

Washington DC: Bomb blast rocks Pure Human Citizen's Council

A massive bomb blast has torn through a building in the US capital of Washington DC, killing three and injuring eleven.

CNN said no arrests have been made and no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Local news footage showed a plume of smoke floating over a two-storey office building that had been largely reduced to rubble. The street was cordoned off by police investigating the bombing, even as firefighters continued to suppress the flames.

All roads into the city centre have been closed, said radio network NPR, and security officials evacuated people from the area, fearing another blast. A spokesman for the Washington Hospital Center said the survivors had been taken there for treatment, many with serious injuries.

In a telephone call to a DC television station, Eric Vale, assistant chief of Washington DC police, said the leadership of the Pure Human Citizen's Council was safe, including Pennsylvania senator Joseph Vaughn, head of the PHCC. An investigation is ongoing, according to Mr. Vale. "We urge people not to point fingers until all the facts are in. We've got experts taking the scene apart in order to determine who is responsible for this attack."

The names of the dead have not been released.

2

NO SIRENS, NO LIGHTS

Boom.

I didn't see Samantha hit the ground. But I heard the sound of it. The blunt impact is still looping through my brain, ringing like a concussion. It's a blurry haze that settles over everything: my crawl back to the window, the sharp looks from late-to-arrive cops, and the concerned questions from my students in the hallways. I can barely speak, much less answer. Principal Stratton takes one look and tells me to take the rest of the day off.

Now, I'm walking fast and aimless through downtown. Headed on a loose path toward my dad's office. The rain has let up and I'm searching the gleaming streets for something sane to latch onto. Some thought, some sight. I'm not finding anything.

The city of Pittsburgh is in the middle of a major course correction. The rest of the nation is, too. The Supreme Court's ruling has slapped about half a million people in the face. This morning, everybody with an amp in his head is standing, blinking into the light of a new day. Wondering what it all means.

I'm starting to get the gist.

Legalized discrimination. Around a hundred thousand amped kids being sent home from school across the nation. Nearly half a million amped adults wondering if they've still got a job. And a couple hundred million normal people, celebrating.

Sirens wail as a column of dark SUVs hurtles past me, long antennae seesawing over potholes. At one point, a tubby, middle-aged

AMPED

guy sprints by, barefoot and panting and with one metal-laced plastic leg. His real foot hits the sidewalk, then his fake one.

Slap, clink. Slap, clink. Slap, clink.

I stop and watch the man until he is gone. The shock of what I saw this morning is starting to fade around the edges, tickling and stinging. An acid knot of anger and sadness has wormed its way into the back of my throat and cornered itself there.

From somewhere nearby, I hear the repetitive, booming calls of a rally.

“Pure Pride,” they’re chanting. “Pure Pride.”

The Pure Human Citizen’s Council is reveling in the decision. The organization grew up organically in the last decade, responding to amps like a foreign body rejection. At first the PHCC was a religious nonprofit. Sanctity of the body, love what God gave ya—that sort of thing. But then they got support from all over and they got it fast. Middle-class families who worried their kids wouldn’t be able to compete in the new future. Labor unions with an eye on keeping jobs for their human members. And politicians who knew a good bandwagon when they saw it.

Pure pride. Pure pride.

Following the chants, I find the Cathedral of Learning jutting out of the university lawn like a broken shard of some fairy-tale castle. Out in front, a crowd surrounds a hastily constructed stage with a solid-looking podium on top. These people are all smiles, victorious. Less than a mile from here someone is rinsing blood off a high school lawn.

Everywhere I look, I see bare temples.

Crossing into the park, I slide half behind a tree and watch a girl wearing a short skirt and a pair of sunglasses with frames that dip to intentionally expose her smooth, unmodified temples. Hair-styles, sunglasses, hats—all designed to make sure that one important patch of undisturbed skin is visible. Proof of your humanity.

I don’t remember when the style became popular. A year ago?

Two? Maybe when people first started boycotting amp-run businesses. Or when the first Paralympian broke an Olympic record. It was a gradual erosion. Always something small enough to shrug off. And besides, none of it should affect me. I'm not an amp like Samantha.

The neural implant in my head only kills seizures. That's it. Boring. No intelligence amplification or prosthetic memory or body diagnostics—just a run-of-the-mill medical implant. Amazing for the minute after it was created, then made stupendously mundane by mass proliferation and daily use.

I'm a normal guy. I was a normal kid. Normal as anybody. That's the speech I practiced for so many years. A litany I repeated so many times I'd even convinced myself. Until this morning.

Now I'm starting to understand that I stood right in the middle of the train tracks until it was too late. I convinced myself things were fine, even while the steel rails were vibrating under my feet like jackhammers and that great big steaming black mother of a locomotive was inches away, whistle shrieking, barreling down on me faster than God's thoughts.

The nub on the side of my head feels like a conspicuous pimple. I let my hair hang loose over it, but it won't fool anybody. And I see it hasn't fooled the three well-dressed guys with radio earpieces who roam the crowd. Nobody allows his hair to hang this way by accident. Not unless he has something to hide.

Some weakness. Some deformity.

My first seizure happened when I was thirteen. I was hanging with some older kids from school. We skipped out to lunch and I rode in the back of a real manual-driven pickup truck. Dumb typical teenager shit. I remember standing up and leaning into the wind. My hair lashing my face numb. That old truck rattling with speed, really galloping.

And then the bump, of course.

I didn't feel the impact. Just the cold hand of a ghost running

AMPED

down the back of my neck. Saw trees flashing by. Body skipping over asphalt and rolling to a stop like a puppet with cut strings. The smell of grass and the burned-rubber scrape of my sneakers on hot pavement. Limbs quaking. Those strange funny moans in my throat. I remember the eyes of my friends as they leaned over me, scared and guilty and confused.

Those same eyes were there when I came back from the hospital. Amped. My own dad, Dr. Gray, put the bug in my head and he always said he did it just right. I didn't come back any smarter. Didn't move any faster. Still had all my fingers and toes. Just left the seizures and brain trauma behind me.

I thought I came back normal. Thought I could pull it off.

But a medical maintenance nub looks the same as a Neural Autofocus one. No matter what you say to yourself, you get the same stares. The technology has made it inside your body and contaminated you. *Outsider*, say the eyes that flash my way. *You don't belong here*.

I flinch when the applause begins.

"I am incredibly honored to introduce the president and founder of the Pure Human Citizen's Council, based right here in Pittsburgh . . . our very own senator Joseph Vaughn," announces a reedy-voiced woman from the podium. Rapturous applause radiates from the crowd.

Vaughn. Self-appointed watchdog for the human race. As a second-term senator from Pennsylvania and a news pundit, he doesn't promote hate but calls the struggle between amps and "pure humans" a war. Never condones violence but supports self-defense for any person whose way of life is under attack. Claims only to target extremist amps, but says that among amps, well, extremism is mainstream.

This is the man who is responsible for pushing Samantha's case all the way to the Supreme Court.

The crowd vibrates to Vaughn's thousand-watt smile. The politician is shaking hands and making eye contact with each person he greets. Everywhere he looks, his smile is reflected in the faces of his supporters. Watching him move among the crowd is like watching a fire spreading.

By the time the head of the Pure Human Citizen's Council bounces onto the stage, the crowd is buzzing. Signs bob in the air: "PURE PRIDE!" "LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD." "HUMANS FIRST!"

"The highest court in the land has spoken. . . . Welcome to the first day of the future of the United States of America!" shouts Vaughn, pumping his fist to violent applause.

A shadow falls across me and I'm staring at a red tie. It is wrapped around the neck of a large, friendly-looking man. His suit is crisp but his fingernails are filthy. A tattoo marks the web of his right thumb. Two tiny capital letters: *EM*.

I frown at the tattoo and he casually folds his hands to hide it.

"Maybe you want to move along?" asks the security guard, smiling down at me like he was my best friend's dad. *That's okay*, I think. Maybe I'll just stay and hear this rally out. Learn something about my enemy.

So I smile right back and sit down cross-legged in the grass. He takes a measured breath and mutters something into his collar. Then he smiles wide again and walks around behind me. I feel his palm on the top of my head. His meaty fingers drum against my skull a couple times.

"That's fine," he says. "Just be a good little amp."

I rest my chin in my hand and listen to the senator.

"Today, the Supreme Court upheld what we knew was right all along—this country needs a *level* playing field!" he shouts. The crowd's hands blur in applause.

"Yes, the courts have ruled in our favor," Vaughn says, "but the fight is not over. Just this morning, our offices in Washington, DC,

AMPED

were bombed. I know we're all praying for our brothers and sisters who were murdered in that cowardly attack, and we sure won't rest until the guilty parties are brought to justice!"

The energy feels manic. People spew ragged shouts of approval.

"And there are plenty of guilty parties. As I speak, doctors trained at this university are turning more people into amps. Federally funded researchers are not just curing disease but going further—tearing the humanity away from regular people. Our soldiers. Our parents. Our children.

"The federal Uplift program promised that, with a wave of a magical wand, our disadvantaged youth would be implanted and cured forever. They made promises. Said their legs will run faster, their minds will think more clearly, and their eyes will see farther. The doctors came and turned whole communities of people into amps overnight," says Vaughn, his vowels falling like snow on the crowd.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't overnight. The changes crept in around the edges, too slow to be noticed, like mold on bread. Fixing serious medical problems first but always moving closer to the simple trials of daily life.

It started with kids. The blind kids, the ones crippled by disease, and the stone-faced kids with low IQs. Kids with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder so bad they couldn't sit still long enough to wipe their own asses.

I remember seeing those kids after school was out, climbing inside a wheezing government bus with the words UPLIFT PROGRAM written on it. Its windows were painted over with the silhouette of a little boy reaching hopefully for the sky. Diagnosed and evaluated and treated in one afternoon. The kids came back to school the next day with a nub on their temples and a wicked case of the smarts.

It was a new life for kids in need. Until one day an amp kid threw a football hard enough to snap ribs. A high school debate

championship got canceled when the judges realized two-thirds of the participants had amps. A new generation of children was arriving, smart and fast and strong enough to send chills down your human spine.

“But what if *you* are not ready?” asks Vaughn. “What if you see the risk as too great, the cost as too high, or if you are comforted in the knowledge that your child is perfect in God’s eyes, as all children are? Ask yourself, how long will you be able to hold the line against this new wave of parasitic technology? Because we are on the verge of an arms race. One child upgrades and leaves for an amp school. Then another. And another. Soon, your child will be the *only* normal child. Left behind. And even if your community doesn’t upgrade, *others will*. So if you don’t live in a flashy place like Los Angeles or New York City, why, you just might watch your whole town get left behind. How then will you protect your *children*?”

Vaughn’s voice breaks with emotion on the word. He pinches the bridge of his nose and wipes his eyes. Very convincing.

“Amps are going to work together. Amps are going to find each other. And if we don’t stop them *right now*, these amp communities will continue to grow like a cancer that will rot out the heart of this great nation.

“We are balanced on the edge of a cliff, my friends. When we step off that ledge, things will never return to normal. There are now nearly five hundred thousand amps. Once these implants become even more widespread, the technology will accelerate faster and faster until we are in a future spinning out of control. Our society—the one our forefathers fought and died for—will be ripped away from its heritage, cast out of the orbit of human civilization that stretches back for thousands of years. And we must not let that happen.”

Joseph Vaughn rakes a sober gaze over the crowd and then looks down at his pages, waiting until the adulation subsides.

AMPED

“What can we do? How can we stop the destruction of our nation, our society, and our children’s future? Well, I’ll tell you how. We’ve got to *separate* the amps. *Regulate* the amps. And *obliterate* the technology that turns human beings into amps. Together, we stand as the last generation of pure human citizens. And so we must act as a collective instead of as individuals. We must fight for our nation instead of for ourselves. And we must win. Because if we fail, ladies and gentlemen, the world of humankind—our world—will come to an end.”

The crowd’s wild response is like proof that Samantha was right. Everything changed today. The most terrifying part is that Sam was smarter than me. Her eyes were open so wide at the very end—open for such a long time while mine were squeezed shut. She saw this coming and she chose to step away. Chose to have her dead body shoveled onto a gurney and pushed into an ambulance waiting quietly in the parking lot with its goddamn engine off.

No sirens, no lights.

In a final orgy of applause, the rally moves on. The smiling faces and unblemished temples march out of the park, singing, headed downtown for the next stop. They leave behind muddy footprints, crumpled flyers, and tiny plastic American flags.

The litter of patriots.

I sit in the damp grass and absorb the numb quiet for fifteen minutes. Soon, the Cathedral green is abandoned. Even my friendly bodyguard with the strange little tattoo has ambled away. Now there is just the stage and the podium sprouting from it like a tombstone.

Curious and alone, I mount the stage and stand behind the podium. Looking out onto the green expanse shaded by the slat-windowed cathedral tower, I try to imagine the power Vaughn must have felt standing here.

But I don’t feel powerful. I feel empty.

My enemy stood on this spot moments ago and declared war

on people like me. His vision of how the world should be seems so stark. Now that he has the momentum of the nation, I doubt Senator Vaughn and his Pure Priders will stop at words.

A piece of paper still rests on the podium. Just an extra page that must have fallen off the end of the speech. I pin it against the wood, hold it quivering in the breeze.

The letterhead is marked with an official seal: a coat of arms with the words “Pure Human Citizen’s Council” on a circular banner, wrapped around the bas-relief image of a smiling little girl with a clean temple. Beneath her face, the word “Elysium” is embossed. Faintly, I notice the first and last letters of the word are bigger. Somehow familiar.

I’ve seen those two letters before, in a tattoo: *EM*.