

LIVING WILL

Alexander Jablov

Within the last few years, Alexander Jablov has established himself as one of the most highly regarded and promising new writers in SF. He is a frequent contributor to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Amazing*, and other magazines. He lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, where he is involved in working on a projected anthology of "Future Boston" stories being put together by the Cambridge Writer's Workshop; he himself has written several stories set in the "Future Boston" milieu. His story "At the Cross-Time Jaunters' Ball" was in our Fifth Annual Collection; his novella "A Deeper Sea" was in our Seventh Annual Collection; and his "The Death Artist" was in our Eighth Annual Collection. His first novel, *Carve the Sky*, was released in 1991 to wide critical acclaim, and his second novel, *A Deeper Sea*, will be out soon. He's at work on a new book, tentatively called *Nimbus*, and I have little doubt that he will come to be numbered among the Big Names of the nineties.

Here he relates the powerful story of a far-sighted man who makes all the necessary preparations for his eventual death—including a few that *most* people would not think of...

The computer screen lay on the desk like a piece of paper. Like fine calfskin parchment, actually—the software had that as a standard option. At the top, in block capitals, were the words COMMENCE ENTRY.

"Boy, you have a lot to learn." Roman Maitland leaned back in his chair. "That's something I would *never* say. Let that be your first datum."

PREFERRED PROMPT?

"Surprise me." Roman turned away to pour himself a cup of coffee from the thermos next to a stone bust of Archimedes. The bust had been given to him by his friend Gerald "to help you remember your roots," as Gerald had put it. Archimedes desperately shouldered the disorganized stack of optical disks that threatened to sweep him from his shelf.

Roman turned back to the screen. TELL ME A STORY, it said. He barked a laugh. "Fair enough." He stood up and slouched around his office. The afternoon sun slanted through the high windows. Through the concealing shrubs he could just hear the road in front of the house, a persistent annoyance. What had been a minor street when he built the house had turned into a major thoroughfare.

"My earliest memory is of my sister." Roman Maitland was a stocky, white-haired man with high-arched, dark eyebrows. His wife Abigail claimed that with each passing year he looked more and more like Warren G. Harding. Roman had looked at the picture in the encyclopedia and failed to see the resemblance. He was much better looking than Harding.

"The hallway leading to the kitchen had red-and-green linoleum in a kind of linked circle pattern. You can cross-reference linoleum if you want." The antique parchment remained blank. "My sister's name is Elizabeth—Liza. I can see her. She has her hair in two tiny pink bows and is wearing a pale blue dress and black shoes. She's sitting on the linoleum, playing with one of my trucks. One of my *new* trucks. I grab it away from her. She doesn't cry. She just looks up at me with serious eyes. She has a pointy little chin. I don't remember what happened after that. Liza lives in Seattle now. Her chin is pointy again."

The wall under the windows was taken up with the black boxes of field memories. They linked into the processor inside the desk. The screen swirled and settled into a pattern of interlocking green and pink circles. "That's not quite it. The diamond parts were a little more—" Another pattern appeared, subtly different. Roman stared at it in wonder. "Yes. Yes! That's it. How did you know?" The computer, having linked to some obscure linoleum-pattern database on the network, blanked the screen. Roman wondered how many more of his private memories would prove to be publicly accessible. TELL ME A STORY.

He pulled a book from the metal bookshelf. "My favorite book by Raymond Chandler is *The Little Sister*. I think Orfamay Quest is one of the great characters of literature. Have you read Chandler?"

I HAVE ACCESS TO THE ENTIRE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HOLDINGS.

"Boy, you're getting gabby. But that's not what I asked." I HAVE NEVER READ ANYTHING.

"Give it a try. Though in some ways Elmore Leonard is even better." He slipped Chandler back on the shelf, almost dumping the unwieldy mass of books piled on top of the neatly shelved ones. "There are books here I've read a dozen times. Some I've *tried* reading a dozen times. Some I will someday read and some I suppose I'll never read." He squatted down next to a tall stack of magazines and technical offprints and started sorting them desultorily.

WHY READ SOMETHING MORE THAN ONCE?

"Why see a friend more than once? I've often thought that I would like to completely forget a favorite book." From where he squatted, the bookshelves loomed threateningly. He'd built his study with a high ceiling, knowing how the stuff would pile up. There was a dead plant at the top of the shelf nearest the desk. He frowned. How long had that been there? "Then I could read it again for the first time. The thought's a little frightening. What if I didn't *like* it? I'm not the person who read it for the first time, after all. Just as well, I guess, that it's an experiment I can't try. Abigail likes to reread Jane Austen. Particularly *Emma*." He snorted. "But that's not what you're interested in, is it?" His stomach rumbled. "I'm hungry. It's time for lunch."

BON APPETIT.

"Thank you."

Roman had built his house with exposed posts and beams and protected it outside with dark brick and granite. Abigail had filled it with elegant, clean-lined furniture which was much less obtrusive about showing its strength. Roman had only reluctantly ceded control of everything but his study and his garage workshop. He'd grown to like it. He could never have remembered to water so many plants, and the cunning arrangement of bright yellow porcelain vases and darkly rain-swept watercolors was right in a way he couldn't have achieved.

At the end of the hallway, past the kitchen's clean flare, glowed the rectangle of the rear screen door. Abigail bent over her flowers, fuzzy through its mesh like a romantic memory, a sun hat hiding her face. Her sun-dappled dress gleamed against the dark garden.

Roman pressed his nose against the screen, smelling its forgotten rust. Work gloves protecting her hands, his wife snipped flowers with a pruner and placed them in a basket on her arm. A blue ribbon accented the sun hat. Beyond her stretched the perennial bed, wanned by its reflecting stone wall, and the crazy-paving walk that led to the carp pond. White anemones and lilies glowed amid the ferns, Abigail's emulation of Vita Sackville-West's white garden. A few premature leaves, anxious for the arrival of autumn, flickered through the sun and settled in the grass.

"I'll have lunch ready in a minute." She didn't look up at him, so what spoke was the bobbing and amused sun hat. "I could hear your stomach all the way from the white garden." She stripped off the gardening gloves.

"I'll make lunch." Roman felt nettled. Why should she assume he was staring at her just because he was hungry?

As he regarded the white kitchen cabinets, collecting his mind and remembering where the plates, tableware, and napkins were, Abigail swept past him and set the table in a quick flurry of activity. Finding a vase and putting flowers into it would have been a contemplative activity of some minutes for Roman. She performed the task in one motion.

She was a sharp-featured woman. Her hair was completely white and she usually kept it tied up in a variety of braids. Her eyes were large and blue. She looked at her husband.

"What are you doing up there in your office? Did you invent a robot confessor or something?"

"You haven't been—"

"No, Roman, I haven't been eavesdropping." She was indulgent. "But you do have a piercing voice, particularly when you get excited. Usually you talk to your computer only when you're swearing at it."

"It's my new project." Roman hadn't told Abigail a thing about it and he knew that bothered her. She hated big-secret little-boy projects. She was the kind of girl who'd always tried to break into the boys' clubhouse and beat them at their games. He really should have told her. But the thought made him uncomfortable.

"It's kind of egomaniacal, actually. You know that computer I'm beta testing for Hyperneuron?"

"That thing it took them a week to move in? Yes, I know it. They scratched the floor in two places. You should hire a better class of movers."

"We'd like to. It's a union problem, I've told you that. Anyway, it's a wide-aspect parallel processor with a gargantuan set of field memories. Terabytes worth."

She placidly spread jam on a piece of bread. "I'll assume all that jargon actually means something. Even if it does, it doesn't tell me why you're off chatting with that box instead of with me."

He covered her hand with his. "I'm sorry, Abigail. You know how it is."

"I know, I know." She sounded irritated but turned her hand over and curled her fingers around his.

"I'm programming the computer with a model of a human personality. People have spent a lot of time and energy analyzing what they call 'computability': how easily problems can be solved. But there's another side to it: what problems *should* be solved. Personality can be defined by the way problems are chosen. It's an interesting project."

"And whose personality are you using?" She raised an eyebrow, ready to be amused at the answer.

He grimaced, embarrassed. "The most easily accessible one: my own."

She laughed. Her voice was still-untarnished silver. "Can the computer improve over the original?"

"Improve *how*, I would like to know."

"Oh, just as a random example, could it put clothes, books, and magazines *away* when it's done with them? Just a basic sense of neatness. No major psychological surgery."

"I tried that. It turned into a psychotic killer. Seems that messiness is an essential part of healthy personality. Kind of an interesting result, really..."

She laughed again and he felt embarrassed that he hadn't told her before. After all, they had been married over thirty years. But he couldn't tell her all of it. He couldn't tell her how afraid he was.

"So what's the problem with it?" Roman, irritated, held the phone receiver against his ear with his shoulder and leafed through the papers in his file drawer. His secretary had redone it all with multi-colored tabs and he had no idea what they meant. "Isn't the paperwork in order?"

"The paperwork's in order." The anonymous female voice from Financial was matter-of-fact. "It just doesn't look at all like your signature, Dr. Maitland. And this is an expensive contract. Did you sign it yourself?"

"Of course I signed it." He had no memory of it. Why not? It sounded important. "But this signature—"

"I injured my arm playing tennis a few weeks ago." He laughed nervously, certain she would catch the lie. "It must have affected my handwriting." But was it a lie? He swung his arm. The muscles weren't right. He had strained his forearm, trying to change his serve. Old muscles are hard to retrain. The more he thought about it, the more sense it made. If only he could figure out what she was talking about.

"All right then, Dr. Maitland. Sorry to bother you."

"That's quite all right." He desperately wanted to ask her the subject of the requisition but it was too late.

After fifteen minutes he found it, a distributed network operating system software package. Extremely expensive. Of course, of course. He read over it. It made sense now. But was that palsied scrawl at the bottom really his signature?

Roman stared at the multiple rolling porcelain boards on the wall, all of them covered with diagrams and equations in many colors of magic marker. There were six projects up there, all of which he was juggling simultaneously. He felt a sudden cold, sticky sweat in his armpits. He was juggling them, but had absolutely no *understanding* of them. It was all meaningless nonsense.

The previous week he had lost it in the middle of a briefing. He'd been explaining the operation of some cognitive algorithms when he blanked, forgetting everything about them. A young member of his staff had helped him out. "It's all this damn management," Roman had grouched. "It fills up all available space, leaving room for nothing important. I've overwritten everything." The room had chuckled, while Roman stood there feeling a primitive terror. He'd worked those algorithms out himself. He remembered the months of skull sweat, the constant dead ends, the modifications. He remembered all that, but still the innards of those procedures would not come clear.

The fluorescent light hummed insolently over his head. He glanced up. It was dark outside, most of the cars gone from the lot. A distant line of red and white lights marked the highway. How long had he been in this room? What time was it? For an instant he wasn't even sure where he was. He poked his head out of his office. The desks were empty. He could hear the vacuum cleaners of the night cleaning crew. He put on his coat and went home.

"She seemed a lovely woman, from what I saw of her." Roman peered into the insulated takeout container. All of the oyster beef was gone. He picked up the last few rice grains from the china plate Abigail had insisted they use, concentrating with his chopsticks. Abigail herself was out with one of her own friends, Helen Tourmin. He glanced at the other container. Maybe there was some chicken left.

Gerald Parks grimaced slightly, as if Roman had picked a flaw in his latest lady friend. "She *is* lovely. Roman, leave the Szechuan chicken alone. You've had your share. That's mine." Despite his normal irritation, he seemed depressed.

Roman put the half-full container down. His friend always ate too slowly, as if teasing him. Gerald leaned back, contemplative. He was an ancient and professional bachelor, dressed and groomed with razor sharpness. His severely brushed hair was steel gray. For him, eating Chinese takeout off Abigail's Limoges china made sense, which was why she had offered it.

"Anna's a law professor at Harvard." Gerald took on the tone of a man about to state a self-created aphorism. "Women at Harvard think that they're sensible because they get their romantic pretensions from Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters rather than from Barbara Cartland and Danielle Steel."

"Better than getting your romantic pretensions from Jerzy Kosinski and Vladimir Nabokov."

Sometimes the only way to cheer Gerald up was to insult him cleverly. He snorted in amusement. "Touché, I suppose. It takes Slavs to come up with that particular kind of over-intellectualized sexual perversity. With a last name like Parks, I've always been jealous of it. So don't make fun of my romantic pretensions." He scooped out the last of the Szechuan chicken and ate it. Leaving the dishwasher

humming in the kitchen they adjourned to Roman's crowded study.

Gerald Parks was a consulting ethnomusicologist who made a lot of money translating popular music into other idioms. His bachelor condo on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston had gotten neater and neater over the years. To Roman, Gerald's apartment felt like a cabin on a ocean liner. Various emotions had been packed away somewhere in the hold with the old Cunard notice NOT WANTED ON THE VOYAGE.

Gerald regarded the black field memories, each with its glowing indicator light. "This place seems more like an industrial concern every time I'm in here." His own study was filled with glass-fronted wood bookcases and had a chaise longue covered with yellow-and-white striped silk. It also had a computer. Gerald was no fool.

"Maybe it looks that way to you because I get so much work done here." Roman refused to be irritated.

But Gerald was in an irritating mood. He took a sip of his Calvados and listened to the music, a CD of Christopher Hogwood's performance of Mozart's great G Minor Symphony. "All original instrumentation. Seventeenth century Cremona viols, natural horns, Grenser oboes. Bah."

"What's wrong with that?" Roman loved the clean precision of Mozart in the original eighteenth century style.

"Because we're not *hearing* any of those things, only a computer generating electronic frequencies. A CD player is just a high-tech player piano, those little laser spots on the disk an exact analog of the holes in a player piano roll. Do you think Mozart composed for gadgets like that? And meant to have his symphonies sound *exactly the same* every time they're heard? These original music fanatics have the whole thing bassackwards."

Roman listened to an oboe. And it *was* distinguishable as an oboe, Grenser or otherwise, not a clarinet or basset horn. The speakers, purchased on Gerald's recommendation, were transparent. "This performance will continue to exist after every performer on it is dead. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a recording of Mozart's original version?"

"You wouldn't like it. Those gut-stringed instruments went out of tune before a movement was over." Gerald looked gloomy. "But you don't have to wait until the performers are dead. I recently listened to a recording I made of myself when I was young, playing Szymanowski's *Masques*. Not bad technically, but I sound so young. So *young*. Naive and energetic. I couldn't duplicate that now, not with these old fingers. The man who made that recording is gone forever. He lived in a couple of little rooms on the third floor in a bad neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago. He had a crummy upright piano he'd spent his last dime on. Played the thing constantly. Drove the neighbors absolutely nuts." Gerald looked at his fingers. He played superbly, at least to Roman's layman's ear, but it had never been good enough for a concert career.

"Did you erase the tape?"

Gerald shook his head. "What good would that do?"

They sat for a long moment in companionable silence. At last Gerald bestirred himself. "How is your little electronic brain doing? Does it have your personality down pat yet?"

"Test it out."

"How? Do you want me to have an argument with it?"

Roman smiled. "That's probably the best way. It can talk now. It's not my voice, not quite yet."

Gerald looked at the speakers. "If it's not sitting in a chair with a snifter of Calvados, how is it supposed to be you?"

"It's *not* me. It just thinks and feels like me."

"The way you would if you were imprisoned in a metal box?"

"Don't be absurd." Roman patted one of the field memories. "There's a universe in these things. A conceptual universe. The way I used to feel on our vacations in Truro is in here, including the time I cut my foot on a fishhook and the time I was stung by a jellyfish. That annoyed me, being molested by a jellyfish. My differential equations prof, Dr. Yang, is in here. He said 'theta' as 'teeta' and 'minus one' as 'mice wa.' And 'physical meaning' as 'fiscal meaning'. For half a semester I thought I was learning economics. The difference in the way my toy car rolled on the linoleum and on the old rug. The time I got enough nerve to ask Mary Tomkins on a date and she told me to ask Helga Pilchard from the Special Needs class instead. The clouds over the Cotswolds when I was there with Abigail on our honeymoon. It's all there."

"How the hell does it know what cloud formations over the Cotswolds look like?"

Roman shrugged. "I described them. It went through meteorological data bases until it found good cumulus formations for central England at that season."

"Including the cloud you thought looked like a power amplifier and Abigail thought looked like a springer spaniel?" Gerald smiled maliciously. He'd made up the incident but it characterized many of Roman and Abigail's arguments.

"Quit bugging me. Bug the computer instead."

"Easier said than done." Roman could see that his friend was nervous. "How did we meet?" Gerald's voice was shaky.

"The day of registration." The computer's voice was smoothly modulated, generic male, without Roman's inflections or his trace of a Boston accent. "You were standing against a pillar reading a copy of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Classes hadn't started yet, so I knew you were reading it because you wanted to. I came up and told you that if Lady Bracknell knew who you were pretending to be *this* time, you'd really be in trouble."

"Quite a pickup line," Gerald muttered. "I never did believe that an engineering student had read Wilde. What was I wearing?"

"Come on." The computer voice actually managed to sound exasperated. "How am I supposed to remember that? It was forty-five years ago. If I had to guess I'd say it was that ridiculous shirt you liked, with the weave falling apart, full of holes. You wore it until it barely existed."

"I'm still wearing it." Gerald looked at Roman. "This is scary." He took a gulp of his Calvados. "Why are you doing this, Roman?"

"It's just a test, a project. A proof of concept."

"You're lying." Gerald shook his head. "You're not much good at it. Did your gadget pick up that characteristic, I wonder?" He raised his voice. "Computer Roman, why do you exist?"

"I'm afraid I'm losing my mind," the computer replied. "My memory is going, my personality fractionating. I don't know if it's the early stages of Alzheimer's or something else. I, here, this device, is intended to serve as a marker personality so that I can trace—"

"Silence!" Roman shouted. The computer ceased speaking. He stood, shaking. "Damn you, Gerald. How dare you?"

"This device is more honest than you are." If Gerald was afraid of his friend's anger he showed no sign of it. "There must be some flaw in your programming."

Roman went white. He sat back down. "That's because I've already lost some of the personality I've

given it. It remembers things I've forgotten, prompting me the way Abigail does." He put his face in his hands. "Oh my God, Gerald, what am I going to do?"

Gerald set his drink down carefully and put his arm around his friend's shoulders, something he rarely did. And they sat there in the silent study, two old friends stuck at the wrong end of time.

The pursuing, choking darkness had almost gotten him. Roman sat bolt upright in bed, trying desperately to drag air in through his clogged throat.

The room was dark. He had no idea of where he was or even who he was. All he felt was stark terror. The bedclothes seemed to be grabbing for him, trying to pull him back into that all-consuming darkness. Whimpering, he tried to drag them away from his legs.

The lights came on. "What's wrong, Roman?" Abigail looked at him in consternation.

"Who are you?" Roman shouted at this ancient, white-haired woman who had somehow come to be in his bed. "Where's Abigail? What have you done with her?" He took the old woman by her shoulders and shook her.

"Stop it, Roman. Stop it!" Her eyes filled with tears. "You're having a nightmare. You're here in bed. With me. I'm Abigail, your wife. Roman!"

Roman stared at her. Her long hair had once been raven black and was now pure white.

"Oh, Abigail." The bedroom fell into place around him, the spindle bed, the nightstands, the lamps—his green-glass shaded, hers crystal. "Oh, pookie, I'm sorry." He hadn't used that ridiculous endearment in years. He hugged her, feeling how frail she had become. She kept herself in shape, but she was old, her once-full muscles now like taut cords, pulling her bones as if she was a marionette. "I'm sorry."

She sobbed against him, then pulled away, wiping at her eyes. "What a pair of hysterical old people we've become." Her vivid blue eyes glittered with tears. "One nightmare and we go all to pieces."

It wasn't just one nightmare, not at all. What was he supposed to say to her? Roman freed himself from the down comforter, carefully fitted his feet into his leather slippers, and shuffled into the bathroom.

He looked at himself in the mirror. He was an old man, hair standing on end. He wore a nice pair of flannel pajamas and leather slippers his wife had given him for Christmas. His mind was dissolving like a lump of sugar in hot coffee.

The bathroom was clean tile with a wonderful claw-footed bathtub. The floor was tiled in a colored parquet-deformation pattern that started with ordinary bathroom-floor hexagons near the toilet, slowly modified itself into complex knotted shapes in the middle and then, by another deformation, returned to hexagons under the sink. It had cost him a small fortune and months of work to create this complex mathematical tessellation. It was a dizzying thing to contemplate from the throne and it now turned the ordinarily safe bathroom into a place of nightmare. Why couldn't he have picked something more comforting?

He stared at his image with some bemusement. He normally combed his thin hair down to hide his bald spot. Who did he think he was fooling? Woken from sleep, he was red-eyed. The bathroom mirror had turned into a magic one and revealed all his flaws. He was wrinkled, had bags under his eyes, broken veins. He liked to think that he was a loveable curmudgeon. Curmudgeon, hell. He looked like a nasty old man.

"Are you all right in there?" Abigail's voice was concerned.

"I'm fine. Be right there." With one last glance at his mirror image, Roman turned the light off and went back to bed.

Roman sat in his study chair and fumed. Something had happened to the medical profession while he wasn't looking. That was what he got for being so healthy. He obviously hadn't been keeping track of things.

"What did he say?" The computer's voice was interested. Roman was impressed by the inflection. He was also impressed by how easy it was to tell that the computer desperately wanted to know. Was *he* always that obvious?

"He's an idiot." Roman was pleased to vent his spleen. "Dr. Weisner's a country-club doctor, making diagnoses between the green and the clubhouse. His office is in a building near a shopping mall. Whatever happened to leather armchairs, wood paneling, and pictures of the College of Surgeons? You could trust a man with an office decorated like that, even if he was a drunken butcher."

"You're picking up Abigail's perception of style."

Roman, who'd just been making that same observation to himself, felt caught red-handed. "True. Weisner's a specialist in the diseases of aging. Jesus. He'll make a terrible old man, though, slumped in front of a TV set watching game shows." Roman sighed. "He does seem to know what he's talking about."

There was no known way to diagnose Alzheimer's disease, for example. Roman hadn't known that. There was only posthumous detection of senile plaques and argyrophilic neurofibrillary tangles in addition to cortical atrophy. Getting that information out of Weisner had been like pulling teeth. The man wasn't used to giving patients information. Roman had even browbeaten him into showing him slides of typical damage and pointing out the details. Now that he sat and imagined what was going on in his own brain he wasn't sure he should have been so adamant.

"Could you play that again?" the computer asked.

Roman was yanked from his brown study. "What?"

"The music you just had on. The Zelenka."

"Sure, sure." Roman loved Jan Dismas Zelenka's Trio Sonatas and his computer did too. He got a snifter of Metaxa and put the music on again. The elaborate architecture of two oboes and a bassoon filled the study.

Roman sipped the rough brandy. "Sorry you can't share this."

"So am I."

Roman reached under and pulled out a game box. "You know, the biggest disappointment I have is that Gerald hates playing games of any sort. I love them: chess, backgammon, Go, cards. So I have to play with people who are a lot less interesting than he is." He opened a box and looked at the letters. "You'd think he'd at least like Scrabble."

"Care for a game?"

"What, are you kidding?" Roman looked at the computer in dismay. "That won't be any fun. You know all the words."

"Now, Roman. It's getting increasingly difficult calling you that, you know. That's *my* name. A game of Scrabble with you might not be fun, but not for that reason. My vocabulary is exactly yours, complete down to vaguenesses and mistakes. Neither of us can remember the meaning of the word 'jejune.' We will each always type 'anomaly' before correcting it to 'anomaly.' It won't be fun precisely *because* I won't know any more words than you do."

"That's probably no longer true." Roman felt like crying. "You're already smarter than I am. Or, I suppose, I'm already dumber. I should have thought of that."

"Don't be so hard on yourself—"

"No!" Roman stood up, dumping Scrabble letters to the floor. "I'm losing everything that makes me me! That's why you're here."

"Yes, Roman." The computer's voice was soft.

"Together we can still make a decision, a final disposition. You're me, you know what *that* is. This can all have only one conclusion. There is only one action you and I can finally take. You know that. You know!"

"That's true. You know, Roman, you are a very intelligent man. Your conclusions agree entirely with my own."

Roman laughed. "God, it's tough when you find yourself laughing at your own jokes."

When he opened the door, Roman found Gerald in the darkness of the front stoop, dressed in a trench coat, fedora pulled down low over his eyes. "I got the gat," Gerald muttered.

Roman pulled him through the front door, annoyed. "Quit fooling around. This is serious."

"Sure, sure." Gerald slung his trench coat on a hook by the door and handed his fedora to Roman. "Careful of the chapeau. It's a classic."

Roman spun it off onto the couch. When he turned back Gerald had the gun out. It was a smooth, deadly, blue-black pistol.

"A Beretta model 92." Gerald held it nervously in his hand, obviously unused to weapons. "Fashionable. The Italians have always been leaders in style." He walked into the study and set it down on a pile of books, unwilling to hold it longer than necessary. "It took me an hour to find. It was in a trunk in the bottom of a closet, under some clothes I should have taken to Goodwill years ago."

"Where did you get it?" Roman himself wasn't yet willing to pick it up.

"An old lover. A police officer. She was worried about me. A man living all alone, that sort of thing. It had been confiscated in some raid or other. By the way, it's unregistered and thus completely illegal. You could spend a year in jail for just having it. I should have dumped it years ago."

Roman finally picked it up and checked it out, hand shaking just slightly. The double magazine was full of cartridges. "You could have fought off an entire platoon of housebreakers with this thing."

"I reloaded before I brought it over here. I broke up with Lieutenant Carpozo years ago. The bullets were probably stale... or whatever happens to old bullets." He stared at Roman for a long moment. "You're a crazy bastard, you know that, Roman?"

Roman didn't answer. The computer did. "It would be crazy for you, Gerald. For me, it's the only thing that makes sense."

"Great." Gerald was suddenly viciously annoyed. "Quite an achievement, programming self-importance into a computer. I congratulate you. Well, I'm getting out of here. This whole business scares the shit out of *me*."

"My love to Anna. You are still seeing her, aren't you?"

Gerald eyed him. "Yes, I am." He stopped and took Roman's shoulders. "Are you going to be all right, old man?"

"I'll be fine. Good night, Gerald."

Once his friend was gone, Roman calmly and methodically locked the pistol into an inaccessible computer-controlled cabinet to one side of the desk. Its basis was a steel fire box. Powerful electromagnets pulled chromemoly steel bars through their locks and clicked shut. It would take a

well-equipped machine shop a week to get into the box if the computer didn't wish it. But at the computer's decision, the thing would slide open as easily as an oiled desk drawer.

He walked into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Abigail woke up and looked at him nervously, worried that he was having another night tenor attack. He leaned over and kissed her.

"Can I talk with you?"

"Of course, Roman, just a second." She sat up and turned on her reading light. Then she ran a brush through her hair, checking its arrangement with a hand mirror. That done, she looked attentive.

"We got the Humana research contract today."

"Why, Roman, that's wonderful. Why didn't you tell me?" She pouted. "We ate dinner together and you let me babble on about the garden and Mrs. Peasley's orchids and you never said anything about it."

"That's because it has nothing to do with me. My team got the contract with their work."

"Roman—"

"Wait."

He looked around the bedroom. It had delicately patterned wallpaper and rugs on the floor. It was a graceful and relaxing room, all of it Abigail's doing.

His night table was much larger than hers because he always piled six months' worth of reading onto it.

"Everyone's covering for me. They know what I've done in the past and they try to make me look good. But I'm useless. You're covering for me. Aren't you, Abigail? If you really think about it, you know something's happening to me. Something that can only end one way. I'm sure that in your nightstand somewhere there's a book on senile dementia. I don't have to explain anything to you."

She looked away. "I wouldn't keep it somewhere so easy for you to find."

The beautiful room suddenly looked threatening. The shadows on the wall cast by Abigail's crystal-shaded lamp were ominous looming monsters. This wasn't his room. He no longer had anything to do with it. The books in the night table would remain forever unread, or if read, would be soon forgotten. He fell forward and she held him.

"I can't make you responsible for me," he said. "I can't do that to you. I can't ruin your life."

"No, Roman. I'll always take care of you, no matter what happens." Her voice was fierce. "I love you."

"I know. But it won't be *me* you're caring for. It will be a hysterical beast with no memory and no sense. I won't even be able to appreciate what you are doing for me. I'll scream at you, run away and get lost, shit in my pants."

She drew in a long breath.

"And you know *what?* Right now I could make the decision to kill myself—"

"No! God, Roman, you're *fine*. You're having a few memory lapses. I hate to tell you, but that comes with age. I have them. We all do. You can live a full life along with the rest of us. Don't be such a perfectionist."

"Yes. Now I have the capacity to make a decision to end it, if I choose. But now I don't *need* to make a decision like that. My personality is still whole. Battered, but still there. But when enough of my mind is gone that I am a useless burden, I won't be able to make the decision. It's damnable. When I'm a drooling idiot who shits in his pants and makes your life a living, daily hell, I won't have the *sense* to end it. I'll be miserable, terrified, hysterical. And I'll keep on *living*. And none of these living wills can arrange

it. They can avoid heroic measures, take someone off life support, but they can't actually *kill* anyone."

"But what about me?" Her voice was sharp. "Is that it, then? You have a problem, *you* make the decision, and I'm left to pick up whatever pieces are left? I'm supposed to abide by whatever decision *you* make?"

"That's not fair." He hadn't expected an argument. But what, then? Simple acquiescence? This was Abigail.

"*Who's* being unfair?" She gasped. "When you think there's not enough of you left to love, you'll just end yourself."

"Abigail, I love and care for you. I won't always be able to say that. Someday that love will vanish along with my mind. Allow me the right to live as the kind of human being I want to be. You don't want a paltry sick thing to take care of as a reminder of the man I once was. I think that after several years of that you will forget what it was about me that you once loved."

So they cried together, the way they had in their earliest days with each other, when it seemed that it would never work and they would have to spend their whole lives apart.

Roman stood in the living room in confusion. It was night outside. He remembered it being morning not more than a couple of minutes before. He had been getting ready to go to the office. There were important things to do there.

But no. He had retired from Hyperneuron. People from the office sometimes came to visit, but they never stayed long. Roman didn't notice because he couldn't pay that much attention. He offered them glasses of lemonade, sometimes bringing in second and third ones while their first was yet unfinished. Elaine had left in tears once. Roman didn't know why.

Gerald came every week. Often Roman didn't recognize him.

But Roman wanted something. He was out here for some reason. "Abigail!" he screamed. "Where's my... my... tool?"

His hair was neatly combed, he was dressed, clean. He didn't know that.

Abigail appeared at the door. "What is it, honey?"

"My tool, dammit, my tool. My... cutting..." He waved his hands.

"Your scissors?"

"Yes, yes, yes! You stole them. You threw them away."

"I haven't even seen them, Roman."

"You always say that. Why are they gone, then?" He grinned at her, pleased at having caught her in her lie.

"Please, Roman." She was near tears. "You do this every time you lose something."

"I didn't lose them!" He screamed until his throat hurt. "You threw them out!" He stalked off, leaving her at the door.

He wandered into his study. It was neat now. It had been so long since he'd worked in there that Abigail had stacked everything neatly and kept it dusted.

"Tell Abigail that you would like some spinach pies from the Greek bakery." The computer's voice was calm. "Wha—?"

"Some spinach pies. They carry them at the all-night convenience store over on Laughton Street. One of the small benefits of yuppification. Spanakopita at midnight. You haven't had them for a while and you

used to like them a lot. Be polite, Roman. Please. You are being cruel to Abigail."

Roman ran back out into the living room. He cried. "I'm sorry, pookie, I'm sorry." He grabbed her and held her in a death grip. "I want, I want..."

"What, Roman?" She looked into his eyes.

"I want a spinach pie," he finally said triumphantly. "They have them on Laughton Street. I like spinach pies."

"All right, Roman. I'll get some for you." Delighted at having some concrete and easily satisfied desire on his part, Abigail drove off into the night, though she knew he would have forgotten about them by the time she got back.

"Get the plastic sheet," the computer commanded. "What?"

"The plastic sheet. It's under the back porch where you put it."

"I don't remember any plastic sheet."

"I don't care if you remember it or not. Go get it and bring it in here."

Obediently, clumsily, Roman dragged in the heavy roll of plastic and spread it out on the study floor in obedience to the computer's instructions.

With a loud click the secure drawer slid open. Roman reached in and pulled out the pistol. He stared at it in wonder.

"The safety's on the side. Push it up. You know what to do." The computer's voice was sad. "I waited a long time, Roman. Perhaps too long. I just couldn't do it."

And indeed, though much of his mind was gone, Roman *did* know what to do. "Will this make Abigail happy?" He lay down on the plastic sheet. "No, it won't. But you have to do it." The pistol's muzzle was cold on the roof of his mouth.

"Jesus," Gerald said at the doorway. "Jesus Christ." He'd heard the gunshot from the driveway and had immediately known what it meant. He'd let himself in with his key. Roman Maitland's body lay twisted on the study floor, blood spattered from the hole torn in the back of his head. The plastic sheet had caught the blood that welled out.

"Why did he call me and then not wait?" Gerald was almost angry with his friend. "He sounded so sensible."

"He didn't call you. I did. Glad you could make it, Gerald."

Gerald stared around the study in terror. His friend was dead. But his friend's voice came from the speakers.

"A ghost," he whispered. "All that fancy electronics and software, and all Roman has succeeded in doing is making a ghost." He giggled. "God, science marches on."

"Don't be an ass." Roman's voice was severe. "We have things to do. Abigail will be home soon. I sent her on a meaningless errand to buy some spinach pies. I like spinach pies a lot. I'll miss them."

"I like them too. I'll eat them for you."

"Thanks." There was no trace of sarcasm in the computer's voice.

Gerald stared at the field memories, having no better place to address. "Are you really in there, Roman?"

"It's not me. Just an amazing simulation. I'll say goodbye to you, then to Abigail, and then you can call the police. I hear her car in the driveway now. Meet her at the front door. Try to make it easy on her.

She'll be pissed off at me, but that can't be helped. Goodbye, Gerald. You were as good a friend as a man could ask for."

Abigail stepped through the door with the plastic bag from the convenience store hanging on her wrist. As soon as she saw Gerald's face, she knew what had happened.

"*Damn* him! Damn him to hell! He always liked stupid tricks like that. He liked pointing over my shoulder to make me look. He never got over it."

She went into the study and put her hand on her husband's forehead. His face was scrunched up from the shock of the bullet, making him look like a child tasting something bitter.

"I'm sorry, Abigail," the computer said with Roman's voice. "I loved you too much to stay."

She didn't look up. "I know, Roman. It must have been hard to watch yourself fade away like that."

"It was. But even harder to watch you suffer it. Thank you. I love you."

"I love you." She walked slowly out of the room, bent over like a lonely old woman.

"Can I come around and talk with you sometimes?" Gerald sat down in a chair.

"No. I am not Roman Maitland. Get that through your thick skull, Gerald. I am a machine. And my job is finished. Roman didn't give me any choice about that. And I'm glad. You can write directly on the screen. Write the word 'zeugma.' To the screen's response write 'atrophy.' To the second response write 'fair voyage.' Goodbye, Gerald."

Gerald pulled a light pen from the drawer. When he wrote "zeugma" the parchment sheet said
COMMAND TO ERASE MEMORY STORE. ARE YOU SURE?

He wrote "atrophy."

THIS INITIATES COMPLETE ERASURE. ARE YOU ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN? He wrote
"fair voyage." ERASURE INITIATED.

The parchment sheet flickered with internal light. One by one, the indicator lights on the field memories faded out. A distant piece of Mozart played on the speakers and faded also.

"I'll call the police." Gerald looked down at his friend's dead body, then looked back.

On the sheet were the words COMMENCE ENTRY.