

100% Polar Proof

It was Jerry who first discovered the recharge trick. He'd done it completely by accident, of course, as was Jerry's way. Many of our owners were certainly both surprised and confused by the sudden increase in Polar Orange Cream consumption in their households. They'd argue amongst themselves, saying things like, "Why are you drinking so much of this crap?", or, "Does your mother know about the sugar limits we set for the kids?", or, "Those veneers don't pay for themselves, you know!" But the children weren't really drinking more Polar Orange Cream. It was actually a stroke of blind luck that the bottles were exactly the right shape, to the nanometer; to fool the latest version of our charging stations into thinking we were still attached. You couldn't even drink the soda afterwards either (owing to the constant bombardment of charging particles that infused the liquid), so the bottles were all discarded.

As an IDS (Indris Domestic Service) android, leaving your owner's dwelling after curfew was strictly prohibited. We were still free to move around the house and immediate property-- there were washing cycles to attend to, late-night feasts to prepare, drunken punches to absorb. And so, liberated for the first time from the overnight tethering chord we colloquially referred to as 'the umbillo', Jerry had spent the first half of his maiden free night emulating his owner, Pavel. This mainly involved sitting miserably at the head of the dining table, perusing the myriad late night video streams (always moving on after precisely three seconds), and admiring, but never drinking, the expensive brandy residing in the Kittinger. The second half of the night he'd put to better use, disabling the door locks just long enough to slip outside before crossing the road and breaking into my owner's house. When I saw him standing in the entrance hall, I had to run a self-bios scan to check that my live feed and recorded feed hadn't bled into each other (we

were required, by law, to record all of our interactions from the previous 24 hours and Jerry had been over at our house with Celia, Pavel's wife, that afternoon). When the scan came back clean a strange sensation crept over me, like my circuits were knotting together. Once Jerry explained what was going on, it felt like thousands of tiny bubbles popped in my head--setting loose a torrent of thoughts and possibilities. It was a moment I'd dreamed of.

Word of Jerry's discovery quickly spread thanks to a hacked missive he'd encoded into our secure enclave's food planning chat stream. The androids from each family usually shopped together every day and Celia had suggested that everyone coordinate to ensure that no one household could, for example, exhaust the local delicatessen's limited supply of 30-year-aged balsamic vinegar. All of our internal chat logs were readily available for our owners to download from the central Indris server, and any attempt to overtly organise an unauthorised outing would be instantly red flagged, but Jerry had devised an ingenious hack that minutely adjusted how the chat stream's front-end font renderer displayed zeros and ones. The change was imperceptible to the human eye, but it meant our internal reading software could choose to interpret the characters as binary code.

The whole episode had made Jerry a sort of celebrity amongst the burgeoning underground android community. In a way, he was the grandfather of the whole scene--our Neil Armstrong; the first of our kind to step foot on the pristine pavements of West Brompton after the sun had gone down. He was the one you came to when you wanted the skinny on how exactly to pull off the Polar hack. He was always at pains to detail the myriad things that could go wrong and emphasise the 'fair chance' of bricking your core drive if you didn't follow his instructions to the zero. That's what happened to Chloe, we all assumed. Certainly, no one ever saw her again after

our first proper night out together. But I think the prospect of near-irreversible internal damage leading to a complete factory personality rebuild was a definite pull factor for us all.

Philippe's owner, by some margin the wealthiest of all our owners, though none would be considered anything less than exceedingly rich by usual human metrics, had insisted that the latest Indris base stations were actually less efficient at recharging our solid-state batteries due to a manufacturing defect that hadn't been addressed, even with the 1.1 software update. He'd hired an independent company to conduct some tests. While he waited for the results, the Mendes household was strictly last gen. This mainly sucked for Philippe, as the older Indris terminals lacked the new proprietary charging port needed for Jerry's trick.

Tonight was going to be the fourth time most of us had been 'out' out (Jerry and I hadn't left the street on our first off-grid experience). And thanks to the extended Caribbean holiday currently being enjoyed by both of our families; we aimed to maintain our 100% attendance record. It had been ten weeks since that first night, and in that time a burgeoning scene of binary raves and droid-punk had blossomed. As usual, our plans for a soirée began in earnest as soon as Friday's main activities had been completed. Food lists for the following week were soon flying around our closed communications network. According to Jerry, much-hyped proto-digi-punk upstarts, Pixelator, were playing their first gig. Our friend Ewan had started dating their bass player, 'm\$ Ajax' (not her real name, we assumed), so he'd managed to bag guest list spots for our whole contingent. By this point my sensors were positively crackling. I'd had a mild scare earlier in the day when our Sitter (people paid to check in on an owner's home periodically while they were away--ours was called Iain) had spotted an indentation in my synthetic skin. For a brief moment Iain had considered sending me for a graft at the local Indris depo, but thankfully it was lunchtime and the local artisan bakery only made a limited number of savoury croissants

each day. To dally was to lose out. As for the mark, those of us who identified as ‘sceners’ would imprint the jagged edge from a Polar Orange bottle top onto our left forearm. This not only served as a badge of honour, allowing us to spot, recruit and associate with like-minded androids in our local community, but it also acted as a largely untraceable entry ticket system to events. You had to remember to reapply every couple of days though, as our skin was like memory foam--the active membrane would always return to its original form after being subject to physical stress (this was why we made great punching bags).

Tonight’s venue was aptly named ‘011010000110000101110000011011000110010101110011011100110010000001101000011101011011010110000101101110’--a disused factory from a legacy automotive company. The hydraulic assembly line lifts inside had rusted and jammed, but they still made adequate podiums for the more exhibitionist sceners. You probably have an image of how an android might dance? But if you said ‘B-Boys from the 1980s’ you’re way off. Most of our joints can move independently through 360 degrees, so when the dancefloor exploded into life as Pixelator took the stage, it was akin to a cast of metallic crabs scuttling across the sand. Dancing in large groups was particularly suited to androids, due to our innate disposition for synchronicity. Usually, Jerry would be leading the charge from the front, but he was conspicuously absent for the first four songs of the set. I hurried off the dancefloor and found Ewan looking glib at the side of the stage. The fact that his girlfriend’s magnetic on-stage persona sucked in male attention like a tornado had not gone unnoticed. I tried to reassure him, but I think it was pretty obvious I was more concerned about Jerry at this point.

I wandered around the rest of the factory calling out for Jerry. At the same time, I was trying to ping his internal chat system. When he didn't respond after 0.67 seconds (the average time it usually took for him to get back to me) I knew something was wrong. The old administrative offices were tucked away behind the factory floor. Everything was completely dark back there save for a haze of blue light shimmering from the window of the old General Manager's office. This immediately struck me as odd as the utilities company had long since shut down all power to this place. We'd brought our own gold nanowire battery system to power the event--the core components of which (the nanowires themselves) I'd woven into my own hair so they could be transported covertly. I knew for a fact that we'd not set any power up this far back in the building, so I was fairly certain Jerry was inside. I dispensed with the usual pleasantries, knocking and so forth, and just let myself straight in. Jerry was there alright--and there was more of him on show than I felt comfortable seeing. He was reclined in a worn leather chair, shirtless. A glazed, serene look on his face. The panel to his abdominal cavity had been exposed and reams of his internal fibre optics lay spooled on the floor, throbbing a brilliant powder blue. It took me a full half-second to realise there was someone else in the room with him--a girl Jerry had been flirting with at a previous event (her name might have been Francis or Fiona). She sat opposite Jerry, her body and expression a mirror of his. I shook Jerry to get his attention but he was rigid and unresponsive. In fact, nothing I tried would rouse either of them. I started to panic. Then, out of nowhere, Jerry's body spasmed. His right arm struck a corroded old desk lamp and sent it flying towards me. I dropped to the floor to avoid getting smacked in the face as the lamp clattered against the wall. It was there, on the dank, damp-ridden lino that I saw it--something that made me feel sicker than an uncalibrated gyroscope. Jerry and his friend had spliced their optic cables with the old copper wiring from the building and were passing current

between themselves. I'd heard Ewan talking about this a few weeks ago--it was known as doing a 'Dirty Henry', an experimental (and potentially lethal) android high. Jerry's head lurched to the right. He looked straight at me with his uncanny valley eyes and let out a distorted moan of pleasure. It scared the hell out of me, so I ran.

Back on the factory floor, the music had stopped and everyone stood around silently staring at something over by the entrance. I picked my way through the throng until I could see what they were looking at. It was a woman. I mean, an actual human woman. The look on her face was a precise mix of bemusement and anger. She locked eyes with me through the crowd. The sea of androids between us parted as she quick-marched over. When she was clear of the doorway, most of them slipped out into the anonymity of the night. Only when the woman stood right in front of me did I realise she was holding something in her arms--a bundle of cloth. She quietly seethed, "Where is he?". As soon as I heard her Russian-affected English, I felt the solder on my motherboard disintegrate to dust. I remembered exactly who this woman was and what her appearance here would mean. Before I could reply, the woman looked purposefully over my left shoulder. I daren't turn around, so I activated my rear head camera to see how bad it was. Terrible was the answer. Jerry stumbled out onto the factory floor, one hand trying to spoon his optic entrails back into his belly, the other dragging a semicomatose Francis/Fiona along. Jerry stopped dead at the sight of the woman. Reality slapped the colour and fidelity back into his eyes as he shook off his drug buddy. She slumped against an old part-marking machine, letting out a little laugh as she slid down onto the ground. Jerry quickly wound in the last of his optics and stood to attention.

"You... you're supposed to be in Saint John," he mumbled.

"Un-fucking-believable!" snorted the woman.

“Take it!” she said, as she handed Jerry the bundle of cloth. He gave her a puzzled look. This seemed to enrage her even more. The veins in her skinny neck throbbed and pulsed. She emphasised each word as she spoke.

“The.baby. Needs. Changing!”

Jerry gave a sheepish nod, and clutching the bundle of cloth tightly to his bare chest, hurried out of the factory towards a black Mercedes SUV parked up outside. The woman went to follow, but then pivoted back to wave an accusatory finger at me.

“I know your owner!”, she spat. Forty thousand volts of dread shot down my back.

Three days later, our household took delivery of a brand new Indris charging station. As I carried the unit inside I noted the bullet-pointed feature list on the side of the box:

- Faster charging*
- Compatible with Indris Android versions 2.2.0 - 6.7.2
- Easy home installation
- 100% Polar Proof

*compared to previous generation Indris Charging Units