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Adjusting the Moon
by Karawynn Long
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Melanie held her hands out in front of her. They looked exactly like her real hands, even down to the thumbnail she'd broken that morning. She curled her fingers a couple of times, watching the movement, and then flipped both hands over and back as quickly as she could. Of course the technicians had assured her that everything would be completely realistic, no time lag at all, yet Melanie was still surprised to discover that they were right.

Glancing down at the rest of her body, she saw that she was barefoot, dressed in jean shorts and a t-shirt -- her typical after-work attire. The t-shirt was an old one of Jason's, memento from a Disney World vacation. On the front a cheerful Mickey floated in a red-and-white spacesuit and bubble helmet.

Melanie crossed the room then, feeling the flexion of muscles in her thighs with every step, her feet sinking just slightly into the carpet. She'd forgotten how good this was. Everything looked normal -- she could almost believe she'd gone home after work as usual. She rubbed her hand along the arm of the sofa as she passed; it seemed as though she could feel each individual thread in the cloth.

She opened the door to her bedroom and touched on the light. It was her bedroom, down to the collection of old books in alphabetical order on the shelves. Her little array of sun-loving houseplants stood along the windowsill, seemingly alive and every leaf just as she remembered. Reaching out, she touched the dial next to the window. The plastic was hard under her fingertips, even a little cool. It was set on "Opaque," and she twisted it all the way over to "Clear." Outside, the little treeless plot of grass that served as her backyard became dimly visible, and a few stars, but otherwise there was little change.

It felt somehow wrong, and suddenly Melanie realized why -- she'd been visualizing the room as it had been that last night. It was the moon she missed. She had lain awake for most of an hour after Jason had fallen asleep, watching the light linger on the contours of his face, balance on his bare shoulder. The memory brought an ache to her chest.

She moved away from the window and touched the light off. It took several seconds for her eyes to adjust, and she held her hands out low in front of her to avoid bumping her shins against the bed in the dark. Touching the comforter, she turned and sat down. A small wave travelled across the bed and back, repeating in slowly diminishing ripples. Melanie looked out the window.

"There should be a moon," she said aloud, starting a little self-consciously at the loudness of the sound in the empty room. "Almost full, and very bright." Between one blink and the next, a moon appeared, midway in the sky. She glanced down at the slanted rectangle of light on the bed, then up again, frowning. "Maybe a little higher to begin with, but setting. It was last Friday night, around seven, if that helps." The moon scooted upwards in a slight arc. "Okay."

She stood up then and walked across to the other door, and into the bathroom. An army of colognes and cosmetics was arrayed across the countertop, his and hers all mixed together. Two toothbrushes lounged next to the sink. They were still there in her real apartment, too; he had duplicates, and hadn't bothered to take them when he left. Nor, of course,

had he been back.

Her eyes moved upward to her reflection. Brown hair, brown eyes, nondescript nose, almost nonexistent breasts. For a moment she toyed with the idea of changing something -- auburn hair, perhaps, or bigger tits -- but then shook her head. It would feel strange, and anyway Jason liked her well enough the way she was -- or he had once. Maybe some other time she'd come back and play, just to see what it was like. She made a face at herself, and then grinned. It had looked bad enough in the mirror; she could only imagine what it would look like to the techs, standing around her twitching, grimacing body in its reclining chair.

She went out the other door and stood just outside the kitchen, turning slightly to glance over the apartment one more time. "All right," she said to the ceiling. "Put him in."

For a long moment nothing happened, and she began to worry. Then she heard a voice, faintly, from beyond the front door. Locks clicked back in response to the identification. After a startled moment, Melanie relaxed. Somehow she had been expecting him to just appear, like the moon.

Instead, Jason walked through the door just like he always had, nudging it shut behind him with a foot. He set the two canvas grocery bags on the dining table and grinned at her. "Hi!" he said, beginning to pull vegetables out of one bag. "You haven't eaten yet, have you?"

Melanie just stared at him. The motion, the tone of voice, the facial expressions -- all were flawless. Somehow the realism was more startling in a human being than in her furniture.

He was reacting to her silence now, tilting his head and frowning quizzically. "Are you okay, hon?" Still she didn't respond, and he left the food and crossed over to her, arms closing around her in a protective hug. "What's the matter?"

She returned the embrace almost by reflex. The muscles of his back under the cotton shirt moved in familiar patterns as he stroked her hair. He even smelled like Jason. The realization brought her perilously close to crying. She'd told them his brand of cologne, and soap and shampoo, but there was something beyond all that, a uniquely-Jason smell that she could not define, and therefore hadn't thought could be recreated.

But there it was. She breathed in again, shakily. Jason pulled back and looked at her, smiling as he saw her expression. He touched her cheek gently with one hand, and she half-closed her eyes in response to the familiar touch. Then he bent his head and kissed her softly on the mouth -- once, and then again more firmly. His hands moved up to cup her face, and hers moved restlessly across his chest.

For an indeterminate time she simply returned the kiss, melting into the familiar patterns and sensations. A warm, sexual tingle spread through her body -- something that had only ever happened when Jason kissed her, no one else. Then some small part of her brain began to wonder how such a thing could possibly have been programmed, which brought her smack up against reality. Abruptly she disengaged from the kiss and stared at the man in front of her. He looked like Jason, moved like him, smelled like him. Even her body had been fooled, and for a moment, her mind had forgotten . . .

"Off," she said, backing away from him. He looked at her in puzzlement and concern. In a moment he would ask her what was the matter, and did I do something wrong, and she couldn't bear to hear that. "Turn it off, get me out!" she said, voice rising. She put her hands up to her eyes, pulling at the goggles she knew were there, even though she couldn't see them, couldn't feel them --

Abruptly they were gone, her apartment gone, and Jason . . . She blinked slowly. A junior tech stood on her right, holding the headgear. He smiled at her reassuringly. Another tech stood behind the episode director, who was seated on Melanie's left. Both were watching a complex set of monitors and terminals, and the director was speaking softly into a hand microphone. She swiveled the chair around and smiled at Melanie.

"I know it's a bit of a shock, coming out of it," she said sympathetically. "Just relax for a moment."

The tech not holding the headgear left the room, reappearing after a moment with a mug of black coffee. He held a package of sweetener up questioningly, and Melanie shook her head. She took the mug carefully and held it with both hands; the wires in the gloves made her grip uncertain. The warm liquid seemed to calm her down, and she closed her eyes and sipped it gratefully.

When she'd begun to feel a little more solid, Melanie looked up again. "You were practically shouting when we pulled you out, you know," the director said. "Was there a problem with the simulation?"

Melanie swallowed her coffee, shaking her head. "No. Not like that. I just didn't expect it to be so -- well, real. It was . . . disconcerting," she said. Now, there was an understatement.

"Hardly anyone does expect it. We tell them, but advertising is so outlandish and exaggerated anyway these days, no one pays us much attention." She shrugged. "Things have advanced to the point now, there's really not any discernible difference between the virtual world and the real one."

"I noticed . . . he smelled exactly like he used to, I mean the real Jason used to," Melanie said. "Not just the same cologne, but his own smell."

The director nodded wisely. "Smells all seem very complex and different to our noses, but each one can be reduced to a fairly simple chemical formula. That's why we ask for an unwashed pillowcase or piece of clothing -- so our lab can analyze the chemical components of his particular scent. Over ninety percent of them are standard in all humans, and another six to seven percent occur in all males. It was just a matter of itemizing the remaining three percent and adding them to our basic stock."

"Oh." She wanted to ask about the kiss, too, but was all too aware of the two male techs listening nearby. She wondered what that had looked like, deep-kissing the air. Probably they had seen it before, or worse, but that didn't make her any less embarrassed.

"Now, is there anything else you'd like to adjust in the simulation before I lock it in?"

Melanie thought a moment, then shook her head. "Just the moon, I guess."

"Yes. I'm sorry about that. I didn't know you were recreating a particular night, or I would have programmed that in." The woman looked at her, more reproachful than apologetic, Melanie thought.

"I wasn't, at first. It just occurred to me, sort of, when I was there."

"I see. Well, if that's all, we can get you out of that suit now."

Melanie nodded, and was relieved to see the junior techs exit discreetly. She was, by necessity, entirely nude under the bodysuit; direct skin contact was required to induce the various tactile sensations. She tried to unvelcro the front, but the gloves' wires made it awkward, and she had to wait for the director to do it for her. Once Melanie had her arms clear, the woman pressed a button on the chair, and the whole thing hummed and began tilting forward. The legs were somewhat more difficult, but eventually she was free of the entire contraption. She put her clothes back on gratefully.

She said goodbye to the director and made her way through the halls to the front lobby, where she reserved a machine for tomorrow evening and paid in advance. The decorators had been unsubtle -- the whole building was done in sleek black and silver, and fairly screamed hi-tech. The other customers she'd seen matched, tending towards mirrored glasses and colorflow bodysuits, and Melanie felt desperately out of place.

It had been Jason who first suggested they rent one of the new VR setups when Virtual Worlds had opened six months before. She'd never been too interested in that kind of thing, but his enthusiasm was contagious, and she'd eventually agreed to try it. They'd chosen to explore Mars, the newest stock simulation. After the recent cooperative mission, two of the American

astronauts had sold their memories of the experience to VPL. The resulting program was touted as "better than being there," although there were only fourteen people on the planet who could provide the comparison.

Mars was actually prettier than she had expected, for a place so barren; the sky was shell-pink, and the dirt soft and fine like ground cinnamon. They had stood together at the top of the Valles Marineris, five times deeper than the Grand Canyon -- and Jason had grinned mischievously and coaxed her into jumping with him. Her hands shook for hours afterward, adrenalin pumping through her body even though her mind knew there wasn't any danger. It hadn't even happened in any real sense -- yet even so, it had been one of the most impressive and wondrous experiences of her whole life.

If they hadn't gone then, together, Melanie doubted the idea would ever have occurred to her now, even after seeing the ad for a "Free Personality Simulation" with any three-hour rental. She stayed away from high technology in general, stubbornly keeping audio-only phones, for example. She'd minored in Computer Science at school -- even in a field like agriculture you could hardly avoid it and expect to get a job -- but she was still the only person she knew under forty who didn't have her own PC.

But the more she thought about it, the more she began to look forward to returning to the virtual world. She did feel a little guilty about it, as though it were cheating to use a machine to recreate her missing lover. But the incredible thoroughness of the reproduction had given her the beginnings of an idea, which she worked out on the drive home. If the virtual Jason had the complete personality of the original -- and he certainly seemed to -- then he would react to any situation in the same way the real Jason would have.

In effect, Melanie realized, this gave her the opportunity to turn back time. She knew she could have kept him from leaving her, somehow, if she'd just done or said something differently that night. She'd gone over it a thousand times in her head in the three days since, wanting to take it back, do it over, trying to guess where she'd gone wrong.

What had made it so awful was that it came completely without warning. If they'd been fighting, well, at least she could have expected it. But they'd been happy -- and somehow, she thought sarcastically, she'd overlooked the possibility that that might be the problem.

It was Friday night; Jason had come over and they cooked a spaghetti dinner together, set it up with candles and everything. Afterward they sat for a while in the living room and talked. It was one of the things she liked best about him, that they could talk to each other so easily.

Jason had just graduated from the University of Texas in May, with a B.S. in biology -- they'd met in a class his sophomore year, her junior. But unlike Melanie, he had no real idea what he wanted to do next. She wanted a Masters degree in biofarming, and had been saving for the past year so she wouldn't have to work full time while in school. A&M had already accepted her, and she would be moving up to College Station in the fall.

Jason was a year younger and had never been as directed. Then a few weeks ago he'd started talking about teaching high-school to inner-city kids. He'd grown up in Chicago, and had begun to toss around the idea of moving back there and getting certified as a science teacher.

For her part, Melanie had never cared much for big cities, and she couldn't understand why anybody would want to live in Chicago; it was a dirty, polluted, ugly place with the second-worst crime rate in the nation. But she could tell Jason loved it. He got so excited, talking about all the ideas he had for capturing the kids' interest. She thought he'd be a great teacher.

That night in bed she watched the moonlight slide over his sleeping form, and thought she couldn't be happier. She loved him -- it couldn't be anything else. Every time he looked at her she thought her heart would explode. It was there in that look, that he loved her too -- she knew it was, even though they'd never said it, and they'd been together nine months. There was an unspoken agreement, that they wouldn't say the words, as though it might jinx the relationship somehow. They'd both had things turn out badly

before.

But this time would be different -- was different. She remembered thinking that last before falling asleep beside him. This time was different.

And sometime a couple of hours later, he awoke her by kissing the side of her neck, and caressing her breast under the t-shirt. She rolled over and kissed him back, willing enough though she still felt half-asleep. It wasn't one of the best times, probably because she was having trouble getting completely awake, but she was happy just to be near him, happy that he wanted her. At the end of it, they snuggled together for a while, whispering occasionally about silly, inconsequential things that later she couldn't remember at all, no matter how hard she tried.

Finally, after one particularly long silence, his voice floated to her in the darkness. "I think I'm falling in love with you, Melly."

For a moment she had no reaction at all, and then Melanie felt her heart jump up into her throat and just stick there, not beating. Something like joy began buzzing in her head. She rolled over and looked at him, trying to see his face. "Really?" she asked.

"Yes." He lifted a hand and touched her cheek, then let it drop and turned onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. "And I'm not ready for that."

She froze, listening, as each word dropped like a stone.

"I mean, in a couple of months we'll probably be living thousands of miles apart. I . . . feel really close to you, but if we were any closer -- leaving you would just be too hard. I don't want to go through something like that again right now."

She was silent a moment, choosing her words carefully, though she felt despair creeping in. Not yet, she thought, he doesn't have to mean that. "So you are moving to Chicago, then?"

He pulled his arm out from under her neck and propped himself up on one elbow. "I don't know. But I have to do something. I'm just -- marking time, here, not really accomplishing anything important."

She felt the knife twist. "So I'm just what, a passing fancy to keep you entertained until you can move on to something more important?"

"No, you know I didn't mean it like that," he answered reproachfully. "You've always known where you were going, what you were going to do. But I just found out. And I can't give that up, even to be with you."

"I never asked you to," she retorted. "I was under the impression that you were here voluntarily."

"I was," he insisted, the past tense falling like a death blow.

After that she rolled away from him and lay there for a long time, perversely wide awake. She kept hoping that he would reach out to her -- say he'd made a mistake, or even just hold her -- but he made no move. Eventually the rhythm of his breathing told her he'd gone to sleep.

When she awoke next it was morning, and he was already out of bed and in the shower. She padded sleepily into the kitchen, poured a cup of coffee, and stood at the counter, thinking. She loved him; nothing he'd said had diminished that. She knew that eventually they might part ways, but surely they could deal with that when and if it happened. Right now, she wanted to be with him -- that was the one thing that mattered to her.

Melanie decided she'd better start by looking at least marginally human. She set the mug down and washed her face at the kitchen sink, and then hunted up a comb in her bedroom and started to untangle her long hair.

She was still working on it when he opened the bathroom door. He smiled at her, but somehow it lacked real warmth. His motions as he stepped into his jeans and pulled a t-shirt over his head were tense and abrupt, but he said nothing about their conversation.

She waited, wanting him to speak first and establish a tone. But as he sat on the edge of the bed to pull on his socks, then his shoes, all without saying a word, she began to panic, afraid he would leave then and there without ever having brought the subject up.

"So where does this leave us?" she asked.

"I don't know. What do you mean?" He bent over to tie his shoelaces, not looking at her.

"Well, is this 'goodbye forever'?" She tried to put a joking tone into her voice, but it came out harsh and almost accusatory. "Will I see you again?"

"Sure you'll see me again." His tone implied that she was being silly. "God, we have all the same friends, Mel -- we could hardly help it. I didn't mean that I never wanted to see you again. I just don't think we should continue things . . . on the same level as before."

"I don't see how you can say that." All the frustration and confusion she'd been suppressing suddenly exploded. Her voice wavered, and despite her resolve, she was very close to tears. "How can you say you're falling in love with me, and then break it off?"

"You don't understand. I've been hurt before, and I don't want to go through it again."

"I do understand. I've been hurt too, but that doesn't mean that I duck and run at the first sign of emotional attachment." She was half-yelling at him now, and crying for real.

"That's not what I'm doing." He seemed about to argue further, then shook his head. "Look, I'm sorry it turned out like this. I really didn't mean to hurt you."

She didn't respond. If she opened her mouth she would only yell at him again. Of course it would hurt her -- he had to have known that, and he didn't care.

After a moment he said softly, "Look, I'm gonna go now. I'll talk to you later, or something." He walked past her, and in a minute Melanie heard the front door unlock, and then close behind him.

He was gone -- it hit her like a blow to the chest, and she started crying again, in deep, raw, racking sobs that went on for hours.

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The next few days seemed interminable. Thinking about it didn't help, but somehow that was all she could do. She'd forget for a minute, and then the horrible realization would hit her again. It wasn't even just Jason anymore -- she'd never had a relationship that turned out right, not even as far back as high school, and she wondered if somehow it was her fault. She kicked herself for taking such a defensive tone. She should have been understanding, persuasive, making him want to stay instead of accusing him.

On Monday she made herself go to work, even though it still felt like she had a hole in her chest. While on lunch she saw the vidboard ad for Virtual Worlds, and their new "Simulated Personalities."

She'd stopped by the place that evening, mostly on impulse, and when they told her how much it would cost she almost choked. Still, she had this fantasy building up in her mind, about Jason coming back, and the two of them being together . . . Melanie decided she could take a couple hundred out of her school fund; she could make up the difference before the summer was over.

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He woke her up, kissing her neck and caressing her breast under the t-shirt. This time she was wide awake, if somewhat distracted by the knowledge that these rather intimate sensations were being artificially produced. She'd heard the techs refer to it jokingly as "dildonics," and apparently it was why a lot of people came -- sex with someone you couldn't have in real life for one reason or another. Once she relaxed she decided it wasn't half-bad.

Afterward they lay spooned together, his arm around her waist, thumb lightly stroking the skin of her belly. It tickled, and she shivered.

He chuckled. "Now how come you're never ticklish when I'm trying to tickle you?"

"Because you're trying," she murmured.

He laughed again, and continued caressing her.

"I love the way your skin feels," he said after a minute. "Like velvet."

"Mmmm."

"What does my skin feel like to you?" he asked.

"Sandpaper," she responded decisively. "Covered with steel wool."

"Hey!"

They went on like that for some time, the pauses stretching out as each of them grew sleepier. Finally, after one particularly long silence, his voice floated to her in the darkness. "I think I'm falling in love with you, Melly."

She'd thought she was prepared for it, but she wasn't. Her heart pounded, and her mouth went dry as cotton. She licked her lips and swallowed. "Well, when you decide for sure, let me know, okay?"

He gave a short bark of laughter. "Okay." He waited a few seconds, then whispered, "Melly."

"What."

"I've decided."

"And?"

"I'm falling in love with you."

She found his hand in the dark. "I love you too," she answered seriously. "I don't know exactly when it started, but it's been that way for a long time. I didn't say anything because I was afraid it would put too much pressure on things, maybe scare you off, and I didn't want that to happen."

He was silent a while. "You want to know the truth?" he said then. "I am scared. I mean, I could become really attached to you -- and in two months you're going to move away to school." He rolled over on his back. "God, when Kayla and I broke up, it was hell. I can't imagine going through that again right now."

She rolled over and looked at him, trying to see his face in the darkness. "First of all, Kayla was a diagnosed schizophrenic. I'm not. Second, a lot can happen in two months. Two months ago you were talking about getting your Masters from UT. Two months from now I may decide to forget school altogether, move to Australia and herd sheep."

"Or I might move to Chicago, and you might go to College Station."

"Aargh." She dropped her forehead to his chest in frustration. "You're so pessimistic." She looked up again. "Okay, so what if we do end up going our separate ways -- we've still got two months." Consciously, she softened her voice. "I would like to spend two happy months with you."

"Melanie, you're not listening to me. I'm not ready to take that chance."

"Take what chance? That we might be happy?"

"No. I just don't want to fall in love with someone and then have to leave them just a few weeks later."

"So whatever's between us, better just to kill it now, before it can become even more of an inconvenience, is that it?"

"If you want to look at it like that, yeah." They were both sitting up now, glaring at each other in the darkness. Despair tinged her anger; this wasn't how it was supposed to go. Without meaning to, she started to cry.

"I'm sorry, Mel," he said then, but without touching her. "Look, I'm just afraid that if we keep seeing each other, I'll become so involved that when it comes time to leave, I won't be able to."

She laughed bitterly. "Would it help if I promised to kick you out?"

"No. It's something I have to do for myself. It's easy for you," he said. "You've always known where you were going, what you wanted to do. But I just found out. And I can't give that up, even to be with you."

"I never asked you to," she retorted. "I was under the impression that you were here voluntarily." Then she turned away, hearing his response even before he said it.

"I was," he insisted, the past tense falling like a death blow.

After that she lay there for a long time, perversely wide awake. She

kept hoping that he would reach out to her -- say he'd made a mistake, or even just hold her -- but he made no move. Eventually the sound of his breathing told her he'd gone to sleep.

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She turned and reached for him instinctively, and then realized this wasn't her bedroom. She raised a hand to her face and saw the thin black glove and the wires trailing down from it. A tech was nearby, holding her headgear. He smiled at her; it was the same one who'd brought her coffee -- just yesterday, she realized.

"It pops you out automatically if you go to sleep," he explained. "I can put you back, if you want -- I know it was kind of abrupt, pulling you out like that, but with your eyes closed you couldn't see the little warning light anyway." He tapped the side of his face near his temple.

She shook her head, still disoriented. So it hadn't happened, after all; it was part of the simulation. But it didn't really matter. Nothing had changed, and she would still have to go back to an empty apartment.

As she dressed, Melanie kept thinking that he'd said he loved her -- twice he'd said it, and that had to mean there was a chance. She'd come back tomorrow night and do it again. All she had to do was convince him that they wouldn't be moving apart, and there would be no problem. Everything would be fine.

#

This time she started all the way back with their conversation in the living room. When he talked about Chicago, she asked questions about the city and tried to sound interested, though not blatantly so -- rather as if she were intrigued in spite of herself. When A&M was mentioned, she merely shrugged. "I'm starting to think maybe that's not really the place for me," she said, and changed the subject.

They made love again, and she concentrated on pleasing him, doing all the things she knew he liked, even ones she didn't care for herself. She was too tense to derive any pleasure of her own from any of it, but Jason made it clear that it was important to him, and in the end she faked it. She'd never done that with him before, and it made her feel guilty. Still, it would be worth it in the end.

Afterward they lay quietly for a while, and then he spoke. "When we were talking, earlier --" He stopped, and started again. "I know you don't like big cities," he said. "It was pretty obvious you were just saying that because I was talking about moving. I just want you to know that if I do go, I don't want you to follow me. You should stay here and get your degree."

"I don't know if that's really what I want to do anymore."

"You can't give up your dreams just to be with me," he argued. "They're too important."

"Well, our relationship is important, too."

He was quiet for a while, and finally the phrase she had been waiting for came. "I really do care for you, Melly."

Not trusting to anything she might say this time, she simply leaned over and kissed him. He returned it, but disengaged rather quickly.

"But I think that maybe we should stop seeing each other, at least for a while."

Melanie wanted to scream. "You love me but you don't want to see me anymore. Jason, you make no sense."

"I didn't say I loved you."

She felt ice spreading through her body. "What?"

"I said I cared for you. I do. But I'm not ready to fall in love with anybody right now."

She sat up. This wasn't right. He couldn't mean that. He had said he loved her, she remembered the words exactly. Or had that been a dream? Suddenly she wasn't sure.

"It's not anything personal," he continued. "I just can't put that kind of trust in anyone right now."

She looked at him leaning against the headboard, trying to see his expression. The moonlight edged his ruffled hair in a silver halo, but his face was dark. "I'm not asking you to trust anyone; I'm asking you to trust me. I've never given you a reason to think you couldn't trust me, not ever."

"Really? You've been pretending enthusiasm for Chicago all night."

"How do you know I wasn't serious?"

"What, overnight Chicago went from being the second-worst place on the planet to being the city of your dreams? Fine. Are you also going to try to tell me you had a real orgasm tonight?" His voice was ironic and cruel. "You promised that you wouldn't ever fake it with me; where did that go?"

"I don't see how it matters whether I did or not. You're the one who just said he doesn't love me -- why do you even care?"

"Hey, you want to fake orgasms till you're blue in the face, that's fine with me. But I'm not going to stay around and watch, thanks." He stood up and began pulling on his jeans.

"Oh, that'll solve everything. Duck and run at the first sign of emotional attachment." She was half-yelling at him now, and trying desperately not to cry.

"That's not what I'm doing. I'm getting out of a relationship before it turns sour and we both regret it." He sat on the edge of the bed to pull on his socks, then his shoes, and Melanie began to panic.

"Jason, don't go like this. I'm sorry I pretended to like Chicago; it was just that you kept saying it would be too hard to leave, and I just wanted to show you that we wouldn't have to split up when school started."

He looked over at her, puzzled. "I kept saying what?"

She frowned. "'I don't want to fall in love with someone and then have to leave them two months later.'" She said the words precisely.

Jason turned around to face her, looking at her oddly. "Melanie, you need to go see a therapist or something. I never said any such thing. I never even thought it."

She stared at him. "Yes, you did. You said you loved me, or at least that you were falling in love with me --" Suddenly she broke off in confusion. In her mind's ear she heard him saying, "I didn't say I loved you."

"No," she argued, "You did say it. I remember." Suddenly a little red light began blinking on her right, in her peripheral vision. She turned her head towards it but it moved with her. "What's that?"

"What?" he said warily.

"That light. It keeps moving."

"Melanie, there isn't any light. We're here in complete darkness. Don't do this to me."

"Yes, there is -- it's right there." She held her head still and held out her right hand, trying to touch it. Trouble was, she couldn't tell if it was close up or far away.

"All right, that's it." He bent and tied his other shoelace. "I'm gone. I can't deal with this shit." He stood up and left the bedroom.

When she realized what he'd said, Melanie jumped up and followed him to the front door, almost hysterical. "Jason, you can't leave."

"Watch me."

"No!" It was almost a howl. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. You're not doing it right." The red light was still blinking insistently, and she batted at it with one hand.

"God, I really know how to pick 'em." He looked at her disgustedly. "They should make you people wear warning signs. 'Danger: Psycho-Bitch on the Loose.' Protect a lot of innocent people." He turned and opened the door.

She lunged at him, grabbing at his arm. He felt her and jerked it up out of her grasp, hitting her in the face.

The world went dark.

#

Something was removed from her head, and she could see again. Above her

was a black ceiling with two fluorescent fixtures in metal reflectors. She squinted against the light. Her skin felt tight where tears had dried on her cheeks.

"Are you all right? Miss Lynch? Melanie?" A face bent over her, one that looked vaguely familiar. With great effort, she placed him: the helpful tech. Then she knew where she was.

It was the same overwhelming relief she'd felt after waking up from a nightmare, and realizing none of it had happened after all. "Oh God."

#

The next day was a Sunday, and Melanie decided she felt like cleaning. If nothing else, it would take her mind off Jason. It was late afternoon, and she had just finished a spate of enthusiastic vacuuming, when the door monitor beeped. She crossed the room and hit the "view" button, and the screen flickered to life.

"Jason." She stared at him dumbly, conflicting emotions battling for expression.

"Hi." He had the grace to look embarrassed. "Can I . . . come in for a minute?"

She punched the monitor off and opened the door. "Yeah. You want your stuff?"

He didn't answer, just stepped inside and put his arms around her.

She returned the embrace almost by reflex. She'd always loved the way Jason hugged her; there was a kind of safety in it. After a second he pulled back and looked at her, touching her cheek gently with one hand. Melanie half-closed her eyes in response to the familiar touch. Then he bent his head and kissed her softly on the mouth -- once, and then again more firmly. His hands moved up to cup her face, and hers moved restlessly across his chest.

For an indeterminate time she simply returned the kiss, melting into the familiar patterns and sensations. A warm, sexual tingle spread through her body -- something that had only ever happened when Jason kissed her, no one else. But some small part of her brain wouldn't leave it at that.

Abruptly she disengaged from the kiss, backing up against the dining table and trying to regain some composure. "Yeah. Well, it's nice to see you too."

"I missed you, Melly," he said softly.

"You're the one who walked out, not me," she said in a flare of irritation.

"I know. Melly, I'm sorry. I've thought about it a lot, and I really want to be with you. I don't care if we -- well, I do care if we have to move, but I want to be with you until then." He smiled at her. "And you never know, maybe something will come up."

"Why now?" she wanted to know. "What changed your mind?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just realized that I'm happiest when I'm with you, and it seemed kind of silly for us to throw all that away."

She thought about that for a minute, and found herself getting angrier and angrier as the implications sank in. "That's it, isn't it. You want what makes you happy, and what makes me happy is strictly secondary, if it's even a consideration at all. You don't love me; it doesn't even matter whether you said it or you didn't." She gave an ironic half-laugh. "Suddenly I have a lot of sympathy for Kayla."

"You don't know anything about me and Kayla."

"I know how you treated me when I was confused and needed help. You called me a psycho bitch and walked out."

He stared at her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Melanie paused. Of course, he wouldn't. For a moment she had forgotten that. She took a deep breath and backtracked. "After you left, I went to the virtual reality place, you remember? They have a technology now, where you can" -- she paused, choosing her words carefully -- "create a kind of computer model of somebody: looks, personality, everything."

"I recreated you," she said, and saw him startle. "And went over the

night you left, in the simulation, trying to do or say something that would make you stay.

"I loved you." She said it accusingly. Tears filled up her eyes and began to spill over, but her voice was steady. "I guess I would have done anything to hold on to you. Only, no matter what I did, at the end of it all you still left. Every time. I was going to give up school for you," she said disgustedly, "and all you could think about was protecting your own fragile ego!"

"Melanie, that was in a computer! It doesn't mean anything."

"No. It meant a lot. I don't care if it was real or not -- it still affected me. Knowing you could say those things. And nothing I could do would change anything, of course --" she was surprised at how much sense it made now "-- because I, and what I did and felt, never really mattered to you."

"Melly, be reasonable." He stepped toward her, reaching out.

She backed up a step, avoiding his hand. "I am being reasonable! Don't treat me like a child!"

He shook his head but didn't move any closer. "Melanie, you can't hold me responsible for something that happened in a computer simulation, for God's sake! There've got to be bugs all through something like that! Can't you get it through your head that I wasn't there? I didn't do those things!"

"No. But you would have." As she spoke the words aloud she knew, suddenly and clearly, how true they really were. "If it had been doing things you wouldn't do, I would have felt it. That whole time, I never once stopped and thought, 'That's not like Jason.' I knew it was, even if I'd never consciously admitted it before."

There was a pause. "Well," Jason said after a moment, "as long as you're convinced of that, there's really nothing I can say, is there? I still want you back, Melanie. It's up to you."

They stood looking at each other for a minute. Suddenly she wanted desperately to go to him, let him enfold her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right. She leaned back against the table and closed her eyes. He had come back; that was what she'd wanted all along. Maybe he didn't love her selflessly, but they had been happy, for a while. She could still accept him on those terms.

He seemed to guess something of what she was thinking, because he said softly, "Melly, it'll work. Just forget the past week; it'll be like it never happened."

"No," she said softly and opened her eyes. "No, I don't think so." There was no joy in it, now. "I can't turn back time. I'm sorry."

He looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. "I'm sorry, too."

"Wait a sec," she said, and ducked around into the bathroom. When she reappeared, she was holding a black duffle bag, which she handed to him.

"Here. I washed all the clothes for you, since I'd worn half of them anyway."

He looked down at it, then up at her. She met his gaze unflinchingly. "Well," he said. "I'll see you around."

He turned and walked around the corner to the front door. Melanie didn't move. She heard the locks click back, and the door close behind him.

She looked around herself in the sudden quiet. She didn't feel the least bit like cleaning anymore. In fact, she wanted to get out of the apartment entirely. She'd spent too much time in here this past week, one way or another.

Melanie stuck her cardkey in her jeans pocket and stepped outside. The sun was just setting, and in the darkening sky the moon hung, curved and golden, exactly where it was supposed to be.

END

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K.Long/Adjusting/28