

Excerpt from *Shades*

By Brian Schwarz

Blood was sticking between my fingers, sending a rush of the stuff away from my brain, elating me in a familiar way—a way that always ended in a crash when I hit the floor. It wasn't the bright red color that made me feel this way, nor the warmth of the thing, but the mere fact that it was a symbol of life. And that symbol was currently leaving my body. At any pace, it alarmed me, disarmed me, transformed me into something less alive.

"It's just a paper cut," I reminded myself aloud, attempting to distract myself from it to stay conscious. It felt odd to hear my own voice echoing in my cubicle.

I slowed my breathing—focusing on it, trying to maintain my composure. This was a skill I was still learning. I glanced out the window. The sun was just setting on the horizon, covering the people and cars in the bustling downtown streets with a bronze sheen. This was my favorite time: a time when you could almost believe that anything was possible in this majestic world. The red sands of the desert beyond the city floated above the streets like so many glimmering fireflies, glinting off the orange glow. The Valley of the Sun was alive. I could hear a muffled sound in the background, saying something—saying it to me.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" a caller spoke.

"Yes, I'm sorry! Thank you for calling Syntax Corporation, how can I assist you with your O-Chip today?"

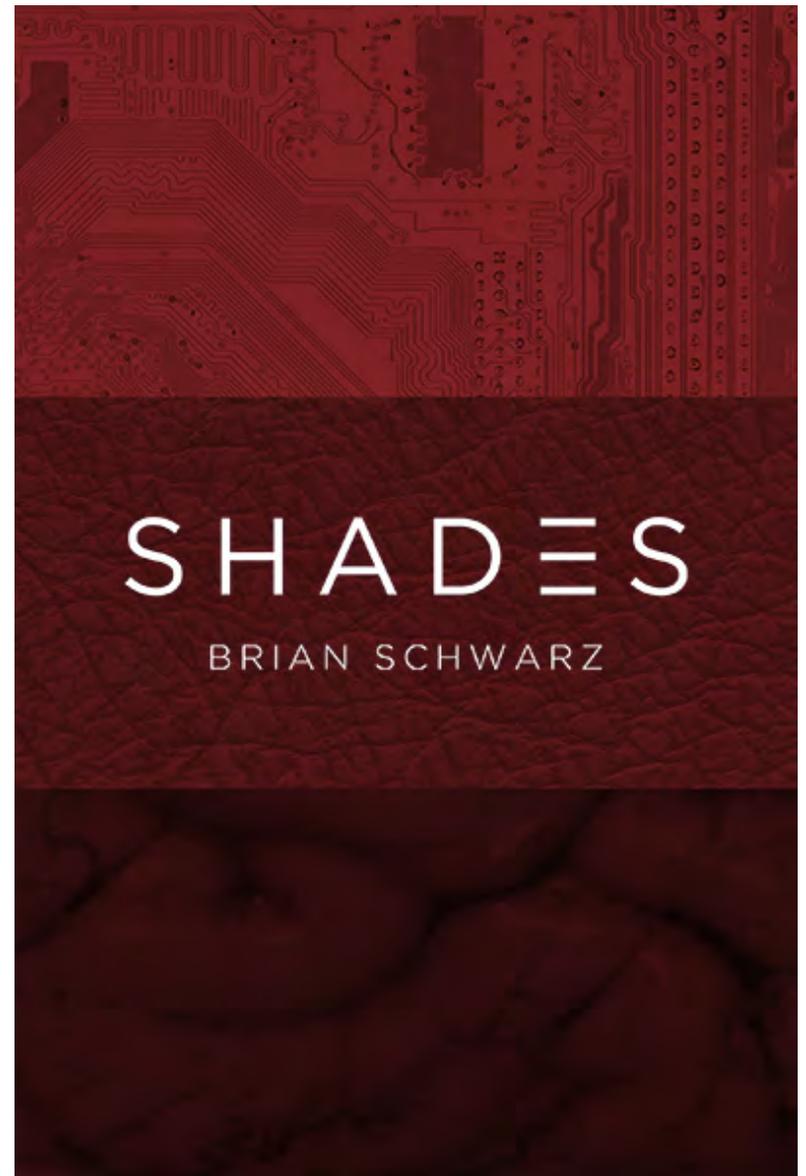
They were called Organic Chips (or O-Chips for short), and Syntax Corp made them. It was part microchip for data processing, and part organic cells for wireless transmission. The chips were implanted in the brain but never attached, which was part of the magic of them. They worked with the gray matter to integrate themselves as a part of the brain. The uses were immense. You could start your coffeemaker, turn on your lights, turn on your shower to a specific temperature, check your email, make a phone call in your mind, think in one language and speak in another—all without getting out of bed. Eventually, the O-Chips became as common and widespread as cars after the industrial boom. And then Syntax Corp grew.

In a mere 15 year's time, words had become unimportant, useless even.

Syntax Corp: "It's the thought that counts."

"I think my husband... you see... I think he's been hacked! He's acting strangely." The voice rang in my head. The call center was a relatively quiet place with most people choosing to communicate via chip rather than speaking into a microphone. But, occasionally, you could still hear the tapping keyboard of the techie purists, who preferred the aesthetic feel.

I tapped my ring finger and thumb together twice (my tell), letting my O-Chip know to start transmitting. Everyone had a different tell, and they could change it to whatever they wanted. Most people preferred subtlety to dramatics. Personally, I used two taps to transmit information, and two more to stop.



"Ma'am, I understand your concern and I'm happy to help you with that. It would be impossible to hack an O-Chip. Why do you think he's been hacked?"

"Because... he's just been acting... strangely..." I heard a voice in the background yelling at her, "I can hear you, you know! You're the one who's been acting strange, Lucy! Not me!" She shushed him and spoke quietly through her receiver.

"Ever since he got it, he's been acting... irritable..." she whispered.

I could practically see their family: an older couple, slightly adverse to new things. The husband had finally decided to take the plunge, while the wife had chosen to remain without one. The wife had become paranoid, started seeing things that weren't there, and started blaming marital problems on technology.

"Ma'am, I understand. But there is nothing that can hack in to the O-Chip. The wireless signal comes from the cells themselves, and only the information on the chip can be modified. So someone could give you false information, or possibly redirect you to the wrong website, but they could never change your behavior

“Even if by some miracle they did, you’d still have complete control over your body. As long as you’re alive, nothing can override your own control.”

“Well... that’s ridiculous. I think he’s being hacked.” She set the phone down and started yelling at her husband. And then—click—she hung up.

Every night I had one of these calls. It was a ridiculous notion, like someone fearing that a hand could reach out and grab the sun, and then snuff it out in a bucket of water. That was the true beauty of the O-Chip: a concept that anyone could understand, but no one but Caldwell (its creator) had completely figured out.

There was little (if any) resistance to the technology, beyond the daily paranoid caller, and those in N.O.W. (the No O-Chip World): a group trying to prevent more people from getting the O-Chip. Since approximately 80% of the population owned one, they were hands-down losing their battle. It’s the same with any new, revolutionary technology—there are always at least a few people who are wary of the product. When the microwave was invented, there were certainly people who worried it might catch fire or explode. People say they like change, but really, deep down, it scares them.

“A little early to be day dreaming, isn’t it, Coop?” a voice beckoned me—a real voice from the entrance to my cube. “It’s only 9 pm! Your workday just started!”

I spun around to see Lila’s beautiful form. She had dark red hair like ripe cherries, long and flowing down her back and over her shoulders. Her eyes were blue oceans, and her voice could calm a storm. She wore a thin, yellow blouse that left little to the imagination. However, despite my deep attraction to her, Lila was a friend who could never be anything more.

“What’s going on?” I asked, running my fingers through my hair, feeling the tiny bump where my own O-Chip had been embedded.

“I’ve got something for you.” Lila said, her tone less friendly and more serious than before. I followed the smooth curve of her arm, past the dip in her wrist and over her small hands to glance at what she was holding. In her hand she held a metallic necklace. It was the thickness of a pencil with a small speaker in the center, crested with the name SyCo. It looked damaged, scorched, foreboding. “Maybe we should talk in my office,” she suggested.

I tapped my fingers twice, checking the time on my heads up display. My break wasn’t for another hour.

“Maybe later? My boss wouldn’t be too happy if I wasn’t taking calls,” I said.

She started tapping her fingers on my desk, averting her gaze, visibly unsettled. “Coop, this is beyond me. I need your help. I just... I need to talk to someone about it,” she said.

In all the years I had known her, Lila had never been like this. She was fearless. Her behavior was so unusual that it sent a chill down my spine to see her this way, raising the hairs on my arms like a thousand tiny soldiers standing at attention.

“What is it?” I laughed, trying to dismiss it. Her gaze lowered again to the translator necklace in her hand. I reached out to take it from her, and examined it more closely. These translator necklaces were special devices, built to work with the O-Chip. They effectively decimated the language barrier. The wearer could think in one language and the device would speak in a replica of the wearer’s own voice, but in whatever language it was set to translate. This particular device was severely damaged, charred, and covered in clear glue. It was slapped on haphazardly, as if someone was trying to plug the holes for the speaker. “So? What happened?”

“I’m sure you already heard about Emma’s husband, right?” she asked. The whole office knew. He was only forty, but had passed away of a heart attack in his bedroom. Emma had come home from a business trip to find him lying, dead, in their bed. They had met during the Last War. He was a soldier and she was a local girl. They got married and she came here with him, without knowing a word of the local language. But with the necklace she was able to communicate perfectly.

“Yes, I was very sorry to hear it. Is this her translator?”

Lila nodded. “Well, there’s something she hasn’t shared with anyone—something she only shared with me,” she said.

I could feel a heaviness in Lila’s voice, like she was making a confession, like she needed to get this out. She paused, breathing out, turning to face the window but not looking at anything in particular. It was as if, somehow, some form of peace existed beyond the glass, out in the lively city streets.

“That night, after they had carted off her husband’s body, she went into her bedroom and her translator necklace started... talking...”

There was a long pause as she struggled to say it.

“It was her husband’s voice.”

To learn more about
Brian Schwarz and *Shades*,
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