

# MACHINES OF LOVING GRACE

By Gardner Dozois

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DAWN WAS JUST beginning to color the sky. She huddled inside the small bathroom—door closed, bolt slid and locked—sitting on the toilet lid and hugging her knees. Her head was tilted and hung down, chin almost on breast, and her eyes were nearly closed. She had wrapped her hands around her ankles. Her fingers were turning white. There was no noise in the empty apartment, not even the scurry of a cockroach. She had stopped crying hours ago.

There was noise beyond the window on her left, beyond plaster and glass, outside the vacuum of bedroom-kitchen-livingroom-guestroom-bath: a frozen automobile horn had been honking steadily for the last hour, occasionally traffic whined on the asphalt below, earlier in the evening there had been radios in nearby buildings, tuned to the confusion of a dozen different stations and fading one by one toward morning. She didn't pay any attention to these noises. The silence inside her apartment was too loud.

She opened her hands, flexed her stiff fingers, let her legs uncurl. One of them had gone to sleep, and she stamped it softly, automatically, to restore circulation. The floor was cold under her bare feet. Gooseflesh blossomed along her arms and she ran her hands down over them to smooth it. She had put on a new half-slip for the occasion. She shifted her weight; the toilet lid had been chilly at first, but now it had grown hot and sticky with the heat of her body. She leaned in closer to the hotwater pipe that descended from ceiling to floor—it was still warm to the touch. The dull paint had flaked off it in jigsaw pieces. There was a dingy gray toilet brush leaning against the base of the pipe. The bristles were broken and matted down. All this without thinking at all.

To be free, she thought.

Her head came up; eyes snapped open, closed to slits, opened again, wider.

The muscles in her neck had started to cord.

Her head jerked to the left. She stared out the window. Dawn was a growing red wash across the horizon, clustered buildings blocky beast-silhouettes, a factory plume of smoke etched black against tones of scarlet. Lights far away and lonely. A television antenna like a cross of stark metal. Her head turned back to center, wobbling: the string cut.

For a while she did not think. The shaving mirror on the wall over the sink, clutter on the shelves to the right of the basin: empty bottles of mouthwash, witch hazel, deodorant, the cardboard center from a roll of toilet paper, crumpled toothpaste tube, box of vaginal suppositories. The burlap curtains, frayed edges

polarizing in the new light. Cracked and chipped plaster around the edges of the windowsill, streaks of white on the walls where paint had run thin. The closed door, the whorls in dark wood: beyond were the cluttered kitchen, the empty bedroom. They pressed in against the door. The door hinges were made in five sections.

I'm going to go crazy, she thought.

She reached out and flicked off the light switch. It was bright enough now to see: a gritty, hard light; harsh, too much grain and contrast. She had begun to tremble. The noise of the horn in the background was a steady buzz through her teeth. She picked up the razor blade from the window ledge. The horn stopped abruptly. In the silence, she could hear pigeons fluttering and cooing on the adjacent roof.

She turned the razor blade over in her fingers. The blade was smooth and sharp. No nicks in it, like the ones she used to shave her legs. She'd saved this one special. Orange sunlight refracted along the honed edge of the blade.

The bathtub was only inches away on her right, its head to the toilet. Without getting up, she leaned over, turned on the hot-water tap. Let the water run. This early it was reluctant: the water sputtered, the pipes knocked. But after a while it began to run hot. A thin wisp of steam. She put her arm under the hot water and sliced her wrist, holding the razor between thumb and forefinger. Clumsily, she switched hands and sliced her other wrist. Then she dropped the blade. Her wrists stung dully, and she felt a spreading warmth and wetness. She lifted her arms away from the water. Blood, welling up in thick clots, running down her arms toward the elbows.

To be free, she thought.

She sat with her arms held over the tub, palms up. Already it was better; the pressure that had been trying to turn her into someone else was receding. She wouldn't go crazy this time. She tilted her arms up to help the flow. She noticed that the shower curtain had a pattern of yellow swans and fountains on it, that there was a quarterfull plastic bottle of shampoo and a bit of melted soap in the bath shelf. A big glob of blood splattered against the porcelain bottom of the tub. The flowing water stretched it out elastically, tugged at it, swept it loose and swirled it down the drain.

Too slow. The Lysol had been faster.

She fumbled for the razor blade, dropped it, wiped her hand dry on the shower curtain, picked it up again. She tilted her head back, felt for the big vein in her throat, located it with a finger. Very carefully, she positioned the razor blade. Then she closed her eyes and hacked with all her strength.

The control light flittered on the Big Board: green dulled to amber, died to red, guttered out completely. A siren began to scream. The duty tech put down his magazine, winced at the metallic wailing, and touched the arm of his chair. Pneumatics hissed, the chair moved up and then sideways along the scaffolding,

ghosting past thousands of unwinking green eyes set in horizontal rows, rows stacked in fifty-by-fifty-foot banks, banks filling the walls of the hexagonal Monitoring Complex, each tiny light in the walls in the banks in the rows representing the state of the life-system of one person in this sector of the City.

The tech found the deader easily: one blank spot in a solid wall of green—like a missing tooth, like the empty eye socket of a skull. He read the code symbols from the plaque above the dead light, relayed them through his throat mike to the duty runner down on the floor. “Got that?” “Check.” Below, in Dispatching, the runner would be feeding the code symbols into a records computer, getting the coordinates of the deader’s address, sending a VHF pulse out to the activated monitor in the deader’s body, the monitor replying with a pulse of its own so that the computer could check by triangulation that the deader was actually at his home address and then flash confirmation to the runner. The whole process took about a minute. Then the runner, fingers racing over a keyboard, would relay the coordinates to the sophisticated robot brain of the meat wagon, flick the activating switch, and the pickup squad would whoosh out over the private government monorail system that webbed the City’s roofs.

The duty tech hung from the scaffolding, twenty feet above the floor, three feet away from the banked lights of the Big Board. He settled back against the black leather cushions of his chair, waiting for the official confirmation. The siren had been cut off. He was bored. He nudged at the blank light with the toe of his shoe. Idly, he began to read the code symbols again. Somehow they seemed familiar.

The runner’s voice buzzed in his head. “Dispatched.” “Confirmed,” the tech replied automatically, then still tracing the symbols with his finger: “Christ, do you know who this is? The deader? It’s her again. That crazy broad. Christ, this is the third time this month.”

“Fuck her. She’s nuts.”

The tech looked at the dead light, shook his head. The chair eased back down into its rest position before the metal desk. He squirmed around to get comfortable, drank the dregs of his coffee, rested his feet on the rim of the desk and settled back. The whole thing had taken maybe eight, maybe ten minutes. Not bad. He reached out and found the article he’d been reading.

By the time they brought her back, he was deep in the magazine again.

They carried her in and put her into the machines. The machines kept her in stasis to retard decay while they synthesized blood from sample cells and pumped it into her, grew new skin and tissue from scrapings, repaired the veins in throat and wrists, grafted the skin over them and flash-healed them without a scar. It took about an hour and a half, all told. It wasn’t a big job. It was said that the machines could rebuild life from a sample as small as fifty grams of flesh, although that took a few

weeks—even resurrect personality/identity from the psychocybernetic records for a brain that had been completely destroyed, although that was trickier, and might take months. This was nothing. The machines spread open the flesh of her upper abdomen, deactivated the monitor that was surgically implanted in every citizen in accordance with the law, and primed it again so that it would go off when her life-functions fell below a certain level. The machines sewed her up again, the monitor ticking smoothly inside her. The machines toned up her muscles, flushed out an accumulated excess of body poisons, burned off a few pounds of unnecessary fat, revitalized the gloss of her hair, upped her ratio of adrenaline secretion slightly, repaired minor tissue damage. The machines restarted her heart, got her lungs functioning, regulated her circulatory and respiratory systems, then switched off the stasis field and spat her into consciousness.

She opened her eyes. Above, a metal ceiling, rivets, phosphorescent lights. Behind, a mountain of smoothly chased machinery, herself resting on an iron tongue that had been thrust out of the machine: a rejected wafer. Ahead, a plastic window, and someone looking through it. Physically, she felt fine. Not even a headache.

The man in the window stared at her disapprovingly, then beckoned. Dully, she got up and followed him out. She found that someone had dressed her in street clothes, mismatched, colors clashing, hastily snatched from her closet. She had on two different kinds of shoes. She didn't care.

Mechanically, she followed him down a long corridor to a plush, overstuffed office. He opened the door for her, shook his head primly as she passed, closed it again. The older man inside the office told her to sit down. She sat down. He had white hair (bleached), and sat behind a huge mahogany desk (plastic). He gave her a long lecture, gently, fatherly, sorrowfully, trying to keep the perplexity out of his voice, the hint of fear. He said that he was concerned for her. He told her that she was a very lucky girl, even if she didn't realize it. He told her about the millions of people in the world who still weren't as lucky as she was. "Mankind is free of the fear of death for the first time in the history of the race," he told her earnestly, "at least in the Western world. Free of the threat of extinction." She listened impassively. The office was stuffy; flies battered against the closed windowpane. He asked her if she understood. She said that she understood. Her voice was dull. He stared at her, sighed, shook his head. He told her that she could go. He had begun to play nervously with a paperweight.

She stood up, moved to the door. "Remember, young lady," he called after her, "you're free now."

She went out quickly, hurried along a corridor, past a robot receptionist, found the outside door. She wrenched it open and stumbled outside.

Outside, she closed the door and leaned against it wearily. It was full daylight now. In between dirty banks of clouds, the sun beat pitilessly down on concrete, heat rising in waves, no shadows. The air was thick with smoke, with human sweat.

It smelled bad, and the sharper reek of gasoline and exhaust bit into her nostrils. The streets were choked, the sidewalks thick with sluggishly moving crowds of pedestrians, jammed in shoulder to shoulder. The gray sky pressed down on her like a hand.