

COLLAPSE

"Mr. Foster, please. This is his son."

As Tony waited for his father to answer the phone, he turned around and chided his sobbing younger brother. "Will you shut up! God, you're such a baby."

"Jer-my's gone!" Brian continued to wail.

"I know, but dad'll bring him back."

"You don't know that. You're just saying that."

"Shut up, I'm on the phone . . . Dad? It's me. I'm really sorry 'bout calling you at work."

"Never mind. Anything wrong? What are you doing home from school?"

"Well, there was this two-hour delay this morning . . ."

"Yeah, I know."

"And then they gave us the whole day off."

"Really?" Richard Foster, glanced out the window from his third- floor office. "That's odd, it's not snowing anymore. The roads must be icy out in the country. Your mother isn't home, is she?"

"No, she's at work. Dad, something happened here. I'm really sorry. Honest, I am! But Brian and his friend, Jeremy went into your den to play some games on your computer."

The father's voice suddenly grew tense. "Oh my God, what happened?"

"Dad . . . You're not going to believe this." This time it was Tony's turn to become emotional. He fought back tears before continuing.

"Jeremy's gone! He's gone, dad. He's inside the computer!"

"I told you kids NEVER to go in there! I thought I'd made that perfectly clear!" He strained to control his anger and shock. In a more subdued tone he continued, "All right. O.K. I'll be right there. Listen, Tony, do NOT go in that room. You hear me? I am NOT joking!"

"We'll stay out, dad. Promise."

Mr. Foster abruptly hung up.

Tony wiped his tears away, and attempted to regain the proper composure a twelve-year old should have. He turned to his seven-year-old brother, whose swollen red eyes were shut as tears streamed down his face.

"Stop it, Brian. Dad's coming."

"Can he bring Jer-my back?"

"He'll try. And he says NOT to go in there."

"I won't," Brian promised. He tried to fight back his tears.

"You shouldn't 've went in there in the first place. You know dad says no one's allowed in there."

"We just wanted to play some games on his computer. We didn't know. Besides, it was already on."

"Really?" Tony led his brother out of the kitchen and into the T.V. room. He sat on the couch, contemplating their predicament, as Brian stood beside him. "I wonder why dad left it on. I've looked in there before and never saw it on. He always has it off and locked up."

"See! It's dad's fault."

Tony waved his finger at Brian. "You better not say that to him when he gets here! We're in enough trouble already. I mean YOU are."

"Sorry."

"What good does that do? Jeremy's gone thanks to you. Do you even remember what you were doing?"

"I don't know."

"You BETTER remember. Dad'll be here soon. And he's gonna wanna know."

"We tried to play that game called 'COLLAPSE'. It's the same one that Jer-my has on his computer."

"Yeah, I've heard of it. It's about collapsing stars."

"Yeah. But when we started the game on daddy's machine it didn't work."

"What happened?"

"I was sitting there, cuz I was gonna go first. Cuz the last time we

played over at Jer-my's he went first. We always take turns every time. But it doesn't matter cuz I always beat him . . ."

"Will you get to the point! I don't care who wins. Just tell me what happened."

"I will!" Brian replied indignantly.

"Well?"

"I'm trying to remember . . . I don't know. Jer-my was standing right next to me, then he wasn't. I looked over and he was gone. But there was some pieces of him there. Then I called for you."

"You mean that fuzzy stuff I saw?" Brian nodded. "It was sort of like his outline. Sort of something of him still there. I wonder what that was?"

"When's daddy coming?"

"Soon. Just turn on the T.V. and wait for him. He'll be here. He'll get Jeremy back. It's almost lunchtime so, if you want, I'll make ya a peanut-butter and marshmallow sandwich."

"I don't want nothing."

"Anything," Tony corrected him.

"Who cares?"

Brian reluctantly turned on the television and began to watch cartoons. Tony stared out the window at the icy street in front of their house. The dark clouds moved swiftly over them and the dreary day depressed him. It had not snowed since the early morning squalls but the entire town was blanketed in white. The schools had closed and the children happily embraced the opportunity to occupy themselves, merrily sleigh-riding down the gentle white slopes that had formed throughout town. That's where he was headed with his buddies before Brian's sudden and frightful scream. Too impatient to wait, his friends departed without him, as he turned his attention to the mysterious disappearance of Jeremy. Now he impatiently awaited the return of his father.

But what could have happened to Jeremy? What could the computer have done to him? He still vividly recalled the afternoon when his father brought home the state-of-the-art computer from work and installed it in the guest room upstairs, which they always referred to as 'the den'. It was a week after his company received a contract from the Department of Defense. Their project for the Department was,

naturally, highly confidential. Even their mother did not know the nature of their father's work. But the one fact that was emphasized repeatedly was that no one was allowed to enter that den as long as the computer resided there. For four months everyone had obeyed the father's rule – until that morning.

After a period that seemed like eternity to the boys, their father arrived with two other co-workers. They were all dressed professionally (the two men in dark business suits, the woman in a gray outfit) and appeared very formal and important. Tony grew fearful and intimidated by their prominent appearance. The older man carried two large, black briefcases, while the woman held several small boxes. His father carried a laptop computer plus peripherals. The serious nature of their visit was evident by their solemn expressions.

"Dad's here," Tony called out to Brian. He had expected his brother to run upstairs and hide in the bedroom closet but instead the young boy erupted into tears and began to wail once again. "What are you crying now for?" Tony berated him. "You're a big baby."

"Shut up! It's your fault. You were in charge."

"I ought to pound you, you little twerp!" Tony was about to run over to the couch and teach his brother a lesson when his father and his co-workers entered the side-door.

Sensing an impending fight, he quickly yelled at his sons. "Stop it, you two. You're in enough trouble!"

Brian leaped off the couch and cried all the way to his father's arms. "Jer-my's gone, daddy! Bring Jer-my back."

"Can you get him, back?" Tony asked nervously.

But the father was in no mood to placate either son. "We'll try and bring Jeremy back. Now quit crying, Brian. Upstairs, last bedroom on the left," he informed the man and woman. They ascended the steps. "Brian you stay down here."

Richard Foster pried himself from his son's grip and quickly followed the others upstairs. Tony noticed that his father had not included him in his orders to Brian and began to quietly ascend the steps behind him. Brian remained downstairs, still whimpering.

Tony peered into the den and saw them slowly approach the computer. There was still a faint, translucent outline of Jeremy's body visible just two feet in front of the computer. They were careful not to touch it.

Tony recognized the tall, gray, older man as his father's supervisor, Mr. Philbin. He had met the man at one of the company picnics. He recalled quite vividly that Mr. Philbin had been the life of the party, joking and wisecracking the entire day. But no such joviality was displayed today.

He had never seen the woman before. She was middle-aged and petite, with auburn hair. Her nervous smile appeared permanent.

"You really did it this time, Rich," Philbin admonished the father. The supervisor's voice was irritatingly rough and Tony deduced that he was a heavy smoker. "You were told this machine was to be locked at all times."

"It had been," the father sheepishly replied. "I must've left it unlocked when I was using it last night."

Mr. Philbin began to nervously pace the room. "That's just great. I never wanted it here in the first place. You were the one who promised that nothing like this would happen. Now it's my ass on the line, if we don't get that kid back." Tony grew increasingly angry at the demeaning tone of voice that Mr. Philbin used when he spoke to his father.

"We'll get him back," the father replied. But his voice revealed his uncertainty.

"Like I said," the woman interrupted. "At least we know that COLLAPSE works. You did a hell of a job, Rich."

"It APPEARS to work, anyway," Philbin replied, sounding unconvinced. Then he turned to address the woman. "All right, Bev, we go with EXPAND now?"

"You know, on second thought, I'm not so sure." She examined the faint remains of Jeremy. "It looks as if COLLAPSE didn't get all of him. That'll be a problem. Since he's not completely in the computer, there's no guarantee we can reassemble him – at least not all of him."

"Assembling him is not enough!" Philbin warned them. "You've got to bring that kid back the way he was – alive."

"I don't know if it's possible."

The father loosened his tie and let out a sigh of frustration as he surveyed the computer monitor. It remained ominously black. "Maybe COLLAPSE didn't work after all. Getting ninety-nine percent might mean the program never finished running. Yet there's no indication that it

ABENDED. No error-codes, nothing. Of course, it's possible that it's stuck in a loop. In that case, we might be able to bypass the condition code."

"Bottom line, Rich?" Philbin anxiously asked him.

"I must've missed something in my programming. Something I failed to account for. If that's the case then COLLAPSE wasn't finished after all. The specs were very clear on this. Downloading a human being is just PHASE 1. Uploading him out of that thing with the EXPAND program is the FINAL PHASE. And he's not completely downloaded."

"And we still haven't completed the EXPAND program yet – just a beta version."

Philbin ran his fingers through his thin hair. He removed his suit jacket and tie and seated himself on the love seat beneath the window. "We've already discussed this. We have no alternative but to try the preliminary version of EXPAND. And let's pray it works."

"Dad, I paused it," Tony suddenly announced. He emerged from the hallway and entered the den. It was now clear to him that COLLAPSE was not the game that Brian and Jeremy had assumed earlier. Whatever it was, he was certain that he stopped it before it was completed.

The father was irate at the sight of his son. "I thought I told you to stay downstairs!"

"Wait a minute, Rich," Bev interrupted. "What do you mean? You mean you hit the PAUSE key?"

Tony nodded.

"This could be good news," Philbin noted. "Maybe he stopped COLLAPSE before it had time to complete the job."

"Then COLLAPSE may still work."

"Of course it will," the father said confidently. "I said it was finished. Tony, are you sure that's what you did? Are you sure you stopped the computer before it finished the job? Jeremy's life weighs in the balance."

"I'm pretty sure," he replied shyly. "I just hit the PAUSE button and everything got quiet."

"That's it," Bev said, smiling. "All right. Let's let COLLAPSE finish downloading the rest of the boy, then we'll run this preliminary version of EXPAND. With any luck, the boy'll rematerialize. Tony, is

there anything else you did? Anything at all?"

"No. I just hit the PAUSE to stop Jeremy from downloading and then called dad. Did I do anything wrong?"

"Plenty!" the father replied angrily. "But you didn't hurt anything by stopping the program. That was fine. Now go downstairs with your brother. And close the door behind you."

Tony nodded.

"Oh, and don't tell anyone about this," his father ordered. "If anyone calls or if anyone comes by, say nothing about this to anyone. Especially, if it's Jeremy's parents. Do you understand?"

Tony nodded again and closed the door. Inside, he heard Mr. Philbin say, "I better call the office. I'm sure Baten's having a heart-attack by now."

"In the meantime, we'll get started," Bev announced.

Tony headed down the steps only to find Brian staring at a blank television screen. He was wiping his eyes.

"Is Jer-my back yet?" he asked.

"No. Soon, though."

An hour passed before the boys heard the den door open upstairs. Several lingering moments later, their father slowly descended the steps. He remained somber and Tony expected the worse. He then joined them on the couch in the silent room.

Brian's eyes were filled with anxiety. Unable to wait any longer, he asked, "Is Jer-my back?"

The father never answered the question. The significance of the situation weighed too heavily on him to uplift his spirit.

"I want to talk to you two, first." He took a deep breath and paused momentarily before beginning. "I'm going to tell your mother about this – I can promise you that. But you must promise me that what happened today never leaves this house. Never! Do you understand?"

"Why, daddy?" Brian asked.

"Brian, I can't explain everything to you now. You're too young, yet. Maybe someday . . . In the meantime, you must swear that you'll never tell anyone what happened here. No one must ever know that Jeremy was

trapped in the computer. This is really important to me. I know sometimes we make promises to each other and don't keep them – like using a computer in someone's den! But this is much more important than that. Once this is over, we must never talk about it again. Brian, are you listening?"

"Yes."

"If you ever tell anyone, your father will be in lots of trouble."

"Will you go to jail?" Brian asked in horror.

"Maybe. But it could even be worse than that." The boys cringed at the thought of an unknown fate that was more terrible than jail. "Promise me?"

The boys promised him they would keep their word and the father rose from the couch and headed toward the steps.

"Dad?" Tony quickly called to him.

"Yeah?"

"Did you get fired?"

"Geniuses don't get fired, son." Tony had anticipated a smile from his father, but soon recognized that he wasn't joking. "Their jobs . . . or should I say – their careers – are just kept on hold, indefinitely."

Tony thought for a moment, then meekly responded. "We're sorry, dad."

"My fault. I should've been more careful and locked the computer." He ascended a few steps before turning to them. There was a look of surprise in his eyes and a smile suddenly emerged. "Well, aren't you boys coming? Brian, don't you want to see your friend, Jeremy?"

Brian leaped off the sofa. "Jer-my's back?"

"You bet. Your old man ever let you down before?"

"Jer-my's back!" Brian cried out again. He began jumping for joy.

"One thing, though. Remember, you two promised that you would never tell anyone about what happened. Right? Well, Jeremy doesn't remember a thing about what happened. And Brian, you aren't gonna tell him, are you?"

"I promised, didn't I!" The boys gleefully hurried up the steps to

discover little Jeremy Parker talking to their father's boss and co-worker. He was informing them of his tremendous talents at playing computer games before Brian rushed into the room and hugged his best friend. Jeremy was nearly knocked over.

"Jer-my! You're back!" Brian was jumping all over him, as Jeremy tried to fight him off.

"Brian, remember your promise," his father sternly reminded him.

The two boys ran down the steps together, shouting and yelling all the way into the kitchen.

Mr. Philbin and Bev gathered their equipment. Philbin suddenly addressed the father. "Baten's going to want to see you immediately when we get back."

The father nodded in acknowledgement.

"Finish up here. We'll be out in the car, waiting for you." Philbin left the room.

Bev turned to the father and gave him a smile and a thumbs-up. To a fellow-programmer like Bev, the completion and success of the COLLAPSE program far outweighed the 'minor' problem that it had created. She patted Tony's head and followed Philbin down the steps.

From the hallway, Tony carefully watched his father as he sat before the computer. He pressed several buttons on the keyboard as he locked up his equipment. But as Tony studied him, he realized that in some inexplicable way, his father appeared different.

The father rested his elbows on the desk as his hands covered his forehead and his eyes stared down at the carpeted floor below. He had grown so serious, so thoughtful this past hour that in some ways it seemed to Tony that he was a different person. He knew where his father worked, but he never knew that his job involved anything this fantastic.

What was he programming on that machine? How could his father have written a program that would download someone into a computer? And for what purpose? Ever since his company had won the bid for a contract with the Defense Department, he had spent night and day working diligently with that computer.

And there were personal changes, too. In his actions, his demeanor, his attitude toward everyone. Now, it seemed, Tony could barely recognize him – or what he had become. Who was this man that sat there

so silently? What was he capable of doing? Trapping human-beings in computers! It all seemed so outrageous to Tony. Certainly this could not be his father. Could it? Was this the simple, hard-working, honest man who had raised him? The man who had taught him how to pitch a baseball, cast a fishing line, catch night-crawlers, and how to swim? Was he the very same man whom Tony had always idolized and strived to please? It just didn't seem possible.

Tony suddenly broke the silence. "Dad?"

His father had mistakenly believed that he was alone and was startled. "Yeah?"

The son took a deep breath before he apprehensively asked, "Dad, what is the Defense Department making you do?"

There was a long drawn-out pause. The father never removed his eyes from the floor and his forehead was still buried in his palms. Finally, he replied with conviction, "I said that when this was over we would never discuss it again. Now close the door and go downstairs with your brother."

Although he was dissatisfied with his father's reply, Tony immediately obeyed him. And to his chagrin, he knew the subject would never be mentioned again.