

The Only Gift a Portion of Thyself

by Terry McGarry

Some people came in here to hack off limbs, to excise eyeballs, to inflict pain and revel in gore. Some people came in for unprotected sex. Some people dropped in for a smoke. I liked them the best, the way they inflated with pleasure as they took that first drag. I watched them closely. I wondered if that's how I would look, taking my first lungful of air.

None of them knew I was here. The ones I tagged as aberrant received an obligatory-therapy notice and were, as far as I could tell from what I monitored, none the wiser. The exhibitionists who came in looking for an audience created one for themselves -- and there were times, after you'd seen enough pathetic Hamlets and horrendous standup comics, when you wished you had a choice.

Choices are a concept very new to me.

* * *

She had never come in before. I'd heard theories, expressed by subjects in other projection scenarios, that there could be people like her, who didn't need it. They had enough Outside to fulfill them; they couldn't wish for anything more. Some of them thought it was psychologically or morally dangerous, to have a place where you could do anything you wanted to with no repercussions. Perhaps they would be comforted if they knew of my presence. She was certainly surprised to find me; but she was far less surprised at that than I was to find that she could see me. It was not supposed to work that way.

She came in on an assignment from college, and she clearly resented it. A lot of schools required interspace as a creative exercise, to be saved to disk and handed in. Hers, she had informed the system, was to interact in some historical time period. A pale-skinned brunette, she was sitting on a crate in a Conestoga wagon, groaning, her stomach upset from the jolting.

"This is stupid," she said, to no one, knowing that her teacher would hear it when it was played back in vicarity mode. "I could have told you myself that this would be uncomfortable; what was wrong with my paper on the trials of women on the Oregon Trail? I hereby lodge my complaint at this double-checking of my imagination. I imagined this perfectly well in my own mind, and my report communicated that clearly. To require me to live the experience so that Professor Daniels can see me experience it is redundant and invasive."

She looked toward the front of the wagon, and her eyes widened, though there was nothing there but the piled and wrapped belongings of the projected interspace family moving from Independence, Missouri, to the American northwest.

"Who are you?" she said, and I realized that she was looking not just in the direction of my virtual perspective, but at me. "You're not part of the simulation."

It was not in my programming to be interactive. I didn't think I could generate speech.

"You look like a ghost, all see-through, diaphanous. I didn't know interspace was haunted, unless you programmed a scary experience."

A ghost. A good characterization. The ghost of your conscience; the conscience of the directorate, who used the interspace system to diagnose the sick and dangerous before a crime could be committed. The ghost of a personality who had never existed. That was me, all right.

"Can't you talk to me?" she said. "Has no one ever seen you before? You look so amazed." She scrunched around awkwardly on the crate, toward me. "Have you come in from some other program, by accident?"

If I appeared to have a body, it followed that I would have a head to shake, and tried the gesture. It worked. Being an observer for so long, I must have conceived of myself as having a human-looking body all this time and never been aware of it.

"What is your name?" she asked.

The most basic of questions. Most creatures with an ego, with self-awareness and the language to express it, have a name, some way of indicating themselves. "No," I said, and blinked to hear my own voice, a thin tenor. I could blink. I had eyes. I had a tenor voice; I was male. I tried to look down at myself, to see this body I hadn't known existed, but I saw only the crates and tarps, felt the familiar shift of perspective I was able to make at will.

"Wow!" she said. "You must like to imagine flying, if you can float around like that."

"I . . . didn't know I was," I said. I was not supposed to talk to them. This was terribly wrong.

"You look so confused, and sad." She got up, clinging to the frame of the wagon's top, and took a few halting steps toward me. Her face, heart-shaped, petite, surrounded by an effervescence of black curls, filled my field of view. Her hand came out, moved forward.

She flinched. "Okay, all right, don't be afraid. I won't touch you if it bothers you."

"I'm sorry," I said. I must have appeared to shrink back. "I am . . . confused, as you say. Please tell me . . . what do you see?"

"A handsome young sandy-haired man. Blue eyes. You're cute. Maybe I imagined you myself; you'd be just my type, outside."

"Is that all?" I said.

"You have a kind, sad expression, and beautiful hands, very thin and delicate, an artist's hands. Did I dream you up?"

"No. I live here." I shouldn't tell her this . . . I would be wiped, tagged as aberrant the same way I tagged the subjects . . .

But nothing changed. Perhaps the system was not registering this interaction. Was this queer surge I felt hope?

"You're not supposed to know I'm here." I was talking very fast. Her face was relaxed, mildly surprised but interested, encouraging. "No one has ever seen me before. I'm not part of the projection. I supervise to insure nothing goes wrong."

She either made a deductive leap, or saw some sign of deceit on my face, for she said, "If you were just a diagnostic program, you wouldn't be sentient. They don't use AIs for maintenance. What do you really do? Do you watch us in here, report on us when we're bad?"

I tried a nod this time. Still the system did not respond. There was no one here except for me, and her, and the projections around us, which were going along on their preprogrammed route.

"But what use is that?" she asked. "Interspace lets people let off steam without hurting anything in the real world. The whole point is that you can do anything you want."

I found that I could sigh -- that I wanted to sigh, not merely simulate a subject sighing in response to the correct stimulus. "That isn't always enough. I have a list of things to look for, to tell when someone is liable to repeat their behavior outside. Frustration at unfulfillment; dissociation, insanity; sadism -- "

She cut off what would have been a long list. "And when you find one of those people?"

I didn't answer.

"All my life I believed that the reason interspace wiped out crime was because it gave an outlet. After world peace was achieved, after economic parity was established, there was no reason to rob or rape or kill except perverse desire . . . and you could do those things here without being punished, so there was no reason to do them outside." She placed fingertips against her temple. "But that isn't the whole story, is it . . ."

The wagon jolted to a halt; I couldn't feel it, myself, but I observed the effect on her.

"Maisie?" yelled someone from up front -- her brother in the simulation, who had been driving the ox team. "Time to set up for supper, Maise."

She looked at me. "I could stop the program now. Where would you go if I did?"

I paused, not knowing the answer. "Just a place. A waiting place, until another program is activated."

"Are there others of you?"

"The system is constantly in use worldwide."

"How will I find you again?"

"Perhaps you won't." An abyss of regret opened at the idea. "Perhaps you'll see one of my analogues."

"I'll call you Glowrie," she said, "for the Glowrie Ghost in that old twovie _The Ghost Goes West_." She waited for me to react to her humor, and I effected a smile. "If I see another one of you, I'll ask if it's Glowrie, and only you will know to say yes."

"You said you didn't like interspace. You would have to keep using it."

"I'll just set blank parameters, like a waiting room, somewhere we won't be disturbed, where we can talk."

I felt sadness; did my face show it? "I'll be gone by then. When your professor screens this disk -- "

"Maisie? Come on along now, girl, the team's unhitched, I'm starved." The brother projection banged on the outside of the wagon.

"I'll be right there, Abe," she called, scrunching up her face at her response to the illusion, and then said, "I'll purge it, ask to do it over. Then no one will ever know. I can't just leave you alone in here."

I thought about that. She had done me a disservice, in seeing me, in registering me. It had never occurred to me that I was alone in here. But I was, and nothing could change that -- or my awareness of it, now. I might be better off wiped. But I didn't want to be wiped. I wanted very badly to stay alive. And to see her again.

At last I nodded. "All right," I said. Then, before she could stop the program, I said, "Is your name Maisie?"

She smiled. "No, that's just the persona. My name is Emma. Goodbye, Glowrie. I'll see you soon." She winked, gave a small wave, and then said, "System, abort" -- and I was in blackness, a gray-black emptiness I had never registered as gray-black, never having considered sensory stimuli before at all.

Almost immediately I was transferred to a man's fantasy. He came into a room to find a woman tied to an old-fashioned four-poster bed. He pulled off her clothes and entered her. There was nothing to tag; he didn't cut her, or hit her.

I had observed, impartially, countless scenes of rape, murder, torture. I tagged them and went on, unaffected. But this time I was affected. She was only a projection, true. Binary code translated into a virtual reality. But so was I. And she looked like Emma . . .

She was begging him to stop, not unusual in a male-fantasy sequence. I leaned over the bed and looked right into her face. "Can you see me? Can you hear me?" I said. She didn't react. She couldn't feel anything, not really . . . not like me . . .

He didn't react, either. I wondered what was different about Emma, why she had been able to sense me. Some human esper capacity, perhaps? Some extra sensitivity?

It seemed to take forever for the simulation to end. I had never had a concept of subjective time before, when the system chronometer was all I perceived; now the endlessness was painful, the repetition of this act. And I could not stop seeing Emma's face on the woman. At last the subject terminated the program, and I was back in the blessed black nothingness of the waiting area. I wanted to rest, to think, but again I was transferred to a new scenario.

This one was pleasant, the subject experiencing what it would be like to be an Olympic athlete. I started to keep track, as the scenarios flashed by; I kept tabs on how many were harmless, and how many were horrifying. I expected them to be weighted toward the latter, but to my surprise the numbers were equal. I also expected a diagnostic to be triggered by this keeping track; I was using storage space to remember, something I'd never done much of before, and I lived in fear of being purged. But apparently it was accepted that the monitor programs would use up thinking space.

I wanted to know why I was suddenly capable of feeling revulsion for sadistic and criminal fantasies. Why I was capable of feeling rage at having to witness them. I wanted to know if I was intrinsically male, or if Emma had projected maleness onto me, because she was female. Most of all, I wanted to know whether I had always had the potential for emotional awareness, or if she had somehow created me, impressed some of herself into me.

I missed her. I feared that she would never reappear. I wondered how long I would live. As long as the system was maintained, I supposed. I just wanted to see Emma one more time before the end.

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that when I found myself in a plain room, looking at Emma sitting in a chair, I could barely believe it. Her look of pleasure, the way her face lit up when she saw me, was beautiful.

"Hi, Glowrie," she said.

"Hi, Emma," I replied. "How did you know it was me?"

She shrugged. "I haven't seen any other beings like you. I've come and sat in this room about thirty times,

and never seen a thing. I've been afraid to call out to you; I'm afraid to alert the system. So when you don't show up in five minutes, I just leave, and try again. It's taken me all afternoon."

Why was I the only monitor she could see? There had been one present each time she entered this room. "I think," I said slowly, "that you made me somehow. Out of your own imagination. Maybe because you were angry at being in the simulation. I existed before; I remember existing. But I think you gave me a body, and a . . . I don't know, something else I didn't have before. Compassion. Something."

She smiled. "Well, you're Glowrie now; it's too late to call you Galatea, and anyway she was female."

We talked for a while, about my experiences, about what was different since we'd met. I told her I knew she had a life Outside, and that I wouldn't expect her to spend much time with me, but that it would be nice to look forward to a visit now and then. I told her I'd missed her.

"I missed you, too," she said. "Maybe I did create you in the image I most like, because I feel very drawn to you, more than to anyone outside, anyone flesh-and-blood. I don't suppose it's healthy, but I don't really care."

It wasn't healthy; even I knew that. "You should go back. You're real. Go live your life."

She reached out again, as if to soothe me. "You look so pained by the idea. It's sweet of you to worry for me."

This time I didn't shrink away; I leaned toward her hand. But I never felt it. I looked down, and saw her hand outstretched immediately below me. When I looked up, her expression flickered through surprise and discomfort to disappointment.

"I'm almost at the end of the time I set aside," she said quietly, after a moment. "But I'd like to keep talking to you, at least. I'll be back, Glowrie . . ." Before I could cry out to her to stay, not to cut me off, she had aborted.

I agonized through scenario after scenario, sure that my lack of a corporeal self had put her off me forever. But she did come back, at last.

"I've been doing research," she said, without preamble. "It seems that other people have seen ghosts in here, the first time they come into interspace. All of those people had strong psi powers, were adults the first time they tried interspace, and never felt a need to utilize the system for personal reasons; they were always required to by jobs or tests or school, like me. No one has ever reported connecting with a monitor, but I'm convinced that they could have, or did and didn't tell anyone. And all of them were content in family relationships. I was lonely when I came here; I was a nerd in a dysfunctional romance. My family uses their money to herd me like a sheepdog, and to pretend they care for me by buying me anything I want. I guess we needed each other," she concluded. "And some kind of bond was forged."

"The system works by tapping into your memories," I supplied. "That's how it knows how people look and sound and feel to you."

"Yes," she said, regarding me fondly. "And somehow you were born out of that function."

She would visit me every couple of days, setting up scenarios where we could walk through wooded glens side by side, or drift on buoyant lakes, or sail through clouds on feather-down gliders. It was all for her; for me there was only the half- sense of a body I could never fully enjoy. But I loved her company. I loved her stories of the Outside, though they made me ache for what I could never share with her; in return I told her everything I knew about the system, about myself, embarrassed at how little there

seemed to be to tell.

She broke off her crumbling love affair. She got a job and stopped relying on her parents for money. She got her degree, although she changed her concentration. She wouldn't tell me why, or to what; but she did tell me that she loved me, and as far as I understood yearning and joy and peaceful companionship, I loved her utterly, heartbreakingly.

* * *

The couple on the bed were kissing deeply, their bodies sinuous mounds under silk sheets. This would be a gentle projection, requiring little of my attention, leaving me to dream of Emma. (I didn't want to give it much attention; I didn't want to feel envy of the virtual passion they shared.) Then the woman, who had been on top, rolled to the side of the man, twining her hand in his sandy hair, and I saw her face.

Emma's face.

"Glowrie," she murmured as she caressed him. I almost answered before I remembered her descriptions of my appearance. The projection male was a projection of me. "I wish it could always be like it is now . . ."

"Let me make it true for you," my voice said as his full lips moved, and they kissed again, openmouthed, as if trying to consume each other. He rolled on top of her, and his back arched so that the top sheet slipped away as he slid into her --

Her eyes, half-shut in ecstasy, focused on me, opened. She pushed at his shoulders and he pulled up, braced on his elbows. "System," she began, as if to abort. Then she said, "No, I'm sorry, wait, I don't want to run from you -- Glowrie -- "

The projection appeared completely confused. "Run from what?" he said. "I'm right here, my love, I'm --"

"No, get off me, please," she said, pushing at him again, and he rolled away and sat up, frowning as her eyes stayed locked on me.

"What is it?" he said. "What are you staring at?"

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Just stay quiet for a moment, please; whatever I say or do, be quiet." Then she looked at me again and said, "I'm so sorry."

"For what?" my projection and I said simultaneously; but he was baffled, and I was bitterly sarcastic.

I wanted to scream as she hushed him again -- that hand on his shoulder, communicating through touch. "For betraying me with myself? How can I be jealous? Except, of course, that he can do for you everything I can't, and probably everything I can as well -- "

"No, not anything you can; it's never enough, it's never the same, I can't program him to be you, to have your unpredictable reactions, your youth, not really . . ."

Never enough, never the same? How many of these scenarios had she run? Rage filled me; I didn't know how I contained it. "Why not?" I snapped. "People do it every day. Every day they come in here to be with dead loved ones, to sleep with movie stars, with the lovers who spurned them. Who needs reality? You don't need me. I'm not even real!" I was shouting. I didn't want to shout at her; her face showed hurt, the threat of tears, and I didn't know how I could be so enraged at her and at the same time feel such anguish at causing her pain.

"Don't do this," she said sharply. "Dammit, try to understand how much I wanted you -- "

"I'm no realer than that lump of electrons next to you. You don't know what you want. You didn't create me; you only created a hell for me to be aware of."

I wanted to leave her then. But I couldn't abort. Only she could do it.

Her body seemed to sag. "I should never have risked this. I should have known you'd show up eventually. I am so sorry. Goodbye, Glowrie -- real Glowrie, one and only Glowrie."

And she terminated.

It was what I had wanted her to do, to release me -- but when she did it I felt betrayed all over again, because she'd never walked out on me before. The moment I spent, stunned, enraged, in the between-place was the longest moment of my existence.

I wanted to terminate myself, but I hadn't the means. Hoping they'd wipe me for malfunctioning, I tried to tag every subject in the scenarios that followed -- one after another, rolling inexorably by, sickening me with their twisted escapist formulas. But whatever had caused my expanded sentience did not alter my basic functions, and my programming left me incapable of unwarranted tagging.

Years passed, Outside; for me it was eons, the eons that must pass in a place like Hell, for those damned to eternal pain of the sort I saw in the fantasies of a Satanist and a minister. The anger faded, over time, and eventually so did the stabbing recollection of betrayal. They left in their wake a profound loneliness, compounded as each scenario I entered proved again, and again, and again, to be one that had no Emma in it.

In time I forgave her. Her solution to our dilemma had been understandable, and had I accepted it right away she would be visiting me still. But there was no one I could talk to; I was doomed ever to observe, never to participate, with only my own thoughts for company.

The years turned into decades, but of course she came back to me, if only for one last time. I had just left a fantasy sequence set up by a girl in love with her married, much older zergymnastics teacher, and its poignancy had uncomfortably echoed my own loss. It was perfect timing.

"How long have you been waiting?" I asked her quietly.

"It took twelve tries," she said, from her stuffed chair in the old waiting-room scenario.

"You've come as you are?" I said, an old joke between us, referring to her appearance: she had aged past middle years, gained weight, her long black curls cropped short and now almost entirely gray.

"Yes," she answered. "I've missed you." The eyes had not changed: still dark, penetrating, regarding me as they always had -- except for the hint of sadness.

"How is your life Outside?"

She rubbed her upper lip, a gesture that had always signaled indecision. Then she said, "I married, three years after the last time I saw you. I haven't been back to interspace since then. I have two daughters, one grandson. He doesn't play in here, and neither do they."

I nodded, glad that I still could. I had not felt the illusion of a body since she'd gone. "I hope he's kind to you. I hope he holds you at night, when you have bad dreams, as I never could. I hope you've been happy."

She nodded back. "I have been. But I've never been able to forget you. I thought if I had a normal life . . . But you've been in my heart always, Glowrie. I'm so sorry I left you alone." At the thought, her eyes filled with tears, seeming magnified, unfocused. "It was selfish of me. All of it."

I nodded again, knowing what she meant. "Visit me now and then," I said, aware of echoing my own long-ago words, aware of the empty existence they implied.

"I will," she said, "as long as I'm able." Pain flashed across her face.

Misunderstanding, I said, "Mortals die. I know you fear it. But take heart; immortality isn't all it's cracked up to be."

She smiled, as I'd known she would, but tears had escaped to flow down her sagging cheeks and nestle in the folds of her lips. "Glowrie," she said, her voice gone very flat. "They're going to purge you."

222

I just stared at her.

"You hate me so already, for the pain I've caused you -- all these years -- "

"No," I said quickly, not to convey my forgiveness but because her self-recrimination was leading to something. I needed to find out what.

She collected herself, looked at me dead on. "I changed my major in college to interspace studies," she said. "I couldn't tell you, somehow; I thought it would seem like I was dissecting you. I learned programming, Glowrie -- I learned this system top to bottom. Ironic, since I hated it, huh? But if you want to change something, you have to know it better than you know yourself. I'm on the task force that exposed the covert psychological tampering, the invasion of privacy. I couldn't tell them I'd found out about it from you; I had to do it believably, legally . . ."

She paused to let me process this, and I said, "Won't that cause the resurgence of real crime?" The thought of what went on in here happening to corporeal beings disturbed me. I didn't really know what they were. But I knew that Emma was one. It didn't matter that it had nothing to do with me, with my existence. Dying was something I didn't want to think about yet.

"Probably," she said. "But the mind control that prevented it was unethical. We have to find better ways of coping with the darkness inside us."

I nodded again. "How long do I have?"

"A week, roughly. I'm so, so sorry, Glowrie, my old love. I debated not telling you, to save you worrying; you'd never have known, then, it would have been quick and painless. But I love you, and you had a right to know, a right to the chance to make peace with yourself."

I thought for a moment, and then I said, "For that I thank you, Emma. But I'd like to make one final point."

She nodded, receptive, waiting.

"Isn't this murder?"

* * *

For six days by the chronometer, I thought. The scenarios ceased their endless flow, leaving me in the

darkness of the in-between place. This disturbed me, because I didn't understand why they wouldn't just wipe me, why they had just separated me from the system -- and because without the system, I had no hope of talking to Emma. I tried to use the time to come to terms with the prospect of nonexistence.

It was overwhelmingly frightening at first, for all my former suicidal desire, for all the immortal ennui that had followed it. I wanted to scream I AM HERE, I EXIST; the intensity of my own consciousness seemed far too alive a thing to be snuffed out. At times I was merely curious: would I have a soul, a ghost, was my consciousness indeed something with an energy that could continue past the cessation of pulses in the circuitry that was my true body? It didn't seem to matter; once nonexistent, I wouldn't be aware of nonexistence.

I resigned myself to it as best I could, and spent what time I had left replaying in my mind's eye the scenarios Emma and I had shared, and dreamed of a final scenario where I had a body that could feel hers in its arms, just once, as I hugged her goodbye forever.

But more than a full week passed, and I was still there to register it. At the end of the third week, when I was frantic, never sure when it would happen, never knowing when the blow would fall, Emma popped up. This time it felt as if the scenario coalesced around me, rather than that I popped into it.

"Glowrie," she said. She was beaming.

"Before you say anything, please let me know when I'm to be shut down. I can't stand -- "

"You're not," she said. "You're an AI, a consciousness. So are the other monitors, at whatever level. We're going to give you all permanent control of miniature portions of the system, leave it all on auto. It will be inaccessible from the Outside, and from interspace. But you'll have control of your environment as if you were a subject. And no one will ever cut off the juice."

She was laughing, exultant. She said my comment about murder had made her think; she'd persuaded the task force that shutting down these AIs would be unethical, since none of them had malfunctioned in any way, and had worked up an estimate of the cost of maintenance, which was really no more than an electric bill.

I thanked her, quietly, overwhelmed; and at last I said goodbye, for I would never see her again -- nor would I create a projection Emma in my new world, for it would never have her reactions, her spirit. It would be as thin and unfulfilling as her projection of me had been. I tried not to grieve for the time we could have had if I'd just understood that from the beginning.

And so, as a world unfolded around me -- a world I could smell and feel, in which I could take any form, go anywhere, be anything -- I immersed myself in the indescribable joy and freedom of life. Not the half-life of my previous existence, but a 3-D, sense-filled, self-determined life.

I worried that I would get tired of playing God, creating playmates and companions, having long conversations with talking flowers and singing skies. But I knew that Emma could not have been sure that no one would ever disconnect the system; my existence would forever be at the mercy of those Outside, and I doubted that, should the system break down, anyone would fix it.

That was all right, I told myself; no one should live forever. And except for missing Emma, I never did tire of my world. It seemed a natural extension of my being, something I'd earned in all those years of imprisonment inside other people's dreams.

For a long time I immersed myself in my virtual freedom. But eventually I began to think about the other AIs. We were each locked into our own separate interspace; the system was not advanced enough to

admit two consciousnesses simultaneously, even AIs -- and it may have been that the directorate was not willing to see what happened if we combined our intelligences.

I wondered if that could be changed, and I concentrated very hard, as if somehow I could make contact with the others by will alone. I got nowhere -- although I intend to continue to try -- but it did remind me of the Outside, and make me realize how much time had passed while I played in my "new" world.

* * *

Twenty years. Emma would be an ancient woman, if she was alive at all. I found myself mourning her; even denied her visits, I'd always known she existed, somewhere . . .

I fashioned a gazebo in a meadow all in blue, the cobalt grass stretching away to meet an indigo sky, so that I could gaze out into the distance and let my grief take its course. Then I felt something brush my shoulder --

And Emma, young Emma as I'd first seen her, was sitting on the bench beside me.

Reflexively I put on the body she had envisioned for me, then blushed at having done it. "Did I create you out of my grief?" I asked. "Or are you really visiting somehow?"

"Well, the former would be a neat infinite regression, since you used to claim that I'd created you."

I smiled; that sounded like the Emma I had known. "You gave the breath of life to a shell."

She nodded and hooked her arm through mine.

"I did make you up," I said then, disappointed at the touch of her: wondrous as it was, it could only be my imagination. I wouldn't have put it past her to get in to see me, perhaps the dying wish of an elderly lady -- who happened to head the task force that had put the seals on in the first place -- and I realized I'd been half hoping for that all along, that she would come back, as she always had, that not even her own rules or her own death could stop her. But because I could feel her I knew she wasn't real.

"No," she said, gazing out at the blue-tinted horizon. "But you could say that I'm a ghost. Emma's body is dead."

Despite the presence of the creature next to me, I was pierced by grief to hear it stated so definitively. Could this really be her ghost? Were there souls that could get into closed computer systems and haunt them?

"But I'm not. I'm a program, like you. 'The only gift is a portion of thyself,' as Emerson said. Emma had her engrams copied onto a compatible matrix, for injection here when her body died; and she left a good bit of her money in a fund for the upkeep of the system. Her ghost, I hope, is in Heaven." She looked at me at last. "But I'm Emma now."

"How did she get around the seals?"

"She asked to. The rest of her money went to the interspace directorate -- but only in the event of their compliance with this part of her will."

I looked at her; raised my other hand; ruffled her long black hair. The curls were bouncy, soft. "You always were too clever for the system."

Her final gift to me, after full awareness, after the reprieve of my death sentence, after this universe. She'd

left me herself, as a legacy.

I pulled Emma's lithe body tight against my side, and together we conjured up a sunrise.

This ASCII representation is the copyrighted property of
the author. You may not redistribute it for any reason.

The original story is available on-line at