



/ Edison's Clusters

Chris Braak

The little clicker bastard was just staring.

He sat there in layers and layers of dirty clothes, lying in a filthy gutter, surrounded by broken bottles and condom wrappers, cigarette butts and rock-hard bits of gum.

He had some kind of hood or scarf pulled over his head; it was ratty and it smelled. I could see his Arch glittering underneath it, a fat metal slug that lay thick on the crown of his head like a fin. There was tarnish on the casing. His left eye had been plucked out

and replaced by one of those old-fashioned Sino-Japanese models, with a stainless steel orbit and a hundred pulsing red diodes.

The Arch on his head was illegal. I was willing to bet that his little electric eyeball had a resolution that exceeded legal limits. The little clicker probably had a dozen more sensory limbs and apparatuses and God knows what else, plugged into his pasty parchment-paper skin.

I didn't call the cops. I didn't do anything. I was sixteen, and this was my first foray into downtown Cleveland. It was the first time I'd ever seen a clicker in the flesh. The Exodus hadn't happened yet, so they were all still on Earth, but the little sons-of-bitches had begun withdrawing from human society for years.

I'm not sure what the exact numbers were; the year I turned sixteen,

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I think there were about one or two hundred thousand people who'd had the Delgado Arch installed. Only, I don't want to call them people, because the whole point of a Delgado Arch is that you got one because you didn't want to be human anymore. Usually, you didn't see the clickers on the street. They kept to themselves, in filthy communes, holed up in tenement buildings, living on recycled soy-product and rainwater that they scooped out of the gutters.

"There are," the clicker told me as I tried to walk by, in his dreamy, doped-up voice, "six hundred and fifty-nine separate compounds in concrete." He didn't turn away from his rapt contemplation of the broken curb. "Mostly they are crystalline structures. Isometric. Hexagonal. Tetragonal. Rhombohedral. Monoclinic. Triclinic. Some crystals are different from others. Van der Waals forces affect crystal structures, as do covalent properties..."

He just went on and on, I wasn't sure what it was he was saying.

Downtown Cleveland was empty back then. It was where most of the clickers were concentrated; where all of the homes and businesses stood that they'd abandoned once they had their Arches installed. Walking through it was like walking through a ghost-town, except you knew that somewhere, behind the window of some ragged rat-warren firetrap, a hundred men and women with Delgado Arches plugged into their brains were sitting. Maybe they were staring at each other in ecstasy, the way the poor loon I saw was. Maybe they were looking out their windows at me.

I didn't like it. I hurried home.

"He was probably getting a data feed from some other clickers, somewhere," my father told me later, at dinner. He was putting away the dishes, and his own prosthetic leg hummed softly. "The Arches transmit constantly on a broadband, wireless connection. But it's all just data," he added with a wink. "It doesn't mean anything. They don't

understand the information that comes through the Arch, they just repeat it."

Dad's leg was a souvenir from the Humanist Revolution. It had a soft, shiny-smooth bacterioplasmic casing, with just under the legal limit of artificial nerve-endings per square inch. Tactile resolution was as strictly controlled as visual resolution.

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happened after.

"Oh," said my father. "People have always done things like that. It's almost never for self-improvement; more like a fashion statement. When I was a kid, punks used to do all kinds of self-mutilation. Pierced ears, tattooed skin. I knew someone that had metal balls implanted under his scalp to look like horns."

He leaned in close to me while I chewed. "Back in the old days, there were even folks that would drill holes in their skulls," he pointed his finger at the side of his head like a gun. "*Sllllrrrrrrp*. Then, they'd let the holes fill with blood, so their brains would work better."

"Did they? Work better, I mean?"

"Well, I always thought that if you thought drilling a hole in your head was a good idea in the first place, then there's probably already something so wrong with your brain that

"Why would anybody want something like that?" It was mostly a rhetorical question. I was occupied with summoning the force of will required to choke down another forkful of asparagus. It's a wonder I remembered this conversation at all. I'm glad I did, though, especially in light of what

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a little extra blood isn't going to fix it." Dad put his dishes away. "Clear up your dishes when you're done. I'm going to go plug into the 'tran."

While my father was off browsing the world-net, getting sensory information beamed by low-frequency sound waves directly into his brain with the transcranial stimulator, I sat and stared at my asparagus. It was a long while before I thought again about the clickers.

Of course, my dad was wrong about the point of the Delgado Arch. It wasn't body-modification, like tattoos or piercings or anything like that.

The Delgado Arch is a thick network of complex nanoprocessors, arranged in a free-form neural network called an Edison Cluster. It's got extra bits on it, things like

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radio transmitters, data storage and encryption facilities, but it's the Edison Cluster that's the most important thing.

When you get

an Arch installed, the med-techs crack your head open along the coronal suture, where the bones of your skull meet at the very top. From there, they cut out sections of the frontal and two parietal bones, and start plugging nano-wires right into the brain. The Arch connects into the cerebral neocortex, the thalamus and hippocampus, and I don't even know what else. The Arch gets connected everywhere, from the cognitive processing centers to the limbic control centers, even the sensory information processors. About the only thing that gets left alone are involuntary motor functions, like the heart and lungs.

Having a Delgado Arch installed is like being on drugs all the time. It suppresses unpleasant limbic responses, it lights up hallucinatory neuroreceptors. It ties information retrieval to the pleasure centers, so that clickers can get high by just sending data to each other; they can become sexually stimulated just from reading their e-mail.

A Delgado Arch is like being on every drug, all at once. That's the reason people get it done; that's why they'll kill and steal and do whatever they can to get plugged in. It's the reason why they practically disappear once they've got one, to spend all their time packet-sharing with other clickers.

The Arch was made illegal almost the minute it was patented. All working prototypes were destroyed. But the data got out. Someone, somewhere, maybe in Mexico or Singapore, who knows, got a hold of the copyrighted DNA code that was used to make the protozoans that, in turn, built the Edison Cluster. Everything else about the Arch – that was just basic neurology.

Of the two hundred thousand bona fide clickers around when I was sixteen, about eighty-percent of them were in prison. They still had their Arches and Edison Clusters buzzing away, causing their bodies to fill up with serotonin and endorphins which would keep them in a constant ecstatic stupor. No one had found a way to remove the Arch without lobotomizing the clicker.

I remember when I first heard about the Church of Gort. That wasn't their real name, obviously. They called themselves something heinously complex, like The Second Church of the Expanded Electric Consciousness. I imagine it was quicker to say in wireless pulse-transmission through the Arch. Anyway, some clever blogger somewhere started calling them the Church of Gort, and the name caught on.

You have to understand, this whole thing took us by surprise. We hardly noticed the clickers. The Church of Gort was some nut-job fringe religion, an information-age cult of body-mod freaks. There were a million things just like it, the People of the Plastic, the Children of Nanotech, whatever. One more cracked out voice, screaming nonsense to the world, didn't merit worldwide attention for more than twenty hours.

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Until the Exodus. That happened when I was nineteen. Somehow, somewhere along the way, the Church of Gort had been gathering money. A lot of money. Maybe they had a couple of wealthy converts, or someone in their ranks was really good at playing the stock market. We knew they couldn't get real, face-to-face jobs, but maybe they had surrogate world-site jobs, making world-net pages or administering networks, or something like that.

When I turned nineteen, the Church of Gort revealed that it had a significant fortune. It bought the John Glenn Space Station at L5. We'd abandoned it after the Revolution, once we realized that space exploration was just cost-prohibitive. So, the station just hung there at the neutral-gravity point between the Earth and the Moon. Until the Church bought it.

The Church then began ferrying its own members to the station. And the world let them go. Yes, their implantation was illegal and we were fighting a war against them, technically. But the truth was, actually catching them, imprisoning them, and subsequently supporting them was too much of a hassle. We all felt it was a better idea to just let them go off into space, if that's what they wanted.

The world governments granted an amnesty to anyone with a Delgado Arch—any clicker could find a Church-funded spacecraft and leave Earth for John Glenn Station. And leave they did, in droves. I remember watching clips of thousands of them, filing on to old, single-use chemical rockets, their Arches glimmering like obscene worms feeding on their skulls.

Most of them had extra implants, too; one of the things about the Arch was that once you got it, you were more inclined to get other, even less human, adaptations. I saw hundreds of people whose hands had been replaced with tentacle clusters. People had extra appendages, extra sensory packages, sometimes complete artificial faces grafted onto their chests. Human legs were replaced with animal legs, with wheels sometimes, or skittering spider-legs. There were dozens more with artificial genitals grafted to their hands and faces.

Watching them file into those rockets was like watching a bio-mechanical freakshow. We were glad to be rid of them. They left Earth and once they were out of sight, they were out of our minds.

Then came the Scare. A rumor started somewhere. Maliciously, maybe, maybe not. Whispers began to start, and in the era of the world-net, whispers spread fast.

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The freaks were doing something. The clickers, up there on their space station, looking down at us, staring at us with those vacant, stoned-out-of-their-mind eyes, were up to something.

They knew something we didn't. An asteroid, due to wipe out all life on the planet. Or a coming Ice Age. Or a plague. A plague that they had built. No, it wasn't a plague, it was a bomb, or worse, it was a GASER, a gravity-laser that could level cities. Whatever it was, we knew they were doing something, and we knew we had to stop them.

I enlisted in the North American Marine Corps when I turned twenty.

Richard Vauxhall was the president-elect of the North American Union. All the newsfeeds said he was "statesmanlike" and "dignified."

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Vauxhall was a big man, and he always wore a white suit.

They showed us a vidclip of his speech while we rode the shuttle to the L5 station.

"Your fathers fought a noble war," he said, "A war for the independence and the sanctity of man. They fought for the idea that Humanity is not something that we are born with, but something that we aspire to. Your fathers won that war, and with it came the freedom of every single man, woman, and child in the world.

"You will soon engage with an enemy that has no respect for that freedom. They have given up the humanity that your fathers fought for. They have surrendered to cold, mechanical inhumanity.

"More than that, your enemy has now decided to try and destroy our humanity. Our essence of being, our very selves, they are the prize that you fight for today. Your enemy wants to destroy human nature itself. You are the last guardians of humanity. Fight well."

I remember when the airlock opened and the hundred and twenty of us fell into the open, zero-G core that the rest of the station revolved around. Our shuttle left and another one docked and unloaded more Marines. We didn't carry guns for fear of breaching the bulkheads. We had machetes instead. We made our way to the crew section.

Hundreds of thousands of them were inside, staring off at things in rapt ecstasy, communicating with each other, transmitting data. Only one looked up when the Marines started to come in. Maybe they could all see through his eyes, I don't know. I don't know if they understood why we were there. None of them moved. They all just sat there, perfectly still.

We're standing there, facing them, and they're not even looking up at us. My squad captain shouts something to us; he pulls out his machete, and he starts laying into them.

Suddenly it's a slaughter. We are slaughtering them. They won't fight back, they won't even move. Their stillness drives us to greater anger. We strike harder, faster. We mutilate when we could kill, striking off arms and legs, tentacle clusters and bioplastic antlers. We scream at them and hack away, covered in their blood.

I hack at them like a man possessed.

They don't move. The clickers don't move. My arm's fallen to my side, and I can see that the clickers have tears in their eyes. No, not tears. Just one tear. They are all shedding a single tear in perfect unison, while we dismember their mangled bodies.

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Chris Braak is an eccentric loon who enjoys both beer and women. He is poor but pretty, and probably lurking in your kitchen RIGHT NOW.

Illustration / Nick Allanach