

Four Huddled Masses

a short story by J. Adam Lefever



Your Huddled Masses

by J. Adam Lefever

Odors of neglected hygiene, garbage-lined floors, puddles of human waste and disease are to be expected in any room with fifteen million Americans crammed inside. Such a scenario would be a sauna of body heat and stink, with belligerent and angry people helplessly trapped inside, yearning for fresh air, food, water, bathroom access, bandages, entertainment, and five seconds without the person behind them violating personal space.

If any of this was really happening, Keith would fall to the ground, scream like an infant, curl into a pathetic little wad on the floor and wet his pants. He would avoid the crowd of strangers and the twelve hours he has already spent in line. But SENS reality is only partially real, and that very fact has enabled him to survive Day One of Netherica Immigration for this long.

Requiring every citizen to stand in absurdly long lines is so backwards to technology that Keith imagines the very purpose of the U.S. Federal Government is to create lines. Virtual landscapes are, traditionally, pleasantly lawless places. The idiot who planned this process must believe these conditions are

acceptable if the usual human inconveniences like bathroom breaks or showering are altered, and filling the lines with buffets of food and virtual Simulant servants to keep them occupied.

The strong aromas of flavors wafting in Netherica Great Hall Three hold a powerful pacifying effect on most of the people. As far as Keith can see, there are exquisite spreads of savory and salty meats, pastel-colored cheeses stacked high like children's building blocks, colorful fruits and vegetables, and dessert spreads so wide it is impossible to reach everything without climbing across the table. Millions have been stuffing their faces since they arrived, chewing these virtual delicacies incessantly like cattle to distract their minds from their very real hunger. Perhaps they think it makes the line go faster.

"It's just like Thanksgiving," Keith hears repeatedly around him, a mantra that inadvertently mocks his condition.

Thanksgiving is Keith's favorite holiday, but he hasn't touched the buffets since his arrival. Social anxiety and weariness have been tightening the knot in his belly since he found himself behind the millions of others who came before him. At first he blamed his therapist, but admittedly his own lack of courage is what put him so far back in line.

Twelve hours ago, he hovered anxiously over his SENS module, pacing the floor and pulling his thin hair through excessively sweaty palms. A news broadcast of the crowd filled his head with a medley of terrifying scenarios; embarrassment, being trampled, being pick-pocketed, vomiting and humiliating himself. Maybe a riot would happen. Maybe he would get beaten up. Or maybe bitten. He hesitated by distracting himself with made-up chores and activities. He created a list of 'Pros' and 'Cons' to help him decide what to do, on a whiteboard which still hanging over his almost motionless body with a top-of-the-line SENS module strapped to his head.

Keith's phobia is called "*Ochlophobia*" or "*Demophobia*", depending on which therapist he is talking to. Last week, his primary therapist filled him with optimism and encouragement, convincing him that persevering here today would be therapeutic for him. Netherica is a "new chapter in life" for everyone, including him. He would be granted his own piece of the land to do with as he wishes and never, ever again have to live in fear of crowds.

"Self-Administered Systematic Desensitization", his therapist says, helps condition the mind and relieve his anxiety of crowds. The process is far simpler than its fifteen-syllable name implies: first to place himself into a virtual environment that exemplifies his paranoia, then relieve the fear by associating the event with something he finds pleasurable.

For the first ten hours Keith managed relatively well. He listened to New Grand Opera, enjoyed several mugs of tea, chewed Blueberry NutriGum and worked through several crossword puzzles about animals. He pretended everyone else in the room was there for his own amusement. It isn't real, after all.

"I'm Pavlov's Dogging Myself", he thought, a nod to I.P Pavlov and classical conditioning.

But the mind grows bored when surroundings remain stagnant, and when satisfying an appetite with pseudo-tea no longer satisfies real thirst, and crossword puzzles no longer satisfy boredom and ego, life quickly becomes a downward spiral of discomfort and negativity.

Keith cranes his neck above the ocean of bodies before him, just long enough to see the front of the line without becoming dizzy. He frowns with frustration and self-pity. Nobody, even those orchestrating this ridiculous scenario, could have predicted the overwhelming response to the Nexus Ethereal America Project. The estimations are somewhere around ninety percent of the U.S. population is either waiting in lines or waiting for their chance to stand at the end.

Netherica Great Hall Three is an immense box with the same institutional flair found in modern airports. Concrete as thick as an underground bunker with large beams of steel or glass passing through from floor to ceiling structured in some complex architectural elegance Keith has a difficult time appreciating. The drab grey walls, when one is close enough to see them, are decorated with a lot of the same kind of contentious artwork conspiracy theorists use to dream up stories about government control. The building itself is stretched four-by-four-and-a-half miles with a ceiling about ten stories tall. Above them, on a network of connected planks and platforms, Immigration officers funnel people into each series of lines. Altogether, there are twenty-eight Great Halls of equal size and structure, each filled with its own share of the population.

For all intents and purposes, the wait is more akin to a night club or a cocktail bar than government business. Three quarter-million professionally dressed virtual servants known as 'Simulants' sweep through the masses. Each Simulant is assigned to a section containing about twenty or so individuals, catering to their every convenience: gourmet foods, heaps of blankets, wardrobes of clothes, hand wipes, earplugs, cots, games, toys. Some Simulants entertain their line with dances, jokes, costumes, music and magic tricks.

An angry man nearby grumbles, "Our most intelligent minds created the largest SENS ever built, but can't find a reasonable way to prevent lines? First-come-first-serve, what a joke! 'Netherican Great Hell' is more like it."

Keith acknowledges him with a silent nod. He must be hungry, too. The never-ending human babble is insufferable. Every voice grows louder to be heard over the others, children scream for attention, hecklers shout disparaging comments about the line, and religious groups sing repetitive hymns about God or Jesus or Allah or Rapture or the Holy Land. The rest grumble their grievances about the government's handling of Netherica immigration. (*'Why don't we have our own waiting rooms?'*, *'Since when did torture become legal?'*, and *'What kind of moron puts all of us in one giant room?'* are among Keith's most agreeable gripes.)

Keith stares at his feet and imagines he is standing in purgatory, albeit without the unfortunate requirement of being dead, or the stress of having your entire life examined. In SENS Reality, you are free to leave at any time; a triple-tap-hold to the temples will safely send any participant back to the real world, or you can simply will your way out if you don't mind the headache. But there's a catch; leave now, and you'll find yourself starting over again, in the back of the line.

Many have already left their place in line for any number of reasons. Some are ill. Some are tired of enduring endless entertainment. Others are too hungry to stay any longer, and others are tired of willfully wetting themselves. Others separate themselves to take care of the friends or family who are wetting themselves.

"This is a game," Keith says to himself. A game of endurance. His twelve hours in line will not be in vain, and no amount of hunger or urine will persuade him to leave. But if he is to win, something needs to change. Soon. He'll never make it otherwise.

"Aaaand... now," said Keith to the tick of his watch.

"WELCOME TO NETHERICA - THE NEW AMERICAN FRONTIER" shines brightly on projections hovering ten feet above the buffet tables. The American flag waves proudly behind it, stripes flapping and stars glittering like disco balls. Since the fifteenth broadcast of the U.S. Department of Virtual Living Presentation, Keith has flawlessly predicted it to the second. This is now the twenty-third broadcast since he arrived. He has most of it memorized by now.

The presentation is comforting to Keith. It gives him an excuse to raise his peripheral above the crowd without looking snooty, and even better, tuning in mutes the noise around him. The mumbling and complaints are instantly replaced with the presentation's audio.

"Dear citizens, the U.S. Department of Virtual Living welcomes you to Netherica. This recording is to educate you and your family with the basics of Netherica, the immigration process, and facts about SENS technology to ensure that your experience is safe, pleasant, and productive," says the soothing, soft baritone voice with a sense of optimism not found anywhere near Keith's place in line.

"The 'Nexus Ethereal America Project', or 'Netherica', is the first SENS Reality of its kind. It is an all-encompassing virtual mirror of the North American continent. Originally conceptualized by the private enterprise Nexus Corporation, the SENS Integration Act approved by Congress in 2092 instituted the Department of Virtual Living and taxpayer funding to develop the Netherica program as a public institution to be utilized and enjoyed by all Americans."

There are birds-eye visuals of a majestic, wild landscape, as the voice glows with excitement, "It is accessible via a SENS Module by government, military, private institutions and civilians use for all lawful intentions. It is the staging ground for American infrastructure, R&D, and planning, both public and private. It is the first SENS Reality platform legally protected and secured by the United States government."

Keith's mouth silently mocks the narration. Cartoons of patriotic bald eagles demonstrate how Netherica's programming protocols are integrated with the U.S. Department of Robotics, and how infrastructure development translates directly to the blue-collar robot sector in the real world. Arrows and flying colors demonstrate how Netherica allows for endless consumption without wasting valuable resources or compromising national security.

During the ninth presentation he realized the government neglects to mention any history or health concerns Congress bickered about before approving the SENS Integration Act. Some argued SENS technology engages participants in 'virtual fantasies', making them prone to schizophrenia. Nexus scientists and independent research concluded that only existing schizophrenics and those prone to it had these difficulties, easily tested and fixed by measuring the brain's *paracingulate sulcus*. Others argued SENS detaches the mind from reality, making users stupid and unproductive addicts concerned only with satisfying base Hedonistic desires. The scientists drew a blank; they had no answer for these kinds of philosophical problems. These things are what politicians are for.

"Being prepared for registration facilitates your fast and efficient passage through the Great Hall. When approaching an Immigration Booth, the Immigration Officer will scan your Digistamp to determine your status and eligibility. Once your file has been promptly reviewed, you will be given choice in one of seven randomized plots of land across the seven regions of the Netherican continent. Size and location of the options you receive are contingent on number of dependents, zoning regulations, personal request, and intended use of the land. The Department of Virtual Living appreciates your cooperation, and we hope you enjoy your stay."

The second time he heard this is when Keith observed the real problem holding up the line; when idiots are presented with options, time and courtesy are suspended for as long as it takes to make a decision. He wished for an expedited line for "people who don't care". All he wants is something private and relatively secluded. A simple box to dwell in, a miniature Great Hall with no strangers or lines. He would install a reading lamp, a comfortable recliner to do logic puzzles and craft haikus about solitude. Or something like that. He possesses about as much creativity as a military RollBot, and in reality, will probably just tell his Simulant to build something for him.

"When registration is complete and your deed is signed, a Netherican Simulant will be permanently assigned to you and to each of your dependents to facilitate your needs. This Simulant, or Simulants, will be installed on your chosen land prior to your arrival. If you are unhappy with the look and demeanor of your Simulant, at any time a customization may be requested."

Anderson, the Simulant assigned to Keith's small cluster of line, is dutifully pacing the aisle with a belt of drinks and a platter of nachos, each chip piled high with toppings. Keith hesitates to eat, but it could make him feel better, so he plucks a chip from the plate and shoved the morsel in his mouth. He watches a boy in front of him snatch a bottle of Saf-T-Cola from Anderson's belt and cautiously does the same. The bubbles fizz in his mouth and a mental tap-dance begins as SENS pushes the synthetic sugar rush to his brain.

Anderson never acknowledges his presence; simulants are like that unless asked on the contrary. They are virtual servants and companions, eternally dwelling in a world programmed to change at the will of its participants. It's impossible to tell how long Netherica will exist, but when a Simulant's human is dead and gone, whenever that may be, they'll still be here, just assigned to someone else. They are the immortal spirits, slaves, and test subjects of Netherican culture.

The next segment in the presentations, "Making the Most of Your SENS", begins as thousands of hands in the room wave gestures of discontent and boredom.

"Synchronous Ethereal Neural Streaming, or SENS, transmits programmed input directly into the brain's sensory system and replaces it with its own electrochemical stimuli. This is achieved..." Keith is repeating the presentation, but trails off when he notices a burly man adjacent from him glaring back. Nervously, he shuffles his feet and coughs.

The presentation educates relentlessly, "...an engrossing, lucid experience in a programmed world. Sensory stimuli provided by SENS alters the conscious mind and provides an experience encompassing sight, sound, taste, smell, and numerous touch receptors. SENS modules combine these signals into a single, cohesive stream of data. This data, along with your psychological responses, are sent to this stream, transmitted through SENS repository networks and shared instantaneously with the SENS modules of all participants within proximity."

Having worked at Nexus Corporation, Keith is well educated in SENS technology. The eyes are easiest to fool; SENS interfaces with the optic nerve to push signals directly into the visual cortex without the eyes needing to do anything at all. SENS hearing was developed decades ago, when the war began, for Special Forces to communicate without creating noise, and later used for everything from listening to music to driving directions. Germans led the path to the effective replacement of touch stimuli, originally as a method of safe and effective pain relief and anesthesia.

Taste and olfactory manipulation (discovered by an MIT research group facetiously dubbed "Sniff"), is a beautiful thing; smells and flavors can simply be replaced with more pleasant smells and flavors. Chemical compounds programmed into SENS are personalized to suit the individual's preferences. Keith had dabbled with his personal settings, mostly out of boredom; body odor smells like fresh linens, curried rice tastes like Wintergreen chewing gum, pool chlorine will taste like orange juice. The brain is none the wiser.

Having muted the room for the presentation, Keith couldn't hear the children and teenagers chuckle as nude silhouettes twirled in circles on the projections above them, "Your appearance within SENS is a projection of your most recent Digistamp physiology record. Due to necessity of public identification for your safety and security, appearance alterations are limited to minor cosmetic adjustments and voluntarily override physical limitations such as disabilities that may hinder quality of life within Netherica."

Keith's understanding of SENS makes it obvious to him the rest of the presentation is only to indirectly inform the best ways to enjoy food and sex without any of their negative consequences. They run through a series of risks, (like the reasons not to attach a SENS Module to your pet), and later it recognizes Nexus Corporation for their involvement in developing the Netherica platform. Blah, blah, blah. Keith couldn't bear to listen to the cross-promotional brown nosing again.

He turns off the presentation's audio and braces himself for the ear-piercing ambience of the crowd again. "THE AMERICAN DREAM" glides across the projections. The line had progressed maybe twenty

feet, and Keith has nearly reached the next line funnel.

"Please, everyone," a moody immigration officer yells through a megaphone, "if you already have already received registration approval prior to today, please step into the left line. I understand you are all very anxious. You'll all get through much sooner if we respectfully and patiently move these lines."

"Anxious? Why even suggest the word," Keith thinks to himself, visibly holding out his left hand so the officer could see it.

The Simulant in his new line wears a nametag on her bust. It says 'Karen'. Karen is an attractive brunette dressed in heels, sheer black hosiery, and a top that sits about a half-inch below what seems appropriate for a public setting. Karen is pouring a Bloody Mary for a man staring at her chest when the Netherican News Network logo appears on the projections overhead, spinning authoritatively on an invisible axis above them.

Claps and cheers spread infectiously throughout the room, presumably in approval for Nexus, or the assumption an announcement would be made to speed up the lines.

"Wonderful," Keith thinks sarcastically, "they'll go ballistic if they're told to leave or wait longer."

The floating head of an aesthetically pleasing 30-something blonde replaces the logo, with a broad smile, wrinkle-free forehead, artificially tanned skin and notably wide brown eyes. She is dressed conservatively in a fitted skirt and blue shoulder-padded suit jacket. Dozens of hands and bodies squirm excitedly behind her to get into the picture. Behind them is another layer of strangers, feeding on a thirty-layer chocolate cake and pretending not to notice the live broadcast.

"Good evening, America! Or should I say Netherica! I'm Debbie Powell, with you live from Great Hall Three where millions of Americans wait for their turn to register and pass through into Netherica for the very first time. Behind me are excited Americans from all walks of life that have come today. Chances are," she says, turning to those behind her and flirtatiously placing a single finger to her chin, "many of you tuned in right now are probably standing somewhere in line right now."

Keith immediately hates Debbie. Her eyes blink repeatedly as she speaks, a quality he finds particularly obnoxious. Even more obnoxious than being force-fed a broadcast of news rhetoric reporting the same event everyone is experiencing, the moment they are experiencing it.

The Peerbot pans the crowd to exploit the faces of those unnecessarily cheering, applauding, and shouting at it.

"Debbie, we love you!" he hears, but not through Debbie's microphone tied to the PA system. His perked ears angle towards the commotion. The live broadcast is only a few hundred feet away, to his right, adjacent to the line where he is standing. His heart pounds harder.

The small, round Peerbot returns to Debbie. She stands up straight, as if someone had shoved a board down her backside. She reports, "Some say Netherica levels the playing field, free of all the limitations

and the socio-economic class hierarchies we are so used to back home. Many are saying Netherica is the 'New American Frontier' and the 'Next American Gold Rush'. There is no doubt Netherica is culturally important, and on this historical day for America and Nexus Corporation, November 20, Year 2100, Americans of all class, creed, and color have come for this extraordinary event. But why have they come? Let's talk with some of them and discover the reasons why."

Blood circulation halts in Keith's hands and feet. His groin and face tense. Keith had never seen a live broadcast in action before, let alone for this many people. He sucks in air through his nostrils to prevent himself from gasping out loud, tightening his lips and rocking gently to prevent from vomiting. She may get close to him. He may be on camera. It would expose him to everyone and they would see him like this, a starving nervous wreck bouncing on his heels and wringing his cold clammy hands in front of a pile of food he is too anxious to eat. He'll say something stupid. They'll laugh at him. His lips and nose go numb as he theorizes his social downfall.

An older gentleman wastes no time drawing Debbie's attention. He dons a hodge-podge of traditional American garb; dark colonial-style navy blue jacket, Bowie knife at his hip and a coonskin cap wrapped over a curly grey wig. He expresses himself with a red-and-white marching drum. Behind him stand more advocates of patriotism, each dressed in costume as some caricature of American history.

Debbie gracefully slips herself next to him and says, "Excuse me, sir, would you mind telling us a little bit about why you're here today?"

"Liberty! Freedom! And opportunity!" he shouts, banging the drum furiously, a startling reminder to Keith just how close in proximity they are. "We are the champions of the Constitution, and we aim to keep our fine country the way it was intended to be! Free of the robo-socio-technocratic hypocrisy that taints the Rule of Law, spoils the minds and bodies of children, and plagues our lands!"

The crowd is hoots in both appreciation and amusement. Something about confidence and patriotism always riles up crowds; a good reason for Keith to avoid debates and town hall meetings.

Debbie fruitlessly attempts to furrow her wrinkle-free brow, "Sir, where in Netherica will you..."

"We fight, ma'am, for the values our nation was founded upon! The struggle against oppression never ends!"

"And...and what values would those be, sir?"

"The American way of life, the freedom to express ourselves as our founding fathers intended, and no taxes without representation," he thrusts a fisted drumstick in the air and gestures towards his patriotic friends behind him.

"But isn't it true, sir, that without taxes we couldn't be here today? After all, the United States government commissioned and..."

"Yeah, and we are going to make sure what happened at home doesn't happen in here! Wake up, America! We're already seeing the oppression, and we haven't even gotten inside. See, all this authority standing above," he points upward, towards the platforms where the officers look below, "Just look at them. All high and mighty on their pedestals, herding us like cattle, just waiting for their chance to piss on the rest of us! Protect your liberties, America! Remember what I said!"

His discontent is matched with a mix of cheering, laughing, jeering and booing. The officers shake their heads and roll their eyes. Debbie takes it in stride and excuses herself to the tapping of drums.

Debating the morality of authority and taxation and law in Netherica is pointless news programming. There is no commerce here to tax, and why would there be? Material goods are conjured at request by Simulants; the only thing scarce in Netherica is scarcity itself.

Keith watches with cautious as the Peerbot ominously hovers above the crowd like a possessed baseball. He can't leave. Leaving is failure, and failure means the back of the line. The back of the line means only the scraps will remain when he gets to the front; a piece of shoddy land in the desert, next to a military testing site or something as equally unattractive.

"Excuse me. Excuse me, ma'am," says Debbie, and the Peerbot focuses its lenses on an aged but healthy woman.

"Hmm?" she responds, with chin up and raised eyebrows. She is short and lean with thin silver hair, wearing a crisp flower print blouse and polyester slacks. She carries an aura about her that lacks the despondency Keith usually associates with the elderly. She is, by all appearances, far less controversial than 'patriot-drum-beating-colonial-Daniel-Boon-authority-tax-hating-man'.

"Could you describe how you're feeling today," asks Debbie.

The old woman responds excitedly, "Amazing. I haven't felt this good in at least thirty years!"

Debbie gives a curt, tight-lipped smile, nodding and clapping with her microphone in the air. The crowd cheers as if a miracle is occurring.

"You are the wife of Gerald Henselmeier, correct?"

"Yes, I am, Miss Debbie."

Gesturing towards Mr. Henselmeier, Debbie reports, "Mr. Henselmeier is the CEO and founder of Genra Corporation, and the gracious donor of millions of Genra SENS modules distributed to many low income families who are with us today. I believe Mr. Henselmeier deserves a round of applause for his efforts, if you will join me."

She executes another tight-lipped round of applause. Keith grimaces at the '*Pop-Pop-Pop*' of her clap echoing through the microphone.

Genra Corporation mostly does business by developing knock-off products based on popular technology, altering patents just enough to make their products unique. Nexus lobbied hard against Genra's SENS Modules, explaining them away as unsafe and unreliable. Congress disagreed, and three months later, Genra Corporation factories were pumping out a more economical module.

Still, many can't afford these cheap generics, so Genra Corporation made an investment with their customers; agree to wear Genra Corporation brand clothing within Netherica and receive a free SENS module. The free Genra SENS Modules are shoddy pieces of junk, but it is good marketing, and the public thought well of them for it. Genra Corporation branding is seen for miles in every direction. Keith's best guess is at least nine-hundred thousand in the room are using the free modules.

Keith is eligible for a free SENS module, but thankfully, he didn't need one. Nexus Corporation replaced his custodial job with a robot two months prior and his lay-off package included a top-of-the-line Nexus brand SENS Module. It is far more than he could afford, and far more than he would've gotten for himself.

"Mrs. Henselmeier, what could you tell us about your husband?"

"Gerald is a wonderful, kind and caring man," she says to newscaster Debbie. Mr. Henselmeier turns his sincere blue eyes humbly to his feet.

"And what do you intend to do once inside Netherica?"

"Retire," Mrs. Henselmeier says with a joyful laughter shared among the seniors in the crowd. They can relate with her; SENS Reality has a way of transforming even the most regressed, dependent seniors into the most adventurous, able-bodied and vigorous pleasure-seekers. Rich, healthy retirees until the very last breath. Perhaps this is the point.

Debbie houses the microphone in the shadow of Mr. Henselmeier's broad chin, "Sir, it is a pleasure to stand next to you; is there anything you would kindly tell us, or to those benefactors who are so grateful for your hard work?"

"Thank you, Debbie, it is a pleasure," said Mr. Henselmeier, taking the microphone, "Friends, I am humbled to stand with you on this historical day. Many thanks go to the fine folks at Nexus Corporation for making all of this possible, the hard-working and productive Department of Virtual Living, and for the stellar engineers at Genra Corporation to make it possible for so many of you to be here with us today. Be happy, be productive, and thanks for your continued support. Thank you."

Being no stranger to the press, he seems unusually vague and brief. Perhaps he is embarrassed by the attention. Perhaps he is careful not to offend the news network owned by his corporate adversary. Or, perhaps, he is more comfortable arguing over Genra Corp patent rights.

"Mr. Henselmeier, you are truly an amazing individual, a role model, and a valuable asset to humanity. We thank you for your contributions towards the betterment of the human condition."

The Henselmeiers silently mouth the words "*Thank you*" below the roar of standing ovations. Mr. Henselmeier is only one of many rich investors who contributed to the Genra Corporation SENS module program. It isn't surprising to Keith the rich are donating their assets into emerging blue sky research projects. They all seem so bored of money these days. Ingrid Haggard, a wealthy widow socialite floating around somewhere in the crowd, had given most of her inheritance to several Midwestern universities to further development in the field of Agri-Robotics. James Peymore, veteran and founder of Advanced Integrated Defense Robotic Systems (or 'AIDERS'), donated nearly eighty percent of his personal assets towards veteran relief and post-war rebuilding efforts, and then invested another in the Indigo Mills robot retooling facility.

"Conscience clear, the end is near," a religious group is chanting, each of them lying in a prostrate position on the floor three lines across from Keith. The chants grow loud enough to drown out the casual non-stop yammering around him. He watches with amusement as Debbie makes her way to their leader, planting her high heels between the followers, her free arm waving in the air to support her balance.

Their pastor is adorned in a flowing yellow robe with blue tassels and two large blue crosses across his chest. He is a portly man with a red face and a wiry, thick grey beard. A towering headpiece with six steeples is affixed to his head, each with a golden serpent wrapped around it. In one hand he holds the New Canonized American Bible, in the other a large cowbell he jangles with as much rhythm as the chanting it is meant to encourage.

"Conscience clear, the end is near, conscious clear, the end is near," they repeat as Debbie steps between them. They ignore her with a lack of courtesy that one can only assume the chanting must require.

He raises his Bible to silence the chanting and speaks loudly from deep within the confines of his soul, "Come unto me so I may share with you the truth."

Before Debbie can respond, he continues with proud, clear conviction, "I am Pastor Harold with the Integrated Church of the Apocalypse. The end is coming, my friends. And the proof is right here."

He pats the Bible in his hand, "*Revelation 7:16 says, 'They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.'*"

He gestures towards the buffet tables and says, "Tell me, how many of you here today feels either hungry or thirsty? And how many of you are, quite literally, dwelling in the darkness of your homes? Prophecy is unfolding; do not be so naive to doubt the truth, or so foolish to deny it! The Bible has all of the answers; it only requires an inquisitive, open mind and these truths will become evident!"

Aside from a few 'boos' and hecklers, most in the crowd are silent; it is either confusion or some state of guilt and interest. With exasperation, Pastor Harold preaches, "Do you need further proof? Matthew 24:14 says, '*And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*' We are a moral, God-fearing civilization, are we not? Let us

establish a new Church. A church for all people to join hands and come together, to pray, and God willing, we will establish the greatest Worship Center in all of Netherica! Praise the lord!"

The followers raise their arms in a frenzy of worship. Keith hasn't heard of this church, and he assumes it is a spinoff from a larger congregation, like the New Christ Movement or the Fruits of Labor Community Church. Perhaps the Fellowship of the Almighty, with the second-largest marketing budget in the world, who must be very envious of the free press Pastor Harold is getting.

Debbie interrupts him for a chance to direct the interview, "Pastor Harold, could you please explain what a worship center is?"

Pastor Ron carefully places his cowbell and Bible on a velvet pillow held by a lackey behind him and demonstrates his spiritual vision with his hands, "The ICA Worship Center will be a temple seen for miles in any direction. It is where all people come together in His honor, to bring light to the glory of God the Most High, to bringing awe to the hearts and minds of the world! It is a refuge for the persecuted, made of gold and precious gems. All believers are welcome and the worship centers are places for all to come and never again be chastised for their faith in the Almighty."

"And one more thing," says Pastor Harold, holding the microphone firmly, "Remember the Lord says, 'Be thou faithful until death, and I will give thee a crown of life.' Join our congregation today, my friends, and you will receive your very own crown of life, just like I'm wearing right now. Come and receive your free crown of life! Receive the crown! All you must do to receive the crown is repent your sins and stand with the lord!"

A dumbfounded teenager next to Keith stares at the screen and says, "The free crown sounds nice, but repent my SENS? What is he talking about?"

"No, not your SENS," says Keith. The jaw-dropping cluelessness on the young man's face makes it clear he still didn't understand, "He wants you to admit to God all the bad things you've done."

"Pfft," he scoffs, "I didn't do anything illegal."

Keith shrugs and ignores him. He doesn't want to explain what religious people believe, or even worse, get roped into philosophical discussions on morality. His only prayer, the only thing he cares about, is for the line to keep shuffling forward. Even in its slow, constipated fashion. And for Debbie to go away; the big gaping holes in the line ahead make it obvious the live broadcast is just another distraction.

The family in front of him is one such distracted group. They stare at the broadcast, totally oblivious of their surroundings. Keith fruitlessly clears his throat and shuffles. Two boys in loud floral Hawaiian shirts and colorful leis sit in lawn chairs, their legs kicking gleefully in the air, stuffing their faces with fire-roasted pineapple pork pizza. Their younger sister shoves a red, white and blue cupcake into her mouth. She notices Keith watching and grins, the sweet icing caulked between her teeth and up her nostrils. She laughs and blows the icing from her nose onto the floor.

Her mother waddles in her ultra-tight knee-length Genra Corp brand designer dress, bends down eye-to-eye and jams an index finger into the girl's face to scold her loudly, "Beth, how many times do I have to tell you to wait until we're inside to act silly? Act silly again and no more cupcakes, do you understand?"

The girl nods solemnly and frowns. She walks to her brothers and graciously holds out her hand with the remaining mashed-up dessert, the remnants of which cling between her tiny fingers. The oldest brother slaps it out of her hand and onto the floor, grabs her dirty hand and shoves it into his brother's face.

"Don't!" the girl cries.

"Hey!" the offended boy screams back, wiping the mess off of his face and punching his brother in the arm.

Mom flutters her hand in the air, "Karen! Karen! Clean her for me, would you? And the rest of them? Please?"

"At least she asked nicely," Keith thinks to himself. At this point in line, most people aren't so polite with Simulants.

Debbie is drawn to the extravagant dress and commotion like a hungry wild animal. She is now standing close enough for Keith to see her glimmering teeth and large, blinking eyes. Her makeup and skin tone are obviously muted by the Peerbot to beautify her screen presence, with a pair of sculpted eyebrows that rise above her golf-ball-size eyes as she speaks, "Excuse me, ma'am, you look absolutely gorgeous."

"Why, I... thank you," the mother stammers. She blushes and pulls her hair away from her face to reveal the enormous shimmering diamonds dangling under her ears and around her neck.

Debbie pulls her in close, just to Keith's right side, close enough for the light of the hovering Peerbot to illuminate him. He glances at the projection and leans back to avoid the camera's focus. He wants to scurry away, hide under a table, somewhere dark, convinced the Peerbot is sent to exterminate him. His heart pumps blood at high-speed, beads of sweat gathering on his forehead.

He is certain his therapist would know a name for the 'fear of being broadcasted live in front of a crowd'. But for now, he'll invent it himself. '*Visiovoiraphobia*' sounds nice. But it should include his existing fear of crowds. Yes! *Demovisioioraphobia*. That is what he'll call it.

Debbie bats her eyes and inquires, "Could you tell me a little about your family, and why you're here with us today?"

"There's not much to say, really. We just want a better life for ourselves and our kids," says the woman, insecure and camera-shy, still frustrated by her children.

Debbie sizes her up and asks, "From the looks of your stunning clothes, are you going on vacation?"

"Yes, vacation! Hawaii," she blurts with a nervous smile.

The three children stand quietly behind her while Karen hands the boys moist wipes and scrubbing the little girl's face. Debbie asks, "Could you introduce us all to your family?"

"I'm Sarah, this is my husband, Daniel, and our three kids, Paul, Jimmy and Lindsey," Sarah says, pointing to each of them and pulling her skirt down with her free hand.

"So why vacation in Netherica?"

"It's free," chimes her husband from behind, his voice not carried through the PA but loud enough for Keith to hear.

Sarah nods, "Our family hasn't been able to afford a vacation since Jimmy was born eight years ago. Hawaii is my dream, I'm so excited," she squeals, clapping her hands and bouncing on her toes.

"And you sir, could you tell me what you're most excited about," asks Debbie, sticking the microphone in Daniel's face.

Daniel is wearing a tailored pinstripe suit and a blue lei around his neck. Jutting his mouth inches from the microphone, he responds with molasses-thick Southern drawl, "Debbie thank you for giving me the chance to speak to all of these wonderful people. I'd just like to say that I came for a better life for my wife and kids. I'm a simple guy. Now I can give my family what they deserve. I'm the luckiest man in the world."

He pulls away for a second and then grabs the microphone, "Thank you."

Keith doesn't have to even ask to realize they're poor. He didn't come from much himself. The most impoverished came here today dressed in high-fashion, carrying fancy toys and asking Simulants for expensive jewelry. Before today, if they ever had the chance to blow large sums of money on trips and tangibles, it was the lottery. Netherica makes everyone a winner.

The room responds with hoots and ear-piercing wolf calls as Daniel and Sarah hug and kiss.

Debbie bends down to speak with the children, "And you are Lindsey, yes?"

The crowd swoons as Lindsey sheepishly nods for the Peerbot.

"And Lindsey, what do you think of Netherica?"

Lindsey speaks only after her mother encourages her, "I want a rainbow," she coos.

More heartfelt expressions from the crowd as Debbie addresses the two boys, "Paul, and... Jimmy, right? Are you enjoying your ice cream?"

"It's good," says Jimmy, shoving the broad end of a cone into his mouth and smacking his jaws. His face drips with dairy products. Keith wonders if enough SENS sugar convinces the brain to simply accept diabetes and attention deficits.

"What is the first thing you two want to do?"

"We want to ride this," exclaims Paul, jumping up and down with a brochure in his hands, accidentally tearing the corner.

"Yeah!" says Jimmy, jumping with his brother.

The Peerbot zooms in for a closer look at the pamphlet. "World's Largest Slide", it says, something constructed by a new resident somewhere in Southern Texas within the past twelve hours. Netherica's citizens are already marketing their attractions.

Keith whimpers as dozens around him crowd his space, flocking for their chance in the Peerbot's field of view. A man dressed as a giant parrot next to him flaps a wing and knocks over a punch bowl. Keith reels back, falling into another man wearing a football helmet. He is overwhelmed with the smell of fresh linens as the scores of camera whores pile stupidly in front of the Peerbot, forcing their bodies into the broadcast and hoping Debbie gives them a chance to speak. Line-jumpers take advantage of the bustle while Immigration Officers try to make their way into the fray.

Keith considers a triple-tap.

"No," he says loudly, an utterance lost in the screams of idiots. He can face this, regardless of this circumstance. It's not real; just mind tricks and streams of binary code. A digital rite of passage. Nobody will even recognize him, except maybe his therapist.

The projections cut to a Nexus Corporation commercial as the Immigration officers file in. Everyone stops pushing to watch. A few nibble at the food nearby. Debbie is checking her teeth and makeup. Keith takes deep breaths, counting to ten with every exhale. He watches the imagery of the impressive Netherica Nexus Corporation headquarters with its wide open parks. It is a towering structure with over four-hundred stories; each floor independently designed by a Nexus Corporation designer. Their Netherica centerpiece is very trendy architecture, making it a worthy aspiration for the creative types.

The colors of floor designs flow to glorious New Orchestra music. It is a warm and relaxing introduction for Nexus Corporation. For the first time since Pastor Harold rattled off his Biblical sound bites, the room is hush with excitement and awe. And even for only a second, Keith almost forgot where he is.

The Netherican News Corporation logo returns and quickly fades into live broadcast.

Keith is staring at himself. His head darts to the Peerbot and he winces at the light shining brightly in his eyes. Debbie comes in close and the smell of her perfume invades his nostrils. He bends forward and dry-heaves. Dutifully, the Peerbot follows his motions.

"Sir, are you OK?" asks Debbie, careful not to place the microphone close enough to fill the room with the sound of his gagging.

Keith nods and holds up his hand to signal he is ok. The Peerbot meticulously follows his movement. He leans his head to the left and speaks into the microphone, "Yes, it's just... your perfume."

"My perfume?" asks Debbie incredulously, slightly embarrassed. Her eyes expand to the size of headlights.

"No, no! I mean, it smells very nice, I just..."

"...so tell me about Netherica," Debbie says with her lips pursed, not skipping a beat. She certainly isn't going to have her choice of perfume insulted by some fool. She will force him through this.

The crowd guffaws at his antics; Keith is a deer in Debbie's headlight-sized eyes, frozen in fear and entrenched in humiliation. He forgets he can leave and blurts a sliver of incoherent psycho-babble stuck in his mind, "Demovisioiraphobia."

Debbie covers her microphone and asks the others if he speaks English. They shrug.

"I don't do well in crowds... or... on television," he stammers, inappropriately placing his hand on her shoulder.

Debbie *shoo's* him away, cocks her head and frowns, "You poor thing. This must be a horrible experience for you. Could you tell me your name?"

Keith isn't thinking clearly enough to decide if she is sincere or condescending. Held hostage in live broadcast with no choice but to accept his condition, he wallows in self-pity and her sympathetic tone.

"K...Keith," he says.

"Now, tell me why you're here," she demands patronizingly.

Keith forgot where he is, or why he came. With endless therapy sessions muddling his mind he utters, "Self-Administered Systematic Desensitization."

"And would you mind explaining to all of us what that means?"

"Pavlov Dogging myself.... I am. I mean, it's why I'm here. Do you mean what in line I am for? Or...?"

He can't breathe as his mind drowns in five million gallons of laughter. He sits on the floor, takes several deep breaths, holds his ears, closes his eyes and screams in anguish, "I hate this stupid place!"

Then, a miraculous nightmare happens. Keith opens his eyes to witness numerous others in front of him fade away from Great Hall Three, as if they are phantoms tired of tormenting him. They left only the piles of junk they had accumulated.

A calm of confusion sweeps through the remaining millions. They look at the projection, where the Peerbot focuses on Debbie's stupid expression. Her mouth is wide open with wide eyes no longer blinking, as if someone had shoved snowballs into her skull. They look at each other. They look at huge gaps in line. They look at the entrance.

Keith stands up, bewildered and emotional. Where did all the people go? What was happening?

The crowd surges. Pandemonium ensues as hordes begin hurtling over line barriers in a mad dash for the front gates, screaming so loud the ceiling rattles above them. Mothers grab children and hold them close, gangs of young people run across buffet tables, stepping in gobs of food and kicking over dishes. Maniacs grab handfuls of food and throw them at the strangers standing in their way. The Integrated Church of Apocalypse holds hands and chants something about Rapture.

Keith's eyes are now as wide as Debbie's, and he screams in horror as someone slips and is trampled by the herd. Others leave entirely, fading away like the others. In shock, Keith drops into the fetal position, audibly weeping as someone slams into his back and pushes him forward. He grips a line barrier for his life, wrapping his body around it. Tears stream down his cheeks and soak his twelve-hour stubble.

His throat emits low guttural noises that some animal would probably interpret as a mating call. What he thought was a warm Shepherd's Pie beneath him is really his own urine; he had wet himself again, his real self, not his digital self.

Wait! He can leave this place. Of course! With hands quivering, he reaches for his temples to give the triple-tap-and-hold signal. Tap, tap...

Keith opens his eyes. He is still standing in Great Hall Three. Bewildered, he blinks and looks at his own hands, still quivering with palms both sweaty and pale. His crotch is warm but with not a drop of fluid or a morsel of food can be seen. There is no evidence about his person that anything had happened. In front of him is a single family of three, and beyond that, the front gates to Netherica.

What happened?

An official-looking, wordless government seal flicks on the projections above him. "NETHERICA RIOT CONTROL" blinks below it.

The message is replaced with a close-up of a suited man who clears his throat and says, "Greetings, everyone, if I may have your attention, please. My name is Gregory Winslet. I am the Director of Netherican Security in the Department of Virtual Living. For everyone's benefit, we ask that you remain calm. I will explain what has just happened. Be informed that non-compliance will be reprimanded according to standard Netherican usage policies. Officials at Genra Corporation have informed us that due to overwhelming demand, technical difficulties and system limitations, most Genra Corporation brand SENS modules have unexpectedly dropped their users from the system. Furthermore, due to the unrest that subsequently followed, I have ordered the standard Netherica riot control policy."

"This policy executes a mandatory 'Soft Reset' of all users in proximity of the riot location, reestablishing a location within the environment. Rest assured this does not cause harm to you or your SENS module, and this policy has been executed only to maintain the peace."

Fearful of punishment, the room is nearly silent.

"You surely have noticed your place in line has changed. In some cases, significantly. All individuals present have been automatically repositioned by Riot Control Ordinance 11.23, which outlines procedures related to security in government waiting lines."

"This ordinance employs an algorithm to determine placement in line after a Soft Reset has executed. These factors have been applied to determine your new placement in line: the presence of gaps, which are now filled. The presence of dependents and family within the crowd, in which you will be placed in close proximity. And, finally, your participation in the halted conflict is taken into consideration. Those who did not participate in the riot have been moved to the front of the line. Those who did participate have been moved to the rear. We understand this policy may require independent human review, and we will be reviewing specific cases to approve or deny any contest to this decision. Field your concerns through your nearby Simulant and we will address them on an individual basis. We ask that you continue to conduct yourself in a respectful and orderly fashion. Provoking unrest and violence, or a refusal to cooperate with Immigration officers results in immediate denial until further notice."

"For those of you with family connected via a dropped Genra Corporation SENS module, each of them will soon be placed in an alternate line when space is available. You will be informed when they have returned so you may establish contact with them remotely from your current location. Thank you for your cooperation. Immigration officials will now return to processing."

The projection fades. Keith internalizes his joy, careful to withhold strong displays of emotion that could draw attention to himself. The past, and this crowd, is literally behind him now. He approaches the immigration booth with a bounce in his walk, the sunlight in Netherica shining brightly through the doors beyond.

At the booth, Keith holds out his left hand, which is promptly scanned, and a number of open deeds are presented to him. He decisively chooses what appears to be the most rural area available; near a lake in the mountains of what we know as Montana. It looks picturesque. Quiet.

Perfect.

Before he is moved along, Keith turns back to ask the officer, "If Netherica is everything it promises to be, what will we do back home?"

The officer shrugs, takes a large bite of a turkey leg and talks as he chews, "Keep this thing running, I suppose," he says, smacking his lips.

They both glance back at the crowd who are already picking at the buffets again. The officer gulps his mouthful, wipes his lips with his sleeve and says, "Move along and enjoy yourself. And have a good day, sir."

Keith nods and turns away as the next family is ushered into the line. And with newfound confidence, he strolls into the new Land of Plenty.