

# Flip of a Coin

a serialised short sci-fi story  
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## Chapter Two

Marga is sitting in a comfortable office chair in a dark lab in front of a bank of black monitors. The only window in the room is doused in a black cloth. It is 5.50 a.m. on Tuesday morning, just minutes before the apps will boot up.

She is a tall woman with an air of mystique; everything about her is from the sixties; her dress, her hair, her perfume, as if she had just arrived. She oozes loveliness with the lightness of a breeze: the way she sits with one long heel on a low stool, how she has her fair hair up in a bandanna, that soft, floral dress that cascades almost to the floor.

She is a mature student at the university. She is in her mid 30s. On her knee is a folder containing the profiles of her subjects. She has read them carefully, she is studying to become a psychiatrist, and this is her first real opportunity to work on a project she manages somewhat on her own. Fredic will not be in for another two hours; he's not a morning person, unlike her. And anyway, he is the engineer, she is the analyst.

Marga looks up at the monitors in anticipation. She has seen trials of the equipment before, has sat in the same chair many times in the last couple of weeks, but today is the day she has been waiting for. Three months she has been waiting, and now the minutes tick by as if they were hours.

She taps one of the open files on her knee with a pencil. "Osca," she murmurs to herself, "who exactly are you?"

In Marga's assessment, Annie is an open and shut case; easy to read, simple to the core. Annie is a determined young woman, she is proud and dedicated. She buries confusion so it does not influence her, what she doesn't know she doesn't care about. That includes relationships. On the opposite side she is not judgemental, accepting things as they are, perhaps a little too naively at times, however she believes that trust should go both ways and she is a trusting person. Bottom line: Annie is a family asset.

Cohen? Well, Cohen is a man, as all men should be; desperate to please, absent-minded, apologetic and obsessive. Who wouldn't want to date a man like that, especially with his physique, she chuckles. So he's a jock, he spends too much time thinking about himself and no time at all thinking about those around him. But that is basically because he can't. He doesn't understand the complexities of others, he is having a hard enough time figuring himself out.

But Osca? Of all the people who had taken her psychological test before, none had responded in the way he had during Fredic's screening process. That is why he chose Osca, she supposes. "Mistake," she mutters - when suddenly a blast of colour fills the room as if someone had opened all the windows at once.

The monitors are up! The experiment has commenced.

Marga's eyes are dry and the light is fierce. She rubs them, blinks, then looks up again. She sees a room, now another, then a face flashes past a monitor but she doesn't quite catch who. There is a lot of motion in two monitors and her stomach takes a tumble. The video screens are stable, there is no wobble; there is no blurred panning when a head turns; it is as if the screen instantly moves from one object to another - weird - like still images but with things moving in them. She turns right, looks at some other monitors; just peaceful, drifting white numbers and little blocks of colour. She pulls herself together, she has never done this with three up before. She takes a deep breath and then focuses back on the motion.

"OK, so whose eyes are these?" A glance at the sticker on the middle monitor tells her it is Cohen. He is in the kitchen, yes, and he sees Annie from behind. She appears to be preparing something at the counter. "Stand still, man," she half shouts, as the screen races off left and right. Marga looks at Annie's monitor and clearly sees a bowl of cereal being lovingly created, heaped with bananas and sugar - way too much sugar!

The third monitor, Osca's, appears immobile. It is white, and there is an undefined geometric shape in the top left hand corner. Every few seconds there is a dark flash, it puzzles her. Then she gets it - Osca is blinking, staring blankly up to the ceiling from his bed. She had not consciously noticed blinking in previous test sessions.

"So, now what?" Marga hears from his monitor, "Monkey on a chain. Well, monkey, go earn yourself some peanuts." With that, the screen surges back and Osca's bedroom comes in to view.

A minute later. "Hi Osca, how did you sleep?" asks Annie.

"Like a log." he replies. "My bed was really comfy, I couldn't get out of bed. So, what for breakfast?" He says, strolling into the kitchen with a huge grin.

"There's a pot of coffee over there, and some eggs in the fridge. Why don't you make yourself an omelet?" Annie suggests.

"Me too," Cohen jumps in. "Eggs are good for you."

Osca takes a step back and says; "Just coffee for me. I grew up on a chicken farm, I hate eggs. My family had a big poultry distribution centre, when I was a kid growing up in Europe, supplying the entire eastern block. I can't eat eggs or chicken, never will again."

"Sure, I know what you mean," replies Annie, "My mother forced baked beans down my throat every day of my life."

"Wow," says Cohen, "that must have been horrible. Say, Osca, where was that then, where your parents are from originally?"

"Holland," he answers, looking oddly around. Then walks over to the coffee machine and pours himself a cup. "So, what you doing today, Cohen? Me and Annie going out in my BMW to taste some local wines."

Annie winces. "Excuse me!"

"Just kidding," Osca laughs.

"I've got a lecture this morning," says Annie. "This apartment is just minutes from my faculty, I'll walk, thank you."

"You got a BMW?" Chirps Cohen, who is sitting at the kitchen table gnawing on an apple.

... Chicken farm? What? Marga ruffles through Osca's bio to assure herself that she has not missed anything. She notes on his resume that his father was a doctor, an immigrant who established his practise in 1999, nothing more. Nothing to do with chickens. She immediately goes on line with his father's name, a search...

Meanwhile: "Can you drop me off at the gym?" asks Cohen to Osca.

"No problemo. Get me a free pass and we'll do a work out together."

Marga taps enter. Scrolls down, then a bit more; then a muffled scream. OMG! A short piece in the Midsvale Chronicle, August 2004 edition: a Doctor Brouer, barred from practising in the state of Missouri for indecent assault on a number of interns. She does a quick calculation: that was when Osca was 11 years old. And if his father was doing such things to his nurses, what might he have been doing to his own children. Mental note: siblings! She can't be sure it is Osca's father, she needs to dig some more.

"Why are some eggs brown and some eggs white?" asks Cohen.

"It's what you feed them," says Osca, turning to face the kitchen table. "My dad could make them any colour you like. He even produced golden eggs - made a fortune out of them."

Annie is sitting next to Cohen. She is spooning down her bowl of cereal while her eyes are darting about, stopping for a few seconds on each object she encounters on the table. Marga finds the whole thing fascinating. She wonders if Annie is trying to memorise the layout, or the objects she sees. The two men, on the other hand, seem to make sweeping eye movements, often resting on nothing in particular. Looking over to Annie's EEG monitor she sees a recent spike of brain activity, then - "My parents raise a few chickens in the back yard." Annie remarks, looking straight at Osca. "The white ones give white eggs and the brown ones give brown eggs. They can change the colour of the yoke by feeding them different things, but I never heard that the shell could."

Osca shrugs. "You see, you learn something new every day."

"Well, of course I do. I'm a student. That's my mission: to learn. And hopefully I will learn a lot more than just one new thing today," Annie quips. She is still looking at him, but he is looking past her to the window over her left shoulder. Annie drops her gaze, stops on the mug in his left hand. Marga notices, too, the mug, it is shaking ever so slightly. Then it rises swiftly, disappears from Annie's viewpoint and enters Osca's monitor.

Cohen stands up. "Ok, guess I'll go and get dressed." He walks passed Osca to the door. Marga half looks away, then realises that she needn't be embarrassed. The apartment has no full length mirrors, only small ones at head height. As the monitoring equipment is only up during the day, windows do not reflect the subjects back in to view. It was Fredic's idea, to respect their privacy. Well, the whole experiment is a clandestine invasion as far as Marga is concerned, and she is nervous, had spent a long time wondering if she could or should be a part of such a lie; to hide the truth from the subjects, that they are being watched - but the opportunities? And, besides, it is a bona fide

scientific experiment being conducted by a highly respected department in a very prestigious university, which she can only benefit from.

Marga looks at the clock on the wall behind the monitors: 7.15 and Fredic will be arriving in about half an hour. She glances at Annie's monitor to see her washing her bowl in the sink. There is silence in the kitchen, just the faint squeak of a clean bowl now being dried with a cloth. She senses tension between the two remaining subjects, notices Annie's heart rate is a little high. Then she speaks. "You know, wine tasting would be fun, Osca. Let's do it another day. Tuesday's I'm usually pretty busy."

A smile erupts on Marga's lips. That was hard - she is thinking - to break the tension and make such a positive, thoughtful approach. Marga is impressed again by Annie's sense of responsibility. She relaxes, Annie makes her feel much better. She will take care of Annie, indeed, all of them.

A few minutes later and Fredic rumbles in. Piles of papers and folders are stuffed under one arm, an over-loaded open briefcase swings from the other. He apologises for being late, though he isn't. He grabs for the empty chair by Marga's side as if it were trying to run away from him. Sits. Looks around. Looks at Marga, questioningly. She nods and smiles simultaneously, then gives him the low down. She does not mince words, she tells him exactly how it is (all except the father bit). He is delighted. "Excellent! Three different characters, and one that tells lies. This will really show us how time works."

Fredic seems to skip passed Marga's insistence that a mentally unstable subject might be a danger not just to himself but to the others; he merely shrugs it off with a, "He's lived up to this moment, and nothing bad has happened." To which Marga replies that he doesn't know that for sure.

He then points out that they are being watched all the time, that their locations are known - stabbing a finger at the GPS map indicators - so what's the problem? OK, their apps are off over night, but they will be asleep for most of that time. Though Marga is not particularly happy, she bows to his insistence, for now. She is not about to jeopardize the experiment over an issue she feels she can keep an eye on. But she will research more on Osca, dig up whatever else she can.

Besides, Fredic does not appear to want to hear any bad news right now, he is euphoric, already unpacking his briefcase and rewinding the morning's events. He has a lot to do to prepare the synchronization of subject data, so that the apps programming will be complete for the big day tomorrow.

Later that day, Fredic is pacing his lab when Marga walks in. He explains that he wants to phone his subjects just after six, to find out how there day went and express a fundamental point: that they must allow the apps to direct their actions tomorrow without question, with total commitment. Marga understands that Fredic is slightly obsessive and needs constant reassurance, hardly surprising seeing the nature of this experiment. She agrees, even though he was plainly obvious about this matter in his instructions yesterday, so she simply points out that he only need phone one. She thinks it best not to tell him at this juncture what she has just found out about Osca.

She sits back as six o'clock roles by. She wonders if the choice of who to call makes any difference to his experiment. She hasn't quite figured it out but she is getting there. Fredic is dialling Cohen's mobile. A pause..., "Hi Cohen, it's Fredic. How was your day? Any discomfort, everything alright?"

"Cool, man, yeah, everything great."

"Where are you?"

"Oh, I'm in the Mall with some guys, checking out some new trainers. Really awesome."

"Listen, Cohen, I just want you to understand that tomorrow when you follow the eye display, you don't need to think about why you should be doing things, just enjoy the 'now' and what it brings. Thinking too much is not necessary. You know, like, if you normally have an apple for breakfast but tomorrow you are directed to eat a banana, no problem - right?"

"Sure, I understand. That's what you said yesterday. I got it."

"Thanks, Cohen. Have a good night and tell the others when you meet up. I want everyone to act normal."

Cohen hangs up and turns to Annie. "That was Fredic, nice guy, yeah?"

"Sure, what did he have to say?"

"Oh, something about if we eat an apple for breakfast we should act normal tomorrow. No, that wasn't it, it was if we eat a banana tomorrow, everything is OK! Then he said I should tell you guys, so we don't think too much, kinda just let it happen. Same stuff he said yesterday but I guess he just forgot he'd already told us."

Annie looks awkwardly at Cohen. "Apple, you said?" Her mind whirring, memories lighting up, thoughts bouncing off more thoughts. Then a deep breath and a whisper: "Do you always eat an apple for breakfast?"

"What was that, Annie?" Cohen glances sideways across a row of shoes.

"Oh, nothing," she replies with a wave.