!”*

So naturally, the Mazda quit on me.

Dad and I had left Spray, Oregon on bright and early at 8 a.m. The math seemed solid: six-hour drive to Boise, flight at 4 p.m., plenty of time. I figured we’d roll into the airport around 2:30, relaxed, maybe grab a Coke. Instead, I woke up to Dad’s voice and the sound of silence—the kind of silence that means the gas gauge wasn’t lying after all.

Now, this wasn’t exactly a shocker. My car—a 1974 Mazda RX-2 I’d bought for \$500 from a guy who looked like he should be selling stolen watches—had gotten me through tech school and plenty of mountain camping trips. It was reliable in the “gets you there most of the time” sense. Today was not one of those times. I can’t blame the car, really, we should have been paying closer attention to the gas gauge!

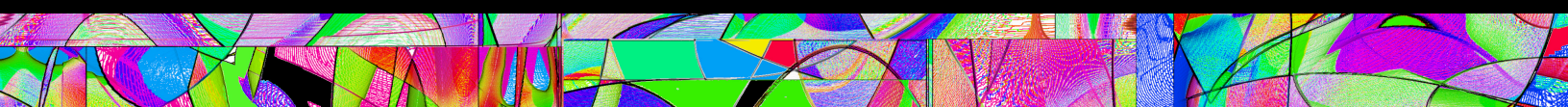
We coasted to a stop on an exit ramp. The good news: there was a gas station about a quarter mile ahead. The bad news: it was uphill. A quarter mile doesn’t sound like much until you’re pushing a car with your dad, sweating bullets, and both of you wondering if you should just abandon ship and thumb it to Boise.

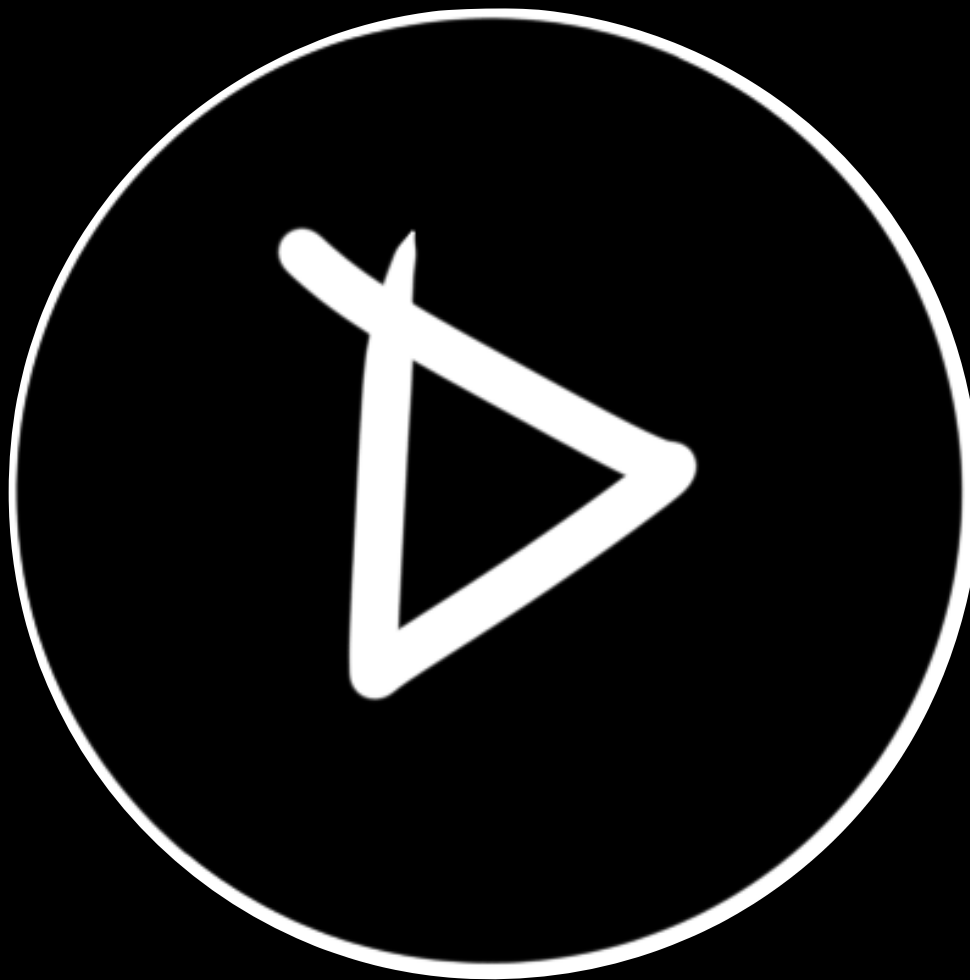
But we made it. Filled the tank, hopped back in, crisis averted. Or so we thought.

Here’s what we forgot: Boise is in the Mountain Time Zone. Yep. So while we thought we’d roll into the airport all cool and early, instead we screeched in at 3:30, with boarding already happening.

Luckily, this was 1981. Airport security basically amounted to someone glancing at your ticket and asking if you had any bombs in your suitcase. I bolted through the gate, Dad gave me a handshake and a look that said, *“You got this”* and just like that I was on my way to England.

All because I swapped assignments with a guy who didn’t want to go overseas. Rick got Mountain Home, Idaho—six hours from home. I got England, a dead Mazda, and a story I’ll never forget.





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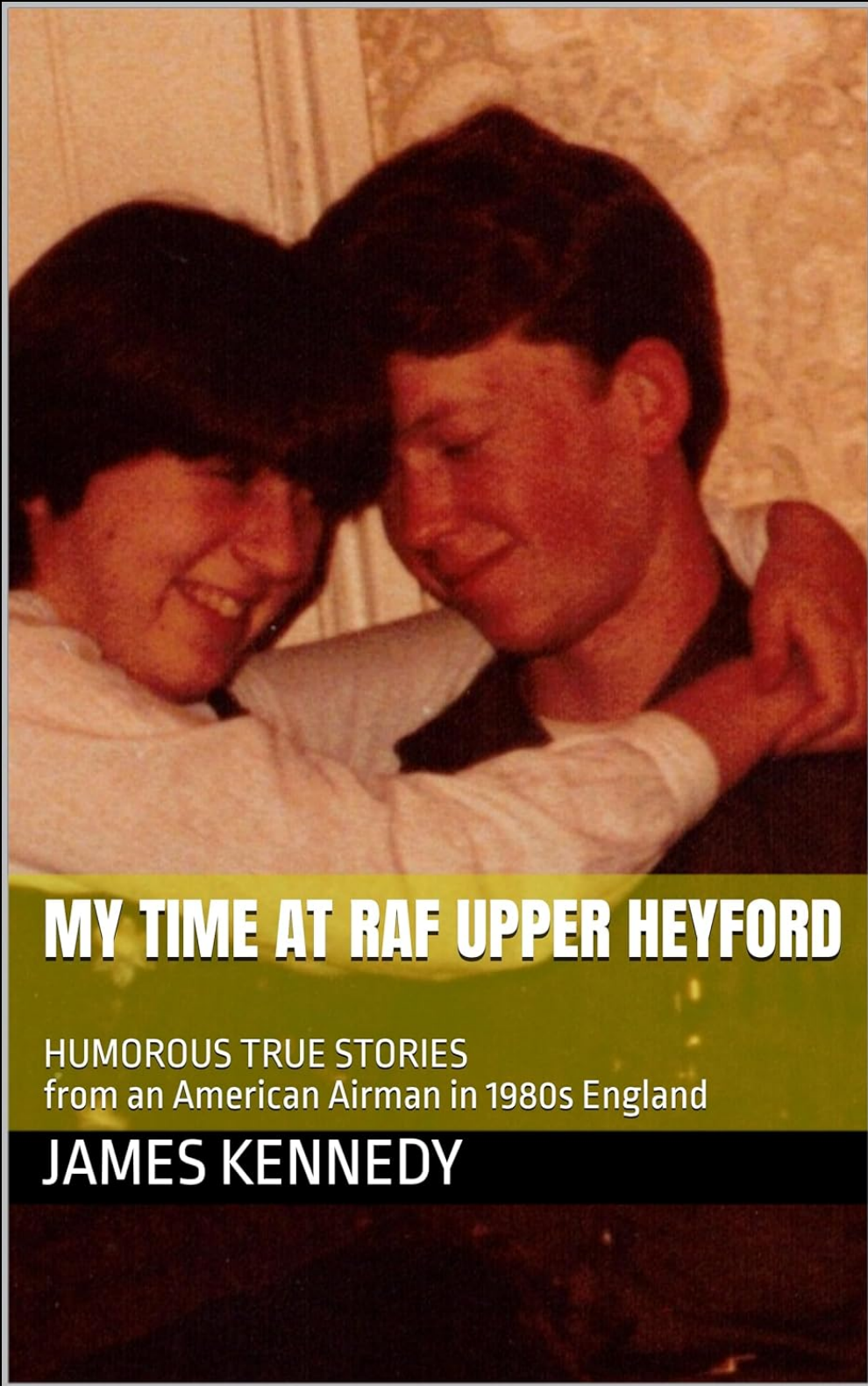
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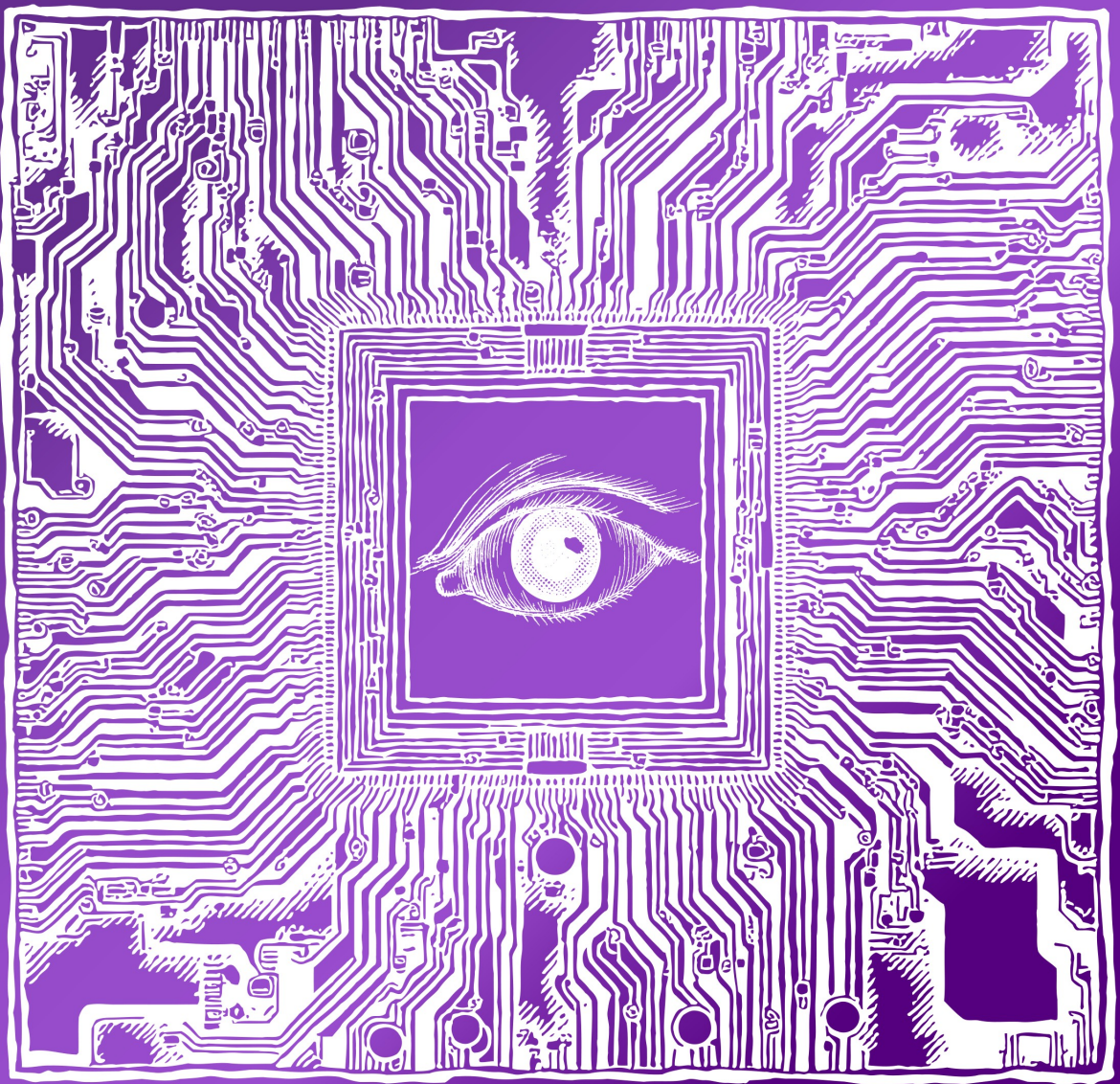
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