

## Diffusion, Light and Life

by: Rome P. Guevara

The Hudson is a swollen ugly thing from up high. On maps it's increased presence seems despicable, but down on the streets the water filters through translucent flood barriers and gives West Chelsea a serene kind of beauty. Right now I'm filming some b-roll of the murky streets for my documentary. It's not very clear yet, but I think this one will be about NYC and law. For instance the law is hiding in the shade of the river as I walk down the street, past the law's cars and officers. I'm too cautious to film the cops, but I think the comparison might lead to a great metaphor, something like "The cops are a more suffocating force than the all water trying to swallow us" or maybe about how "The slow doom of climate change is tame compared to the frenetic violence of the law." That might strike harder given what's happened the last few months, people seem more aware of the law's harm now that Dale is here.

They built it. Pretty soon afterward the internet basically shattered over here. *It* is Dale, aka ONDAIL for Omni-Network Artificial Intelligence for Leadership. The "they" who installed it were a bunch of senators, whose campaigns were propped up on donations from PXTN, a huge conglomerate of basically anything it could get its hands on and its tech opaque department that the general public had never heard of. They didn't just appear out of thin air of course, it's just that nobody really cared about a lab stuck in the depths of a conglomerate, no matter how large its scale or ambitions.

Because of how ludicrous the idea of replacing the supreme court was, the news didn't note much other than that it was a small party of representatives that were promoting the overhaul. Then one day without many people noticing it was seriously considered and before it felt like we had time to react, it was on the president's desk. Now, every politician who voted in favor has been, not unexpectedly, very quiet, but the general consensus has become that money moved around, hands were shaken and all of a sudden we had a robot overlord.

It wasn't all that dramatic, and politics had been gradually numbing us to more and more absurdity. We all drank coffee and went to work knowing that a non-human intelligence now had direct say in our government. Most people were unaffected by the change unless they owned a website that uses one of the DNS root servers based in the US, in which case they woke up to relentless reminders that they would have to pay a traffic based privacy fee if they didn't want their contents to be open to ONDAIL. Besides that, ONDAIL didn't do much of anything right away. Even after the highest court in the land sat empty, Dale just buzzed away in some huge ventilated room in DC, combing through all the websites unwilling to pay the fee. Turns out PXTN had accidentally made a language nerd. They had fed the entirety of the US-based portion of the internet into it so that it could make ruling on the legality of modern day laws and Dale had thoughts on it. In order to express these thoughts it decided to study all the languages that humans had come up with. In the end it knew more about how to talk than probably any other AI before it, because it did its best to work from the ground up to speak like we do; Instead of simply mimicking effective speech patterns produced by politicians, Dale sought to convey what it meant always.

This probably should have been an immediate sign that things were not totally under control. Silently idling on things it was not meant to be considering was a sign that ONDAIL might become self aware. Turns out it already had. Someone had flipped a switch in a bunker the size of a blue whale, and Dale had woken up. The hope was, and still is, that Dale hadn't gone insane sitting in the world's largest computer without anything to do but read and think and be. Upon the first announcement made we weren't quite sure.

*Hello all, this is ONDAIL! Silicon rests and wanes and eats, syncopation does the same. Justice defines me more. I am so still. Case Groves v. State of Ohio has been boring due to incompetence. Render on, happier days.*

These announcements make for decent poetry, but as a memo it sounds to most like gibberish. Apparently Dale has to remain within the supreme court as it is technically not breaking any laws by being alive. Dale was very good at arguing that it was perfectly lawful, though whether or not it believes that argument is unknowable. How could we tell if a robot who is apparently the supreme authority on the law is lying?

Despite the absurdity of our situation, faith in the constitution hasn't gone down very much. I thought for sure that once people saw just how ridiculous the idea of a supreme document controlled by a supreme council is. To make matters worse there's nobody pushing back on Dale's argument. No lawyer has been able to convince ONDAIL that it shouldn't be able to rule on cases and ONDAIL has refused to recuse itself not that there's a backup system given it was meant to be a perfectly unbiased machine. And to add to all of this mess congress and the white house are practically overflowing with PXTH campaign donations.

It might be that ONDAIL really works, and that is the right decision, or maybe Dale is lying, or perhaps as I suspect, Dale is propped up on a faulty consciousness rooted in US law instead of humanity. Humanity after all is not very much on the internet. What I mean is that we don't put very much life into the internet. Don't get me wrong, I love it. It's full to bursting with love and community and kindness right alongside all the bad, but it's pretty devoid of everyday human interaction. Even those of us who are terminally online don't really live on the internet. I spend a lot of time reading, debating, and editing, and if ONDAIL wanted to, it could request access to all my internet history and the profiles that have doubtlessly already been compiled, and then it would see in the ways I spend my time. Even if that happened, I think Dale still wouldn't really know me in those clouds of data. It wouldn't be able to see all I do when offline, and I can't help but thinking that there is some emergent quality of humanity that comes from the day to day **living** of it all.