

In the Flesh - a short story by Brian Stableford

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Martha was in the middle of icing Jennifer's birthday cake when the doorbell rang. She wasn't making a very good job of it, but until the doorbell rang it hardly seemed to matter. Once the doorbell had rung,

of

course, interrupting her in mid-squeeze, the fact that it was a bit of

a

mess suddenly became the fault of whoever was at the door and an

occasion

for resentment. She cursed under her breath as she moved into the hall, wiping icing off her fingers with the hem of her apron.

When she opened the door and saw that it was a boy in his early teens

the

curse rose to her lips again--but it died when she realised that the

boy

was wearing dark glasses.

It was a sunny day, in spite of being Friday the thirteenth. There was

no

reason why a boy his age shouldn't be wearing dark glasses--but the

fact

remained that he was wearing dark glasses.

He was also carrying a small parcel, about five inches square and two deep. The wrapping-paper enclosing the box was glossy, the colour of

red

wine. It wasn't wrapped in pink ribbon, tied with a bow, just sealed

with

sellotape--but it still looked suspiciously like a present.

"Yes?" she said, trying hard to sound neutral, if not actually pleasant.

"Mrs Mortimore?"

"Yes." Martha was still trying to sound neutral, but even she could

hear

the note of anxiety in her second yes. She told herself that there was nothing to be scared of--but she had told herself that far too often

for

the telling to have any effect, even though it had nearly always been

true.

The boy shifted slightly; he was embarrassed too. So he should be,

Martha

thought. If being a fourteen-year-old boy isn't enough to cast you into

a

Hell of permanent embarrassment, what is? She tried not to look at the dark glasses but she couldn't do it.

"I don't know if Jennifer's mentioned me," the boy said, in the

slightly

fluty tone of a child who might have been slow to learn to talk. "My name's Carl Ulick."

Martha didn't have to ask him to spell it. Jennifer hadn't "mentioned" him. Jennifer hadn't "mentioned" anyone at all. Jennifer found it

absurdly

easy to keep secrets.

"I'm afraid not," she told the boy.

Because she knew that it wasn't what he wanted to hear she had no difficulty in keeping her voice straight, but she couldn't help feeling that she was a bit of a bitch for being able to find satisfaction in

the

imparting of bad news. She knew that she couldn't keep the conversational initiative for long, though--that ominous package he was carrying, all done up in fancy wine-coloured wrapping, gave him the advantage. He lifted it up slightly to draw her attention to it, although there wasn't any need. "I've brought her a present," he said. His fluty tone made the words trip lightly from his tongue, as if he might have been anybody bringing a gift to anyone. "A present," Martha parried, hopelessly. "A birthday present. Today is her birthday, isn't it? She's sixteen, I believe." The tone was more anxious now, and Martha knew exactly why.

Carl Ulick couldn't be absolutely sure that it was Jennifer's birthday. He couldn't be absolutely sure that she was sixteen. He probably hadn't even been absolutely sure that her name was Jennifer until Martha had let the name pass unchallenged. On the Net, Martha knew, people lied. They lied about everything. On the Net you could change your name, your sex, your age, your state of mind and your state of being. Carl Ulick might have been tap-tap-tapping at Jennifer for years, with Jennifer blink-blink-blinking back as fast as she could flutter her eyelashes, but for all Carl Ulick really knew, Jennifer might be an incontinent old man with emphysema and a sick sense of humour. Didn't they have a saying nowadays? The truth is in the flesh. Oh yes--the truth was in the flesh all right. The truth of Jennifer was flesh through and through. Frail flesh. As it happened, though, it really was Jennifer's birthday and she really was sixteen. This was the thirteenth of the month, and it was Friday. Poor Geoff would be stuck on the M4 somewhere near the junction with the M25. Come four o'clock on a Friday all the trouble in the world was focused on the junction where the airport traffic met up with the commuters streaming out of London, and this was the thirteenth: Disaster Day. Poor Geoff, late for his daughter's birthday. If no one else complained about the higgledy-piggledy icing he would. He had no idea--no idea at all. "Mrs Mortimore?" The troubled gaze of whatever was behind the dark glasses was boring into her. For all she knew, Carl Ulick had eyes like Superman's, able to see right through her apron and her blouse, her bra and her breasts, all the way to her beating heart. It has to be gold, she thought, with all the vitriol flowing through it. But she was being unfair to herself.

"I'm sorry," she said, rallying. "That's very kind of you, Carl. I'll give it to her." She stuck out her hand with all the parental authority she could muster, even though she knew full well that he wasn't going to hand it over.

"I'd like to give it to her myself, if I may," said the boy, disguising his adamant stubbornness with all the politeness a boy his age could muster. "I've come quite a way, you see."

Martha had always known that the greatest advantage of the Net was its vast range. On the Net, you could talk to people in Timbuktu and Tokyo as easily as people in the next street. In the Global Village, everyone was a neighbour--which meant that no one you knew was likely to pop round for a cup of sugar. The downside was that if anyone ever did take the trouble to call, they'd expect the kind of welcome that befitted someone who'd come "quite a way".

How much, Martha wondered, has she told this boy? Which lies need protecting? Am I supposed to let him in, just like that? How am I supposed to know, when she hasn't taken the trouble to tell me? "Really," she said, without moving aside to let the boy into the house. "Where from, exactly?"

"Oxford," he replied.

In Global Village terms, Oxford was practically next door. Why couldn't the silly little slut make friends in Adelaide or Vancouver? Martha thought--but she immediately felt ashamed of having called her daughter a slut, and then felt more deeply ashamed as she realised that it might have been a Freudian slip. People had sex on the Net, or so it was said. They tap-tap-tapped and blink-blink-blinked all kinds of dirty stuff to one another, working themselves up to....

"Well, that's very thoughtful of you," Martha said, severing her own train of thought with calculated brutality, "but you really should have phoned first. Jennifer's asleep, I'm afraid, and she really isn't able to receive visitors even when she's...."

"She told me not to," Carl Ulick said, wincing slightly as he realised that impatience had made him interrupt. "Phone, that is. I would have....only she told me not to. She invited me. I was hoping...."

"That she'd told us," Martha finished for him, feeling that her golden heart might be slowing in its paces--but the obligation to continue the scrupulously polite conversation still remained.

"Well, she didn't," Martha continued. "I think she knew well enough that we wouldn't--couldn't--have allowed it. We have to be very careful, you see. Everyone agrees that it's better for her to be at home than permanently in hospital, but we do have to be very careful. She had no right to ask you to come." It sounded feeble even to her, in spite of the fact that it was true. Unfortunately, the gaze of whatever was behind

those dark glasses was still boring into her like an electric drill.  
"I understand how you feel," the boy lied. "You don't have to worry,  
Mrs  
Mortimore--I really am a friend. I know all about Jennifer's condition.  
I'm not going to be surprised, or horrified. I've been helping her, you  
see--ever since she got the eyes. It was easier for me. I got mine when  
I  
was three, and the visual cortex had plenty of time to adapt to the  
interface. I didn't even have to learn, not really...but they put me  
through the programme anyway. Jennifer has a much more advanced model,  
of  
course. I almost wish I could trade mine in, but the adaptation's set  
now.  
I really have been able to help her, to talk her through. I know she  
can  
do even better than she has, Mrs Mortimore. I know how much the human  
brain can do, under the pressure of necessity."  
The torrent of words left Martha numb. She hadn't even attempted to  
follow  
the meaning of the sentences, although she had heard every word. She  
had  
been too busy thinking: I have to let him in. I can't say no. I have to  
let him in. She told herself again, truthfully, that there was nothing  
to  
be afraid of, but she still couldn't quite accommodate the fact.  
"You'd better come in," she said, colourlessly. She let him past and  
closed the door behind him. He waited politely until she ushered him  
into  
the living-room. He sat down on the sofa, in response to another  
gestured  
invitation. There was nothing wrong with his common-or-garden eyesight,  
whatever else his shades were hiding.  
"Would you like a cup of tea?" Martha asked.  
He wanted to refuse, and nearly did, but he obviously came to the  
conclusion that it was best to play it by the book in the hope of  
smoothing things over. He wanted everything to go well. He wanted  
everyone  
to be happy. He wanted the moon on a stick, and he probably had the  
means  
of getting it, even though Jennifer had a much more advanced model.  
"Please," he said.  
"I'm afraid you'll have to wait until my husband gets home," Martha  
said,  
seizing the only initiative that remained to be seized. "When he  
comes...well, perhaps...." She left it at that. Carl Ulick nodded  
politely, as befitted a boy who'd just sat down on someone else's sofa  
in  
someone else's living room and accepted a cup of tea.  
Martha left him there, and hurried to the kitchen.  
As soon as she'd plugged the kettle in Martha whipped the phone from  
its  
cradle and stabbed out the number of Geoff's mobile. He answered  
immediately--which was ominous in itself. Martha listened for the sound  
the engine made when the Helvetia was bombing along in fast-moving  
traffic, like a squadron of bumble bees at the bottom of a well, but  
she  
couldn't hear it.  
"Where are you?" she demanded, without preamble.  
"Stuck just west of junction eight. Accident. Bastard must have turned

sideways or something--only one lane left. Yellowjackets in sight, but they're filtering half a dozen at a...."

Martha wasn't interested in technicalities. "How long?"

"I'll still be early," he protested. "I left at three, as promised. Not

my

fault if..."

"There's someone here," she told him, trying to keep her voice down in case Carl Ulick could hear her over the hiss of the kettle.

"What kind of someone?" Geoff made no attempt to hide his exasperation.

"A boy. He says Jenny invited him. He's brought her a birthday present."

There was a pause. Geoff always made a point of pausing when someone

told

him something he didn't want to know, to give the impression that he

was

deep in thought. It was a habit he'd picked up at the office.

The kettle switched itself off. Martha wondered whether to get the

teapot

out of the cupboard under the sink, but decided not to bother. It was

only

a boy, after all. She did fetch cups down, though, putting aside the

mug

she usually used for herself. She flipped a teabag into each cup and poured the water on.

"Okay," said Geoff. "You tell him Jenny's asleep. You take the present

off

him and tell him that we'll give it to her when she wakes up. Thank him kindly, give him a cup of tea and a chocolate digestive and tell him

we're

sorry."

Martha reached back up to the cupboard to get the chocolate digestives.

"I've done all that," she said, witheringly. "He isn't going to go.

He's

wearing dark glasses." She realised as she said it that it sounded ridiculous, as if dark glasses were the mark of a race apart--a race

which

couldn't be subjected to the pressures of everyday etiquette. Except,

of

course, that it wasn't as ridiculous as it sounded, because people who wore dark glasses for the reason that Carl Ulick was wearing dark

glasses

really were a race apart, and because her own daughter was a member of that race apart, and because that really did mean that the pressure of everyday etiquette wasn't adequate to get the boy out of the house and away before Geoff got home.

Martha took advantage of deep-thought-pause number two to agitate the water in the cups and press the bags against the sides to make them

yield

up their treasure.

"She invited him, you say?" Geoff asked. It wasn't so much a comment,

more

a punctuation mark to signal that he was still thinking hard.

"So he says," Martha agreed, unable to stop herself from adding: "She would, wouldn't she? Not tell us, I mean."

"Its okay," Geoff said. "Maybe. No need for....well, what I mean is,

maybe

we should just accept it as normal. I mean, it is her birthday and she

is

sixteen, and....well, hell, just wait till I get there, okay. Don't do anything. Just hang on. It's no big deal."

Martha hoped that he could perform better than that in the office. If

he

couldn't people must fall about laughing every time he launched himself into one of his pregnant pauses. On the other hand, if he could perform better than that in the office he wouldn't still be in the office.

Anyone

who was anyone these days used a home-based workstation. The only

people

who still set out every weekday morning to run the gauntlet of the M4

were

salesmen, delivery boys and people too stupid to get fully to grips

with

the new technology.

It's all right for people like Carl Ulick, she thought. Born blind and probably born deaf too, he's still a child of the twenty-first century.

He

grew up with it all, when it wasn't just his visual cortex that was

nice

and pliable, ready to adapt. I was born in 1980 and never laid a finger

on

a keyboard until I was in Miss James's class, by which time I was a fully-fledged technophobe. Geoff's five years older than me, and never

got

closer to IT than his playstation. We're dinosaurs. Jenny's may be the last generation to suffer what she's suffering, but we're the last generation to suffer what we're suffering. All wrecks together.

"Thanks a bunch," she said aloud, as Geoff bid her goodbye without

giving

her time to formulate a proper reply, pretending that he had to put the mobile down and get stuck into some serious driving. She knew that the phrase had been out of date since she was a child, but it was still

stuck

in her mind, still likely to come through in her private thoughts,

because

her brain simply wasn't adaptable enough to discard it.

Martha hung up the receiver and fished the teabags out of the cups. She put the saucers on the tray with the milk jug and the sugar-bowl, then placed the cups carefully upon the saucers. Then, fully armed for the fray, she set off for the living-room, wishing she had married someone with more sense and better genes--and regretting, even more, that she hadn't been born with more sense and better genes herself.

"I was just icing Jennifer's birthday cake when you rang the doorbell," Martha told Carl Ulick, making the point that Jennifer did have

birthdays,

and parents who cared about them--parents who made an effort, in spite

of

the fact that they hadn't actually bought her a present this year.

There

was no way of knowing what Jennifer might have told the boy, but he

could

see for himself how things were, how neat and normal the house was, how decently aproned and ever-dutiful Martha was.

"Don't let me keep you," the boy said. "I'll be okay."

Martha wanted to take advantage of the invitation to retreat but she didn't dare. If she'd gone back into the kitchen she'd have been safe

from

conversation, but not from embarrassment. The problem was that he would

be

okay, that in a sense he wouldn't even be here. His body would be

sitting

patiently on the sofa but his eyes would be looking out upon some other world entirely--a world that was exclusive to him and his kind: the empire of the blind. He had been helping Jennifer to find her way within it, to make the journey that was far more difficult for her because her visual cortex had become set in its ways while she could still see out of her own eyes.

"That's all right," she said. "It won't take a minute, once Geoff's home. He's stuck on the motorway. An accident."

"I'm sorry," he said, probably referring to the accident rather than Geoff being stuck.

"The roads don't get any better," she said. "Ever since I was your age they've been saying that the day of the commuter is dead, but it doesn't seem to make a jot of difference how many people work from home. It's partly the airport, of course. We signed a petition against the sixth terminal, but no one ever takes any notice of petitions." The more she talked the easier it became. Now that she was sitting down, sipping tea, she felt much more at home, almost in control of herself, if not the situation.

"May I take these off?" the boy asked, as if he'd read her thought and knew exactly how to throw a spanner in the works. He meant the glasses, of course.

She barely hesitated. "Of course," she said. After all, she saw Jennifer's eyes every day. Jennifer never wore dark glasses. The boy removed the shades, folded them up and tucked them away in the breast pocket of his jacket. It was a good jacket--must have cost at least four hundred, with a quality label.

Carl Ulick's eyes were blue. It was a discreet blue, though, not the kind of day-glo blue that the kind of people who used contact lenses as fashion accessories went in for. It was easy enough to see, if you looked hard, that the eyes were false, but they weren't obtrusively false. All the miraculously-compacted electronic bits were tucked away inside. Martha didn't have a clue what any of that stuff actually looked like, or how any of it worked; she still had to think in terms of miniature computers and miniature radio stations, as if Jennifer's eyes were lumber rooms packed tight with tiny screens and keyboards, with tiny cinema projectors to project the virtual displays on to the retina.

"How long have you known Jennifer?" Martha asked, trying to make it seem like the perfectly natural question that it was.

"Three years," he told her. "She posted a notice asking for advice--about training the cortex, that is. She needed moral support. I couldn't tell her anything the doctors hadn't, but it makes a difference if it's coming from the inside. The doctors know the theory, but they don't know how

it

feels. Only people who actually use their eyes really know what's involved in learning to see."

Martha felt a stab of guilt when he said that. Of course Jennifer couldn't

get adequate moral support from her parents. Of course she had to go to the Net in search of fellow citizens of the New Self. Of course she never

told her parents who she was talking to, or what about, or to what effect.

Why waste time blink-blink-blinking at your parents when you could be talking to somebody real? Why bother to tell them you've invited some smart kid to your birthday party to see that the stupid icing on your futile cake is all over the bloody place?

"I suppose the time will come when we'll rip out the eyes of new-born babies as a matter of routine," Martha said, deliberately treading on dangerous ground. "Why leave them with a handicap when it's so easy to train their visual cortex to use supersight? In a hundred years time, people like me will be freaks. And it won't just be eyes, will it? By then, it will be whole bodies. Maybe they'll just take out the babies' brains and put them into different flesh, better in every imaginable

way

than the stuff mere genes provide. On the other hand, maybe there'll be superintelligent brains made out of silicon chips, so that we won't

need

the babies at all."

The trouble with dangerous ground, she thought, as she lowered her eyes to

avoid his accusative stare, is that it's always downhill every step of the

way.

"I don't think that's the right way to think about it," Carl Ulick opined,

his fluty voice as mild as milk. "In my case, it really was a case of replacement. My eyes and ears didn't work, so the doctors took them out and gave me ones that did--ones that had extra abilities. When they're dealing with people whose eyes do work, they don't think in terms of replacement. They think in terms of augmentation."

Martha didn't want an argument, especially today. It was Friday the thirteenth, after all. Jennifer was sixteen. Sweet sixteen and never

been

kissed, except perhaps in virtual reality. In virtual reality, she

might

have done anything--except, of course, that her visual cortex was still having trouble with adaptation. She could look out into cyberspace,

live

within the Net far more comfortably and far more fully than she'd ever

be

able to live in the world of her parents, but she was still half-blind there because her brain was too set in its ways. Even in the empire of

the

blind, she was still a cripple of sorts--and this was the guide dog who had come to her aid: the sighted man who was a king in the country of

the

exiles, the country beyond the borders of reality. Maybe Jennifer

hadn't

had sex even on the Net. Maybe she was still a stranger, and afraid, in the land she never made.

I ought to know! Martha thought. She ought to tell me. I'm her mother,



after all. I don't even know if she hates me for not having better genes, or the benefit of genetic counselling, or for having eyes that see after their own stupid fashion.

"I'm sure they do," she said, in answer to Carl Ulick's little homily. "And I'm sure you're right about the proper way to think about it. I'm really very glad that Jennifer has been able to use her eyes, and that there are people out there who can help her. It's just....so difficult to understand. She doesn't talk to us much, you see. Now that she's found a world where she can function so much better, she doesn't like to come back to ours. But she's still in ours, day in and day out." The truth is in the flesh, she added, silently.

"It must be very difficult for you," the boy conceded, graciously. "It was difficult for my parents, at first. I anchored them down for a long time, and when I wasn't a burden any more....well, as you say, it's as if I stepped into a world of my own, where they couldn't follow. I couldn't explain it to them--how it felt to be permanently tuned in to the Net, with access to every printed page and every visual image stored there. I did try, but it wasn't so hard for me. Once the implants in my ears were working it was easy to learn to talk and I was so glad of it I babbled all the time about anything and everything. It's not so easy for Jennifer. For her, it's far easier to talk to me, or anyone else wired into the Net, than it is to talk to you. You mustn't think that it's because she doesn't want to. I'm sure she loves you very much, and I'm sure she's very grateful for everything you do for her."

"I know that," Martha assured him, dishonestly. "How much, exactly, do you know about Jennifer's condition?"

"I don't know much about medical science or molecular genetics," Carl Ulick told her, although she couldn't tell whether he was missing the point on purpose. "The technical terminology's beyond me. All I know, really, is that her motor nerves don't work and that the condition is still deteriorating. I gather that she's almost entirely paralysed. She told me that she needed the new eyes even if she never learned to see properly, because her eyelids were the only part of herself she still had enough control over to use--instead of fingers, that is. Sorry, I didn't put that very well--what I mean is...."

"It's all right," Martha told him, brusquely. "I know exactly what you mean." After a moment's hesitation, while she wondered why she didn't feel relieved that she didn't have to protect any lies that Jennifer had told, she continued: "She used to be able to use her fingers, you know--just a bit, for a while. Then, after they gave up on the speech therapy, they fitted a keypad gizmo to her mouth so that she could pick out the

letters

with her tongue--but the disease is degenerative, you see. It just gets worse and worse."

but

"I know," the boy said. "She told me. I can't follow all the jargon, she can."

which

Martha felt tears welling up then. For some reason, she thought that Jennifer understood what was happening to her--that the fancy eyes

had

had allowed her to look directly into the information-world of the Net

ever

allowed her to read and inwardly digest every single research paper

the

written about her condition--always seemed to add that extra turn of

screw to the tragedy itself.

her

Taking a defensive sip of tea, Martha tried to blink the tears away. She was determined not to make a show of herself by reaching up to dab at

eyes while the boy was watching her. "Why did you come here," she whispered. Her confusion had made it impossible for her to hold the question back any longer.

boy

Carl Ulick paused, but it wasn't one of Geoff's theatrical pauses. The boy really was thinking. Eventually, he said: "I'm sorry if I've upset you, but it was Jennifer I came to see. I just wanted to give her a birthday present--and she wanted me to come. If you'd just let me see her for a

few

minutes...it really will be all right."

He's right, of course, Martha thought, still fighting back the tears.

I'm

the one who's being stupid. I'm the one who's being blind. I'm the one

who

doesn't understand. Of course she's told him everything. Of course she wanted him to come. Of course she wouldn't think it worth her while to

try

explaining it to us, blinking and blinking and blinking and knowing all the while that she wasn't getting through....

Outside, in the road, she heard a car door bang. All banging car doors sounded alike, but she knew that this particular bang was Geoff's. He'd been within sight of the men in yellow jackets, after all, and on the other side of the accident the road must have been beautifully clear.

He'd

probably had the accelerator flat to the boards ever since, and now he

was

here to complicate matters--after they'd only just been simplified.

She heard the sound of a key in the front door, and then she heard the door open and close. It didn't bang; no matter what kind of noise he

made

in the street Geoff always came into the house on tiptoe, out of

respect

for his daughter's condition.

"That's my husband," she said, wishing that she didn't sound--or

look--so

utterly foolish.

"It's very kind of you to come all this way," Geoff said to Carl Ulick, "but I really don't think that Jennifer should have asked you without telling us."

"I'm sorry about that," the boy replied, doggedly, "but she is

expecting

me, and I can't see that there's a problem. I just want to give her a present."

Martha waited by the door. She knew that she ought to go into the kitchen

and finish icing the birthday cake, but she also knew that she might be needed here. She now regretted the instinct that had sent her scurrying for the phone, anxious to turn the problem over to Geoff so that he

could

sort it out. It was an instinct that was utterly reliable where

dripping

taps and defective light-switches were concerned, but now that she

thought

back on all the Jennifer problems she had automatically turned over to Geoff she wasn't so sure that he had ever been the best person to

handle

them.

"The thing is," Geoff said, depositing his briefcase in the gap between the TV and the rubber-plant, exactly as he always did, "that I'm not

sure

you understand the situation here. Jennifer's a very sick girl. She doesn't have visitors, apart from the doctors. I suppose she can communicate with you--and other people like you--fairly readily, in

spite

of the problems she's had adapting to her new eyes, but she isn't

nearly

so good at coping with face-to-face communication. I don't think you understand the kind of pressure you'd be putting her under by coming

here

in person to see her in the flesh. I can understand why she might have thought that it was a nice idea, but I'm certain she hasn't thought it through. It's very kind of you, as I said, and we'll be only too glad

to

pass your present on to Jennifer, but we have to be very careful. I

really

don't think...."

Martha could see that Carl Ulick was becoming slightly annoyed. She was becoming rather annoyed herself--and that was unusual, because Geoff's speeches usually washed over her like steady rain, gradually wearing

her

down without ever raising the slightest hint of anger or resistance.

She

was afraid that the boy might say something that would make things

worse,

so she stepped in before he could.

"Would it really do any harm, Geoff?" she said. "Maybe if he just

looked

in...."

Geoff turned on her in frank astonishment, raising his eyebrows as if

to

say: Is this what I rushed home for? Did I come hell for leather in

answer

to your hysterical call, only to find that you've gone over to the

enemy?

"I think it might do some harm," Geoff said, as if anyone but a

complete

idiot would have been able to understand his concern and support his stance. "I don't think this young man understands...."

"Actually, Mr Mortimore," said Carl Ulick, doing exactly what Martha

had

been afraid he'd do, "I think it might be you who doesn't understand." Geoff's pause was the mother of all pauses. For the first time in her life, Martha understood what people meant when they said that there were times when you could hear a pin drop. She felt that she could have watched the pin in question fall, in slow motion close-up, even though she only had the eyes that nature had given her. Like all Geoff's pauses, though, this one only led to an anti-climax. There was nowhere else it could lead, in a household as civilized as this one. "Indeed," he said, in a tone so falsely polite that you could have cut it with a paring-knife. "In that case, perhaps you'd like to explain it to me."

Martha realised that Geoff thought that he could deal with Carl Ulick as he might have dealt with any common-or-garden fourteen-year-old boy. He thought that his acid request for an explanation would only bring forth bluster and confusion. He thought that he had the upper hand within the ordered sanctum of his own home. Martha already knew that he was wrong on every count, and couldn't tear herself away even though she knew full well that her presence would make his humiliation worse. "You said that Jennifer's a very sick girl," the boy said, by way of preamble. "She is," Geoff confirmed, feeling that he was on safe ground. "Very sick indeed."

"In fact," Carl Ulick said, "you think she's dying." Martha winced. Even Geoff winced. Neither of them wanted to make the obvious reply. "Well, she isn't," the boy told them, with all apparent sincerity. "She used to be. She told me once that she used to think that there was nothing to life except dying, and that she was just saving time. Now, she knows that she's living."

Martha could see that the boy was taking care not to go for the jugular. He was taking care not to say aloud what Jennifer must actually have said--that she was the only one in the house who had turned the corner, had given up dying and taken to living. But Jennifer had never said that to Martha. She had never said anything to Martha about any of this. She had turned for help to someone who had ears to hear and eyes to see--someone lucky enough to be born deaf and blind; someone lucky enough to take full advantage of the wonders of modern technology. "I'm glad..." Geoff began--but Carl Ulick hadn't finished. His pauses were honest pauses. "Jennifer knows that she's in a race," the boy said, "but she honestly thinks she has a fair chance of winning it. She's keeping a close eye on every team involved in relevant research. She thinks that they'll find a way to control the regeneration of neural tissue accurately enough to begin stitching her back together again--her phrase, not mine--before the degeneration kills her. She thinks they'll be able to hold her together

long enough and well enough for what she calls serious cyborgization. I think she's right. She can't see half the things I can see, because her visual cortex can't produce the illusion of deep immersion in virtual reality, but she can read and she can hear. I wish there were better words

to describe it, but there aren't. I suppose the only way you can imagine

what she's experiencing is to think of her new eyes as little videophones

planted in her skull--glorified versions of the mobile in your car--but the sight they offer is so much richer than that...she's not dying, Mr Mortimore. She was, but she isn't any more. I wish she could have explained that to you herself, but I can understand how difficult it is for her."

This time, Geoff didn't bother to pause. "Is that why she told you to come?" he wanted to know. "To lecture us?"

Of course it is, you bloody idiot, Martha thought. And how else could she do it, when it's so hard for her to speak to us, and so much harder for us to listen?

"Of course not," Carl Ulick said, as generously as he could. "I wanted to come, and she said I could. I wanted to give her a birthday present."

He was still clutching the square package sealed in wine-coloured wrapping.

I bet it's a good present, Martha thought. I bet he knows what you ought to give to a girl who has everything--everything, at least, that we could think of.

"She should have told us," Geoff insisted, doggedly. "This isn't right."

But he knew he'd lost the battle, and the war. He didn't have any answer

to the boy's charges.

"It's just a present, Geoff," Martha said, as soothingly as she could--and she'd had a lot of practice. "It can't do any harm to let him give it

to Jenny himself. She'd never forgive us if we didn't." And she'd be right,

she added, silently. What can I have been thinking of, to be so scared? Geoff wilted. He could have shot Martha a venomous glance, but he didn't.

He just wilted. Those blue, unshaded eyes had knocked the stuffing out of

him--as if, like Superman's eyes, they had looked right into his heart and

shrivelled it with heat. "All right," he whispered. "If that's what you want."

He was talking to Martha, trying to shift the blame---but it was the boy

who said: "It is."

"If you can hang on for two minutes," Martha said, "I'll finish icing the

cake. We can all go up together." She wasn't ashamed of the cake any more.

She knew that Carl Ulick wasn't going to look down on her because she couldn't ice a decent curve. She knew, too, that he wasn't going to

flinch

when he saw Jennifer in the flesh.

of

While they went up the stairs Martha wondered what was in the box. In times past she and Geoff had had all kinds of options when Jennifer's birthday came round. They had bought her pictures to decorate the walls

the

her room, music to play on her stereo, textpaks to slot into her king-sized bookplate. Ever since she'd had her new eyes fitted, though, she'd been tuned into the Net.

Now, Jennifer could summon any piece of music she wanted, and she could replace the walls of her room with any of a million virtual rooms--and even if she couldn't see them very well, that was far, far better than

holding

prison-cell in which she'd lived for more than twelve years. Now, the king-sized bookplate always faced away from the bed, displaying nothing but the things Jennifer said, when she took the trouble to use her blinking eyes to say anything at all.

Geoff had to open the door of Jennifer's room because Martha was

earlier

the cake in both hands. She'd put a single lighted candle on it in the hope of making amends for the lousy icing. She intended to invite Carl Ulick to blow it out.

Jennifer wasn't asleep. She couldn't actually look around when the door opened, but her eyes shifted in their sockets. Like Carl Ulick's, Jennifer's eyes were blue, but they were a brighter blue than his. Her hair was bright too, and the time Martha had put into grooming it

that

that afternoon hadn't gone to waste. Jennifer wasn't pretty, and the wasting of her nerves had taken all the life out of her flat cheeks and slack mouth, but she did have nice hair.

Geoff should have introduced the visitor but he didn't. He just stood aside, unwilling or unable to rouse himself from his sulk. It wasn't

being

he was ashamed of the way his daughter was--he just couldn't avoid

What

infected, in spirit if not in body, by the fact of her slow decline.

the boy had told him hadn't made any difference; when he looked at Jennifer now he still saw a hopeless case. He didn't dare to hope. Do I? Martha asked herself.

The lack of an introduction didn't matter.

"Hello Jennifer," Carl Ulick said, shuffling nervously towards the bedside. "I'm Carl. I'm sorry I'm a little late."

out-turned

HELLO CARL. GOOD TO SEE YOU AT LAST. The words appeared on the

bookplate with marvellous alacrity, red letters against a black background. Martha realised that Jennifer must have had them set up in advance, ready to flash at the least twitch of her eyelid.

"Your mother's brought your cake," Carl told her, dutifully, "and I've brought you a present."

it

But the cake's useless, Martha thought. Now that you can only take liquids, cake's just as useless as all the other things we used to give you. We can think of you while we eat it, but all you can do is look at

being

and weigh its worth as a measure of our love. She knew that she was

of

stupidly maudlin, but she couldn't help it. She blinked away the threat

a tear and concentrated hard on Carl Ulick's slender fingers as they

tore the sellotape away, peeled back the burgundy wrapping-paper and lifted the lid of the white plastic box within. Jennifer was watching too. For the moment, her eyes were turned away from the great wide world of the Net, bringing the ordinary world into focus--the world where her poor half-blind parents were condemned to spend their relentlessly ordinary lives. The thing that lay in the five-inch box was less than four inches across. It was round and lenticular, like an oversized magnifying glass. Martha could see that it wasn't glass, though--it had a texture like jelly, or one of those silicone implants they used to implant in women's breasts in the days before cosmetic somatic engineering. It seemed to be some kind of fluid-filled sac but the fluid wasn't clear; it had clouds in it: ominously dark clouds, as grey as thunderheads. The boy set the box down on the bed and used two hands to lift the jelly up. His attitude was reverent and his hands didn't shake at all. Martha glanced down at her own burden, and the awkward way she bore it, but she soon returned her attention to the bed, the boy and the blinking bookplate.

WHAT IS IT?

This time, Jennifer had to blink each letter individually but the message appeared by swift and sure degrees. "It's a closed ecosystem," Carl said, glancing sideways at Martha to include her in the explanation. "You can get them in glass globes, with photosynthetic algae to import the energy required to keep them going, but this is different. These are all artificial micro-organisms, cooked up in a lab. The primary producers are thermosynthetic. Instead of soaking up photons they absorb heat from the environment. The soft shell's a wonderfully efficient conductor. If I put it on your chest, just below the neck, it will absorb heat from your skin. Your body-heat will become the motor of a little universe. There's nothing in there bigger than a single cell, but the organisms at the top of the food-chain are bioluminescent. When it's stabilised you can see them glinting in the dark, like tiny flashes of lightning."

As he spoke the boy placed the lump of jelly exactly where he'd said he would. He didn't have to move anything out of the way; the intelligent mattress and coverlet that kept Jennifer's unmoving body free of bedsores required her to be naked, and the coverlet only came up far enough to hide her nipples, for modesty's sake. Jennifer didn't have to look down to see it. There was a mirror set above her bed, so that she could look at herself. She had insisted, and Geoff hadn't been able to talk her out of it. Jennifer looked into the mirror

now with her bright blue eyes, studying the circle that lay on her  
sternum  
like an enamelled pendant, grey clouds set against the background of  
her  
uncannily pale skin.  
"You don't have to keep it on all the time, of course," the boy told  
her.  
"If you put it somewhere cool the whole system goes into suspended  
animation--a kind of hibernation." He turned to Martha, adding: "You  
don't  
need to put it in the fridge. A drawer will do."  
LEAVE IT, Jennifer said, as if she feared that Martha might ship it  
away  
instantly..  
I knew it would be good, Martha thought. Even though we racked our  
brains  
and couldn't think of anything, I knew there had to be an answer. Her  
eyes  
already give her access to everything there is to be seen, and her  
flesh  
is so frail that she can't lift a finger or even use her tongue to  
proper  
effect, but she still has blood in her veins and heat in her  
heart--heat  
enough to sustain a world in miniature.  
"The truth is in the flesh," she murmured. She was talking to herself,  
but  
everyone could hear her.  
NO. The word appeared angrily red on said Jennifer's bookplate. The  
device  
added, letter by letter: NOT TRUTH. NOT ME.  
Martha knew that her acute embarrassment must be showing. The  
candle-flame  
flickered as her hands shook.  
"What Jennifer means," Carl Ulick said, softly, "is that truth is in  
the  
senses. Truth is in what you see and hear, and how you interpret it.  
Warmth is in the flesh."  
It was Geoff who asked: "Do you like the present, Jenny?"  
YES, the bookplate flashed. WEAR IT ALWAYS. WANT TO SEE THE LIGHT.  
"Me too," said Geoff.  
"You'll have to wait a while," Carl Ulick advised. "Give it a couple of  
hours, then switch off the lights. When your eyes have adjusted to the  
dark, you'll see the sparks. It's beautiful."  
"I baked you a cake," Martha said, as she came forward to join the boy.  
"I'm sorry about the icing. I just can't seem to steady my hands any  
more.  
I'll put some icing in the blender later, so that you can taste it.  
Would  
you like Carl to blow out the candle?"  
YES.  
Carl blew out the candle. He opened his mouth to say something else but  
he  
stopped when he saw the bookplate's screen flicker into life again.  
I LOVE YOU, Jennifer spelt out, one red letter at a time.  
Carl was, after all, a fourteen-year-old boy. He couldn't take that  
kind  
of declaration with equanimity. Like a perfect fool--a gloriously  
perfect  
fool--he turned to Martha and said: "She means you." He meant I told



you

so--and so he had. Not that Martha had every doubted that her daughter would love her parents, if she could. All that Martha had doubted was

that

her daughter was still capable of love, now that her frail flesh had become so pale, so nearly dead.

Jennifer had set the message to repeat.

I LOVE YOU, the screen said. I LOVE YOU. I LOVE YOU. I LOVE YOU.

Martha wasn't about to object to Carl Ulick's heroic attempt to include them in Jennifer's fulsome thanks, and neither was Geoff. Geoff wasn't quite magnanimous enough to suggest aloud that the message might have

been

meant to include all of them, but that was only because he was too busy pausing. He knew well enough what Jennifer meant.

Carl Ulick's face was as crimson as the letters. His confusion was a

joy

to behold--but he was pleased. He was certain that he'd done the right thing, delighted that he'd had the guts to follow through. Martha knew that even Geoff must be relieved, by now, that he hadn't managed to deflect the boy from his purpose.

Martha also knew, and was very glad she knew, that it didn't matter in

the

least who Jennifer's words were intended for.

The important thing--the only important thing--was that she was able to mean what she said.

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