

# Life in the Clouds

An Original Short Story

By

Stuart Clark

“What do you mean it’s all gone?”

The assistant huffed, a holo-tag hovering above his breast pocket identified him as Peter. “I’ll check again for you, Mister..?”

“Witten. Simon Witten. You do that. You check again.” Witten ran a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe this,” he muttered.

Peter looked at the hovering two-way display and pulled a face. “Nope. Nothing.”

“But this is absurd! I only got notice that my premium was due last week. I’m a day late.”

“Have you been late before?” Peter asked.

“Yes.”

“Ah.” The exclamation was laced with knowing accusation. “You know the policy here at Cloud Incorporated, Mister Witten. Three strikes and all that.”

Witten’s mouth moved but no words came out, his mind reeling. “But...but...that was *everything*. That was everything I had.”

“I know,” Peter said, trying to sound sympathetic but lacking any sincerity whatsoever. “It usually is.”

And that was the problem with computers. They didn’t see accounts as people, just as streams of data. You broke the rules and you got marked as a problem. And problem data got erased. Now there was nothing left and that’s exactly what Witten was now. Nothing. A nobody.

I looked up, focusing beyond the words of the novel I was reading on my heads-up Ray-Bans. I was also here for an account renewal but I was hoping to renegotiate the contract. I had about three and a half thousand stereoscopic images and a dozen holo-features I wanted to save and the holo-features came in huge. Adding that much data would push me up into the next storage bracket and the premiums for that were astronomical. So here I was, hoping that with an in-person visit I could negotiate a better package price, but with the scene unfolding in front of me it looked like that idea was evaporating before my very eyes. Peter was shutting down. Already his arms were folded across his chest and, as assistants go, he wasn’t being of much assistance.

“Isn’t there something you can do?” Witten asked.

Peter shook his head.

“Look, I’m here right now,” Witten raised his hand and pressed his thumb onto the biometric pad on the desk. “Check my credit. I’ve got good credit. I’ll pay the premium and then whatever late charge you want.” He was starting to sound panicked. “Just restore my data.”

“I can’t.”

“*Please.*”

“Don’t you understand?” Peter scowled. “It’s gone. It’s all gone. I couldn’t check your credit even if I wanted to. There’s nothing there to check.”

On hearing this, the three other people in Cloud’s small customer waiting area looked up. I glanced at each of them and could see my own thoughts mirrored in their eyes. *Run! Get out of here.* Because if Peter, today’s gatekeeper for Cloud Incorporated told you that you’re life was no longer in the cloud then you were truly facing hell. If the authorities hadn’t been notified the moment the servers deleted Witten’s storage then, I was sure, something had been triggered the moment Peter had tried to access the void account. They were probably on their way here right now. I wanted to scream at the man but I knew I couldn’t. You couldn’t be seen helping a nobody – because that’s exactly what Witten was at that moment. Everything about him deleted. All his music downloads. All his streaming holo’s, all his digital stills, family memories – everything that defined who he was as a person erased in the blink of an eye. Not only that, his personal identifier and government approved banking data. All of it gone - and the authorities couldn’t have that now could they? How were they supposed to keep track of him? Make sure he was paying his taxes like he should be? No, no. They couldn’t have rogue, untraceable elements of society running loose. No, they were coming for him. I knew it and he knew it and there was nothing I could do to help him without meeting a similarly unpleasant fate.

Peter pretended to busy himself with something behind the counter. Cloud’s reception area was silent apart from the white-noise hum of idling electronics emanating from the single door behind him. Beyond that lay Cloud’s server room, a gargantuan warehouse with a footprint the size of sixteen football fields – and this was just the north-east region’s office.

I could sympathize with Witten’s predicament. I had almost been late on payments myself in the past. Not because I’d forgotten but because of Cloud’s exorbitant storage fees. Straight out of college and in an entry-level job, it had been hard just getting the money together on time. But this is what happened when one company had a monopoly on data storage.

Storage media had gone the way of the dinosaurs. Extinct. Discs. Memory cards. Hard Drives. Solid state drives. All of it was obsolete. Useless. The hardware to play or read such things was long gone. My parents still kept some DVD’s in a box in the attic – family photo’s they said – but it was a romantic notion, a clinging to the past. I had found them one day whilst rummaging through some boxes and showed them to my young daughter. She liked the way the light reflected off them in rainbow patterns. “They’re pretty,” she had said. “Like giant sequins.” When I had told her that was how people used to keep their data she looked at me like she wasn’t quite sure if I was joking. Now we were blessed (or cursed) with the cloud.

Along with the cloud came a whole slew of hosting companies. People who, for the right price, would store your data for you. Over time some had failed and some had prospered but one became the dominant market leader – Cloud Incorporated. The fact that the vice-president was a major stakeholder and silent partner of Cloud obviously had nothing to do with their success, was conveniently overlooked and no-one dare mention it. Seven years ago Cloud had bought out their only other remaining competitor – *Remotely Yours* – and that was it. Cloud had us all over a barrel. They could up their

premiums when they felt like it (and they regularly did), and there was nothing that anyone could do about it.

*Run!* I thought again, but Witten just stood there slack-jawed, the embodiment of illegality, blood draining from his face almost as quickly as Cloud's system had executed its delete command. Maybe he knew it was pointless. Maybe he was too afraid to leave, thinking that they were already at his home and roughing up his family; demanding to know of his whereabouts.

"Next!" Peter looked up from whatever it was he had been faking doing.

An old woman across from me began rising from her seat just as two armored and helmeted enforcers burst through the doors and into the reception area. One of them spied Witten. "This the one, is he?"

Peter nodded before turning a bogus smile on his next customer.

"Come along now..."

"It'll go a lot easier for you if you just go quietly," the second enforcer added.

Witten must have been going in to shock because he didn't even move. A moment passed and then the two men approached him, turned, and each interlocked an arm with his. I kept my head down and watched his heels slide by as they dragged him out. Poor bastard didn't even put up a decent fight.

There were rumors of what happened to people like Witten. It was said that Cloud's computer would search for tags of him and, using sophisticated algorithms, digitally doctor any photographs he appeared in; reconstructing backgrounds from the pixels around him. Witten would be physically erased from even his family's collective memory and, if they had any sense, they'd deny any knowledge of ever knowing him or be brought in for "special" counseling.

As for Witten himself, the enforcers would take him away to a highly secure undisclosed location and gave him a psychological working over. Sure, it was easy enough for cloud to erase your data. Not so easy to erase the memories in your head. For days, weeks or months – however long it took – they would use every kind of psychological torture known to man. Isolation. White noise. Torture positions. Brainwashing. By the time they'd finished with him, they'd have messed with his head so bad he wouldn't even know who he was any more, the very essence of his existence rubbed from his own memory. And that was the whole point. When you couldn't even recall your name or where you lived their job was done. After that, you simply disappeared.

All of that's hearsay of course. Ask me again what happens to people like Jason Witten. Couldn't tell you. I'm sure I don't know who you're talking about.