

A black and white photograph showing the back and head of a person from behind. The person is bald, and the lighting highlights the contours of their neck, shoulders, and back. The background is dark and out of focus.

M. Darusha Wehm

Self Made

# Self Made

by M. Darusha Wehm

© Copyright 2010 M. Darusha Wehm

ebook ISBN 978-0-9737467-4-7

Get the audio podcast or buy the complete book in print, audiobook or ebook at  
<http://darusha.ca/selfmade>

© This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-  
No Derivative Works 2.5 Canada license.  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca/>

## Chapter Eleven

Dex didn't have time to go shopping for a new tie, let alone a new suit. It had been a while since he'd been hoodwinked into taking someone to dinner, and his good tie was, he realized now, hideously ugly. He put it on anyway, and changed his view so that he could get a good look at his avatar. The suit his avatar always wore was fine, and he'd always been fond of the hat. But the tie — what had he ever been thinking? Bright red and shiny against his charcoal suit. Ugh. It wasn't that ugly, he told himself, so long as you just closed your eyes and didn't look at it. Whatever. It was only Annabelle, and it was under duress. Maybe she'd take the tie as a hint.

By now Dex was physically back at his apartment, and he took a minute to unfocus from Marionette City and make his body comfortable. He changed clothes, used the lav, and poured the last of the Jamaica's Best into a tumbler.

He hadn't had time to get another bottle, so he would have to drink the virtual crap. At least he could get a glass of the real stuff in now.

He settled into his comfortable chair, and went back online. At least the restaurant Annabelle had picked wasn't one of those million dollar places that would cost Dex a week's pay. He linked over a minute or two early and got to the table first. He flipped through the menu and tried to remember the last time he'd even been to a restaurant. He just didn't understand the point of tasting food but not getting full. Still, if Annabelle had anything useful for him, it would be worth it. So long as he didn't think about the tie.

Annabelle arrived precisely on time, and she had definitely put more effort into this than Dex had. She had done something to her chin length hair, made it all pouffy and sparkly, and she wore a dress. Dex didn't think he'd ever seen her in dress before — he always thought she was strictly a utilitarian dresser. But this night she had on some kind of semi transparent thing with a slight purple glow to it. Underneath she wore a couple of tiny bands of strategically placed purple fabric. Shit. This could get complicated.

"Hey, Dex," she said as she sat down across from him. "Looking good." Dex rolled his eyes and cursed his tie.

"Yeah," he answered, "you, too." They each looked at the menu and placed their orders with the table's service screen. Their glasses filled immediately, and Dex took a long swallow of the fake dark and stormy. It wasn't that bad after all. "So, got anything for me?" he asked. Annabelle arched an eyebrow, grinning, and he hastened to add, "From the code you took earlier."

Her smile faltered, and she said, "Yeah, the code. Well, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that I'm ninety nine percent sure that we don't have a a multi-hating serial killer on our hands. The code that got your vic was specifically non-replicating. It was made for him and him alone."

"Well, that's good to know," Dex said, beginning to compose a message to Jay Shiraishi while they talked. "And the bad news?"

"Bad news is that's all I know," Annabelle looked away from his gaze. "There's nothing there to identify where it came from. The code itself is just stand-alone malware — there's nothing that identifies it at all. And the bot was very carefully made, not tied to another system, at least not that I can see." She caught his eyes and looked away again. "I mean, there has to be a real system running the damn thing, but I just can't get back to it. They did a good job Dex. It was the real deal."

"Strange," he said, thinking. "From what I've heard, Reuben was the best in the business for that sort of thing. And it seems unlikely that he killed himself, since Ivy is the one who hired me. Besides, he... or she would have had so many easier ways to do it. What would be the point?"

"Beats me," Annabelle said. At that moment, the first course arrived. Dex could smell Annabelle's escargot and it just made him hungry. He picked a piece of what was supposed to be some kind of smoked fish out of his salad and tasted it. The flavour in his mouth was strong, but it just wasn't the same as eating. He'd have been happier with a food brick, but Annabelle seemed to be enjoying herself.

"So," Dex said, when the table had appeared to swallow their empty appetizer plates, "you do this sort of thing often?"

"Eating?" Annabelle asked, looking confused.

"Yeah," Dex said, leaning back a bit. "You know, going to restaurants, blackmailing people into coming with you; the whole dating thing."

"Ah," she said. "I guess. I mean, I've been out a few times — it's something to do. Everyone does, right? We're all looking for that someone."

"I don't know if we all do," Dex said, "and I don't think there is a someone."

"Sure there is," she smiled at him and leaned in. "There's someone out there for everyone — even if you need a pickaxe, a compass, and night goggles to find them." She laughed, and Dex found himself grinning in spite of himself.

"Maybe for you," he said, "but some of us are just better off alone." At that moment, their meals arrived, and they spent a few awkward moments with the food. When the table cleared their plates. Dex began, "Look, I'm sorry..."

"Don't be," Annabelle interrupted him, "I'm not looking for a lifetime here. Why don't we just have a night together — I'm free, you're free. Nothing intimate, just sex."

"Just sex?"

"You know," she said, laughing, "enjoyable act between two creatures in a species in response to biological and neurological stimuli?"

"Yeah," Dex said, smiling sadly. "I know what it is. I just... well, it's not you, I just..."

"What?" she said, softly.

"I, ah," Dex tried to find a delicate way to put his thoughts. "I have a different preference."

"Oh," she said, eyebrows lifting. "That doesn't have to be a problem. I'm no prude." Her body shimmered slightly, and then turned slowly and surprisingly seamlessly into someone else. Her hair shortened to an above the ear short cut, the dress condensed into a pair of fitted trousers and a t-shirt, and the underneath bands changed as well. The top band disappeared entirely, revealing a very solid set of male pectoral muscles and the bottom bands formed into underpants sporting a substantial and prominent package. "Do you like this better?"

Dex had nothing to say, and Annabelle said, "I don't mind dressing up occasionally. Whatever works for you."

"No," he finally got out, "that's exactly the problem. I don't enjoy any of this."

"You don't like sex?"

"Not like this," he said, gesturing around them. "If there isn't touching, real body touching, I just... I just don't like it." Dex felt his face get hot, and wondered if he could get away with just linking out of the restaurant. Instead, they sat together in silence for a moment. "It's not you," he said, finally. "You're... great. Either way. If I met you on the train or something, well, who knows, right? But..."

"It's okay," she said, the avatar standing up, shimmering and turning back to Annabelle, the girl. "If it doesn't work, it doesn't work," she said, a little sadly

but with genuine feeling, "I do understand." Dex stood and walked toward her. He kissed her lightly on the cheek, and she smiled. "Thanks," she said. "It might not do anything for you, but that was nice for me."

"Thanks for your help on the case," he said, then immediately hated himself for sounding like such a heel. Annabelle smiled, though.

"Anytime," she said. "You know if you ever change your mind..."

"If I do, you'll be the first one I call," he said, smiling. He waited for her to link out of the restaurant, then checked to make sure she was offline before he linked over to Monte's.

"Why the long face?" the bartender said, and Dex knew better than to search the bot's face for any hint of humour. There wasn't any.

"It's been a rough day," Dex said, accepting the double dark and stormy with extra neural stims. He took a sip and felt the strange rush of the false liquor hit his system.

"You wanna talk about it?" the bartender asked, as it always did, as it was programmed to do.

"No," Dex said, and the bar bot turned and walked down to the other end of the bar, unoffended. He took another sip of his drink, and looked at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Not bad for a guy who didn't give a damn, he thought, tie or no tie. He knew he didn't see what Annabelle saw, and wondered if he should have just gone with her. He probably could have faked it for an hour or two; it would have made her happy, if only for the moment. But he knew he

couldn't keep it up, the charade, pretending he felt something when he never did.

It was bad enough sitting here, in this fake bar, drinking fake booze served by a fake bartender. Just because he wanted that feeling, the one you get sitting alone in a crowded room, somehow more solitary than if you really were alone. Though, of course, the funny reality of it all was that Dex was actually alone, in his apartment, staring off into space. There were just so many levels of deception in the modern world. He didn't think he was cut out for it. This new world. Born too late, that's what Maks used to say, they were a couple of guys who were just born at the wrong time in history.

But Maks figured it out, somehow. How to fit in, make it all make some kind of sense. He'd figured it out, but never filled Dex in on the secret. He just walked out the door, out of Dex's life, and he'd taken the secret with him. Dex took a long pull on his drink, and wondered, not for the first time, what Maks was doing now. He wondered if Maks ever thought of him, of the life they had lived back when they both believed that they could make a place where things could be different.

Where things could be different. Dex fished in his pockets and found the card that Stella Bish had given him. Do you ever wish things could be different, she'd asked him. Only every second of every day. But there was no program that could make the world the way he wanted it to be. Annabelle's time machine didn't work that way. Still, maybe there was something... something she could do for him to dull the ache. Dull it more than the booze did.

He pulled up his messenger, and started to carefully compose a message. After half an hour, he had it ready and sent it off to Bish. Another dark and stormy went by, the bartender now offering sobering tablets along with the drinks. Dex passed, wanting to feel the sweet oblivion and the promised pain the next day. Feeling things — it took a lot in this world to make him feel things.

He was debating on a third drink when his messenger pinged. Bish had a name for him. Uri Farone. He dealt in memories, making them better, making them the way they ought to be. There was no changing the past, but Farone knew how to make it seem as though the past were different. Dex figured that this was the closest he would ever get. He paged over to Farone's board, and looked at the satisfied customer testimonials and the various options available for purchase.

It was impressive. According to his PR page, the deluxe package could completely erase the "wrong" memory and replace it with a better one. Of course, the usual caveats applied about not being responsible for any cognitive dissonance created by the process and paradoxes that arose as a result. Dex wondered — if he could fix it so that his memory of Maks was gone, would he be able to live in this world? He focussed back on the bar, its lights flashing, avatars dancing, drinking, fighting and fucking within its false walls. He swallowed the last of his drink, and went offline.

Blinking at the seemingly bright lights in his room, Dex stood and worked the kinks out of his body. He shucked off his sweaty clothes and stumbled to the lav. He turned on the shower full blast, and found that he had to lean against the

side of the tiny room as the water rushed over him. With a lurch, he doubled over and threw up under the shower. Once his stomach settled slightly, he turned off the water, let the blower dry him and the room, then padded out, naked, to fall into bed.

## Chapter Twelve

The buzzing in his head was nearly drowned out by the throbbing. The room was hardly lit at all — the windows had automatically become translucent according to Dex's daily program for the apartment, but the surrounding buildings and cloud cover kept the sunlight a dull dishwater streak. Even so, Dex thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head when he looked toward the weak light. He turned off his system's alarm and at least the buzzing stopped. He felt his gorge rise as soon as he sat up, and he grabbed the bottle of Flying Fish on the way to the lav.

After a few minutes on his knees, Dex thought he might be able to keep the tonic down, and sipped carefully from the bottle as he turned the shower on quickly to hose down his body and the room. He stayed on the floor as the water turned to warm air and he dried off. He waited a few moments for the

electrolytes and other chemicals in the tonic to calm his stomach and sooth the throbbing in his head. He'd get to B&B a few minutes later than usual, but he was already in line for a reprimand for the cancelled account — he figured that another minor infraction didn't really matter much.

Dex yanked his spare uniform out of the autoclave, dressed and grabbed a nutrient brick, which he stuffed in his pocket. He took another swig of Flying Fish before he left the apartment, and rested his head on the pole of the lift as it spiraled him down to street level. He nibbled gingerly at the food brick as he rode the train to B&B and ended up arriving only a few minutes later than he usually did.

Thankfully, he was on text duty, so he didn't have to actually speak to anyone. He spent the next three hours answering questions ranging from the moronic to the incomprehensible. Aside from the occasional attack of vertigo, it was really the perfect mindset for the job. At break time, Dex grabbed a coffee, then hightailed it back to his work station, and called up the contact details for Uri Farone.

Interested customers could get a quote for the "software memory upgrade" of their choice in a variety of ways — there was a text form, a voice messaging line and Farone provided a link to a small kiosk in Marionette City where he or a bot was available 24/7 to help potential clients realize their dreams. The CSR in Dex was impressed with the customer service commitment. He went back to answering client queries, still thinking about Farone's offer.

Dex was self aware enough to know that he had a problem. The disaster of

his date with Annabelle only reminded him a truth he had known for a long time. Maybe he wasn't cut out for the modern world, but he was pretty sure there were other people like him, only they didn't spend every spare moment curled up in a bottle watching the same videos of their past on eternal repeat.

Just after he'd first joined up with the Cubicle Men, Dex had actually made an effort to at least pretend to be normal. He'd searched out boards for people who record their lives, ostensibly to hone the technical aspects of the operation, but secretly Dex hoped he might meet someone he could actually talk to. There were plenty of people on the boards that probably would have done, but it never worked out. Dex kept looking for the ease that comes with physical, real world companionship, that connection with another person that he just never felt online. Eventually, he gave up on the boards, and just focussed on the work. He told himself there was more than enough stimulation on the job.

And that might even have been true, once. Dex was rarely bored; the work he did as one of the Cubicle Men was fascinating to him, and he liked to think he was good at it. He'd certainly been given enough encouragement by his squad leaders. Two full time jobs managed to fill the days and Dex usually didn't feel like he was missing out on anything. But today, this morning, in his stimulant-weakened state, he let himself want things to be different. Maybe Uri Farone's ad text was right — maybe Dex could change the past in order to change the future.

Dex spent the rest of the day focussed on B&B work; it hurt his head too

much to manage two viewers at once. He did send Ivy a message in the afternoon, asking for another meeting. It was time to check in, to find out if she had any other information and see how she reacted to the news that while he hadn't found the killer, he had found the murder weapon. They set an appointment for that evening at Monte's and Dex figured he'd have at least thirty minutes at his apartment before he'd have to link over. On his way back to the apartment, he found himself surprisingly looking forward to the taste of real alcohol. He wondered how he could be in such pain in the morning, but by the time the workday ended, be ready for another drink.

It was raining again, the drops big and cold, making the street slick and drawing up the smell of something long dead from the pavement. The city seemed darker, more ominous to Dex when it rained. It could be just the lack of the weak and ineffective sunlight they usually got, making the world a grimmer place than usual, or maybe it was the shine that made the concrete and metal gleam like a knife in the LED streetlights. Whatever it was, it made Dex's mood even more foul, and as he trudged from the train stop to his building, he wished he could skip meeting with Ivy and go straight to bed. Twelve hours of oblivion seemed about right just then. Even so, he stopped in at the store, and picked up another bottle of Jamaica's Best to replace the previous day's dead soldier.

Dex spiraled up the lift to his floor, dripping water all the way down the shaft. He stepped off into the dank hallway, and walked down the hall and into his apartment. He had his system turn the heat up a couple of degrees as he undressed. He stuffed his wet things along with the previous day's clothes into

the autoclave and stepped into the lav. Ten seconds of water, followed by the blower, and Dex was almost warm again. He found a light fleece blanket, and without bothering with clothes, wrapped himself up. The joys of living alone.

He opened the new bottle of rum and poured a small amount into a mug, then topped it up with ginger ale. He put the mug in the zapper for a half minute, then took his makeshift hot toddy to the chair. He settled in and linked over to Monte's.

He headed for the usual table, and ordered a coffee. He was still chilled from the walk and the image of a warm drink fitted his mood better than his usual cocktail. His avatar sipped the coffee while Dex sipped his hot toddy, waiting for Ivy. Dex waited about ten minutes, spending the time catching up on news from around the boards and the Cubicle Men's own feed. He was getting near the end of his coffee when Ivy linked in, looking somewhat frantic.

"What's wrong?" Dex messaged over to her, as she looked for him in the darkened room.

"I'm supposed to be with Renna and the others, and I just had a bit of trouble getting away," she said as she walked over to the table. "I don't have very long."

"No problem," Dex said as Ivy sat across from him. "I'll just give you the executive summary. Whoever killed Reuben tried to hit me with the same code."

"Oh my god," Ivy said, her avatar's face registering shock. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Dex said. "I linked out before it got me, and anyway all it would have done is kept me out of Marionette City for a few days. Everlock

would have eaten it."

Ivy nodded gravely, and said, "I was always worried about that." Dex looked puzzled and she continued. "The multi avatars. I knew Everlock didn't really do anything for them; I knew they were vulnerable. Oh, Mr. Dexter," Ivy looked panicked. "Is going around? Has it replicated?"

He shook his head. "Don't worry," he said. "That's the other thing. The code was specifically non-replicating. The good news is that means everyone else is okay, or at least they're safe from this. The bad news," he looked in her eyes, "is that someone really specifically didn't like Reuben, and I'm no closer to knowing who."

Ivy's avatar's face went slack, and she was quiet for a while. "No, that's good news," she said, finally. "I don't know what I did to deserve this, but at least it was only for me. And now that it happened, I can maybe find a way to protect the others from this kind of attack."

Dex was surprised at her reaction, but in all his dealings with the multi community it had been clear that they tended to look out for one another. But there had to be a leak, a crack, a chink in the armour somehow. "Ivy, I need you to tell me something," he said. "The work you do for people in the community, the work Reuben did for Stella Bish, what was all that? Why is it so secret?"

She looked at Dex like an adult looks at a retarded child. "Do you tell everyone you know about this?" she asked, gesturing at the two of them. "Your landlord, your lovers, your regular job, if you have one? Do they all know you live off grid?"

Dex was silent a moment. She had a valid point. "Fair enough," he said, "but what were you doing? Alvaro Zuccarelli told me you started with his building, and I know you do avatars for multis, but by the look of Reuben's bank statements, there's a lot more to it than that. What did Reuben do, Ivy?"

"Do you have a regular day job?" she asked. Dex nodded, hoping she'd cut to chase sooner rather than later. "So you're on the two full time job schedule?"

"Sure," he said. "A lot of it is concurrent, if you know what I mean."

"Of course," Ivy said, smiling without warmth. "I've been doing it a while now, myself. I do UI for a big firm for big, normal projects, and Reuben does... did UI for Stella Bish, for small, underground projects. I don't know how you do it, but it's been fucking hell for two years. Hardly any time to myself, trying to juggle all the projects, keeping all the secrets... but it all seemed worth it. I was getting somewhere, you know," she said, looking at Dex with sadness in her face. "I thought I was finally getting somewhere."

"I'm not sure I follow you," Dex said, softly.

"I think I just about had it all worked out," she said, talking as much to herself as to Dex. "I think I could have done it."

"Done what?"

"Disappeared," she said, looking up at Dex. "Left Ivy behind once and for all. Become Reuben. Full time, all the time, just Reuben. Who I've always really been all along." Dex was silent, waiting for her to finish. "As soon as I created him, it just felt so much more right. His personality, his body, everything about him... was me. I just never knew it before. I thought..." she paused, as if trying to

catch her breath. "I thought I might actually get to be happy."

Dex had nothing to say to that, and once he didn't answer her, Ivy looked embarrassed and begged off to go back to her friends. "They'll come looking for me if I'm away much longer," she said and Dex told her they were done. Ivy linked out of the bar, and with no other reason to stay, Dex linked out of Marionette City and went offline. He thought about what she had said, and saw the sadness in her face as she remembered how close to happiness she might have been. It was a familiar sight. What remained of his hot toddy had grown cold, and Dex threw it down the drain in the middle of the floor in the lav. He drank a glass of water, took a draught of Sleeping Juice and slipped into the dark well of sleep.