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DEEP BLUE SLEEP

THERE WAS A SUDDEN SNAPPY rapping sound at Gerson's door, followed by a sort of inflamed and frenzied tintinnabulation of the doorbell that would not be denied. It was just plain bad timing, because Gerston had been on the verge of plunging into SnuggleDown, the Deep Blue Sleep program provided by the good people at Unconscious Adventures Unlimited for those who wanted some fun during the hours normally reserved for zilch.

Excitement, thrills, love, laughter, all these could be yours while you slept! Things had changed a lot since the bad old days when at some time in every twenty-four hours you had to lie down in a darkened room and let your mind go into a holding pattern for eight or so hours.

Until recently, mankind was enslaved to sleep, that ancient enemy of our days and nights that condemned us to spend a third of our lives just hanging around doing nothing, and without anything to show for it but vague and generally unsatisfactory dreams that needed highly paid experts to render them even slightly intelligible.

Then along came the Deep Blue Sleep programs.

At last waking entry could be made into the mysterious kingdom of Mind, and this could be accomplished by ordinary people, not just college grads with a Masters or better in Psychedelic Psychology.

In this brave new world you could even earn a living while asleep, as a dreammaster, for example, or, if that position was filled, there was always room for a dreamslave. And this was a considerable boon for those who were unable to earn anything while awake.

The possibilities for inner travel were little short of amazing. Using the automated electronic services available at a price most middle-class citizens could afford, and lower classes aspire to, you could log onto SnuggleDown and plug the old psyche into a Personalized Sleep Corridor that would take you all the way to the Gates (frequently described as tall and made of iron) of Death. This became a considerable tourist attraction, and some daring couples even opted for marriage in the Oblivion Zone. They were advised not to tarry there too long, however, since death was still not completely under the Company's control, and individual safety could not be guaranteed, even though the Company took every precaution.

Gerston had no interest in going to see the Gates of Death. That could wait until he was in a morbid mood. He passed up on the Waterfall of Creative Endeavor, too, figuring his productive period might as well wait until later, since right now he was modeling Procrastination. He didn't even want to see the

Eternal Life exhibition, where the Company had created a great composite jellyfish which it kept in a shallow lagoon in southern Florida.

The jellyfish was a composite entity made up of the life-essences of thousands, soon to be millions, of subscribers, who had opted for something comfortable and not too demanding as a way of spending eternity.

And there were other possibilities. For a little extra you could add on the Limbo Walkers service that would take your mind out from time to time and show it a nice time in the country before putting it back into the undying jellyfish.

There were other interesting things to do while asleep. They were listed on the Extra Services menu and cost a little more. Gerston had chosen one of those, opting for a deluxe interior adventure. He was ready to begin, but first he had to take care of whoever was at the door.

The loud doorbell shrieked again, and Gerston called out, "Who's there?"

"Thought-o-gram for Mr. Grumpton."

"Gerston?"

"What I said."

"Who's it from?" Gerston asked, because he led a quiet life and hardly ever received thought-o-grams or their near-cousins, intuition-flashes.

"Hey, buddy, you wanna know what color it is too and does it smell nice? Whyncha accept it and see for yourself? You catch my drift or am I visting spitzie?"

Gerston had never liked the rudeness of what used to be called the lower classes and now weren't referred to at all. If he didn't answer, the fellow would undoubtedly go away. Still, Gerston wanted to know who had sent him a thought-o-gram and so he unchained the door and opened it. Standing in front of him was a small individual wearing a khaki uniform and a cap on which was written Mercury Thought-Transfer Service.

"Do I have to sign for this thought-o-gram?" Gerston asked.

"Naw, just signify assent by an act of mental volition and it will be so noted on the mind-sensitive receipt form which I carry in this small leather pouch."

Gerston signified, and the messenger said, "Here you are," and touched Gerston's forehead with a transistorized forefinger.

Gerston felt the familiar flash of transmission and waited for the message to appear in his mind. But it didn't. Instead he felt a strange interior sort of a movement. It took him half a beat to realize what this was. Something was stirring and moving inside his mind.

Gerston's first thought was a compact squeamish sensation for which there is no precise verbal equivalent. Somebody was in his mind!

"Hi," a woman's voice in his head said.

"What?" Gerston replied.

"I said `hi.'" "

"Yes, but who are you?"

"I'm Myra."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"You invited me here, don't you remember?"

"I did?" Gerston said. "The details are a little dim. Perhaps if you could just remind me of the circumstances`"

"It was in the letter you wrote me. `If you're ever in these parts, do drop in.' That sounds like an invitation to me. What was I supposed to do, go to Siberia?"

"I'm afraid I don't remember," Gerston said. "But the thing I don't understand is, why didn't you just come visit me in the normal fashion?"

"Because I thought this would be a fun thing to do."

"I see."

"But you hate it, don't you?"

"Well..."

"So I made a mistake. So sue me. So I'll go kill myself."

"Myra, there's no need to be melodramatic. Of course I'm glad to see you. Well, it's not exactly seeing, but you know what I mean. It's just that I don't usually entertain people in my head."

"Don't you ever get lonely in there all by yourself?"

"Of course I do. But I still don't -- "

"I know, you still don't entertain people in your head. Well, don't worry, I don't hang around where I'm not wanted. Where did that delivery boy go? He said he'd come back for me. At least I think that's what he said. It was a little hard making out what he was saying, you know?"

"But you pretended you did?"

"Sure. I don't like to hurt people's feelings, Harold."

"What did you call me?"

"I called you Harold, of course."

"I'm not Harold."

"But of course you are!"

"Hey, I ought to know who I am. I'm Sid, that's who I am."

"Sid what?"

"Sid Gerston, of course."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Not Harold Greeston?"

"No!"

"Then that idiot delivered me to the wrong mind!"

There was a short pause while Gerston tried to think.

"As long as you're here," Gerston said at last, "I guess you might as well make yourself comfortable."

"Thanks." There was movement in Gerston's mind, and then a sort of plop, as of someone sitting down. "Nice place you got here."

"Well, it's just my mind, of course, but I try to keep it nice. Some might consider it a little austere."

"A little what?"

"Stiff."

"No, I think it's real nice. You sure got a lot of books in here!"

"Well, I think having a library in one's mind is important."

"How come these titles blur out when I try to read them?"

"It's just the ones I haven't read that blur out that way."

"And what's this here? A kitchen?"

"A virtual kitchen, actually. I thought it would be rather fun, if you know what I mean."

"But what do you do with it?"

"Well, you can eat by merely reading the recipe you want. They're all right here in this book."

"Wow, that's a big book!"

"It's the Encyclopedia of All Encyclopedias of All Recipes Ever Conceived Since the Beginning of the World, Together with Their Main Variations. As you can imagine, it's pretty thorough."

"Must have been expensive."

"Yes, but well worth it, especially with its Length of Meal option which lets you set Ingestion Duration anywhere from 5 nanoseconds all the way up to 18 hours for feasts you really want to linger over. And the Intensity scale has an orgasmic level that's new this year. It makes a good meal just that much more enjoyable."

"Too bad I'm not hungry."

"You don't have to be. I also have a Virtual Hunger program that will give you all the appetite you could want."

"I don't want to be hungry right now. I'll just wander around a little more, thank you. What's this, a broom closet?"

"I like to keep things clean."

"In your mind?"

"Of course. Virtual cleanliness is just as important as the real thing."

"Have you got a bathroom here?"

"What would I be doing with a bathroom in my mind? And what would you need it for?"

"A virtual bathroom will do just as well. My, what a lot of doors. And what is this? A winding staircase! I wonder where it leads."

"Don't go down there!"

"Take it easy. I always enjoy looking around men's minds. Now this is interesting. It gets darker as I go down."

"Stay out of there! That staircase leads to the recesses of my mind. Can't you read the sign? It says, 'Unconscious Level. Entry Strictly Forbidden Except to Licensed Psychotherapists.' I will thank you to keep your nose out of my personal private business."

"Come on, don't be such a spoilsport. I'm down there already. I just want a peek at what's behind this odd little door..."

"Don't touch that door!"

"Don't get so excited. What makes you think you got anything I ain't seen before?"

"SHUT THAT DOOR!"

There was the virtual sound of a door opening. Then Myra said, "Greck!"

"I beg your pardon?" Gersten said.

"'Greck' is the sort of expression my ex-husband Hubert used when he came across something especially nasty. I think what I just saw qualifies."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I should think not. You are a dirty bit of business, aren't you?"

"I'm perfectly normal. All men's heads have cellar rooms like that."

"You know, I don't think you know men's heads very well. The last guy's head I was in, it was just one big room, you know? No upstairs or downstairs. And this room was empty except for a pile of stuff in one corner. Do you know what it was?"

"Women's dismembered bodies?"

"Golf trophies! Isn't that a scream?"

"I see nothing funny about it. Get out of my Unconscious!"

"In a moment."

"What are you doing now?"

"Looking around. This doorway here...It leads to the Pleasure Center! I knew you had to have one! Everyone's got one!"

"Leave my Pleasure Center alone! And what do you mean, everybody's got one?"

"Well, everybody whose head I've been in."

"What were you doing in other men's Pleasure Centers?"

"Well, you know. Someone hires you to go into their Pleasure Center, you don't spend a whole lot of time asking them what they want you to do there, you know what I mean?"

"I'm not sure."

"Want me to spell it out?"

"No! Why do you do that sort of thing?"

"Well, it's a job, you know?"

"No, I don't know!"

"You've led a sheltered life."

"So what do you do when you get into a guy's head?"

Myra hesitated, then said, "Look, maybe we shouldn't talk about this."

"No, no, it's all right, tell me."

"You're not going to like it... Okay, a guy usually asks me to sit down, make myself comfortable. Sometimes he offers me a drink. It's not a real drink, of course, it's a virtual drink, but it helps break the ice. Sometimes he'll offer me a joint or two, or a couple of snorts of coke."

"That's against the law."

"Real coke is, but not virtual coke."

"What do you do then?"

"We fool around a little."

"What do you mean, you fool around? There aren't any bodies involved, what can you do?"

"I'm trying to tell you, aren't I? What's this?"

"Wait a minute, what are you doing?"

"It looks so nice and pink in here. I think I'll just touch it..."

"Don't touch anything!"

"Whassa matter, don't you like being touched?"

"Not by people who are in my mind without my permission, no! What are you doing now?"

"It's so nice here, I think I'll just take a little nap. Catch you in a few minutes, lover."

GERSTON WAS in a high state of nervous perplexity. He didn't know what to do. And just to make it worse, at that moment there was a violent knocking sound at the apartment door, the real one, not the virtual one. Gerston knew at once by its slightly hollow sound and over-determined air of realism that it was even more trouble coming his way. And that was really too much.

"I'm busy!" he shouted. "Go away!"

"Open the door," a voice said, "before we kick it in. This is the Thought Police."

"I never heard of the Thought Police. Are you sure -- "

"Of course I'm sure, dummy. Open this door or we'll break it down and kick your forehead in."

"You have no right!" Gerson cried. "It's not legal!"

"The hell it's not! We have a search warrant that permits us to invade your house, and another that allows us ingress to your mind."

"But why are you doing this?"

"We have information that you are harboring a dangerous criminal."

"In my apartment?"

"Don't play dumb with me, sucker! You're hiding her in your mind!"

Gerston took a moment off from his panic to wonder, how could they know that? "Don't be silly," he said, fighting for time, space, air. "I'd never do that."

"We know she's in there. An alien sex criminal from a faraway planet. A sex criminal who calls herself Myra. Am I getting through to you? Do yourself a favor, buddy. It's probably not your fault. Let us in and we'll get this cleared up quicklike."

Gerston said, in a deadened voice, "I swear I didn't know she was a criminal. All right, come on in, officers."

He unlocked the apartment door. Three bulky officers in dark blue uniforms came in. They wore silver badges on their shirts which read Thought Police, Squad Three. One of them wore sergeant's stripes.

"Permission to enter?" the sergeant said, tapping Gerston's forehead with a squat forefinger.

"Go ahead, you're going to do it anyway."

The doors of Gerston's mind opened. The three policemen entered in a flurry of virtual black leather jackets and calf-length jackboots. Their feet were dirty and their faces grim. They were frightening despite their virtuality.

"It's too crowded, please hurry!" Gerston cried.

The policemen searched through Gerston's mind. They swept memory-objects off simulated shelves and knocked down the portraits of ancestors so remote that Gerston hadn't known he had them. Their boots made marks on the pink scuff-sensitive surface of Gerston's mind. Their crude remarks lingered near the virtual ceiling like clouds of ill-smelling gas.

"Is this going to take long?" Gerston asked through gritted teeth.

"Better get used to it," the sergeant said.

There was a crash. "Sorry, chief," one of the policemen said. "I dropped one of his golf trophies."

"She's not here," another policeman reported. "We've searched all of the way down to the rotting depths of the stupid insanity he calls his deepest self. We'd a found her if she'd been hiding there."

"Damnation!" the sergeant said. "She got away again! But at least we got you, sucker."

They exited Gerston's mind. A smile of great amusement appeared on the sergeant's tough cop face with the little busted red veins and the tufted eyebrows.

Gerston opened his mouth to speak. Suddenly he froze. Everything around him was arrested in mid-motion. There was a flash of light.

The policemen disappeared. Gerston goggled, unable to make sense out of this.

And then a voice spoke in his head.

"Hi!" the voice said. "We have interrupted your entry into Deep Blue Sleep to bring you a preview of our unlimited psychic adventures for the young at heart. Did you enjoy what you just experienced? Want more like it? Just signify your assent. Trained operators will pick up your inference and put the charge on your credit card."

So that was what all this was, Gerston thought. This was outrageous!

Aloud he said, "I demand to see someone in charge."

A tall thin man with glinting spectacles appeared in his mind.

"Supervisor Olson at your service. Is there a problem?"

"Damned well right there's a problem! I never chose any psychic adventure program. A little sleep was all I was after! And even if I had selected an adventure, what right did you have to humiliate me by sending this Myra person to invade my mind? And what was this police thing?"

The supervisor said, "Let me just look at your record, sir."

Swiftly he plucked a card out of Gerson's mind, read it, replaced it.

"It's all right, sir, we do have your assent, right here. That is your signature, isn't it?"

Gerston squinted. "It looks like it. But I never agreed to anything like this."

"But you did, sir. I hope you won't force me to tell you when you in fact signed for the service."

"Go ahead, tell me!"

"It was just before you died."

"I'm dead?" Gerston asked.

"That is the case, sir."

"But how could I be dead?"

The supervisor shrugged. "It happens."

"If I'm dead," Gerston said, "how come I'm still here?"

"We have our ways of keeping the dead alive."

"I don't want to be dead!" Gerston wailed.

"Sir, please be quiet, you'll wake up the others."

"The others? What others?"

But the supervisor was gone and the lights were beginning to fade.

Lights in his own apartment? In his mind? Fading? At first he thought he was going to die. Then he remembered he was already dead. Or were they lying to him

about that? And if this was death, what lay beyond it? And anyhow, how could he be sure he was dead? Might this not just be the continuation of one of their dream adventures? It would be just like them to lie to him, tell him he was dead, when actually he was just...just...

Suddenly Gerston didn't know what to think. For now something rather strange seemed to be taking place.