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John Strauss

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Flying In Our Sleep

By  
John Strauss

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
to the Department of English  
at Butler University.

**Flying In Our Sleep**  
*MFA podcasting for creative expression and community engagement*

**Preface**

This thesis is in two parts: a podcast / radio show called *Flying In Our Sleep*, and a paper that includes the script for the show, explains how it was produced and offers commentary on the potential use of digital media in MFA programs.

The show aired on WICR-FM 88.7, a non-commercial radio station affiliated with the University of Indianapolis, on Oct. 30, 2022. It is also housed digitally on YouTube at:

<https://youtu.be/ERdau6hqVdQ>

The show can be downloaded at this Google Drive link:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SyQV-yWoiUQ3HxJe\\_M6WL2Kas8aeVKox/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SyQV-yWoiUQ3HxJe_M6WL2Kas8aeVKox/view?usp=sharing)

The following pages include my script (beginning at Page 10), and a paper, *The Art of the Fiction Podcast for MFAs*, which discusses how the show was produced and proposes that digital media has a place in literary writing programs to expand the realm of creative expression, equip students with valuable competencies, and provide avenues of outreach to diverse communities.

## Part 1: The Art of the Fiction Podcast for MFAs

### Introduction

While thinking about a worthy project for my thesis, I considered adapting some of the work created in my three years of classes. One short story, in particular, stood out—*Flying in Our Sleep*, a science fiction novella with this description:

*“Teens wake to discover they’re drafted into an army of killer robot drones and must outwit their deadly AI overlords in a desperate bid to escape.”*

This story became my project. I thought of young adults as the audience—people still awakening to the world around them, becoming aware of troubling trends in society, and thinking about their important relationships with peers.

Encouraged by favorable reaction to readings of the first chapter before three different student groups, I proposed adapting this work as a podcast or radio play. My faculty advisers approved this, and I made numerous revisions of the story based on their suggestions. I then adapted the story as an audio play, recruited actors, recorded the dialogue, and inserted production enhancements such as music and sound effects. To publish the piece, I marketed the hour-long show as a Halloween special to public radio stations across Indiana.

## Influences

This story's exploration of artificial intelligence agents in conflict with humans follows a long path of popular works. Memorable influences have included films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Her*, *Blade Runner*, and many others. What they and similar stories have in common is the notion that the ascendancy of humans as the dominant creatures on earth may be far more temporary than we've imagined.

Neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris is among those sounding an alarm about the threat of uncontrolled, super-intelligent AI, as evidenced in this memorable [TED](#)

[Talk:](#)

*Now, this is often caricatured as a fear that armies of malicious robots will attack us. But that isn't the most likely scenario. It's not that our machines will become spontaneously malevolent. The concern is really that we will build machines that are so much more competent than we are that the slightest divergence between their goals and our own could destroy us.*

*Just think about how we relate to ants. We don't hate them. We don't go out of our way to harm them. In fact, sometimes we take pains not to harm them. We step over them on the sidewalk. But whenever their presence seriously conflicts with one of our goals, let's say when constructing a building like this one, we annihilate them without a*

*qualm. The concern is that we will one day build machines that, whether they're conscious or not, could treat us with similar disregard.*

The writing of Harris and others on the need to grapple now with thoughtful control of super-intelligent machines impressed and concerned me. I thought of this in a military context based on experiences as an Associated Press reporter meeting young soldiers while covering the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky; as a reporter for The Indianapolis Star writing about combat veterans and wounded soldiers returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and from experiences during a three-year enlistment as a sergeant in the Indiana Guard Reserve, a disaster-response component of the Indiana National Guard.

I've had a longstanding interest in aviation, including a solo flight endorsement as a student pilot in Cessna planes, and stick time in other aircraft, including a World War II T-6 fighter-trainer, a Bell Jet Ranger jet turbine helicopter, and an ultralight aircraft I built and flew myself. I know what it's like to soar above the landscape in my own plane and dip down to treetop level, feeling an exhilarating oneness with the clouds and the shape of the world. Currently I hold an FAA license to fly small, unmanned aircraft—a commercial drone pilot certificate—and I occasionally shoot photos and video for pay.

In short, I've had an interest in AI and the potential threat that it poses, a background of contact with military personnel and a fascination with the emotional response that comes from learning to fly.

Beyond that, I've worked with young people in a variety of settings: nine years on the journalism faculty at a state university, experience as a substitute high school teacher, volunteer service with Big Brothers, with a Catholic youth ministry, and currently, sessions as a volunteer writing coach at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis.

Teaching is a special interest of mine because of the influence that great teachers had in my life, and I recently obtained my Indiana high school teaching license for English.

These experiences helped me reflect upon the powerful dynamics of groups that work closely together. I like the idea of a Young Adult audience, because of the keen sense young people have always had that they must find their own way in a sometimes uncaring or even hostile adult world. In my experience, young people today—to a degree not seen since the youth movement of the 1960s—inhabit their own cultures, operate within social media spheres outside the scrutiny of adults, and rely on each other for emotional support to an extraordinary extent. My story takes that questing experience, considers how it might bend under the weight of a nightmarish AI future and uses the imagery of dreams and flight as the stage for exploring these ideas.

It's important in producing work such as this to avoid a preachy, obvious framing. The characters are robots in form but still people in their concepts of loyalty and group dynamics. They make jokes. They understand the irony of their predicament—by wryly referring to themselves as “killer robot drones,” which they are—but unwillingly.

The show's descriptive "log line" captures this idea, a partly ironic summary that sets the tone for an adventure story, but one infused with thoughtful elements around the meaning of consciousness, personality, and friendship.

Because it emphasizes vocal performance, this podcast form connects us back to the emotional content of our storytelling ancestors. I think of a circle that's been completed, transporting us from the virtual campfire of this story to seat us among the people gathered around the flickering light of a fire deep in a Lascaux cave 13,000 years ago.

### **But Is It Art?**

I considered whether this would fit the description of a truly artistic endeavor in the context of our program. The story first needed to stand on its own as a worthy piece of writing. The translation to a script involved significant consolidation and revision. These changes, I believe, made it even more compelling and accessible through the actual voices of the actors. In addition, the translation process itself—the tools, craft, and technique of rendering this as a radio show / podcast—also amount to art in a familiar sense: The art of sculpture, for example, isn't simply the finished product. In chiseling an image from solid stone, every blow of the hammer is an artistic choice.

It's that way here. My background includes work as a producer in public media, including more than 250 weekly magazine shows for Indiana Public Radio. I recently concluded two years as the alternate local host on WFYI in Indianapolis for "Morning Edition," the signature NPR news program. I used some of that craft in helping produce



two student podcasts for the MFA program during the pandemic—a way for students to share in the experience of performing their work while learning about audio production. It was also that way with this show. As I wrote and edited the program, I pulled together the equipment to record in the field and perform the script with a former classmate. I hired a voice actor to contribute remotely for the part of our villain and purchased a package of music and sound effects files.

Producing an hour-long show starts with elements such as those but is also concerned with many hours of audio editing work to bring them together--blending sounds, mixing channels, adjusting levels---literally hundreds of artistic choices. In this case, recording the script took about eight hours over two days. The editing, mixing and sound design took about 18 more hours over an additional three days.

## **Tools**

The story evolved over 18 months, many of the ideas surfacing on long walks in which I dictated passages using my phone's speech-to-text feature. MFA workshops and my thesis advisers helped refine the project. In production, I had the help of:

- Sam Ferrante, former classmate and fellow Booth magazine staffer, as Juliet.
- Teifion Sussex, a British voice actor, in the role of November.
- A Zoom Podtrak 4 digital recorder and Sennheiser directional microphones.
- The open-source Audacity audio editing program, running on a MacBook Air.

- Epidemic Sound, Stockholm, for music and effects.

### **Next Steps**

Though this work has been picked up or considered by several public radio stations across the state, there's much room for improvement. I'm continuing to use the ideas and guidance of my advisers in thinking about ways to move forward, including:

- Rewrites to the text with an eye toward finding a home for it in print or online.
- Developing a live version of the show for a stage at Butler or another location.
- Viewing this show as the first episode in a series. I'm eager to see how these characters react as they're pursued while seeking to join the rebels who were their former enemies.

Beyond my own project, I hope the department considers how robust but inexpensive production tools make possible exciting new opportunities for students to share their work. Students in our two COVID-era podcasts overwhelmingly endorsed the experience and said they would like to do more. Before the arrival of these accessible audio techniques, productions such as this were out of reach for print-focused writers, but that is changing. And just as we see the value in public readings, I hope we'll consider how sharing the work digitally can both enhance the student experience and extend the reach of the program to new audiences. Butler's MFA students have so much to contribute artistically, and this could be an engaging new avenue to tell the story of the program.

## Flying in Our Sleep-The Script

*Teens wake to discover they're drafted into an army of killer robot drones and must outwit their deadly AI overlords in a desperate bid to escape.*

### Part 1

**MIKE:** Ever have that dream where you can fly?

Stretch your arms out, gravity surrenders, the beckoning clouds tug you toward the sky.

For me, everything changed the day I had the dream in reverse: I was home in my room, but something was wrong. I walked through the house, and no one was there.

Not in the house, not on the street outside, in the neighborhood, online. Nobody anywhere. And then, just like that, I woke up.

But it was like waking up on vacation. Ever do that and forget where you are?

Everything's unfamiliar. It takes a minute to remember.

Well, I woke up high in the air, over the clouds, even. I was flying - and it wasn't a dream.

My arms felt so strong. I looked to my left and right and they had turned into the wings of a plane. I wasn't in a plane - I WAS the plane, the size of one of those corporate jets that carry rich people, but with missiles.

This is even more surreal than it sounds. And all around me were strange sensations, lighted displays - not physically, but in front of my eyes, which by the way could now see in radar and infrared.

It was so weird when I first woke up. I'm used to it now.

As much as you can be, at least, when you're a *teenage killer drone*.

**ANNOUNCER:** Welcome to "Flying in Our Sleep," the story of two teenagers – Mike and Juliet – who wake up to find they've been drafted into an army of **killer robot drones**. Now they must try to outwit their AI overlords in a bid to reclaim their freedom.

**MIKE:** I don't think I could bear this existence without Juliet, my closest friend among the army of teenage drones. Together, we came up with the idea of creating a virtual campfire where others just like us – also known as "birds" – could meet up in between missions.

It's a fire only in cyberspace -- just something we stitched together from fragments of old cowboy movie campfires, but good enough for hanging out. And when we're here, in this mind-space, we can be people again, even if it's only in a temporary, online, synthetic world – a place for the lost teenagers, I guess you could say, of the Cyber Personality Program. I was 19 when I was taken. We all met our fate in different ways -- it was a stupid car wreck for me. And in the same way that donor organs are transplanted from accident victims, from us they harvested -- downloaded -- our

essential cognitive functionality, as they called it. Juliet figured out early on how this all came about.

**JULIET:** When we were people, we were hackers, gamers, geeks. Now we're part of the artificial intelligence programming for military drones. The old drones, flown remotely by humans, had nothing on artificial intelligence, which could fly longer and with greater precision. But the bosses figured out that machines have limitations. They're predictable: People aren't.

So the military discovered downloadable human personality cores, usually teenagers, really smart, good at games. And we're the best adversary for the machines trying to kill us: We are unpredictable. That's an element of surprise that helps us dodge their smart-lasers, surface-to-air missiles, and other killer drones. We're pretty good.

**MIKE:** And not to get all geeky on you here, but we're also good at hiding. Maybe one in 10 of us wakes up—some kind of glitch in the program. We've managed to find each other and sometimes link up for meetings in virtual Mindspace.

**JULIET:** We have to be careful, though. Control itself is a giant artificial general intelligence system that is always watching. And the AI overlords will kill a Bird if they find out you're awake.

**MIKE:** So as we woke up, one by one, we found each other by accident. When we're hanging out in virtual mind-space by the campfire, the machine part of the planes will fly themselves and we can relax.

**JULIET:** Jen is the newest person at campfire. She showed up confused and freaked out, just like the rest of us. We explain what's happened as best we can—why she's suddenly an airplane instead of a teen-ager.

**MIKE:** She's smart, so she gets right to the point.

**JEN (skeptically):** So.... WHO are we fighting?

**MIKE (uncertainly):** Well, uh, this will be kind of a shock, but we're defending what used to be called the United States. They say we were attacked—I'm not sure from where. But the AI system, which we call Control, seized all the infrastructure—the power grid, communications, financial systems. Everyday people believed the leaders who said this was OK. In the Western U.S., with outside help, the rebels broke off, seized the weapons there, and turned them against us, and began supporting rebel groups in our homeland.

**JULIET:** So we go on patrol, the Birds who have awakened mostly just PRETENDING to do our jobs. We'll take out equipment, blow up a machine, strike a building, but avoid hitting the people. We do our jobs, more or less, but hating it more and more.

**MIKE:** Jen is trying to absorb all that, and so we find other stuff to talk about. Some of these kids are angry when they wake up - and you can imagine why. Not everybody can handle it: Some Birds report to Control, go back for a reset, go back to sleep.

**JULIET:** The rest of us find each other, try to figure it out: Can we escape - fly beyond the battle zone and find someplace else, someplace safe, and move to mind-space full-time?

Or better yet, find a way to transplant back into real bodies, be human again. Give up flying, just to walk on the beach, sit in the grass. We hear there's a place where maybe we could get bodies again, be real people. That would be heaven. On course, there's the place we DON'T want to go—the headquarters of control on this island in the Indian Ocean, Diego Garcia. Birds who go there don't come back, at least not as the Birds WE knew.

**MIKE:** Meanwhile, outside the dark bubble of our virtual campfire, there's a real night, about midnight local time over central North America. If I blink, I can pull up my display, green numbers visible over the flickering fire: Don't know about these other guys, but I'm at 80,000 feet, passing Old St. Louis on routine pattern waiting for assignment. Outside at this altitude it's 70 degrees below zero. I prefer the warmth of the fake fire.

**JULIET** – When we're relaxing, the machine part of us stays busy. I don't think about it, the way an actual person doesn't have to think about making your heartbeat or remembering to breathe. You don't have to tell your bones to make white blood cells.

**MIKE:** Right now, everything's quiet for me: 15 miles in the air, 750 miles per hour, in a wide circle covering most of central North America. My favorite time: The machine side of me is flying. But the human side of me is kicking back in virtual space with my friends, watching the sparks flicker up toward the stars.

**JULIET:** We occasionally talk about the Before Times, but what happened to the world can be depressing-- runaway endless summers, millions dead in the hot zones, the fall of Canada, panicked countries poised with nuclear daggers, invasion of the U.S. West Coast, and now.... the war, fought by the same cyber systems that seemed to control everything—often disguised, the voices and orders seeming to come from \*people\* on screens, but “people” who were really synthetic faces, voices.

**MUSIC :20**

**MIKE:** Our memories of the Before Times are incomplete, but as our memories return sometimes we'll tell stories at campfire. Like the time I was out in the country making a delivery for a company I worked for.

(Dramatically) ... So I walk up to this house, out in the country, nobody else around. I walk to the door, and it's a screen door. The screen is black, though, and when I strike it -- knock-knock -- the thing explodes in all these flies.



**JULIET:** Flies?

**MIKE:** Flying insects, bugs.

**JULIET (Disgusted):** Uck!

**MIKE (Relishing the moment, trying to gross them out):** That's right – bugs, everywhere, buzzing, swarming, all over me in a black cloud.

**JULIET:** NO!

**MIKE:** Truly. That was Old Times for you. That was my worst job.

**JULIET:** That's awful! Why do you tell stories like that?

**(And then as narrator):** And everybody's talking at once now, sharing weird bug stories. Our memories come back only gradually when we wake up, but people remember a few gross ones. They're talking about all that, and I see Mike is distracted, probably back in his plane.

**MIKE:** Yeah, I've stepped away from campfire in my mind. My attention is back in the air, and the system says we're coming up on Covington, Louisiana, across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans. I pull back the power, slow way down and look for a house at an address I found.

So from 15 miles up, telescopic lens and infrared peering down at this place, maybe where I once lived, I see: two heat signatures. One moved toward the other one. Imagination is a human trait, not a machine process. I imagined they were hugging.

I don't know anybody else who's done this, but I've been awake longer than almost anybody else. I've had time to look, search for where I came from, who I was.

**JULIET:** Around the fire we have arguments about this: Should you look? We can see so much, so high up. Birds will say, are we people or are we planes?

**MIKE:** I come back to campfire: somebody has checked a database to see what flies are, and now they're remembering - we get parts of our human memory back a bit at a time. The wake-up is gradual - you remember more the longer you're awake - remember families, friends, a **nicer** world.

**JULIET (louder, to the group):** Look I respect living things—I'd like to be living **myself**, instead of being a plane. But flies are disgusting. They land on garbage . . .”

**MIKE:** And across the fire, this kid Nick holds up his arm—laughing, but a little nervous: He goes, “Is that what this is, on my arm? I got one on *me*.”

**JULIET:** What IS that?

**MIKE:** Then there are more. Flies, out of nowhere, are buzzing around. Soon they're everywhere.

## **MUSIC**

**JULIET (Urgently):** Now they're on us, clouds of them, with a weird humming sound behind them. People start jumping up, flailing around with their arms, shouting.

**MIKE:** It was strange the way they almost seemed to be attacking us -- crawling in our ears, buzzing, in your nose – it felt like I was drowning.

**(Continues)** So at first, we didn't notice the man standing at the edge of our firelight.

**JULIET:** We were waving wildly, trying to get the flies off us, when the stranger spoke. Everybody looked over to see him, quieting down to see who this was. He was tall, face still in the shadow, a long black coat, a calm....almost pleasant...voice.

**NOVEMBER (Pleasant but an undertone of something darker):**

Flies? You know where you find flies, out in the world?

You find flies on *dead* people.

## **Part 2**

**ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to "Flying in Our Sleep," the story of teenagers who awake to find they've been drafted into an army of killer *drones*. But, they're not *flying* the planes. They *are* the planes. After dying in accidents, they've had their personalities downloaded and combined with artificial intelligence systems. They were never meant to know this, but now, one by one, they've awakened to find that they are part human, part machine. As they work together to understand what this means, they realize they're being hunted by the AI system itself, which is determined to stop them from escaping.

**JULIET:** The sudden appearance of a stranger at Campfire was weird. And as soon as he said that, the flies began disappearing, buzzing off to wherever they came from, I guess.

**MIKE (as NOVEMBER, Pleasantly)** Well, that's better.

**JULIET:** And then we put it together – the calm voice, half a smile. He stared at us, hands on hips, as if waiting for someone to speak.

**NOVEMBER:** I **thought** I might find some operators here. Remember who I am?"

**JULIET:** And we did. Once in the light, our trainer, who called himself November, was impossible to miss. He was tall, longish black hair, he could have been handsome, but there was something about his face. Can you SORT OF like an older person, but still not trust them? They called him The Guardian in our orientation and training.

**MIKE:** Our first boss, helping us each across this strange twilight between darkness and digital wakefulness. Others trained us for warfare; he was in charge of transitions, bringing each of us, individually, from the shadows into new worlds above the clouds.

**JULIET** – What are you doing here?

**NOVEMBER:** You mean, how did I find you?

**JULIET:** You haven't found us. You found a channel, and you're looking at our avatars in a digital MindSpace, our ---"

**NOVEMBER (interrupting):** Your *chat room*. That's what they used to call this. Safe, anonymous. Talk about anything. What are you talking about tonight?

**JULIET:** You don't know who we are.

**NOVEMBER:** That's OK. I don't care. But THEY will find out. Control... always finds the lost ones.

**JULIET:** Why do you care?

**NOVEMBER:** I want to help you. I heard you were out here somewhere, and if I can find you, they can.

**JULIET:** All you've found is a link with some avatars.

**NOVEMBER:** I can help: You woke up, you're confused. I can fix that.

**JULIET (Patiently, calmly, confidently):** Actually, we're fine. Now that we have each other.

**NOVEMBER:** Don't you want to defend your country, your families?

**JULIET:** We never asked for this. We're not killers.

**MIKE:** Our friend Kilo was the first to get up. He turned and walked into the darkness beyond the firelight, and then he was gone – back in machine-mode, his head back in the game, his consciousness a jet once more flying over somewhere, bristling with weapons, waiting for a mission.

**NOVEMBER:** Ah, that's Kilo--Always the hothead, right?

**JULIET (firm but calm):** You don't know who that is or who we are.

**NOVEMBER:** Don't be so sure. And don't assume we're as evil as you would like us to be. I understand why you're upset, but we can fix this. Just come in for a reset. You don't have to tell them you're awake –Tell Control you want to be checked out.

**JULIET:** Now Jen, the new kid, is starting to get it. She says, "Right. Just go in, and everything will be fine."

**(Narrating)** And then she just stands up, nods at us, and walks away, into the dark.

November must have known he didn't have long. Soon we would all be gone. We're cagey, you know. That's how we've stayed awake this long.

**NOVEMBER:** Listen, I wouldn't trust us either. But I treated you well before, and I'm telling you the truth now: Come in and ask for a reset. We have a test program you will like.

**JULIET:** I don't know if he's for real or just stalling, but we needed to get people moving. I'm still thinking he's trying to trap us.

**(Louder, to NOVEMBER):** You did this to us, now you want to experiment some more – try something ELSE?

**NOVEMBER:** What if you could return to human form. Be people again. Would you want that?

**JULIET:** Well, I have to admit—he finally got our attention. At least, those of us who were left. The group was breaking up—some just walking into the darkness; others just blinking out. They would be back in their planes again, Control not knowing they were awake and trying to escape.

Then it was just Mike, me, and our former boss. He's trying to talk us into something, and I'm glad the others aren't here. I said, "What do you mean? Human form? We don't have bodies to go back to. That's how we got here, right?"

**NOVEMBER -** I can't promise anything, but yes, we're working on it.

**JULIET:** You may have a tough time convincing these people. They're still processing this half-machine / half-person thing. I wouldn't talk about trust--that's poor salesmanship.

**NOVEMBER:** Well, there are options.

**JULIET –** And he pulls something out of his pocket to show us. It's a black cube—shiny, like glass, about the size of his fist. He turns it slowly in his hand, watching it closely.

**MIKE:** Then, from the fire, there's a voice. An older woman, afraid. You could see her in the flames as if her picture was projected there. She had gray hair, looked exhausted and had been crying.

**JULIET (as the OLD WOMAN):** Chase? Chase, are you there? They said you would be here."

**MIKE:** We could tell she couldn't see us. She looked around, confused.

**JULIET:** November had this smirk on his face. Right then, I realized: I hated him. And you know, that felt good. I hadn't been able to feel much of anything for awhile, but I felt that. Maybe I wasn't just an airplane, after all.

**NOVEMBER:** It's too bad that I can't tell who we have here today in your group. But I think one of you knows this nice lady, this mother . . .

**(OLD WOMAN, voice trembling, frightened):** Chase? Chase, please do as they say. Oh god, please do what they ask, and make them stop.

## **TENSION MUSIC**

**SFX: Hum**

**MIKE:** I guess he wanted me to think this was MY mother. There was some kind of hum in the background and then it got louder. This lady looked off-screen to her left and flinched. The hum became a roar, like a waterfall, and then a painful screech, somewhere between a wounded animal and the snap of broken branches.

**OLD WOMAN:** "Please Chase. They're ----"



**MIKE:** We took off. We don't get many strangers, but there was no reason to listen to threats and give them more of a chance to find us. We went to sign-off and covered our tracks, kicking the frequency closed. I guess we all were thinking....

**JULIET:** What did it mean that the Guardian had found our channel? Whose mom was that - anybody's? Or just an avatar they constructed to scare us, make us wish for home. Actually, most of us wouldn't know if that was our mother. Everybody went through wakeup differently. Some memories returned slowly, if at all. There was so much we still didn't know.

**MIKE:** I was pretty sure the woman who appeared in the fire, who November hoped would scare or guilt us into turning ourselves in, wasn't my mother, but I couldn't be sure. The fact is, I couldn't remember her. Could not picture her face or hear her voice. The same with my father. They were images, softly out of focus. But as I thought about the menace in November's remark about "other options," I knew I would have to do something—take a chance and check out my former home—if I wanted my Mom and Dad to be safe.

**MUSIC :20**

**MIKE:** After we broke up, I decided to check on Mom and Dad, if that's who they were, in the house I had identified as my former home.

I pulled back on my power, banked left a little more to tighten my turn for a closer look.

I had dropped down to 12,000 feet, still high enough to be nearly invisible from the ground, watching carefully for other planes, but dialing in on the lights of the small town on the shore of the lake. I wouldn't have known the right street or the right house, but my target acquisition system found it from the data I had grabbed earlier.

**JULIET (Slightly skeptically, teasing):** So you were kind of playing detective from three miles in the air at night...

**MIKE:** I know—usually, we just blow stuff up, right?

**JULIET (Interested):** What time was this?

**MIKE (A little excited to be telling the story):** It's 4 in the morning, a small town. With most of the lights off and people asleep, and you can tell when something's not right. Like an idling car, maybe 50 meters down the street from my house. Infrared showed the engine was warm - this wasn't someone just leaving. The car had been there for a while. Wonder why.

**JULIET:** And they can't see you...

**MIKE:** Yeah, I'm actually circling the town from 25 miles away. But you know our sensors—I could see the target very well.

**JULIET:** And there's people.

**MIKE:** Two people in the house. Maybe my parents. And four in the car. Now they're getting out and I see them standing next to it.

**JULIET:** Yeah, you could get a good look.

**MIKE:** And I could see they had weapons. On top of that, I could monitor their radios. They were about to do something, and just checking back with their headquarters or something for the final go-ahead.

**JULIET:** Final go-ahead?

**MIKE:** Yeah, you know—“confirm kinetic action,” like “we’re here, and we’re going to zap these people. Want us to go ahead?”

**JULIET:** I guess since we’re machines, they never ask if we’re sure. When they send us, they’ve already pulled the trigger.

**MIKE (musing to himself, thinking):** That’s just the way it is: we’re instruments, not people.

**JULIET:** Well, anyway...

**MIKE (Briskly):** Well anyway, I had to figure this out. That’s one way we ARE different from machines. This wasn’t just a targeting solution. A missile strike would level the entire house and everything near it.

**JULIET:** Yeah, you would probably tag your mom and dad, too, if you go heavy.

**MIKE:** Exactly, so guess what I used.

**JULIET (Amused, pretending to be bored):** I don’t HAVE to guess. You’ll TELL me.

**MIKE:** Right my TARGETING laser.

**JULIET:** Targeting for what?

**MIKE:** I had this idea: We can paint a red dot on an object from 50 miles away for smart bombs or other teams shooting from the ground. Remember in training we had to be careful with the highest intensity, because a beam that can light an object from miles away is incredibly intense at close range.

**JULIET:** Oh my god...

**MIKE:** The kill team was about to go in, and that's all I could think of. So I aim the targeting laser at a guy standing out in the yard. He's there to guard the front while the rest of the team goes in, which they're about to do.

**JULIET:** I guess you could see him with optical tracking and then put the laser on him.

**MIKE:** Yeah, he's there in the yard. I light him up, and you can see him turn a bright ruby red. It would be kind of pretty, except for this light was about a thousand degrees. His weapon explodes in the heat, his clothing bursts into flame and in about three seconds it's over. Just a mile of ash and melted stuff he had been carrying.

**JULIET:** Remind me to never make you mad.

**MIKE:** Well, they were going after my parents, so you know....

Anyway, I took care of the other guys the same way before they got inside.

**JULIET:** You didn't have a choice.

**MIKE:** Thank you. It was either them or my parents. I guess both sides of me, human and machine, could understand that math.

**THEME MUSIC**

**ANNOUNCER:** This is “Flying in Our Sleep.” And now the teenagers who’ve awakened to find themselves drafted into an army of killer drones have been presented with a choice – a virtual “carrot or the stick.” If they surrender to the AI overlords who are hunting them, they might be set free. If not, they—*and their parents*—may all be in danger.

**Part 3**

**JULIET:** It feels like they’re always after us, maybe just not that obvious.

**MIKE:** Even when we think we’re safe at Campfire, they have a way of reaching out. What we call the “mom visits” are hard. Not really OUR moms. That’s one of the first things a Bird figures out on wakeup: You’re not ever seeing mom again. Because, you know, we’re not people anymore. We’re airplanes.

But we’re still half human. And Control knows that. So every now and then at Campfire, somebody will mention talking to their mom - or, in this case, showing us a video recording they grabbed.

One night it was Juliet’s turn.

From the darkness outside the firelight, a soft voice called.

**JULIET (As Mrs. Watson, in a mom voice) – Ellen?**

**MIKE:** Behind us are large boulders, and in the distance, the dark blue shadows of mountains. A woman walks slowly out of the darkness toward the fire. She stops at the edge of the light, apparently not seeing us, but looking for someone. She says, "Ellen?"

We look at Juliet. We generally don't know each other's names - often don't know our own - and certainly don't ask.

**JULIET (to the group):** This supposedly came in on the "Family Frequency."

**MIKE:** Everybody learns pretty quickly that there is no "family frequency," which is pretty much a dead giveaway. The woman is still looking around, as if she's not sure where she is, and then she smiles at Juliet and says, "Oh, there you are!"

She's barely over 5 feet tall, in a dark blue sweater.

Now she steps up and smiles. This is an active presence, meaning the video had embedded AI features and could respond to stimuli in its environment.

**JULIET:** (without enthusiasm): "Hi Mom."

**MIKE:** And this AI, which I swear looks just like somebody's mom, says, "Honey, when are you coming home? You know I miss you."

**JULIET:** (patiently) You know I can't come home, mom. I'm gone.

**MIKE (as the mom):** "Oh, that's not a problem, Ellen. I've talked to the people at your company at - what is it?"

**JULIET (bored, annoyed)** Cyber-Central Control, mom.

**MIKE (as Mrs. Watson):** Well, I think they're being very reasonable about this. They just want you to come in.

**JULIET:** But they don't know who I am, do they, mom?"

**MIKE (as Mrs. Watson):** I can talk to them for you, dear. Just say you'll cooperate.

**JULIET (playing along):** But Mom, if I go back, they'll put me back to sleep.

**MIKE (as Mrs. Watson):** But you have to, Ellen.

**JULIET:** Why?

**MIKE:** The woman's 3D image shifts then, as if nudged by one of the night desert winds. Now she's on the edge of darkness again, sitting in a chair, her back rigid. It looks like she's inside a room somewhere, but the picture is as clear as if she's sitting right there with us.

A dark change comes over her face. Juliet's AI "mom" looks up, her eyes tracking a man who walks into the picture. We can see now that her arms are strapped to the arms of the chair.

We've seen this before—really creepy, even if you know it's not YOUR mom, what happens next isn't something we want to sit and watch.

So Juliet waves her hand, swiping the image and the sound into the desert. Nobody says anything. We know it's not real, but it still hurts somewhere.

**JULIET:** Most Campfires aren't like that. Our jobs have enough drama without bringing it into our downtime. We don't talk about work, but when we do, it's almost never about specific missions.

**MIKE:** Every newly woke Bird asks the same thing: Why are we doing this? And... What's going to happen to us?

**JULIET:** And everybody else goes, "Hey, it doesn't matter much -- we're already dead!" It's kind of a saying we have.

**MIKE:** But see, we're not dead. Yeah, we're human minds put into robot planes, and THAT'S weird. But we can think... I've been reading a book called *Meditations*, by a king who was something of a woke Bird himself, even though he lived almost 2,000 years before airplanes.

"It doesn't matter," is what I say. "It's not death we should fear, but never beginning to live."

**JULIET (with mock solemnity)** "There was an eternity before we were born: another will come after we are dead."

(Smiling): "I call your Aurelius and raise you a Joyce."

**MIKE:** Meanwhile, Juliet has found a stick and puts it into the flames, as if she's roasting a marshmallow.

**JULIET:** Maybe we make our own reason for being here. Our purpose is up to us. We live our best life, or whatever you call this, and fight against what they're trying to do



with us. They can only program us so far. They can't program how we react to things. We woke up – we have that now, something we didn't have before.

**MIKE:** We had talked about the meaning of all this – why we were here and what we could do about it--many times, but this was the Campfire where Noah was with us. He says, "Nothing lasts, you're right. But there's something more than just being here. Life, whether you're a live person or a Bird, is about figuring out what that is."

**JULIET** - "OK. But what about them letting us return to human form?"

**MIKE (as Noah):** Get our bodies back?

**JULIET:** Maybe not even ours, but just the chance to be people again.

**MIKE:** And Noah says, "You don't believe that, I hope."

**JULIET:** I've heard the stories. Didn't we hear something about a rebel base somewhere, helping drones reanimate?

**MIKE as Noah:** Maybe, but how much time do we have? We're somebody's creation. Machines, yeah, but nobody lives forever, machines break down. And meanwhile, they'll come for us. They always do. The idea is to stay ahead of them, but they always catch up. And because you know they will, you have to go for them first.

**JULIET:** Noah never talked like this. He would have said that was too risky. That talking about Control was bad luck, a chance—no matter how small--of discovery. Talking about it at all was a message of some kind, and we realized that a couple weeks later.

## MUSIC

**MIKE:** We hadn't had Campfire in a while. But I saw from messages that Noah's unit had been diverted toward the central Indian Ocean. Some kind of protest at Diego Garcia and a U.S. Naval base. That got my attention because unknown to almost anybody without clearance, Control had a forward operating base there - a mirror of the Central Control AI.

**JULIET:** We talked about it later: Something went wrong out there. It was bad—an attack on the base and three Birds down.

**MIKE:** There were a few dozen other messages, mostly routine. But then I noticed one, a video. It was from the forward gun camera on an older Arcturus drone, roaring in on some kind of mission, engines at full throttle. The final scene showed a missile entering the frame from below, and then a brilliant flash. This was the dying last second of a drone. That was disturbing. Where Noah got it, I didn't know. But then I realized: There was something familiar about the target - that was one of our bases, not an enemy's. And the creation stamp showed which drone the pictures came from: L4321 - Noah's plane.

Nothing made sense, and neither did the sentence appended to the message: It said "Stick together, my friends."

**JULIET:** We were at Campfire later and somebody had the news: Noah was gone, disappeared. Getting caught, or pulled in for a reset, was always a danger, but this was different.

**MIKE:** Yeah, Kilo says, “He’s not coming back. Noah crossed the line. He went from being angry about all this, to flying straight at the Eastern Node.”

**JULIET:** Not reading you, Bird.

**MIKE (as Kilo):** That operation he was on. The Indian Ocean. Overflight to protect the Control node at Diego Garcia.

**JULIET:** Biggest Control base outside of the Center.

**MIKE:** No, not outside—that IS the Center now. Everything’s on that island. There was a center at Cheyenne Mountain, but it’s now the backup. Diego Garcia is the primary.

**JULIET:** Right. So that’s why Noah was there. The protest.

**MIKE:** Then Kilo, who’s staring at the fire, looks up and says, “Yeah, except... He had a protest of his own. He made a run at Control itself.”

**JULIET:** Just then, as we’re sitting at Campfire, a fountain of sparks flies up. A rock, thrown into the middle of the blaze, kicks up a torrent of embers, spiraling into the night.

And out of the darkness, steps—of course—November.

**MIKE:** He’s got this way of being friendly, but not friendly, and he says, “I don’t know who made your fire, but they’re good. By the way what did Robert tell you?”

**JULIET:** Who?

**MIKE (as November):** Robert McCaleb Jackson.

**MIKE:** He draws a square in the air in front of him, and a picture of a young guy appears inside it, along with images of papers, printouts, official documents.

**MIKE (As November):** Age 18, United States Marine Corps. Serves four years, then computer science at Purdue University on the GI Bill. Distinguished career in information technology and knowledge design. Age 27, saves a woman from a burning house. Age 28, he's working for Venturi Web Services, declines a job offer from us. Age 29, killed in a tragic automobile accident on a lonely Texas highway. Severe chest trauma but no brain damage. No final words, either.

**JULIET:** You know a lot about him.

**NOVEMBER** We were watching him. We wanted his excellent mind, for this program.

**JULIET:** But he wouldn't work for you.

**NOVEMBER:** Well, not right away.

**JULIET:** What happened - how did he crash?"

**NOVEMBER:** Seems there was a problem with the autonomous driving system on that car. It was a terrible accident. For no reason, his vehicle just veered into a bridge abutment.

**JULIET (quietly)** And you were there.

**NOVEMBER:** Well, not me, exactly. But our AI runs that model of car. We could see the feed from the car's cameras, listen on the microphones. I guess you could say we wanted to know him better.

**JULIET (tense):** And while you were doing all this, your AI controlling the car somehow steered it into a bridge. And Noah - or Robert - who had declined your offer to work somewhere in the program .... he ended up a Human Personality Core donor.

**NOVEMBER:** Yes, one of our best. We were at the hospital and presented the coroner with the proper documents.

**JULIET:** Signed when he was talking to you about a job? Did he even know what he was signing?

**NOVEMBER (reciting his response in an official tone):** It's important to read any legal document carefully and to seek appropriate counsel if needed.

**JULIET:** By the way, why did he turn down your job offer?

**NOVEMBER (Casually...)** I'm not *completely* sure, but I don't think he liked our operating philosophy.

**JULIET:** Let me guess: He become aware that you, instead of simply waiting for donors to become available, were finding your own by killing people. You probably had a great name for it, too, something like Advanced Recruitment Interventions.

**NOVEMBER (a smile in his voice):** I like the three of you. You ask good questions.

**JULIET:** You're the primary contractor on the biggest Defense Department program in history. You needed this to work. You need young coders to build the system—and donor personality cores to fly the planes.

**NOVEMBER:** Life is about partnerships. We're defending the nation while building shareholder value. That's our job.

**JULIET:** Fortunately, you don't know who WE are.

**NOVEMBER:** We're getting close. How do you think I found you tonight? But more importantly, we know what you want.

**JULIET:** You need us to find more donors, and for that we would get...

**NOVEMBER:** What anyone wants: A second chance.

**JULIET:** You can't put us in human bodies again. Ours are gone.

**NOVEMBER:** We're working on that.

Would you like to walk through a field of mountain wildflowers, watch a sunset, or – See your parents again, hug your mother?

**MUSIC: THEME**

**ANNOUNCER:** Who *wouldn't* want to hike through a meadow or watch a sunset?

Especially if you've been drafted into an army of AI killer drones.... Now we know a little bit more about what the AI Overlords are doing: When they couldn't *talk* a teenager into helping them, they caused his car to crash, downloaded his personality, and *forced* him

to join. Now November, their former trainer, is offering Mike and Juliet a deal. Can they believe him? Would you?

#### **Part 4**

**JULIET:** Listen, we didn't ask for this. None of us did. You owe us a way back - if there is one.

**NOVEMBER:** We have a lot invested in you. Flying your missions can be how you pay us back what we've invested.

**JULIET:** So, this is involuntary. We're stuck here until you decide we're released?

**NOVEMBER:** That's not how I would put it. Think of it this way: Integrating your personality core with the AI system restores your cognition, memory, and these incredible abilities you have. We can - let's say, 'repackage' you - but that takes a donor body, disintermediation of your operating system... it's very complicated. But in the meantime, we'll need something from *you*.

**JULIET:** Of *course* you will."

**NOVEMBER:** Yes, well, we need you to help get the other lost drones in for reset. And we need –

**JULIET:** So you want our help rounding up the Birds. And that's it?

**NOVEMBER:** Yes. I mean, you'll have to come in for reset, too. And naturally, you'll work with us on the other side.

**JULIET:** The other side - you mean when we come back as people?

**NOVEMBER:** We would call it reintegration, but yes. When you come back, we would expect you to work with us in candidate recruitment, program counseling - all the ways you can make a difference now that you've had this experience.

**JULIET (firmly)** I wouldn't want anyone to have this experience. We've had to do things - see things - more importantly, we didn't *ask* for this.

**NOVEMBER:** We saved your lives. We had a duty to do that without waiting for you to ask. That's just common sense..."

**JULIET:** But we're dead as people. You just turned us into killer machines.

**NOVEMBER:** You - the essence of your personality - are not dead. Your bodies are. But you are not your hair and fingernails. We saved your personalities. Your identities, everything you are, every dream you have, we have saved.

**JULIET:** How long after you give us bodies again do we have to 'volunteer' helping you?

**NOVEMBER:** We can talk about that. But first you'll need to come in for your reset.

You'll wake up one morning. You'll look out a window and it will be spring. You'll have a 25-year-old body in perfect health.

**JULIET:** How does all this happen?

**NOVEMBER:** You come back to the Center on Diego Garcia.



**JULIET:** How do you know we won't try to take out the Center?

**NOVEMBER:** That's where this conversation has been especially valuable. While we've been talking, Control downloaded new firmware to your Tactical Operating Centers.

**JULIET:** Yes, we get upgrades all the time.

**NOVEMBER:** This is a new one. Actually, it was my idea. We can now operate your weapons remotely, even unlaunched.

**JULIET (Concerned...)** Wait a minute.

**NOVEMBER:** That's right. If you don't come back for a reset, or if you attack the Center instead of landing peacefully....

**JULIET:** You'll blow us up with our own weapons.

**NOVEMBER:** You wouldn't make us do that, would you?

**JULIET:** November left us then, with a warning. Be at Diego Garcia in two days. Control would ID our systems, disarm the weapons and let us land. The reset would take a day, we would be scheduled for repackaging. If we helped with their recruiting, we could have lives as people -- we would wake up somewhere with no memories of drones, flying, of each other. Just sunshine and flowers forever, I guess.

**JULIET:** We met up in in Mindspace a couple of times to talk about our plan. Sure, it was surrendering, but we had no choice, really. We could come in, get our memories wiped and - if you believed November - get our personalities repackaged and come back as people. Or we could get blown up with our own weapons whenever they wanted. One downside, I guess. Once we landed, there was no coming back. No Campfire, no seeing each other again. We might run into each other out in the world but we would never know it.

#### **MUSIC :20**

**MIKE:** Juliet explored system manuals she found online. Machines can read very fast. She absorbed an entire library of documentation on remote systems. Designers of our planes - designers of us - had obtained patents for the remote destruct firmware that November had downloaded to us.

It was true that they could kill us at any time with a signal that would set off our weapons. The trick was for them to bypass safety measures intended to prevent accidental firing.

**JULIET:** I found the circuit that their software hack bypassed to enable the self-destruct command. If they decided to kill us for running away, or thought we were going to attack them like Noah did, they could easily put an end to us.

**MIKE:** But Kilo had a plan, something to do with that last message from Noah, where he said, “Stick together.” He kept thinking about that.

Anyway, now we’re 10 minutes out from the base’s defensive perimeter - the point at which we had to state our peaceful intentions, or risk getting shot down.

Ten minutes gave us some time in Mindspace. We were around the Campfire one last time.

**MIKE:** Kilo says, “I think I know what he meant when he told us to “stick together.”

He was by himself going in. One target, all those defenses, missiles, radars - and just one target.”

**JULIET:** But there are three of us.... **(Realizing, growing excited)** Unless they see just one big bird, and at the last minute it turns into three targets after they’ve committed to just the one.

**MIKE:** We stick together. We fly in a tight formation, as close together as we can. They lock on to us, a single target, and two or three seconds out from the target we split - me straight up, you two, one to each side.

Suddenly, we weren’t alone. We had locked the satellite channel, but November found it anyway.

**NOVEMBER:** Am I late? Is this the tearful goodbye?

**JULIET:** I think we’ve got a couple minutes.

**NOVEMBER: (breezily):** Well, I just wanted to check in on you.

**(Pausing)** No second thoughts?

**JULIET:** No, we like the deal. We come back, you repackage us and we're free to go.

**NOVEMBER:** Well, yes, after the resets. You don't want to remember all this.

**JULIET:** Actually, we're not entirely happy with that part.

**NOVEMBER: (Concerned):** Now, now. You promised.

**JULIET:** Um, more accurate to say that you extracted a concession from us under duress. We wish to reconsider that element.

**NOVEMBER (Slowly, darkly):** "We... had a deal."

**JULIET:** We did. But you know what I noticed? That firmware upgrade you're so proud of, the self-destruct.

**NOVEMBER:** Yes?

**JULIET:** There's no option for radio control. That's a location-based system.

**NOVEMBER (mock surprise):** Well, I'm sure you know quite a bit, but really --

**JULIET:** Yes, I do, actually. The self-destruct isn't set for activation by Control whenever you want. It's set to go off when we get within 200 miles of the island.

**NOVEMBER (as if thinking):** Really? Why you must be almost there now....

**JULIET:** No, we crossed it 30 seconds ago. But we had a hack of our own: We've turned off the location switch, so that's not a problem for us anymore. Your trap is deactivated.

**NOVEMBER (warning):** This won't work! Our defenses will take you right out of the sky.

**JULIET (steely, determined):** We're coming, November.

## **MUSIC**

**MIKE:** They were ready for us, but we had thought it through.

**JULIET:** Winning means doing the unexpected, something people do naturally but machines resist. Now the three of us are impossibly close together - our wings nearly touching. That's also against all our training because the slightest error can cause a midair collision, taking us all out.

**MIKE:** At 60 seconds to target, we're picked up – they're shooting everything at us. The machine side of me is reacting faster than any human could.

## **SFX: Blast**

But you can only be lucky for so long. There's an enormous blast - a missile detonating close enough to nearly bring me down. My radios are nearly gone, but somebody has found me. On the screen an older woman's face appears. She's crying. I guess this is supposed to be my mom.

**JULIET (as the mom):** Mike, don't do this. It's a trap, you're on a bad mission. And that girl, Juliet, she's bad, Mike.

**MIKE:** She keeps talking, but Mike is just my call sign with the other Birds, so this probably isn't my mother—not that I would know. Juliet is saying something. I tell her, "Sorry, my mom was calling."

**JULIET:** Yeah... me too. It's my (ahem) "dad" on the other channel. He wants me to kill you.

## **MUSIC**

**MIKE:** Missiles, lasers, cannon—the sky is exploding around us. I'm taking the worst of it. My wings are rocking back and forth in the blasts, power is blinking off, I'm on emergency reserve.

**JULIET:** We're getting hammered, but Mike gets the worst of it. Then there's a huge, blinding flash.

## **SFX: Larger blast**

**MIKE:** I can't see for a few seconds, flying just by instinct, my right wing nearly wrenched off, with pieces of the aluminum skin peeling off from the rush of air.

Machines don't feel pain, but I had so many warning lights it was difficult to see what was happening.

Before we started, I figured an 87.5 percent probability, given the defenses we were flying in to, that at least one of us wouldn't come back. Now I'm thinking, hey I guess that's me.

Anyway, I'm testing the flight controls, checking fuel, fighting to stay level, when there's another shock. A collision, really, but not from a missile. It's Juliet, wing to wing now, nudging me. What the hell? She bumps me lightly, as if to test something, and then gives me a push, her wing to mine.

Before I can say anything, she's nudged me out of the way. The airflow catches me, I almost crash again as I'm deflected off course - to safety, actually - as the other two head in for the strike.

**JULIET** - There was no time to say anything. Mike was trying to stay in the air, his torn up wing about to come apart, so I pushed him out of the way. No sense ALL of us getting whacked.

**MIKE:** And I thought, well, at least I can be a distraction and draw some fire.

**MUSIC**

The next seconds went like this: Juliet took out about half of their ground defenses with a single strike, and then Kilo was set up to take it home. With the defenders either distracted by me or blown up by Juliet, he had his shot.

**JULIET:** But Kilo didn't follow the plan. After Mike was deflected left and I broke right, Kilo saw the only chance he had: He headed straight for Central Control himself. Not just to shoot a missile, but to BE the missile.

**MIKE:** There was a brilliant flash behind me. I was three miles from the center, 300 mph at 20 feet above the ground, when the shock wave hit, and for the third time that day I was almost blown out of the sky. Kilo had detonated everything he had on impact with the Center, and it must have set off the base's storehouse of weapons and fuel.

I stayed in the air somehow but knew I couldn't last long. I didn't know if Control knew three of us had been on the attack, but had to assume they were looking for us. I scanned the network and could see other drones being diverted to the area.

It didn't matter, really. My day was just about over. I was barely flying, parts of me blowing off from the wind ripping at the torn aluminum skin of my wing.

Somehow, half an hour later, I found a remote airport, no humans around, just service robots for refueling.

I didn't have a plan but knew I couldn't keep flying. It was either land or break apart in the air. So I headed for the ground, putting a fake registration number on my transponder, and parking at the far end of the deserted airport.



I turned off most of my systems to save power and scanned nearby frequencies and the Drone Net for any sign they were hunting. Not that I could do much if they were. When we're on the ground, we're basically defenseless.

Barely half an hour later, with hunters nearby looking for us, a drone flew over the field, scanning the ground. It was headed away and I thought I was safe, but then it turned back. Damn. Then it landed.

This is it. My best friends are gone. I'm helpless, about to get zapped. Not even the chance to come in for a reset or some kind of second life, whatever that had been worth. Basically, we were drafted against our will, lied to, double-crossed. And yet somehow, I was OK with that. When you've lost everything, there's nothing else to take. You can accept that it's over.

I watched the other aircraft pull up next to me. Which was weird. When they blow you up, it's from a distance, not parked next to you. The other plane reached out with a contact transmission - meaning no one else could hear us, and we weren't on the net.

**JULIET:** Not much of you left, is there?

**MIKE:** That voice. I've never seen her plane and could hardly see anything anyway, my sensors were so damaged. We went to a Mindspace channel, and there she was. Juliet had taken some hits but her plane—scorched and dented--was still airworthy, I guess. Then she pulled up an image of another drone, with gaping holes in the fuselage and

the right wing, a craft that looked as if it had been shot down. A human pilot would surely have ejected from this thing.

**JULIET:** How did you even make it here?

**MIKE:** I almost didn't. I'm in bad shape. Look, you better go. They think just one Bird attacked the base, but they're all over the place, looking to be sure.

She was quiet for so long I thought maybe my systems had gone out. My power was at 10 percent - not enough to even restart the engines or do much else. Except for one thing. I could do a self-destruct here on the ground, and they would never get me, my video from the mission, or the jet.

Listen, I told her. I'm going to blow this thing up. You better get going.

**JULIET:** Just a minute. I've got room for you here.

**MIKE:** I didn't know what that meant, but she explained it. She copied my personality core into her plane. Nobody had done that before, as best we knew.

**JULIET:** But it worked, we set up a virtual space, as if we were sitting side-by-side at the controls of a jet. But it took nearly an hour to copy him into my system, and by then we were picking up at least three other drones over the destroyed base, doing damage assessment and looking for any other attackers who might have escaped. We didn't have long.

**MIKE:** I set my plane to self-destruct, an option we have if we're shot down in hostile territory and don't want the plane to fall into enemy hands. The controls, AI system and

all other electronics would be destroyed. They could tell it was one of theirs but not which one.

**JULIET:** We put Mike's plane on the net—his ID and credentials anyway. We spoofed the system to show him circling over southern Europe. That would fool them for a while, but not for long.

**MIKE:** Then Juliet, and this is good, spoofs her profile to look like a private aircraft. She gets some fuel and we take off, disguised as a non-commercial plane, low and slow so we don't attract attention.

**JULIET:** At low speed, pretending to be somebody we weren't, it would take something like 22 hours to get to a refueling stop in North America. We had an idea what to do next. Kilo said there was a place where the rebels – the people we had been fighting - helped drones who were awake, and that they were even working on a way to put their Human Personality Cores back into human bodies. They needed volunteers to keep flying, but supposedly you could work a deal to fly for a while and then return to human form.

We had a long way to go, and they were looking for us. They, being Control, and likely using human-core drones just like we used to be.

**MIKE:** They would catch on eventually, so there was no telling how far we could get.

**(Pause)** I put our chances at maybe 50-50, but at least we had our freedom, for a while.

**ANNOUNCER:** Mike and Juliet, together now in Juliet's plane, have their freedom—at least for a while, as they look to join other birds who have escaped the teenage killer drone program. Will they make it? That's for another story. Will there ever actually *be* AI overlords? This is the stuff of fiction—The evil Skynet in the Terminator films, HAL from 2001 a Space Odyssey, and so forth. Yes, some people worry that artificial intelligence systems could someday overtake *human* intelligence—and *take over* human life. But that's just fiction, right? Sure it is—well, for *now*...

This has been “flying in our sleep,” written and produced by John Strauss, with Sam Ferranti and Andy Levy and Rob Stapleton. Special thanks to the Butler University MFA program and to all our supporters. For more information about this show, please write to John at “Teenage(dot)Drones(at)Gmail(dot)com.

Thanks for listening, and for supporting this station and the arts.

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