

Spew

Are you on the trail of the next unexploited market niche - or just on a nookie hunt?

New fiction by Neal Stephenson

Yeah, I know it's boring of me to send you plain old Text like this, and I hope you don't just blow this message off without reading it.

But what can I say, I was an English major. On video, I come off like a stunned bystander. I'm just a Text kind of guy. I'm gambling that you'll think it's quaint or something. So let me just tell you the whole sorry tale, starting from the point where I think I went wrong.

I'd be blowing brown smoke if I said I wasn't nervous when they shoved in the needles, taped on the trodes, thrust my head into the Big Cold Magnet, and opened a channel direct from the Spew to my immortal soul. Of course they didn't call it the Spew, and neither did I - I wanted the job, after all. But how could I not call it that, with its Feeds multifarious as the glistening strands cascading sunnily from the supple scalps of the models in the dandruff shampoo ads.

I mention that image because it was the first thing I saw when they turned the Spew on, and I wasn't even ready. Not that anyone could ever get ready for the dreaded Polysurf Exam. The proctors came for me when they were ready, must have got my address off that job app yellowing in their infinite files, yanked me straight out of a fuzzy gray hangover dream with a really wandering story arc, the kind of dream concussion victims must have in the back of the ambulance. I'd been doing shots of vodka in the living room the night before, decided not to take a chance on the stairs, turned slowly into a mummy while I lay comatose on our living-room couch - the First Couch Ever Built, a Couch upholstered in avocado Orlon that had absorbed so much tar, nicotine, and body cheese over the centuries that now the centers of the cushions had developed the black sheen of virgin Naugahyde. When they buzzed me awake, my joints would not move nor my eyes open: I had to bolt four consecutive 32-ounce glasses of tap water to reconstitute my freeze-dried plasma.

Half an hour later I'm in Television City. A million stories below, floes of gray-yellow ice, like broken teeth, grind away at each other just below the surface of the Hudson. I've signed all the releases and they're lowering the Squid helmet over me, and without any warning BAM the Spew comes on and the first thing I see is this model chick shaking her head in ultra-slow-mo, her lovely hairs gleaming because they've got so many spotlights cross-firing on her head that she's about to burst into flame, and in voice-over she's talking about how her dandruff problem is just a nasty, embarrassing memory of adolescence now

along with pimples and (if I may just fill in the blanks) screwing skanky guys who'll never have a salaried job. And I think she's cute and everything but it occurs to me that this is really kind of sick - I mean, this chick has admitted to a history of shedding blizzards every time she moved her head, and here she is getting down under eight megawatts of color-corrected halogen light, and I just know I'm supposed to be thinking about how much head chaff would be sifting down in her personal space right now if she hadn't ditched her old hair care product lineup in favor of -

Click. Course, it never really clicks anymore, no one has used mechanical switches since like the '50s, but some Spew terminals emit a synthesized click - they wired up a 1955 Sylvania in a digital sound lab somewhere and had some old gomer in a tank-top stagger up to it and change back and forth between Channel 4 and Channel 5 a few times, paid him off and fired him, then compressed the sound and inseminated it into the terminals' fundamental ROMs so that we'd get that reassuring click when we jumped from one Feed to another. Which is what happens now; except I haven't touched a remote, don't even have a remote, that being the whole point of the Polysurf. Now it's some fucker picking a banjo, ouch it is an actual Hee Haw rerun, digitally remastered, frozen in pure binary until the collapse of the Universe.

Click. And I resist the impulse to say, "Wait a minute. Hee Haw is my favorite show."

Well, I have lots of favorite shows. But me and my housemates, we're always watching Hee Haw. But all I get is two or three twangs of the banjo and a glimpse of the eerily friendly grin of the banjo picker and then click it's a '77 Buick LeSabre smashing through a guardrail in SoCal and bursting into a fireball before it has even touched the ground, which is one of my favorite things about TV. Watch that for a while and just as I am settling into a nice Spew daze, it's a rap video, white trailer park boys in Clackamas who've actually got their moho on hydraulics so it can tilt and bounce in the air while the homeboys are partying down inside. Even the rooftop sentinels are boogieing, they have to boogie, using their AK-47s like jugglers' poles to keep their balance. Under the TV lights, the chrome-plated bayonets spark like throwaway cameras at the Orange Bowl Halftime Show.

And so it goes. Twenty clicks into the test I've left my fear behind, I'm Polysurfing like some incarnate sofa god, my attention plays like a space laser across the Spew's numberless Feeds, each Feed a torrent, all of them plexed together across the panoscopic bandwidth of the optical fiber as if the contents of every Edge City in Greater America have been rammed into the maw of a giant pasta machine and extruded as endless, countless strands of polychrome angel hair. Within an hour or so I've settled into a pattern without even knowing it. I'm surfing among 20 or so different Feeds. My subconscious mind is like a retarded homunculus sacked out on the couch of my reptilian brain, his thumb wandering crazily around the keypad of the world's largest remote control. It

looks like chaos, even to me, but to the proctors, watching all my polygraph traces superimposed on the video feed, tracking my blood pressure and pupil dilation, there is a strange attractor somewhere down there, and if it's the right one....

"Congratulations," the proctor says, and I realize the chilly mind-sucking apparatus has been retracted into the ceiling. I'm still fixated on the Spew. Bringing me back to reality: the nurse chick ripping off the handy disposable self-stick electrodes, bristling with my body hair.

So, a week later I'm still wondering how I got this job: patrolman on the information highway. We don't call it that, of course, the job title is Profile Auditor 1. But if the Spew is a highway, imagine a hard-jawed, close-shaven buck lurking in the shade of an overpass, your license plate reflected in the quicksilver pools of his shades as you whoosh past. Key difference: we never bust anyone, we just like to watch.

We sit in Television City cubicles, VR rigs strapped to our skulls, grokking people's Profiles in n-dimensional DemoTainment Space, where demographics, entertainment, consumption habits, and credit history all intersect to define a weird imaginary universe that is every bit as twisted and convoluted as those balloon animals that so eerily squelch and shudder from the hands of feckless loitering clowns in the touristy districts of our great cities. Takes killer spatial relations not to get lost. We turn our heads, and the Demosphere moves around us; we point at something of interest - the distinct galactic cluster formed by some schmo's Profile - and we fly toward it, warp speed. Hell, we fly right through the middle of it, we do barrel rolls through said schmo's annual mortgage interest statements and gambol in his urinalysis records. Course, the VR illusion doesn't track just right, so most of us get sick for the first few weeks until we learn to move our heads slowly, like tank turrets. You can always tell a rookie by the scope patch glued beneath his ear, strong mouthwash odor, gray lips.

Through the Demosphere we fly, we men of the Database Maintenance Division, and although the Demosphere belongs to General Communications Inc., it is the schmos of the world who make it - every time a schmo surfs to a different channel, the Demosphere notes that he is bored with program A and more interested, at the moment, in program B. When a schmo's paycheck is delivered over the I-way, the number on the bottom line is plotted in his Profile, and if that schmo got it by telecommuting we know about that too - the length of his coffee breaks and the size of his bladder are an open book to us. When a schmo buys something on the I-way it goes into his Profile, and if it happens to be something that he recently saw advertised there, we call that interesting, and when he uses the I-way to phone his friends and family, we Profile Auditors can navigate his social web out to a gazillion fractal iterations, the friends of his friends of his friends of his friends, what they buy and what they watch and if there's a correlation.

So now it's a year later. I have logged many a megaparsec across the Demosphere, I can pick out an anomalous Profile at a glance and notify my superiors. I am dimly aware of two things: (1) that my yearly Polysurf test looms, and (2) I've a decent chance of being promoted to Profile Auditor 2 and getting a cubicle some 25 percent larger and with my choice from among three different color schemes and four pre-approved decor configurations. If I show some stick-to-it-iveness, put out some Second Effort, spread my legs on cue, I may one day be issued a chair with arms.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Have to get through that Polysurf test first. And I am oddly nervous. I am nervous because of Hee Haw.

Why did my subconscious brain surf away from Hee Haw? That wasn't like me at all. And yet perhaps it was this that had gotten me the job.

Disturbing thought: the hangover. I was in a foul mood, short-tempered, reactionary, literal-minded - in short, the temporary brain insult had turned me into an ideal candidate for this job.

But this time they will come and tap me for the test at a random time, while I am at work. I cannot possibly arrange to be hung over, unless I stay hung over for two weeks straight - tricky to arrange. I am a fraud. Soon they will know; ignominy, poverty will follow.

I am going to lose my job - my salaried job with medical and dental and even a pension plan. Didn't even know what a pension was until the employee benefits counselor clued me in, and it nearly blew the top of my skull off. For a couple of weeks I was like that lucky conquistador from the poem - stout what's-his-name silent upon a peak in Darien - as I dealt this wild surmise: 20 years of rough country ahead of me leading down to an ocean of Slack that stretched all the way to the sunlit rim of the world, or to the end of my natural life expectancy, whichever came first.

So now I am scared shitless about the next Polysurf test. And then, hope.

My division commander zooms toward me in the Demosphere, an alienated human head wearing a bowler hat as badge of rank. "Follow me, Stark," he says, launching the command like a bronchial loogie, and before I can even "yes sir" I'm trying to keep up with him, dodging through DemoTainment Space.

And 10 minutes later we are cruising in a standard orbit around your Profile.

And from the middle distance it looks pretty normal. I can see at a glance you are a 24-year-old single white female New Derisive with post-Disillusionist leanings, income careening in a death spiral around the poverty line, you spend more on mascara than is really appropriate compared to your other cosmetics outlays, which are Low Modest - I'd wager you're hooked on some exotic brand - no appendix, O positive, HIV-negative, don't call your mother often enough, spend an hour a day talking to your girlfriends, you prefer voice phone to video, like Irish music as well as the usual intelligent yet primal, sludgy yet danceable rock that someone like you would of course listen to. Your use of the Spew follows a bulimic course - you'll watch for two days at a time and then not

switch on for a week.

But I know it can't be that simple, the commander wouldn't have brought me here because he was worried about your mascara imbalance, there's got to be something else.

I decide to take a flyer. "Geez, boss, something's not right here," I say, "this profile looks normal - too normal."

He buys it. He buys it like a set of snow tires. His disembodied head spins around and he looks at me intently, an oval of two-dimensional video in DemoTainment Space. "You saw that!?" he says.

Now I'm in deep. "Just a hunch, boss."

"Get to the bottom of it, and you'll be picking out color schemes by the end of the week," he says, then streaks off like a bottle rocket.

So that's it then; if I nab myself a promotion before the next Polysurf, they'll be a lot more forgiving if, say, the little couch potato in my brain stem chooses to watch Hee Haw for half an hour, or whatever.

Thenceforward I am in full Stalker Mode, I stake out your Profile, camp out in the middle of your income-tax returns, dance like an arachnid through your Social Telephony Web, dog you through the Virtual Mall trying to predict what clothes you're going to buy. It takes me about 10 minutes to figure out you've been buying mascara for one of your girlfriends who got fired from her job last year, so that solves that little riddle. Then I get nervous because whatever weirdness it was about you that drew the Commander's attention doesn't seem to be there anymore. Almost like you know someone's watching.

OK, let's just get this out of the way: it's creepy. Being a creep is a role someone has to take for society to remain free and hence prosperous (or is it the other way around?).

I am pursuing a larger goal that isn't creepy at all. I am thinking of Adderson. Every one of us, sitting in our cubicles, is always thinking of Adderson, who started out as a Profile Auditor 1 just like us and is now Vice President for Dynamic Programming at Dynastic Communications Inc. and making eight to nine digits a year depending on whether he gets around to exercising his stock options. One day young Adderson was checking out a Profile that didn't fit in with established norms, and by tracing the subject's social telephony web, noticed a trend: Post-Graduate Existentialists who started going to church. You heard me: Adderson single-handedly discovered the New Complacency. It was an unexploited market niche of cavernous proportions: upwards of one-hundredth of one percent of the population. Within six hours, Adderson had descended upon the subject's moho with a Rapid Deployment Team of entertainment lawyers and development assistants and launched the fastest-growing new channel ever to wend its way into the thick braid of the Spew.

I'm figuring that there's something about you, girl, that's going to make me into the next Adderson and you into the next Spew Icon - the voice of a generation, the figurehead of a Spew channel, a straight polished shaft leading

direct to the heart of a hitherto unknown and unexploited market. I know how awful this sounds, by the way.

So I stay late in my cubicle and dig a little deeper, rewinding your Profile back into the mists of time. Your credit record is fashionably cratered - but that's cool, even the God of the New Testament is not as forgiving as the consumer credit system. You've blown many scarce dollars at your local BodyMod franchise getting yourself pierced ("topologically enhanced"), and, on one occasion, tattooed: a medium #P879, left breast. Perusal of BodyMod's graphical database (available, of course, over the Spew) turns up "(c)1991 by Ray Troll of Ketchikan, Alaska." BodyMod's own market research on this little gem indicates that it first become widely popular within the Seattle music scene.

So the plot thickens. I check out of my cubicle. I decide to go undercover. Wouldn't think a Profile Auditor 1 could pull that off, wouldja? But I'm just like you, or I was a year ago. All I have to do is dig a yard deeper into the sediments of my dirty laundry pile, which have become metamorphic under prolonged heat and pressure.

As I put the clothes on it occurs to me that I could stand a little prolonged heat and pressure myself.

But I can't be thinking about that, I'm a professional, got a job to do, and frankly I could do without this unwanted insight. That's just what I need, for the most important assignment of my career to turn into a nookie hunt. I try to drive it from my mind, try to lose myself in the high-definition Spew terminals in the subway car, up there where the roach motel placards used to be. They click from one Feed to another following some irrational pattern and I wonder who has the job of surfing the channels in the subway; maybe it's what I'll be doing for a living, a week from now.

Just before the train pulls into your stop, the terminal in my face surfs into episode #2489 of Hee Haw. It's a skit. The banjo picker is playing a bit part, sitting on a bale of hay in the back of a pickup truck - chewing on a stalk of grass, surprisingly enough. His job is to laugh along with the cheesy jokes but he's just a banjo picker, not an actor, he doesn't know the drill, he can't keep himself from looking at the camera - looking at me. I notice for the first time that his irises are different colors. I turn up the collar on my jacket as I detrain, feeling those creepy eyes on my neck.

I have already discovered much about the infrastructure of your life that is probably hidden even from you, including your position in the food chain, which is as follows: the SRVX group is the largest zaibatsu in the services industry. They own five different hotel networks, of which Hospicor is the second-largest but only the fourth most profitable. Hospicor hotels are arranged in tiers: at the bottom we have Catchawink, which is human coin lockers in airports, everything covered in a plastic sheet that comes off a huge roll, like sleeping inside a giant, loose-fitting condom. Then we have Mom's Sleep Inn, a chain of motels catering to truckers and homeless migrants; The Family Room, currently

getting its ass kicked by Holiday Inn; Kensington Place, going for that all-important biz traveler; and Imperion Preferred Resorts.

I see that you work for the Kensington Place Columbus Circle Hotel, which is too far from the park and too viewless to be an Imperion Preferred, even though it's in a very nice old building. So you are, to be specific, a desk clerk and you work the evening shift there.

I approach the entrance to the hotel at 8:05 p.m., long-jumping across vast reservoirs of gray-brown slush and blowing off the young men who want to change my money into Hong Kong dollars. The doorman is too busy tapping a fresh Camel on his wrist bone to open the door for me so I do it myself.

The lobby looks a little weird because I've only seen it on TV, through that security camera up there in the corner, with its distorting wide-angle lens, which feeds directly into the Spew, of course. I'm all turned around for a moment, doing sort of a drunken pirouette in the middle of the lobby, and finally I get my bearings and establish missile lock on You, standing behind the reception desk with Evan, your goatee-sporting colleague, both of you looking dorky (as I'm sure you'd be the first to assert) in your navy blue Kensington Place uniforms, which would border on dignified if not for the maroon piping and pseudo-brass name tags.

For long minutes I stand more or less like an idiot right there under the big chandelier, watching you giving the business to some poor sap of a guest. I am too stunned to move because something big and heavy is going upside my head. Not sure exactly what.

But it feels like the Big L. And I don't just mean Lust, though it is present.

The guest is approaching tears because the fridge in her room is broken and she has some kind of medicine that has to be kept cold or else she won't wake up tomorrow morning.

No it's worse than that, there's no fridge in her room at all.

Evan suggests that the woman leave the medicine outside on her windowsill overnight. It is a priceless moment, I feel like holding up a big card with 9.8 written on it. Some of my all-time fave Television Moments have been on surveillance TV, moments like this one, but it takes patience. You have to wait for it. Usually, at a Kensington Place you don't have to wait for long.

As I have been watching Evan and you on the Stalker Channel the past couple of days, I have been trying to figure out if the two of you have a thing going.

It's hard because the camera doesn't give me audio, I have to work it out from body language. And after careful analysis of instant replays, I suspect you of being one of those dangerous types who innocently give good body language to everyone. The type of girl who should have someone walking 10 paces in front of her with a red flashing light and a clanging bell. Just my type.

The woman storms out in tears, wailing something about lawyers. I resist the urge to applaud and stand there for a minute or so, waiting to be greeted. You and Evan ignore me. I approach the desk. I clear my throat. I come right up to

the desk and put my bag down on the counter right there and sigh very loudly. Evan is poking randomly at the computer and you are misfiling thousands of tiny little oaktag cards, the color of old bananas, in a small wooden drawer.

I inhale and open my mouth to say excuse me, but Evan cuts me off:

"Customerrrrzz . . . gotta love 'em."

You grin wickedly and give him a nice flirty conspiratorial look. No one has looked at me yet. That's OK. I recognize your technique from the surveillance camera: good clerk, bad clerk.

"Reservation for Stark," I say.

"Stark," Evan says, and rolls it around in his head for a minute or so, unwilling to proceed until he has deconstructed my name. "That's German for 'strong,' right?"

"It's German for 'naked,' " I say.

Evan drops his gaze to the computer screen, defeated and temporarily humble. You laugh and glance up at me for the first time. What do you see? You see a guy who looks pretty much like the guys you hang out with.

I shove the sleeves of my ratty sweater up to the elbows and rest one forearm across the counter. The tattoo stands out vividly against my spudlike flesh, and in my peripheral I can see your eyes glance up for a moment, taking in the black rectangle, the skull, the crossed fish. Then I pretend to get self-conscious. I step back and pull my sleeve down again - don't want you to see that the tattoo is only about a day old.

"No reservation for Stark," Evan says, right on cue. I'm cool, I'm expecting this; they lose all of the reservations.

"Dash these computers," I say. "You have any empty rooms?"

"Just a suite. And a couple of economy rooms," he says, issuing a double challenge: do I have the bucks for the former or the moxie for the latter?

"I'll take one of the economy rooms," I say.

"You sure?"

"HIV-positive."

Evan shrugs, the hotel clerk's equivalent of issuing a 20-page legal disclaimer, and prods the computer, which is good enough to spit out a keycard, freshly imprinted with a random code. It's also spewing bits upstairs to the computer lock on my door, telling it that I'm cool, I'm to be let in.

"Would you like someone to show you up?" Evan says, glancing in mock surprise around the lobby, which is of course devoid of bellhops. I respond in the only way possible: chuckle darkly - good one, Ev! - and hump my own bag.

My room's lone window looks out on a narrow well somewhere between an air shaft and a garbage chute in size and function. Patches of the shag carpet have fused into mysterious crust formations, and in the corners of the bathroom, pubic hairs have formed into gnarled drifts. There is a Robobar in the corner but the door can only be opened halfway because it runs into the radiator, a 12-ton cast-iron model that, randomly, once or twice an hour, makes a noise like a rock

hitting the windshield. The Robobar is mostly empty but I wriggle one arm into it and yank out a canned Mai Tai, knowing that the selection will show up instantaneously on the computer screens below, where you and Evan will derive fleeting amusement from my offbeat tastes.

Yes, now we are surveiling each other. I open my suitcase and take my own Spew terminal out of its case, unplug the room's set and jack my own into the socket. Then I start opening windows: first, in the upper left, you and Evan in wide-angle black-and-white. Then an episode of Starsky and Hutch that I happened to notice. Starsky's hair is very big in this one. And then I open a data window too and patch it into the feed coming out of your terminal down there at the desk.

Profile Auditors can do this because data security on the Spew is a joke. It was deliberately made a joke by the Government so that they, and we, and anyone else with a Radio Shack charge card and a trade school diploma, can snoop on anyone. I sit back on the bed and sip my execrable Mai Tai from its heavy, rusty can and watch Starsky and Hutch. Every so often there's some activity at the desk and I watch you and Evan for a minute. When Evan uses his terminal, lines of ASCII text scroll up my data window. I cannot help noticing that when Evan isn't actively slacking he can type at a burst speed in excess of 200 words per minute.

From Starsky and Hutch I surf to an L.A. Law rerun and then to Larry King Live. There's local news, then Dave comes on, and about the time he's doing his Top Ten list, I see activity at the desk.

It is a young gentleman with hair way down past the epaulets of his tremendously oversized black wool overcoat. Naked hairy legs protrude below the coat and are socketed into large, ratty old basketball shoes. He is carrying, not a garment bag, but a guitar.

For the first time all night, you and Evan show actual hospitality. Evan does some punching on his computer, and monitoring the codes I can see that the guitarist is being checked into a room.

Into my room. Not the one I'm in, but the one I'm supposed to be in. Number 707. I pull out the fax that Marie at Kensington Place Worldwide Reservation Command sent to me yesterday, just to double-check.

Sure enough, the guitarist is being checked into my room. Not only that - Evan's checking him in under my name.

I go out into the streets of the city. You and Evan pretend to ignore me, but I can see you following me with your eyes as I circumvent the doorman, who is planted like a dead ficus benjamina before the exit, and throw my shoulder against the sullen bulk of the revolving door. It has commenced snowing for the 11th time today. I walk cross-town to Television City and have a drink in a bar there, a real Profile Auditor hangout, the kind of joint where I'm proud to be seen. When I get back to the hotel, the shift has changed, you and Evan have apparently stalked off into the rapidly developing blizzard, and the only person

there is the night clerk.

I stand there for 10 minutes or so while she winds down a rather involved, multithreaded conversation with a friend in Ireland. "Stark," I say, as she's hanging up, "Room 707. Left my keycard in the room."

She doesn't even ask to see ID, just makes up another keycard for me. Bad service has its charms. But I cruise past the seventh floor and go on up to my own cell because I want to do this right.

I jack into the Spew. I check out what's going on in Room 707.

First thing I look at is the Robobar transcript. Whoever's in there has already gone through four beers and two non-sparkling mineral waters. And one bad Mai Tai.

Guess I'm a trendsetter here. A hunch thuds into my cortex. I pop a beer from my own Robobar and rewind the lobby security tape to midnight.

You and Evan hand over the helm to the Irish girl. Then, like Picard and Riker on their way to Ten Forward after a long day of sensitive negotiations, you head straight for Elevator Three, the only one that seems to be hooked up. So I check out the elevator activity transcript too - not to be monotonous or anything, but it's all on the Spew - and sho nuff, it seems that you and Evan went straight to the seventh floor. You're in there, I realize, with your guitar-player bud who wears shorts in the middle of the winter, and you're drinking bad beer and Mai Tais from my Robobar.

I monitor the Spew traffic to Room 707. You did some random surfing like anyone else, sort of as foreplay, but since then you've just been hoovering up gigabyte after gigabyte of encrypted data.

It's gotta be media; only media takes that many bytes. It's coming from an unknown source, definitely not the big centralized Spew nodes - but it's been forwarded six ways from Sunday, it's been bounced off Indian military satellites, divided into tiny chunks, disguised as credit card authorizations, rerouted through manual telephone exchanges in Nigeria, reassembled in pirated insurance-company databases in the Netherlands. Upshot: I'll never trace it back to its source, or sources.

What is 10 times as weird: you're putting data out. You're talking back to the Spew. You have turned your room - my room - into a broadcast station. For all I know, you've got a live studio audience packed in there with you.

All of your outgoing stuff is encrypted too.

Now. My rig has some badass code-breaking stuff built into it, Profile Auditor warez, but all of it just bounces off. You guys are cypherpunks, or at least you know some. You're using codes so tough they're illegal. Conclusion: you're talking to other people - other people like you - probably squatting in other Kensington Place hotel rooms all over the world at this moment.

Everything's falling into place. No wonder Kensington Place has such legendarily shitty service. No wonder it's so unprofitable. The whole chain has been infiltrated.

And what's really brilliant is that all the weird shit you're pulling off the Spew, all the hooch you're pulling out of my Robobar, is going to end up tacked onto my Profile, while you end up looking infuriatingly normal.

I kind of like it. So I invest another half-hour of my life waiting for an elevator, take it down to the lobby, go out to a 24-hour mart around the corner and buy two six-packs - one of the fashionable downmarket swill that you are drinking and one of your brand of mineral water. I can tell you're cool because your water costs more than your beer.

Ten minutes later I'm standing in front of 707, sweating like a high school kid in a cheesy tuxedo on prom night. After a few minutes the sheer patheticity of this little scene starts to embarrass me and so I tuck a six under my arm and swipe my card through the slot. The little green light winks at me knowingly. I shoulder through the door saying, "Honey, I'm home!"

No response. I have to negotiate a narrow corridor past the bath and closets before I can see into the room proper. I step out with what I hope is a non-creepy smile. Something wet and warm sprays into my face. It trickles into my mouth. It's on the savory side.

The room's got like 10 feet of open floor space that you have increased to 15 by stacking the furniture in the bathroom. In the midst of this is the guitar dude, stripped to his colorful knee-length shorts. He is playing his ax, but it's not plugged into anything. I can hear some melodious plinks, but the squelch of his fingers on the strings, the thud of calluses on the fingerboard almost drown out the notes.

He sweats hard, even though the windows are open and cold air is blowing into the room, the blinds running with condensation and whacking crazily against the leaky aluminum window frame. As he works through his solo, sighing and grunting with effort, his fingers drumming their way higher and higher up the fingerboard, he swings his head back and forth and his hair whips around, broadcasting sweat. He's wearing dark shades.

Evan is perched like an arboreal primate on top of the room's Spew terminal, which is fixed to the wall at about head level. His legs are spread wide apart to expose the screen, against which crash waves of black-and-white static. The motherly warmth of the cathode-ray tube is, I guess, permeating his buttocks. On his lap is just about the bitchingest media processor I have ever seen, and judging from the heavy cables exploding out of the back it looks like he's got it crammed with deadly expansion cards. He's wearing dark shades too, just like the guitarist's; but now I see they aren't shades, they are VR rigs, pretty good ones actually. Evan is also wearing a pair of Datagloves. His hands and fingers are constantly moving. Sometimes he makes typing motions, sometimes he reaches out and grabs imaginary things and moves them around, sometimes he points his index finger and navigates through virtual space, sometimes he riffs in some kind of sign language.

You - you are mostly in the airspace above the bed, touching down frequently,

using it as trampoline and safety net. Every 3-year-old bouncing illicitly on her bed probably aspires to your level of intensity. You've got the VR rig too, you've got the Datagloves, you've got Velcro bands around your wrists, elbows, waist, knees, and ankles, tracking the position of every part of your body in three-dimensional space. Other than that, you have stripped down to voluminous plaid boxer shorts and a generously sized tank-top undershirt.

You are rocking out. I have never seen anyone dance like this. You have churned the bedspread and pillows into sufferin' succotash. They get in your way so you kick them vindictively off the bed and get down again, boogieing so hard I can't believe you haven't flown off the bed yet. Your undershirt is drenched. You are breathing hard and steady and in sync with the rhythm, which I cannot hear but can infer.

I can't help looking. There's the SPAWN TILL YOU DIE tattoo. And there on the other breast is something else. I walk into the room for a better look, taking in a huge whiff of perfume and sweat and beer. The second tattoo consists of small but neat navy-blue script, like that of names embroidered on bowling shirts, reading, HACK THE SPEW.

It's not too hard to trace the connections. A wire coils out of the guitar, runs across the floor, and jumps up to jack into Evan's badass media processor. You have a wireless rig hanging on your waist and the receiver is likewise patched into Evan's machine. And Evan's output port, then, is jacked straight into the room's Spew socket.

I am ashamed to notice that the Profile Auditor 1 part of my brain is thinking that this weird little mime fest has UNEXPLOITED MARKET NICHE - ORDER NOW! superimposed all over it in flashing yellow block letters.

Evan gets so into his solo that he sinks unsteadily to his knees and nearly falls over. He's leaning way back, stomach muscles knotting up, his wet hair dangling back and picking up detritus from the carpet as he swings his head back and forth.

This whole setup is depressingly familiar: it is just like high school, when I had a crush on some girl, and even though I was in the same room with her, breathing the same air, sharing the same space, she didn't know I existed; she had her own network of friends, all grooving on some frequency I couldn't pick up, existing on another plane that I couldn't even see.

There's a note on the dresser, scrawled on hotel stationery with a dried-up hotel ball-point. WELCOME CHAZ, it says, JACK IN AND JOIN US! followed by 10 lines of stuff like:

A073 49D2 CD01 7813 000F B09B 323A E040

which are obviously an encryption key, written in the hexadecimal system beloved of hackers. It is the key to whatever plane you and your buds are on at the moment.

But I am not Chaz.

I open the desk drawer to reveal the room's fax machine, a special Kensington

Place feature that Marie extolled to me most tediously. I put the note into it and punch the Copy key, shove the copy into my pocket when it's finished and leave the note where I found it. I leave the two six-packs on the dresser as a ritual sacrifice, and slink out of the room, not looking back. An elevator is coming up toward me, L M 2 3 4 5 6 and then DING and the doors open, and out steps a slacker who can only be Chaz, thousands of snowflakes caught in his hair, glinting in the light like he's just stepped out of the Land of Faerie. He's got kind of a peculiar expression on his face as he steps out of the elevator, and as we trade places, and I punch the button for the lobby, I recognize it: Chaz is happy. Happier than me.

Neal Stephenson has written several novels, some of which have actually been published: Zodiac: The Eco-Thriller and Snow Crash. The Diamond Age will be released early next year by Bantam.