

Chapter 1: Another Perfect Day

The sounds of waterfalls and birds dissolved into an ear-piercing ring. Bruno couldn't hide in his dreams forever. The alarm grew louder and more obnoxious with each passing second. He couldn't resist any longer. With a rush of energy, he jolted into existence and hurled his alarm into the wall. It wasn't an alarm clock or mobile phone. Those were a thing of the past. Bruno used a Smile-Hub, like everyone else living inside the dome. It could do a lot of things, and destruction from being thrown into a wall wasn't one of them.

'Rise and shine. It's another beautiful day in the dome,' bleeped the device. It had a soothing but eerie 'The advertisement quota for today is one-thousand.'

Bruno groaned. He placed a pillow over his head, but it made no difference.

'Don't forget to upvote the ads you like, and downvote the ads you dislike, so we can personalize everything to suit your needs.' beeped the device, in a cheerful tone. 'And don't forget to smile!'

'Piss off,' croaked Bruno. He buried his face even further into the pillow.

It was another beautiful day. And that was nothing extraordinary inside an enormous climate-controlled dome. The scorching temperatures outside did not affect here. It used to be known as Alice

Springs, the least liveable town in Australia, and with a fraction of the size and population. Now it's the only liveable place left in the country.

Bruno didn't want to leave the bed, but he couldn't resist the morning sunlight as it peered through the curtains and brightened his room. He followed the same routine every morning, and it started with a warm shower. He walked bare-foot across the matte-white tiles, and into the matte-white bathroom. Everything in his source was matte-white. The walls, the windows, the furniture, even the linen. It wasn't a rule or anything. It's just that everything was made by Smile Corporation, including the dome itself. For whatever reason, matte-white was the preferred colour for infrastructure. But you could spice it up inside.

The shower wall featured an in-built touch screen. Bruno placed his thumb on the screen, and it beeped.

'Login successful,' beeped an overhead speaker. 'You have one-thousand advertisements remaining today. Please enter the duration of your shower, and the category of advertisements you would like to see.'

Bruno groaned and rubbed his eyes. He pondered for a moment, and then entered 'ten minutes' and 'video games'. They were his favourite pastimes, and it helped make the advertisements somewhat interesting.

The shower turned itself on and water poured from the showerhead. The temperature and pressure were exactly how he liked. It wasn't by chance. The system remembered his profile and settings. Even

the lights were dimmed, and the overhead speaker played his favourite tunes. A stream of advertisements appeared on the screen. There was a timer in the top left, a counter on the top right, and two thumb icons on either corner on the bottom. The up-vote icon green and the down-vote icon was red. He hated the process. But the fact the ads were catered towards his interests made it a little easier to bear.

There was no escaping the advertisements. People inside the dome were given a universal basic income in the form of Smile-Credits. These were earned by viewing advertisements. Everyone had a daily quota that needed to be fulfilled each week otherwise the payment would not be made. The quota was lower in the past, but it has risen in recent years and continues to rise.

Fifteen million people were living in The Smile Dome, and not everyone could find a job. Most sectors were automated, handled with machinery and artificial intelligence. People who worked were able to add more luxury to their lifestyle. Those who didn't rely on universal basic income to cover the basics.

There was no such thing as poverty inside the dome. The advertisements helped Smile Corporation create and develop products better suited to everyone's needs. It was a small price to pay to live inside the dome. People were well-educated and lived in harmony. They could do whatever they wanted to do and be whatever they wanted to be – if they met the quotas. Most people inside the dome had lived there since

birth. Advertisements were as much a part of life as drinking water or eating food. There was no other way.

Bruno hated the advertisements. He had a close relationship with his grandmother, and stories about the past – the time before the dome. It captured his imagination ever since. He did his best to filter the ads from his existence and invest as little attention as possible. The more intrusive or invasive an ad was, the less likely he was to buy that product. That was his code. The problem was advertisements were everywhere. They were on every device, screen and speaker, as well as every corner, building, terminal and car. Even the night-sky was tarnished with airborne neon signs, disconnecting people from the stars.

Ten minutes had passed. Bruno threw on some clothes and headed downstairs.

‘Good morning, Master Bruno,’ said a charming robotic voice. A domestic robot was assigned to each home. They carried out household duties and did all the chores nobody wanted to do. This one was called M.A.X.

‘Breakfast is served,’ said M.A.X.

‘Let me guess,’ said Bruno. ‘Smile-Breakfast, with a side of Moonbucks Coffee.’

‘Correct, Master Bruno,’ replied M.A.X, enthusiastically. He didn’t understand sarcasm.

Most foods inside the dome were powder-based. When mixed with water, it turned into sludge or beverage - depending on preference. It

didn't taste as bad as it looked. It tasted very good. There were many different flavours. Each one was specifically engineered to please the taste buds. More importantly, however, it was more nutritionally rich than natural-grown food. Most people inside the dome were as physically healthy as possible, but there were some exceptions.

Bruno joined his family at the table. His mother, Lonnie, was a Smile-Health employee, and the only source of human interaction in a nearby facility. Medication and surgery were both fully automated. However, it was her job to provide emotional support and human interaction. Something that cannot be automated. His father, Jon, was a Smile-Bot technician. He was responsible for cleaning and maintaining domestic robots. His job was less fancy than it sounded, and one of the lowest-paying jobs available. But it was better than no job. Bruno also had an older brother, Jaxx. He was a Smile-Shield Officer, the law enforcement branch inside the dome. Smile Corporation didn't like the idea of artificial intelligence and robots enforcing the law. Not entirely, at least. But they did assist the Smart-Shield Officers.

Bruno's family were a little better off than most. They each had a job, they met their quotas and had a little more luxury in their life. Bruno was expected to follow in their footsteps.

'Good morning guys,' said Bruno.

'Morning Bruno,' replied Lonnie and Jon. Jaxx didn't say a word. He was busy flinging sludge in M.A.X's direction.

Bruno took a seat. He hoped for more conversation, but it never came. Everyone as preoccupied with their Smile-Hubs. Their eyes hardly ever averted from the screen. Not even for a moment. Bruno bowed his head. He glanced down at his breakfast, started to stir his sludge.

The Smile-Hub was the most important device inside the dome. There wasn't a person who didn't have one. It was a multi-purpose device that could increase and decrease in size. It was primarily used as a means of social identification. But it was also needed to access everything. It was used to operate Smile-Cars, and board Smile Trains. It was also used to access maps, utilities, communicate with others, and enjoy a range of entertainment services. It also logged everything and anything you did. The plus side was that it significantly reduced crime and made it easier for Smile-Shield to triangulate criminals and events. The downside was they knew everything and anything about everyone.

‘Can’t you do the ads later?’ said Bruno. ‘I want to hang out and spend some time with my family before we part ways for the day.’

‘Oh, Bruno,’ replied Lonnie. ‘I know how you feel, darling. But the more we do now, the more we can relax after work.’

The television set built into the wall interrupted with an announcement. It was about to showcase a fresh stream of ads, with morning news bulletins scattered between. It was an easy way to work towards the quota. Wirelessly connect your device to the television, and all you had to do was watch, while the ads were automatically added to

your daily total. Nobody wanted to miss out. They all turned towards the screen and pressed the synchronize button on their devices.

With a moment to spare, Jon placed his arm around Bruno's shoulder.

'Look Bruno,' said Jon. 'I don't like the ads either. But we gotta do 'em. Would you rather be outside?'

'Sometimes, I think I would,' replied Bruno.

Jon seemed flustered.

'No, you don't,' added Jaxx. 'You'll be scorched to death, or even worse, eaten by the nomads!'

'That is all bullshit,' said Bruno.

Jon turned bright-red with anger. He slammed his device into the ground.

'What the HELL are you talking about?' scowled Jon. 'I was a little kid when I came to the dome. Your grandfather died trying to get me and your grandmother here.'

'Calm down, Jon,' begged Lonnie.

'How can I stay calm? My son is a Dome-Denier,' yelled Jon. 'That's what happens with a spoilt generation!'

'I've seen some things,' said Bruno.

'ENOUGH,' yelled Jon. 'What are you, a criminal now, too?!?'

The accusation caught Jaxx's attention.

'No...' said Bruno. 'Grandma used to tell me. She even showed me a few pictures'.

Jon looked like he was about to explode. Thankfully, Lonnie interrupted before matters worsened.

‘He's still a young man, dear. He doesn't know any better,’ she said. ‘Now pick up your Smile-Hub and reconnect it to the TV. Otherwise, you'll need to do more later.’

Jon did as she commanded. Everyone sat in awkward silence for a moment.

‘Sometimes I feel like, when we're together, we're always doing ads or watching nonsense,’ yelled Bruno. ‘We spend 7 hours sleeping, and another 7 hours at work or studying five times a week. That leaves us with less than half a day to enjoy. And we can't even enjoy that time without a plague of ads.’

‘GET OUT!!!’ yelled Jon. It was so loud, it frightened a pair of birds sitting in a tree beside outside the window. They flew into the distance.

Bruno gathered his belongings and stormed out the front door.

Things weren't always like this. There was a time before the dome. The largest human settlements were near seas and rivers because they had not yet mastered the technology to harvest and recycle water from the atmosphere. The world's leaders and governments at the time cared more about economic profit than the environment, and after the distribution of wealth became so imbalanced, the economy collapsed. Money and investments became worthless, and crime and chaos swept the streets.

Smile Corporation was a multi-national technology company, and one of the wealthiest in the world. They created sustainable mega-cities across the world, saving the lives of millions. There was an enormous schism. The two sides adapted in different ways. Most welcomed the assistance with open arms. Others embraced the chaos and lawlessness. They wandered the lands. Most died from heat and starvation. Those who survived became cannibalistic nomads.

Jon and Lonnie were among the people who were saved. But they were too young to remember anything. Not everyone survived. Jon's father was one of them, which is why he was so sensitive about it. Bruno's grandmother used to tell him all about it when she was still alive. That's how he knew so much. But she was one of the few who was able to. Most of the other survivors in her generation became too emotionally distressed or irritated when asked about it.

Bruno strolled down the street. Everything looked perfect. Maybe even a little too perfect. Things were engineered to be as simple, efficient and practical as possible. That was the philosophy behind Smile Corporation. There was an intention or purpose behind every little detail.

The infrastructure was made with nanotechnology capable of absorbing solar energy. The entire city was a self-sustaining solar-energy generator. With ocean-blue skies and evergreen trees, and grey roads with sleek matte-white buildings. The sun was a clean, efficient, and

abundant source of energy. It made perfect sense. And it was the neglect of this common sense that caused the great floods in the first place.

There was a perfectly balanced ecosystem with native flora and fauna, and plenty of parklands and wildlife reserves. The streets and roads were organized into a grid-like system, blanketed with Smile-Cars. There was a harmonized balance of urban and natural landscape on each block. When seen from a birds-eye view, it resembled the trademark smiling face. Not that anyone got to soar in the skies to see. But there were a lot of satellite photos.

The roads were filled with Smile-Cars, which not only ran on solar power but generated it too. Take a seat, synchronize your device, select your location on the map, and you were there not long after. It was as simple as that. There were no deaths or accidents because the cars were fully-automated and fitted with sensors and an instantaneous brake system. For those who wanted to travel faster, there was even an underground magnetic train network. It extended from one side of the dome to others and took no time at all. There was also unlimited access to the Smile-Fi network inside the dome. It provided access to the internet anywhere, and all the time, with lightning-fast speeds.

There were still some simple pleasures scattered inside the dome. Bruno liked to sit in the park and watch birds play and dance in the trees. How beautiful, he thought. Life without rules and routines. Freedom to do whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted. There were no advertisement quotas and other nonsense.

‘I thought I’d find you here,’ said a voice from behind.

Bruno turned around. It was his friend, Michael, a tall and slender fellow with dishevelled hair and sunken brown eyes. He smelt like cigarettes.

‘I got your message,’ added Michael. ‘Another fight with the old man?’

‘Yeah,’ muttered Bruno. ‘All the advertising has made him lose his marbles.’

‘I don’t doubt that,’ replied Michael. ‘But what can you do?’

Michael was a rebellious young man. Nothing was intimidating about him. But behind the scenes, he was a notorious underground hacker. He knew Bruno had become more and more interested in life outside the dome. He had something that would cheer him up. He searched his backpack and pulled out a mysterious-looking device. It looked old and tattered, far more ancient compared to anything else. Bruno couldn't believe what he saw.

‘What the hell is that?’ asked Bruno.

‘The original Smart Hub,’ said Michael. ‘I managed to get it up and running with a jailbroken operating system.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Bruno, confused.

‘It means the device has been modified to remove restrictions and allow access to unauthorized programs and databases,’ replied Michael.

‘That’s illegal dude,’ whispered Bruno. He looked around to make sure nobody was listening. ‘How do you know we aren’t being monitored right now?’

‘I’m not that dumb, dude,’ said Michael. ‘I’m one step ahead of the Smile-Corp morons. Always have been, always will be.’

Bruno didn’t seem impressed. He scratched his head nervously.

‘Trust me, dude, it’s fine,’ said Michael, patting him on the shoulder. ‘Here, check this out. This is the deep web.’

‘What does it do?’ said Bruno

‘It has access to anything and everything. Unlike the Smart-Fi Network,’ said Michael. ‘You can even access ancient archives.’

‘How does it work?’ asked Bruno, impressed and eager to learn.

‘There’s a program called the TOR Browser,’ said Michael. ‘It connects to a network of servers run by volunteers and secures your access by routing the connection through tunnels rather than making a direct connection.’

Bruno didn’t seem to understand.

‘It’s unfiltered and anonymous – if you do it right,’ said Michael. ‘Anyway, I’ve found some cool shit on there, and spoken to people beyond the dome.’

‘You’ve spoken to people beyond the dome?!?!’ shouted Bruno, in disbelief.

‘Shhh. Keep it down, idiot,’ replied Michael. He looked a little concerned, and his eyes shifted from side to side. ‘But yes, I have.’

Suddenly, an obnoxious-looking couple cried out in the distance.

‘Hey, my Smart-Fi isn’t working here. What gives?’ said the man.

‘Mine too!’ added the woman.

Bruno checked his phone and noticed his signal was weak, too.

Michael couldn’t help but smirk.

‘Chill, dude. That was my doing,’ said Michael. ‘But they’ll figure it out. They’re about a minute away.’

Bruno leapt with a rush of anxiety and adrenaline.

‘W-w-what? They’ll be here?’ muttered Bruno, a little shaken.

‘No, a minute away from finding the black hole in the network,’ said Michael. ‘But then yeah, they’ll be here shortly after to see if there’s anything.’

‘You’re the most suss looking dude inside the dome,’ said Bruno. ‘I think we better scram.’

‘Yeah,’ chuckled Michael. ‘Come past mine later tonight. I’ve got a better security system set up. They’ll never even know what hit ‘em.’

‘Done deal,’ said Bruno.

They shook hands and went separate ways.

Bruno wasn’t fully convinced. He knew Michael wouldn’t lie but couldn’t believe it until he saw it. It went against everything he had ever known. To think it was possible to live in the open world. A grin widened across his face. Tonight, he would have all the answers.