

VIRTUAL LOVE

By Maureen F. McHugh

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The thing I like best about VR is that you can do anything. Not just the obvious things like murder someone or be an archaeologist in Peru, although that's fun once in a while. But just when you're hanging out, meeting people, you can be anything you want. I have twelve different personas. Some of them, like Lilith and Marty, I don't use very often, but I like to know that they're back there and if I want to be a vamp I can put on Lilith and go to a party, wear midnight blue sequins to show off my fox red hair, drink virtual martinis — did you ever taste a real martini? Jesus! — and sway my virtual hips all I want.

Being good in VR is a talent. When anybody can be anything, the competition for attention can get pretty fierce. Everybody can have a perfect figure, perfect legs, perfect hair, perfect lips, a wardrobe worth hundreds of thousands. You've got to have an edge and the really great thing, see, is that it isn't money and it isn't the genetic hand that mother nature dealt you and it isn't the accidents of fate and disease, it's really all mind. Out there, dressed as Lilith or Alicia or Terese, it's really pure energy, just the pure flame of a mind burning like an electron candle. Electrons dancing in the light. And who can tell the dancer from the dancer

Well, I can, baby, but you can't and that's really the whole point, isn't it?

I have a VR system in my place. It's not the best, it's a seated system, of course. My gloves are second-hand. They're good gloves, British made, DNRs. My helmet, I paid a lot for the helmet, you have no idea what that helmet cost. It's a Mitsubishi, not the most expensive but definitely high end. It's light weight, and that's important to me if I'm going to wear it for any length of time. I put on the gloves and then the helmet and there's this moment before the system kicks on when everything is black inside the visor and there's no sound in my ears and I'm just floating there, suspended in the pre-virtual darkness as if I'm about to be born. Just time to take a breath and then the feed hooks in.

I'm in the dressing room. It's a dingy little green room, like actors use to get ready for a play. I can see the gloves on my hands, ruby red like the slippers in the Wizard of Oz, but there's no face in the mirror which is exactly right because I haven't picked one yet.

Once in a while I go out invisible. It's called lurking. When I was eighteen and I first got full access to all the boards, including the adult boards, I used to do it all the time. For a couple of years I didn't have a body, never talked to anyone. I was just watching learning the local customs so to speak. I became a connoisseur of people's personas. I could tell when the person was different from the body they'd picked, when they were really just an eighteen-year-old kid who was trying to pass for a thirty-five-year-old Cary Grant. What I really liked was watching someone do it

right, so you forgot that they weren't the person they had put on and then there'd be a bit of stage business and I'd think, "ah-hah, I see you." Because that was just what I would have done in their place.

Eventually, I couldn't stand it anymore. That's when I set up the green room. I made Sulia, first. I didn't plan to wear Sulia but I knew she was amazing. Sulia's the most into the moment of my personas. She's tall and she's got comrows all the way down her brown back in a waterfall of hair. She's muscular and sleek and innocently fetal with a beautiful open smile. I'd wear her in the green room for hours, where no one could see me, just being her. Then, when I'd pull the helmet off there would be this moment when I had to remember I was just me. And I hated it.

But I have to be really riding high to wear Sulia. I built her first and she was inspired, but I didn't wear her first.

I started with Terese. Terese is a pale wisp of a thing in a soft, flowered dress, rose and pale green like spring to go with her pale hair. Terese doesn't overpower a room, she works on it like perfume. Terese listens a lot and people confide in her. People will say the most amazing, intimate things if you let them. It was easy to be Terese because one of her traits is that she's still. People think it means that she is calm. I can be very still.

Today I think I'll do Alicia. She's the persona I wear most often anymore.

There are a bunch of things besides makeup on the desk. There's a rose in a bud vase — that's Terese. If I pick up the rose I put on Terese. I pick up a fine gold chain and I am Alicia, a sleek woman with long warm brown hair swept up in a French braid. Almost all my personas have long hair. I worry about that, but my hair is mousy brown and thin and I always wanted long hair even though it would be so much trouble. Still, I am afraid it might become part of a signature. They should all be different, all be individual.

Alicia looks back at me from the mirror, her sun brown arms bare and smooth, her little ivory silk shift simple. That's Alicia, simple and unadorned and direct.

I point with the glove and I'm moving to the door. I open the door and go out into the world.

The access is always a big lobby, with menus posted. I study the menus, skipping the games, Illuminati, Knights Templar, Cthulu, Voodoo Horsemen, International Spy, looking for places. Doc's is all right, I've been there. The Black Hole is fun. Nightmare is a dud. Madame Stael's is one of my favorites, so I tap the menu, and the elevator door opens. Take a deep breath in the elevator.

The elevator opens and I'm looking down a long room, something like the

Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. To the left are windows looking out on a garden, to the right are huge, gilt framed mirrors, and between the mirrors are doors to Salons. I head for the cafe, three doors down.

“Allo, Alicia,” says Paul-Michel, the bartender. “Champagne?”

“A glass of Bordeaux.” Paul-Michel is an eliza program. He’ll let you pour out your troubles for hours and he always remembers your name. The only problem is that if the sysop is monitoring, she hears your problems, too.

There are half a dozen people in the cafe; sitting by the window is a guy I’ve never seen before. He’s a nice job, and he looks like he belongs in a French cafe. He’s sitting, either accidentally or on purpose, where the light falls on him like a figure in a Dutch painting. Vermeer. His face is the play of light and shadow, full-lipped and dark eyed and young. The face of an angel.

He’s interesting. All the men are handsome, but right now there seems to be a lot of cynical, world-weary, channing matinee idol types running the virtual scene, sometimes it’s like everybody shops for faces at the same store. His face doesn’t seem made up, as if it might be his real face. Not that it is, of course. But it seems to be. That’s skill.

He smiles at me, since I’m looking at him, a bit shy. So I take my glass of red wine and sit down across from him. To move, I point my finger and my system moves me through the environment, but the interface is configured so that for anyone watching I just walk. I’ve programmed different walks for all my personas using a bootleg spline program; Sulia walks like a cheetab, but Alicia has a subtle walk. I like to think she looks as if she might have taken dance when she was younger. I would have liked to have taken dance.

“Hi,” he says. “I’m Ian.”

“Hi, Ian,” I say. “Alicia.”

The table top is scarred wood. Outside the day is beautiful, the sky is clear blue and people are out on the Champs Elysees. We can’t see the Eiffel Tower from the window, but we could if we were outside.

Usually people ask something like, “Do you come here a lot?” or “Are you local?” meaning is this a local call for you or are you coming through a service. I always lie and say I’m coming through a service. But he doesn’t ask, instead he says, “Seems like someone sitting here should be sketching or writing a poem or something.”

“Are you an artist?” I ask. But of course, I know he is. Looking at him I can see his work, he is his work.

But he shakes his head. “I like this place,” he says. I don’t know if he means the Salon, or the cafe. Or maybe this place in the window. He looks out the window and I look out. A couple is strolling by arm in arm. She is pale and red-haired, the quintessential French girl, and he is dark-skinned, looks like a sailor. They are perfect, simple, uncomplicated. He stops to tie her scarf and for a moment I wish I were her — which is odd, because at this moment I am Alicia, and I am whole and graceful. I am what I wish to be. That couple is not even real, they are window dressing, generated by the sysop, the system operator, whose name is Cassia and who I have spoken to.

I look back and Ian is looking at me. I feel embarrassed, wondering if my feelings were written on my face.

“You are quite beautiful,” he says. My chest constricts, and I feel caught out, naked. What made him say that? “Here,” I say, “everyone can be beautiful.” I mean it to be nice, a way of saying that it doesn’t mean anything but it comes out sounding disparaging. He blushes.

That’s a really nice touch, and I wonder how he does it; my program doesn’t include blushing.

“Copies of beauty aren’t really beautiful,” he says. “They’re perfect but all alike.”

“What makes real beauty?” I ask, but I already have an idea what he’s going to say. Something about originality.

“In real beauty,” he says, “there is always something strange, an asymmetry.”

Alicia isn’t asymmetrical in any way. I made her to be like a dancer. And now he has me thinking of myself as not Alicia. “I’m just not sure I understand you,” I say lightly.

He shakes his head. “I don’t say things very well.”

“Maybe you are a poet.” I am trying to smile, trying to make the appropriate noises. Trying to keep things from becoming serious.

“No,” he says sharply, abrupt, “I’m not.”

Sometimes conversations in the Salon are very strange, suddenly intimate, because it’s not oneself that is really talking or more, it is oneself which is really talking from behind the safety of the mask.

“I haven’t seen you in the Salon before,” I say.

“I’ve been lurking” he says. “Ghosting around. I’ve seen you before.

Can I ask you a question?”

I shrug.

“Do you have more than one persona? If I’m out of line, tell me. But there is another woman who comes here and something about her reminds me of you. An older woman in a linen dress, all patterned, with her hair pulled back?”

Kristiana. Yes, she’s my persona, but of all the personas to link together, Kristiana and Alicia. They’re nothing alike; Kristiana is an old wise woman, tall and strong with her gray-white hair pulled back in a knot tied with an ocher cord. “No,” I lie. “No, I’m just me.”

He smiles, but he looks perplexed. And I’m thinking thinking, when was the last time that I wore Kristiana? I don’t wear her often. Almost never to the Salon. I am almost tempted to ask if he is sure he saw her at the Salon. I could lie and say I have never seen anyone like that here.

He bites his lips. “There is a quality about her, that you have . . .”

Like a rabbit in headlights I sit still and listen.

“These people are all alike, but there is something about her. She, she is . . . beautiful. Like you.”

“Thank you,” I say. My foolishness, I am glad I can’t blush. “Do you know the people here?” I ask, and I start pointing them out, telling him about them. Yellow Eyes and Greg, Lizabeth R. I’m just distracting him. And he smiles and nods and makes the appropriate noises but when I point to someone I can feel his eyes on me.

After a while I say, “I’ve got to meet some friends on another board, but it was very nice talking with you. Maybe we’ll meet again.”

“Wait a minute,” he says, “how can I get in touch with you?”

“It’s a small world,” I say, “we’ll run into each other again.”

Alicia saunters out, but I know I’m fleeing.

Back in the green room I pick up the ocher hair tie that puts on Kristiana, grave Kristiana, how is she like Alicia?

Kristiana who rarely smiles, who moves slowly — not because she is old but because she is grave and deliberate. Alicia isn't like her at all.

Maybe it is just a coincidence. He is new, he's been ghosting. Or maybe it's a gesture, maybe a slip, something of Alicia crossing over into Kristiana.

I put on Alicia. She is grave, too. I always thought she had a certain dignity, but maybe there is no difference between Alicia's dignity and Kristiana's deliberateness. And maybe Terese's stillness, maybe they are all the same.

No, Sulia is different, and Lilith the vamp with her fox hair, and Stork, who swears like a truck-driver and drinks virtual scotch and plays poker.

Beautiful. He said they were both beautiful. Sulia is beautiful. Even Stork, with her freckles and her broad bones, Stork is not really pretty, but I think she is beautiful. They are all beautiful to me.

I take off Alicia and I'm invisible in the mirror. Open the door, ghosting through the lobby to pick Madame Stael's, back up the elevator and ghosting, lurking to the cafe. To watch him, sitting in the light. To see if he can see through other people. To watch him and see through him.

The bartender, Paul-Michel, doesn't look up as I ghost through the closed door.

The chair by the window is empty. He is gone.

And I notice that the light is different, not nearly so hot and white, when he is not sitting there.

He was beautiful, too.

For days and days I am a ghost. I haunt the Salon, I sit in Cairo in white linen under slow ceiling fans, I check all the local places where he might be. Places appropriate to his taste. But how do I know his taste? No one would ever guess that the same woman who is Alicia, who loves the Salon, could also be Stork, who loves the dirty talk of the Black Hole. Or Sulia, who lives in the flash of the Metro. He could be anywhere. Like anything. Maybe he has more than one persona.

Of course he has more than one persona.

So I start to look in all sorts of places.

I find him in the Rathskeller, talking politics. I know him the moment I see him, even though now he is a long-haired radical student wearing a coat out of the French revolution. He is vivid, interesting in the way that the pale copies around him

are not. His signature is instant, apparent. It is not in any one thing, this student is as different from Ian as Kristiana is from Alicia, and yet they are both so intense, so original; they have style. He is an artist. He is someone I can talk to, who will understand the things I admire.

I slip back to the lobby, ghost back into the green dressing room — and pause. Who do I have for the Rathskeller? Who can sit in a brick basement and talk politics over the sound of the band?

I pick up a man's bracelet. Marty could go there. Marty looks back at me. Marty is small, neat, a bit natty. "System," I say out loud and do something I almost never do once I have finished a persona and named it; I change Marty.

Instead of his natty suit, I give him a long sharkskin coat, just a bit roughed up. And I give him glasses, the kind you can look over. I raise his temples, take a little of his hair, working fast and knowing if I make a mistake it will take too long to fix, that I might miss him. I give Marty a narrow braid tail of hair, a pair of knee boots. He's a mix of eras and styles, scruffy and just right for the Rathskeller. I save him as Mick, and his icon becomes the glasses.

I cross the lobby and the elevator takes forever. He will be gone, I know it. I clump down a Berlin street, seeing myself reflected in the windows, moving wrong, moving in Marty's dapper way despite Mick's heavy boots, but it's too late to fix it. Past the green-haired whores shivering in the cold, calling "Hey Brit," because they think Mick looks British. So I decide maybe I'm a bit Irish, as I'm walking, flying high on adrenaline, improvising like mad, scared and excited.

He is still there. And he doesn't even notice me come in. The white-haired girl with the snake tattoo curling up her skinny arm draws me one of those tall beers, a virtual bier. And I lean on the bar and watch the people and wait for him to notice me, to see if he will.

His eyes slide across me once without recognition. That's okay, I'm patient. I look at the posters, Marlene on the wall in her Blue Angel pose. I glance back from a worker's movement poster and his eyes are on me again — not really looking at me; he is listening to someone else. His eyes wander away. They are radical blue.

And then they come back to me; we are looking at each other.

I have made a mistake. I should have avoided him. His hair is the wild gray-black of a storm cloud, soft and full around his face. He is a master. And he can see through the mask, can see underneath me, read all the insecurities and needs out of which I build my personas.

When he is looking at me, I forget Mick, just like I forgot Alicia. I know myself, a tiny woman in a chair, held in by seat restraints, wearing a VR visor and

gloves. A woman who couldn't have a treadmill because she doesn't have a leg to stand on. Flipper babies they call us when we are little, seal babies, and even though I know I should be grateful that I was born with normal arms and hands, I'm not, I'm just not. I want to be normal. He is as beautiful and terrible as an angel, one of the thrones or seraphim, many-eyed, that surround God, and in the heat of his gaze, I feel the mask melt away and I am exposed for what I really am.

I reach up for the visor, because it is the fastest way to leave, because I am going to cry.

“Wait!” he says, interrupting the conversation. “Wait, I know you!”

That is the problem, I think, but I stop.

The chair clatters behind him as he stands — the sysop of the Rathskeller is good, things like that happen here — and he comes to me. “What is your name?” he asks.

“Mick,” I say.

He is tall this time, very tall, over six feet I would say. He would be tall even to Sulia, who is the tallest of my personas.

“I've been looking for you,” he says. “Ever since you left the French place. I looked on Tu Do Street, from the veranda of the Continental, and left a message for you on the moon.”

I was in both of those places, but I was a ghost, so no one ever told me I had any messages.

“Tell me how you get your walk,” he said. “Tell me how you make your people so . . . so, how do I explain it. Not flashy. Not like me, my people are all so obvious, but yours, it took me a while to realize just how good you are. You are more than good, you're . . . you're an artist. The more I look at you, the more things I see.”

I shake my head. It was a mistake to see him, he's cruel without meaning to be, he makes me know the illusion. I should ask him about the white light in the cafe, the Vermeer light, and about how he blushes. I can't, though.

“I can't talk to you,” I say.

“You can't leave,” he says. He grabs my hand and I feel his hand through the glove. I jerk away.

“I can't,” I say. “It was a mistake.” Everybody in the bar is looking at us, but

I don't care. When I turn and walk away, he doesn't follow me.

Up the steps and out on the street, past the green-haired hookers shivering in their shorts. I keep watching behind me, to see if he will follow me, but he doesn't, back to the elevator, back to the safety of the green room. Back to sit down in the chair and take off Mick and cry. Sit, invisible, and cry and cry. I don't know what to do.

He has killed it for me. I can't go back out there; what if I run into him again? But what am I going to do if I can't do VR? How am I going to give them all up? How do I spend my days, sitting in my chair, watching the vid, doing my word processing jobs and dumping them into the modem, not talking to anyone for days at a time and waiting for my parents to call to break the monotony? I hate him. I hate what he has done to my life.

You are beautiful, he said. But I knew it wasn't true.

I can't stay away from the green room. I ghost about, start a new personality; a copy, something no one would notice. But I can't stand it, don't want to wear it. There's no magic to it, when I put it on I don't forget. I don't come alive. So I don't bother to save it and I drop out of the system, go watch something on the vid.

But in a little time I'm back again, rattling around in the green room. Nothing to do, no one to talk to. I could find a service, pay membership fees and pay for the minutes of time I use. He is local, like me. I wouldn't see him if I left the local net. But I don't make enough, not to pay my bills, and my home help who comes in to clean. It's too expensive. I need the local boards. Like an addict.

I don't even dare pick up the icons. I don't want a reflection in the mirror.

Just the ruby red gloves, dancing around the room.

My system tells me I have a message. Mail.

I've never gotten anything but junk mail before. Nobody knows my system address. It's him, he's a magician. I look all over the green room, ignoring the message flag in the mirror, until I find it, tiny glittering scarab, blue-black beetle, hiding near the door. He must have attached it to me when he took my hand.

Now what? I look at the bug and try to decide what to do. Ignore the message? Accept it and never read it? He'll understand silence, won't he? (But he knows my address. What do I do, pay Ma Bell and change my access line? I'll have to, and that costs money.)

So I accept the message and play it. A screen rolls down in the dressing

room, flat, like a window, like the vid. It is pearl gray for a moment, transition time, waiting to be born.

The little man in the wheelchair is all head, head with a sharp, pointed chin and thinning hair and quick eyes. He's not really all head, he has a body, and short stick legs, short muscular arms. Like something out of a Velasquez painting. a dwarf.

"Hi," he says.

It's a recording so I don't have to say anything back.

He twists a bit in his chair. I am very still. I am very good at still.

"I'm gambling," he says. "I have this terrible feeling that I'm wrong. But there was this theory about Toulouse-Lautrec, that one of the reasons he could paint his characters so unsparingly was that he wasn't one of them. The other people out on the board, they are all projecting something. But I'm not. I'm not projecting myself at all."

He pauses and wipes one hand over his mouth, his shoulder rolls. I wonder what screwed him up so badly that they couldn't fix his genes? Was he like me? Did the virus that was supposed to fix his genetic material screw up, only make things worse? There aren't very many of us.

"I don't know what makes you different," he says. "Maybe you're just some kind of genius at virtual reality. But I need to talk to you." Plaintively, "There's nobody else out there who would understand, but you do."

"I think this is a mistake," says the recording. "I'm not even sure I'm going to send it. But if I do, and if you want to get in touch with me, leave a message on the moon for Sam. Hell, I don't even know your name. Alicia."

And it ends without a good-bye.

Stork. She is the only person I could wear to the moon. Someone strong and a little brash. She fits when she strides into the Tech Bar, with its windows looking out on the lunar landscape, all stark and blasted. Stork could be a rigger on a lunar station.

He knows me as soon as he sees me. He is still tall (of course, just like I almost always have long hair; it is something he wants so badly he can't keep from putting it in). He stands up from his solitaire game, he's a blue-eyed, redhaired viking in a jump suit; it says "Sam" on the patch.

"Hi, Sam," I say. "I'm Stork. I think maybe your Toulouse-Lautrec theory is right." Not that I really do. I don't think I'm less likely than anyone else to project,

any more objective than anyone else. But maybe people like Sam and me, we spend more time. We refine our art. "I want to ask you a bunch of stuff. Like how do you blush?"

Stork is like that, kind of in your face.

He doesn't say anything for a long moment. And then he laughs, a deep, big man belly laugh. I want to know how he does that, too.

"You are beautiful," he says.

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Maureen F. McHugh's first novel *China Mountain Zhang*, was a Hugo and Nebula Award nominee, and won the Tiptree Award, the Lambda Literary Award, and the Locus Award for Best First Novel. Her second novel, *Half the Day is Night*, is due from Tor in 1994. Her short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. "Virtual Love" marks her first publication in *F&SF*.

One strange item associated with this story