
Point of View

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“The search for truth is more
precious than its possession”

- Albert Einstein

Preface

Wikipedia (IPA: /ˌwɪkiːˈpiːdi.ə/) is an international Web-based free-content encyclopedia. It exists as a wiki, a website that allows visitors to edit its content; the word Wikipedia itself is a portmanteau of the words wiki and encyclopedia. Wikipedia is written collaboratively by volunteers, allowing articles to be changed by anyone with access to the website.

Wikipedia's main servers are located in Tampa, Florida, with additional servers in Amsterdam and Seoul. The project began January 2001 as a complement to the expert-written (and now defunct) Nupedia, and is now operated by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation.

Midway through 2006, Wikipedia had more than 4,600,000 articles in many languages, including more than 1,200,000 in the English-language version. There were more than 200 language editions of Wikipedia, fifteen of which had more than 50,000 articles each. The German-language edition has been distributed on DVD-ROM, and there were also proposals for an English DVD or paper edition. Since its inception, Wikipedia has steadily risen in popularity, and has spawned several sister projects. Wikipedia ranked in the top 20 most visited websites, and many of its pages had been mirrored or forked by other sites, such as Answers.com.

Wikipedia's co-founder, Jimmy Wales, has called Wikipedia "an effort to create and distribute a multilingual free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language."

However, there has been controversy over Wikipedia's reliability and accuracy, with the site receiving criticism for its susceptibility to vandalism, uneven quality and inconsistency, systemic bias, and preference for consensus or popularity over credentials.

Nevertheless, its free distribution, constant and plentiful updates, diverse coverage, and versions in numerous languages have made it one of the most-used reference resources on the Internet.

Wikipedia's official slogan is "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit"; developed using a type of software called a "wiki", a term originally used for the WikiWikiWeb and derived from the Hawaiian wiki wiki, which means "quick". One of the encyclopedia's main advantages is its ability to update quickly as events unfold and new information becomes available.

Although other encyclopedia projects exist or have existed on the Internet, none has achieved Wikipedia's size or popularity.

Traditional multilingual editorial policies and article ownership are used in particular, such as the expert-written Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the now-defunct Nupedia, and the more casual h2g2 and Everything2. Projects such as Wikipedia, Susning.nu, Enciclopedia Libre and WikiZnanie are other wikis in which articles are developed by numerous authors, and there is no formal process of review. Wikipedia has become the largest such encyclopedic wiki by article and word count. Unlike many encyclopedias, it has licensed its content under the GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL).

Wikipedia has a set of policies identifying types of information appropriate for inclusion. These policies are often cited in disputes over whether particular content should be added, revised, transferred to a sister project, or removed.

One of Wikipedia's core policies is that articles must be written from a "neutral point of view", presenting all noteworthy perspectives on an issue along with the evidence supporting them. Wikipedia articles do not attempt to determine an objective truth on their subjects, but rather to describe them impartially balancing all significant viewpoints.

- from www.wikipedia.org/ circa July 2006

I live in two worlds.

In one, I rise and set with the sun. I waddle my way out to work where I preach to disaffected youths. They don't listen and I don't mind. At the end of the day we go our separate ways.

I'm a numberless drone in a hive of inactivity. I waddle my way back home and, as the City sleeps, I enter the other world.

In the other world, no one ever sleeps. Communication takes place at the speed of thought and society is vague and ephemeral. As anywhere, there are rules of etiquette and conduct, and there are troglodytes who flaunt the rules. I have friends there, but I've never shaken their hands, kissed their lips, heard their voices. Someone described it as a world of machines, of maths and language and thought and art and information.

But it's none of those.

I'm there now, in my other world.

Actually, you might say I was in both worlds, depending on whether you're a rationalist or a dualist. In the physical world my rather gangly and slightly beer-bellied body hunches unergonomically over a keyboard, projecting my alter ego. The lights are off and a guitar thrums away in my ears... The Doors, I think.

In the other world, that's right, the electronic world, all the lights are on. My thoughts, turned to letters, each one enumerated in eight binary digits and swaddled in wrappers, spit onto a wire and ricochet to their destination like so many electronic pinballs.

They pass other fragments, coming in the opposite direction, pause ever so briefly and assemble themselves into thoughts again, spilling out onto a screen a thousand miles from me.

In this world I have a slightly bigger reputation. In a small slice of that infinite space I have a reputation for sorting out problems, for fixing things. It's a tiny, tiny slice of fame but it's probably all I'll ever have. I cling to it like a baby with a pacifier.

I don't prefer one world over the other. They both have their pleasures and their tribulations. I'm freer, less encumbered by wearisome chores in the other world. No washing dishes, no paying bills, no standing in queues. But on the other hand, without the first world I would wither. My body would waste away, belly not withstanding, and I would disappear. And there are plenty of pleasures (of the flesh - so to speak) that exist only in the first world.

Truth be told, if I had to, I could live without the other world.

This is the story of how an idea in the other world turned into an argument and how that argument turned into a fight for truth and a fight into murder. Would someone kill for an idea? Of course. You'd be surprised how often it happens.

It's a crazy story. It's paranoid.

But is it true? Depends on what you mean by true.

There is corruption and graft and there's a conspiracy. . . but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's start at the beginning.

Wikipedia Arbitration IRC Channel #27

Sept 23, 10:05pm EST

Rollcall : Speaker - BlueDude - Tirofijo - Locke - Rolli - Demosthenes.

Demosthenes: Who are you? What authority do you have?

Speaker: I'm no one special. I have no more authority than anyone else here.

Demosthenes: Why should we listen to you?

Speaker: I understand there is an edit-war going on. I might be able break the deadlock.

Demosthenes: : You will rule in favour of one side or the other?

Speaker: Not as such. But if you agree, I'll offer some suggestions to consider.

Demosthenes: How do I know you won't side with the other party?

Speaker: You could consult my user page and see what else I've done, but that would take too long. Locke has been with you from the start. I've worked with him before, I'm sure he'll vouch for me.

Locke: Absolutely. Speaker's a first class mediator.

Speaker: Thank You.

Demosthenes: Very well. Based on Locke's recommendation I will accept your input. But I reserve the right to seek further redress if I feel you are unjustly siding with the other party.

Speaker: Thank you for your vote of confidence (no sarcasm intended). BlueDude can you accept me as a mediator? Any objections?

Rolli: I don't think you're the right person to be doing this!

Speaker: Who let you out of the box? The dispute is between Demosthenes and BlueDude. You're just a spectator Rolli. If they accept me, your objection is irrelevant.

BlueDude: I accept! Speaker is awesome.

Demosthenes: And I have already indicated I will accept your input.

Speaker: Well Rolli? Staying quietly or going?

Rolli: Staying.

Speaker: Thought you might. Any more questions?

...

Speaker: So, BlueDude requested this mediation and was sponsored by Locke.

Demosthenes: Locke! I thought you were on my side!

Locke: I'm not on anyone's side. I'm just keeping the peace.

Speaker: It seems to be an NPOV dispute over the subject of the article, one Hugo Chavez.

Demosthenes: Sorry to be obtuse, but what is NPOV?

Speaker: Neutral-Point-Of-View. It's a guiding principle that we should have a neutral point of view, representing all views fairly and without bias.

Demosthenes: I fail to see how flagrant slander constitutes a neutral point of view!

Speaker: It's another guiding principle that we should not indulge in personal attacks.

Demosthenes: My apologies. I am upset. I have ten years of experience in the political affairs of Latin America and I'm being forced to debate semantics with a street punk.

Speaker: Everyone's view here is equally valid. BlueDude could have twelve years experience.

Demosthenes: You're joking? Have you asked him? Have you seen what he's written?

Speaker: I read all of the archived discussion.

Demosthenes: You've been watching us?

Speaker: Everyone here has an equal say in how the article is written.

Demosthenes: I'm a published expert with two books on South American politics to my name! I lecture all around the country! How is my opinion less valid than a layman?

Speaker: This is a cooperative forum. Everyone's contribution is equal.

Demosthenes: But this is important! How can you let any unwashed bum off the street spew out their opinion on such a subject?

Speaker: I understand your concern, but this-is-how-it-works. If you want to contribute, you must accept the right of everyone else to contribute too. If you don't, perhaps you should try a scientific journal, where your credentials might be recognised. . . and I'll repeat this once – no personal attacks!

Demosthenes: I suppose I must accept this to move forward.

Speaker: Yes, you must.

Demosthenes: I apologise for the unintended slur on BlueDude's character.

BlueDude: Beg pardon?

Speaker: He says 'sorry'. Now, as I was saying, there's an NPOV dispute over the Chavez article. BlueDude do you want to go first?

BlueDude: Oh, okay. I found a lot of this stuff about Chavez on a website. I summarised it and posted it to the article. Then Demosthenes deleted it! So I posted it back and put a notice on the talk page asking him not to delete it and he did it again. When I put it back he called me an idiot!

Speaker: Demosthenes, do you want to respond? Please keep it 'civil' and 'assume good faith'.

Demosthenes: I'm not sure what you mean but I suppose they must be more 'policies'. I'll try and summarise. BlueDude has posted a slander of Hugo Chavez that has no basis in reality. He's pushing a load of lies from some gutter trash publication.

Speaker: Demosthenes, did you call BlueDude an idiot?

Demosthenes: Yes. I can't dispute that.

Speaker: Okay. That's against the rules, no more of that please. Now, the material posted by BlueDude, can you provide a reference or counter example to refute it?

Demosthenes: I don't need to provide a counter-example! It's errant nonsense! I thought you said that this encyclopedia was supposed to have a neutral point of view? The corruption rubbish he's spouting is disgraceful anti-Chavez propaganda!

Speaker: Okay, two points. Firstly, please try and avoid emotionally laden words like 'rubbish' and 'disgraceful' they just make the discussion more complicated. Second, we are neutral-point-of-view, not no-point-of-view. We try and expose all points of view, not just the majority view otherwise we'd be a white-middle-class-mainstream mouthpiece.

Demosthenes: But then any crackpot can post anything they like!

Speaker: That's true, but not entirely. We don't allow hearsay or opinion. We don't allow original research. We ask people to reference reputable sources to support their position. Hence my question, can you provide a counter-example quoting a reputable source?

Demosthenes: How can I provide a counter-example to something that has no basis in reality? It's like trying to refute a fairy tale!

Speaker: Good point. BlueDude, did you provide a reputable source for the information you posted?

BlueDude: I did, but when I went back to check, the information was gone.

Speaker: Do you have another source?

BlueDude: No.

Speaker: So it's unsubstantiated at this point?

BlueDude: Yes, I guess so.

Speaker: Before I make some recommendations does any one else have anything?

Rolli: I'm with Demosthenes. This stuff that BlueDude is pushing is crap! Chavez is a man of the people. He's standing up to the neo-con Globalisation mafia and he's being punished for it.

Speaker: Funny, I thought we would have heard from you earlier.

Rolli: As usual you're hijacking the debate for your own personal purposes.

Speaker: Do you have anything relevant to contribute to this discussion?

Rolli: The Western Democracies can't push the Third World around any more! This is an attempt to silence the critics of cultural imperialism. Chavez is a popularly elected president but because he's not a Washington lapdog they're trying to discredit him.

Speaker: Anything -relevant- to the discussion?

Rolli: I provided half a dozen links which prove the stuff BlueDude posted was lies!

Speaker: I reviewed all of them. Out of seven sources, only three had anything to do with Hugo Chavez and one was your own blog. The other two didn't say anything at all about the allegations that BlueDude posted, they were just copies of Chavez's bio.

Rolli: You can't just close your eyes! Those sites are as relevant as anything BlueDude provided! Your trying to spin this as a POV debate. It's just another sign of your latent fascism.

Demosthenes: Rolli, really! Please! I appreciate your support but I don't think dragging all of this out here will help resolve the issue!

Rolli: You don't understand, they want to dominate Wikipedia and the media, they think by suppressing our freedom of speech they can suppress the truth!

Speaker: Rolli, try and contain yourself or I'll boot you out of the discussion.

Rolli: Crypto-fascist! As soon as anyone challenges your authority. . .

Speaker: Right, name calling, bye-bye.

Rolli: <disconnects>

Locke: Good riddance.

...

Speaker: I have a short fuse where he's concerned.

Demosthenes: It must be difficult trying to keep the peace without any vested authority?

Speaker: It is. Locke?

Locke: Thanks Speaker. Everyone conducted themselves well, especially Demosthenes and BlueDude who are both newbies. They argued their sides without being too aggressive. Demosthenes tended to be a little personal but I think it was just the heat of the moment. BlueDude did a good job of summarising his documentation but when I helped him look, we couldn't find a supporting source to reference.

Speaker: Succinct as always, thanks Locke. Last but not least, Tirofijo, you've been very quiet. What's your interest?

Tirofijo: I know he's right.

Speaker: Who?

Tirotijo: BlueDude.

Speaker: How do you know he's right?

Tirotijo: I can't say.

Locke: That's not much help is it?

Tirotijo: I have sources. I have seen the documents. I know he's right. I saw what Chavez did.

Speaker: Yes, but do you have any proof?

Tirotijo: None that I can share.

Speaker: Without proof it's unfounded hearsay.

Tirotijo: It's the truth.

Speaker: With no disrespect intended, it's your truth. There maybe others.

...

Speaker: If no one objects, I'm ready to make some recommendations: Demosthenes needs to remember to be civil. He should refrain from making personal attacks in the future; BlueDude should seek out a reputable source to support his material; When he does find a source I suggest that he works with Demosthenes to produce a suitable NPOV presentation of the information.

How does that sound?

BlueDude: Okay, I guess.

Demosthenes: Very fair. My apologies for any insult or injury I might have caused. I look forward to working with BlueDude, if he comes up with verifiable information.

Speaker: BlueDude, you understand the need for reliable sources?

BlueDude: Yes, I suppose so.

Speaker: That's the way the cookie crumbles.

BlueDude: I thought I had something big.

Speaker: The price of consensus. Sorry people, it's late where I am, I have to go now, if you need me again just holler.

Demosthenes: Thank you and good night Speaker. You're assistance has been useful. <disconnects>

BlueDude: Yeah, thanks.

Locke: Breakfast time for me, see you at the next one. Ciao. <disconnects>

...

Speaker: Hey, BlueDude - you there?

BlueDude: Yeah.

Speaker: You okay with this?

BlueDude: I guess so. I'm just disappointed. I thought I was really onto something with this stuff.

Speaker: Well, I understand. Don't lose heart. Try again and maybe you'll find a source.

BlueDude: Maybe you could take a look at it for me?

Speaker: I'm kind of busy right now.

BlueDude: Oh. I guess I can drop it.

...

Speaker: Okay, I'm going to hate myself for this, but send me the stuff. I'll have a look at it.

BlueDude: Hey, thanks, that's great!

Speaker: No problems, now I got to get some sleep. Bye. <disconnects>

BlueDude: Bye. <disconnects>

Tirofijo: <disconnects>

I sat back and switched on the light.

It wasn't late. I had ulterior motives. They couldn't have known of course, I could have been from any time zone on the planet. In cyberspace no one knows if you're a dog.

I looked at the clock.

My ulterior motive was 5'4" of gorgeous brunette and I was running late. I drilled down through a couple of windows and flicked up my mailbox. A bunch of documents was drifting in. BlueDude was keen. They looked like files clipped from a website and a lot of them too.

But they could wait.

I poked the machine off, Jimmy Morrison dying away in mid lyric, and took the stairs three at a time.

The City was quiet on a school night, the muted hum of traffic on the Boulevard and the swish of jets overhead. The pavements were slick with debris from a late summer storm and the air was heavy with ozone; there would be thunder later. I preferred winter when the City was a blanket of silent powder. It never snowed where I was born, it hardly even rained.

I ducked out between the parked cars and onto the road. A taxi blared it's horn and sluiced past, throwing up a wall of water.

Shit. Direct hit. Never mind.

Jimmy's Pizzas was on the corner of my block. Inside the decor was faux Napoli; red-and-white striped tablecloths, plastic booths and fake wood paneling. The place smelled of stale smoke even though no one had lit a cigarette in here for ten years. They still made pizzas by hand but they served more coffee than they sold pies. If I moved out of the neighbourhood, they'd go under.

Carmen was in back, by the window. Her hair was tinted neon pink by the sign buzzing above her head. A waiter was talking to her, a hairy ape with a five o'clock shadow, leaning his furry forearms on the table. She caught sight of me, raised her head and smiled; the sun came out.

The knuckle-dragger retreated behind the counter and sneered at me as I went by – testosterone salvos at twenty paces.

I slid into the booth, “Hi beautiful!”

She cocked an eye at the puddles I was making on the table, “Let me guess, you got caught up?”

“Uh. . . yeah, sorry – it was a bit involved and then one guy asked for help. . .”

She smiled and shook her head, “I must like you. You keep me waiting around but I keep coming back.”

I smiled back, “Yah, you must like me.”

“Ain't that the truth!”

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all ye know and all ye need to know!”

She grinned.

I stretched my neck out and we indulged in a little tongue hockey with fireworks.

“I ordered already,” she said.

“Good! I'm starving!”

“Didn't eat again, huh?”

“Yeah, got caught up on WikiP.”

The ape appeared bearing a large pizza – egg, sausage, artichoke – a Capriciosa. God I loved this girl!

She nodded to him, “Thanks, Alberto.”

The ape inclined his head and disappeared.

Her eyes twinkled, "That was Alberto, he was keeping me company."

I looked at him, skulking behind the counter, "Like the strong silent types?"

"No, I like the chatty, intelligent, highly strung types."

She grinned again. I grinned back.

We ate, we chatted – her day, my day.

"So what is this Wikipedia thing anyway?"

We'd only been going out for two weeks or she'd know the answer to that one off by heart, "It's a free, online, cooperative encyclopedia."

She pawed through the adjectives and stopped at number three, "Cooperative?"

"Yeah, anyone can contribute to anything."

"You mean I could write an article on. . . Albert Einstein or nuclear physics or something?"

"That's how it works."

One lovely eyebrow went up, "But I know nada about nuclear physics? How can it be any good if anyone can write anything?"

I shrugged, "It works. It's not that surprising. People who are passionate and knowledgeable tend to stick with their stuff. People who aren't get bored and drift off."

"What do you do?"

"I contribute to stuff I know about. Philosophy, computers, that stuff. And I help out with editing and disputes."

"What kind of disputes?"

"I had one tonight. A history professor arguing with some guy about the president of some South American country, Hugo someone. . ."

"Chavez? Hugo Chavez?"

"Yeah, that's him."

There was a buzzing noise - her fingers were drumming on the table.

"What?"

Now her pretty brown eyes were filled with fire.

I wracked my brain.

"That's right, your family is from. . . down there isn't it."

Again the drumming fingers.

"Brazil?"

"Venezuela! And Hugo Chavez is - and has been - the president since '98."

"Oh wow! Well maybe you could help me out with this stuff, you probably know all about it!"

Her smile twitched at the corners. She snorted, "You're hopeless!"

I hung my head. "But cute?"

She sighed, "Madre mia! Yeah, cute!"

She smiled again, this time it had an edge.

"What?"

"You can ask my my Mama about Chavez when you see her on Saturday."

My blood ran cold, "I forgot!"

"I know."

I looked at her, "No chance. . ."

She was shaking her head.

"Good. Great. Love to meet your parents."

She grinned at me again, "Don't worry, you'll enjoy it. Make sure you bring a present for Mama."

"A present? Like what?"

"You'll work something out. I have faith."

"Uh, okay."

The pizza sat on the table between us like a half eaten full-stop. She was watching me. I leaned close, "It's a real shame that you have to work tomorrow, because my classes don't start till eleven."

She leaned in and giggled, "That's why I took tomorrow off."

I snapped my fingers at the ape for the bill.

What did he have that I didn't?

I rolled out of bed early, while Carmen slept. I put the headphones on, so as not to wake her, and punched up my machine. Jimmy Morrison took up where he'd left off, liars and cops and cars and bars.

I called up my email.

Penis enlargement - offer to win a million dollars - invitation to buy a slice of an oilfield in Nigeria - three adds for Viagra - and chain mail from a right wing Christian nut job. All of it went in the trash, but Karl had left me a joke :

A man calls for an ambulance. "I think my friend is dead," he says.

"Well," says the operator, "you'd better make sure."

The man puts the phone down and the operator hears the noise of two gun shots.

The man comes back on the line, "Okay, he's dead now."

I fired back, "Gee, you must be a professional writer or something."

He was still in the office so his response took all of twelve seconds, "And you're a professional asshole. We still on for squash Saturday?"

I started to reply and remembered Carmen's steady gaze last night. "Sorry pal," I typed, "no can-do. I've got to go meet Carmen's folks. What's the chance of playing Sunday?"

"Her folks? How long you been going out? Two weeks?"

“Yeah. How about SUNDAY?!????!”

“Sunday is okay. You must be crazy on her.”

“Yeah, I am. See you Sunday.”

Chit-chat over, I flicked to the email from yesterday.

BlueDude had sent me half-a-dozen different documents. The first one looked like a transcript of a phone conversation. Two long columns of dialog, on the left Spanish, on the right an English translation. Two people were doing most of the talking, “Tango” and “Piper One” while a third, “Piper Two”, chipped in occasionally. There were lots of acronyms I didn't understand – API, MVR, specific gravity, PDVSA, recovery factors. But no Hugo Chavez.

The second document was some kind of government report. Short columns in a horrible monospace font, like a 1960's type writer. The title read “EIA Impact Analysis on Venezuelan Crude Oil Production Loss.” The first paragraph started, “Venezuela is only five days away from the US Gulf Coast by tanker. . .” and there was a graph. Still nothing about Chavez.

I flipped to the third document.

This one was more like it. It mentioned Chavez by name and read like a CNN news report -

The situation in Caracas is extremely fluid with the balance of power unclear. There is significant dissent within the ranks of the MVR that could be exploited. Elements of the MAS and PPT are also disenchanted with the pace of the Chavez reforms and with allegations of corruption. With suitable encouragement a transition could be achieved. The most likely candidate to succeed the president would be. . .”

A feather-light touch on my shoulder.

Carmen was up, standing behind me with her hands on my shoulders. I pulled back the headphones, Jimmy fading into rush hour traffic outside the window.

“Hi baby!”

She yawned, revealing a gleaming set of pearly whites and a velvet tongue that sent shivers up my spine, "What are you reading?"

"Stuff from last night."

"Lemme see."

She bent over, her breasts warm against my back, her hair brushing my fingers on the keyboard. I had goosebumps.

"Uhuh. That'll be about the coup in 2002."

"Sorry? The what?"

"The coup. Some guys tried to take over in 2002 but Chavez made it back into power. Mama can tell you all about it. She was there."

"Really?"

"Really. I was little. What are we going to do today? You're not going to read that all morning are you?"

I flicked the monitor off, "I thought we could go for breakfast and then maybe you could walk me to work."

"Mmm. . . bueno, but I'm not hungry. . .yet. . ."

"So what are we gonna do?"

She reached out and snagged the neck of my t-shirt, "I've got a few ideas."

"I'll bet you have."

We went back to bed.

~

Later, we lingered over breakfast - croissants, prosciutto and melon - stretching it out to two cups of treacle-like coffee.

Carmen was going shopping but needed a change of clothes. I walked her to the bus and then jogged the three blocks to campus.

The University was a red-brick monstrosity built in the seventies. A half-dozen rectilinear buildings perched on the bank of the river like badly formed Lego. No one ever called it pretty. The river was nice but you wouldn't swim in it without a rubber suit and goggles. If the wind blew the wrong way you could smell the rotting seaweed on the outer beach, five miles away. The neighbourhood was better, quiet and green since they'd razed the tenement buildings. I lived further out, in an unfashionable suburb being squeezed to death by two suburbs of up-and-coming yuppies. My rent was precisely half my salary but I figured I saved on transport.

I was ten minutes late for my first lecture.

Everyone else was fifteen minutes late.

We crawled through 'Philosophy and Theology' with a bunch of dummies that couldn't understand that Pascal's Wager, while neat, was no more than a bit of sophistry by the crusty old French apologetic - putting a metaphorical cat amongst the rationalist pigeons. They couldn't seem to grasp fact that, although burning for eternity in hell was rational motivation for believing in God, it didn't mean He actually existed. A couple of them were getting jumpy so I threw them Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem and asked them to consider how it applied to Blaise's Wager - one of my more inspired redirects - and left for the next class.

Two floors down and we had a more lively session with 'Computational Semiotics'. We started with fuzzy linguistics and its potential for building adaptive semiotic taxonomies. One guy in the front row was arguing that it was pointless since the human brain could be boiled down into one big Turing machine and all we needed was a fast enough computer to crack the encoding scheme of natural languages. Nothing I hadn't heard before but it kept me awake.

My job was a little unusual.

In an age of specialisation I had slipped through the cracks, I floated between definitions.

I liked to refer to my position as 'academic without a portfolio'. You could usually find me in the Philosophy department but sometimes I floated around CompSci or dropped in on Psych. I frustrated the hell out of the administration and who couldn't categorise me, couldn't discipline me and often failed to pay me.

Which suited me fine, I ran a little business on the side, research consulting for advertising firms who wanted semiotic interpretations of their work and a particular brand of intellectual bullshit to dazzle their clients. I also tutored a lot, slept a lot and played around with computers too much. It was a nice life. It wouldn't make me rich but it might make me happy.

After the last lecture I dropped into the library to photocopy some notes, grabbed some lunch and strolled back to my cupboard sized office in the Architecture building.

Architecture was the ugliest slab of concrete on campus. Designed, so the story went, to crush any residual creative impulses that the lecturers might have missed. I had my office there because it made me hard to find - who would look for a specialist in truth amongst a bunch of failed engineers?

I sat down in front of my work machine and hauled up my email.

There was one waiting from BlueDude - "Can we talk about the Chavez article again?"

I dropped a reply, "No problems. I'll be online tomorrow night, grab me then." There was also one from Carmen - "Don't forget Saturday and don't forget a present for Mama."

That one didn't need a reply.

I picked up a stack of papers and headed for the library. It was quiet there. In my office, there was always the remotest chance that a student might find and pester me. I found an empty desk, slipped my iPod on and waded into my marking to the tunes of Baba Maal. By the time he'd finished the album I'd finished the marking. I checked my watch, time for the last lecture of the day.

This was a smaller class, only about twenty kids, so I couldn't help but notice the older guy sitting up the back. He had a kind of light-coloured sports coat on and was just watching, not taking notes. He looked to be in his late forties with black hair, olive skin and a mild expression. In contrast to the kids he was sitting so still he could have been cut from stone. Maybe he was from the Dean, checking up on me, or the Board of Education or a parent?

Maybe he was a prospective student?

At the end of the lecture I went to find him but he was gone.

It didn't matter, he'd be back.

~

I got home around seven, had cold Capriciosa for dinner, and rang Carmen. She didn't pick up, so I hit the computer again. I knew I spent more time on Wikipedia than was healthy, but it was so damned addictive - who said "knowledge is a drug" ?

I was working on a couple of articles, trying to get them up to 'featured article' status.

Wikipedia runs on a gerontocracy. Anybody can write anything but you get real kudos, real social currency by writing articles. The older wiser heads rule the roost. They set the standards and lead by example.

The best articles get 'featured' on the front page and half-a-million people a day get to read your pearls of wisdom. The more articles you write, the more edits you perform, the older and wiser you get and the more your opinion is respected.

But it's not a democracy.

You don't vote. Voting is evil. You're supposed to achieve consensus instead.

The argument goes that voting can allow a particular interest group to hijack an issue by drumming up temporary support. Wikipedia's high ideals call for everyone to be included, for true consensus. More often than not it comes down to how long and how hard you argue. People burn out, fade out of the discussion and leave the passionate ones triumphant. At least for a while. Creative friction I guess. Hume said, "Truth springs from an argument amongst friends," but there weren't many friends made on Wikipedia.

'My' articles were on lesser known philosophers, Hannah Arendt and Hans Georg-Gdamer. I'd had a third on their mentor, Martin Heidegger, but had to drop it after some anti-Nazi, yammer-head wouldn't leave it alone. It was easier to walk away, let him make a hash of it than it was to talk him round. No great loss.

Tonight, I was working my way through Arendt's "Life of the Mind". It wasn't easy. She had an endearing habit of switching context just when you thought you had got a handle on it. I was wading through her definitions of 'thinking', 'willing' and 'judging' when the doorbell rang.

It took me a while to work out what it was. It never rings.

It rang again.

I dumped the headphones and wandered over opened the door : Carmen, in a little black dress that made my heart skip a beat.

"Thought we might go out. Seeing as it is Friday night."

“Yeah! Right! Of course! Let me grab my coat.”

She came in and stood by the computer making 'tutting' noises while I got organised

Shoes, wallet, coat, keys, hair, done.

“Where are we going?”

“Thought I'd take you back to Cocina del Diablo.”

I grinned.

'Hell's Kitchen' was a local Latino/rock club, sunk in the basement under a Japanese restaurant. Last time we'd been there I'd got hammered with a white-haired drummer from a Judas Priest cover band. He'd kept buying me shots of tequila and chatting up Carmen. After eight or nine rounds, we staggered back to my place and Carmen got to hold my hair back while I puked in the toilet.

That had been our second date.

We left my place and headed out onto the street. Since I started going out with her my choice of venues had expanded a thousand-fold. She moved in social circles I didn't even know existed. Everyone in this town knew her. We couldn't drop into a bar without a circle of old school friends appearing. My old friends were dead and buried on another continent.

“You've got to get off that computer. It'll ruin your life.”

“Yeah, I know. At least I don't watch television all day.”

“That's something,” she admitted. She glanced at me, “Are you going to pick me up tomorrow? Have you found a present for Mama?”

Shit.

“Yeah, of course. I thought I'd come around about 11.30.”

“And Mama?”

“I've got something.”

She hugged my arm, "Good! I knew you'd come through!"

A wave of warmth surged up my chest, closely followed by a tickle of guilt.

I hugged her back and ignored it.

~

We stayed in the Kitchen till the wee hours.

I felt as out of place as a nun in a whorehouse. Everyone was half my age, had twice as much hair or hadn't washed in ten years. The music was tamer stuff that I could swallow right on up to head-banging, ear-splitting nonsense that made my eyes water. The decor was neutral, black on black.

Carmen and I snagged a seat near the stage and chatted as much as the music would allow. Some of her friends showed up after a little while and I retreated to a corner and nursed my beers. I liked her friends but the chit-chat wore me down. Sometimes, I wondered what she saw in me. We didn't have much in common. I ordered another beer. By the time we'd left I'd had a few more than was good for me.

We staggered back through dark and empty streets, dodging taxis and rowdy drunks.

Or maybe they were dodging us?

I couldn't tell.

Carmen, sober and as steady as ever, guided me to my doorstep.

I had one arm around her shoulders and I tried to kiss her every three steps. She alternated between pushing me away and letting me slobber on her face. We reached my place and I tried to gouge a hole in the front door until Carmen took my keys away and let me in. We stumbled upstairs, ricocheting off the walls. She opened my door and pushed me in.

I lurched into the bathroom and peed unsteadily while Carmen rummaged around in the kitchen. I bounced off a few walls on the way to the bedroom and did a swan dive onto the bed. I thought about her and me for a while and closed my eyes.

I surfaced to the sensation of something tugging at my feet.

I looked down the length of my body. Carmen was taking off my shoes. I blew her a kiss and she disappeared. I watched the room gyrate for a bit and then rolled over on my back and stared at the ceiling.

Carmen appeared in my peripheral vision, a glass of water in her hand.

She held it out.

"I love you!" I sang out.

She smiled down at me and, as I took the glass, tumbled into bed beside me.