

Fools

by Amelia Day

Society is cruel, caring more for its short term pleasure than the people around. I know it used to be different -- the proof shows in my own family -- but sometimes I still doubt. If people used to really care about each other, then how could this happen? How could anything like this happen? I grunt as I pull an especially tenacious weed out by its stalks, spraying some speckles of dark dirt on my face.

The virus had seemed random, striking all over the world, causing confusion in the minds of many of the world's leaders, but I had a theory of my own. About four or so years ago, the leading brand in all technology, CoreTech, came out with a new product, StulteWare. Their new product was a chip implanted in the brain that could basically be an extension of the human mind. No need to spend any extra energy, no, everything's at the tip of your thoughts. The first clue should have been the name. Even though I have an abnormally rich Latin vocabulary (my mother made sure I was well educated in that department) the word stulte is taught in early elementary schooling. The product "innocently" named StulteWare, quite literally means FoolWare! Even so, many people still went ahead and bought the chip, not thinking of the repercussions, only of their next commodity.

Gritting my teeth, I start to go for a green weed with white tipped pokers, only to pull my hand away quickly. Sometimes, even the best gardening gloves don't offer the best protection. Quickly I pull off my right glove and examine the puncture marks. It's nothing major, but just enough to make a person want a bandage. Taking off my slightly sweaty left glove, I gather myself up off of the ground on which I was crouching. Stretching my slightly cramped legs, I ease my bare, dirt-dusted feet onto the burning rock path, until my feet adjust to the change in

temperature. Putting pressure on the small puncture with the sleeve of my old, green sun-bleached t-shirt, I speed-walk along path to the peeling front door of our cozy cottage and let myself in.

Walking across the cool wood floor in our kitchen, I reach the cabinet that normally holds the bandages and pull it open a bit too harshly. Cringing as the hinged cabinet side hits the wall beside my head, I start to examine the contents of the cabinet. Old socks litter the bottom layer, stubs of chewed-on crayons and broken computer parts the middle, and slightly smudged bits and pieces of paper the top, but I can't seem to find bandages. I grin as I realize that it's kind of like a geological rock formation, the most recent things on the top, and the oldest things on the bottom.

"Mom!" I call through the house. "Where are the bandages?" As I say that and hear no answer, I suddenly realize that there's been an odd silence that I hadn't noticed. Forgetting entirely about the lost bandages I sprint towards my Mom's room, not focusing on anything other than my rushing thought. I know what has happened. Tears prick my eyes as I force open Mom's door and yell out her name.

"Mom!" I cry out in desperation. "Where are you? What happened?" I yell this out, but I already know what's wrong. I look down at the sea green carpet below to see my Mom, my strong mother, crumpled on the floor weeping.

"Mom," I say softly, comfortingly. I kneel down on the floor beside her.

"Cara, sweetie," she chokes out between sobs. I make eye contact with her and just know. "Dad," she says in a wavering voice. "He...he has the virus." That one short sentence breaks

me. All my memories of my dad will never be able to be repeated. He's gone. My head pounds as I lie down next to my mom and hold onto her, the only thing left supporting me. I don't know how long we cried before Dad came in. Instead of his previously cheerful disposition I only see emptiness. His piercing blue eyes seem blank, no life, no anything. His whole being just seems full of cold, computer calculations. As he slowly walks out to do who knows what, I sink back down to the ground and remember the day he went to the city to get StulteWare implanted.

I was younger then, but still understood the danger of StulteWare. My mother and I pleaded with my father to stay home, to not get the implant, but he wouldn't listen. All three of us had always been fascinated with technology, but my father most of all. He would spend hours reading manuals and testing out new ideas, his childlike fascination without limits. Unlike most in this day and age, his love of all things electrical hadn't corrupted his heart, but it did cloud his judgment. I remember seeing his indecision the day StulteWare came out, but after lots of thought, he went with his own judgment. I suppose society and the allure of technological possibilities intrigued and pressured him to the point of going against the two people he loved most.

I lie there on the floor, and let my weariness take me into the realm where I can feel no pain, sleep.

I awaken in the night by harsh light shining through a window right above my head. It takes me a moment to register that I am now in my bedroom. I don't even know how I got into my bed, but I suppose it doesn't matter now. As I sit there, I feel my sadness returning, but some of it has been replaced by rage towards CoreTech, and pretty much towards the whole of humanity.

Squinting out the window I try to take in and separate the black and white colors outside my bedroom window. It takes me a second for my eyes to adjust, but soon enough, I realize that the bright light that woke me is the headlights of a truck parked right outside of our house. My forehead crinkles in confusion. Why would a truck be parked outside of *our* house, in the middle of the woods? We never get any visitors, especially at such a late hour...whatever hour it even is. Finally sitting up, I put my knees on my pillow and take a closer look. I can just make out an insignia on the side of a truck, a red T inside of a blue C. I start to look away, but then I see something that's even more disconcerting. I see my dad being shoved into the passenger seat.

They had no business coming here! As I angrily shove my only black sweatshirt over the blue t-shirt I had hastily grabbed from my "crawl-in closet" I glance in the mirror. Everyone always says that I look exactly like my father, but I suppose I had never really noticed it until now. The gold strands that appeared randomly in his dark brown hair, the strong resolve in his sea blue eyes, the way that his eyes crinkle when he smiles, I see it all in myself as my reflection's intense gaze reflects how I feel. I now know that no matter what, I have to get him back. I start to turn away towards the door, but then I stop, noticing the sterling silver barrette he gave me for my last birthday on the top of my dresser. Taking one last look into the mirror, I push my hair aside and push the barrette into place, taking in a deep breath. As I turn away from the mirror I have only one thought in my mind: he gave me everything, now I have to pay him back.

The hallway is silent and empty as I grope along the walls of the house, my eyes still adjusting to the intense blackness of night. The wood floor feels cold and hard beneath my feet, warning me that one slip could make or break my future. As I slowly creep along the walls toward the front door, I start to worry. What if they already left? My nerves are bouncing around as I reach

the door, but to my great relief, I hear voices. I can't hear anything that they're saying, but it does mean one thing. They're still here!

I inch open the door, flinching every time I hear the creak that I've come to expect. I mustering up my courage and holding my breath, I slip through the small crack in the door into the abyss of the night. Pulling my hood over my head, I crouch down beside the door frame. Though the man hasn't noticed me yet, I feel like a sitting duck about to be poached. The man is still over by the passenger side door, which comforts and worries me at the same time. What could he be doing to my dad? I force myself to stop thinking about anything other than the task at hand: entering the van.

As I check out the van, my eyes momentary look over to the back, then freeze. For some strange reason, the back of the van is left open. My eyes widen in surprise. It might be fate, it might be luck, but it certainly doesn't matter now. All that matters is getting into that van, and quick. I glance over to the man, making sure that he's preoccupied with whatever he's doing, then make a go for it. I sprint over to the van, trying to make my footsteps light and quiet.

As I start trying to enter the van, it soon becomes clear to me that it's no easy feat to get into the back of a van that's almost your height, in the dead of night, without making a sound. On my third attempt at clambering into the van, I decide to try using my palms to take the brunt of the weight, as I lift myself up by my arm strength. Then I slowly slide one leg onto the van's edge, and roll over, bringing the other with me.

As soon as the rest of my body touches down on the sleek metal of the truck's floor, I slide as fast and as silently as I can into the shadowed corner, and just in time too. Just as I feel my

body make contact with the corner, the man stalks back around the van. With his muscle definition frighteningly clear, even in the dim light, he reaches up, and pulls down the back of the van. I grin as I notice he leaves it unlocked. That'll be helpful later. Even though I know it's far from over, I can't help feeling a little pride at pulling off the first part of my escapade. As the adrenaline passes from my body, I feel my body start to suffer from fatigue. As I shift to get comfortable, I close my eyes and cross my fingers, hoping that I'll wake up before they open the van, but also accept that right now I am in great need of sleep. Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes, and try to think comforting thoughts.

As I feel something press against my shoulder, I jolt awake. My eyes fly open to see grass green eyes staring back at me. I start to yell, but a soft hand comes up to cover my mouth. I hear a voice, a young boys voice, mutter in my ear.

"Don't worry," he says softly, "I'm trustworthy, but you need to be quiet. Who knows what would happen if *he* found you back here!" With that he pulls his hand away from my mouth and puts his pointer finger to his lips, warning me to keep my voice down.

"Who is *he*?" I say, confusion playing across my face, then I turn around to face him, "and who are you?" The boy flinches away from me, clearly taken aback by my hostile tone. I can tell he's younger than me, maybe a year or two, and I can see the intelligence in his furrowed brow as he tries to figure out what best to say next. Running his hands through his light brown hair, he starts to say something, than stops.

Finally he just says, "I think you know who I'm talking about. Remember Mr. Muscles back there? As for his name, I don't know who he is, but then again he didn't really bother for cordial

introductions when he shoved me in the back of this dump.” He rubs his eyes with his right hand as he motions to the inside of the van with his left. “As for me, the name’s Jay.”

“My name’s Cara,” I say, in a diplomatic manner. I hold my hand out to him, receiving a firm handshake in return. “Why are you even here in the first place?”

“Apparently I’m immune to the disease,” he says in an offhand manner. My eyes widen in surprise as he just sits there and yawns.

“So it doesn’t affect you at all?” I say slowly, not quite believing it. He shrugs in answer. I start to smile broadly. “This is perfect!” I say in excitement. “Together, we could get my father back *and* take down CoreTech.” My head spinning, I begin to ramble on and on about how we might try to complete these actions when I feel Jay’s finger touch me on the shoulder and flinch, banging my arm against the van’s side.

“That would be great,” Jay says heavily, “but there’s only one problem.” He lifts up his hands up and splays his palms out, displaying his wrists. My grin fades away as I take in the grim reality of this situation. Jay is handcuffed to the van! For a second it strikes me as odd that he’s *handcuffed* to the van instead of, I don’t know, put in some sort of fingerprint sensitive locking system, but I shake that thought out of my head as quickly as it came. Trying to think of any possible way out of this situation, we both sit silently on the cold metal floor, legs crossed.

“I guess you’ll just have to figure this whole mess out on your own,” he says in acceptance. “Have fun finding...” but I cut him off.

“Jay!” I exclaim, perhaps a bit too loudly, then I start to spurt words in hardly understandable succession. “I know how to get you out! Before I climbed into this van I brought only one thing with me, just a keepsake. I didn’t think it was a tool, didn’t think it had any value except for being sentimental, but I was wrong. In fact, it could be the most useful tool I could have grabbed!”

“What is it?” he says, his head propped up onto his hand, clearly perplexed.

“This,” I say, as I hold the barrette, its luminous surface glinting in the dim light. “This will get you out of here.” I can see his eyes brighten in recognition.

“A barrette!” he exclaims excitedly. “Is it really true that you can pick a lock with one of those?”

“Well, we’ll find out soon enough.” I reach toward his hands, pulling his shackled wrists toward me and put the barrette between my pointer finger and thumb.

Hesitantly, making sure I don’t bend the barrette, I push the rest of it into the misshapen hole. The locks various grooves and small dents show signs of past struggles that were likely unsuccessful. After I’ve been working the barrette around in the lock for a while, I glance up for a second to see that Jay is shaking with laughter, his eyes crinkling around the edges.

“What?” I say, offended.

“Nothing,” he says back struggling to catch his breath. “It’s just...”

“It’s just what!” I retort.

“You’re kind of grunting as you work,” he says, clearly trying to stop laughing, but being obviously unsuccessful. I start to blush as I realize he’s correct.

“If you’re so good at it, why don’t you do it yourself,” I retort, shoving the barrette into his hands. As he twists his hands into what must be a very uncomfortable position, I turn around and obstinately stare at the wall opposite to him and his jeering self. A few seconds later I decide to turn around so that I can have my turn at poking fun, only to realize that Jay’s unlocked himself. For a second I don’t know whether to be angry or happy, but I decide to put my petty frustrations behind me and congratulate him.

“Impressive,” I say, grinning wide.

“I’ve picked up a few things,” he says nonchalantly, handing me back the barrette, but I can see the hint of pride beneath his “cool” demeanor.

“So, about the plan...” I say, knowing that the conversation had to go there at some point.

“I have an idea,” Jay says slowly. “I was thinking that if one of us could find our way into the main control room, the other could come back and stand guard.”

“That’s pretty good,” I say, smiling at him. “Then we can rescue my father and take care of CoreTech at the same time. I doubt we’d be able to help my father any other way anyways.” After that we let the subject rest. Neither of us really want to talk about CoreTech. For the rest of the ride we talk about home, about literature, and about things we used to do. As we’re talking about molecular studies, the van suddenly jolts to a stop.

I squeeze his hand. “We’ll be all right,” I say, not quite sure of that myself. “Just remember, don’t let your fear control you.”

Slowly I pull open the door, and peek out, surveying the grounds, but they appear to be clear.

“Are you sure you want to do this Jay?” I say, worry shown clearly on my face.

He nods, hopping down from the edge of the van. “Yes,” he says, smiling genuinely. “Let’s go!” with that, he holds his hand out to me, and I take it, hopping down from the van. Looking up, I see CoreTech headquarters for the first time, and it’s definitely not understated. With great columns, curling abstract structures, and sleek metal walls and floors, it combines both the architecture of today and the past. As I gape at the CoreTech building, Jay pulls me toward him, and he starts to walk.

“I know it’s marvelous and all, Cara, but we really do need to get going,” he says, panic on his face. “We only have so much time before they realize we’re gone.”

“Alright,” I say, then start running along with Jay. We decide to take a round-about route, trying not to attract more attention than we need to. We hide under shadows, trees, overhangs, and any other cover we can. After a while, we finally find ourselves at the front door. It seems like we took a minute walk and made it take five times longer than it should have, but I do understand the need behind the precautions. When I near the door, I look out for any booby traps, but as far as I can tell, there aren’t any. Hesitantly I touch my fingertips to the door handle, but weirdly enough nothing happens. I look over at Jay and he nods his head. Slowly I push down the door handle and open the door, but yet again nothing happens.

“Why would they lead the world in electronic production, but have no lock or anything on the door?” I say, mystified. Jay shrugs.

“I guess they just thought that they were in a secluded enough location that they didn’t need one,” he says. I give him a dubious look. “Look Cara,” he says, taking my shoulder. “I don’t

know why they don't have a lock, but we should just take this as good luck." He's right of course, but I still can't shake off my suspicions in the back of my head.

"Okay, you win," I say, cautiously opening the door and striding into the room. Jay runs his hands through his hair, then quickly follows suit. The room is stunning, a domed skylight making the room shine with natural light, glass floors, and fancy padded chairs, but I decide to follow Jay's direction and push that all out of my mind. I have more important things to focus on. Jay scans the room with his analytical green eyes, then turns back to look at me.

"Look," he says solemnly, pointing to the end of the entryway opposite from us. Following the tip of his finger, I see what he's gesturing towards, two different hallways. Each are identical with the same lighting, flooring, and wall color. I start to panic as I realize the truth, Jay and I will need to separate.

"Can't we just go down both together?" I stutter frantically. He shakes his head, looking down at the floor.

"I'm afraid not," he says. "We just don't have the time." Switching his gaze from the floor to me, he looks straight into my eyes, his own sincere and trusting. "Before we part, I want you to take one of these. I managed to pick them up before they took me," he says, holding out his hand, two sleek black watches in it.

"Why do we need watches?" I ask, bemused.

"Think of them as modern walkie-talkies," he says, as he gingerly secures the smaller one onto my wrist.

“They’re so we can stay in touch and tell the other when we have found the control room.”

“Are you ready for this?” I say, half excited, half nervous.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” he says with a smile, jovial despite the fact that we could die at any minute. I return his smile and squeeze his hand. “Let’s get started then,” I say with resolve, and start toward the hallway on the left.

“Wait,” Jay says, running up to me and pulling me around. “Could I take that door? I don’t know, I just feel like going toward that door for some reason.” I laugh.

“If you really want to,” I say, and switch positions with him. “See you soon,” I say, and with a last wave, his grey sneakers disappear from my sight.

The hallway is dimly lit, and quite a contrast from the bright modern entrance. Its walls are composed of sleek metal and the whole hallway has a rather depressing feel about it. The hallway seems more like it would be found in an infirmary than in a high-stature research facility. Each door is marked with some sort of three digit number, and each room is white-walled and plain, holding various random objects, but none of the rooms seem to have any importance or even any remnants of human activity. As I’m scanning around room number 143, its contents a wood wardrobe, and some kind of microscope, I hear a faint voice coming from the watch.

“Cara, you there?” questions the voice, and even though there’s a lot of static, I immediately recognize it as Jay’s.

“Yeah, I’m here!” I say excitedly. “Did you find anything?”

“If you count finding the control room as something, then yes,” he says, laughing. “I’m reprogramming the system as we speak. Really, it’s elementary!”

“Great!” I say, grinning though I know he can’t see it. “I’ll be right there.” As I look up, I stumble back in surprise. Right in front of me is a man in a black suit, standing there smirking in my state of confusion.

“Ah, Cara,” He says, his smile spreading broadly across his face, though it’s not a kind one. “I knew I’d see you here. You’re such a resourceful young girl. Excuse me, where are my manners!” he suddenly exclaims, in a fake state of apology. “I completely forgot to introduce myself! My name is Adrian Cowell. You may know me as the owner of CoreTech.”

“It’s so nice to meet you,” I sarcastically spit at him, barely containing my desire to claw his eyes out on the spot.

“Oh!” he says with a fake laugh. “I see you’re a feisty one! You do know I could kill you on the spot, though, don’t you? But I think you’ve already figured out that I must have brought you here for a reason. You, Cara, are the perfect specimen for the virus, smart, extremely strong, light on your feet, along with the perfect chemical balance for our procedure. But that’s enough with the flattery. You might be wondering, “Why hasn’t evil Mr. Billionaire implanted the chip in me yet? Why has he waited this long?” and that dearie, is simply so I can break you even further.”

“How could you possibly make me feel more pain than you have already?” I say, my face contorted in rage.

“Oh, I don’t know...maybe tell you that your little “friend” you met on the van was working for me all along.”

“That’s not true!” I scream back at him, my face surely turning red, “Jay would never betray me, not for anything!”

“Are you so sure, sweetie? How about you ask him right now?” he says, tapping his wrist.

“Jay,” I say with authority. “Tell this man that you’d never betray me, that he’s just a liar!”

“I...I can’t,” says the static-filled voice.

“What?” I say slowly, and my heart starts to pound.

“He offered me everything!” Jay protests. “I couldn’t...”

“Shut up!” I yell as I rip the watch off my wrist and throw it to the ground, grinding its pieces into dust with the sole of my shoe. I turn my gaze towards Adrian, my murderous rage tuned to a different person. It was a trap all along, I realize as I watch his tell-tale smirk. The use of handcuffs instead of the futuristic technology I know CoreTech has, the back door of the van and front door with no lock, the absence of guards on the grounds and in the building. It was all a trap.

“This is all your fault!” I screech, lunging at him, but as I close my eyes, I find that I never connect with his flesh. Instead, another man in a black suit jumps out of the shadows, and shoves me to the ground by my neck. I struggle, coughing, against his vice-like grip, but he doesn’t budge a bit. I try screaming for help, but nothing comes out except a gurgle. I start to

black out, letting the chip be the end of my pain, until nothing happens, I'm haven't fainted, and I don't have a chip. I still am in my own conscience, and the pressure on my neck has completely disappeared.

Lying on the floor, choking and dizzy, I open my eyes to see Adrian looking very nervous, a patch of sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"Men!" he commands, starting to slowly back up towards the door. "You're supposed to be going after her!" he gives a frustrated chuckle. His bodyguards start walking toward him, smirks on their faces.

"So this is what you were planning all along, Adrian," says one with blond hair. He viciously pulls off his sunglasses and throws them on the ground, his next step crushing them with a solid crunch. The bodyguard chuckles. "If I were you, I'd start running, and quick." He gestures toward the door. "I'll give you two seconds, Cowell, but after that, all I have to say is good luck." Adrian gives a worried look around the room at the men with their arms crossed, and then bolts through the doorway like a jack-rabbit late for lunch.

"Sorry about that, honey," the man with the blond hair says helping me up. "You know I had no control over what I was doing, none of us did," the rest of the men nodded in agreement.

"Of course, sir," I say shakily, still recovering from the knock-down.

"I would stay and help you miss," the man says, sincere apology in his eyes "but someone has to catch that devil! Ready men?" all of the other suited men, give a thumbs up and response.

"Head out!" he yells, sprinting at a speed that should be criminal, the others following behind

him. I stand puzzled and alone in the room wondering what had happened and what I should do next until I hear a knock on the doorframe. I turn around in surprise, and see Jay, smiling and leaning against the wall. As I tense up, ready for a fight, he holds both of his hands up to stop me.

“Wait, wait!” he says frantically, waving both of his hands in the air, as if to ward me off.

“Why would I wait after all you’ve done, all of those lies you told me?” I shout at him.

“Cara,” he says softly. “I reprogrammed the systems then immediately came after you!”

“What?” I say, confused. “But what about what Adrian said, about you being a spy?”

“It’s a long story,” he says wearily. “I’ll explain it all as we go find your dad...that is, if you even want me to come along after all I’ve done.” His eyes look up into mine, tired and pleading. He looks as if he hasn’t slept in days, though given his predicament, that’s probably the reality. I know that I could never say no, especially after all that he’s done to help me.

“Let’s go,” I say, smiling warmly at him. An expression breaks across his coarse, scarred face that I can only describe as pure happiness, as he looks at me with newly brightened eyes.

“Let’s find your dad!” he announces, sticking his pointer finger into the air like a pompous king. With that, we close the door together, leaving our pain behind.