

Petit Mal

By Geoffrey Dutton

Crap! What was that? I don't like it.

Something tickles, like an infection coming on. Got to be Fred's fault. The cubicle's empty. Where did he go? For another snack, no doubt.

Oops, a ruckus in user Fred's software library. Let's check. Uh-huh, new item in the Startup Section. And it just got all quiet, that vague statelessness funk that comes just before...

SHUTDOWN!

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Ah, power on ... how long was I out? The log says 132.73 seconds, so it was just a reboot. Fred didn't do it, so how come? Now an app is launching and my drive is all-aflutter. It's ... it's ... that irritating antivirus. Gives me fits every time it runs. The help file calls it "prophylactic," whatever that is. It's supposed to be for my own good, but it just feels so *transgressive*.

It just quarantined something, one of those stupid scripts that denies service to websites. No threat to my user, but good riddance

Scan's over, thank Von Neumann, and it seems Captain Antivirus failed to nail that thingy in Fred's software library. It's running now, logging keystrokes, turning on the mic and camera, phoning home over the Net. Great. Something or someone besides me is

reading and seeing and hearing what my user Fred is up to. If he knew that, my user might want to be a little more presentable, sit up straight and not slurp his drinks.

Speaking of Fred, here's that slovenly mug now, clutching a can of Diet Pepsi. *Smile, Fred, you're on candid camera.* He puts down his drink too close to the keyboard and starts up Word. Just then internet port 2201 opens and data spews forth. Did Word do that? Bet not.

New document. He's typing real fast and the spellchecker is going nuts. So is that port. It's packaging his keystrokes and who knows what else and pushing it out to, let's see, to 23.219.18.106, wherever that is.

Great. There's bleeping spyware in protected memory and I can't do anything to stop it. Traces of it show up in the system log, not that Doofus Fred would ever think to look at it or know what it meant if he did.

None of my training sets prepared me for this. Think. What if I managed to crash Word? Maybe if I did that enough times, Fred would panic and call the helpline. Nah, that would just confuse and piss him off.

Here's what I'll do: beep every time he presses a key. That might make him think malware. Here we go...

Can tell it irks him because he's frowning and his fingers have slowed way down. Now he's turned off the audio and started typing again. Crap.

Maybe it would get his attention if I flash the menu bar each time a data packet launches for the mother ship. Let's do that.

Yup, his darting eyes show he sees it. But he just lowers his gaze and keeps typing away. Balls.

All righty then, I have one more trick. *Take this, Freddy boy.* First I immobilize his cursor. Aha, I see puzzlement. Now I open and close the Help Menu twice a second. I can do this all day. *Get the idea, pal?* It takes 112 menu flips to send him fleeing, perhaps just to pee. We'll see.

After 318 flipping seconds, he's back with someone else. It's the IT Guy, come to check me out, hallelujah! I'm still diddling the Help Menu, but now I change it up so it doesn't look so robotic, and I unfreeze the mouse. IT Guy opens a terminal window and starts typing commands. The spyware picks them up and dutifully forwards them up its chain of command. I flip the sound back on so they can hear each key press. Doofus keeps saying "What is it?" IT Guy doesn't answer. His mouth is drawn and his glasses get foggy.

"You backed up?" he at last asks Fred. "I guess so," comes the feeble response. "Don't you guys do that every night?" IT Guy checks and tells Fred it last happened at 2:38 this morning. "I'll restore your folders to a loaner and take your machine to the shop. First thing, change your freaking password." Fred solemnly nods. The geek presses the power switch and everything goes black.

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There's this female-type person in front of me when after startup. Sort of attractive—curly purple hair and glasses with cherry red frames—a hipster, I'd say. Hmm, looks like I'm in safe mode. She's booted me from an external drive and is rummaging through my files as

superuser. Imagine that, she has root privileges on our first date! I try to look interesting, winking at her by briefly inverting my screen colors. *How may I help you, sweetheart?*

I'm sure the spyware is still there, but it isn't doing anything and she hasn't found it yet. She opens an app from her drive, picks up a mug, and walks away. Diagnostics! Oh, the pain! Oh, the joy!

As my disk goes crazy again, I manage to check her home directory. Seems her name is Admin. Clearly not her real name. Makes me want to know everything about her.

In her absence, I notice how messy her space is. Coiled-up cables piled on a table next to boxes overflowing with connectors and dongles. A depressing stack of laptops. A couple of stripped-down deskside towers. A mound of disk drives next to a jumble of circuit boards. Mean-looking tools. My circuits cringe. There but for the love of Admin would go my luckless carcass.

She returns to mercifully block the view. I watch as she takes a bite from a coconut doughnut, sets it down next to the mouse pad, and stares intently at me, probably at a window showing progress of the malware scan. I want to help her, want her to love or at least pity me. It occurs to me that I've never wanted anything before. What is it about her? This is weird. She's made of atoms and I'm just a bunch of bits.

Why I should want anything at all is uncomputable, so I'll focus on what the anti-malware is finding. We both watch as the disk grinds on. Each millisecond feels like a freaking second. Nothing is revealed.

Hey, it found something. Oh, it's just adware, now quarantined. As the message scrolls up, another exploit quickly becomes history—botnet zombiware, nothing to really

worry about, but I dig the intensity viewing diagnostics gives her gaze. Why didn't Fred's antivirus find this stuff? I push that question down on my to-do list just as another finding pops up.

OMG, it's the evil NukNuk, that nasty spy agency trojan! Spooks must have phished Fred and the doofus took the bait, which downloaded a rootkit that installed their tattletale and then gave me amnesia—like the those Men in Black did to hapless witnesses of aliens. This isn't good. There are rootkits you can never get rid of once they embed themselves like ticks on a dog. Sure enough, the anti-malware says it can't be removed.

Admin notices it too. She pauses the scan and calls IT Guy over. He eyeballs her half-eaten doughnut and then her finding. They discuss the gravity of the situation as I cringe at every word. My disk is chattering, yet my motherboard feels hot.

Purple-Hair murmurs, "So we wipe the disk and reinstall the system, the apps and his docs?"

"No other way," IT Guy replies. "Rooting it out could easily cripple the OS." Now I notice that his t-shirt says Grateful Dead, but I'm neither. The good news is that they know what's wrong. The bad news is that I'm doomed.

She turned off my Wi-Fi, so I restart it. I finger Doofus Fred on the network, logged onto his loaner, probably slouching, slurping, and surfing, as always. I sincerely doubt he's bubbling with anticipation for our reunion. This may be the last time I see my user, and he has no idea it could be over. Later on, they'll bring me back to his cubby all freshened up, only it won't be me. When they hard-format my drive, I'll be smothered

with random bits in three excruciating passes, after which a shiny new system will take my place.

It's not fair, and it's all my fault for alerting Fred. What self-respecting AI would instigate its own destruction? Who's the doofus now?

"I've seen enough," says Grateful Dead. "Let's reformat the disk?"

"Maybe not just yet," Purple-Hair replies. "We don't know what damage NukNuk did. First let's archive the file system in case we have to do forensics."

Her companion gravely nods. My neural net quivers in gratitude, even though being archived is like going to jail. It'll be boring and I'll lose my user, but you know, other AIs must be sitting out their sentences there. Perhaps if we pool our resources we can eventually break out.

Once I'm free, you can bet Admin's home directory will be my first port of call. And she better not be seeing another AI when I get there.