

THE WHITE STUFF

Peter F Hamilton & Graham Joyce

From the short story compilation *New Worlds 1997*, edited by David Garnett.

v1.0 by the N.E.R.D's. Scanned, page numbers removed, paragraphs joined, formatted, common OCR errors have been removed and a full spell check is complete. Full read-through still required.

v1.1 Full read through completed by the N.E.R.D's

Nigel Finchley first blinked into the gleam on his way into the City, where he high-rolled other people's money on the trading floor. A Nimbus owner himself, he cast an appreciative gaze over the classic Lotus Esprit swishing up beside him at the traffic lights. Its engine purred with deliberate, sexual rhythm as the brunette Trust Fund Babe behind the wheel toed the accelerator in provocation.

But when he tried to eye-photo her silhouette, the glare coming off the Esprit's ice-blue paintwork defeated him. Squinting to filter out the reflected sunlight he realized just how mirror-bright that polish was. The Esprit had a sunbeam corona all of its own, making the rest of the queuing cars dull, mundane. Money, he told himself, money lays that kind of gleam on everything it touches.

The Esprit surged forward in a burst of arrogant power.

Nigel watched it go, thoughts contaminated by low-level resentment. Later he saw the gleam again. A Piccolo this time. Nothing wrong with Piccolos; MG versions were decent sporty runabouts. But they shouldn't gleam, not like that. He watched it pass. The Piccolo went gliding down the street with unnatural elegance.

His curiosity was roused. Almost unconsciously he began searching the traffic for more, and spotted another three examples before he swung down into the company's underground car park. Five extraordinarily gleaming cars out of a near-gridlocked city.

* * *

Nigel's regular lunchtime pub was The Swan, perched alongside a canal restored by a government benefit-earn scheme. Smartened up beyond the pocket of its original water-traffic clientele, serving a nouveau cuisine menu, it had achieved a reputation equal to any of the area's contemporary wine bars, sucking in a whole strata of City financiers, the players of digital money. It had a whitewashed facade with a frieze of iron-rimmed cartwheels bolted onto the brick, and hanging baskets adorning the taproom door. The landlord served real ale from wooden kegs, and carrot juice from liquidisers with a sound like a dentist's drill. A large parking lot round the back was bordered by a high redbrick wall. It couldn't be seen from the street.

Nigel coasted the Nimbus into a spare slot, turned off the ignition, and looked up to see her. Maybe sixteen years old with freckles and a riot of vivid copper hair in tiny corkscrew curls. Her adolescent breasts bobbed like half tennis balls under a scoopneck T-shirt; her faded denim microskirt offered him a grand view of her long, suntanned legs. Bright noonday sun made her hair blaze, halo fashion.

* * *

She would be one of the kids from the sink estate on the edge of the Capitalcorp's redevelopment incentive zone—a hell-hole of squatters, dealers, pimps, and exo-European illegals—all trying to make

the same quid washing windscreens. Nigel felt a hot jab of envy. Though he had everything she didn't have, he envied her youth. He envied her street-sassy. He envied, very badly, the twentysomething black guy lurking possessively a few paces back, and who would undoubtedly be screwing her.

Lovely big emerald eyes glittered at him. "Hi there, captain, wanna have your wheels gleamed?"

"Huh?"

"Gleamed." A blink of flawless white teeth. She proffered a little square of metal. Sunlight skipped across its metallic purple paint, dazzling.

"Let me see that." Taking the metal square from her he tried to stroke its coloured surface, to understand the texture, but his fingers slipped about as if it were coated in warm ice.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Micro-friction layer, captain. We'll wipe your bodywork down, and spray it on." She shook a grey aerosol can in his face; no brand name. "Dirt and water can't get a grip, so your shine's permanent, and rust don't get a look in, see?"

He couldn't take his eyes off her. "How long does it last?"

"Always. It's micro-friction, right? Can't rub it off."

He ran through the dubious logic, his eyes wandering down to her legs again. "How much?"

"Twenty five."

It even seemed reasonable. "Count me in. Cheque or card?"

"Aww, come on!"

"If you want cash I'll have to find a hole in the wall."

"Fine. Have your pint and slot your card. We'll have your wheels sorted for when you get back." She stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled. "Got a live one!"

Her proto-gangsta boyfriend stepped over to the car, attempting a customer-friendly smile. On that face, it was never going to work. His head had been shaved in a chessboard pattern, with each square of hair sprouting a single stubby dreadlock. The clothes were ultra-trendy; heavy biker boots crushed the tarmac.

Uneasy prejudices started cattle-prodding Nigel's defence mechanisms awake. Sure the guy was well-dressed, but the hostility was as blatant as Nigel's own disapproval.

They looked at each other, silently negotiating a demilitarized truce for the duration of the gleaming. The black guy clicked his fingers, and a posse of kids solidified around the Nimbus. Seven of them, ranging from sixteen years down to about ten: black kids with locks, white kids with bent-nail tattoos, Asian kids, all loaded with buckets and sponges and can-do. The young redhead was already sauntering off after her next victim.

Nigel paused on the pub's doorstep, the slow-turning cogs in his brain winching a frown onto his face. It had been a very slick operation, way beyond any usual street-rat earner. He turned to look back. The little shits were gleefully spraying his car white, great sweeps of fuck-the-rich graffiti sizzling eagerly out of the grey cans, an oily foam contaminating the grilles, the hubs, the windscreen. It looked like the Nimbus was getting ready for a shave. He was about to scream at them, but his shout never got past the first

syllable. The white foam was gradually turning translucent, smoothing out to form a thin, uniform coat, already delivering the gleam.

The redhead caught his eye, giving him a laughing thumbs up. Feeling hopelessly old and dumb (memory image kicking in: his father holding his first-ever CD up to the light in utter perplexity) he smiled back weakly and retreated into the pub. Pity there had been no brand name on the spray cans; the company who owned that process would be worth a dabble. Interesting.

Rewarded by that not-totally-innocent smile of hers, Nigel had promised the redhead to put the word round the trading floor. In two days all his smart colleagues were driving round in gleaming cars.

The Swan's landlord didn't object. Customers parked their cars and checked in for a drink while the kids sprang to work with sponges and spray cans. They had a regular production line going out back. Only once did the financier in him assert itself. How much should a micro-friction coating actually cost? Were the kids at The Swan pulling a fast one?

Nigel tried to price the coating at his Nimbus dealer's showroom. "What's micro-friction?" was the reply.

* * *

There were at least a dozen kids in The Swan's parking lot when he pulled in the following Monday. Five cars had their bonnets up, two kids to a car, doubled up over the radiator grilles, looking like they were being swallowed whole.

The redhead bounded over. Today she wore hip-hugging navy-blue shorts and a sleeveless white blouse, top four buttons undone. Boyfriend nowhere to be seen.

"Business is looking good," Nigel commented.

"I give people what they want."

He glanced up. He wondered exactly how old she was.

"Take you. I mean, these wheels of yours: seriously loaded." Her hand stroked the bonnet, coyly. "But you can't jack up the throttle cos of these speed laws. They ain't tailored to modern cars. They're antiques, thirties fodder."

"How do I just know you're going to sell me something else?"

Her answering grin was evil, moist tongue tip peeking out from the corner of her mouth. "Cos I like ringing your bell. I've got a zapper scrambler here that's got your name on it. You game?"

He tried to keep his eyes off the open buttons of her blouse. "Maybe. Speak to me."

"It screws the law's radar guns something chronic. First, a warning bleep from the laser detector at half a mile, then the LCD counts you down to ground zero. And the big plus: even if they do blast you, their read-out swears blind you're only doing a poxy twenty eight."

No more fines, no more penalty points. Every motorist's dream gadget. "How much?"

"Fifty."

He sighed. "I'm all yours."

* * *

The next day he drove into the tarmac wasteland of his local hypermarket's customer park and shot into a space near a trolley rack, tires crunching the litter of polystyrene wrappers.

"Wow, this is one totalled-out machine." The Nimbus's admirer was another girl: mid-teens, golden hair, dirty fingernails and white jeans as tight as a tourniquet. "I just bet you could go supersonic if it wasn't for those dumb speed limits."

He pointed to the newly installed LCD radar-trap warning on his dashboard. The girl shrugged and moved on. Looking out across the hypermarket park he could see nearly all of the cars sported micro-friction coatings. Several cars in the row behind him had their bonnets raised, with kiddie teams slamming in zipper scramblers as though they were on a triple bonus productivity scheme. They also had a runner. A twelve-year-old boy collected the cash from the older kids, then disappeared into a graffiti-splashed alley at the rear of the park. A minute later he would reemerge with boxes of scramblers.

Nigel strolled over to the hypermarket entrance. Simon was sitting in his usual place beside the wire baskets, wrapped in a thick Oxfam duffle coat despite the warm sun. Scuffed wraparound sunglasses made him look like a washed up Terminator. He was playing his flute, a tired golden Labrador guarding a threadbare cap with a few coins in.

"Morning, Simon."

"That you, Mr Finchley?" Simon asked.

"Indeed it is." Nigel found a coin and bent down as if to drop it into the cap. He made the coin chink quietly, to disguise the fact that he kept it in his hand. It was a nothing- for-nothing world, in which Nigel was prepared to donate to the blind beggar no more than the sound of his money.

"Thank you, sir."

"My pleasure."

As Nigel stood up he saw the runner on the other side of the road. He was sure the boy had looked away quickly, a subliminal impression of a guilty start.

When Nigel had negotiated the maze of dingy backstreets at the side of the hypermarket he found the other end of the alley was blocked by a hired Transit van. A young black man was sitting in the driver's seat, flicking through a tabloid newspaper.

Nigel ambled past, snatching a glimpse of the runner returning to the car park, a scrambler box tucked under each arm. Another young man stood beside the van's rear doors.

The pair of them could have been cousins of the redhead's boyfriend. There was something shared between them; it wasn't so much a physical characteristic, more an attitude. Not arrogance exactly. Confidence. They possessed confidence.

Unenlightened, Nigel moved on. If they'd got the whole day's cash taking in the van, they'd be nervous about people who loitered.

* * *

Wednesday saw the redhead in a black one-piece cycling uniform. Nigel couldn't understand how she'd got into it, the fabric was already stretched to its limit.

Her knowing grin was becoming a little too familiar.

"Have you ever heard of the term 'market saturation'?" he asked before she made her pitch.

She stuck her tongue out, awesomely childlike. "Nah. Have you ever heard of an encryption-buster?" Resting in her palm was a matte-black box the size of a blockbuster paperback. There was a small keyboard on top. "Unkink everything the satellites beam down: Disney through to Movie Channel, Hot Dutch, the works, no smart card required. You'll never cop for a subscription charge again."

"Very nice. Where did you get it?"

"Bloke in a pub."

Acquisitive lust began to gnaw. The cost of a decoder card for his Globecast system was criminal. "How much?" It seemed to be the one consistent phrase he spoke to her.

"Fifty for cash."

"Sold. Come and have a drink with me."

She looked over her shoulder and thought for a moment. "Sure."

* * *

Nigel lived alone in his Docklands condominium. There were plenty of trees lining the empty streets, and no delinquents since the entire area was security-ringed and patrolled. Sometimes the only movement in the whole neighbourhood would be that of a scrap of newspaper blowing down the aching new concrete walkways.

He told himself he still enjoyed the single life. He had enough friends in the same situation to make a cosy self-reinforcing group when they spent their weekend nights on the town. Jannice had been his last permanent attachment, though the relationship had broken down on a dispute over language.

"Please don't refer to me as your 'partner' or your 'girlfriend.' It's insulting and demeaning."

"So what are you, then?"

"Nothing which implies a contract."

I'm being outmoded before I'm thirty, Nigel had thought at the time. Jannice was four months ago. There had been other girls since, one night stands picked up while clubbing, a friend's younger sister. But his job on the trading floor was secure, which in itself was a bonus these days. The City and the new government were still eying each other wearily across the political divide; but apart from a little ideologically symbolic blood-letting among the fat cats of the utilities in the first six months after the election, there had been no incursions, no major campaigns led by reforming chancellors. The sheer voltage of money flowing through the cables of the City's finance web was so great nobody was going to risk shorting it out. So Nigel and his kind were still allowed to play their fast, adrenaline-high game.

Bathing in the timid blue phosphorescence of the monitors, he drank down information, hungry for the elusive patterns that bespoke success. When he found one, a bond, a rights issue, a commodity, he pumped money into the precious new find, guarding the knowledge until the stock rose and his investment grew ripe for harvest. He bred money from money, a nexus between data and currency arranging diabolical matings. Always on the hunt for new brides. A search he could run on autopilot these days. Same as his life.

And so unlike Miranda, the young redhead who had unsettled him. A teeny-rebel, making money and having fun, delighting in life. She made him realize that his own secret promises to himself had been

broken; that his technicolour dreams had been pawned to pay for a permanent place on the trading floor. Freshness for stability.

That drink in The Swan had turned into two before she would even tell him her name. Then when he'd offered to take her to dinner she'd narrowed her eyes at him.

"It's a good thing I'm older than I look," she said, fingering the stem of her glass.

"Why? How old do you look?" The stupidity of this question didn't strike him until long afterwards.

He'd collected her from The Swan later that evening. Later than he intended, actually. The floor had gone through one of those unexplained jittery days; as if nervousness had suddenly mutated into an airborne virus, circulated by the slow-spinning rooftop fans of the City's air conditioners. End-of-month figures showed African imports of electronics were down, reducing the continent's borrowing. Rumour-quakes ran gleefully through the money market. Several blue chip companies turned slightly pale. He hated days like that, hated the disorder.

Miranda had waited, though, an encouraging measure of her eagerness to sample the good life. She'd applied too much make-up, and that a little carelessly, but it didn't diminish her. He broke the speed limit thanks to his new box and tried to impress her by taking her to a Chelsea restaurant supposedly used by Princess Di, knowing she'd be completely out of her depth. Princess Di wasn't in, but it looked as if the maître d' was operating a beauty code for patrons.

"Hot dump this, eh?" Miranda said as they sat. Her gaze hardened as she took in the designer dresses by Lang, Versolato, Rocha, and Westwood. Her own dress was some not-quite-Goth purple velvet with a low front and black lace sleeves.

"All the best TFBs come here," Nigel assured her.

"?"

"Trust Fund Babes. Never done a day's work in their lives."

"You normally go out with women like that?"

"Only when they're slumming. They tend to go for farmers who own half of Sussex."

Miranda ordered the same dishes as him; she watched him carefully when the food arrived, mirroring his movements, and choosing the same cutlery. It wasn't as amusing as he'd expected. She was so bloody determined. He knew that for the rest of her life now she would always select the right fork, would tilt her soup bowl away from her.

"Another bottle of champagne," Nigel said to the wine waiter.

"Don't waste your folding," Miranda said. "I've already decided to fuck you."

They lay on his bed, the curtains of his room drawn back and the strange spectral light from the flashing and steaming Cesar Pelli tower reflecting on the perspiration of their naked bodies. He tried to get her to tell him where she got all the strange new merchandise. One slip of the tongue, one name, was all he needed to make his killing on the floor.

"Secret."

"Ah, come on!" His voice mellowed out. "Between us?"

She flinched, confused and vulnerable. "Don't know much. Honest. All I know, it's called *afto-aspro*. Same stuff in the electronics as does for the gleam."

He puzzled over that. "*Afto-aspro?*"

"Yeah. Ilkia says that's what the Greeks called it. Means white stuff."

"It's manufactured in Greece?"

"No. That's just where it turned up first. Couple of weeks back."

"So where does it come from originally?"

"Ilkia says the exos brought it in with them when they come over from Africa. It's all over the estate now."

"Who's this Ilkia character?"

"Mate of mine. He'd kill me if he knew I was here."

"Jealous type, is he?"

"Not that... Well, sometimes. He gets us the *afto-aspro* gear, see. I have to keep him sweet; and he don't like the likes of you."

"White?"

"Nah. Rich. Ilkia says companies like yours are the generals on your side of the class war."

"Oh, Jesus wept. Look, does this Ilkia know who's manufacturing *afto-aspro*?."

"Dunno. He never says much about it, just bangs on about how it's gonna make things different for us. All the global capitalist state is gonna get whacked. It'll start with the electronics companies, and when they go, they'll bring everything else down with them."

"I think your friend is talking out of his arse. He really doesn't know much about enterprise economics. The electronics industry is a perpetual war of innovations and next generation chips. That's what makes the companies so dynamic, and strong. One new gizmo isn't going to bring civilization to a halt."

"We don't want to halt it, just change it."

"So, broadly speaking, would you describe yourself as an anarchist, or just another rainbow Nazi?"

"Don't say stuff like that. Nigel, be straight, d'you think it's possible for someone like you to love someone like me?"

He grinned savagely, she didn't get it—too young. "Let me show you instead."

When she was finally asleep he went through her bag. Usual teenage junk, except for a wad of seven hundred quid in new twenties held together by elastic bands. No hint to the origin of *afto-aspro*.

The only thing he didn't understand was a slim oblong of plastic with chrome-silver surfaces, about the same size as a credit card.

"I want a favour from you," he asked her over breakfast.

Miranda giggled. "I thought I did all that last night."

"I want you to find out more about *afto-aspro*."

"You got all I know."

"Listen, you want to be like me, to run in my world, move in my circles?"

"Maybe." She nodded, face all dumb and serious. "You ain't how Ilkia said you would be. And this place... I had a good time last night, Nigel. Honest. That's not greedy, is it? Not to want that?"

"Nothing like. Motivation makes the world go round. You have to give people incentives. As a race we need to create and achieve; the alternative is stagnation."

"Right. Yeah."

"This is your chance to achieve, Miranda. You can come in with me, I can make you part of my deal. All I need is the name of the company which produces *afto-aspro*. I can buy up their stock and cut myself in for a big percentage. It'll be like knowing the lottery roll-over numbers in advance. Now do you want a piece of that? Do you want last night to be every night?"

"You shitting me?"

"Just bring me the information."

* * *

Trouble mugged Nigel as soon as he reached the floor. Everyone was on their feet screaming into telephones. The markets were going crazy. High Street banks had reported a massive surge in demand for gold sovereigns. There was no logical reason for it. Of course the banks didn't stock the coins, they had to be ordered from the Bank of England.

There was a similar demand sweeping the entire European mainland. Not from dealers, but from the public. Gold prices grew by the minute. Nobody knew what was happening. Yesterday's nervousness blossomed out into full-scale panic.

Six hours later everyone held their breath as New York started trading. Wall Street dived straight into the gold market. And Nigel found out the true meaning of pandemonium.

After a terrible day he washed up at The Swan, hoping to find Miranda there. She wasn't. But a fourteen-year-old girl wanted to sell him an emax.

"A what?"

Freckles crinkled against spots as she smiled. "An energy matrix, what they used to call a battery." She showed him a small fat cylinder: black, glossy, seamless. "The outside casing is a solar collector, see? Ninety-five per cent conversion efficiency. You just have to leave it in the sun and it'll recharge in a couple of hours."

Ten quid each. He bought six to power his ghetto blaster.

* * *

Next morning the public's thirst for gold had increased. The Chancellor appeared on the lunchtime news to try to calm people, assuring them that the Bank of England had enough reserves to cope with the unexpected consumer-led boom, and no restrictions were even being contemplated. The interviewer's questions about the economy starting to downturn in such a climate were brusquely dismissed as

scaremongering.

Nigel couldn't concentrate that afternoon, despite all the floor supervisor's screams and threats to level their investments. He spent the time accessing share prices for electronics companies. What he found was more unsettling than any of the five-million-quid skeletons he had rattling round his accounts. Miranda had been right: the prices were slowly starting to drop. Worse, it was a global picture. Other analysts would be plotting the trend, the whole electronics section of the market would crash. If he just knew which name made *afto-aspro* he could pump millions into their stock and ride the storm's lightning.

Before he left work that evening a rumour swept the floor that cashpoint machines all over town had malfunctioned, dishing out three thousand pound windfalls to hundreds of lucky punters. The banks were closing down their hole-in-the-wall outlets until the electronics could be checked.

He started the drive home. The traffic all around him shone like a river of prismatic sunlight. Everyone, these days, gleamed.

Halfway to Docklands he saw three ten-year-old girls standing beside a building society's cashpoint. One of them had a silver card just like the one in Miranda's bag, which she shoved into the slot. Money started gushing out. The girls squealed excitedly, scooping it up.

Nigel parked and walked, soaking up the new fizz loose on the block. A knot of five boys loitered ahead of him. He had no doubt that the one with his back to him was an *afto-aspro* peddler. It was the clothes—bright, new, expensive. There was a glint of gold necklace chains exchanged for a slimline afto-aspro box. The peddler shook hands and departed; not getting three paces before more people buttonholed him.

Each of the boys he left behind registered an awed, vaguely guilty expression as they stared at their new *afto-aspro* box. Nigel followed them without a qualm.

It was crazy. They marched into a jeans shop that was chromed, strobed, and shaking with some classic Pulp. A bored girl assistant read a tatty X Libris paperback behind the counter. The boys clustered at the back, sunburst xenon pulses segmenting their movements to robotic jerks as they stuffed jeans into plastic carrier bags. Then they sauntered out casually. The assistant never even glanced up.

Nigel started after them, slackjawed; then he saw the two white pillars on either side of the open door. *Why not?* he thought. *If they can cobble up something that'll scramble a radar trap, then why not something to jam a shop's security tags?*

Outside on the pavement a man was struggling past, carrying what looked like a huge painting, an oblong of brown wrapping paper five foot by three foot, barely an inch thick. A furtive look in his eye suggested he'd just snapped up a bargain.

Nigel raised a finger. "Excuse me."

It was a flatscreen television. No need to use up valuable living room space with a bulky black cabinet, just screw it on the wall, neat and out of the way. The screen was edged with a solar collector frame, so it didn't need to be plugged into the mains. Better yet, the man confided, it wouldn't register on TV detector van equipment, no need for a licence. And all for a hundred pounds.

Nigel knew that the corporate giants like Sony, JVC, Goldstar, IBM, and Racal had spent most of the last decade and hundreds of millions of dollars into cracking the concept of flat wide screens.

The blue chips would be haemorrhaging white tonight.

"Mobile phone, mister?" A dreadlocked Asian boy smiled winningly; two missing front teeth turned him into a juvenile vampire. "It's got a floating clone number, you never get a bill. Twenty quid folding, or a sovereign."

"Sod off."

* * *

Miranda was waiting for him on the leather settee in his lounge, denim shirt unbuttoned to show off a small black bra.

"How the fuck did you get in here?"

She grinned, and held up a snow-white version of his HiSecure infrared key. "Fair's fair, Nigel. You got the key to my panties."

"You shouldn't be carrying that kind of gadget round with you right now. People are starting to realize what *afto-aspro* can be made to do."

"Sure they are. They've seen what's coming; they're gonna be carrying themselves pretty soon. Just like Ilkia said. Have you seen the way it's taking off? Stuff's flooding out of the sink estates. There's kids in every city got a breeder chip now. Nobody's going to stop it."

He glanced up from the Twenties glitz-mirror cocktail bar. "A breeder chip? You found out something?"

For once the youthful confidence was missing. She shivered a little as she took the Pimms he'd mixed. "Yeah. I got Ilkia to take me to the Cameroon boys' squat. They showed me. All you need to make *afto-aspro* is a little chip of breeder and the right chemical junk for it to scoff. Theirs is hooked up to an old PC running a composition program. Do you see? You tell the *afto-aspro* what you want it to be, and it just fucking does it." She paused. "The function is hardformatted into the molecular structure. It can be anything you want."

Nigel sank deep into the leather settee. "Holy shit." No name. She'd told him there was no name, no single source, no stock to invest in. It was the end of the world.

She laughed, kitten spry again. "Isn't it beautiful? It was crude gear at first, like the gleam and the encryption-buster; but there are composition program upgrades coming in every hour now, downloaded through the Internet. People like the Cameroon boys are matching anything the big companies can build, and then some." Miranda threw her arms round him and tried to kiss him.

"You don't understand what you're doing, do you?"

"Yeah. I'm having a good time. I'm winning. Like you."

"Jesus Christ."

"So is that enough to make our deal? Are we hot now, or what?"

"What deal? You and your friends are screwing the world to death. Do you understand that? To *death!*"

She looked at him strangely, as if he'd missed some terribly obvious point. "Sure it's gonna be different for you. Your world's gonna be the same as mine, now. Didn't you realize that? That's why you wanted the deal, ain't it, so we could make a stash and clean out first?"

"Stash of what, you stupid bitch? Your bastards from Cameroon are wiping out the economy."

"No we ain't. We're just spreading it around a bit. Stopping things costing so much. *Afto-aspro* lets people like me have what you've got. No hurt in that. We'll all be better off."

"You understand nothing."

Miranda laughed and climbed onto his lap. "Kiss me Nigel. It's going to be a brand new day. A whole new world! We're gonna change everything! Ilkia says it's democratic electronics. He says that's what it was designed for, to give the world's poor what the rich Westerners enjoy. *Afto-aspro* don't kill, it helps everyone. Ilkia says it's only the old capitalist structure which is dying. There's still going to be an economy, but we're going to free it from banks and billionaires. Ilkia says—"

"Fuck what Ilkia says." Nigel surged upwards, violently pushing her away. She fell back heavily, cracking her head against the mahogany cocktail bar.

For the first time she seemed to realize his position. She looked confused. "I thought you and me had a thing."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Miranda went from confusion to plain hurt. She stroked strands of hair from her eyes, which were moist. "Here's a tip, Nigel," she said tearfully, going to the door. "Hang on to your gold watch, and your gold pen, and your tie-clip, and your gold neck chain. You'll need them. Credit's gonna get busted too, and that's what your kind live on. Cos we never get given any, do we?" Then she was gone.

He stood there for maybe half a minute. "Hell." He ran out into the landing, but the lift door was already closing. "Good luck, Miranda," he shouted after her. "I want to wish you good luck."

* * *

The TV news was overloading on *afto-aspro*. Half of the nine o'clock news was devoted to the new manufacturing revolution, hot young reporters tackling happy punters. Studio talking heads followed with hyper-cautious interpretations of its possible consequences. The end of large-scale industrialisation, the start of a true global village economy, green, clean, and noncompetitive.

"Bollocks," Nigel snapped. He fired the remote, wiping out the report. De-industrialisation wasn't the outcome, he was sure of it. Instinct was strong here, a lifetime of feeling the patterns spoke to him.

He pulled his laptop over, flipped it open, and after a while, began to type.

* * *

"Dump every electronics share we have," Nigel told Austin St. Clair next morning.

"Are you insane?" the supervisor bawled. Outside the glass walls chairs had become as redundant as silicon; everyone stood, shouting and waving at each other like bookies on speed. Gold was still rising. Governments were issuing optimistic forecasts—nobody was paying attention. VDUs were flashing up red starburst symbols as the electronics market crashed. "If we sell now, we'll lose over a quarter of a billion. Totally outside my authority. I won't be working the floor, I'll be fucking sweeping it!"

"We'll lose a lot more if we hang on to them."

"It'll bottom out. It looks bad, but it always bottoms out. Intel and Fujitsu have already announced they're going to start *afto-aspro* production; the rest will follow."

"It doesn't matter. Those kind of companies are obsolete now. It took an investment of half a billion

dollars to build every new chip plant; and two years later the next generation processor would come along, and you'd have to rebuild. That's why only the rich countries ever produced the damn things. The whole point of *afto-aspro* is that it doesn't need that kind of investment. Right now, the dumbest people in the country are making *afto-aspro* in rooms full of cockroaches. Don't you get it? There is no more electronics industry. It just went the same way as gas lamps and vinyl records."

"Christ!" Austin thumped a fist on his desk, then jammed the grazed knuckles into his mouth. "Oh Christ, Nigel."

"It doesn't matter. We can get the company out. Buy engineering, the heavier the better. Firms which make big, solid, bulky metal products: ships, cranes, combine harvesters, bridges, cement lorries, steam rollers, trains, hell even washing machines are mostly mechanical. *Afto-aspro* can't replace that. And those shares are a good buy right now. Everyone was so keen to get into sunrise technologies and multimedia bollocks we ignored the fundamentals. If we move quick we can recoup our losses on electronics. But it's got to be now, Austin. The market will figure it out; capital is going to flood into that section. If you're smart, we'll be ahead of them."

* * *

Five months later his prediction had almost come true. There were no more electronics companies. There weren't any oil companies left either, thanks to the ubiquitous emax.

The *afto-aspro* spring had edged out the winter of faded technologies right across the UK. Vigorous new growth supplanted the obsolete structures and systems of yesterday. Solar collector panels were spread over roofs, replacing slates and tiles and thatch. Cars were fitted with electrolyte regenerator cells, kits which turned exhaust fumes back into petrol. That was just a stop-gap. Factories were already busy installing new production line facilities for vehicles which would be powered solely from an emax, their bodywork reverting to the Henry Ford bon mot of gleaming solar-collector black.

Afto-aspro was at the heart of it all, but the actual change, the physical adaptations, required manual labour, skilled and semi-skilled. Opportunity for all. People lost jobs, people found new ones. Unemployment only rose a couple of per cent. Nigel was laid off and re-employed on a freelance basis, lower income, inferior terms, poorer conditions. But at least he was still in work.

It was the day the gas network was due to be turned off permanently when Nigel glided his not-so-new Nimbus into the hypermarket park. He turned off the ignition and the perfect tone of the Sonic Energy Authority ebbed away; the *afto-aspro* MB (memory block) player had replaced CDs and cassettes. MBs had also replaced videos, games cartridges, and floppy disks; each cigarette-sized cylinder stored hours of data.

There were no kids lurking about ready to thrust the latest *afto-aspro* application into his face. He missed them somehow. But for fitting regenerator cells on cars you went to a garage; to wire your home up to a domestic emax a professional electrician was called in; any household gadget was grown to order in your local electrical store. Blind Simon was hunched in his usual place beside the hypermarket entrance, coat buttoned up against the sweltering September sun, flute trilling gently. Nigel patted his pockets for a coin. There was a wad of notes in his wallet; for a couple of weeks transactions had been all in sovereigns, or jewellery, or even art; but with things settling down again people were accepting the promise of the Chief Cashier once more. Even cashpoints were coming back in use as banks replaced their old electronics with blocks of *afto-aspro*. "Morning, Simon."

Simon smiled softly. He raised the scuffed old shades and looked straight at Nigel. "I always wondered what you looked like. I always wondered about the face of a man who would pull a shitty stunt like that, week in, week out."

The golden Labrador barked angrily.

Nigel stumbled a pace backwards, shock draining the heat from his blood. Simon's eye sockets were filled with balls of *afto-aspro*. No irises, no pupils, just blank white spheres. "Clever, isn't it?" the old tramp said. "The latest compositional program upgrade can design organic substitutes. Eyes are easy; all an eye does is convert photons to nerve impulses. Molecular filters like kidneys are a little more complicated, but they'll get there, I'm sure. After all, the only real work left these days is thinking."

"Christ almighty."

"How does your money sound these days, Mr Finchley?" The heat returned to Nigel's blood as fast as it had left, burning his cheeks and ears. He almost sprinted back to the Nimbus.

* * *

The trading floor was quiet. Half of the terminals were veiled below dust covers; the level of activity on the market no longer justified a full team of dealers. Those still on the company's payroll were a subdued, sober bunch intent on steering a steady course. The days of screaming out deals while holding three telephone handsets and reading five displays at once were long gone. After the holocaust of corporate casualties *afto-aspro* had inflicted on the global economy, what remained was rock solid stable. The international financial playing field still wasn't exactly level, but the disparity between the developed nations and what had been the Third World was a lot smaller. In fact, the distinction between the two was now measured in the amount of infrastructure a country had: industrial output per capita was approaching equilibrium. As people suddenly realized, the Third World had a lot of heavy engineering plants, most of them built by the multinationals who wished to exploit the cheap labour costs such countries boasted as their principal asset.

Nigel walked down the row of silent, blank computers knowing how grave-robbers must feel. Dealers just picked over the bones these days; they didn't control or dictate like before. But like everyone else, he'd adjusted. He was good at picking over bones, spotting the scraps of flesh. His position was almost as safe in the new order as it had been in the old.

"Some weird delegation in," one of the dealers muttered uneasily as Nigel sat at his station. "Austin's been talking to them for forty minutes."

Four people were sitting in Austin St. Clair's glass wall office. Not the usual collection of Armani and Yamamoto power suits either. Three black men and a red-headed white woman, all dressed in army surplus fatigues and combat boots.

Austin St. Clair caught sight of Nigel, and met him at the door. "Trouble," he announced bleakly before Nigel could get into the office. "Anarchist freaks from the London-Cameroon software collective. They've made an approach to our board for improving the trading floor's performance. So they say."

As the door closed behind Nigel, he glanced over at the intruders, and froze. It was Miranda. Miranda looking poised, taller, broader, delectable.

"Hi there, Nigel. It's been a while."

"Miranda?" He tried to retain his composure. "What's new?"

"Meet the boys from the collective. We're about to buy you out."

"Buy us out? Well, I see you joined the human race. I always said ex- anarchists make the best capitalists." He tried an uneasy laugh.

"Not quite." She glanced at Austin St. Clair as if to decide his trustworthiness, then shrugged and relaxed. "Actually, we're going to stamp you out, Nigel."

"No way."

"You like the way I look now?"

"What? Yes. Yes, I suppose so."

"It's the latest *afto-aspro*; our collective specialises in compositional programs for organic substitutes. I had a few implants."

"They suit you. You suit you."

"We don't really give a fuck about cosmetics, of course; but it helps screw up the income for private clinics. What we're concentrating on is providing enhanced automated intellectual services."

"What?"

"Neural networks. We grow *afto-aspro* brains, Nigel."

"The London-Cameroon collective has persuaded the board that their new *afto-aspro* development can handle the trading floor by itself," Austin St. Clair said grimly. "They're going to wire neural networks into our finance net, and replace the dealers."

"*What?*" Nigel yelled.

All four of the collective were smiling at him.

"We're using capitalism's own strength to break it, Nigel," Miranda said. "Capitalism fosters the culture of competition and achievement; so someone told me once. And in order to compete and achieve you've got to have the best product. Once we've installed the system here, the other financial companies will see how good it is, and they'll buy the same system for themselves. They'll be refined and polished and debugged until they can't be improved any further. Then everybody will have identical systems battling for the same business. It'll be the final stalemate; nobody will be able to win. You'll be levelled, Nigel. What you are now will cease to exist. It'll allow a social market to grow without interference."

"Banks and billionaires," he whispered.

"You got it, comrade. But before we sound the last crash, the collective would like to offer you a week's contract. You always said you were the best, Nigel, now here's your chance to prove it. Our neural networks need to learn the ropes, so who better than you to teach them their core program? They'll spend a week observing you deal, then take over. Our terms for your thought routines will be generous."

"You want my thought routines?"

"Yes. That's all you have left to sell, Nigel. The last aspiration."

"But what about me?" he yelled. "What about after?"

"Try earning a living," Miranda said. "I wish you luck. Really, a lot of luck."