

MORE TOMORROW

by

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I got a new job a couple of weeks ago. It's pretty much the same as my old job, but at a much nicer company. What I do is trouble-shoot computers and their software, and yes, I know that sounds dull. People tell me so all the time. Not in words, exactly, but in their glassy smiles and their awkward 'let's be nice to the drone' demeanour.

It's a strange phenomenon, really, the whole 'computer people are losers' mentality. All around the world, in every office in every building, people are using computers day in, day out. Every now and then, these machines go wrong. They're bound to: they're complex systems, like a human body, or society. When someone gets hurt, you call in a doctor. When a riot breaks out, it's the police that – for once – you want to see on your doorstep. Similarly, if your word processor starts dumping files or your hard disk goes non-linear, it's someone like me you need. Someone who actually *understands* the box of magic which sits on your desk, and can make it all lovely again.

But do we get any thanks, any kudos for being the emergency services of the late twentieth century? Do we fuck.

I can understand it to a degree. There are enough nerds and geeks around to make it seem like a losing way of life. But there are plenty of pretty random earthlings doing all the other jobs too, and no one expects them to turn up for work in a pin-wheel hat and a T-shirt saying 'Programmers do it recursively'. For the record, I play reasonable blues guitar, I've been out with a girl and have worked undercover for the CIA. The last bit isn't true, of course, but you get the general idea.

Up until recently I worked for a computer company, which was full of very perfunctory human beings. When people started passing around jokes which were written in C++, I decided it was time to go. One of the other advantages of knowing about computers is that unemployment isn't going to be a problem until the damn things start fixing themselves, and so I called a few contacts, posted a CV up on the Internet and within twenty-four hours had seven opportunities to choose from. Most of them were other computer businesses, which I was kind of keen to avoid, and in the end I decided to have a crack at a company called the VCA. I put on my pin-wheel hat, rubbed pizza on my shirt, and strolled along for an interview.

The VCA, it transpired, was a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting effective business communication. The suave but shifty chief executive who interviewed me seemed a little vague as to what this actually entailed, and in the end I let it go. The company was situated in tidy new offices right in the centre of town, and seemed to be doing good trade at whatever it was they did. The reason they needed someone like me was they wanted to upgrade their system, computers, software and all. It was a month's contract work, at a very decent rate, and I said yes without a second thought.

Whitehead, the guy in charge, took me for a gloating tour round the office. It looked the same as they always do, only emptier, because everyone was out at lunch. Then I started down with their spreadsheet-basher to find out what kind of system they could afford. His name was Egerton, and he wasn't out at lunch because he was clearly one of those people who see working nine-hour days as worthy of some form of admiration. Personally I view it as worthy of pity, at most. He seemed amiable enough, in a curly-haired, irritating sort of way, and within half an hour we'd thrashed out the necessary. I made some calls, arranged to come back in a few days, and spent the rest of the afternoon helping build a hospital in Rwanda. Well, actually I spent it listening to loud music and catching up on my Internet newsgroups, but I could have done the other had I been so inclined.

The Internet is one of those things that more and more people have heard of without having any real idea of what it means. It's actually very simple. A while back a group of universities and government organisations experimented with a way of linking up all their computers so they could share resources, send little messages and play *Star Trek* games with each other. After a time this network started to take on a momentum of its own, with everyone from Pentagon heavies to pin-wheeling wireheads taking it upon themselves to find new ways of connecting things up and making more information available. Just about every major computer on the planet is now connected, and if you've got a modem and a phone line, you can get on there too. I can tell you can hardly wait.

What you find when you're there almost qualifies as a parallel universe. There are thousands of pieces of software, probably millions of text files. You can check the records of the New York Public Library, send a message to someone in Japan which will arrive within minutes, download a picture of the far side of Jupiter, and monitor how many cans of Dr Pepper there are in a particular soda machine in the computer science labs of American universities. A lot of this stuff is fairly chaotically organised, but there are a few systems which span the net as a whole. One of these is the newsgroups.

There are about 10,000 of these groups now, covering anything from computers to fine art, science fiction to tastelessness, the books of Stephen King to quirky sexual preferences. If it's not outright illegal, out there on the information superhighway people will be yakking about it twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year. Either that or posting images: there are paintings and animals, NASA archives and abstract art, and in the alt.binaries.pictures.tasteless group you can find anything from close-up shots of roadkills to people with acid burns

on their faces. Not very nice, but trust me, it's a minority interest.

Basically the groups are little discussion centres that stick to their own specific topic. People read each other's messages and reply, or forward their own pronouncements or questions. Some groups have computer files, like software or pictures, others just have text messages. Now that I think of it, there's some illegal stuff too (drugs, mainly): there's a system by which you can send untraceable and anonymous messages, though I've never bothered to check it out.

No one, however sad, could hope to keep abreast of all of these groups, and nor would you want to. I personally don't give a toss about recent developments in Multilevel Marketing Businesses or the Nature of Chinchilla Farming in America Today, and have no interest in reading megabytes of mindless burlblings about them. So I, like most people, stick to a subset of the groups that carry stuff I'm interested in – Mac computers, guitar music, cats and the like.

So now you know.

The following Tuesday I got up bright and early and made my way to the VCA for my first morning's work. England was doing its best to be summery, which, as always, meant that it was humid without being hot, bright without being sunny, and every third commuter on the hellish Underground was intermittently pebble-dashing nearby passengers with hay-fever sneezes. I emerged moist and irritable from the Tube, more determined than ever to find a way of working that meant never having to leave my flat. The walk from the station to the VCA was better, passing through an attractive square and a selection of interesting sidestreets, and I was feeling chipper again by the time I got there.

My suppliers had done their work, and the main area of the VCA's open-plan office was piled high with exciting boxes. When I walked in, just about all the staff were standing round the pile, coffee mugs in hand, regarding it with a wary enthusiasm as if they were simple country folk and it was a recently landed UFO. There was a slightly toe-curling five minutes of introductions, embarrassing merely because I don't enjoy that kind of thing. Only one person, John, seemed to view me with the sniffy disdain of someone greeting an underling whose services are, unfortunately, in the ascendant. Everybody else seemed nice, some very much so.

Whitehead eventually oiled out of his office and dispensed a few weak jokes which had the – possibly intentional – effect of scattering everyone back to their desks to get on with their work. I took off my jacket, rolled up my sleeves and got on with it.

I spent the morning cabling like a wild thing, placing the hardware of the network itself. As this involved a certain amount of disrupting everyone in turn by drilling, pulling up carpet and moving their desks, I was soon on apologetic grinning terms with most of them. I guess I could have done the wire-up over the weekend when nobody was there, but I like my weekends as they are. John gave me the invisibility routine that people once used on servants, but everyone else was fairly cool about it. One of the girls, Jeanette, actually engaged me in conversation while I worked nearby, and seemed genuinely interested in understanding what I was doing. When I broke it to her that it was actually fairly dull, she smiled.

The wiring took a little longer than I was expecting, and I stayed on after everybody else had gone. Everyone but Egerton, that was, who stayed, probably to make sure that I didn't run off with their spoons, or database, or plants. Either that or to get some brownie points with whoever it is he thought cared about people putting in long hours. The invoicing supreme was in expansive mood, and chuntered endlessly about his adventures in computing, which were, to be honest, of slender interest to me. In the end he got bored with my monosyllabic grunts from beneath desks, and left me with some keys instead.

The next day was pretty much the same, except I was setting up the computers themselves. This involved taking things out of boxes and installing interminable pieces of software on the server. This isn't quite such a sociable activity as disturbing people, and I spent most of the day in the affable but distant company of Sarah, their PR person. At the end of the day everyone gathered in the main room and then left together, apparently for a meal to celebrate someone's birthday. I thought I caught Jeanette casting a glance in my direction at one point, maybe embarrassed at the division between me and them. It didn't bother me much, so I just got my head down and got on with swapping floppy disks in and out of the machines.

Well, it did bother me a little, to be honest. It wasn't their fault – there was no reason why they should make the effort to include someone they didn't know, who wasn't really a part of their group. People seldom do. You have to be a little thick-skinned about that kind of thing if you work freelance. There are still tribes, you know, everywhere you go. They owe their allegiance to shared time, if they're friends, or to an organisation, if they're colleagues: but they're tribes just as much as if they'd tilled the same patch of desert for centuries. As a freelancer, especially in the cyber-areas, you tend to spend a lot of time wandering between them, occasionally being granted access to their watering hole, but never being one of the real people. Sometimes it can get on your nerves. That's all.

I finished up, locked the building carefully – I'm a complete anal-retentive about such things – and went home. I used my mobile to call for a pizza while I was en route, and it arrived two minutes after I got out of the shower. A perfect piece of timing, which sadly no one was on hand to appreciate. My last experiment with living with someone did not end well, mainly because she was a touchy and irritable woman who needed her own space twenty-three-and-a-half hours a day. Well it was more complicated than that, of course, but that was the main impression I took away with me. I mulled over those times as I sat and munched my 'Everything on it, and then a few more things as well' pizza, vague-eyed in front of white noise television, and ended up feeling rather grim.

Food event over, I made a jug of coffee and settled down in front of the Mac. I tweaked my invoicing database for

a while, exciting young man that I am, and then wrote a letter to my sister in Australia. She doesn't have access to Internet E-mail, unfortunately, otherwise she'd hear from me a lot more often. Write letter, print letter, put it in envelope, get stamps, get it to a post office. A chain of admin of that magnitude usually takes me about two weeks to get through, and it's a bit primitive, really, compared to 'Write letter, press button, there in five minutes'.

I called my friend Nick, who's a freelance sub-editor on a trendy magazine, but he was chasing a deadline and not disposed to chat. I tried the television, but it was still outputting someone else's idea of entertainment. By nine o'clock I was very bored, and so I logged on to the net.

Probably because I was bored, and feeling a bit isolated, after I'd done my usual groups I found myself checking out alt.binaries.pictures.erotica. 'alt' means the group is an unofficial one, 'binaries' means it holds computer files rather than just messages; 'pictures' means those files are images. As for the last word, I'm prepared to be educational about this but you're going to have to work that one out for yourself.

The media has the impression that the minute you're in cyberspace, countless pictures of this type come flooding at you down the phone, pouring like ravening hordes on to your hard disk and leaping out of the screen to take over your mind. This is not the case, and all of you worried about your little Timmy's soul can afford to relax a little. You need a computer, a modem, access to a phone line, and a credit card to pay for your Internet feed. You need to find the right newsgroup, and download about three segments for each picture. You require several bits of software to piece them together, convert the result, and display it.

The naughty pictures don't come and get you, and if you see one, it ain't an accident. If your little Timmy has the kit, finance and inclination to go looking, then maybe it's you who need the talking to. In fact, maybe you should be grounded.

The flipside of that, of course, is the implication that I have the inclination to go looking, which I guess I occasionally do. Not very often – honest – but I do. I don't know how defensive to feel about that fact. Men of all shapes and sizes, ages and creeds, and states of marital or relationship bliss enjoy, every now and then, the sight of a woman with no clothes on. It's just as well we do, you know, otherwise there'd be no new little earthlings, would there? If you want to call that oppression or sexism or commodification of the female body, then go right ahead, but don't expect me to talk to you at dinner parties. I prefer to call it sexual attraction, but then I'm a sad fuck who spends half his life in front of a computer, so what the hell do I know?

Still, it's not something that people feel great about, and I'm not going to defend it too hard. Especially not to women, because that would be a waste of everyone's time. Women have a little bit of their brain missing which means they cannot understand the attraction of pornography. I'm not saying that's a *bad* thing, just that it's true. On the other hand they understand the attraction of babies, shoe shops and the details of other people's lives, so I guess it's swings and roundabouts.

I've talked about it for too long now, and you're going to think I'm some kind of Neanderthal with his tongue hanging to the ground who goes round looking up people's skirts. I'm not. Yes, there are rude pictures to be found on the net, and yes, I sometimes find them. What can I say? I'm a bloke.

Anyway, I scouted round for a while, but in the end didn't even download anything. From the descriptions of the files they seemed to be the same endless permutations of badly-lit mad people, which is ultimately a bit tedious. Also, bullish talk notwithstanding, I don't feel great about looking at that kind of thing. I don't think it reflects very well upon one, and you only have to read a few other people's slaverings to make you decide it is too sad to be part of.

So in the end I played the guitar for a while and went to bed.

The next few days at the VCA passed pretty easily. I installed and configured, configured and installed. The birthday meal went pretty well, I gathered, and featured amongst other highlights the secretary Tanya literally sliding under the table through drunkenness. That was her story, at least. By the Monday of the following week everyone was calling me by name, and I was being included in the coffee-making rounds. England had called its doomed attempt at summer off, or at least called time out, and had settled for a much more bearable cross between spring and autumn instead. All in all, things were going fairly well.

And as the week progressed, slightly better even than that. The reason for this was a person. Jeanette, to be precise.

I began, without even noticing at first, to find myself veering towards the computer nearest her when I needed to do some testing. I also found that I was slightly more likely to offer to go and make a round of coffees in the kitchen when she was already standing there, smoking one of her hourly cigarettes. Initially it was just because she was the politest and most approachable of the staff, and it was a couple of days before I realised that I was looking out for her return from lunch, trying to be less dull when she was around, and noticing what she wore.

It was almost as if I was beginning to fancy her, for heaven's sake.

By the beginning of the next week I passed a kind of watershed, and went from undirected, subconscious behaviour to actually facing the fact that I was attracted to her. I did this with a faint feeling of dread, coupled with occasional, mournful tinges of melancholy. It was like being back at school. It's awful, when you're grown-up, to be reminded of what it was like when a word from someone, a glance, even just their presence, can be like the sun coming out from behind cloud. While it's nice, in a lyric, romantic novel sort of way, it also complicates things. Suddenly it matters if other people come into the kitchen when you're talking to them, and the way they interact with other people becomes more important. You start trying to engineer things, trying to be near them, and it all gets just a bit weird.

Especially if the other person hasn't a clue what's going on in your head and you've no intention of telling them. I'm not good at that, the telling part. Ten years ago I carried a letter round with me for two weeks, trying to pluck up

the courage to give it to someone. It was a girl who was part of the same crowd at college, who I knew well as a friend, and who had just split up from someone else. The letter was a very carefully worded and tentative description of how I felt about her, ending with an invitation for a drink. Several times I was on the brink, I swear, but somehow I didn't give it to her. I just didn't have what it took.

The computer stuff was going OK, if you're interested. By the middle of the week the system was pretty much in place, and people were happily sending pop-up messages to each other. Egerton, in particular, thought it was just fast that he could boss people around from the comfort of his own den. Even John was bucked up by seeing how the new system was going to ease the progress of whatever dull task it was he performed, and all in all my stock at the VCA was rising high.

It was time, finally, to get down to the nitty-gritty of developing their new databases. I tend to enjoy that part more than the wireheading, because it's more of a challenge, gives scope for design and creativity, and I don't have to keep getting up from my chair. When I settled down to it on Thursday morning, I realised that it was going to have an additional benefit. Jeanette was the VCA's Events Organiser, and most of the databases they needed concerned various aspects of her job. In other words, it was her I genuinely had to talk to about them, and at some length.

We sat side by side at her desk, me keeping a respectful distance, and I asked her the kind of questions I had to ask. She answered them concisely and quickly, didn't pipe up with a lot of damn fool questions, and came up with some reasonable requests. It was rather a nice day outside, and sunlight that was for once not hazy and obstructive angled through the window to pick out the lighter hues amongst her chestnut hair, which was long, and wavy, and as far as I could see entirely beautiful. Her hands played carelessly with a Biro as we talked, the fingers long and purposeful, the forearms a pleasing shade of skin colour. I hate people who go sprinting out into parks at the first sign of summer, to lie with insectile patience or brainlessness in the desperate quest for a tan. As far as I was concerned, the fact that she clearly hadn't done so – in contrast to Tanya, for example, who already looked like a hazelnut (and probably thought with the same fluency as one) – was just another thing to like her for.

It was a nice morning. Relaxed, and pleasant. Over the last week we'd started to speak more and more, and were ready for a period of actually having to converse with each other at length. I enjoyed it, but didn't get over-excited. Despite my losing status as a technodrone, I am wise in the ways of relationships. Just being able to get on with her, and have her look as if she didn't mind being with me – that was more than enough for the time being. I wasn't going to try for anything more. Or so I thought.

Then, at half-past twelve, I did something entirely unexpected. We were in the middle of an in-depth and speculative wrangle on the projected nature of their hotel-booking database, when I realised that we were approaching the time at which Jeanette generally took her lunch. Smoothly, and with a nonchalance which I found frankly impressive, I lofted the idea that we go grab a sandwich somewhere and continue the discussion outside. As the sentences slipped from my mouth I experienced an out-of-body sensation, as if I was watching myself from about three feet away, cowering behind a chair. "Not bad," I found myself thinking, incredulously. "Clearly she'll say no, but that was a good, businesslike way of putting it."

Bizarrely, instead of shrieking with horror or poking my eye out with a ruler, she said yes. We rose together, I grabbed my jacket, and we left the office, me trying not to smirk like some recently ennobled businessman who'd done a lot of work for charity. We took the lift down to the lobby and stepped outside, and I chattered inanely to avoid coming to terms with the fact that I was now standing with her *outside* work, beyond our usual frame of reference.

She knew a snack bar around the corner, and within ten minutes we found ourselves at a table outside, ploughing through sandwiches. She even ate attractively, as if she was a genuine human being taking on sustenance rather than someone appearing in amateur dramatics. I audibly mulled over the database for a while, to give myself time to settle down, and before long we'd pretty much done the subject.

Luckily, as we each smoked a cigarette, she pointed out with distaste a couple of blokes walking down the street, both of whom had taken their shirts off, and whose paunches were hanging over their jeans.

"Summer," she said, with a sigh, and I was away. There are few people with a larger internal stock of complaints to make about summer than me, and I let myself rip.

Why, I asked her, did everyone think it was so nice? What were supposed to be the benefits? One of the worst things about summer, I maintained hotly, as she smiled and ordered us coffee, was the constant pressure to enjoy oneself in ways which are considerably less fun than death.

Barbecues, for example. Now I don't mind barbies, especially, except that *my* friends never have them. If I end up at a barbecue, it's because I've been dragged there by my partner, to stand round in someone else's scraggy back garden as the sky threatens rain, watching drunken blokes teasing a nasty barking dog, and girls I don't know standing in clumps gossiping about people I've never heard of, while trying to eat badly cooked food that I could have bought for £2.50 in McDonalds *and* had somewhere to sit as well. That washed-out, exhausted and depressed feeling that comes from getting not quite drunk enough in the afternoon while standing up and either trying to make conversation with people I'll never see again, or putting up with them doing the same to me.

And going and sitting in parks. I hate it, as you may have gathered. Why? Because it's fucking *horrible*, that's why. Sitting on grass which is both papery and damp, surrounded by middle-class men with beards teaching their kids to unicycle, the air rent by the sound of some arsehole torturing a guitar to the delight of his fourteen-year-old hippy girlfriend. Drinking lukewarm soft drinks out of overpriced cans, and all the time being repetitively told how nice it all is, as if by some process of brainwashing you'll actually start to enjoy it.

Worst of all, the constant pressure to *go outside*. "What are you doing inside on a day like this? You want to go outside, you do, get some fresh air. You want to go outside." No. Wrong. I don't want to go outside. For a start, I

like it inside. It's nice there. There are sofas, drinks, cigarettes, books. There is shade. Outside there's nothing but the sun, the mindless drudgery of suntan cultivation, and the perpetual sound of droning voices, yapping dogs and convention shouting at you to enjoy yourself.

And always the constant refrain from everyone you meet, drumming on your mind like torrential rain on a tin roof: "Isn't it a beautiful day?", "Isn't it a beautiful day?", "Isn't it a beautiful day?", "Isn't it a beautiful day?"

No, say I. No, it fucking *isn't*.

There was all that, and some more, but I'm sure you get the drift. By halfway through Jeanette was laughing, partly at what I was saying, and partly – I'm sure – at the fact that I was getting quite so worked up about it. But she was with me, and chipped in some valuable observations about the horrors of sitting outside dull country pubs surrounded by red-faced career girls and loud-mouthed estate agents in shorts, deafened by the sound of open-topped cars being revved by people who clearly had no right to live. We banged on happily for quite a while, had another cup of coffee, and then were both surprised to realise that we'd gone into overtime on lunch. I paid, telling her that she could get the next one, and although that sounds like a terrible line, it came out pretty much perfect and she didn't stab me or anything. We strode quickly back to the office, still chatting, and the rest of the afternoon passed in a hazy blur of contentment.

I could have chosen to leave at the same time as her, and walked to whichever station she used, but I elected not to. I judged that enough had happened for one day, and I didn't want to push my luck. Instead I went home alone, hung out by myself, and went to sleep with, I suspect, a small smile upon my face.

Next day I sprang out of bed with an enthusiasm which is utterly unlike me, and as I struggled to balance the recalcitrant taps of my shower, I was already plotting my next moves. Part of my mind was sitting back with folded arms and watching me with indulgent amusement, but in general I just felt really quite happy and excited.

For most of the morning I quizzed Jeanette further on her database needs. She was lunching with a friend, I knew, so I wasn't expecting anything there. Instead I wandered vaguely round a couple of bookshops, wondering if there was any book I could legitimately buy for Jeanette. It would have to be something very specific, relevant to a conversation we'd had – and sufficiently inexpensive that it looked like a throwaway gift – and in the end I came away empty-handed. Which was probably just as well. Buying her a present was a ridiculous idea, out of proportion to the current situation. As I walked back to the office I told myself to be careful. I was in danger of getting carried away and disturbing the careful equilibrium of my life and mind.

Then, in the afternoon, something happened which made my heart sing. I was off the databases for a while, trying to work out why Jeanette's computer was behaving rather strangely. Tanya wandered up to ask Jeanette about something, and before she went, reminded her that there'd been talk of everyone going out for a drink that evening. Jeanette hummed and ha-ed for a moment, and I bent further over the keyboard, giving them a chance to ignore me. Then, as if from nowhere, Tanya said the magic words.

Why, she suggested, didn't I come too?

Careful to be nonchalant and cavalier, pausing as if sorting through my myriad other options, I said yes, why the hell not. Jeanette then said yes, she could probably make it, and for a moment I saw all the locks and chains around my life fall away, as if a cage had collapsed around me, leaving only the open road.

For a moment it was like that, and then suddenly it wasn't.

"I'll have to check with Chris, though," Jeanette added, and I realised she had a boyfriend.

I spent the rest of the afternoon violently but silently cursing and trying to calm myself down. I should have known that someone like her would already be taken – after all, they always are. Of course, that didn't mean it was a no-go area. People sometimes leave their partners. I know, I've done it myself. But suddenly it had changed, changed from something that might – in my dreams, at least – have developed smoothly into a nice thing. It had changed into a miasma of potential grief which was unlikely even to start.

For about half an hour I was furious, with what I don't know. With myself, for letting my feelings grow and complicate. With her, for having a boyfriend. With life, for always being that bit more disappointing than it absolutely has to be. Then, because I'm an old hand at dealing with my inner conditions, I talked myself around. It didn't matter. Jeanette could simply become a nice thing about a month-long contract, someone I could chat to. Then the job would end, I'd move on, and none of it would matter. I had to nail that conclusion down on myself pretty hard, but thought I could make it stick.

I decided that I might as well go out for the drink anyway. There was another party I could go to but it would involve trekking halfway across town. Nick was busy. I might as well be sociable, now that they'd made the offer. So I went, and I wish I hadn't.

The evening was OK, in the way that they always are when people from the same office get together to drink and complain about their boss. Whitehead wasn't there, thankfully, and Egerton quickly got sufficiently drunk that he didn't qualify as a Whitehead substitute. The evening was fine, for everyone else. It was just me who didn't have a good time.

Jeanette disappeared just before we left the office, and I found myself walking to the pub with the rest of them. I sat drinking Budweisers and making conversation with John and Sarah, wondering where she was. She'd said she'd meet everyone there. So where was she?

At about half-past eight the question was answered. She walked into the pub and I started to get up, a smile of greeting on my face. Then I noticed she looked different somehow, and I noticed the man standing behind her.

The man was Chris Ayer. He was her boyfriend. He was also the nastiest man I've met in quite some time. That

sounds like sour grapes, but it's not. He was perfectly presentable, in that he was good-looking and could talk to people, but everything else about him was wrong. There was something odd about the way he looked at people, something both arrogant and closed-off. There was an air of restrained violence about him that I found unsettling, and his sense of possession of Jeanette was complete. She sat at his side, hands in her lap, and said very little throughout the evening. I couldn't get over how different she looked to the funny and confident woman I'd had lunch with the day before, but nobody else seemed to notice it. After all, she joined in the office banter as usual, and smiled with her lips quite often. Nobody apart from me was looking for anything more than that.

As the evening wore on I found myself feeling more and more uncomfortable. I exchanged a few tight words with Ayer, mainly concerning a new computer he'd bought, but wasn't bothered when he turned to talk to someone else. The group from the office seemed to be closing in on itself, leaning over the table to shout jokes which they understood and I didn't. Ayer's harsh laugh cut across the smoke to me, and I felt impotently angry that someone like him should be able to sit with his arm around someone like Jeanette.

I drank another couple of beers and then abruptly decided that I simply wasn't having a good enough time. I stood up and took my leave, and was mildly touched when Tanya and Sarah tried to get me to stay. Jeanette didn't say anything, and when Ayer's eyes swept vaguely over me I saw that for him I didn't exist. I backed out of the pub smiling, and then turned and stalked miserably down the road.

By Sunday evening I was fine. I met my ex-girlfriend-before-last for lunch on Saturday, and we had a riotous time bitching and gossiping about most of the people we knew. In the evening I went to a restaurant that served food only from a particular four-square-mile region of Nepal, or so Nick claimed, such venues being his speciality. It tasted just like Indian to me, and I didn't see any sherpas, but the food was good. I spent Sunday doing my kind of thing, wandering round town and sitting in cafés to read. I called my folks in the evening, and they were on good form, and then I watched a horror film before going to bed when I felt like it. The kind of weekend that only happily single people can have, in other words, and it suited me just fine.

Monday was OK too. I was regaled with various tales of drunkenness from Friday night, as if for the first time I had a right to know. I had all the information I needed from Jeanette for the time being, so I did most of my work at a different machine. We had a quick chat in the kitchen while I made some coffee, and it was more or less the same as it had been the week before. Because she'd always known she had a boyfriend, of course. I caught myself dipping a couple of times in the afternoon, but bullied my mood into holding up. In a way it was a kind of a relief, not to have to care.

The evening was warm and light, and I took my time walking home. Then I rustled myself up a chef's salad, which is my only claim to culinary skill. It has iceberg lettuce, black olives, grated cheese, julienned ham (that's 'sliced', to you and me), diced tomato and two types of home-made dressing: which is more than enough ingredients to count as cooking in my book. When I was sufficiently gorged on roughage I sat in front of the computer and fooled around, and by the time it was dark outside found myself cruising around the net.

And, after a while, I found myself accessing `alt.binaries.pictures.erotica`. I was in a funny sort of mood, I guess. I scrolled through the list of files, not knowing what I was after, and found the usual stuff, like '-TH2xx.GIF-{m/f}-hot sex!'. Hot sex wasn't really what I was looking for, especially if it had an exclamation mark after it. Of all the people who access the group, I suspect it's less than five percent who actually put pictures up there in the first place. It seems to be a matter of intense pride with them, and they compete with each other on the volume and 'quality' of their postings. Their tragically sad bickering is often more entertaining than the pictures themselves.

It's complete pot luck what is available at any given time, and no file stays on there for more than about two days. The servers which hold the information have only limited space and files get rolled off the end pretty quickly in the high-volume groups. I was about to give up when suddenly something caught my attention.

'j1.gif-{f}-"Young_woman-, fully_clothed" (part 1/3)'.

Fuck me, I thought: that's a bit weird. The group caters for a wide spectrum of human sexuality, and I'd seen titles which promised fat couples, skinny girls, interracial bonding and light S&M. What I'd never come across was something as perverted as a woman with all her clothes *on*. Intrigued, I did the necessary to download the picture's three segments on to my hard disk.

By the time I'd made a cup of coffee they were there, and I severed the net connection and stitched the three files together. Until they were converted, they were just text files, which is one of the weird things about the net. Absolutely anything, from programs to articles to pictures, is up there as plain text. Without the appropriate decoders it just looks like nonsense, which I guess is as good a metaphor as any for the net as a whole. Or indeed for life.

When the file was ready, I loaded up a graphics package and opened it. I was doing so with only half an eye, not really expecting anything very interesting. But when, after a few seconds of whirring, the image popped on to the screen, I dropped my cup of coffee and it teetered on the desk before falling to shatter on the floor.

It was Jeanette.

The image quality was not fantastically good, and looked as if it had been taken with some small automatic camera. But the girl in the picture was Jeanette, without a shadow of a doubt. She was perched on the arm of an anonymous armchair, and with a lurch I realised it was probably taken in her flat. She was, as advertised, fully clothed, wearing a shortish skirt and a short-sleeved top which buttoned up at the front. She was looking in the general direction of the camera, and her expression was unreadable. She looked beautiful, as always, and somehow much, much more appealing than any of the buck-naked women who cavorted through the usual pictures to be found on the net.

After I'd got over my jaw-dropped surprise, I found I was feeling something else. Annoyance, possibly. I know

I'm biased, but I didn't think it right that a picture of her was plastered up in cyberspace for everyone to gawk at, even if she was fully clothed. I realise that's hypocritical in the face of all the other women up there, but I can't help it. It was different.

Because I knew her.

I was also angry because I could think of only one way it could have got there. I'd mentioned a few net-related things in Jeanette's presence at work, and she'd shown no sign of recognition. It was a hell of a coincidence that I'd seen the picture at all, and I wasn't prepared to speculate about stray photos of her falling into unknown people's hands. There was only one person who was likely to have uploaded it. Her boyfriend.

The usual women (and men) in the pictures are getting paid for it. It's their job. Jeanette wasn't, and might not even know the picture was there.

I quickly logged back on to the net and found the original file. I extricated the uploader information and pulled it on to the screen, and then swore.

Remember a while back I said it was possible to hide yourself when posting up to the net? Well, that's what he'd done. The E-mail address of the person who'd uploaded the picture was listed as 'anon99989@penet.fi'. That meant that rather than posting it up in his real name, he'd routed the mail through an anonymity server in Finland called PENET. This server strips the journey information out of the posting and assigns a random address which is held on an encrypted database. I couldn't tell anything from it at all. Feeling my lip curl with distaste, I quit out.

By the time I got to work the next day I knew there wasn't anything I could say about it. I could hardly pipe up with "Hey! Saw your pic on the Internet porn board last night!" And after all, it was only a picture, the kind that people have plastic folders stuffed full of. The question was whether Jeanette knew Ayer had posted it up. If she did, well, it just went to show that you didn't know much about people just because you worked with them. If she didn't, then I think she had a right both to know, and to be annoyed.

I dropped a few net-references into the conversations we had, but nothing came of them. I even mentioned the newsgroups, but got mild interest and nothing more. It was fairly clear she hadn't heard of them. In the end I sort of mentally shrugged. So her unpleasant boyfriend had posted up a picture. There was nothing I could do about it, except bury still further any feelings I might have entertained for her. She already had a life with someone else, and I had no business interfering.

In the evening I met up with Nick again, and we went and got quietly hammered in a small drinking club we frequented. I successfully fought off his ideas on going and getting some food, doubtless the cuisine of one particular village on the top of Kilimanjaro, and so by the end of the evening we were pretty far gone. I stumbled out of a cab, floloped up the stairs and mainlined coffee for a while, in the hope of avoiding a hangover the next day. And it was as I sat, weaving slightly, on the sofa, that I conceived the idea of checking a certain newsgroup.

Once the notion had taken hold, I couldn't seem to dislodge it. Most of my body and soul was engaged in remedial work, trying to save what brain cells they could from the onslaught of alcohol, and the idea was free to romp and run as it pleased. So I found myself slumped at my desk, listening to my hard disk doing its thing, and muttering quietly to myself. I don't know what I was saying. I think it was probably a verbal equivalent of that letter I never gave to someone, an explanation of how much better off Jeanette would be with me. I can get very maudlin when I'm drunk.

When the newsgroup appeared in front of me I blearily ran my eye over the list. The group had seen serious action in the last twenty-four hours and there were over 300 titles to contend with. I was beginning to lose heart and interest when I saw something about two-thirds of the way down the list.

'j2.gif-{f}-"Young_Woman"', one line said, and it was followed by 'j3.gif-{f}-"Young_Woman"'.

These two titles started immediately to do what half a pint of coffee hadn't: sober me up. At a glance I could tell that there were two differences from the description of the first picture of Jeanette I'd seen. The numerals after the 'j' were different, implying they were not the same picture. Also, there were two words missing at the end of the title: the words 'fully clothed'.

I called the first few lines of the first file on to the screen, and saw that it too had come from 'anon99989@penet.fi'. Then, reaching shakily for a cigarette, I downloaded the rest. When my connection was over I slowly stitched the text files together and then booted up the viewer.

It was Jeanette again. Wincing slightly, hating myself for having access to photos of her under these circumstances when I had no right to know what they might show, I looked briefly at first one and then the other.

j2.gif looked as if it had been taken immediately after the first I'd seen. It showed Jeanette, still sitting on the arm of the chair. She was undoing the front of her top, and had got as far as the third button. Her head was down, and I couldn't see her face. Trembling slightly from a combination of emotions, I looked at j3.gif. Her top was now off, showing a flat stomach and a dark blue lacy bra. She was steadying herself on the chair with one arm, and her position looked uncomfortable. She was looking off to one side, away from the camera, and when I saw her face I thought I had the answer to at least one question. She didn't look very happy. She didn't look as if she was having fun.

She didn't look as if she wanted to be doing this at all.

I stood up suddenly and paced round the room, unsure of what to do. If she hadn't been especially enthralled about having the photos taken in the first place, I couldn't believe that Jeanette condoned or even knew about their presence on the net. Quite apart from anything else, she wasn't that type of girl, if that type of girl indeed existed at all.

This constituted some very clear kind of invasion by her boyfriend, something that negated any rights he may have felt he had upon her. But what could I do about it?

I copied the two files on to a floppy, along with j1.gif, and threw them off my hard disk. It may seem like a small distinction to you, but I didn't want them on my main machine. It would have seemed like collusion.

I got up the next morning with no more than a mild headache, and before I left for work decided to quickly log on to the net. There were no more pictures, but there was something that made me very angry indeed. Someone had posted up a message whose total text was the following.

'Re: j-pictures-{f}: EXCELLENT! More pleeze!'

In other words, the pictures had struck a chord with some nameless net-pervert, and they wanted to see some more.

I spent the whole morning trying to work out what to do. The only way I could think of broaching the subject would involve mentioning the alt.binaries.pictures.erotica group itself, which would be a bit of a nasty moment. I hardly got a chance to talk to her all morning anyway, because she was busy on the phone. She also seemed a little tired, and little disposed to chat on the two occasions we found ourselves in the kitchen together.

It felt as if parts of my mind were straining against each other, pulling in different directions. If she didn't know about it, it was wrong, and she should be put in the picture. If I did so, however, she'd never think the same of me again. There was a chance, of course, that the problem might go away: despite the net-loser's request, the expression on Jeanette's face in j3.gif made it seem unlikely there *were* any more pictures. And ultimately the whole situation probably wasn't any of my business, however much it felt like it was.

In the event, I missed the boat. About half-past four I emerged from a long and vicious argument with the server software to discover that Jeanette had left for the day. 'A doctor's appointment'. In most of the places I've worked, that phrase translates directly to 'A couple of hours off from work, *obviously* not spent at the doctor's', but that didn't seem to be the general impression at the VCA. She'd probably just gone to the doctor's. Either way, she was no longer in the office, and I was slightly ashamed to find myself relaxing now that I could no longer talk to her.

At half-past eight that evening, after my second salad of the week, I logged on and checked the group again. There was nothing there. I fretted and fidgeted around the apartment for a few hours, and then tried again at eleven o'clock. This time I found something. Two things. j4.gif, and j5.gif, both from the anonymous address.

In the first picture Jeanette was standing. She was no longer wearing her skirt, and her long legs led up to underwear that matched the bra I'd already seen. She wasn't posing for the picture. Her hands were on her hips, and she looked angry. In j5 she was leaning back against the arm of the chair, and no longer wearing her bra. Her face was blank.

I stared at the second picture for a long time, mind completely split in two. If you ignored the expression on her face, she looked gorgeous. Her breasts were small but perfectly shaped, exactly in proportion to her long, slender body. It was, undeniably, an erotic picture. Except for her face, and the fact that she obviously didn't want to be photographed and the fact that someone was doing it anyway. Not only that, but broadcasting it to the planet.

I decided that enough was enough, and that I had to do something. After a while I came up with the best that I could. I loaded up my E-mail package, and sent a message to anon99989@penet.fi. The double-blind principle the server operated on meant that the recipient wouldn't know where it had come from, and that was fine by me. The message was this:

"I know who you are."

It wasn't much, but it was something. The idea that someone out there on the information superhighway could know his identity *might* be enough to stop him. It was only a stop-gap measure, anyway. I now knew I had to do something about the situation. It simply wasn't on.

And I had to do it soon. When I checked the next morning there were no more pictures, but two messages from people who'd downloaded them. 'Keep 'em cumming!' one wit from Japan had written. Some slob from Texas had posted in similar vein, but added a small request: 'Great, but pick up the pace a little. I want to see more FLESH!'

All the way to work I geared myself up to talking to Jeanette, and I nearly punched the wall when I heard she was out at a venue meeting for the whole morning and half the afternoon. I got rid of the morning by concentrating hard on one of her databases, wanting to bring at least something positive into her life. I know it's not much, but all I know is computers, and that's the best that I could do.

At last three o'clock rolled round, and Jeanette reappeared in the office. She seemed tired and a little preoccupied, and sat straight down at her desk to work. I loitered in the main office area, willing people to fuck off out of it so hard my head started to ache. I couldn't get anywhere near the topic if there were other people around. It would be hard enough if we were alone.

Finally, bloody, *finally* she got up from her desk and went into the kitchen. I got up and followed her in. She smiled faintly and vaguely on seeing me, and, seeing that she had a bandage on her right forearm, I used that to start a conversation. A small mole, apparently, hence the visit to the doctor. I let her finish that topic, keeping half an eye out to make sure that no one was approaching the kitchen.

"I bought a camera today," I blurted, as cheerily as I could. It wasn't great, but I wanted to start slowly. She didn't respond for a moment, and then looked up, her face expressionless.

"Oh yes?" she said, eventually. "What are you going to photograph?"

"Oh, you know, buildings, landscapes. Black and white, that kind of thing." She nodded distantly, and I ran out of things to say.

I ran out because, in retrospect, the topic didn't lead anywhere, but I stopped for another reason too. I stopped because as she turned to pick up the kettle, the look on her face knocked the wind out of me. The combination of unhappiness and loneliness, the sense of helplessness. It struck me again that despite the anger in her face in j4, in j5

she had not only taken her bra off but looked resigned and defeated. Suddenly I didn't care how it looked, didn't care what she thought of me.

"Jeanette," I said, firmly, and she turned to look at me again. "I saw a pict –"

"Hello, boys and girls. Having a little tea party, are we?"

At the sound of Whitehead's voice I wanted to turn round and smash his face in. Jeanette laughed prettily at her employer's sally, and moved out of the way to allow him access to the kettle. Whitehead asked me some balls-achingly dull questions about the computer system, obviously keen to sound as if he had the faintest conception of what it all meant. By the time I'd finished answering him, Jeanette was back at her desk.

The next hour was one of the longest of my life. I'd gone over, crossed the line. I knew I was going to talk to her about what I'd seen. More than that, I'd realised that it didn't have to be as difficult as I'd assumed.

The first picture, j1.gif, simply showed a pretty girl sitting on a chair. It wasn't pornographic, and could have been posted up in any number of places on the net. All I had to do was say I'd seen *that* picture. It wouldn't implicate me, and she would know what her boyfriend was up to.

I hovered round the main office, ready to be after her the minute she looked like leaving, having decided that I'd walk with her to the Tube and tell her then. So long as she didn't leave with anyone else, it would be perfect. While I hovered I watched her work, her eyes blank and isolated. About quarter to five she got a phone call. She listened for a moment, said "Yes, all right" in a dull tone of voice, and then put the phone down. There was nothing else to distract me from the constant cycling of draft statements in my head.

At five she started tidying her desk, and I slipped out and got my jacket. I waited in the hallway until I could hear her coming, and then went out and got in the lift. I walked through the lobby as slowly as I could, and then went and stood outside the building. My hands were sweating and I felt wired and frightened, but I knew I was going to go through with it. A moment later she came out.

"Hi," I said, and she smiled warily, surprised to see me, I suppose. "Look, Jeanette, I need to talk to you about something."

She stared at me, looked around, and then asked what.

"I've seen pictures of you." In my nervousness I blew it, and used the plural rather than singular.

"Where?" she said, immediately. She knew what I was talking about. From the speed with which she latched on, I realised that whatever fun and games were going on between her and Ayer were at the forefront of her mind.

"The Internet. It's ..."

"I know what it is," she said. "What have you seen?"

"Five so far," I said. "Look, if there's anything I can do ..."

"Like what?" she said, and laughed harshly, her eyes beginning to blur. "Like what?"

"Well, anything. Look, let's go talk about it. I could ..."

"There's no use," she said hurriedly, and started to pull away. I followed her, bewildered. How could she not want to do anything about it? I mean, all right, I may not have been much of a prospect, but surely some help was better than none.

"Jeanette ..."

"Let's talk tomorrow," she hissed, and suddenly I realised what was happening. Her boyfriend had come to pick her up. She walked towards the kerb where a white car was coming to a halt, and I rapidly about-faced and started striding the other way. It wasn't fear, not purely. I also didn't want to get her in trouble.

As I walked up the road, I felt as if the back of my neck was burning, and at the last moment I glanced to the side. The white car was just passing, and I could see Jeanette sitting bolt upright in the passenger seat. Her boyfriend was looking out of the side window. At me. Then he accelerated and the car sped away.

That night brought another two photographs. j6 had Jeanette naked, sitting on the chair with her legs slightly apart. Her face was stony. In j7 she was on all fours, photographed from behind. As I sat in my chair, filled with impotent fury, I noticed something in both pictures, and blew them up with the magnifier tool. In j6 one side of her face looked a little red, and when I looked carefully at j7 I could see that there was a trickle of blood running from a small gash on her right forearm.

And suddenly I realised, with help from memories of watching her hands and arms as she worked, that there had never been a mole on her arm. She hadn't got the bandage because of the doctor.

She had it because of him.

I hardly slept that night. I stayed up until three, keeping an eye on the newsgroup. Its denizens were certainly becoming fans of the 'j' pictures, and I saw five requests for some more. As far as they knew, all this involved was a bit more scanning originals from some magazine. They didn't realise that someone was having them taken against her will. I considered trying to do something within the group, like posting a message telling what I knew. While its frequenters are a bit sad, they tend to have a strong moral stance about such things. It's not like the alt.binaries.pictures.tasteless group, where anything goes, the sicker the better. If the a.b.p.erotica crowd were convinced the pictures were being taken under coercion, there was a strong chance they might mailbomb Ayer off the net. It would be a big war to start, however, and one with potentially damaging consequences. The mailbombing would have to go through the anonymity server, and would probably crash it. While I couldn't give a fuck about that, it would draw the attention of all manner of people. In any event, because of the anonymity, nothing would happen directly to Ayer apart from some inconvenience.

I decided to put the idea on hold, in case talking to Jeanette tomorrow made it unnecessary. Eventually I went to

bed, where I thrashed and turned for hours. Some time just before dawn I drifted off, and dreamed about a cat being caught in a lawnmower.

I was up at seven, there being no point in me staying in bed. I checked the group, but there were no new files. On an afterthought I checked my E-mail, realising that I'd been so out of it that I hadn't done so for days. There were about thirty messages for me, some from friends, the rest from a variety of virtual acquaintances around the World. I scanned through them quickly, to see if any needed urgent attention, and then, slap in the middle, I noticed one from a particular address.

anon99989@penet.fi.

Heart thumping, I opened the E-mail. In the convention of such things, he'd quoted my message back at me, with a comment. The entire text of the mail read:

>I know who you are.

>Maybe. But I know where you live.

When I got to work, on the dot of nine, I discovered Jeanette wasn't there. She'd left a message at half-past eight announcing she was taking the day off. Sarah was a bit sniffy about this, though she claimed to be great pals with Jeanette. I left her debating the morality of such cavalier leave-taking with Tanya in the kitchen, as I walked slowly over to sit at Jeanette's desk to work. After five minutes' thought I went back to the kitchen and asked Sarah for Jeanette's number, claiming I had to ask her about the database. Sarah seemed only too pleased to provide the means of contacting a friend having a day off. I grabbed my jacket, muttered something about buying cigarettes, and left the office.

Round the corner I found a public phone box and called her number. As I listened to the phone ring I glanced at the prostitute cards which liberally covered the walls, but soon looked away. I didn't find their representation of the female form amusing any more. After six rings an answering machine cut in. A man's voice, Ayer's, announced that they were out. I rang again, with the same result, and then left the phone box and stood aimlessly on the pavement.

There was nothing I could do.

I went back to work. I worked. I ran home.

At half-past six I logged on for the first time, and the next two pictures were already there. I could tell immediately that something had changed. The wall behind her was a different colour, for a start. The focus of the action seemed to have moved, to the bedroom, presumably, and the pictures were getting worse. j8 showed Jeanette spread-eagled on her back. Her legs were very wide open, and both her hands and feet were out of shot. j9 was much the same, except you could see that her hands were tied. You could also see her face, with its hopeless defiance and fear. As I erased the picture from my disk I felt my neck spasming, and tears coming to my eyes.

Too late I realised that what I should have done was get Jeanette's address while I was at work. It would have been difficult, and viewed with suspicion, but I might have been able to do it. Now I couldn't. I didn't know the home numbers of anyone else from the VCA, and couldn't trace her address from her number. The operator wouldn't give it to me. If I'd had the address, I could have gone round. Maybe I would have found myself in the worst situation of my life, but it would have been something to try. The idea of her being in trouble somewhere in London, and me not knowing where, was almost too much to bear.

Suddenly I decided that I had to do the one small thing I could. I logged back on to the erotica group and prepared to start a flame war. The classic knee-jerk reaction that people on the net use to express their displeasure is known as 'flaming'. Basically it involves bombarding the offender with massive mail messages until their virtual mail box collapses under the load. This generally comes to the attention of the administrator of their site, and they get chucked off the net. What I had to do was post a message providing sufficient reason for the good citizens of pornville to dump on anon99989@penet.fi.

So it might cause some trouble. I didn't fucking care.

I had a mail slip open and my hands poised over the keyboard before I noticed something which stopped me in my tracks.

There were two more files. Already. The slob from Texas was getting his wish: the pace was being picked up.

In j10 Jeanette was on her knees on a dirty mattress. Her hands appeared to be tied behind her, and her head was bowed. j11 showed her lying awkwardly on her side, as if she'd been pushed over. She was glaring at the camera, and when I magnified the left side of the image I could see a thin trickle of blood from her right nostril.

I leaped up from the keyboard, shouting. I don't know what I was saying. It wasn't coherent. Jeanette's face stared up at me from the computer and I leaned wildly across and hit the switch to turn the screen off. Just quitting out didn't seem enough. Then I realised that the image was still there, even though I couldn't see it. The computer was still sending the information to the screen, and the minute I turned it back on, it would be there. So I hard-stopped the computer by just turning it off at the mains. Suddenly what had always been my domain felt like the outpost of someone very twisted and evil, and I didn't want anything to do with it.

Then, like a stone through glass, two ideas crashed into each other in my head.

Gospel Oak.

Police.

From nowhere came a faint half-memory, so tenuous that it might be illusory, of Jeanette mentioning Gospel Oak Station. In other words, the rail station in Gospel Oak. I knew where that was.

An operator wouldn't give me an address from a phone number. But the police would be able to get it.

I couldn't think of anything else.

I rang the police. I told them I had reason to believe that someone was in danger, and that she lived at the house with this phone number. They wanted to know who I was and all manner of other shit, but I rang off quickly, grabbed my coat and hit the street.

Gospel Oak is a small area, filling up the gap between Highgate, Chalk Farm and Hampstead. I knew it well because Nick and I used to go play pool at a pub on Mansfield Road, which runs straight through it. I knew the entrance and exit points of the area, and I got the cab to drop me off as near to the centre as possible. Then I stood on the pavement, hopping from foot to foot and smoking, hoping against hope that this would work.

Ten minutes later a police car turned into Mansfield Road. I was very pleased to see them, and enormously relieved. I hadn't been particularly sure about the Gospel Oak part. I shrank back against the nearest building until it had gone past, and then ran after it as inconspicuously as I could. It took a left into Estelle Road and I slowed at the corner to watch it pull up outside number 6. I slipped into the doorway of the corner shop and watched as two policemen took their own good time untangling themselves from their car.

They walked up to the front of the house. One leaned hard against the doorbell while the other peered around the front of the house as if taking part in an officiousness competition. The door wasn't answered, which didn't surprise me. Ayer was hardly going to break off from torturing his girlfriend to take social calls. One of the policemen nodded to the other, who visibly sighed and made his way around the back of the house.

"Oh come on, come on," I hissed in the shadows. "Break the fucking door down."

About five minutes passed, and then the policeman reappeared. He shrugged flamboyantly at his colleague, and pressed the doorbell again.

A light suddenly appeared above the door, coming from the hallway behind it. My breath caught in my throat and I edged closer. I'm not sure what I was preparing to do. Dash over there and force my way in, past the policemen, to grab Ayer and smash his head against the wall? I really don't know.

The door opened, and I saw it wasn't Ayer or Jeanette. It was an elderly man with a crutch and grey hair that looked like it had seen action in a hurricane. He conversed irritably with the policemen for a moment and then shut the door in their faces. The two cops stared at each other for a moment, clearly considering busting the old tosser, but then turned and made their way back to the car. Still looking up at the house, the first policeman made a report into his radio, and I heard enough to understand why they then got into the car and drove away.

The old guy had told them that the young couple had gone away for the weekend. He'd seen them go on Thursday evening. I was now more than twenty-four hours too late.

When the police car had turned the corner I found myself panting, not knowing what to do. The last two photographs, the ones with the dirty mattress, hadn't been taken here at all. Jeanette was somewhere in the country, but I didn't know where, and there was no way of finding out. The pictures could have been posted from anywhere.

Making a decision, I walked quickly across the road towards the house. The policemen may not have felt they had just cause, but I did, and I carefully made my way around the back of the house. This involved climbing over a gate and wending through the old guy's crowded little garden, and I came perilously close to knocking over a pile of flower pots. As luck would have it, there was a kind of low wall which led to a complex exterior plumbing fixture, and I quickly clambered on top of it. A slightly precarious upward step took me next to one of the second floor windows. It was dark, like all the others, but I kept my head bent just in case.

When I was closer to the window I saw that it wasn't fastened at the bottom. They might have gone, and then come back. Ayer could have staged it so the old man saw them go, and then slipped back when he was out.

It was possible, but not likely. But on the other hand, the window was ajar. Maybe they were just careless about such things. I slipped my fingers under the pane and pulled it open. Then I leaned with my ear close to the open space and listened. There was no sound, and so I boosted myself up and quickly in.

I found myself in a bedroom. I didn't turn the light on, but there was enough coming from the moon and streetlights to pick out a couple of pieces of Jeanette's clothing, garments that I recognised, strewn over the floor. She wouldn't have left them like that, not if she'd had any choice in the matter. I walked carefully into the corridor, poking my head into the bathroom and kitchen, which were dead. Then I found myself in the living room.

The big chair stood in front of a wall I recognised, and at the far end a computer sat on a desk next to a picture scanner. Moving as quickly but quietly as possible, I frantically searched over the desk for anything that might tell me where Ayer had taken her. There was nothing there, and nothing in the rest of the room. I'd broken – well, opened – and entered for no purpose. There were no clues. No sign of where they'd gone. An empty box under the table confirmed what I'd already guessed: Ayer had a laptop computer as well. He could be posting the pictures on to the net from anywhere that had a phone socket. Jeanette would be with him, and I needed to find her. I needed to find her soon.

I paced around the room, trying to pick up speed, trying to work out what I could possibly do. No one at the VCA knew where they'd gone – they hadn't even known Jeanette wasn't going to be in. The old turd downstairs hadn't known. There was nothing in the flat that resembled a phone book or personal organiser, something that would have a friend or family member's number. I was prepared to do anything, call anyone, in the hope of finding where they'd gone. But there was nothing, unless ...

I sat down at the desk, reached behind the computer and turned it on. Ayer had a fairly flash deck, together with a scanner and laser printer. He knew the net. Chances were he was wirehead enough to keep his phone numbers somewhere on his computer.

As soon as the machine was booted up I went rifling through it, grimly enjoying the intrusion, the computer-rape. His files and programs were spread all over the disk, with no apparent system. Each time I finished looking through a

folder, I erased it. It seemed the least I could do.

Then after about five minutes I found something, but not what I was looking for. I found a folder named 'j'.

There were files called j12 to j16 in the folder, in addition to all the others that I'd seen. Wherever Jeanette was, Ayer had come back here to scan the pictures. Presumably that meant they were still in London, for all the good that did me.

I'm not telling you what they were like, except that they showed Jeanette, and in some she was crying, and in j15 and j16 there was blood running from the corner of her mouth. A lot of blood. She was twisted and tied, face livid with bruises, and in j16 she was staring straight at the camera, face slack with terror.

Unthinkingly I slammed my fists down on the desk. There was a noise downstairs and I went absolutely motionless until I was sure the old man had lost interest. Then I turned the computer off, opened up the case and removed the hard disk. I climbed out the way I'd come and ran out down the street, flagged a taxi by jumping in front of it and headed for home.

I was going to the police, but I needed a computer, something to shove the hard disk into. I was going to show them what I'd found, and fuck the fact it was stolen. If they nicked me, so be it. But they had to do something about it. They had to try to find her. If he'd come back to do his scanning, he had to be keeping her somewhere in London. They'd know where to look, or where to start. They'd know what to do.

They had to. They were the police. It was their job.

I ran up the stairs and into the flat, and then dug in my spares cupboard for enough pieces to hack together a compatible computer. When I'd got them I went over to my desk to call the local police station, and then stopped and turned my computer on. I logged on to the net and kicked up my mail package, and sent a short, useless message.

"I'm coming after you," I said.

It wasn't bravado. I didn't feel brave at all. I just felt furious, and wanted to do anything which might unsettle him, or make him stop. Anything to make him stop.

I logged quickly on to the newsgroups, to see when anon99989@penet.fi had most recently posted. A half hour ago, when I'd been in his apartment, j12-16 had been posted up. Two people had already responded: one hoping the blood was fake and asking if the group really wanted that kind of picture, the other asking for more. I viciously wished a violent death upon the second person, and was about to log off, having decided not to bother phoning but to just go straight to the cops, when I saw another text-only posting at the end of the list.

'Re: j-series' it said, and it was from anon99989@penet.fi. I opened it.

'End of series,' the message said. 'Hope you all enjoyed it. Next time, something tasteless.'

"And I hope," I shouted at the screen, "that you enjoy it when I ram your hard disk down your fucking throat." Then suddenly my blood ran cold.

'Next time something tasteless.'

I hurriedly closed the group, and opened up alt.binaries.pictures.tasteless. As I scrolled past the titles for roadkills and people crapping I felt the first heavy, cold tear roll out on to my cheek. My hand was shaking uncontrollably, my head full of some dark mist, and when I saw the last entry I knew suddenly and exactly what Jeanette had been looking at when j16 was taken.

'j17.gif,' it read. '{f} Pretty amputee'.