

IN THE UPPER ROOM

By Terry Bisson

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"You will feel a slight chill," the attendant said. "Don't worry about it. Just go with it, OK?"

"OK," I said. I had heard all this before.

"You will feel a slight disorientation. Don't worry about it. A part of you will be aware of where you are, and another part will be aware of where you really are, if you know what I mean. Just go with it, OK?"

"OK," I said. "Actually, I have heard all this before. I was on Amazon Adventure last year."

"You were? Well, I am required to say it anyway," the attendant said. "Where was I? Oh yes, go slow!" He wore squeaky shoes and a white coat and carried a little silver hammer in a loop on his pants. "If you look at things too closely at first, nothing will be there. But if you take your time, everything will appear, OK?"

"OK," I said. "What about--?"

"You won't know her name," he said. "Not in the demo. But if you sign up for a tour, you will know it automatically. Ready? Lie down. Take a deep breath."

Ready or not, the drawer started sliding in and I felt a moment of panic, which I remembered from last year. The panic makes you take another breath, and then there is the sharp smell of the Vitazine(TM), and there you are. It is like waking from a dream. I was in a sunlit room with a thick pile rug and high French windows. She stood at the windows overlooking what appeared to be a busy street, as long as you were careful not to look at it too closely.

I was careful not to look at it too closely. She was wearing a burgundy sandwashed silk chemise with a sheer lace empire bodice, cross-laced on the low plunge back. No stockings. I have never liked stockings. She was barefoot but I couldn't make out her feet. I was careful not to look at them too closely.

I liked the way the bodice did on the sides. After a while I looked around the room. There was wicker furniture and a few potted plants by a low door. I had to duck my head to step through and I was in a kitchen with a tile floor and blue cabinets. She stood at the sink under a little window that overlooked a green, glistening yard. She was wearing a long-sleeved stretch pannel velvet bodysuit with a low sweetheart neckline, high-cut sides, and a full back. I liked the way the velvet did in the back. I stood beside her at the window watching the robins arrive and depart on the grass. It was the same robin over and over.

A white wall phone rang. She picked it up and handed it to me, and as soon as I put the receiver to my ear and heard the tone, I was looking up toward what seemed, at first, to be clouds but was in fact the water-stained ceiling of the Departure Hall.

I sat up. "That's it?" I asked.

"That's the demo," said the attendant, who was hurrying over to my opened drawer, shoes squeaking. "The phone is what exits you out of the system. Like the doors elevate you from level to level."

"I like it," I said. "My vacation starts tomorrow. Where do I sign up?"

"Slow down," he said, helping me out of the drawer. "The Veep is by invitation only. You have to talk to Cisneros in Client Services first."

"The Veep?"

"That's what we call it sometimes."

"Last year I did the Amazon Adventure," I said to Dr. Cisneros. "This year I have a week, starting tomorrow, and I came in to sign up for the Arctic Adventure. That's when I saw the Victoria's Palace demo in the brochure."

"Victoria's is just opening," she said. "Actually we are still beta testing sectors of it. Only the middle and upper middle rooms are open. But that should be plenty for a five day tour."

"How many rooms is that?"

"Lots." She smiled. Her teeth looked new. The little thing on her desk said B. Cisneros, PhD. "Technically speaking, the Veep is a hierarchical pyramid string, so the middle and upper middle includes all the rooms but one. All but the Upper Room."

I blushed. I'm always blushing.

"You wouldn't be getting that high in just five days anyway." She showed me her new teeth again. "And since we're still beta testing, we can make you a special offer. The same price they charge for the Arctic and Amazon adventures. A five-day 'week,' nine to five, for \$899. The price will go up substantially when Victoria's Palace is fully open next year, I can assure you."

"I like it," I said. I stood up. "Where do I go to pay?"

"Accounts. But sit back down." She opened a manila folder. "First I am required to ask a clinical question. Which is: why do you want to spend your vacation in Victoria's Palace?"

I shrugged to keep from blushing. "It's different and that appeals to me. You might say I'm a sort of a VR freak."

"Direct Experience," she corrected primly. "And the word is enthusiast."

"DE, then. Whatever." Every company has its own name for it. "Anyway, I like it. My mother says I--"

Dr. Cisneros cut me off by raising her hand like a traffic cop. "This is not the answer I need," she said. "Let me explain. Because of its content, Victoria's Palace is not licensed as an adventure simulation like the Arctic or the Amazon. Under our certification, we can operate only as a therapeutic simulation. Are you married?"

"Sort of," I said. I could just as easily have said, "Not exactly."

"Good." She made a mark in the folder. "Our most acceptable Victoria's Palace clients--the only ones we can accept, in fact--are married men who want to improve the intimacy level of their relationships through frank exploration of their innermost sexual fantasies."

"That's me," I said. "A married man who wants to enter the most intimacy through Frank's sexual fantasies."

"Close enough," Dr. Cisneros said. She made another mark in the folder and slid it toward me with smile. "Sign this release and you can start tomorrow morning at nine. Accounts is down the hall on the left."

That night Mother asked, "What did you do today? If anything."

"I signed up at Inward Bound," I said. "My vacation starts tomorrow."

"You haven't worked in two years."

"I quit my job," I said. "I didn't quit my vacation."

"Didn't you do Inward Bound already?"

"I did the Amazon Adventure last year. This year I'm doing the, uh, Arctic Adventure."

Mother looked skeptical. She always looks skeptical.

"We're going for a seal hunt along the edge of the polyna," I said.

"Who's this Pollyanna? Somebody new at last?"

"It's where the ice never freezes over."

"Suit yourself," Mother said. "But you don't need me to tell you that. You always have. You got another letter from Peggy Sue today."

"Her name is Barbara Ann, Mother."

"Whatever. I signed for it and put it with the others. Don't you think you ought to at least open it? You have a stack this high on that thing you call a dresser."

"What's for supper," I said to change the subject.

The next morning I was first in line at Inward Bound. I was let into the Departure Hall at precisely nine, and I sat down on a stool outside my drawer and changed into robe and sandals.

"What's the little silver hammer for?" I asked the attendant when he showed up in his squeaky shoes.

"Sometimes the drawers are hard to open," he said. "Or close. Lie down. You did the Amazon last summer, right?"

I nodded.

"I thought so. I never forget a face." He was sticking the little things to my forehead. "How high did you go? Could you see the Andy's?"

"The Andes," I said. "You could see them in the distance. The jungle girls wore little bark bras."

"You'll see plenty of little bras in the Veep. Five days will get you pretty high there too. Don't look around the rooms too soon, because as soon as you see a door you will go through it. Slow down and enjoy yourself. Close your eyes."

I closed my eyes. "Thanks for the tip," I said.

"I worked on the programming," he said. "Breathe deep." The drawer slid in there was the sharp smell of the Vitazine(TM) and it was like waking from a dream. I was in a dark, wood-paneled library. She was standing by an arched Tudor window with narrow panes overlooking what appeared to be a garden. She was wearing a tangerine seamed silk charmeuse teddy with flutters of lace trim at the sides and a low cut bodice with covered buttons and lace trimmed wide-set straps. For a moment I thought I didn't know her name, but then I said it: "Chemise." It was like opening your hand and finding something you had forgotten you were holding.

I joined her at the window. The garden was filled with low hedges and gravel walks that spun if you looked at them too closely. I looked away and that's when I saw the door. It was in the far wall, between two bookcases. I ducked my head to go through and I was in a wallpapered bedroom with white-framed windows. The floor was pine with knitted throw rugs.

"Chemise," I said. She was standing between two windows wearing a strapless bodysuit in creamy white stretch satin, with underwire cups and a plunging V-centre. The cups were edged with white lace. The treetops just below the window were shimmering as if in a breeze.

I was getting higher. The sheer satin back of her bodysuit was cut in a low V that matched the V in front. I liked the way the straps did. As soon as I turned away I saw the door. It was down one step, and I had to duck my head, and I was in a long, dark room with narrow windows hung with heavy drapes. Chemise was kneeling on a curved love seat wearing a baby blue baby doll in sheer tulle with lace trim, over a ruffled bra and matching panty. Using one hand I pulled back the drapes. I could see treetops far below, and beneath them, brick streets wet with rain.

I sat down beside her. Her face was still turned away but I could tell that she was smiling. And why not? She didn't exist unless I was with her. She wore little slippers trimmed with lace like her panties. I'm not into feet but they made her feet look sexy. I lingered, letting the lace on her panties make an identical pattern on my heart. Then I thought I heard a faint voice calling for help.

I turned and saw a low, arched hole in the wall. It was hardly bigger than a mousehole. I had to lie flat on my belly, and even then I could barely squirm through one shoulder at a time.

I was in a concrete-floored hallway with no windows. The walls were bare. The floor was cold and it sloped in two directions at once. It was hard to stand. There was a stack of new lumber against one wall and a girl was sitting on it wearing a red hat.

A baseball cap type hat. She stood up. She was wearing a tee shirt that read:

MERLYN SYSTEMS

Software that works hard.

I could feel myself getting confused. "Chemise?"

"Not Chemise," she said.

"Not Chemise," I said. "What are you doing here? This is my--"

"This isn't your anything," she said. "You're not in the Veep right now. You're running parallel, in a programmer's loop."

"How did you get here, then?"

"I'm the programmer."

"A girl?"

"Of course, a girl." She was wearing full cut white cotton panties under her tee shirt.

"What do you think?"

"I'm not supposed to have to think." I could feel myself getting annoyed. "This is Direct Experience. And you are not one of my fantasies."

"Don't be too sure. I'm a damsel in distress. And you're a guy. You came when I called, didn't you? I need your help to get to the Upper Room."

The Upper Room! She said it so casually. "They told me it's--not open yet."

"It is if you know how to get to it," she said. "There's a short cut through the mouseholes."

"Mouseholes?"

"You ask too many questions. I'll show you. But you have to do exactly what I say. You can't be looking around on your own."

"Why not?" I could feel myself getting annoyed again. I looked around the room just to prove I could. I saw a door.

"Because ... " she said, behind me.

But I was already stepping through, ducking my head. I was in an old-fashioned kitchen with white painted wooden cabinets. Chemise stood at the counter stirring a pot with a pair of big scissors. She was wearing a low cut, smooth fitting strapless bra in stretch satin and lace with lightly lined underwire cups, and a high cut, wide band brief with a sheer lace panel in the front, all in white. "Chemise!" I said. I wondered if she wondered where I had been.

But of course she hadn't. Behind her someone was either getting into or out of a pantry door.

It was me.

I was wearing an Inward Bound robe and shower sandals.

It was me.

I was wearing an Inward

It was

I was looking straight up at the water-stained ceiling of the Departure Hall.

"What happened?" I asked. My heart was pounding. I could hear shoes squeaking frantically. A buzzer was buzzing somewhere. Mine was the only drawer that was open.

"System crash," the attendant said. "They want to see you upstairs in Client Services. Right away."

"Out bitmaps show you in places you couldn't have been," said Dr. Cisneros. She was looking back and forth between the manila folder on her desk, and something on her computer screen that I couldn't see. "Areas you couldn't possibly have entered." She looked across the desk at me and her new teeth glittered. "Unless there is something you're not telling me."

When in doubt I play dumb. "Like what?"

"You didn't see anyone else in the palace, did you? Anyone besides yourself and your DE image construct?"

"Another girl?" I decided to go with my instinct, which is always to lie. "No."

"Could be a simple system error," Dr. Cisneros said. "We'll have it sorted out by tomorrow."

"How'd it go today?" Mother asked.

"Go?"

"Your Polly Anna, your arctic misadventure."

"Oh, fine," I lied. I have always lied to Mother, on principle. The truth is too complicated. "I learned to handle a kayak. Lots of open water tomorrow."

"Speaking of open water," Mother said, "I opened those letters today. Lucille says you have to come and get your stuff. She swears he won't hit you again."

"Barbara Ann, Mother," I said. "And I wish you wouldn't open my mail."

"If wishes were pennies we'd all be rich. I stacked them back in the same order. Don't you think you should answer at least one?"

"I need my rest," I said. "We go after basking seals tomorrow. We stalk them across the ice."

"With guns?"

"With clubs. You know I hate guns."

"That's even worse."

"They're not real, Mother."

"The clubs or the seals?"

"Neither. None of it is real. It's Direct Experience."

"My \$899 is real."

I was one of the first ones into the Departure Hall the next morning. I took off my clothes and sat down on the bench and waited for the attendant. I watched the other guys file in, mostly wearing parkas and safari outfits. Their attendants had them in their drawers by 8:58.

At 9:14 Squeaky Shoes showed up. "What's the delay?" I asked.

"Bug in the system," he said. "But we're getting it." He was sticking the little things to my forehead. "Close your eyes."

Bug? I closed my eyes. I heard the drawer rumble; I smelled the sharp smell of the Vitazine(TM) and it was like waking from a dream. Chemise was sitting on a brocaded settee under an open window, wearing a plum red stretch velvet baby tee with lattice edging and elastic trimmed neckline over matching high cut bikini panties.

"Chemise," I said. I tried to concentrate but I couldn't help feeling I had been higher yesterday. A dog walked through the room. The window looked down on a formal garden with curving brick walkways. The sky was blue and cloudless.

Chemise was looking away. I sat down beside her, feeling restless. I was about to get up again when I thought I heard a faint voice calling for help. I looked down and saw a crack in the baseboard. It was too small to put my hand in but I was able to crawl through on my belly, one shoulder at a time.

I was in the concrete hallway again, with stacks of lumber shimmering against one wall. The girl in the red hat was yelling at me: "You almost got me killed!"

"Bug?" I said.

"What did you call me?"

"Not Chemise?" I tried. She was sitting on a stack of lumber, wearing her

MERLYN SYSTEMS

Software that works hard.

tee shirt over white cotton panties cut high on the sides.

"Not Not Chemise. You called me something else."

"Bug."

"Bug. I like that." She had gray eyes. "But you have to quit looking around. We have to go through the mouseholes, not the doors, or you might meet yourself again."

"Then that was me I saw!"

"That's what crashed the system. You almost got me killed."

"If the system crashes you die?"

"Supposedly. Luckily I had saved myself. All I lost was a little memory. A little more memory."

"Oh," I said.

"Let's get going. I can take you to the Upper Room," she said.

I tried to sound casual. "I thought you wanted me to take you."

"Same thing. I know the route through the mouseholes. Watch me or watch the hat. Let's get moving. Clyde'll get the cat out soon."

"Cat? I saw a dog."

"Oh, shit! We better get moving, then!" She threw the red hat behind me. Where it hit I found a wide crack in the concrete floor. It was tight but I managed to crawl through on my belly pushing one shoulder through and then the other. I was in a bright room with one whole wall of windows. Potted plants were stacked on boxes and on the sofa. There was no place to sit down. Bug was standing by the window, wearing a pale peach demi bra with adjustable tapered straps and deep front décolleté, and a matching tanga bikini with full back. And the red hat.

I stood beside her at the window. I expected to see treetops but all I saw were clouds, far below. I had never been so high.

"That cat, that dog you saw, is a system debugger," she said. "Sniffs out mouseholes. It it finds me I'm a goner."

I liked the way her bra did in the back.

"Do you mind if I call you Bug?"

"I already told you, I sort of like it," she said. "Especially since I don't remember my name."

"You don't remember your name?"

"I lost some memory when the system crashed," she said. She looked almost sad. "Not to mention when Clyde killed me."

"Who's Clyde? Who are you, anyway?"

"You ask too many questions," she said. "I'm Bug, that's all, a damsel in distress, and that's one of your fantasies, so let's get going. We can talk on the way."

She threw the red hat against the wall. I found it in the corner, where the wallpaper was pulled loose revealing a crack barely large enough for my fingertips. It was tight but I was able to manage, one shoulder at a time. I was in a bedroom with a bay window. Bug was--

"Do you mind if I call you Bug?"

"I told you, it's OK." Bug was standing at the window wearing a pearl white satin jacquard demi bra, accented with scalloped trim along the deep-V center, and a string bikini with a sheer stretch back, accented with one little bow. And the hat of course.

"Clyde'll find me here in the Veep sooner or later, especially now that they suspect a bug. But if I can make it to the Upper Room, I can port through to the other systems."

"What other systems?"

"The Arctic, the Amazon, whatever adventures they add later. All the franchises are interfaced at the top. It'll be like life. Life after Clyde."

"Who's ..."

"Shit!" A phone was ringing. Bug picked it up and handed it to me. It was porcelain with brass trim, like a fancy toilet. Before I could say "hello" I found myself staring up at the water-stained ceiling of the Departure Hall.

"Client Services wants to see you," said the attendant. For the first time I noticed the name stitched on his white jacket. It was CLYDE.

"You still seem to be showing up in rooms where you aren't supposed to be," said Dr. Cisneros. "On code strings that aren't connected. Unauthorized pathways." Dr. Cisneros had been eating lunch at her desk, judging by the little pile of bones at the edge of her blotter. "Are you positive you haven't noticed anything unusual?"

I had to tell her something, so I told her about the dog.

"Oh, that. That's Clyde's cat. The system debugger. He configures it as a dog. It's his idea of a joke."

Sometimes the smart thing is to act dumb. "What kind of bug are you looking for?" I asked.

Dr. Cisneros swiveled the computer monitor on her desk so that I could see the screen. She hit a key and a still picture came up. I wasn't surprised to see Bug--wearing the MERLYN SYSTEMS tee shirt and the red hat, of course. She also wore baggy Levis and glasses. "Early this year one of our programmers was caught illegally altering proprietary software which is, as you know, a federal crime. We had no choice but to call BATF&S. But while she was free on bail awaiting trial she illegally entered the system."

"As a client?" I asked.

"As a trespasser with criminal intent. Perhaps even sabotage. She may have been carrying a ResEdit. She may have left loops or subroutines designed to render the software unstable or even dangerous. Unexecutable routines, unauthorized pathways."

"I don't understand what this has to do with me," I said. Mother always said I was good at lying. Mother ought to know.

"The danger to you," Dr Cisneros said, "is that one of these unauthorized pathways might lead to the Upper Room. And the Upper Room is not, at present, exitable. It's an enter-only. You may have noticed that Victoria's Palace is a one-way system, from lower to higher rooms. It's like the universe. You go until you hit an exit sequence."

"The phone rings," I said.

"Yes," said Dr. Cisneros. "That was Clyde's idea. A nice touch, don't you think? But at present there's no exit sequence, or phone as you call it, installed in the Upper Room."

"Isn't there a door?"

"There's an in door but no out door. Where would the out door go? The Upper Room is at the top of the code string. The client would be trapped. Maybe forever."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Keep your eyes open. Rogue programmers have rogue egos. They often leave signature stuff laying around; clues. If you see anything odd, like a picture of her, a little token left around, try and remember what room it is in. It will help us isolate the damage."

"Like a red hat."

"Exactly."

"Or her herself."

Cisneros shook her head. "It would only be a copy. She's dead. She committed suicide before we could have her re-apprehended."

"Rhonda left another message on your machine," Mother said when I got home.

"Barbara Ann," I corrected.

"Whatever. She says she's going to bring your stuff over here and leave it on the lawn. She says Jerry Lewis ..."

"Jerry Lee, Mother."

"Whatever. Her new guy, he needs your old room. Apparently they're not sleeping together either."

"Mother!" I said.

"She says if you don't come and get your stuff she's going to throw it out."

"I wish you wouldn't play my messages," I said. "What's the point of having two machines?"

"I can't help it. Your machine recognizes my voice." "That's because you try and talk like me."

"I don't have to try," Mother said. "How was your day? Bash any baskin' robins?"

"Very funny," I said. "We did club a large number of basking seals today. They weren't babies though. We club the old seals, the ones that have borne their children and outlived their usefulness to the tribe."

I gave her a look but she chose to ignore it.

The next morning I was the first one in the Departure Hall. "Get squared away with Bonnie?" the attendant asked.

"Bonnie?"

"Hold still." He was sticking the little things to my forehead. "Lie down." It was like waking from a dream. I was in a library with an arched glass window overlooking faraway hills. Chemise had taken down a book and was leafing through the pages. She was wearing a black camisole embroidered with velvet jacquard on whisperweight sheer

voile, with slender straps, deeply cut cups, and a full stretch lace back. I could see that the pages were blank. "Chemise," I said. I wanted to tell her I was sorry I was neglecting her. I liked the way her cups did when she bent over but I had to find Bug. I had to warn her that Dr. Cisneros and Clyde were looking for her.

I searched along the baseboards looking for a mousehole until I found a crack behind a warped board. It was barely big enough to stick a hand in, but I was able to crawl through on my belly and wedge one shoulder in at a time.

I was back in the concrete hallway.

Bug was standing beside a pile of 2X4s, wearing her MERLYN SYSTEMS tee shirt over french cut white cotton bikini panties with scalloped lace trim along the seams. And the red hat of course. And glasses!

"What's with the glasses?" she asked me. She tried to take them off but couldn't.

"They know about you," I said. "They showed me a picture of you. With glasses."

"Of course they know about me! Clyde for damn sure knows about me."

"I mean, they know you're in here. Although they think you're dead."

"Well, I am dead, but I won't be in here long. Not if we get to the Upper Room." She took off her red hat and sailed it down the hall. It landed by a break in the concrete where the floor met the wall. It was too small for even a mouse but I was able to wriggle through, first my fingertips and then one shoulder and then the other. I was in a conservatory with big bay windows overlooking bright, high clouds that looked like ruined castles. Bug--

"Do you mind if I call you Bug?"

"Jesus, I told you, it's OK!" Bug was standing by the window wearing a sheer white voile bra with lace embroidered cups and a matching panty with lace inserts on the front and sides. And the red hat. And the glasses.

"I'm willing to help," I said. "But this Upper Room stuff sounds dangerous."

"Dangerous? Who says?"

"Client Services."

"Cisneros? That cunt!"

"I wish you wouldn't call her that. She says once I get in the Upper Room I can't get out. Like a roach motel. No phone."

"Hmmm." Bug looked straight at me. Her gray eyes looked worried. "I didn't think of that. Let's go higher, where we can talk." She threw the red hat and it landed next to a little wedge-shaped hole barely big enough for me to crawl into on my belly, squeezing one shoulder through at a time. I was in a dark room with heavy drapes and no furniture except for an oriental rug on the floor. Bug--

"Do you mind if I call you Bug?"

"Will you stop it!? Why does DE make people so stupid?"

"Beats me," I said.

Bug was sitting on the floor, wearing a white faux-satin bra with scoop-cut cups trimmed with an embroidery edge, and a matching white faux-satin string bikini. "Bug is not really my name," she said. "It's either Catherine or Eleanor, I forget which. It's one of the things that goes when they kill you."

"They told me you committed suicide."

"Suicide with a hammer, right!" I liked her laugh. I liked the way the strings on her string bikini did. They were like tiny versions of the velvet ropes in theaters. "They got me arrested, that much of what Bonnie told you is true. I'd been creating illegal subroutines, mouseholes, to allow movement throughout the Veep. That's true too. What she didn't tell you is, Clyde and I were partners in crime. Well, how could she know? That cunt. I put the mouseholes in, buried them in the mainstream code string so later Clyde and I could access the palace on our own. Blackmail and extortion was our game. Clyde designed the Palace and he left the mouseholes up to me. That's the way we always worked. What I didn't know was that he was already in cahoots with Cisneros."

"What are cahoots?"

Bug made a vulgar gesture with a thumb and two fingers; I looked away. "Cisneros owns fifty-five percent of the franchise. Which made her irresistible to poor Clyde, I guess. For months they had been playing Bonnie and Clyde behind my back, while I was busy hacking away. Anyway, when Victoria's Palace got accepted at Inward Bound some franchise checker dude found the mouseholes--I hadn't really bothered hiding them--and he told Cisneros, and she told Clyde, and he pretended to be shocked and outraged! Set me up. So as soon as I got out on bail I went in to get my stuff ..."

"Your stuff?"

"Subroutines, proprietary macros, pics and diffs. I was going to rip it all out. And maybe trash the place a little. I was carrying a ResEdit so I could rewrite code even as I was riding it. But Clyde got wind somehow. So he murdered me."

"With the little hammer."

"You're beginning to get the picture. Just opened the drawer and whack, right between the eyes. What Clyde didn't know was that I could save myself. I always run with a little autosave macro that I wrote back in community college, so I only lost about ten minutes, and some memory. And my life of course. I ducked into the mousehole space but who the hell wants to live like a rat forever? I was waiting for my Prince to come and take me to the Upper Room."

"Your Prince?"

"Finger of speech. I was waiting for the Veep to open. Any dude would have done."

"Figure of speech," I said.

"Whatever. Anyway, what Cisneros doesn't know--or Clyde either--is that the Upper Room is interfaced at the top with the other Inward Bound areas, the Arctic and Amazon franchises. I'll be able to get out of the Palace. And as more and more modules get added, my universe will get bigger and bigger. If I watch my ass, I'll live forever. Or haven't you noticed, there's no death in DE?"

She stood up and yawned. I liked the pink inside of her mouth. She took off the hat and threw it against the wall. It landed by a little opening under the baseboard. It was tight but I managed to squeeze through one shoulder at a time. I was in a stone room with a tiny slit window and a folding chair. Bug--

"Do you mind if I call you Bug?"

"Will you knock it off! Come over here."

Bug was wearing a black lace demi bra with deep décolleté cups and wide set straps, and a matching black lace thong panty with little bows on the side. And the red hat, of course. And the glasses. She made room so that I could stand beside her on the chair and see out of the slit window. I could almost see the curve of the Earth. I could almost feel the curve of her hip against mine, even though I knew it was my imagination. Imagination is everything in DE.

"We're not so far from the Upper Room," she said. "Look how high you've gotten me already. But Cisneros is right about one thing."

"What?"

"You can't take me into the Upper Room. You'd be stuck. No way back."

"What about you?" I liked the little bows.

"I'm already stuck. I don't have a body to go back to. You provide this one, I guess." She peered through her glasses down the front of her bra, down the front of her panties.

"Which is why I'm still wearing glasses, I guess."

"I'd like to help you get to the Upper Room," I said. "But why can't you go in by yourself?"

"I can't move up, only down," Bug said. "I'm dead, remember? If only I still had my ResEdit, I could ...Shit!" There was a phone. We had hardly noticed it until it rang. "It's for you," she said, handing me the receiver.

Before I could say "hello" I was staring up at the water-stained ceiling of the Departure Hall. I heard shoes squeaking. The attendant helped me out of the drawer. Clyde.

"4:55 already?" I asked.

"Time flies when you're having fun," he said.

"Guess who's here," Mother said.

I heard the snarl of a toilet flushing in the bathroom.

"I don't want to see her," I said.

"She came all the way from Salem," Mother said. "She brought your stuff."

"Where is it, then?"

"It's still in her car. I wouldn't let her bring it in," said Mother. "That's why she's crying."

"She's not crying!" a deep voice called out.

"My god!" I said, alarmed. "Is he in there with her?"

"She's not taking it back!" the same deep voice called out. Another toilet flushed. Mother has two in her bathroom, one for me and one for her.

"I'm on my vacation!" I said. The bathroom doorknob started to turn and I went for a walk. When I got back they were gone and my stuff was on the lawn.

"You could dig a hole," said Mother. "And cover it."

I was the first one in the Departure Hall the next morning. But instead of opening my drawer, Squeaky Shoes, the attendant--Clyde--gave me a paper to sign.

"I already signed a release," I said.

"This is for our own protection," he said.

I signed. "Good," he said and smiled. It was not a nice smile. "Now lie down. Now take a deep breath." The drawer slid shut. I inhaled the Vitazine(TM) and it was like waking from a dream.

I was in a formal living room with a cream colored rug, couch and chair. Chemise was standing at the picture window wearing an ivory underwire bra in satin jacquard with low plunge centre and wide set straps, and matching bikini panties with a sheer stretch panel in front. She was holding a cup and saucer, also matching. Through the window I could see rolling hills stretching to a horizon. A dog trotted through the room.

"Chemise," I said. I wished I had time to explain things to her, but I knew I had to find Bug.

I looked around for a mousehole. Behind a lamp, in a dark corner, there was a low arch, like the entrance to a tiny cave. I could barely negotiate the narrow passage, shrugging one shoulder through at a time.

"What took you so long?" Bug was sitting in the concrete hallway on a gleaming stack of lumber, her knees pulled up under her chin. She was wearing her MERLYN SISTEMS tee shirt over a tiny thong bikini. And the red hat and the glasses, of course.

"They made me sign another release."

"And you signed it?"

I nodded. I liked the way the thong made a little V, then disappeared.

"You moron! Do you realize that by signing the release you gave Clyde the right to kill you?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me that," I said.

"Fucking Bonnie and Clyde! Now I'll never get to the Upper Room!" I was afraid she was about to cry. Instead, she hurled the red hat angrily to the floor and when I bent down to pick it up I saw a crack barely large enough for three fingertips but I was able to squeeze through by crawling on my belly and pushing one shoulder in at a time. I was in an empty room with bare wood floors and windows so new that the stickers were still on them. Bug was wearing a coral pink stretch lace demi bra cut low for maximum décolleté with a French string bikini that was full in the back and plunged to a tiny triangle of sheer pink lace in front.

I followed her to the window. Below was a mixture of seas and clouds, an earth as bright as a sky.

"We must be getting close to the Upper Room!" I said. "You're going to make it!" I wanted to make her feel better. I liked the way her bra did in front.

"Don't talk nonsense. Hear that howling?"

I nodded. It sounded like a pack of hounds getting closer.

"That's the cat. Search and destroy. Find and erase." She shivered extravagantly.

"But you can save yourself!"

"Not so easily. I'm already a backup."

I was afraid she was about to cry. "Then let's get going!" I said. "I'll take you to the Upper Room. I don't care about the danger."

"Don't talk nonsense," Bug said. "You would be trapped forever--if Clyde didn't kill you first. If only I had my ResEdit, I could get there by myself."

"So where is it?"

"I lost it when Clyde killed me. I've been looking for it ever since."

"What does it look like?"

"A pair of big scissors."

"I saw Chemise with a pair of big scissors!" I said.

"That cunt!"

"I wish you wouldn't call her that ..." I began. But the phone was ringing. We hadn't noticed it before.

"Don't answer it!" Bug said, even as she picked it up and handed it to me. How could she help it? I had signed the release. It was for me of course. The next thing I knew I was staring up at the water-stained ceiling and at the little silver hammer coming down right between my eyes.

And at Clyde's smile. Not a nice smile.

First it got real dark. Then it got light again. It was like waking from a dream.

I was in a round, white room with curved windows all around. My head hurt. Through the glass I could see gray stars in a milk-white sky. Bug--

"Over here," she said. She was standing by the window wearing periwinkle blue panties of shimmering faux-satin, cut high on the sides and full in the back, with delicately embroidered cutouts down each side of the front panel. And nothing on top at all. No bra. No straps, no cups, no detailing, no lace.

My head hurt. But I couldn't help being thrilled at how high I was. "Is this--the Upper Room?" I asked breathlessly.

"Not quite," she said. She was still wearing the red hat and the glasses. "And now we're out of luck. In case you hadn't noticed, Clyde killed you too. Just now."

"Oh no." I couldn't imagine anything worse.

"Oh yes," she said. She put her hand on my forehead and I could feel her fingers feel the little dent.

"What did you do, copy me?"

"Pulled you out of the cache. Barely." Out the window far below there was a blue-green ball streaked with white. "Hear that howling? That's Clyde's cats rooting through the Palace room by room."

I shivered. I liked the way her panties did underneath.

"Well, what have we got to lose?" I said, surprised that I wasn't more upset that I was dead. "Let's head for the Upper Room."

"Don't talk nonsense," she said. "If you're dead too, you can't pull me through." The howling was getting louder. "Now we have to find the ResEdit. Where'd you see what's-her-name with the big scissors--what room was she in?"

"Chemise," I said. "I can't remember."

"What was out the window?"

"I can't remember."

"What was in the room?"

"I can't remember."

"What was she wearing?"

"A low cut smooth fitting strapless bra in stretch satin and lace with lightly lined underwire cups, and a high cut, wide band brief with a sheer lace panel in the front, all in white," I said.

"Let's go, then," Bug said. "I know the spot."

"I thought we couldn't go anywhere without the res-whatever."

"Down we can go," Bug said. She threw the red hat and followed it herself. It fell near a tiny hole barely big enough for her fingertips. I squeezed through after her. I still liked the way her panties did underneath. We were in an old fashioned kitchen and Chemise was stirring a pot with a pair of big scissors. She was wearing a low cut, smooth fitting strapless bra in stretch satin and lace with lightly lined underwire cups, and a high cut, wide band brief with a sheer lace panel in the front, all in white.

"Give me that!" said Bug, grabbing the big scissors. She was also wearing a low cut, smooth fitting strapless bra in stretch satin and lace with lightly lined underwire cups, and a high cut, wide band brief with a sheer lace panel in the front, all in white. And the red hat. But where were her glasses?

"Bitch," said Chemise, softly. I was shocked. I didn't know she could talk.

"Cunt," said Bug.

Just then a dog trotted into the room from nowhere. Literally.

"The cat!" said Bug. She was trying to jimmy the lock on the pantry with the point of the big scissors.

The dog--the cat--hissed.

"In here!" said Bug. She pushed me backward into the pantry while she cut upward, ramming the point of the big scissors into the dog's belly. The cat's belly. Whatever. Blood was everywhere. I was in a large, empty, pyramid-shaped room with a white floor and white walls rising to a point. There was one small porthole in each wall. Bug--

Bug was nowhere to be seen.

Outside the portholes, everything was white. There weren't even any stars. There were no doors. I could hear barking and growling below.

"Bug! The cat erased you!" I wailed. I knew she was gone. I was afraid I was going to cry. But before I could, a trapdoor in the floor opened and Bug came through feet first. It was odd to watch. Her arm was covered with blood and she was holding the scissors and she was--

She was nude. She was naked.

"It was I erased the cat!" Bug cried triumphantly.

"It's still coming!" I could hear wild barking below.

"Shit! Must be a replicating loop," she said. She was naked. Nude. Stripped. Bare. Unclad completely. "And quit staring at me," she said.

"I can't help it," I said. Even the red hat was gone.

"I guess not," she said. She was nude. Naked. She was wearing nothing, nothing at all. She ran to one of the four portholes and began prying at the frame with the point of the scissors.

"There's nothing out there," I said. The howling was getting louder. The trapdoor had closed but I had the feeling it would open again, all dogs. Or cats. And soon.

"Can't stay here!" Bug said. She gave up on the frame and shattered the glass with the scissors.

"I'm going with you," I said.

"Don't talk nonsense," she said. She put her hand on my forehead again. Her touch was cool. I liked the way it felt. "The dent is deep but not all that deep. You may not be dead. Just knocked out."

"He hit me pretty hard! And I'm trapped here anyway."

"Not if you're not dead, you're not. They'll shut down and reset once I'm gone. You'll probably just wake up with a headache. You can go home."

The barking was getting closer. "I don't want to go home."

"What about your mother?"

"I left her a note," I lied.

"What about your stuff?"

"I buried all my stuff." She was nude. Naked, except for her lovely glasses. Nothing on the bottom, nothing on top. Even the red hat was gone. The hole was barely big enough for my hand but I followed her through one shoulder at a time. Everything was white and the howling was gone and something was moaning like the wind. I took Bug's hand and I was rolling. We were rolling. I was holding her hand and we were rolling rolling rolling through warm blank snow.

It was like waking from a dream. I was wrapped in a foul-smelling fur, looking up at the translucent ceiling of a little house made of ice and leaves. Bug was lying beside me wrapped in the same smelly fur.

"Where are we?" I asked. "I hear cats barking."

"Those are our dogs," she said.

"Dogs?" I got up and went to the door. It was covered with a scratchy trade blanket. I pulled it back and looked out across miles of new snow to a distant line of trees, hung with vines. Silvery dogs were peeing on the outside of the little house. One was shaking a snake to death. It was a big snake.

"They all come together here," Bug said. "The Upper Room, the North Pole, the Headquarters of the Amazon."

"Headwaters." I said. "Where are your glasses?"

"I don't need them anymore."

"I liked them."

"I'll put them back on."

I got back under the fur with her, curious to find out what she was wearing. There's no way I can tell you, from here, what it was. But you would have liked it too. If you're anything like me.

the end