

Chemistry

by James Patrick Kelly

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"I'm going to fall in love tonight," said Marja, "and
this time you're coming with me."

Lily had been staring without comprehension at Screen 8
of 23/Brain Mechanisms in Mating. It was too hot for
neurobiology; the spex with their heavy displays kept
sliding down her nose. When she pushed them back up,
Screen 8 flickered. "I have to study," she said, trying
to remember the last time she'd heard a man whisper her
name in the dark.

"Face it, Lily, you think too damn much. What your
synapses need is a nice warm norepinephrine bath." Marja
Zoltowski had snuggled into a nest of pillows and tilted
the top of her head backwards against the wall to keep
her spex in place. Her Adam's apple bobbed when she
spoke.

"You Poles are such romantics." Lily shivered the way she used to when Glenn touched her face. "What is tonight, anyway?"

"I don't know. Monday?"

Lily blinked at the calendar icon and waited a second for the spex to retrieve her tickler from memory. "Okay, tomorrow we have day two of Freddy's virtual autopsy," she said, "and Wednesday is the immunology test. We hardly have time to sleep, much less fall for strangers."

"Listen to yourself." Marja shook her head. "Do you call this a life?"

"Nah," said Lily. Screen 9 of 12 was a diagram of the septo hypothalamic-mesencephalic continuum. "I call it med school."

"We could try that new place on Densmore Street. It's supposed to be grade."

"We? These are your urges, not mine. Why don't you just program a window shirt to flash available and hang out at Wally's?"

"This isn't about sex, Lily, it's about feelings.

Believe me, after they crank your hypothalamus you won't be able to tell the difference between neuromance and the real thing."

"Says you."

"Emotions aren't magic, doctor. They are reproducible

brain states."

This was something Lily knew to be true, but preferred not to think about -- like the correlation between cheesecake and adipose tissue. "Anyway," she said, "we can't afford it."

"Love makes all things possible."

Lily doubted that, but she said nothing.

"I wonder what kind of men go out on a Monday night?"

Marja smirked. "Gourmet cooks. Don't fancy restaurants close on Mondays?"

Lily set her spex on the kitchen table, mirror side down, so she wouldn't accidentally catch a glimpse of herself goofing off. "Weekend weathermen," she said.

"Priests cutting loose after a long Sunday. I need to study tonight, and so do you." She got up to stretch her legs, but of course there was no room. She and Marja had squeezed into an efficiency apartment off campus and their stuff filled the place to overflowing. Two yard sale dressers, two futons, a MedNet node, a whiny refrigerator, a microwave on the kitchen table, two plastic chairs. They had to wash dishes in the bathroom, which had once been a closet. The closet was a clothesline stretched across the west wall. When the place was picked up she could take four, maybe five steps without bumping into something, but at the moment

piles of hardcopy booby-trapped the floor like paper banana peels. There was a word for their lifestyle, she realized. Squalor.

"How long have we known each other?" said Marja. "Almost two years and you haven't even breathed on a man.

They're not all Glenns, you know. Look, we can fall in and out of love and still be back in plenty of time to weigh old Freddy's nonexistent spleen."

Lily picked up her spex again and held them at arm's length. From a distance the bright little images on the displays looked like a pair of shirt buttons. Had it really been two years? Maybe it was time to unbutton herself.

A private security rover patrolled Densmore Street; the servos of its infrared lenses mewled softly as it wove through the twilight. Most of the stores on the block were just closing: La Parfumerie, Hawkins Fine Wines, a World Food boutique and a couple of art galleries. Next to the Hothouse was the Office Restaurant. Through its windows Lily could see people in gray suits sitting alone at stylized desks, eating absently as they tweaked glowing blue spreadsheets. The neighborhood reeked of money and there was only fifty-three dollars and sixty seven cents left on her cash card. She wondered how much romance that would buy in the caviar part of town.

At street level the Hothouse was as stolid as a bank: two stories of granite blocks regularly pierced by thin, dark windows. Higher up, it blossomed into a crystalline riot of glass and light. They hesitated in front of the marble threshold.

"I bet they're wearing shoes made of real cow." Lily tucked her purse under her arm as if she expected some rampaging doorman to snatch it from her.

"Don't worry." Marja touched Lily's hand. "You look fine." She had lent Lily a crepe off the shoulder dress her grandmother had left her. It was too 90's for Lily's taste, but Marja was the specialist when it came to this sort of thing.

"You too," said Lily, "but that's not what I mean. Look where we are. We can't afford this -- unless you don't mind eating Cheerios for supper until finals."

"Come on. How much could it cost?"

"What's the gross national product of Portugal?"

"I'll ask, okay? I'll just poke my head in the door and find out."

"No, I'm coming." Lily rammed her purse deeper into her armpit and clamped it.

Lily had expected flocked wallpaper and leather couches. Instead there were lots of bright plastic surfaces and a rug with all the ambiance of sandpaper. The lobby of the

Hothouse was emphatically air-conditioned and illuminated almost to the point of discomfort. Only two of the five ticket booths were open. Beyond them was a bank of sliding doors, textured to look like the trunks of trees.

"Hi." The cashier was a young woman in an extravagant foliage print dress. She had jade highlights in her black hair and an expression as guileless as a pansy.

"Are you together?" The button on her collar said Ju.

"Yes," said Marja.

"No." Lily nudged her. "We came together, but we're not together together."

Ju smiled. "Whatever."

"We're interested," Marja said, "but we're not really sure this place is for us. Can you tell us about it?"

"As in, what does it cost?" Lily said.

Ju slid a brochure across the counter toward them; her fingernails were polished the same green as her hair.

"Your basic attraction enhancement is \$39.95." She opened it; inside was a map. "Includes admission to all public areas on the third and fifth floors, all gardens, three dance floors, both pools, complimentary swimsuits and towels in the dressing booths. On the fourth floor are stores and services you'll pay extra for. Sit down and take-out restaurants, bars, gift shops, lingerie boutiques, contraception kiosks, simulators and personal

fx galleries."

It's nothing but a mall, Lily thought. I'm twenty-five years old and still looking for love at the mall.

"We also have fifty-three private encounter rooms," Ju pointed to the map, "on the sixth floor. We're the biggest neuromance palace in the city."

Lily watched a little man in a navy blue jacket and gray slacks approach the other cashier. Her age but not her type; he looked as if he had just finished eating a memo salad at the Office Restaurant. "So how do you make someone fall in love?" she asked.

"Oh, we don't make you fall. We enhance the attraction response. There's a big difference. See, we trick this part of your brain called the hypothalamus into ordering up these special hormones. It's all natural."

"Hormones like LHRH and testosterone?" said Lily.

"Testosterone, right." Ju nodded. "That surprised me when I first heard it. I mean, you'd think you'd grow a mustache -- or worse. But it's okay; I've tried it." She gave them a blissful smile. "Don't know about the one with letters, they all sound the same. To tell the truth, they explained this to me once, but it didn't take. All I know is that whatever we do to you is approved by the FDA and licensed by the Board of Health. This card explains ... "

"Give me that." Marja snatched it from Lily. "Believe me, the procedure is straight out of Wessinger's neurobiology lab. The less you think about it, the better you'll feel."

"Whatever." Ju dimpled. "But really, one of the best parts is that they tickle something called your vomeronasal organ -- don't ask me how. You'll smell stuff you've never noticed before. Unbelievable, how great the food tastes. Try the brownies with brandy sauce." She kissed her fingers to the air and the man waiting at the next booth glanced over at them. Lily thought he might actually be shorter than she was.

"So what if we pay you our forty bucks," she said, "and go upstairs and find there're no human beings left? I don't want to fall for an insurance salesman."

"Oh, that's not a problem, believe me. We offer a money back guarantee, but only a few people ask. See, when those elevator doors open onto the welcome garden, you're ... I don't know ... ripe. I can't explain it exactly, but enhancement makes me realize how cute men look, how sweet they can be. At least while they're here. And it's really a grade crowd tonight. Some real hammers, if you know what I mean. I kind of wish I wasn't working myself."

An older man who shouldn't have been wearing red skintights got in line behind them, so they gave Ju

their cash cards. While she debited them, she had them press thumbs to a blood drawer. She printed two green buttons that read Lily and Marja and explained that green was for righties, red for gays. She had them sign liability waivers and told them they'd need to give a urine sample and warned them about side effects.

Although enhancement would wear off in four to five hours, they might have trouble falling asleep immediately after leaving the Hothouse; there was a chance their next periods might be a couple of days off schedule. She grinned, reminded them about the brownies and ushered them through the booth.

"We're in this together, right?" Lily whispered as the tree trunk doors opened. "You'll stop me before I do anything stupid?"

Marja laughed and patted her on the back. "Sort of late for that now."

Lily rubbed the button-sized swelling on her wrist where the orderly had poked her with the pressure syringe. Her purse hung loosely by her side.

"Pulse accelerated." Marja was practically vibrating as the elevator climbed to the third floor. "Skin temperature elevated. Apocrine sweat glands -- whew!" She peered into Lily's left eye, "Doctor, your pupils

are dilated!"

"Stop diagnosing."

"Okay, so how do you feel?"

Lily considered and then giggled. "Like I'm six and it's Christmas Eve. You're losing your corsage."

Marja repinned the orchid which the orderly had laced with pheromones synthesized from her urine sample. The doors slid open.

Fifteen or twenty faces turned, glowing with expectation. Lily was instantly drawn to them, understanding their conspicuous need because she shared it. They had hauled themselves out of the icy datastream into the warmth of high touch and beautiful feelings. As the enhancement drugs gripped her, she felt the weight of her life drop away. Tomorrow they would all go back to their desks and workshops and counters and she would ligate the arteries of a cybercorpse named Fred. But that was far removed from this bright dream of lush and immediate sensation. She let it fill her lungs and eyes and ears; she wanted to lick it. A band stood poised to play. Leaves like green hands waved at her. She itched to rub her bare feet on the moss rug, shinny up that palm tree, kiss all three of those men by the fountain just to find out how they tasted. No, she wasn't going to ask for her money back. She knew she would find him here. Someone to love, for a little while at least. His

identity was a mystery only she could solve: Lily Brewster, girl detective. Maybe he was still lingering at the marble threshold on Hope Street, ten thousand miles below, or already talking to Ju in the lobby. Most likely he was watching her, one of the happy faces, which she now noticed were arranged in a kind of loose formation. She and Marja stepped down into the welcome garden's central courtyard and smiling people closed around them.

She smiled back, even after she realized she was going to have to square dance.

The bass player had a voice as friendly as a milk commercial.

"All square your sets around the hall,
Four couples to a set, listen to the call."

He chose "The Texas Star," a simple figure dance which featured constant switching of partners.

Her first was the short man from the lobby; his green name badge read Steve. She couldn't understand how he had gotten to the welcome garden before her. Just as the dance began, he insisted on shaking her hand. "You're freezing!" Lily said, clasping his cold hand between hers.

He stared as if he were memorizing her face. "I just washed up." When the fiddles started, he led her into a

left-faced turn under his arched right arm. "You know, Lily, your handshake tells a lot about you."

"Meet your partner, pass on by

Pick up your next one on the fly."

Nick, a pale man with a mustache like a caterpillar said, "I know you! We met at Justin Metaphor's last image launch." He stared at Lily's corsage as if he wanted to eat it. "You came as President Garmezy."

"Not me," she said. "I'm a Neurocrat."

"Smalls back out, bigs go in,

Make that Texas Star again."

"Am I a big or a small?" She crooked her arm into that of a heavyweight with hair down his neck. Tomasz had feet as wide as shovels.

"You're a small, my kitten, but plenty big enough for me." He had a thick Middle European accent; she decided to leave him for Marja.

"Bigs back out and all circle eight

Circle back to place 'til you get it straight."

The fiddlers stroked their instruments. Was that her roommate, skipping like a girl scout? Lily was determined to initiate the next conversation. "This is probably the silliest damn thing I've ever done," she said to a red badge named Renfred who smelled of cigarettes.

"Never done it before." Sweat beaded across his face

like a glass of iced tea. "I'm from Toronto."

"Hand over hand and heel over heel

The more you dance the better you feel."

"I've finally decided who you remind me of." Keith had green eyes and more teeth than a shark. "One of those Vermeer women, standing in front of a window." The fat end of his untied tie dangled in front of his crotch and the skinny end beat against his pocket as he danced.

"Vermeer, you know, the painter?"

Not a bad line, she thought, but he ruined it by prompting her. "Keith." She tugged the tie from around his neck and handed it to him. "Is this yours?"

Her next partner ignored her. "Yes, of course I did." He spoke over his shoulder to the Asian woman behind Lily.

"She belonged with her parents."

"Tuck in your shirt, pull down your vest

And bow to the one you like the best."

The fiddlers tipped their instruments toward the caller and the dance ended. Lily might have nodded at Keith, the Vermeer fan, if he'd been paying attention, but he was already fawning over an older woman with eyes like targets. Someone tapped her left shoulder; she turned.

"My name is Steve." The guy with cold hands bowed.

"Lily." She glanced down to see that she hadn't lost her name badge. "Obviously."

"Lily, do you know that people rarely change their first impressions?" His eye contact was relentless.

"Is that so?" she said. Steve was as clean-cut as a Marine recruiter. He had stubby fingers and wide shoulders. A thread hung loose from the middle buttonhole of his jacket. "What's yours?" He hadn't gotten any taller.

He held up open palms, as if to show he was unarmed.

"That you're gorgeous, lonely, nervous and still shopping. Will you at least let me shake your hand again?"

"Promise to give it back?" she said. He had a precise and sincere grip that didn't try to prove anything.

"You've warmed up." Their hands fit together nicely.

"When my palms get sweaty," he said, "I rinse them under cold water. It's a sales trick: the confident man keeps a cool hand."

She had never understood why men always said such odd things to her.

"Here's another," he continued. "Say we're shaking and you haven't decided whether to trust me. Look where your hand is, Lily. When we started talking, you kept it close to your body. Now that I've drawn it toward me slightly, you've come along with it."

Lily let go of him. She reminded herself that this was a man with a crew cut who practiced sales tricks. "And

what are you trying to sell me?"

"I don't know yet." His voice was low. "First I have to find out if I carry what you want."

The elevator doors opened and everyone turned to inspect the new arrivals. It was Old Man Skintights and a thirtyish brunette in a caramel-colored suit. As the dancers moved to welcome them, the fiddlers picked up their bows.

"Never leave a prospect until you schedule your next meeting." Steve grinned. "Shall we say, after this dance?" He strolled away whistling but paused at the edge of the garden and called to her. "I like you, Lily Obviously." He disappeared behind a hibiscus covered with red flowers.

There's a man who knows exactly what he wants, she thought, and I'm it. She was at once pleased and scared and slightly let down. Where had he gone so abruptly? To rinse in cold water?

The caller tapped the belly of his bass. "All square your sets ..."

Lily had intended to dance again, but that was what he expected her to do. She thought it better to be unpredictable, make his hands sweat. She spotted some people gathered beneath a statue of a satyr groping a nymph.

"Now you're getting into ideology," a nervous black man said. "Ask Alice about that."

"About what?" said a woman in a poet's blouse and orange tights.

"Keith here claims the female orgasm is vestigial. A leftover, like an appendix."

"Should we kill him now," Betty said to T.J., who had his arm around her waist, "or hear him out first?"

"Hey, I'm not against anyone's orgasm," Keith said quickly. "My point is that in evolutionary terms, female orgasm is irrelevant. Some societies don't even have a word for it."

"We should make one up for them," said Lily. "How about shimmer? Or leap?"

"Oh yes, baby, yes, I'm rippling."

Alice shook her head. "Maybe you ripple, honey, but I surge."

All the women laughed.

Keith wasn't giving up. "Women reproduce whether they climax or not. With us, orgasm is everything. If we don't come, there's no ball game."

"Ball game?" Betty rubbed against T.J. "Why is it that whenever we try to talk about love, men change the subject to sports?"

"It's because we take pleasure differently," said Alice.

"A man gets off on objects. He sees tits and an ass and

he doesn't care who they're attached to. We need intimacy and tenderness to enjoy ourselves. We don't give a damn how the his cock is; we want to know the size of his feelings."

"All men want is sex." Maya sighed. "We want love."

"Ah, bullshit," said T.J. "I want to dance."

"Look, someone's imprinting."

The band broke into the ceremonial "Only You Tonight" and dancers closed in a circle around a couple, clapping and cheering them on. Lily strained to see who it was.

Big Tomasz with the shovel feet -- and Marja! "Wait!" As Lily raced across the courtyard, Marja pulled Tomasz down to her. He buried his nose in her corsage. The orderly had explained that once a two people imprinted themselves with each others' pheromones, they would be inseparable the rest of the night. When Tomasz came up, his eyes were gleaming.

Lily waved frantically at her but Marja paid no attention. Tomasz offered her the chocolate the Hothouse staff had impregnated with his own musky androstenols.

It was wrapped in gold foil; she unpeeled it lasciviously, pressed it between her lips and chewed, her jaws working around a cheek-stretching smile.

The crowd's rhythmic clapping punctuated the impromptu ceremony. "Let's congratulate the new couple," said the

caller from behind his bass. Now that they had imprinted, their badges changed to a color which only they shared. It was the purple of venous blood. "Seal it with a kiss!" the caller cried.

The crowd whooped.

"Isn't he grade?" Marja was glowing. "Am I lucky or what? This is Lily, my roommate. Tomasz is a lion tamer, can you believe that?" Lily could smell the chocolate on her breath.

"Moj Boze, Marja, ja cie Kocham."

"Aren't lions extinct?" Lily said.

He didn't hear her; he and Marja were kissing again. By the time they finished, Lily assumed he had forgotten the question, so she asked again.

"In the wild, yes." He kept one massive arm clasped around Marja's shoulder as if she were a trophy he had just won. "I work with the New World cats mostly, cougars and jaguars. We have one leopard." He feinted at her with his free hand and grinned when she recoiled.

"All strong enough to kill you."

"I didn't even know the circus was in town."

"They leave Wednesday," said Marja. "Which is why we're going to the fifth floor right now and find a quiet place and tell each other our life stories. Maybe later we can swim."

"I want an olive pizza," said Tomasz, "and a liter of

kava."

"Okay, kava and pizza." She nestled up to him. "What else do you want?"

He had a laugh that could worry a cougar.

"So Marja," said Lily, "maybe we should set a time to meet?"

"No, no, I'll get home on my own." She gave Lily a look like a bedroom door closing. "Don't wait up. I'll see you at Freddy's tomorrow."

"Freddy?" said Tomasz.

"He's nobody," she said as she steered her prize away.

Lily filled with doubts as she watched her friend go.

They had promised not to let each other do anything stupid. Did falling for a lion tamer qualify? Now that she'd been abandoned, she wished she were home studying.

Coming to the Hothouse made sense in the romantic abstract, but the men here were all annoyingly specific.

She wasn't attracted to anyone and even if she were, how could she trust her feelings? They'd pumped her so full of hormones she could probably fall for a vacuum cleaner

if it smelled right. She decided she didn't much like

being enhanced, although she understood that there was no difference between the brain chemistry of neuromance

and actually falling in love. Despite her B+ in

Wessinger's class, Lily was reluctant to accept a

mechanistic view of her inner life. She didn't like being reminded that love, hope and joy were merely outputs of her limbic system. What she ought to do was march right down for a refund, go home and stare into her spex until she had memorized the immunoglobulins. The idea was oddly comforting: maybe the enhancement was wearing off. Marja had warned her that thinking too much about it might spoil the effect.

"You didn't dance."

She moaned. "Oh, shit." She couldn't help herself. Steve had taken off the navy blue jacket; he was wearing a white shirt and a red striped tie. "I'm sorry. Look, this has nothing to do with you. You seem nice enough. It's just ... I'm probably going to leave. Get my money back."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like being programmed. I mean, I realized that's what would happen when I walked in, but I thought somehow it would fool me. Now I know better. This just doesn't feel like love. It's a chemistry experiment."

"You've been in love before, Lily?"

"Of course." He wouldn't take a hint; she'd probably have to be rude.

"What's it like?"

"Oh, come on." She watched him watching her, his pupils

like black buttons. "You know."

"No. I've never been in love."

"What, you grew up in a monastery?"

The sarcasm seemed to bounce off him. "I thought I was in love once." He paused, as if deciding how much to tell her. "We worked in the same office. She was older. Married. When her husband found out, she broke it off. She said she didn't love me and that I didn't really love her."

"And you believed her?" Lily didn't know why she was encouraging him. He nodded. "She was right. The sex was great but it wasn't love. I got all excited because she was beautiful, smart, rich, powerful, what I thought I wanted. But we never talked, except about the business or the weather or what hotel to meet at. The day we broke up she told me she was a Catholic and went to church every Sunday. She said she'd felt really guilty about what we'd been doing. It wasn't a secret, I just never asked."

The elevator doors opened again and a bald Hispanic woman blinked in astonishment at the welcome garden.

"I realized that if I hadn't loved her, then I'd never loved anyone."

The musicians were ready. "Hell of a thing to find out about yourself," she said.

"Something I'd like to fix, Lily."

This was her chance; she could escape into the next dance. She wouldn't have to hurt him -- not that she cared. Afterward she could sneak away. She didn't need a man with another woman's footprints up his back. But if she left now, who was going to make sure Marja didn't run off with the circus?

"What happened to your jacket?" she said. "Your name badge?"

"I went to find a place where we could be alone. I left them to hold our spot."

The bass player announced a new dance called "Swing or Cheat" and sets began forming around them.

"It's really pretty," Steve said. "There's a stream and a bush with tiny oranges on it and white flowers that smell like honey."

Lily was getting used to the way he made eye contact.

Whatever Steve's other faults, she believed he was sincere. Glenn had always looked away when he lied to her.

"You just left your jacket there?" she said. "I hope no one takes it."

He led her down a slate path past the eight foot wide sheet of falling water which drowned the shrilling of the fiddles. They turned into one of the garden's many

little clearings. The bench was wrought iron; it sat low on a lawn of lemon thyme. The stream bubbled in front of them and the air hung heavy and sweet. Steve's jacket was folded over the armrest.

"Calamondin oranges." She slid her purse under the bench. "They're sour, just barely edible. They make good marmalade, though."

"How do you know so much about plants?"

"My dad's hobby, actually. He had a greenhouse. I remember in the winter, it was always so bright and warm. Like going on vacation. The pots were all on wheels; when he was away I used to move plants around and build myself a jungle. He was away a lot. He was a doctor too."

"Is he still alive?"

"No, my parents are both dead." She let one of her shoes drop off. "He always said he liked flowers so much he had one for a daughter." She tickled her foot in the thyme. This clearing reminded her of one of her jungles.

"My father is an engineer on an oil tanker," Steve said.

"He'd be at sea for three months and then with us for two. I missed him when he was away, but once he got home I couldn't wait for him to ship out again. He was too strict and he yelled at Mom. Since they divorced, I

haven't seen him much. Now Mom -- she's great. She worked twenty eight years at Sears, wherever they needed her. She could talk you into a tent or towels or a thinkmate, no problem. I was a shy boy, if you can believe that, but she kept pushing me. She said I had to go out and show the world what a great son she had."

As he spoke, Lily folded and unfolded her hands. She didn't want to hear about Steve's family problems and now she was embarrassed to have shared memories of her father with a stranger. "What are we doing here?"

"I don't know about you, Lily, but I'm enjoying the view." He leaned back and looked her up and down with obvious approval "Pretty flowers, great company -- hey, ssh!"

He held a finger to his lips. There were muffled voices, then footsteps on the path. The foliage hid the strollers but as they approached Lily heard a man declaiming with the grandiloquence of a longtime Shakespeare abuser. "She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that's best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes"

Lily held in her laughter until they were safely past, then she burst. After a second, Steve roared too, although she suspected that it was only because he was relieved that she was finally unwinding.

"So you can laugh," he said. "What an improvement!"

"It's just ... the old Byron trick." She couldn't catch her breath. "The corniest, the lamest" She started to dissolve again.

"This Byron writes poems?"

"Lord Byron, you dope." It didn't seem to help. "Hey, even I know Byron and I took hackers' English in college."

He leaned forward and reached between his feet for a sprig of thyme. He said nothing.

"I can't believe anyone over eighteen would fall for a line like that."

He started defoliating the thyme. "Maybe she likes poetry."

"But don't you see, that's the whole problem! Tired old poems work, dumb songs work, honesty works, lies work, every trick in the book works. There's no choice involved, we're practically defenseless here."

"You know what the problem is, Lily?" He looked unhappy.

"You're too busy thinking to enjoy yourself."

She was surprised at how much his disapproval stung.

"Excuse me?" He was nobody, a pushy salesman she hardly knew. "Using your head isn't exactly a handicap, you know." She waited for him to apologize, explain himself, make her feel better, but he let the silence stretch.

The dumb little bastard. He wasn't going to get away with hurting her; she could retaliate. "So Steve, what was your major in college?" She already knew the answer.

"Didn't have one."

"Oh come on, everyone ..."

"Didn't go."

The stream babbled through another long silence. She thought of twelve different things to say, but couldn't speak because she was too ashamed of herself for humiliating him. What a snob she was! If this was neuromance then she could do without it; she'd had more conflicting feelings in the past half hour than she'd had in six months. Steve stood up, put on his jacket, sat down again. She watched him, an emptiness growing within her. Maybe she couldn't fall anymore, maybe the parts of her brain that loved had atrophied.

"You never answered my question, Lily," he said.

"What was it?"

"You were going to tell me what it's like to be in love."

"It stinks, actually." She didn't hesitate. "You lose everything, your friends, your freedom. Your bathroom. He kicks you awake at three in the morning but if he's not there you can't sleep. He never wants the vid you want and he doesn't eat fish and he can't wait to tell

you when you're wrong. And when you're fighting, it feels like you're getting an appendectomy without anesthesia."

"You call that a sales pitch?" There was a hint of a smile on his lips. "If it's so horrible, why come here?"

"I don't know why I came here." Another silence that she didn't want loomed. "I'm sorry, Steve."

"Hey, you said my name! That's the first time you said my name."

"I figured it was time, since you've said mine a hundred times already." She gave a dry chuckle. "What is that, anyway, another sales trick?"

"You know studies show only twenty percent of communication is verbal." He slid slowly across the bench toward her. "The other eighty percent depends on non-verbal cues." He kept coming. "Facial expressions, posture, tone of voice." When he stopped, they were six inches apart. "I'm in your personal space now. We're not touching but you can feel me, can't you?"

"Yes." She liked the feeling. It was like coming out of an ice storm and standing next to a crackling fire.

"Sales tricks are based on the way people are, Lily. They connect with real feelings. Sure, some people use them to sell bad products or unnecessary ones, but I

don't. I just try to give the prospect what she wants."

Lily watched his mouth as he spoke. For some reason, the way his lips moved fascinated her. She could see his teeth and the tip of his tongue.

"But you don't know what you want, do you?"

"I want to be happy."

"But you don't want to fall in love?" He leaned and brushed his shoulder against her. "Lose your freedom? Everything?"

"Maybe it's too late." She was surprised to hear herself say it aloud, although she had known it for some time.

"I wonder what would happen if I sniffed my own corsage?" She touched it absently. "Probably spend the night crouching by the stream, admiring myself."

"I'd like to spend the night admiring you, Lily.

Obviously."

She laughed and then she kissed him. When she closed her eyes, he smelled like chocolate. It had to be some kind of trick, she thought before she stopped thinking. When she finished with him, she saw her own smile reflected on his lips.

"I'm hungry." Lily slipped her hand into his pocket. "Do you have anything to eat?" She trapped the candy against his taut abdominal muscles.

He squirmed as if he were ticklish. "Can we do this in private?"

As far as she was concerned, the rest of the Hothouse was nothing but rumors and mist. "We can do whatever we want."

She expected some kind of cortisol and epinephrine boost when she ate the chocolate but all she felt was the lingering warmth of his kiss. It was only when he lowered his head slowly, deliberately, to her corsage, that her blood began to pound. He filled his lungs with her scent. "Nice," he said, "but I prefer the real thing."

"Hey look," she said, "our badges have already changed"

He covered her mouth with his, filling her world in all directions. He certainly knew how to sell a kiss. She brushed her fingertips across his cheek and he pulled back and rubbed his cheek against hers. "You like to hear me say your name." He nuzzled her ear. "Don't you?"

He was whispering. "Lily?"

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes."

She told him about getting an A- in Professor Graves Anatomy class where twenty students failed and he told her about the time he'd hit a grand slam off Chico Moran, who was now the number two starter for the Dodgers. She'd done her pre-med at Michigan State and

he'd played shortstop for a season and a half with the Red Sox's farm team in New Britain, Connecticut before blowing out his knee sliding into third. It was the worst moment of his life; hers was when her father died. He was twenty-six, she was twenty-five. She warned him she wouldn't eat artichokes or buffalo or anything with peanut butter in it. He'd never had an artichoke. He bragged about the time his mother sold a watch to Vice President Blaine and made the six o'clock news. Her mother had never worked, she'd stayed home to take care of Lily and her two sisters and drink blush wine. Lily was the youngest, Steve was an only child. She complained about Marja's shoes. He hardly ever saw his best friend because he caught for the Colorado Rockies. He made her tell him about Glenn who was at Johns Hopkins now studying gerontology because that was where the money was. They'd lived together off-campus their senior year in East Lansing; Glenn had a four handicap in golf and wanted her to wear stupid hats when he was in the mood for sex. He told her a little more about Marsha, how she'd taught him how to sell and how she apologized for her Caesarian scar the first time they'd made love. He said the best times together were when she let him drive her Porsche 717 and Lily laughed and said Glenn had a Mazda Magic which he had never let her drive but that once when he went home for his grandmother's

funeral she had swiped his keys and cranked it to 110 on I 96 and had never told anyone until now so they pressed their bodies hard against each other and kissed until their lips were numb and Lily wondered what it cost to rent an encounter room on the sixth floor.

By eleven the clearing was too small for them. It was time to see if their newfound infatuation was portable.

They started strolling hand in hand up the slate path before she realized she had left her purse behind.

Almost everybody had in the welcome garden paired up and dispersed; there were only enough dancers to make two sets. Lily thought she detected a note of desperation in the music. As the dancers promenaded, the caller warned them:

Hurry up strangers, don't be slow,
You'll never fall in love unless you do-si-do.

Maybe the band was ready to pack up. As she watched Old Man Skintights bravely circling the floor, she wondered what it would feel like to get enhanced and then not find anyone to fall for. A refund wouldn't really cover the cost of being iced out at a neuromance palace. She remembered her first glimpse of the welcome garden, when it had bubbled with exotic possibilities. Now it seemed as flat as yesterday's champagne.

"They gave us four or five hours," she said. "At

midnight we all turn into pumpkins."

Steve had zero tolerance for melancholy. "This way." He aimed her at the elevators.

"No," she said, "let's walk up."

"Two flights?"

"Oh, we have to peek at shops on the fourth floor," she said. He looked doubtful. "Maybe get something to eat?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Well, what if I am?"

He colored; it was the first time she had seen him embarrassed. "Sorry." He turned reluctantly toward the stairs but when he tugged at her to follow, she let him go.

"Steve, what's the matter?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Maybe it's just that I hate being sold things I don't need." She sensed that he wanted to say something else -- but he didn't.

"I'll swallow my cash card, okay?" Lily said. He reached out for her and she came to him. "I'll be good.

Promise."

Where the third floor had been a hot, dark blur, the fourth was a place to lounge and consume conspicuously.

With its open sight lines, it flaunted the true size of the Hothouse. The shops and restaurants ringed an enormous irregularly-shaped pool. Its bays and peninsulas were landscaped with bougainvillea. There

were sandy beaches and ten foot bluffs. They saw couples sprawled on checked tableclothes beside wicker picnic baskets: the picnickers drank wine from bottles with broad shoulders and broke long sticks of french bread.

"We can swim," said Lily. "That's free."

"Sure." When he gave her a forlorn smile, she worried that he was relieved to be getting away from her.

The dressing booths were between the Honey Bun Bakery and the Intimate Moment, a lingerie store. The bakery breathed the yeasty aroma of warm bread onto them.

Lily's mouth watered but she said nothing. Instead she kissed Steve and he brightened. They went through separate doors.

Her booth was a four foot square; its only furnishing was a shelf-like seat. The far wall was a screen on which appeared her image, larger than life. She winked at herself and then giggled because she was certain that she had just discovered Steve's secret character flaw: he was cheap. Somehow that reassured her, perhaps because it was so curable. It wasn't as if he were a womanizer or a drunk or a golfer. Lily believed she understood thrift since she practiced it of necessity herself. Someday, when she was a rich gynecologist, they would come here and she would buy him something from every shop.

Suddenly the little booth seemed very chilly. The enhancement that had helped her fall for Steve would wear off in a couple of hours and then what would be left of her feelings for him? Maybe there wasn't going to be any someday with Steve.

"Welcome to the Hothouse." When the booth spoke to her, it was her own image that appeared to be talking. "This is a dressing booth. Occupancy is strictly limited to one. For those couples requiring privacy, may we suggest our encounter rooms on the six floor?"

"Oh?" She leered at herself. "And how much would they cost?"

Eight windows opened down the left hand side of the screen. "Encounter rooms range from \$20 to \$110." Each window showed a differently priced room. Twenty dollars bought a closet with a bed in it; the suite with a chandelier and the flocked wallpaper cost a hundred.

"Shall I make a reservation for you now?"

"No, make me a bathing suit."

The rooms disappeared. "Swimdress, tank, two piece or bikini?"

"Bikini."

She whimpered when saw herself on the screen in a generic black bikini. There had to be some perverse glitch in the booth's software; her skin was the color of cement and her knees looked like doorknobs.

"Would you prefer a bandeau, halter or athletic top?"

"Bandeau."

"Underwire, sculptex, pump, or natural?"

"Pump?"

She watched in horror as her breasts rose like popovers baking on fast-forward. If they'd been lifted any higher they would have been pointing at the moon.

"No, natural."

They receded. She turned sideways and eyed her figure hopelessly. She experimented with a high-cut brief but the edges of her glutei maximi hung out of it like mocking fleshy grins. The booth could fabricate the suit in any of three thousand prints or 1.2 million solids.

With a sigh, she chose something in the mid-cyan range.

Letting him see her in a swimsuit on the first date -- what had she been thinking of? A drawer slid open with the suit and towel in a sealed plastic bag.

"After pressing your thumb to the printreader, deposit your belongings in the drawer for later retrieval." Lily could not help but think of Steve's cool hands as she started unbuttoning the front of her dress.

She came out of the dressing booth and immediately panicked: Steve wasn't waiting. The door to his booth was open! Her first thought was that he was mad at her and had left. Her skin felt tight. Maybe he'd gone back

to the welcome garden to try his luck again, or left the Hothouse altogether. Oh God, what had she been thinking of? They should've taken the damn elevator; she didn't really care about swimming and she couldn't afford to shop. She had to find him, apologise -- but should she get dressed first or ransack the Hothouse in her bikini? While she was trying to decide, he came out of the men's room. The sight of him made her eyes burn. This was love, yes, it had already reduced her to a dithering adolescent.

"Lily, are you all right?" he said.

She swooped into his embrace. "Fine now." She didn't know why it had bothered her before that he was short. She put her arms around his compact athlete's body and realized that a larger man wouldn't be quite so huggable. She noticed that he was slightly lopsided, right deltoids and biceps bigger than the left. All those throws to first base. "I just missed you."

"Look at you." He peeled her away from him. "You're beautiful. Fantastic."

They kissed again and she ran her fingertips across his back and felt his skin warming hers. She knew exactly what had happened: the fear of losing him had hit her in the adrenal glands. Hard. Hormones had seeped and messenger chemicals had washed into the deepest parts of her brain but the chemistry didn't matter to her

anymore. She wanted him. It wasn't only lust; she wanted to ease his pain over losing baseball, to thank him for listening to her whine about Glenn, to show him what love might be. They would be so good for one another, only she didn't have the \$20. She tried to think of a way to get him to split the cost of a room without aggravating him about the money.

"Lily," he murmured. "There's something I have to tell you."

She shuddered -- she hated the way men confessed! They didn't know how and besides, whenever they were sorry, it was always for the wrong thing. Lily wasn't interested in what he had to say. She wanted to tell him to shut up. But she didn't have to.

"Lily!" Someone was waving.

"Over here. Lily." Marja stood, hands raised, on a red checked tablecloth on the beach. Tomasz lolled at her feet like a sleepy tiger.

"Just wave back," said Steve, "we really need to talk."

"She's my best friend. She'll strangle me if I don't introduce you."

Marja was wearing a purple maillot that had a cookie sized transparency sprite roving across its surface, exposing pale skin. That might have explained why her cheeks were so red, but Lily doubted it. Tomasz sat up

as they approached and rubbed his eyes. There was a half-full bottle of kava in the picnic basket. Someone had kicked white sand into an empty pizza carton.

"And who is this?" Marja said.

"Steve." Lily said. "My God, Steve, you haven't told me your last name yet."

"Beauchamp."

"Nice to meet you." They shook hands; Lily watched and wondered what he discovered about her. "I was just about to swim," said Marja. "You two interested in a quick dip?"

"Sure," said Lily. She glanced over at Steve; he was pouting. "Steve?"

He shook his head.

"Good. Let the ladies go." Tomasz rolled toward the kava. "We'll work the bottle."

The two women waded into the tepid water. When it lapped at her waist, Marja sank backwards with a weary moan. "A pretty little one you picked," she said.

"I think so," Lily said. "So, did you do anything stupid yet?"

"I let him talk me into this damn bathing suit. Bad enough people can see my thighs but random nudity"

She snorted in disgust. "My synapses don't snap for Tomasz the way they used to, but it was grade while it lasted."

"How was the sixth floor?"

"What, am I still flushed? For a while I thought my face had caught fire." She ducked underwater and came up spluttering laughter. "He's one of the hammers -- isn't that what the receptionist called them? Wasn't much of a talker, but he communicated, wow. Got that from his cats, I guess. Funny to be talking about him in the past tense already." She splashed Lily. "So did you have an encounter?"

"We've talked a lot, that's all. He's very ... I don't know ... decisive. From the moment we met he seemed so sure that he wanted me. Eventually I started wanting him. A lot." She laughed. "Whatever they gave us must have worked overtime because I ... I think really love him, Marja. I don't want this to be over in an hour."

She did a few backstrokes away from the shore, where Steve was gesturing at Tomasz with the bottle of kava.

"Is that supposed to happen?"

"Hey, maybe you talked too much, roomie. You're not in the market for a keeper. Besides, where would you put him?"

"He can stay at his place; I just want to borrow him once in awhile. Anyway, right before we spotted you he said he had something important to tell me, which is probably that he's emigrating to Uzbekistan next

Wednesday." When Lily waved to him, Steve got up and walked edge of the water. "I should get back," she said.

"Tomasz and I are about done, Lily." Marja looked worried. "Maybe we should both call it a night? Get his number. If you're still hot in the morning, you can call him."

She treaded water, not listening. "Ever hear of a baseball player named Chico Moran?"

Flowers had overrun the fifth floor. They marched down crushed stone paths and spread across parterres and perennial borders. This was a strolling floor, not as private as the third, nor as public as the fourth. The oak benches tucked beside the flower beds were clearly visible from the paths. The only privacy was that afforded by politeness. Lily and Steve passed blindly past two laughing gay men and an elderly couple who had fallen asleep. She, however, could not help but gape at the impossible couple of Alice the feminist and Keith the lizard, entwining passionately. Finally they chanced upon an empty bench which faced a drift of impatiens swarming around the legs of burgundy roses. She leaned over to smell one and then covered a yawn with the back of her hand. It was almost one. Time for him to stop talking and get back to kissing.

Steve waved for her to sit beside him. "Because good salesmen don't lie, Lily." He put his arm around her.

"We have to buy before we can sell. First I have to believe that my product is the best for you, otherwise I can't get you interested in it. And I do, Lily. Maybe you still have some doubts, but I know I'd be good for you."

"No, I'm sure too." She was delighted that it was still true. Marja was no doubt already home in bed; Lily's enhancement must have worn off by now. This wasn't neuromance anymore; she was on her own.

"This isn't easy, okay? A salesman never brings up his own negatives. That's anti-selling. If a client has a problem or complaint, I acknowledge it and try to work it out. But if I start telling you what I think is wrong with me, not only could I lose you, I might even stop believing in myself."

"I'm sorry; I should've listened before." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "So tell me now."

"Okay, start at the beginning. Ever heard of the new produce?"

"Isn't that the pricey stuff they sell at those food boutiques?"

He nodded. "Here in America we rely on just twenty-four crops for most of what we eat. But there are over 20,000

edible plants. Oca from South America. Arracacha, it's a cross between celery and carrot. Mamey from Cuba. I've spent a lot of time learning the new produce. It's a specialty market now but it has tremendous potential for breakout. I developed contacts all over the country."

"This has something to do with us?"

His voice was tight. "You remember Marsha, the one who taught me about selling? Well, her husband Bill owned the company I worked for. Not only did he fire me, but the son of a bitch is still working overtime to keep me from catching on somewhere else. Like this evening, I stopped by World Food across the street. I used to take the manager there out to the stadium -- on my tab. But tonight my good friend informs me that his headquarters says I'm nobody and there's nothing he can do for me." He choked back his outrage. "I'm going to beat these guys, Lily, and soon. Only"

"You're out of work?" She sat up, giddy with relief.

"You poor thing, that's terrible." It was hard to keep from laughing. "How long?"

"Eight months."

"Steve, you're only twenty-six. It's not like you're Willie Loman. You can find something else to sell."

"Willie Loman? Who's he, some fancy marketing professor?"

What the hell does Willie Loman know about selling glasswort to Piggly Wiggly?"

"Nothing." She slipped her hand onto his knee and squeezed. "Forget it." She didn't want him angry at her, too.

"I gave up my life once, Lily," he said firmly. "What I learned from that is I never want to do it again. But now you know that the real reason I didn't want to go to the fourth floor was that I couldn't afford to. Believe me, if I had money to spend, you'd see all of it. When we were down by the stream, I kept thinking how it would be to take you upstairs to one of the rooms." He reached into his pocket. "Problem is my cash card flamed out two weeks ago." He pulled a crumpled two dollar bill taut, smoothed it against his leg and offered it to her. "My life savings."

"You have no money at all? Then why come to a place like this? How'd you even get in?"

"Because the most important sales trick of all has nothing to do with the prospect. See, a salesman has to keep up his own self image. When everyone else is beating him down, he has to treat himself like a winner. Maybe I'm broke, but I'm not nobody, damn it! I'm Steve Beauchamp; I go where I want, when I want." He straightened. "Anyway, I talked my way into a discount because I didn't get enhanced. Even so, they took almost everything I had at the door."

"You didn't get enhanced!"

"Didn't need to." He took her hand; his palm was moist.

"I know this sounds strange, but when I came out of World Food and saw you with your friend, something happened. I can't explain it, but I thought, there's a woman I need to meet. So I followed you in. Believe me, Lily, I've never done anything like this before. When I saw you again in the lobby, I knew I was right. So what if the cost of admission flattened me? By then I was already falling in love."

"You were not." She pulled away from him. "You didn't even know me."

"I do now." He smiled.

"My God, Steve, this doesn't make any sense." She wasn't sure how she was supposed to react; it was like her recurring nightmare of sitting down to a final she hadn't studied for. This man she wanted was either a phony or a pathological romantic. "Just what did you think was going to happen after my enhancement wore off? Most couples leave this place in separate cars, you know."

"Sure, I knew that was a possibility." He shrugged. "But I had confidence in myself. And you. The way I figure it, there must be something about me you really like because I couldn't afford a treated chocolate." He sifted her hair through his fingers. "Actually, I've

been waiting all night for the drugs you took to wear off. I want us to fall in love for real, not because our hormones are boiling over. We need a clear heads for something as important as this. That's why you should never close in a bar, unless you're prepared to wake up with a sour head and a sour deal."

"You really think we're in love?"

He paused to consider. "Maybe I don't know enough about love to recognize it, but this is what I hoped it would feel like."

She turned her face toward him and closed her eyes "Sell it to me," she said.

He obliged. Time passed, clothing got rearranged, buttons were unbuttoned. The bench wasn't big enough for them to lie on, but they were approaching horizontality when a rover disguised as a sunflower crunched down the gravel path, aimed its enormous yellow blossom at them and said politely, "For those couples requiring privacy, may we suggest our encounter rooms on the sixth floor?"

"We could leave," Lily said breathlessly. "Go to your place."

"I don't have a place. Actually I've been living out of my car. It's parked about ten blocks from here and it's out of gas and I don't get my unemployment check until"

"Ssh!" She put a finger to his lips. "Keep bringing up negatives and you'll lose the sale." Lily stood, reached both hands down to him and pulled him up beside her. "My place then." She wasn't sure exactly what she was going to do when they got there. Tack a sheet to the ceiling between her futon and Marja's? Not a simple project at two in the morning -- and what if Steve snored?

Lily pushed her doubts away. What had Marja said? Love makes all things possible. She knew she was taking a risk with this intense little man but she'd been smart and lonely for so long. She had to laugh at herself as they stepped into the elevator.

It was time to try something stupid.