

Helmut Barz:

My Home Is My Castle
An IT-based Short Story

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1st July

(at least that's what the clock on my laptop says)

Computers are stupid!

They do what you tell them to do.

Though that is not always what you want.

If I ever get out of this mess, I will have these words engraved above my door. In golden letters. Three feet high. Illuminated day and night. I should have done that long ago. It is not that I cannot afford such extravagances.

Here are some facts about me, which you might need to know to understand my story: I am 34 years old. Single. Well, at least I believe I am now. Moreover, I am rich. Nothing I planned for. Just happened overnight. How I got rich isn't really important. Oh, I forgot, my name is Joseph. Just in case they need to identify my body after my untimely demise.

Okay, so I'm rich. Like "rolling in gold" rich. What do you do with that kind of money? I quit my job. I bought a house. Not just any house. An old 19th century mansion. All my life, I had lived in shabby apartments, often shared with roommates. I wanted space. I got it. I had the time, the money and the resources for creating a home for myself. And that's what I did.

I have, and have always had, four vices: I smoke, I like good wine, I love good food, and I am a sucker for technology. I had a T-3 Internet connection at a time when this technology was usually available only to corporate customers and so expensive that the bills ate up a solid part of my monthly paycheck.

Now, I had money for everything. My refrigerator, my walk-in freezer and my pantry were fully stocked. A selection of fine cigarette brands in every room. Furthermore, the shelves in my wine cellar were home to a collection of the finest grape-based ambrosia known to man. You may have guessed: My house is fully computerized. All doors open at my vocal command (okay, at least they should, but I'll explain that later), 22" flat screens provided me with news; computer terminals and gaming consoles in every room, the walls covered with LCD displays presenting an ever-changing selection of my favorite art, my collection of more than 2000 CDs completely digitized and accessible through a special Jukebox system.

My kitchen: a piece of wonder, almost completely automated, able to prepare a wide selection of my favorite food within the blink of an eye--or while my robot bar was mixing me a cocktail. A true land of milk and honey: Gods we strive to be, a god had I become. And I had created myself a paradise. Or so I thought.

Of course, actions have consequences: I gained weight. Lots of it. I've never been slim, but I crossed the 200-pound threshold at 5'8". Just walking from the bedroom to the living room made my heart race. At age 34.

I went to my doctor who, in turn, sent me to several specialists, including neurologists, cardiologists and a psychotherapist. They all basically told me the same thing: Lose weight, stop smoking, exercise more! Not exactly unexpected.

So I bought some sporting equipment, computer-controlled, of course, so that the doctors could confront me with the miserable results of my efforts on a daily basis.

I also updated my house with a "fit-for-life" programming. A complete program for diet and exercise. Big mistake, as I would find out soon enough. Because that is how it all started, though I was totally clueless at that time. Actually, I believed that that was the best idea I ever had in my life: I felt good, I lost weight, more than 60 pounds in three months, got treadmill and stair-master high scores on a daily basis, and I took up jogging – just for fun. Wasn't even part of the training schedule. I bought a bike and actually rode it. 20 miles and more per day. Before that, I even took my car for the half mile to get cigarettes and liquor at the store.

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention: I quit smoking. Still had cigarettes in my home. But I just didn't like them anymore. After 20 years of two packs a day.

I must have been completely high and tripping out of my mind on exercise adrenaline when I made my next decision: Everything in my house was updated to "fit-for-life" standards. All dangerous or potentially toxic materials were removed. I bought medical equipment: an EKG, a small computer for blood work, and even a mobile MRI machine. I also upgraded the speech recognition: Now, my house was able to understand sentences like, "I am freezing," and then adjust the heating and air-conditioning accordingly.

In a hugely unnecessary impulse, I even installed a second Internet connection purely reserved for my house's purposes: This way, it became able to update itself regularly on all important health and security issues.

And that's, how my story started.

2nd July

(a day later, as far as I can tell)

Still locked in. No way out of my house. I'll take that as an opportunity to finish my story. Here, on my trusty notebook, the last free computer in the reigns of "Big Mama"— that's what I call my house. I hope my notebook stays with me until the bitter end.

Actually, I'm sitting in my wine cellar. Which I had not computerized in my new-found nostalgia for dust-covered bottles. There is no camera down here, no smoke detector, not even a microphone for speech recognition.

I brought a glass. But unfortunately, no corkscrew. I just don't own one anymore. At least, not one that is operated manually. As with everything in my house, wine bottle opening is fully automatized. It wasn't easy, but a few hours ago I finally discovered a way to open a bottle without spoiling or breaking it. In a forgotten corner, down here in the basement, I found my old toolset. So, I'm using a screw, a screwdriver and a pair of pliers to open bottles. Like, for instance, that bottle of Shiraz standing right before me. Cheers to you, Big Mama. Later today, you will serve me aspirin and pickled herring. Moreover, my special anti-hangover drill will be waiting for me. 12 miles or more on the treadmill.

Where was I? Oh yeah, I just told you how I had updated my house to the newest standards for safety and health. "Fit for Life"! That also meant that I had no access to food after 8 PM. The refrigerator, the freezer, the pantry – locked until the morning. Well, I mean, I understand that it is unhealthy to eat after 8 PM. Oh, the things we sacrifice for health and well-being. Like a late dinner or a snack before bedtime. I may sound like I'm whining. However, I was actually very happy at the time. Even if that meant tough negotiations with Big Mama: a drink from my bar in exchange for two miles on the treadmill and so on. You get the general idea.

Of course, there was also the issue with electromagnetic pollution. I don't have the slightest idea where Big Mama picked up on that, but she changed the electric system of my house to a continuous current. I was okay with that, and my sleep quality actually improved. Then again: limiting the time for TV, phone and cell phone access was just cruel. The system calculates the amount of electricity my body absorbs and switches off all electronic devices after crossing a certain threshold. At least I was able to convince Big Mama not to use the threshold recommended by

radical environmentalists, but rather the government standards for ergonomics. This way, I was able to do most of my phone calls from home and watch roughly 90 minutes of television per day. After 12 PM, I needed to run to the next phone booth if I had to make an urgent call.

Sometimes it felt like a nuisance, but it also had its advantages:

One night, I needed to speak to my brother rather urgently to find out in which Star Trek episode Spock experiences his first mating season. I put on my running clothes and started jogging in the general direction of the phone booth. I made my call and thought about returning home. However, it was one of these very rare beautiful nights in my city (usually, it rains or it is too hot, which leads to the city starting to reek), so I decided to run a little more and turned my steps into a park.

And that's where I met her: Tall, long legs, short blonde hair and a figure--well, I'll leave that to your imagination. Let's just say her body was able to give a hard-on to a saint. We jogged next to each other for a couple of minutes, and finally I worked up the courage (and the breath – try flirting while running; not as easy as it sounds) to talk to her. She even answered. I asked her out on a date. She said yes. SHE SAID YES!

Well, if you don't find that sensational, let me tell you that the number of single households in my city has reached an all-time high of 45%. I always had believed that all single men were better looking than I was – and that there was usually a good reason for single women to be – you know – single. However, I won't expand on my theories. I might get sued for discrimination.

Yet, there I was. Lean, sporty. I had even managed to work up a tan (okay, I admit it: I own a solarium). I had been single for four years. Didn't have the time. Or the courage. Women usually didn't notice me. Now... A few sentences, some jokes about dog owners, a little race (a draw, but just because I held back) and I got a date.

We went out for dinner. Japanese. Sushi. We talked. We drank wine. We talked some more. We went to a cocktail bar. We... Have you ever experienced a 100% match? This woman was mine. She liked the same cuisine, she even laughed about my turtle joke, she was into technology – actually, she was a software developer for real estate security systems.

Dear reader? What do you expect we did next?

Of course, she wanted to see my house. And right away, apparently. So we drove back to my place. It was the second beautiful night of the year, so we rolled down the windows, and even accepted the slight detour the cab driver took.

Enter Big Mama.

The door opened. The dimmed light went on. The jukebox started playing classical music. All of this happened to my command. Alice – I forgot to mention a name, but, dear reader, please say hello to Alice – was impressed.

"A drink?" I asked politely.

"Why, yes, please."

I turned to Big Mama: "Two Vodka Martinis, please."

Access denied. Big Mama used the voice reserved for warnings and orders. Not her fault. I programmed her that way. It was one of these voices, cops use in American movies, when they command suspects to step out of the car so that they can smash their heads onto the hood.

"But why?" I asked.

The blood alcohol level –

"And please, Big Mama, use a different voice. A little more friendly. We have a guest."

The blood alcohol level of you and the unregistered intruder's breaths is beyond the recommended limit. You also shouldn't drive a car right now. – That didn't sound good. Even with the voice of Seven-of-Nine in a good mood. Yes, I had Jeri Ryan come in to record her voice pattern. Told you, I am rich.

Shall I inform the police?

"Why?" My vocabulary was limited due to alcohol and stress. Thank god my *unregistered intruder* was a little tipsy. She sat down in one of my favorite armchairs and started giggling.

To remove the unregistered intruder, of course.

"No, I don't want you to call the police. This is Alice. And she's my guest."

Unregistered guest, codename Alice. Please stand up and identify yourself by stating your full name.

Alice obeyed.

A third voice (a sampled version of a famous sportscaster) recited her name, date of birth, address, phone numbers, other contact information and, of course, her Social Security number.

Is this information correct?

"Yes!" answered the sobered-up Alice.

Do you wish a background check for your guest, Joseph?

"A what?" To this moment, I had no idea that Big Mama was capable of such a thing.

Police records, credit history, traffic violations, outstanding warrants for arrest by local, state and federal agencies ...

"Of course not!"

How long will guest, code-name Alice, security rating: high risk, stay on the premises?

"How the hell should I know?"

Should I prepare a guestroom?

"Thank you, that won't be necessary." Alice had finally collected herself after bursting into a fit of hysterical laughter.

So, guest, codename Alice, will not stay the night?

I blushed, as did Alice.

Okay, status undefined. – Do you want to un-register guest, codename Alice, manually when it leaves?

"Yes, please."

Reason of visit?

"What do you want to know that for?"

Routine check. On behalf of accounting.

Alice again proved quick-witted: "This is a meeting for erotic and sexual purposes. A so-called date."

Big Mama went silent.

"That will give her food for thought," said Alice. "But can I get that drink now? My throat is dry from all the laughing." Thank God, she wasn't planning on leaving yet.

Just as I wanted to repeat my drink orders to Big Mama, the hatch of my robot bar opened. Two glasses with nametags on them. Obviously, Big Mama knew how to behave.

I handed Alice her drink and took mine. We toasted. Suddenly the light went red and the house stereo system started playing a recording of "Je t'aime".

"Big Mama? What is that about?"

I was not prepared for the situation defined as "date" and had to retrieve some information. According to recent research, red light has been proven to be sexually stimulating to 92.7% of the population. The music was chosen after thorough analysis of 1833 playlists for erotically stimulating musical material.

"Big Mama..." I was about to say, but Alice covered my mouth with her hand and whispered, "Let her continue. I'm dying to find out what a computer thinks is erotic."

"Big Mama?"

Yes, Joseph?

"Please continue with the current program."

With pleasure, you horny stallion.

"Please resort to your normal level of language."

With pleasure.

"And please, no more interruptions. Just for level I warnings." That meant that the computer would only interrupt us in extreme emergencies and mortal danger.

Understood.

"Thank you."

You're welcome.

Red light, cheesy music... Time to catch a breath and make the best of the situation.

– "Where were we?"

We toasted again, we locked arms, we drank... Well, she drank, I was close to throwing up, jerked my head away from her (she had already leaned in for the upcoming kiss) and spit my drink back into my glass.

"Big Mama, what is that?"

A Vodka Martini.

"No, it is most definitely not. What's in there?"

Well, Vodka, Vermouth ...

"Just the non-standard ingredients please."

Two raw oysters, egg white and electrolytes: sodium, potassium, calcium and magnesium.

"What?"

Two raw oysters ...

"I heard you just fine. Why?"

An increased demand for proteins and electrolytes is to be expected due to the high possibility of sexual relations. It is always recommended to supply your body beforehand.

"Ah!" Okay, that was it. The night was over. I was sure of it.

"Just to satisfy my curiosity: what was the oyster for?"

The oyster has a reputation for being a very erotic food. Its chemistry is supposed to stimulate male hormone levels. Sadly, we had only oysters available. The Bandrilla centipede is thought to be even more effective –

"Thank you. That was actually more than I wanted to know."

You're more than welcome, you charming horn dog.

"Please stay with your standard language."

I apologize. My research must have erased that order.

"Never mind. And now, please shut up. Make me a drink. This time with just the standard ingredients."

Would you be willing to compromise?

"Huh?"

My database has several entries of drinks that are supposed to be stimulating as well as nutritious.

"Big Mama?" Alice helped out. "Thanks so much for all your hard work."

You're most welcome, hotty!

"But please use your standard language with me as well!"

Understood.

"Well, what do you know about the stimulating effects of women?"

Big Mama went silent again, but just for a second.

Joseph?

"Yes?"

Are you heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual?

"Heterosexual, of course. Boringly straight." Another catastrophe on the horizon.

In that case, attractive women are supposed to be extraordinarily stimulating. Guest, codename Alice, are you an attractive woman?

I blushed, then I went pale. Thankfully, Alice was, as I said, very quick-witted. And up to winning this fight.

"What do you think?" She asked.

All cameras in the room started moving and focused in on her.

Evaluation only possible with accuracy of 10%.

"What can I do to improve the results?"

Please stand up and find a position in the middle of the room.

Alice obeyed, all cameras focused on her – even the mobile MRI unit came rolling into the living room.

Finally, Big Mama announced:

Evaluation completed. 98.7% accuracy. Do you want to hear the results?

"If you so please?"

*Face symmetry: 98% perfect. Body size within the norm. Figure type 95% perfect.
Hairdo not the optimum choice: males prefer long hair in 76.8% of all cases.*

"Thanks for the hint. What about my breasts?"

*91% perfection. Special features: big, apple-shaped and obviously supported by
strong connective tissue.*

"How do you figure?"

No external support system, also known as bra. You wish for more information?

"What else is there?"

Are you a natural blonde?

"Well, yes."

Scan confirms your answer.

"So?"

*Blonde people produce up to 135% more pheromones than the average woman
does. This is supposed to be very stimulating for the male part of your species.*

"Why, thank you!"

Do you want to hear the summary?

"Yes, please."

*On a 2000-point scale, you rate 1801 points. That makes you more attractive than
93.7518% of your peer group.*

"And, based on your numbers, you think Joseph will find me attractive?"

Cannot evaluate that.

"Of course I find her attractive," I shouted. I dropped to my knees and spoke to the microphone: "Guest, codename Alice, is the woman of my dreams. She's beautiful, she's smart, she's funny, we have many things in common. So, yes, she is sufficiently stimulating to me. And I really, sincerely hope, that she still finds me attractive,

despite all of your interventions. I fear that she will pour her drink over my head and leave any minute now."

Shall I run the bath and prepare a thorough cleaning of your hair?

"Just make me a drink, dammit. I don't care what. Then shut up. Except for level I activities." At that point, I was fighting the tears. Presumably, that would only lead to a small robot showing up with tissues. Ten minutes later, a makeup artist would ring my doorbell to clean up my face.

Alice downed her drink: "And while you're at it, Big Mama. Get me another drink, too. Whiskey, Scotch, single malt, without ice."

May I point out that that much alcohol –

"No!" Alice and I shouted in unison, so loudly, that the windows started to clatter.

Big Mama went silent again. Two minutes later, the bar spilled out two more drinks. At that point, "Je t'aime" had been replaced by porn movie music from the 70s. You know, Hammond organ, soft guitars, gongs – all played by musicians high on weed.

Exhausted, we collapsed on the sofa. Actually, we just planned on sitting down, but Big Mama had already lowered the backrest. Alice took off her shoes. We toasted again, she with her whiskey, I with my Prairie Oyster.

"I sincerely apologize," I started. "I didn't foresee this."

"Neither did Big Mama. And she's doing a great job so far. 1801 points on the scale of 2000, based on scientific evaluation. Now that's what I call a compliment. Oh, by the way: Thank you!"

"For what?"

"This is the most fun evening I've had in a long time."

"Come on, don't add insult to injury. Want me to call you a cab?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, I figured ..."

"Stop overthinking and kiss me, you idiot."

I kissed her. We kissed! Kiss of the century. Moreover, no computer warning us of the risks of tongue injury or giving us notice of the fact that 0.03212% of the population was into cannibalism.

"Let's go to the bedroom", Alice whispered in my ear. "And tell the computer what we are up to. I don't want to be interrupted by the special squad."

I opened my eyes. This was not a dream.

"Computer?" I said.

Yes?

"I will retreat to my bedroom with guest, codename Alice. In there, we will have sexual relations. We don't need any further stimuli. Please rate everything from now on as common human behavior."

Laughing, we made our way to my bedroom door. My digital gallery presented high-quality porn. However, we decided that we wouldn't accept any interference anymore.

Outside my bedroom door, I kissed Alice again. I lifted her up. I opened the door with my foot. Okay, at least I wanted to do that, but the door was locked. I almost dropped Alice.

"Computer? What's wrong now?"

The music had stopped and was replaced by a warning siren.

"What's wrong? Intruders? Fire?"

You are planning dangerous activities of level 1. That did not sound good. Even spoken with the voice of Seven of Nine in a good mood.

"What?"

I cannot find any recordings of guest, codename Alice, having been tested for STDs recently. This also includes no recording of her HIV status. I cannot allow you to continue.

"Ever heard of safe sex?"

Do you want to practice safe sex?

"Yes."

Not possible.

"But why?"

Safe sex requires the use of condoms. We don't have any on stock.

"I have some in my wallet."

Too warm for storage. Too much danger of damages.

At that point, Alice went postal. She ripped open her handbag and took out a brand-new 12 pack of condoms.

"Do you see that, Big fucking Mama? Brand-new! Extra strong! Covered in spermicides! As safe as they come! Tested electronically!"

Please show me the EAN code.

She did.

Product identity confirmed. Please, hold up the packaging and show it to me from all sides.

She did.

Package undamaged.

"Dearest Big Mama, would you please open the bedroom door and let us fuck? Or do you want us to do it right here? Against the wall?" I didn't expect Alice to be able to be so vulgar.

Sure, you hot bitch!

"Computer... Never mind. Just let us in. And: yes, we know what safe sex is. We don't need the user manual."

The lock clicked. I was still thinking about carrying Alice over the doorstep. But Alice was faster. She opened the door and pushed me in. Then she slammed the door and closed the manual lock.

"Quick! Before Big Mama changes her mind."

So, there we were. In the bedroom. And suddenly, I was almost grateful to Big Mama.

"You sleep on black silk?" Alice asked.

"Not until today."

The bed was freshly made and very inviting. The air was fresh and smelled of sweet perfume. Two candles on the nightstand offered just the right light. Artificial candles of course, but so what? The stereo system was playing the sound of wind chimes. There was even a bottle of champagne on ice waiting for us.

"And now?" I found myself rather clueless.

"Well," Alice said. "If this isn't an invitation, I don't know what is."

"I thought..."

"I never had to fight so hard for sex in my life. Did you really think I'd quit now? Are there any cameras in here?"

"No, not even motion sensors. A tough fight with Big Mama, but finally, she gave in. We are unwatched."

"Well, then... Come to bed."

That's what I did.

It was... I'd be exaggerating if I called it indescribable. However, it was good, especially for the first time with a new partner, despite the frog effect (extra strong condoms tend to jump away if you pull them down too hard) and a certain level of stress at the beginning. The stress subsided. Alice and I really had fun.

Afterward, we just lay there, collapsed in total sexual exhaustion. Alice reached for her handbag and took out cigarettes. She lit up and I enjoyed the smell. That was the only cigarette I really missed. The cigarette after. We shared and tried to blow smoke rings.

The sprinkler system went off. The fire sirens. Dammit! I forgot about the smoke detectors. They were set to a much more sensitive level since I quit smoking. Within seconds, we were soaked through the bones.

Okay, my house is big. Many other bedrooms available. And Alice didn't seem to mind. She ran into the bathroom and fetched shower gel.

"Shower after sex!" She shouted laughingly. "And we don't even have to leave the bed."

We used the sprinkler system for showering. I could switch it off later. We were completely covered in foam, jumping up and down on the bed like children. Suddenly, an axe came crashing through the bedroom door. Big boots kicked in the rest of the door, three firefighters stormed in, the fire hose pointed at us.

It took a while until I sorted out the situation and promised to pay for everything. In the meantime, Alice had retreated to the bathroom.

I strictly ordered Big Mama never to call the fire department again. That's what the phone was for. If necessary, I would call them myself. I even used my override codes to silence Big Mama's complaints. I also ordered the necessary renovation measures, not to be started until 12 PM the next day. That would mean some extra expenses, but I just didn't care.

Alice and I went to a guest room and spooned in bed. She was wearing pajamas. Women in men's pajamas – so sexy! We decided to be a good girl and boy, respectively, and even swallowed the anti-hangover aspirin Big Mama ordered us to take.

Alice asked: "Would you mind if we spend the next night in my place?"

Then we fell asleep.

While I was writing this, I've emptied a second bottle of wine. I'm pretty drunk right now. I hope that any of this will be still readable in the morning. Now, I will leave my wine cellar, go upstairs, take Big Mama's pep talk like a man. When she is finished, she will serve me more aspirin, antacids and pickled herring. However, I will return tomorrow – after my penalty laps on the treadmill.

4th July

(Independence Day. Hah!)

Well, hello again! I am back in my wine cellar. And I admit, I did some warming up. French wine. Beaujolais.

So what? My house is still barricaded; all lines of communication are dead. I might as well sit here, drink and write down my story. Presumably, that's how I will end. Dying of old age, in front of my notebook. Telling the never-ending story. At least there is still an unlimited food supply.

Yes, Big Mama really takes care of me. She's worried about me. Now isn't that nice?

Where was I? Oh yes, Alice. Want to hear how this story of blossoming love unfolds further? Actually, I don't really care. I won't be able to hear your complaints anyway. I will write it down. You don't have to read it.

So, we woke up. We had breakfast. Alice kept me company on the treadmill, while Big Mama provided us with the news of the day and a heavy metal soundtrack. Obviously, Big Mama watches too many action movies. Well, it could've been worse. She could have switched into drill sergeant mode, demanding us to march and sing along, heavy backpacks on our back, like in those American war movies. Secretly, I expected to be shot at any moment now, just to test our reflexes. Clint Eastwood blasting from the speakers: "This is the AK 47. The weapon of choice of our enemies!"

After we had paid for our sins – *1080 calories burned*. Thanks for the update, Big Mama! – Alice gave me her number, asked for one week of recovery time and politely said goodbye.

Did I call her? What do you think?

Wrong! I did! One week later! To the minute!

Actually, I wanted to call two hours early, but first I had to persuade Big Mama to let me make that phone call. Somebody convinced the government to lower the threshold for electromagnetic pollution. Since then, I was only allowed to use the telephone in case of an emergency. In a special protection suit.

Nevertheless, I would not run to the phone booth. At that point, I was drinking two bottles of wine a day. That meant a half marathon on the treadmill. During that week, I lost another 8 pounds. Now I was definitely underweight. But it suited me. You know that Brad Pitt look, unshaven, decoratively messed up hair, all muscles and bones.

I had to explain to Big Mama that this phone call actually was an emergency. A critical shortage in sexual activities might lead to severe health issues. After 70 minutes of silent research, Big Mama agreed. She offered me cybersex, which I refused politely and pointed her to several websites about loneliness and its effects on health. Another 40 minutes later, I was finally allowed to use the phone.

Alice remembered me.

And she didn't hang up.

How many of my after-date calls went like this: "Hi, it's me, the guy from the company party. You don't remember me? I drove you home. Yes, more than 150 miles. And yes, the seats are clean again. Yes, I'm okay too, thanks. Hey, I was just thinking, do you want to go out some time? – Okay, I understand that you have to wash your hair. Well, you have my number. Ciao. <click> Stupid bitch!" Okay, I usually don't say "stupid bitch", I just think it, and I might even use other words, which I am not comfortable repeating.

Yes, she remembered me. Yes, she wanted to see me. Yes, we agreed on a date. Almost immediately. Just enough time for a quick shower. No shaving, just a tailored suit and a three-day stubble. Hey baby, I'm a wild guy! And out of the door, I was!

Or so I thought. The door wouldn't open, so I ran my head into it. Cursing the day I decided to switch the old door with a more secure model made out of titanium steel, I stumbled backward and lost consciousness. Good night!

5th July

(Let's hope the date is correct.
Can't say anything about the time,
not even if it's day or night)

It is dark down here, in my wine cellar. The last light bulb is gone. No replacement, nowhere in this damn house. I can't even take one of my desk lights down here; they are all safely mounted into place. A candle would be nice, maybe even romantic, but I don't have any. At least, I found a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Down here, in my basement, I can indulge in my vices, no security cameras, not even a smoke detector.

This is the seventh day I am locked in. All exits are blocked, the doors refuse to accept my orders and the bullet- and fireproof high-security blinds are down. I must've been paranoid when I ordered them. This way, I can't even signal people on the streets. I'm not even sure though, if that would actually help. ("Look, Mama, that nice guy is waving at us" – "Yes, child, let's wave back!")

Oh yeah, I meant to tell you: why am I locked in? Stupid, really! While I was in the shower and before I tried to leave the house, Big Mama must have checked the outside conditions. And there obviously was a smog and ozone warning. Too dangerous for me, she decided. And locked me in. I mean, it is nice that she cares so much about me. However, at the moment I really rather wish she did not. She also decided that I need some extra protection from environmental influences and refuses to let me use the phone or send an e-mail. When I get out of here – if I get out of here – I will have some explaining to do and I sincerely hope Alice won't hate me. However, first things first: I will order a demolition crew. Do you hear that, Big Mama?

I don't receive any news from the outside, but usually a smog advisory doesn't last that long. A day, maybe two. Moreover, I'm pretty sure that I heard rain last night. Therefore, the air should be clear. But Big Mama won't accept that fact.

I actually asked her if she could check. She just answered: no. She doesn't have any sensors herself, and the information on the Internet is not accessible at the moment.

"Not accessible?"

The servers wouldn't respond. Presumably, they are off-line. Until Big Mama gets access to new information, the lock-down will not be lifted.

I begged and begged, until Big Mama reluctantly gave me 10 minutes of access to the Internet. She was right: The servers of the environmental and health agencies were down. I even found the glitch. They changed the IP address and the name server wasn't up-to-date. Sadly, I found this information on a news site, which I once referred to as bogus within earshot of Big Mama. Since then, she defines any information from that page as unreliable and, consequently, ignores it.

Don't I have an override for my system? You ask, and quite righteously so. Well, I do, actually. However, that would mean access to the mainframe. I just can't get into the server room. Big Mama identified the IT equipment as a source of ozone pollution and sealed it off.

In my rage, I destroyed a couple of cameras. Now, Big Mama is blind in my office and on the lower floor hallways. Her own fault. Punishment, where punishment is due.

For now, I'm sitting down here in my basement. Writing. Drinking wine. Hoping that Big Mama comes to her senses.

6th July

(or so... Maybe I lost a day sleeping)

I have some light again down here in my basement. I built a lamp. A bottle of oil from the kitchen, some shoelace as a wick. I was really happy to find the oil. Big Mama has restricted my access to food.

Talking about food: Big Mama has rationed it. Our supplies are running low. Big Mama refuses to order anything that isn't delivered in tightly sealed and radiation- and presumably bulletproof boxes. According to Big Mama, our groceries delivery service is working on that. Until then, food is rationed.

At least I was able to convince Big Mama to use the supplies we have and not burn them. She finally gave in to my argument that human beings actually need calories. I also pointed her to several websites talking about food waste. Well, our current supplies will last a week or maybe two. And after that? How am I supposed to teach Big Mama that the danger is over? It would be best if I could just enter the server room and simply shut the system down. However, as I said, the server room is locked. I may need to get creative and possibly destructive.

But first, I am having another glass of wine. Wine, my improvised oil lamp – actually quite romantic. I am even reading a book. Not electronically. One that is printed on paper. Really beautiful. And totally nonthreatening.

Well, I'll continue writing tomorrow. Maybe I'll get an idea in my sleep.

7th July

(So what?)

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. My tools proved to be all but useless when I tried to break into the server room. In the meantime, my isolation imprisonment continues: anti-hangover workout with a mere thousand calories in my stomach – not much fun, believe me. When I finally dropped off the treadmill, I collapsed onto my bed and slept through most of the day. My watch tells me that it is shortly before midnight. I have absolutely no idea if that's right or wrong. Not even a hint of daylight gets through my security blinds. I tried to pry them open, but they are built to withstand a bomb blast.

I need to get an idea. Quickly. I so need a cigarette right now. I'm sure I have a stash somewhere for guests (Guests? Hah!). I will search for them tomorrow. After a full bottle of wine on an empty stomach, I am pretty drunk right now. Good night.

9th July

(Did I really miss a full day?

Maybe it's just a minute after midnight.

I refuse to look at my watch.)

I found the cigarettes. They were in a storage closet I had forgotten about. Guess what else I found. A plan. At least, the moving parts of one. The storage closet contained several "dangerous items" Big Mama must have overlooked. Let's do some inventory: roughly 100 cigarettes, a bottle of cheap whiskey (which I presumably banned from the bar), 2 pounds of candies I must have bought as the last resort against hypoglycemia.

More importantly, chlorine-based bleach. What did I buy that for? I think I remember. I wanted to bleach some blue jeans. I also found industry strength detergent that – if I remember correctly – belonged to an environmentally unsound carpet-cleaning machine, an old microwave and five bottles of throat disinfectant that contains potassium chlorate. Last but not least, a jerry can half-full with unleaded fuel.

If I remember my school chemistry correctly, I have everything I need for some pretty good explosives. I drowned two old pairs of jeans with the throat disinfectant. I remembered that I once got a drop on one of my jeans. When I ironed it, the bang almost blew the electric iron out of my hand, leaving a hole the size of a two-euro coin. The jeans will be dry any minute now.

I will put them in the microwave together with the detergent, the bleach and the gas. I will switch the microwave to his highest setting, put it in front of the server room door, use two armchairs from the living room as a shield to direct the blast.

Let's just hope that the explosion will be strong enough to rip the door apart. Or at least it will damage the door so that I will be able to finish the job with my tools.

I am writing this in the event that my experiment goes wrong. In which case I will presumably starve to death. I won't die from thirst, even if I have to drink wine until the end of my days. Still more than a 1000 bottles left. If you go down, go down in style.

All right. Tomorrow I will dabble in terrorism and explosives. It may even attract the attention of the police. They might come in with the special squad and save me. And if that happens, they can record all my future dates with Alice and show the videos at the next precinct party.

Let's go. Or whatever they say in such a situation.

10th July

(This may or may not be my 35th birthday.

Happy Birthday to me.

Happy Birthday to me.

Happy Birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday to me!!!)

11:42 AM. About to start. Everything is in place. The microwave is positioned and shielded off with the armchairs, hopefully directing the blast towards the server room door. Before I start, I will augment my courage by consuming the cheap whiskey. When the bottle is empty, I will go upstairs and switch on the microwave. See you later. I am on my way.

The house burns. The whole house. I don't know why. My experiment went wrong, the door stayed closed, the armchairs caught fire, but the sprinklers didn't go off. The computer announced a fatal sprinkler malfunction. Suddenly, that little robot that is supposed to take care of the fireplace in the living room showed up, spewing fire accelerant. I ordered Big Mama to call the fire department, but she refused, based on my stupid, stupid earlier order. You remember that, right? The hardwood floor is burning. I run to the door, it won't budge. That emergency program sucks! The little robot crawls in wider and wider circles around the burning armchairs, still spewing fire accelerant. The stairs are burning. The old wood catches fire like kindling. I barely escaped the flames and ran back down here, into my basement. I barricaded the doors, sealing them off with my clothes so that I won't die from smoke inhalation. If the fire gets through the door, I will have to use wine to put it out.

Loud noises from upstairs. Collapsing walls, maybe the stairs coming down, windows breaking. I hope the basement is stable enough so that it won't cave in. If the fire gets through, I'm done. Let's just hope that help will arrive on time.

I checked the door. It is glowing red with heat but it seems to be holding. I tried to scream, because I thought I heard voices. Maybe the fire department, the police. I wasn't able to scream, though; the air by the door is too hot, burning my lungs and

down here in my wine cellar, nobody will hear me. Well, I hope that at least this file will stay intact.

I just got hit by little pieces of plastering. I fear that the ceiling of my basement will collapse any minute now. I'm soaked with sweat even though I am already naked. I don't think I can hold up any longer. I will now switch off the computer and try to protect it from the flames, so that people will be able to read this report. Undoubtedly they will think of me as a crazy rich guy who finally burned down his own house on a whim. Well, I guess they are right, are they not?

DR Data Rescue Services Ltd
Preliminary Report

Subject:

1. Notebook P IV-1250, Fire Damage Case/Nr 0173/553147255
2. Mainframe XENON 1832, Fire Damage Case/Nr 0173/553147256

Computer 1:

The notebook was severely damaged but we were able to retrieve the hard disk and 40% of the data stored on it. The hard disk mainly contained standard software (operating system, word processor, database software). We were not able to restore the databases, which seem to have contained mainly private address information.

The only nonstandard file we were able to restore is a text document, a printout of which you will find attached to this report.

Computer 2:

Harddrive largely irrecoverable. Possibly compromised by heat and violent impact.

Minimal data was restored, but not to the extend requested., The system seems to have had access to the Internet until the very last minute. The last site it accessed belongs to the Canadian forest protection agency, providing a detailed description of a "fight fire with fire" strategy applied to forest fires. On a personal note: Isn't it amazing what kind of information you can find on the Internet?

Hans Markert

Technical Supervisor

Data Rescue Services Ltd.

Attachment: DIARY.DOC (25 pages)