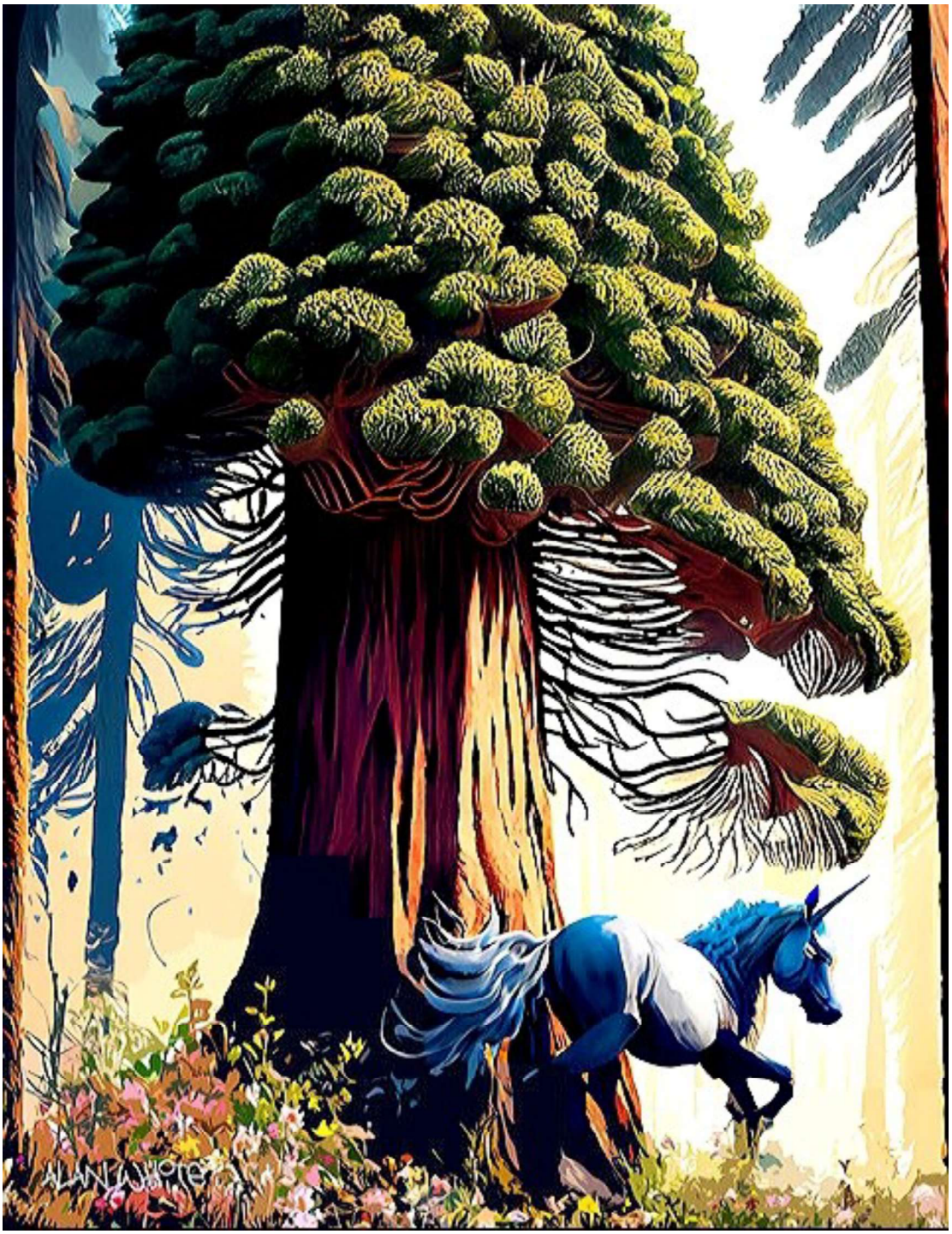
Eldritch Science



September 2025

If You Could Read My Mind

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

If you could read my mind, love
What a tale my thoughts could tell
Gordon Lightfoot

Capture of the resistance messenger as he attempted to sneak across the border was considered at the time to be one of the greatest successes of the regime's intelligence network. The young man was leading a herd of goats across one of the mountain passes that separated the country from a neighboring, hostile nation. The border guards had looked at him with disinterest and had given only a cursory glance at the identification papers the boy presented. They had seen him, or someone as grubby looking like him, many times before. They had given a wave of the hand to the lad and had lifted the barrier that blocked access to the other country.

The goatherd was keeping stray goats in line with his crook and slowly moving on when one of the members of the immigration control office a hundred miles from the border, who was routinely watching the border points through the office's TV monitors, noticed something incongruous about the goatherd's attire. While his worn flannel shirt and denim jeans were unremarkable and his insulated jacket was typical wear for the chilling weather of the heights, the kid's head was not covered by a hat or the usual knit beanie; instead, he sported a new-looking black beret, clearly discordant from the outfit he would have been expected to wear. The immigration officer shouted a direction through the video link at the occupants of the border station: "GRAB THAT MAN, QUICKLY!"

The border guards reacted instantly and sprinted across the border into enemy territory, waving their rifles up in the air. "YOU, STOP!!" they shouted. Instead of obeying, the goatherd dropped his crook and attempted to run away. His progress was, however, impeded by the goats, which were scrambling in all directions, and a moment later the hand of a guard closed roughly around his neck. He was turned around and propelled back home.

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By the time these events took place, the Great Tribulation was well underway. The tyranny had assembled near complete records of all living citizens of the country and could identify the name, last known address, and party affiliation of just about everyone. The fingerprints and other data on the detained goatherd identified him as Francisco Ortiz (also known as "Paco Ortiz"), a foreign student who had been an arts major at one of the country's former liberal colleges. Paco had dropped out of sight a couple of years earlier and was expected to be a member of one of the resistance organizations that opposed the regime.

"Perhaps we'll get lucky with this one" wondered aloud George Phillips, the senior intelligence official assigned to oversee Paco's interrogation. "We know these rats have a burrow in the north edge of the country, but have not been able to locate it yet."

"But Sir, these people seldom give away any information" grumbled one of his deputies. "Even the water torture does not seem to work with them."

Phillips gave a dismissive shrug. "Torture is so very twenty-century. We have better methods now, thanks to our foreign friends. We use magnetoencephalography to extract information from our prisoners."

The assistant demurred. "But I thought the MEG equipment was only of limited application, bulky, and prohibitively expensive."

"You are not in on the latest developments" chortled Phillips. "Our R&D teams have just come up with smaller, nearly portable decoding devices. The latest artificial intelligence hardware and software come in an easy to transport package that can be set up almost anywhere to decrypt a subject's brain activity and decipher what he is thinking. All we need to do now is make him aware by voice or image of the matter of interest and he will summon the information in his mind, and then we will capture the information by reading his brain waves."

The assistant knitted his brow as he concentrated. As the officer issued the command over and over, the assistant's expression turned to one of confusion. "I can't block it!" he acknowledged.

"See, your mind reacts automatically to external stimuli. You can close your mouth to refrain from speaking, but there is no way to shut your mind, particularly if the same input is fed repeatedly."

"Does it always work?" wondered the assistant.

"Most of the time. This refined AI can decode words and sentences from brain activity with surprising accuracy. The AI knows how to recognize specific features of language, both at the level of letters or syllables and at a broader level, such as a word or sentence. It can decipher almost immediately whatever the subject is thinking."

"So, there is no way one of these bastards can shield his thoughts from us."

"No. The resistance is done."

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Paco was brought, tied upon a stretcher, into a brightly lit room, with several people wearing surgical masks began hovering around him. He had IV lines inserted in both arms and, although he could not turn his head to look, he could hear beeps indicating that he was being connected to monitoring devices. He also had a headphone set covering his ears.

One of the people tending to Paco inserted a small bag containing an orange liquid into one of the IVs. Drops of the fluid began coursing down the line and into his arm.

Paco experienced a burning sensation, and then no longer felt anything other than extreme relaxation. He passed out.

When he woke up again, Paco felt he was floating in a wonderful open space. A sultry voice from an unseen female then interrupted his reverie: "Hello, Paco. Are you feeling OK?"

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"But that's not possible" argued the assistant. "A non-cooperating subject can block the inquiry by resisting the pressure to think about it."

"Let's give it a try" replied Phillips. "I want you *not to think* about a pink elephant."
"Why are we giving him sodium pentothal as part of the interrogation?" asked the assistant. "I thought the AI would be able to read his thoughts to find the location of the rebels' base."

"It's a belts and suspenders approach" replied Phillips. "The truth serum will reduce his higher-level brain functions so that he is less able to form complex thoughts, which are required to make up a lie. That way when we read his thoughts through the MEG device we will know he is telling the truth."

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"I'm tired, but otherwise I feel well. How are you?"

The sultry voice replied: "Very well also, thanks for asking. I wonder, Paco, if you would answer a couple of questions for me? Pretty please?"

"Of course, madam, anything you ask."

"You know those bad people who are always making trouble for the rest of us?"

"Yes. Yes. Very bad people" agreed Paco.

"I hear they have set up a secret camp in the mountains near the border. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes, very bad people" repeated Paco. He had to stop for a moment, because he had a splitting headache. He then experienced a sudden coughing fit that lasted for a few seconds.

"Take it easy, Paco" replied the comforting female voice. "Relax." Then she continued: "You were telling me about those bad people and their camp."

"Yes, they are very bad people."

"Yes, bad people. Do you know the location of their camp?"

"Location? What do you mean by location?"

"How does one get to that camp?"

"Ah. Well, I haven't been there myself, but my friend Rudi has told me. Rudi is one of the officers working with our group. He says you are supposed to drive or ride on Route 189 until you hit Holy Moly Lake, then get on some road that runs by the north shore of the lake, halfway round the lake, and then turn northwest on a local unmarked road and start going up several miles, and when you hit another, smaller, dirt road you turn left. The camp is a couple of miles up that road."

"Those are great directions, Paco. How come you know them so well?"

"We were getting trained to go there sometime, so they drilled us on them."

"I see. Thank you."

Paco did not mind repeating himself. "Rudi told us about the camp a couple of times. He said there is only one road that goes up the mountain from the lake shore. You can't miss it" he assured his unseen interlocutor volubly.

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"See?" commented Phillips. "The AI transcription of Paco's thoughts matches exactly what he said. I will request a full air raid on the camp. We'll take them by surprise and fry all those bastards."

"What are we going to do with Paco?"

"I guess we'll let him go for the time being. He's just a chump. He'll figure out sooner or later that he has given his buddies away to be incinerated, and that will be enough punishment for him until we catch him again."

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They launched the raid that same night, three helicopters circling around the mountain, spewing laser guided projectiles and incendiary bombs that sucked the oxygen out of the air. Surveillance cameras onboard the choppers detected no survivors after the attack was over.

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Phillips' court martial had to be conducted out of the public view, because disclosure of his error and its devastating consequences would have been a major embarrassment for the regime. The trial was conducted three days after the ill-fated raid that wiped out a secret government military installation that had been used to spy on the country's neighbors to the north and was laying the ground for a future invasion. Thirty-three government operatives died in the attack, but only their close relatives were informed of the deaths, with no details being provided.

By the day of the trial, Paco was at the resistance's base north of the border. He had received congratulations and thanks for his role in the destruction of the enemy's base. His response to the accolades had always been the same: "I only told them what they asked for." How he chose to interpret the questions he was asked during his interrogation would remain a matter of controversy among AI specialists for many years to come.

END

The Necromancer

by Chris Bunton

The Necromancer entered the King's bed chamber. He was surrounded by the armed guards who had escorted him there.

The room was large and as ornately decorated as any king's bed chamber should be. High ranking members of the court and family stood around crying. Some for real. Some only faking.

King Randall of the city-state of Creston was sprawled out on the bed. His face was contorted, with his tongue hanging out. His giant frame was naked, but someone had thrown a small towel over the royal jewels.

It was obvious that the king had not gone peacefully. The Necromancer, Darvak by name, began his work.

The wisemen of the court tried to watch as the necromancer moved. It irked them to have to pay this filthy man. It was money any court leader would love to have if he could learn the secrets.