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AN OFFICE ROMANCE

by Terry Bisson

The first time Ken678 saw Mary97, he was in Municipal Real Estate, queued for a pickup for Closings. She stood two spaces in front of him: blue skirt, orange tie, slightly convex white blouse, like every other female icon. He didn't know she was a Mary; he couldn't see which face she had. But she held her Folder in both hands, as "old-timers" often did, and when the queue scrolled forward he saw her fingernails.

They were red.

Then the queue flickered and scrolled again, and she was gone. Ken was intrigued but he promptly forgot about it. It was a busy time of year, and he was running like crazy from Call to Task. Later that week he saw her again, paused at an open Window in the Corridor between Copy and Send. He slowed as he passed her, by turning his Folder sideways--a trick he had learned. There were those red fingernails again. It was curious.

Fingernails were not on the Option Menu.

Red was not on the Color Menu, either.

Ken used the weekend to visit his Mother at the Home. It was her birthday or anniversary or something like that. Ken hated weekends. He had grown used to his Ken face and he felt uncomfortable without it. He hated his old name, which his Mother insisted on calling him. He hated how grim and terrifying things were outside. To avoid panic he closed his eyes and hummed--out here, he could do both--trying to simulate the peaceful hum of the Office.

But there is no substitute for the real thing, and Ken didn't relax until the week restarted, and he was back inside. He loved the soft electron buzz of the search engines, the busy streaming icons, the dull butter shine of the Corridors, the shimmering Windows with their relaxing scenes of the environment. He loved his life and he loved his work.

That was the week he met Mary; or rather, she met him.

Ken678 had just retrieved a Folder of documents from Search and was taking them to Print. He could see by the blur of icons ahead that there was going to be a long queue at the Bus leaving Commercial, so he paused in the Corridor; wait states were encouraged in high traffic zones.

He opened a Window by resting his Folder on the sill. There was no air of course, but there was a nice view. The scene was the same in every Window in Microserf Office 6.9: cobblestones and quiet cafes and chestnut trees in blossom. April in Paris.

Ken heard a voice. <Beautiful isn't it?>

<What?> he said, confused. Two icons couldn't open the same Window, and yet there she was beside him. Red fingernails and all.

<April in Paris> she said.

<I know. But how-->

<A little trick I learned> She pointed to her Folder, stacked on top of his, flush right.

<-did you do that?> he finished because it was in his buffer. She had the Mary face, which it so happened was his favorite. And the red fingernails of course.

<When they are flush right the Window reads us as one icon> she said.

<Probably reads only the right edge> Ken said. <Neat>

<Name's Mary> she said. <Mary97>

<Ken678>

<You slowed when you passed me last week, Ken. Neat trick too. I figure that made you almost worth an intro. Most of the workaholics here in City Hall are pretty unsociable>

Ken showed her his Folder trick even though she seemed to know it already. <How long you been at City?> he asked.

<Too long>

<How come I never saw you before?>

<Maybe you saw me but didn't notice me> she said. She held up a hand with red fingernails. <I didn't always have these>

<Where'd you get them?>

<It's a secret>

<They're pretty neat> Ken said.

<Is that pretty or neat?>

<Both>

<Are you flirting with me?> she asked, smiling that Mary smile.

Ken tried to think of an answer, but he was too slow. Her Folder was blinking, a waitstate interrupt, and she was gone.

A few cycles later in the week he saw her again, paused at an open Window in the Corridor between Copy and Verify. He slid his folder over hers, flush right, and he was standing beside her, looking out into April in Paris.

<You learn fast> she said.

<I have a good teacher> he said. Then he said what he had been rehearsing over and over: <And what if I was?>

<Was what?>

<Flirting>

<That would be OK> she said, smiling the Mary smile. Ken678 wished for the first time that the Ken face had a smile. His Folder was flickering but he didn't want to leave yet. <How long have you been at City?> he asked again.

<Forever> she said. She was exaggerating, of course, but in a sense it was true. She told Ken she had been at City Hall when Microserf Office 6.9 was installed. <Before Office, records were stored in a basement, in metal drawers, accessed by hand. I helped put it all disk. Data entry, it was called>

<Entry?>

<This was before the neural interface. We sat outside and reached in through a Keyboard and looked in through a sort of window called aMonitor. There was nobody in the Office. Just pictures of files and stuff. There was no April in Paris, of course. It was added later to prevent claustrophobia>

Ken678 calculated in his head. How old did that make Mary--Fifty-five?Sixty? It didn't matter of course. All icons are young, and all females are beautiful.

Ken had never had a friend before, in or out of the Office. Much less a girl friend. He found himself hurrying his Calls and Tasks so that he could cruise the Corridors looking for Mary97. He could usually find her at an open Window gazing at the cobblestones and the little cafes, the blossoming chestnut trees. Mary loved April in Paris. <It's so romantic there> she said.<Can't you just imagine yourself walking down the boulevard?>

<I guess> Ken said. But in fact he couldn't. He didn't like to imagine things. He preferred real life, or at least Microserf Office 6.9. He loved standing at the Window beside her, listening to her soft Mary voice, answering in his deep Ken voice.

<How did you get here?> she asked. Ken told her he had been hired as a temp, transporting scanned-in midcentury documents up the long stairway from Archives to Active.

<My name wasn't Ken then, of course> he said. <All the temp icons wore gray, male and female alike. We were neural interfaced through helmets instead of earrings. None of the regular Office workers spoke to us, or even noticed us. We worked 14, 15 cycle days.>

<And you loved it> Mary said.

<I loved it> Ken admitted. <I had found what I was looking for. I loved being inside> And he told her how wonderful and strange it had felt, at first, to be an icon, to see himself as he walked around, as if he were both inside and outside his own body.

<Of course it seems normal now> he said.

<It is> Mary said. And she smiled that Mary smile.

Several weeks passed before Ken got up the courage to make what he thought of as "his move."

They were at the Window where he had first spoken with her, in the Corridor between Copy and Verify. Her hand was resting on the sill, red fingernails shimmering, and he put his hand exactly over it. Even though he couldn't actually feel it, it felt good.

He was afraid she would move her hand but instead she smiled that Mary smile and said <I thought you were never going to do that>

<I've been wanting to ever since I first saw you> he said.

She moved her fingers under his. It almost tingled. <Want to see what makes them red?>

<You mean your secret?>

<It'll be our secret. You know the Browser between Deeds and Taxes? Meet me

there in three cycles>

The Browser was a circular connector with no Windows. Ken met Mary at Select All and followed her toward Insert, where the doors got smaller and closer together.

<Ever hear of an Easter Egg?> she asked.

<Sure> Ken said. <A programmer's surprise hidden in the software. An unauthorized subroutine that's not in the manual. Sometimes humorous or even obscene. Easter Eggs are routinely->

<You're just repeating what you learned in Orientation> Mary said.

<-found and cleared from commercial software by background debuggers and optimizers> Ken finished because it was already in his buffer.

<But that's OK> she said. <Here we are>

Mary97 led him into a small windowless room. There was nothing in it but a tiny, heart-shaped table.

<This room was erased but never overwritten> Mary said. <The Optimizer must have missed it. That's why the Easter Egg is still here. I discovered it by accident>

On the table were three playing cards. Two were face down and one was face up: the ten of diamonds.

<Ready?> Without waiting for Ken's answer, Mary turned the ten of diamonds face down. Her fingernails were no longer red.

<Now you try it> she said.

Ken backed away.

<Don't get nervous. This card doesn't do anything, just changes the Option. Go ahead!>

Reluctantly, Ken turned the ten of diamonds up. Mary's fingernails were red again. Nothing happened to his own.

<That first card just works for girls> Mary said.

<Neat> Ken said, relaxing a little.

<There's more> Mary said. <Ready?>

<I guess>

Mary turned up the second card. It was the queen of hearts. As soon as she turned it up, Ken heard a clippity clop. A Window opened in the windowless room.

In the Window it was April in Paris.

Ken saw a gray horse coming straight down the center of the Boulevard. It wore no harness but its tail and mane were bobbed. Its enormous red penis was almost dragging the cobblestones.

<See the horse> Mary97 said. She was standing beside Ken at the Window. Her convex white blouse and orange and blue tie both were gone. She was wearing a

red lace brassiere. The sheer cups were full. The narrow straps were taut. The tops of her plump breasts were round and bright as moons.

Ken678 couldn't move or speak. It was terrifying and wonderful at the same time. Mary's hands were behind her back, unfastening her brassiere. There! But just as the cups started to fall away from her breasts, a whistle blew.

The horse had stopped in the middle of the boulevard. A gendarme was running toward it, waving a stick.

The Window closed. Mary97 was standing at the table, wearing her convex white blouse and blue and orange tie again. Only the ten of diamonds was face up.

<You turned the card down too soon> Ken said. He had wanted to see her nipples.

<The queen turns herself down> Mary said. <An Easter Egg is a closed algorithm. Runs itself once it gets started. Did you like it? And don't say you guess>

She smiled that Mary smile and Ken tried to think of what to say. But both their folders were blinking, waitstate interrupts, and she was gone.

Ken found her a couple cycles later at their usual meeting place, at the open Window in the Corridor between Copy and Verify.

<Like it?> he said. <I love it>

<Are you flirting with me?> Mary97 asked.

<What if I am> he said, and the familiar words were almost as good as a smile.

<Then come with me>

Ken678 followed Mary97 to the Browser twice more that week. Each time was the same; each time was perfect. As soon as Mary turned over the queen of hearts, Ken heard a clippity clop. A Window opened in the windowless room and there was the horse coming down the Boulevard, its enormous penis almost dragging the cobblestones. Mary97's ripe round perfect breasts were spilling over the top of her red lace brassiere as she said <See the horse> and reached behind her back, unfastening--

Unfastening her bra! And just as her cups started to fall away, just as Ken678 was about to see her nipples, a gendarme's whistle blew and Mary97 was wearing the white blouse again, the blue and orange tie. The window was closed, the queen of hearts face down.

<The only problem with Easter Eggs> Mary said <is that they are always the same. Whoever designed this one had a case of arrested development>

<I like always the same> Ken replied.

As he left for the weekend, Ken678 scanned the crowd of office regulars filing down the long steps of City Hall. Which woman was Mary97? There was, of course, no way of knowing. They were all ages, all nationalities, but they all looked the same with their blank stares, neural interface gold earrings, and mesh marks from their net gloves.

The weekend seemed to last forever. As soon as the week restarted, Ken raced through his Calls and Tasks, then cruised the Corridors until he found Mary, at 'their' spot, the open Window between Copy and Verify.

<Isn't it romantic> she said, looking out into April in Paris.

<I guess> said Ken, impatiently. He was thinking of her hands behind her back, unfastening.

<What could be more romantic> she asked, and he could tell she was teasing.

<A red brassiere> he said.

<Then come with me> she said.

They met in the Browser three times that week. Three times Ken678 heard the horse, three times he watched the red lace brassiere falling away, falling away. That week was the closest to happiness he would ever come.

<Do you ever wonder what's under the third card?> Mary97 asked. They were standing at the Window between Copy and Verify. A new week had barely restarted. In April in Paris the chestnuts were in blossom above the cobblestones. The cafes were empty. A few stick figures in the distance were getting in and out of carriages.

<I guess> Ken678 said, though it wasn't true. He didn't like to wonder.

<Me too> said Mary.

When they met a few cycles later in the windowless room off the Browser, Mary put her red-fingernailed hand on the third card and said <There's one way to find out>

Ken didn't answer. He felt a sudden chill.

<We both have to do it> she said. <You turn up the queen and I'll turn up the third card. Ready?>

<I guess> Ken said, though it was a lie.

The third card was the ace of spades. As soon as it turned up, Ken knew something was wrong.

Something felt different.

It was the cobblestones, under his feet.

It was April in Paris and Ken678 was walking down the boulevard. Mary97 was beside him. She was wearing a low cut sleeveless peasant blouse and a long full skirt.

Ken was terrified. Where was the Window? Where was the windowless room? <Where are we?> he asked.

<We are in April in Paris> Mary said. <Inside the environment! Isn't it exciting?>

Ken tried to stop walking but he couldn't. <I think we're stuck> he said. He tried to close his eyes to avoid panic, but he couldn't.

Mary just smiled the Mary smile and they walked along the boulevard, under the blossoming chestnut trees. They passed a cafe, they turned a corner; they passed another cafe, turned another corner. It was always the same. The same trees, the same cafes, the same cobblestones. The carriages and stick figures in the distance never got any closer.

<Isn't it romantic?> Mary said. <And don't say you guess>

She looked different somehow. Maybe it was the outfit. Her peasant blouse was cut very low. Ken tried to look down it but he couldn't.

They passed another cafe. This time Mary97 turned in, and Ken was sitting across from her at a small sidewalk table.

<Voila!> she said. <This Easter Egg is more interactive. You just have to look for new ways to do things> She was still smiling that Mary smile. The table was heart-shaped, like the table in the windowless room. Ken leaned across it but he still couldn't see down her blouse.

<Isn't it romantic!> Mary said. <Why don't you let me order?>

<It's time to head back> Ken said. <I'll bet our folders->

<Don't be silly> Mary said, opening the menu.

<-are blinking like crazy> he finished because it was already in his buffer.

A waiter appeared. He wore a white shirt and black pants. Ken tried to look at his face but he didn't exactly have one. There were only three items on the menu:

WALK

ROOM

HOME

Mary pointed at ROOM and before she had closed the menu they were in a wedge-shaped attic room with French doors, sitting on the edge of a low bed. Now Ken could see down Mary97's blouse. In fact he could see his two hands reach out and pulled it down, uncovering her two plump, perfect breasts. Her nipples were as big and as brown as cookies. Through the French doors Ken could see the Eiffel Tower and the boulevard.

<Mary> he said as she helped him pull up her skirt. Smiling that Mary smile, she lay back with her blouse and skirt both bunched around her waist. Ken heard a familiar clippity-clop from the boulevard below as Mary spread her plump, perfect thighs wide.

<April in Paris> she said. Her red-tipped fingers pulled her little French underpants to one side and

He kissed her sweet mouth. <Mary!> he said.

Her red-tipped fingers pulled her little French underpants to one side and

He kissed her sweet red mouth. <Mary!> he said.

Her red-tipped fingers pulled her little French underpants to one side and

He kissed her sweet red cookie mouth. <Mary!> he said.

A gendarmes's whistle blew and they were back at the sidewalk cafe. The menu was closed on the heart-shaped table. <Did you like that?> Mary asked. <And don't say you guess>

<Like it? I loved it> Ken said. <But shouldn't we head back?>

<Back?> Mary shrugged. Ken didn't know she could shrug. She was holding a glass of green liquid.

Ken opened the menu and the faceless waiter appeared.

There were only three items on the menu. Before Mary could point, Ken pointed at HOME, and the table and the waiter were gone. He and Mary97 were in the windowless room, and all the cards were face down except for the ten of diamonds.

<Why do you want to spoil everything> Mary said.

<I don't-> Ken started, but he never got to finish. His Folder was blinking insistently, waitstate interrupt, and he was gone.

<It was romantic> Ken678 insisted a few cycles later, when he joined Mary97 in their usual spot, at the Window in the Corridor between Copy and Verify. <And I did love it>

<Then why were you so nervous?>

<Was I nervous?>

She smiled that Mary smile.

<Because I just get nervous> Ken said. <Because April in Paris is not really part of Microserf Office 6.9>

<Sure it is. It's the environment.>

<It's just wallpaper. We're not supposed to be in there>

<It's an Easter Egg> Mary97 said. <We're not supposed to be behaving an office romance, either>

<An office romance> Ken said. <Is that what we're having?>

<Come with me and I'll show you> Mary said, and he did. And she did.

And he did and she did and they did. He met her three times that week and three times the next week, every spare moment it seemed. The cobblestones and the cafes still made Ken678 nervous but he loved the wedge-shaped attic room. He loved Mary's nipples as brown and as big as cookies; loved her blouse and skirt bunched around her waist as she lay on her back with her plump, perfect thighs spread wide; loved the clippity clop and her red-tipped fingers and her little French underpants pulled to one side; loved her.

It was, after all, a love affair.

The problem was, Mary97 never wanted to come back to Microserf Office 6.9. After the wedge-shaped room she wanted to walk on the boulevard under the blossoming chestnut trees, or sit in the cafe watching the stick figures get in and out of carriages in the distance.

<Isn't it romantic?> she would say, swirling the green liquid in her glass.

<Time to head back> Ken would say. <I'll bet our Folders are blinking like crazy>

<You always say that> Mary would always say.

Ken678 had always hated weekends because he missed the warm electron buzz of Microserf Office; but now he missed it during the week as well. If he wanted to be with Mary97 (and he did, he did!) it meant April in Paris. Ken missed 'their' Window in the Corridor between Copy and Verify. He missed the busy

streaming icons and the Folders bulging with files and blinking with Callsand Tasks. He missed the red brassiere.

<What happens-> Ken asked late one week <-if we just turn overthe queen?>

He was just turning over the queen.

<Nothing happens> Mary answered. <Nothing but the redbrassiere>

She was already turning over the ace.

<We need to talk> Ken678 said finally. It was April in Paris, asusual. He was walking with Mary97 along the boulevard, under the blossomingchestnut trees.

<What about?> she asked. She turned a corner, then another.

<Things> he said.

<Isn't it romantic?> she said as she turned into a cafe.

<I guess> he said. <But->

<I hate it when you say that> Mary said.

<-I miss the Office> Ken finished because it was already in hisbuffer.

Mary97 shrugged. <To each his own> She swirled the green liquid inher glass. It was thick as syrup; it clung to the sides of the glass. Ken hadthe feeling she was looking through him instead of at him. He tried to seedown her peasant blouse but couldn't.

<I thought you wanted to talk> Mary said, swirling the green liquidin her glass.

<I did. We did> Ken said. He reached for the menu.

Mary pulled it away. <I'm not in the mood>

<We should be getting back then> Ken said. <I'll bet our Foldersare blinking like crazy>

Mary shrugged. <Go ahead> she said.

<What?>

<You miss the Office. I don't. I'm going to stay here>

<Here?> Ken tried to look around. He could only look in onedirection, toward the boulevard.

<Why not> Mary said. <Who's going to miss me there?> Shetook another drink of the green liquid and opened the menu. Ken was confused.Had she been drinking it all along?

And why were there four items on the menu?

<Me?> Ken suggested.

But the waiter had already appeared; he, at least, was still thesame.

<Go ahead, go for it> Mary said, and Ken pointed at HOME. Mary waspointing at the new item, STAY.

That weekend was the longest of Ken678's life. As soon as the week restarted, he hurried to the Corridor between Copy and Verify, hoping against hope. But there was no Window open and of course no Mary97.

He looked for her between Calls and Tasks, checking every queue, every Corridor. Finally, toward the middle of the week, he went to the windowless room off the Browser by himself, for the first time.

Mary97's Folder was gone. The cards on the tiny heart-shaped table were all face down, except for the ten of diamonds.

He turned up the queen of hearts, but nothing happened. He wasn't surprised.

He turned up the ace of spades and felt the cobblestones under his feet. It was April in Paris. The chestnuts were in blossom but Ken678 felt no joy. Only a sort of thick sorrow.

He turned in at the first cafe and there she was, sitting at the heart-shaped table.

<Look who's here> she said.

<Your Folder is gone> Ken said. <It was in the room when I got back, blinking like crazy. but that was before the weekend. Now it's gone>

Mary shrugged. <I'm not going back there anyway>

<What happened to us?> Ken asked.

<Nothing happened to us> Mary said. <Something happened to me. Remember when you found what you were looking for? Well, I found what I was looking for. I like it here>

Mary pushed the glass of green liquid toward him. <You could like it here too> she said.

Ken didn't answer. He was afraid if he did he would start to cry, even though Ken can't cry.

<But it's OK> Mary97 said. She even smiled her Mary smile. She took another drink and opened the menu. The waiter appeared, and she pointed to ROOM, and Ken knew somehow that this was to be the last time.

In the wedge-shaped attic room, he could see down Mary's blouse perfectly. Then his hands were cupping her plump, perfect breasts for the last time. Through the French doors he could see the Eiffel Tower and the boulevard. <Mary!> he said and she lay back with her blouse and skirt both bunched around her waist and he knew somehow it was the last time. He heard a familiar clippity-clop from the boulevard as she spread her perfect thighs and said <April in Paris!> Her red-tipped fingers pulled her little French underpants to one side and Ken knew somehow it was the last time.

He kissed her sweet red cookie mouth. <Mary!> he said and she pulled her little French underpants to one side and he knew somehow it was the last time.

<Mary!> he said.

It was the last time.

A gendarmes's whistle blew and they were back at the sidewalk cafe. The menu was closed on the heart-shaped table. <Are you flirting with me?> Mary asked.

<What a sad joke she is making> Ken678 thought. He tried to smile even though Kens can't smile.

<You're supposed to answer, what if I am?> Mary said. She took another drink of the green liquid. She swirled it jauntily. No matter how much she drank there was always plenty left.

<Time to head back> Ken said. <My folder will be blinking like crazy>

<I understand. It's OK. Come and see me sometime> she said. <And don't say I guess>

Ken678 nodded even though Kens can't nod. It was more like a stiff bow. Mary97 opened the menu. The waiter came and Ken pointed to HOME.

Ken678 spent the next week, the next two, working like crazy. He was all over Microserf Office. As soon as his Folder blinked he was off, on Call, double and triple Tasking, burning up the Corridors. He avoided the Corridor between Copy and Verify, though, just as he avoided the Browser.

He almost paused at an open Window once. But he didn't. He didn't want to look at April in Paris. It was too lonely without Mary.

Two, four weeks passed before Ken678 went back to the windowless room in the Browser. He dreaded seeing the cards on the heart-shaped table. But the cards were gone. Even the table was gone. Ken saw the scuff marks along the wall, and he realized the Optimizer had been through. The room had been erased again, and was being overwritten.

When he left the room he was no longer lonely. He was accompanied by a great sorrow.

The next week he went by the room again and found it filled with empty Folders. Perhaps one of them was Mary97's. Now that the Easter Egg was gone, Ken678 no longer felt guilty about not going to see Mary97. He was free to love Microserf Office 6.9 again; free to enjoy the soft electron buzz, the busy streaming icons and the long, silent queues.

But at least once a week he stops by the Corridor between Copy and Verify and opens the Window. You might find him there even now, looking out into April in Paris. The chestnuts are in blossom, the cobblestones shine, the carriages are letting stick figures off in the distance. The cafes are almost empty. A lone figure sits at a tiny table, a figure that might be her.

They say you never get over your first love. <Then Mary97 must have been my first love> Ken678 likes to think. He has no interest in getting over her. He loves to remember her red fingernails, her soft Mary voice and Mary smile, her nipples as big and as brown as cookies, her little French underpants pulled to one side.

The figure in the cafe must be Mary97. Ken678 hopes so. He hopes she is OK in April in Paris. He hopes she is as happy as she once made, is still making, him. He hopes she is as sad.

But look: his Folder is blinking like crazy, an waitstate interrupt, and it's time to go.

the end