

Natulife

David Brin

I KNOW, THINGS TASTE BETTER fresh, not packaged. Hamburger clots your arteries and hurts the rain forest. We should eat like our stone age ancestors, who dug roots, got lots of exercise, and always stayed a little hungry. So they say.

Still, I balked when my wife served me termites.

"Come on, sweetheart. Try one. They're delicious."

Gaia already had the hive uncrated and set up by the time I came home. Putting down my briefcase, I stared at hundreds of the pasty-colored critters scabbling under a plastic cover, tending their fat queen, devouring kitchen trimmings, making themselves right at home in my home.

Gaia offered me a probe made of fine-grained pseudowood . "See? You use this stickto fish after nice plump ones, like chimpanzees do in the wild!"

I gaped at the insect habitat, filling the last free space between our veggiehydratorand the meat-sublimate racks. "But . . . we agreed. Our apartment'stoo small . . . "

"Oh, sweetie , I know you'll just love them. Anyway, don't I need protein and vitaminsfor the baby?"

Putting my hand over her swelling belly normally softened any objections I might have. Only this time my own stomach was in rebellion. "I thought you already got allthat stuff from the Yeast-Beast machine." I pointed to the vat occupying halfof our guest bathroom, venting nutritious vapors from racks of tissue-grown cutlets.

"That stuff's not natural," Gaia complained with a moue. "Come on, try the real thing. It's just like they show on the NatuLife Channel!"

"I . . . don't think . . . "

"Watch, I'll show you!"

Gaia passed the stick-probe through a sealed hatch to delve after six-legged prey, her tongue popping out as she concentrated, quivering with excitement from

herred ponytail down to her rounded belly. "Got one!" she cried, drawing a twitchinginsect out the hatch and to her lips.

"You're not seriously . . ." My throat stopped as the termite vanished, head first.

Bliss crossed Gaia's face. "M-m-m, crunchy!" She smacked, revealing a still-twitchingtail.

I found enough manly dignity to raggedly chastise her.

"Don't . . . talk with your mouth full."

Turning away, I added -- "If you need me, I'll be in my workout room."

Gaia had rearranged our sleep quarters again. Now the cramped chamber merged seamlesslywith a tropical paradise, including raucous bird calls and mist from aroaring waterfall. The impressive effects made it hard navigating past the bed, so I ordered the hologram blanked. Silence fell as the vid -wall turned gray, leaving just the real-life portion of her pocket jungle to contend with -- atangle of potted plants warrantied to give off purer oxygen than a pregnant womancould sniff from bottles.

Wading through creepers and mutant ficuses , I finally found the moss-lined laundryhamper and threw in my work clothes. The fragrant Clean-U-Lichen had

already sani-scavenged and folded my exercise togs, which felt warm and skin-supple when I drew them on. The organo -electric garment rippled across my skin as if alive, seeming just as eager for a workout as I was.

I'd been through hell at the office. Traffic on the commuter-tube was miserable and the smog index had been red-lining for a week. Termites had only been the last straw.

"Let's go," I muttered. "I haven't killed anything all day."

Long Stick spotted a big old buck gazelle.

"It limps," my hunting partner said, rising from his haunches to point across a hundred yards of dry savannah. "Earlier, it met a lion."

I rose from my stretching exercises to peer past a screen of sheltering boulders, following Long Stick's gnarly arm. One animal stood apart from the herd. Sniffing an unsteady breeze, the buck turned to show livid claw marks along one flank. Clearly, this prey was a pushover compared to last Sunday's pissed-off rhino. The virtual reality machine must have sensed I'd had a rough day.

My hands stroked the spear, tracing its familiar nicks and knots. An illusion of raw, archetypal power.

"The beaters are ready, Chief," my hunting partner said. I nodded.

"Let's get on with it."

Long Stick pursed his lips and mimicked the call of a bee-catcher bird. Moments later, the animals snorted as a shift in the heavy air brought insinuations of humanscent. Another hundred yards beyond the herd, where the sparse pampas faded into a hazy stand of acacia trees, I glimpsed the rest of our hunting party, creeping forward.

My hunters. My tribe.

I was tempted to reach up and adjust the virtual-reality helmet, which fed this artificial world to my eyes and ears . . . to zoom in on those distant human images. Alas, except for Long Stick, I had never met any of the other hunters up close. Good persona programs aren't cheap, and with a baby coming, there were other things for Gaia and me to spend money on.

Yeah, like a termite hive! Resentment fed on surging adrenaline. Never trust a gatherer. That was the hunters' creed. Love 'era, protect 'era, die for them, but always remember, their priorities are different.

The beaters stood as one, shouting. The gazelles reared, wheeling the other way --toward us. Long Stick hissed. "Here they come!"

The Accu-Terrain floor thrummed beneath my feet to the charge of a hundred

hooves. Sensu -Surround earphones brought the stampede roar of panicky beasts thundering toward us, wild-eyed with ardor to survive.

Clutching my spear in sweaty palms, I crouched as graceful animals vaulted overhead, ribcages heaving.

Meanwhile, a faint, subsonic mantra recited. I am part of nature . . . one with nature. . .

The young, and breeding females, we let flash by without harm. But then, trailing and already foaming with fatigue, came the old buck, its leap leaden, unsteady, and I knew the program really was taking it easy on me today.

Long Stick howled. I sprinted from cover, swiftly taking the lead. The auto-treadmill's bumps and gullies matched whatever terrain the goggles showed me, so my feet knew how to land and thrust off again. The body suit brushed my skin with synthetic wind. Flared nostrils inhaled sweat, exhilaration, and for a time I forgot I was in a tiny room on the eightieth floor of a suburban Chitown con-apt, surrounded by fifty million neighbors .

I was deep in the past of my forebears, back in a time when men were few, and therefore precious, magical.

Back when nature thrived . . . and included us.

Easy workout or no, I got up a good sweat before the beast was cornered against

astand of jagged saw grass. The panting gazelle's black eye met mine with more thanresignation. In it I saw tales of past battles and matings . Of countless struggleswon, and finally lost. I couldn't have felt more sympathy if he'd been real.

My throwing arm cranked and I thought -- Long ago, I'd have done this to feed my wifeand child.

That was then.As for here and now?

Well . . . this sure beats the hell out of racquetball.

Mass-produced con-apt housing lets twelve billion Earthlings live in minim decency, at the cost of dwelling all our lives in boxes piled halfway to the sky. Lotteries award scarce chances to visit mountains, the seashore. Meanwhile, Virtualitykeeps us sane within our hi-rise caves.

On my way to shower after working out, I saw that Gaia's private VR room was in use. Impulsively, I tiptoed into the closet next door, feeling for the crack betweenstacked room units, and pressed my eye close to the narrow chink of light. Gaia squatted on her treadmill floor, shaped to mimic a patch of uneven ground. Her body suit fit her pregnant form like a second skin, while helmet and gogglesmade her resemble some kind of bug, or star alien. But I knew her scenario, like mine, lay in the distant past. She made digging motions with a phantomtool, invisible to me, held in her cupped hands. Then she reached down

to pluck another ghost item, her gloves simulating touch to match whatever root orbiter it was that she saw through the goggles. Gala pantomimed brushing dirt away from her find, then dropping it into a bag at her side.

Sometimes, eavesdropping like this, I'd feel a chill wondering how odd I must look during workouts, leaping about, brandishing invisible spears and shouting at my "hunters." No wonder most people keep VR so private.

Gaia tilted her head as if listening to somebody, then laughed aloud. "I know! Didn't the two of them look funny? Coming home all proud with that skinny little squirrel on a stick? Such great hunters! That didn't stop them from gobbling half a carrot!"

Naturally, I couldn't see or hear Gaia's companions --presumably other women gatherers in the same simulated tribe she had been visiting since years before we met. She stopped again, listening, then turned around. "It's your baby, Flower. That's okay, I'll take care of him." She laughed. "I need the practice."

I watched her gently pick up an invisible child. Her body suit tugged and contracted, mimicking a wriggly weight in her arms. Awkwardly, Gala cooed at an infant who dwelled only in a world of software, and her mind. I crept away to take a shower, at once ashamed of spying and glad that I had.

Towel-drying my wet hair, I entered the bedroom to find the wall screen tuned to Mother Earth Channel Fifty-Three -- a green-robed priestess reciting a sermon.

"... returning to more natural ways does not mean having to sacrifice nil modern. . . ."

Gaia emerged from her closet wearing a bright cotton shift over her blossoming figure, sorting through a cloth bag slung over one shoulder. "Where are you going?" I tried asking, but the life-sized matron on the wall was doubly loud.

"... we should eat like our ancestors, who caught meat but twice a week or so. All other food was gathered by skilled women"

I tugged Gaia's elbow, repeating my question. She startled, then smiled at me. "NatuBirthclass, Sweetheart. Lots to learn before I'm ready. Just two months left, you know."

"But I thought . . ."

"... Fats and sweets were rare back then, hence our cravings. Now self-discipline must take the place of scarcity --"

I shouted. "Computer! Shut off that noise!"

The priestess's mouth moved silently. Gaia looked reproving.

"I don't like being left out," I complained.

Gaia stroked my face. "Oh Toms, don't be off-baud. We're just covering nest and birthing methods, tonight. A man would be bored."

Hm. Maybe. Femismo says there are some things men can't understand. Quite a shift from the way old-fashioned feminism preached sharing all life's duties. My dad used to proudly tell of cutting the cord, the day I was born. I kind of liked that idea, but now they call it unnatural. Birth has always been a female ritual. That's what they say.

"You just stay home, be good, and . . ." Gaia pressed against me, affectionately, her eyes lighting. "You had a good hunt, didn't you? I can tell. It always leaves you frisky."

I pulled away. "Mph. Go to class, then. I'll be okay."

She tiptoed to kiss my chin. "Look by the console for a present . . . something to show I haven't forgotten you." Gala blew another kiss from the front door, and was gone.

I wandered over to the master house controller and picked up a brightly colored program plaque, still tacky where Gaia must have peeled off a discount sticker from the NatuLife Store. Something for the Hunter, the title read, and I snorted. Right. Something to keep the man of the house distracted beating drums with a bunch of make-believe comrades, while a wife's attention turns to serious matters-- nesting and the continuity of life. The blyware gift might have been meant as a loving gesture, but right then it made me feel superfluous, more left

outthan ever.

Sliding the plaq into the console, I accidentally brushed the volume knob and thebooming voice of the priestess returned.

" . . . must face the fact that Earth's billions won't accept returning to natureby scratching mud and sleeping on dirt floors. We must learn new ways, bothmore natural and smarter "

I snickered at that. Funny how each generation thinks it knows what "smarter" means.

LONG STICK greeted me with a sweeping bow, at once both sardonic and respectful.

"Welcome back, oh Great Chief."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered at my simulated sidekick. "Okay, I'll bite. What's different, this time?"

Everything seemed less real here in the living room, with my virtuality helmet andbody suit left hanging in the closet. The familiar, primeval forest of my privateworld now cut off sharply where the vial-wall met the couch. Yet, I couldhave sworn my ersatz companion seemed subtler, warmer, somehow.

"The flint-smiths are ready to show their wares, chief."

"The who. . . ?" I began. But Long Stick simply turned to begin striding down a nearby path. The living room had no treadmill-floor, so I stood still, watching Long Stick's buckskin-draped form plow past trees and boulders and down a series of switchbacks. A rhythmic sound grew steadily louder--a tinny clatter of brittle objects colliding and breaking. Finally, we reached a sandy streambed where several figures could be seen sitting on logs, hammering stones together.

Oh, yes. Flint-smiths. NatuLife stocked countless "You-Are-There" programs in all the ancient arts, from bronze casting to automobile design. With our shared interest in the Neolithic, Gala had cleverly bought a stone age simulation the computer could fit right into my private world, to help me pass an evening while she trained for motherhood.

Okay, I sighed. Let's get on with it.

A youngster with a wispy beard noticed us, stopped hammering, and nudged the others-- a weathered old man and a sturdy-looking fellow with one leg much shorter than the other. The smiths rose and bowed respectfully. Naturally, these wouldn't be full scale sim -personas, like Long Stick, but animated actors in a limited scenario.

"We have worked those chert cores you traded from Seacliff Tribe, oh Chief," the oldest one said, lipping through gaps in his teeth. "Would you like to see?"

I shrugged. "Why not?"

He spread a fur and began laying out an assortment of neolithic cutlery, glinting under ersatz sunshine. There were spearheads, axes, burins and scrapers -- plus other tools I couldn't identify offhand -- each item the product of at least a hundred strokes, skillfully cleaving native rock into shapes useful for daily life. A prehistoric kitchen, armory and machine shop, all in one. The smith offered to let me feel an edge. It was disturbing to watch the computer manifest an image of my own hand, holding an object I couldn't feel. I resolved to try again later, replaying the scenario with body gloves on.

"Well, it's been interesting," I said after a while, feeling fatigued. "But I think that's enough for now --"

A high shout broke in. Everyone looked past my shoulder, but the scene remained obstinately riveted until a new figure entered view from the left. Shorter, slimmer than the others, this one strode with a springy, elfin gait, clothed in the tunic and leggings of a hunter. The newcomer carried a bundle of slender wooden saplings the right size for fashioning spears. Only when these were dumped with a clatter did I note with surprise that this hunter was female.

"Ho, Chief," she greeted me, acknowledging Long Stick with a nod.

My companion leaned over and muttered, "This is Ankle-of-a-Giraffe, daughter of Antler and Pear Blossom. She is one of the beaters in the hunt."

"That's what I want to talk to you about," the young stone-ager said, planting

fistson her hips. She was lithe and a trifle lean for my tastes -- as well as beingsmudged from head to toe-- but she made eye contact in a bold, provocative way. "I'm sick of just beating, Great Chief. I want to be in on the kill. I want to learn from you two."

The stone-smiths hissed surprise. Long Stick rambled."Ankle! You forget yourself!"

The girl bowed submissively, yet her eyes held fierce determination. She seemed readyto speak again when I shouted.

"Freeze frame!"

All action halted, leaving the "tribesmen" locked in time. A blue jay hovered in suspendedflight across the gully while I wrestled with confusion. It wasn't the ideaof a female hunter . . . plenty of tribes allowed it, according to tradition. But why complicate matters with such a player right now, just as the simulationseemed about to end? What did it have to do withprehistoric tool-making?

"Computer.This isn't just a packaged you-are-there, is it?"

"No it is not. These are fully autonomous persona programs, operating stochasticallyin your private sire world."

So, Gaia had been generous after all! Long Stick was no longer my only,

full-scale companion. But how could she afford . . .

"In addition, core memory has been enhanced to allow up to five flexible personae at any one time."

"Oh, I get it."

Gaia must have needed more memory for her own programs, the midwives and doulas and other helpers she'd need when the baby came. The expense was already budgeted. No wonder she could throw in a few extra playmates for me, purchased at discount. After wondering for a minute whether to feel hurt, pleased, or amused. . . I finally decided it didn't really matter. I hesitated, then decided.

"Computer, hold simulation for transfer to my rec room."

Minutes later, fully suited for virtuality, I held one of the tool-knappers' new flintknives in my hands, each curve and serrated edge conveyed by subtle, electrochem gloves. The stone-smiths seemed pleased by my admiration. It was a good knife, of the finest obsidian, bound to an ivory handle carved with figures of running horses. Despite not being real, it was the most splendid thing I had ever owned.

The treadmill worked beneath my feet, mimicking movement as Long Stick and I finally departed the neolithic factory, heading toward Lookout Point to observe

migratory herds of wildebeest and eland crossing the plain. Along the way, we passed the young beater, Ankle, squatting by the river bank where she'd been banished by Long Stick for impertinence. Tying stone points to spear-shafts, tightening the leather thongs with her teeth, she looked up as we passed by, unrepentant, a light of challenge in her eyes.

I paused, then turned to Long Stick. "We could use a scout to carry messages. Next hunt, bring this one along."

My simulated friend returned one of his sharp looks, but nodded silently. Ankle turned away, wisely hiding a jubilant grin.

I emerged from my primeval world to find Gaia already home from her class, nestled in our small, darkened bedroom. I slipped between the sheets quietly, but soon felt her hand upon my thigh. "I've been thinking about you," my wife whispered, her breath warm on my ear.

Pregnancy doesn't exactly mean no sex. Doctors say it's all right if you're careful.

In fact, it can be much better than all right. Gaia was very skilled.

The buffalo groaned, mired in muddy shallows with five spears in its flank. I commanded no more thrown.

Ankle protested, waving her javelin. "Why not finish it off?"

"Because the Chief said no!" Long Stick snapped. But I gestured for patience.

With Ankle for an apprentice, I now appreciated the adage--You never really know something til you teach it.

"Think. What happens if he falls where he stands?"

She eyed the panting beast. "He'll fall into the riv . . . Oh! We'd lose half the carcass." Ankle nodded soberly. "So we try getting him ashore first?"

"Right. And quickly! We don't want him suffering needlessly."

Several tribesmen made pious gestures in agreement. Through ritual, hunters like these used to appease the spirits of beasts they killed, which made me wonder -- would modern folk eat so much meat if they had to placate the ghost of each steer or chicken? My time in a simulated stone age hasn't made a vegetarian of me, but I better appreciate the fact that meat once lived.

Long Stick called for rope. Bearing coils of braided leather, we worked toward the bull from three sides. The treadmill imitated slippery mud beneath my feet, while the body suit tickled nerves so that I felt hip-deep in slimy water.

Electronically-stirred receptors in my nose "smelled" the creature's blood and defiance, above the rank swamp stench. It was hard work, floundering toward our prey. Harder and more varied than lifting weights in a gym, and more terrifying.

The buffalo shifted left and right, bellowing and threatening with its horns.

Everything had seemed more vivid since Gala bought that extra memory, including this beast's hot zeal to survive. "Watch out!" Ankle cried as it lunged. I swerved and felt a wall of fur and muscle glance off my shoulder, rushing through space I'd just occupied. Teetering in the mud, I glimpsed a snaking lasso chase the old bull, landing round its neck.

"Got him!" Long Stick cried.

"My turn!" called a higher voice. Ankle cast her lariat-- only to fall short as the angry beast thrashed aside.

"Wait!" I cried when she plunged after it. Too late, I watched the girl vanish beneath the frothy, scummy surface.

"Ankle!"

Suddenly, I was too busy dodging to worry about my young aide. Sharp horns flashed viciously. While I knew the computer wouldn't kill me, other slipups in the gym had left me bruised for weeks.

She's only a program, I told myself, backpedaling from a roaring shaggy face the size of a small pickup. Programs can take care of themselves.

"Yip- yi-i-yip!"

The cry coincided with a sudden change in the creature's bellows. It whirled and I blinked in astonishment. The young hunter, Ankle, had clambered on its back! Dripping water and marsh reeds, she held tightly to its mane and slipped her noose over the shaggy head, while the bull snorted, wild-eyed and convulsing. Others joined her exultant shout as ropes pulled taut from three directions.

Resignation seemed to settle over the animal then, as it let itself be drawn toward dry land. Two meters . . . three . . .

Suddenly, in one last, desperate heave, it reared. Ankle flew off, arms whirling to splash near the bull's stomping hooves.

With a shout I dove toward her.

Or tried to. Today's virtuality tech can't fake buoyancy, so the machine wouldn't cooperate. The body suit did let me flounder forward, though, evading the thrashing horns while flailing underwater in search of my apprentice.

Frantic seconds passed . . . and finally I felt the touch of a slim arm! A small hand closed vice-like round my wrist as I yanked back hard . . . just as the buffalo pitched over, toppling with a mighty splash on the spot where Ankle had lain.

We made it ashore downstream from where the tribe was already commencing the frenetic ritual of butchery. In olden times, a kill like this came at best once a month, so these hunters sang their joy to the spirits of water, earth and sky.

But the artful ceremony was wasted on me as I slogged uphill, feeling pressure leavemy cramping legs exactly like water slipping reluctantly aside. The weight inmy arms seemed all too real as I lowered Ankle to a patch of grass.

This was an awful lot of trouble to go to, just for a piece of software. I might haverationalized that good persona programs are expensive, but the thought didn'tcross my mind as I hurriedly checked Ankle's breathing. Pale, mud-grimed fromcrown to toe, she gave two sudden, wheezing coughs, then revealed twin flashesof abalone blue as her eyes popped open. Ankle gasped a sudden, stricken soband threw both arms around my neck.

" Urk!"I answered. Never before had my exercise togs yanked me down so, into sucha flood of sensations. Pain lanced my palms from impacting pebbles. Sunlight spread heat across my mud-splattered back. Then there was the press of herwarm body, clinging beneath mine, much more cushiony, in places, than I had imagined.

Soon I realized Ankle no longer clung to me for comfort. She was moving breathingin ways having little to do with reassurance. I grunted surprise for a secondtime, and reached up to pry loose her arms. "Stop simulation!" I shouted.

My last glimpse, before yanking off the helmet, was of Ankle lying there, muddy allover, wiry-strong and hunter-attired, yet suddenly utterly female, gazing at meboth worshipful and willing.

She was only software -- bits of illusion on a silicon chip. Besides, I barely

knew her.

She was already the second most desirable woman I had ever known.

Now get this, I love my wife. Always figured myself one of those lucky bastards whose woman understands him, inside and out, and despite that thinks the world of him.

So, I figured, there's got to be a mistake here!

Trembling I peeled off my sweaty body suit and stumbled into the shower, wondering, How am I going to explain this to Gaia?

Then, while soaping myself, I thought, What's to explain? I didn't do anything!

Rinsing I pondered, And if I had? Would it've been adultery? Or an exotic form of masturbation?

I recall how Morn blithely tolerated Dad's collection of mildly erotic magazines, apparently quite unthreatened by his harmless, private fantasies. Nor did Gaia ever seem to consider my electronic Playboy subscription a rival.

Sometimes she would dial it up herself . . . "for the articles." Still, if a certain amount of healthy, visually stimulated autoeroticism was okay, I also knew it would hurt her terribly if I ever had a real-life affair.

So . . . what had nearly taken place in my VR gym? The experience seemed to fall somewhere between bolting a co-ed and an encounter with an inflatable doll.

Too bad they never produced that sci-fi gimmick, a direct computer-mind interlace. Then I might have dismissed any sim -adventure as something purely mental. But so much of what we are and do is tied up in our bodies . . . the nerves, hormones and muscles. To have a truly vivid experience, you must take your meat along.

With flesh taking part, virtuality can mimic any surface. I've crawled across grass and tide pools and steaming sands while stalking prey.

But simulating a woman . . . ?

"Hi-tech marches on, but this is ridiculous!" I laughed, drying under a blast of warm air, then put on a terry cloth robe and went out to tell Gaia everything. I had last seen my wife in the nursery, where she had been humming while sorting things for the baby, and cheerfully wished me a "good hunt."

Gaia wasn't there, but I felt a warm glow just looking around the little room, its walls decorated with hologram mobiles and floating planets. I had installed most of the nursery equipment myself, including the bottom-baster, with its simmering vat of Liquid Diaper. The flotation crib would be programmed to mimic my wife's heartbeat and other rhythms, comforting baby's first weeks with sensations familiar from the womb.

This was where my life was anchored, I thought. Not in some make-believe hunting band that feminism psychologists thought every modern man required. My family. For all its pollution, crowds and exhaustion, the real world was where you lived real life.

"Gaia?" I asked, searching the living room. "You'll never guess what happened .

.. "

She wasn't there either. I tried the kitchen, throbbing with busy, scrabbling sounds of captive insects. Still no sign of her.

Funny, I thought. She hadn't said anything about another NatuBirth class tonight.

"Computer, did my wife leave a message where she was going?"

The control voice answered. "Your wife hasn't left the apartment. She is in her VirtualityRoom."

"Ah . . . of course. Her turn. Must have gone in while I showered."

I sat on the couch gingerly, still feeling tremors from this evening's hi-stress workout. I picked up the remote control and scanned tonight's cable listings. Besides the normal thousand channels of infotainment, there were amateur-rids, pubforums, hobby and spec-interest lines, two-way chatshows , and "Uncle Fred"

showingslides of his blimp-ride to Everest. The usual stuff. I fell back on dialinga good book from the library, and actually stared at the first page of Robinson Crusoe for about ten minutes before pounding the cushion beside me.

"Hell."

I told myself I was getting up to fetch a drink . . . then to go to thecan . . . then to look in the closet for my tennis shoes . . . Maybe I'd go outside for anold-fashioned walk

I found the sneakers where I'd left them, near the crack in the closet wall.

Leaning close, I heard soft sounds coming from the room next door -- my wife's privatesanctum.

They weren't sounds of conversation, but exertion, heavy breathing.

Well, gatherers also used to work hard, netting fish, cutting wild grain

I knew I was rationalizing as I brought my eye to the crack.

Wearing helmet and body suit, Gaia squatted much as the last time I had seen her inthis place, hands outstretched and down before her, as if grasping something.

Underneath, the treadmill-floor mimicked an oblong hummock which she straddled whilestrenuously rocking back and forth. Whatever she was doing in her private world, it apparently involved a lot of effort, for her head rocked back and I heardher moan aloud.

I knew that sound. I looked again at the shape beneath her, and saw that it recreated no patch of ground, no fallen log. Even without goggles for seeing, earphones for hearing, or gloves for touching, I could tell the outlines of a man.

I NEEDED THOSE sneakers, after all. I left at once, and took a walk along the skybridges lacing the gray metropolis at the forty story level, overlooking the maze of transport tubes and vibrating machinery which keeps the city alive.

Looking up past the towering canyon walls of Chitown, I could see no stars, just a hazy glow diffused by pollutant haze. Late at night, I should have been grateful for the countless Public Safety cameras, peering from each lamp post.

But they only made me feel conspicuous, supervised. On the veldt, you don't fear being victimized by a million strangers. Twenty thousand years ago there were no strangers. All you needed was your tribe.

I ducked into a local bar, under a 4-D holoneon sign with one dimension burned out. The beer was excellent, the atmosphere depressing. Other men sat nursing drinks, scrupulously avoiding eye contact with those around them. A wire-o in the corner kept dropping quarters into a stim-zap machine, then sticking his head under the hood for direct jolts of electric pleasure. His sighs were sterile, emotionless.

Gaia's had been throaty, lusty.

Now I knew where she had learned that provocative, swaying motion--the one she'd used the last few times we made love. Apparently, she had a tutor, a good one. One I would never meet, let alone get to punch in the face.

Fair is fair, I thought. Hadn't I already rationalized my own encounter with sex-by-simulation, before finding out that Gaia was doing it first? If it fell into the category of masturbation for me, and not infidelity, then why not for her?

That's different! --part of me replied. But hard as I tried, I couldn't see how. My "rival" was a phantom, no threat in real terms. He could never impregnate Gaia, or give her a disease, or boast of cuckolding me to my business partners, or ever take her away from me.

What it really came down to was the mental image, provoking jealousy at a deep, gut level. Jealousy based on ancient drives a civilized man should be able to overcome.

I was no longer sure I wanted to be a civilized man.

No, I didn't get roaring drunk, or provoke a fight with the big guy two stools down. I thought about it, but what the hell? By now I was much too skilled at killing to trust myself in a friendly brawl, out in the real world. Anyway, my neighbor also looked like he worked out. Maybe, for exercise, he took scalps with Cochise, or rode with a VR Genghis Khan. Under our gray urban disguises, we can all be dangerous mysteries.

I paid up and left.

Gaia was dozing on the couch when I got back, or pretending to be. She seemed relieved to have me home, and I tried not to show my inner turmoil. I turned on the TV wall and she, sensing it wiser, went to bed.

Half an hour later, I slipped into my body suit and re-entered my private world.

Weeks passed. Gala grew larger. We spoke little.

My consulting firm finally won the Taiko Tech account, worth millions. I rushed home and celebrated with Ankle by first killing a lion, then making love by a cool bend in the river. We lay together, listening to locusts and the wind in the swaying branches, while a dry heat seemed to suck all the dank, fetid odors of the office out of my skin. Tension at work had left knots up and down my spine, which Ankle worked out with her strong hands.

She listened quietly to my recitation of setbacks and victories in the corporate world, clearly understanding none of it. That didn't matter. My VR people knew and accepted that their chief spent most of his time far away, in the Land of Gods. In a way, Ankle was the perfect, uncritical sounding board.

If only it had been that simple dealing with the hanging, unspoken tension between me and Gala. Ankle would have listened to that, too, but what was there

tosay?

The whole thing was preposterous and my fault. Why should it bother me what my wifedid in fantasy play?

It did bother me. It was starting to split us apart.

"I want to show you something," Ankle announced, picking up her clothes and evadingmy grasp. "Come," she urged. "Long Stick can send some boys for the lion. There is something nearby you must see."

I shrugged into my tunic. "What is it?"

She only smiled and motioned for me to follow. Still wrestling to lace my moccasins, I tried to keep up as she led me toward a forested rise. It lay in the direction of "Camp," the fictitious home base I had never seen during all of myworkouts with small groups of hunters. It would have taken so much computing powerto process a full tribe that it simply never occurred to me to journey in thisdirection.

We reached the top of the rise and soon picked up faint sounds . . . human voices, talking and laughing. We approached stealthily,crawling the last few metersto peer over a steep bluff. There we saw, a couple of hundred meters downslope, a small gathering of people clustered around an oak tree. They were usingtall poles to bat away at an object high in the branches. Occasionally, oneof them dropped her pole and hopped about, swatting at the air while others

laughed.

Gatherers, I realized. Going after a beehive. This was my first glimpse of the other half of my "tribe." Calmly, I noted that many were accompanied by children . . . and that one of the unaccompanied ones was decidedly pregnant

My breath suddenly caught as I recognized the rotund, laughing figure.

All this time, Gaia and I had played in our own pretend neolithic worlds, and never guessed they were different parts of the same tribe!

It hadn't started out that way. We had bought the original versions of our programs separately, before we even met. But in retrospect it seemed an obvious thing for the computer to do . . . to save memory space by pooling our adventures in the same metaphorical landscape.

"It affects us," Ankle said.

"Who?"

"We. Your folk." She motioned toward the gatherers, slapped her own chest, and waved toward the east, where the hunting parties roamed. "It hurts us."

"What hurts you?" I asked, perplexed, distracted.

"The break . . . the pain between you two."

I was too confused, too curious about this new turn of events to follow what she was saying. I peered at the figures below, and saw two men among the women down there, helping to steal honey. Just as some women could be hunters, certain males might choose the rites and rhythms of gathering. Probably, one of them was my rival, Gaia's synthetic paramour.

Suddenly it seemed important to get closer. But as I made ready, Ankle stopped me.

"You cannot," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Certain charms are needed. To unite us. Unite the tribe."

"Charms?"

She nodded. "From the Land of Gods."

After a pause. " . . . Oh, I get it."

She meant more memory, much more. Until recently, I had hunted with just one companion, then ten or so. Joining the two simulated worlds, depicting several score personified characters, would take more power than our house console

possessed.

But that was no problem! I had a big raise coming. I could go right out and buy the chips on credit! My fist clenched in anticipation. By this time tomorrow, I'd get a much closer look at the bastard who . . .

Suddenly, the laughter below broke under a single, warbling cry. One of the women dropped her pole and doubled over in agony, clutching her swollen abdomen.

I didn't stop to think. With a bellow I came to my feet, running downhill toward the petite form, writhing amid a cluster of anxious women. "Gala!" I cried, frustrated that the ground grew tarry with each step. The gatherers, too, seemed to blur around the edges as I neared, one heavy step at a time. The earth trembled and my ankle clutched my arm.

"Not that way!" she screamed, cringing as I whirled in anger. "You must go!" She slapped the side of her head, then pointed to mine.

Damn the realism of it all!

Cursing I tore off the helmet, gashing my cheek on the strap. The body suit still formed a matrix of other-world sensations -- hot savannah wind and gritty moccasins. But abruptly my eyes saw a tiny, off-white chamber, its coarse floor of needles mimicking a steep hillside. Sense-conflict made me sway in confusion as I dove for the door.

"I'm coming Gaia!" I cried, stumbling into the hallway in haste to reach my wife.

They're making a big deal out of it. I've been interviewed on some of the lesser zines. There's even talk of reviving childbirth classes for husbands. But it's just silly, all the fuss. Any other man would've done the same. What matters is that everything turned out all right.

Tommy junior thrives as his stim-crib cases him into the gaudy multi-world. He'll grow up in Chitown, and on Mars, in mythic Greece and a neolithic clan. He'll roam forests, to know what we've lost. As a teen, he'll live out fantasies of my time only imagined. Still, even his generation will learn to tell what's real. Reality is what still hurts when you take the suit off.

Gaia and I solved our problems once our tribes united. Each of us still plays with personas now and then. Despite all the sudden yammerings of the neo-prudes -- who could resist? Anyway, we always come home to each other, and that's what counts. Virtuality is fun -- it's good to be the Chief - but nothing matches the sweetness of her real skin, or the unpredictability of her real mind.

My blood pressure is low. My arteries are squeaky-clean and muscles wiry, strong. I stay a little hungry, like my ancestors, and may live past a hundred. In a cramped world of twelve billion souls, I can run for hours seeing no one but gazelles, or a lonely hawk.

Lions know to give me a wide berth.

Let others be gods in their private realms. I'm content to be a man.

Give me time. I'm even learning to like termites.