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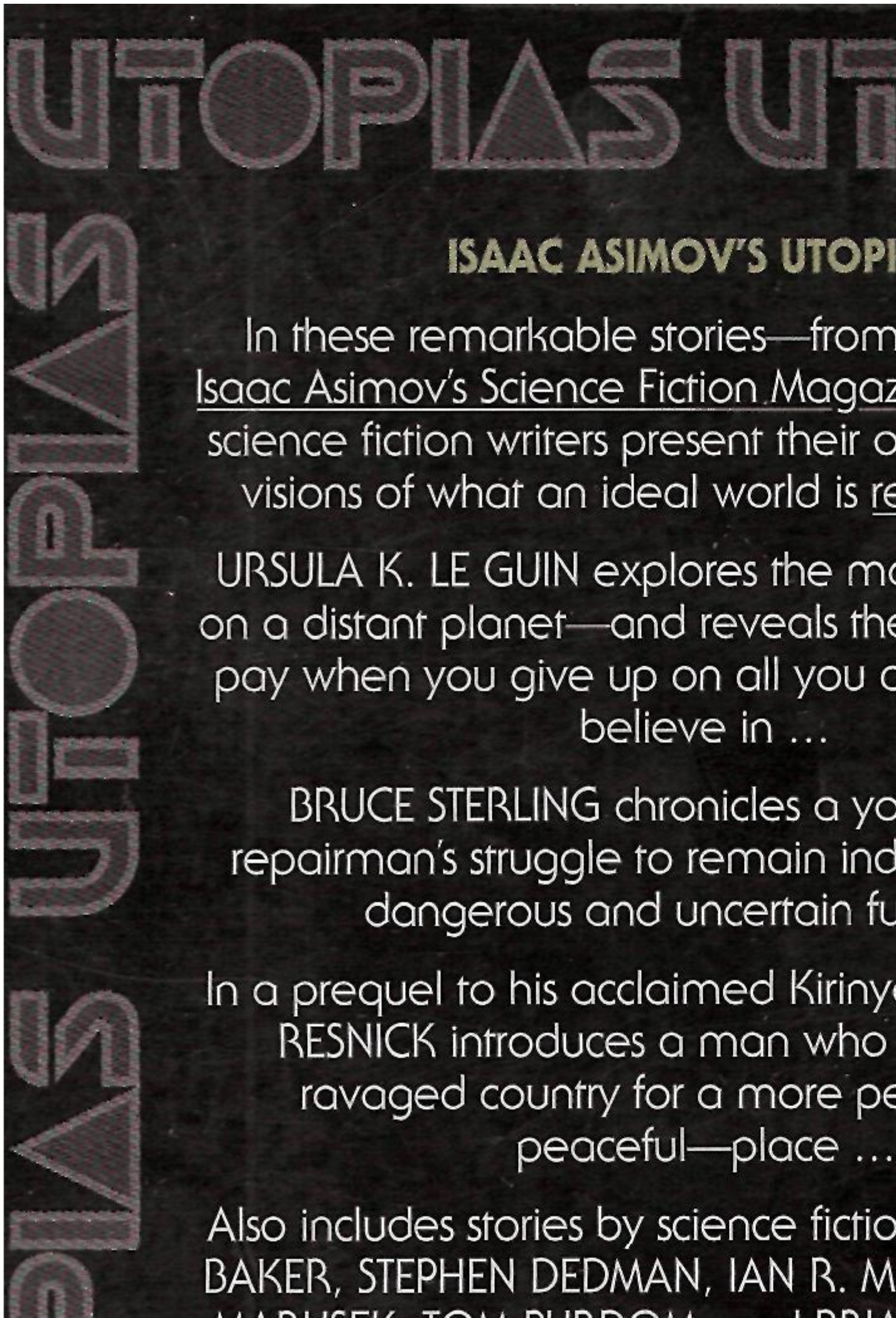
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Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magaz
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URSULA K. LE GUIN explores the ma
on a distant planet—and reveals the
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BAKER, STEPHEN DEDMAN, IAN R. M

Isaac Asimov's Utopias

Edited by

Gardner Dozois

and

Sheila Williams

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MOUNTAIN WAYS

Ursula K. Le Guin

"Mountain Ways" appeared in the August 1996 issue of Asimov's, *with a cover illustration by Fred Gambino and an interior illustration by John Stevens, one of a sequence of monumental stories by Le Guin that have appeared here over the years, including the landmark novellas* "A *Woman's Liberation " and "A Man of the People." Ursula K. Le Guin is probably one of the best-known and most universally respected SF writers in the world today. Her famous book,* The Left Hand of Darkness, *may have been the most influ-ential SF novel of its decade, and shows every sign of becoming one of the enduring classics of the genre—even ignoring the rest of Le Guin's work, the impact of this one novel alone on future SF and fu-ture SF writers would be incalculably strong. (Her 1968 fantasy novel,* A Wizard of Earthsea, *would be almost as influential on future generations of High Fantasy writers.)* The Left Hand of Darkness *won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards, as did Le Guin's monumental novel* The Dispossessed *a few years later. Her novel* Tehanu *won her another Nebula in 1990, and she has also won three other Hugo Awards and two Nebula Awards for her short fiction, as well as the National Book Award for Children's literature for her novel* The Farthest Shore, *part of her ac-claimed Earthsea trilogy. Her other novels include* Planet of Exile, The Lathe of Heaven, City of Illusions, Rocannon's World, The Beginning Place, A Wizard of Earthsea, The Tombs of Atuan, Tehanu, Searoad, *and the controversial multimedia novel* Al-ways Coming Home. *She has had six collections:* The Wind's Twelve Quarters, Orsinian Tales, The Compass Rose, Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Pres-ences, A Fisherman of the Inland Sea, Four Ways to Forgiveness, *and, most recently,* Unlocking the Air. *Upcoming is a new novel, and a collection of fantasy stories set in the Earthsea universe.*

Le Guin has probably examined the theme of Uto-pia in more depth, and from more angles, than any other SF writer of her generation —in fact, the Utopian ideal (and all the things that can go wrong with it) has been explored in most of her work, from The Dispossessed *to* The Eye of the Heron, *as well as in stories such as "Forgiveness Day" and "The Matter of Seggri," and many others. In the vivid and evoca-tive story that follows, she takes us to a Utopian society on the distant planet of O —which may have the most intricate and bizarre marriage customs in*

the universe—for a typically compelling and unflinching examination of the question: What do you do when your only chance of happiness violates everything you've ever believed in, and in order to take that chance, you have to do something that all your values and your training tell you is unforgivably wrong?

*** * * ***

Note for readers unfamiliar with the planet O:

Ki'O society is divided into two halves or moieties, called (for ancient religious reasons) the Morning and the Evening. You belong to your mother's moiety, and you can't have sex with anybody of your moiety.

Marriage on O is a foursome, the sedoretu — a man and a woman from the Morning moiety and a man and a woman from the Evening moiety. You're expected to have sex with both your spouses of the other moiety, and not to have sex with your spouse of your own moiety. So each sedoretu has two expected heterosexual relationships, two expected homosexual relationships, and two forbidden heterosexual relationships.

The expected relationships within each sedoretu are: The Morning woman and the Evening man (the "Morning marriage") The Evening woman and the Morning man (the "Evening marriage") The Morning woman and the Evening woman (the "Day marriage") The Morning man and the Evening man (the "Night marriage")

The forbidden relationships are between the Morning woman and the Morning man, and between the Evening woman and the Evening man, and they aren't called anything, except sacrilege.

It's just as complicated as it sounds, but aren't most marriages?

* * * *

In the stony uplands of the Deka Mountains the farmholds are few and far between. Farmers scrape a living out of that cold earth, planting on sheltered slopes facing south, combing the yama for fleece, carding and spinning and weaving the prime wool, selling pelts to the carpet-factories. The mountain yama, called ariu, are a small wiry breed; they run wild, without shelter, and are not fenced in, since they never cross the invisible,

immemorial boundaries of the herd territory. Each farmhold is in fact a herd territory. The animals are the true farmholders. Tolerant and aloof, they allow the farmers to comb out their thick fleeces, to assist them in difficult births, and to skin them when they die. The farmers are dependent on the ariu; the ariu are not dependent on the farmers. The question of ownership is moot. At Danro Farmhold they don't say, "We have nine hundred ariu," they say, "The herd has nine hundred."

Danro is the farthest farm of Oro Village in the High Watershed of the Mane River on Oniasu on O. The people up there in the mountains are civilised but not very civilised. Like most ki'O they pride themselves on doing things the way they've always been done, but in fact they are a wilful, stubborn lot who change the rules to suit themselves and then say the people "down there" don't know the rules, don't honor the old ways, the true ki'O ways, the mountain ways.

Some years ago, the First Sedoretu of Danro was broken by a landslide up on the Farren that killed the Morning woman and her husband. The widowed Evening couple, who had both married in from other farmholds, fell into a habit of mourning and grew old early, letting the daughter of the Morning manage the farm and all its business.

Her name was Shahes. At thirty, she was a straight-backed, strong, short woman with rough red cheeks, a mountaineer's long stride, and a mountaineer's deep lungs. She could walk down the road to the village center in deep snow with a sixty-pound pack of pelts on her back, sell the pelts, pay her taxes and visit a bit at the village hearth, and stride back up the steep zigzags to be home before nightfall, forty kilometers round trip and six hundred meters of altitude each way. If she or anyone else at Danro wanted to see a new face they had to go down the mountain to other farms or to the village center. There was nothing to bring anybody up the hard road to Danro. Shahes seldom hired help, and the family wasn't sociable. Their hospitality, like their road, had grown stony through lack of use.

But a travelling scholar from the lowlands who came up the Mane all the way to Oro was not daunted by another near-vertical stretch of ruts and rubble. Having visited the other farms, the scholar climbed on around the Farren from Ked'din and up to Danro, and there made the honorable and traditional offer: to share worship at the house shrine, to lead conversation about the Discussions, to instruct the children of the farmhold in spiritual matters, for as long as the farmers wished to lodge and keep her.

This scholar was an Evening woman, over forty, tall and long-limbed,

with cropped dark-brown hair as fine and curly as a yama's. She was quite fearless, expected nothing in the way of luxury or even comfort, and had no small talk at all. She was not one of the subtle and eloquent expounders of the great Centers. She was a farm woman who had gone to school. She read and talked about the Discussions in a plain way that suited her hearers, sang the Offerings and the praise songs to the oldest tunes, and gave brief, undemanding lessons to Danro's one child, a ten-year-old Morning half-nephew. Otherwise she was as silent as her hosts, and as hardworking. They were up at dawn; she was up before dawn to sit in meditation. She studied her few books and wrote for an hour or two after that. The rest of the day she worked alongside the farm people at whatever job they gave her.

It was fleecing season, midsummer, and the people were all out every day, all over the vast mountain territory of the herd, following the scattered groups, combing the animals when they lay down to chew the cud.

The old ariu knew and liked the combing. They lay with their legs folded under them or stood still for it, leaning into the comb-strokes a little, sometimes making a small, shivering whisper-cough of enjoyment. The yearlings, whose fleece was the finest and brought the best price raw or woven, were ticklish and frisky; they sidled, bit, and bolted. Fleecing yearlings called for a profound and resolute patience. To this the young ariu would at last respond, growing quiet and even drowsing as the long, fine teeth of the comb bit in and stroked through, over and over again, in the rhythm of the comber's soft monotonous tune, "Hunna, hunna, na, na…"

The travelling scholar, whose religious name was Enno, showed such a knack for handling newborn ariu that Shahes took her out to try her hand at fleecing yearlings. Enno proved to be as good with them as with the infants, and soon she and Shahes, the best fine-fleecer of Oro, were working daily side by side. After her meditation and reading, Enno would come out and find Shahes on the great slopes where the yearlings still ran with their dams and the new-borns. Together the two women could fill a forty-pound sack a day with the airy, silky, milk-colored clouds of combings. Often they would pick out a pair of twins, of which there had been an unusual number this mild year. If Shahes led out one twin the other would follow it, as yama twins will do all their lives; and so the women could work side by side in a silent, absorbed companionship. They talked only to the animals. "Move your fool leg," Shahes would say to the yearling she was combing, as it gazed at her with its great, dark, dreaming eyes. Enno would murmur "Hunna, hunna, hunna, na," or hum a fragment of an Offering, to soothe her beast when it

shook its disdainful, elegant head and showed its teeth at her for tickling its belly. Then for half an hour nothing but the crisp whisper of the combs, the flutter of the unceasing wind over stones, the soft bleat of a calf, the faint rhythmical sound of the nearby beasts biting the thin, dry grass. Always one old female stood watch, the alert head poised on the long neck, the large eyes watching up and down the vast, tilted planes of the mountain from the river miles below to the hanging glaciers miles above. Far peaks of stone and snow stood distinct against the dark-blue, sun-filled sky, blurred off into cloud and blowing mists, then shone out again across the gulfs of air.

Enno took up the big clot of milky fleece she had combed, and Shahes held open the long, loose-woven, double-ended sack.

Enno stuffed the fleece down into the sack. Shahes took her hands.

Leaning across the half-filled sack they held each other's hands, and Shahes said, "I want — " and Enno said, "Yes, yes!"

Neither of them had had much love, neither had had much pleasure in sex. Enno, when she was a rough farm girl named Akal, had the misfortune to attract and be attracted by a man whose pleasure was in cruelty. When she finally understood that she did not have to endure what he did to her, she ran away, not knowing how else to escape him. She took refuge at the school in Asta, and there found the work and learning much to her liking, as she did the spiritual discipline, and later the wandering life. She had been an itinerant scholar with no family, no close attachments, for twenty years. Now Shahes's passion opened to her a spirituality of the body, a revelation that transformed the world and made her feel she had never lived in it before.

As for Shahes, she'd given very little thought to love and not much more to sex, except as it entered into the question of marriage. Marriage was an urgent matter of business. She was thirty years old. Danro had no whole sedoretu, no childbearing women, and only one child. Her duty was plain. She had gone courting in a grim, reluctant fashion to a couple of neighboring farms where there were Evening men. She was too late for the man at Beha Farm, who ran off with a lowlander. The widower at Upper Ked'd was receptive, but he also was nearly sixty and smelled like piss. She tried to force herself to accept the advances of Uncle Mika's half-cousin from Okba Farm down the river, but his desire to own a share of Danro was clearly the sole substance of his desire for Shahes, and he was even lazier and more shiftless than Uncle Mika.

Ever since they were girls, Shahes had met now and then with Temly,

the Evening daughter of the nearest farmhold, Ked'din, round on the other side of the Farren. Temly and Shahes had a sexual friendship that was a true and reliable pleasure to them both. They both wished it could be permanent. Every now and then they talked, lying in Shahes's bed at Danro or Temly's bed at Ked'din, of getting married, making a sedoretu. There was no use going to the village matchmakers; they knew everybody the matchmakers knew. One by one they would name the men of Oro and the very few men they knew from outside the Oro Valley, and one by one they would dismiss them as either impossible or inaccessible. The only name that always stayed on the list was Otorra, a Morning man who worked at the carding sheds down in the village center. Shahes liked his reputation as a steady worker; Temly liked his looks and conversation. He evidently liked Temly's looks and conversation too, and would certainly have come courting her if there were any chance of a marriage at Ked'din, but it was a poor farmhold, and there was the same problem there as at Danro: there wasn't an eligible Evening man. To make a sedoretu, Shahes and Temly and Otorra would have to marry the shiftless, shameless fellow at Okba or the sour old widower at Ked'd. To Shahes the idea of sharing her farm and her bed with either of them was intolerable.

"If I could only meet a man who was a match for me!" she said with bitter energy.

"I wonder if you'd like him if you did," said Temly.

"I don't know that I would."

"Maybe next autumn at Manebo…"

Shahes sighed. Every autumn she trekked down sixty kilometers to Manebo Fair with a train of pack-yama laden with pelts and wool, and looked for a man; but those she looked at twice never looked at her once. Even though Danro offered a steady living, nobody wanted to live way up there, on the roof, as they called it. And Shahes had no prettiness or nice ways to interest a man. Hard work, hard weather, and the habit of command had made her tough; solitude had made her shy. She was like a wild animal among the jovial, easy-talking dealers and buyers. Last autumn once more she had gone to the fair and once more strode back up into her mountains, sore and dour, and said to Temly, "I wouldn't touch a one of 'em."

Enno woke in the ringing silence of the mountain night. She saw the small square of the window ablaze with stars and felt Shahes's warm body beside her shake with sobs.

“What is it? What is it, my dear love?”

“You’ll go away. You’re going to go away!”

“But not now — not soon — “

“You can’t stay here. You have a calling. A resp —” the word broken by a gasp and sob — “responsibility to your school, to your work, and I can’t keep you. I can’t give you the farm. I haven’t anything to give you, anything at all!”

Enno — or Akal, as she had asked Shahes to call her when they were alone, going back to the girl-name she had given up — Akal knew only too well what Shahes meant. It was the farmholder’s duty to provide continuity. As Shahes owed life to her ancestors she owed life to her descendants. Akal did not question this; she had grown up on a farmhold. Since then, at school, she had learned about the joys and duties of the soul, and with Shahes she had learned the joys and duties of love. Neither of them in any way invalidated the duty of a farmholder. Shahes need not bear children herself, but she must see to it that Danro had children. If Temly and Otorra made the Evening marriage, Temly would bear the children of Danro. But a sedoretu must have a Morning marriage; Shahes must find an Evening man. Shahes was not free to keep Akal at Danro, nor was Akal justified in staying there, for she was in the way, an irrelevance, ultimately an obstacle, a spoiler. As long as she stayed on as a lover, she was neglecting her religious obligations while compromising Shahes’s obligation to her farmhold. Shahes had said the truth: she had to go.

She got out of bed and went over to the window. Cold as it was she stood there naked in the starlight, gazing at the stars that flared and dazzled from the far grey slopes up to the zenith. She had to go and she could not go. Life was here, life was Shahes’s body, her breasts, her mouth, her breath. She had found life and she could not go down to death. She could not go and she had to go.

Shahes said across the dark room, “Marry me.”

Akal came back to the bed, her bare feet silent on the bare floor. She slipped under the bedfleece, shivering, feeling Shahes’s warmth against her, and turned to her to hold her; but Shahes took her hand in a strong grip and said again, “Marry me.”

“Oh if I could!”

“You can.”

After a moment Akal sighed and stretched out, her hands behind her head on the pillow. “There’s no Evening men here; you’ve said so yourself. So how can we marry? What can I do? Go fishing for a husband down in the lowlands, I suppose. With the farmhold as bait. What kind of man would that turn up? Nobody I’d let share you with me for a moment. I won’t do it.”

Shahes was following her own train of thought. “I can’t leave Temly in the lurch,” she said.

“And that’s the other obstacle,” Akal said. “It’s not fair to Temly. If we do find an Evening man, then she’ll get left out.”

“No, she won’t.”

“Two Day marriages and no Morning marriage? Two Evening women in one sedoretu? There’s a fine notion!”

“Listen,” Shahes said, still not listening. She sat up with the bed-fleece round her shoulders and spoke low and quick. “You go away. Back down there. The winter goes by. Late in the spring, people come up the Mane looking for summer work. A man comes to Oro and says, is anybody asking for a good finefleecer? At the sheds they tell him, yes, Shahes from Danro was down here looking for a hand. So he comes on up here, he knocks at the door here. My name is Akal, he says, I hear you need a fleecer. Yes, I say, yes, we do. Come in. Oh come in, come in and stay forever!”

Her hand was like iron on Akal’s wrist, and her voice shook with exultation. Akal listened as to a fairytale.

“Who’s to know, Akal? Who’d ever know you? You’re taller than most men up here — you can grow your hair, and dress like a man — you said you liked men’s clothes once. Nobody will know. Who ever comes here anyway?”

“Oh, come on, Shahes! The people here, Magel and Madu — Shest — “

“The old people won’t see anything. Mika’s a halfwit. The child won’t

know. Temly can bring old Barres from Ked'din to marry us. He never knew a tit from a toe anyhow. But he can say the marriage ceremony."

"And Temly?" Akal said, laughing but disturbed; the idea was so wild and Shahes was so serious about it.

"Don't worry about Temly. She'd do anything to get out of Ked'din. She wants to come here, she and I have wanted to marry for years. Now we can. All we need is a Morning man for her. She likes Otorra well enough. And he'd like a share of Danro."

"No doubt, but he gets a share of me with it, you know! A woman in a Night marriage?"

"He doesn't have to know."

"You're crazy, of course he'll know!"

"Only after we're married."

Akal stared through the dark at Shahes, speechless. Finally she said, "What you're proposing is that I go away now and come back after half a year dressed as a man. And marry you and Temly and a man I never met. And live here the rest of my life pretending to be a man. And nobody is going to guess who I am or see through it or object to it. Least of all my husband."

"He doesn't matter."

"Yes he does," said Akal. "It's wicked and unfair. It would desecrate the marriage sacrament. And anyway it wouldn't work. I couldn't fool everybody! Certainly not for the rest of my life!"

"What other way have we to marry?"

"Find an Evening husband — somewhere — "

"But I want you! I want you for my husband and my wife. I don't want any man, ever. I want you, only you till the end of life, and nobody between us, and nobody to part us. Akal, think, think about it, maybe it's against religion, but who does it hurt? Why is it unfair? Temly likes men, and she'll have Otorra. He'll have her, and Danro. And Danro will have their children. And I will have you, I'll have you forever and ever, my soul, my life and soul.

”

“Oh don’t, oh don’t,” Akal said with a great sob.

Shahes held her.

“I never was much good at being a woman,” Akal said. “Till I met you. You can’t make me into a man now! I’d be even worse at that, no good at all!”

“You won’t be a man, you’ll be my Akal, my love, and nothing and nobody will ever come between us.”

They rocked back and forth together, laughing and crying, with the fleece around them and the stars blazing at them. “We’ll do it, we’ll do it!” Shahes said, and Akal said, “We’re crazy, we’re crazy!”

Gossips in Oro had begun to ask if that scholar woman was going to spend the winter up in the high farrnholds, where was she now, Danro was it or Ked’din? — when she came walking down the zigzag road. She spent the night and sang the Offerings for the mayor’s family, and caught the daily freighter to the suntrain station down at Dermane. The first of the autumn blizzards followed her down from the peaks.

Shahes and Akal sent no message to each other all through the winter. In the early spring Akal telephoned the farm. “When are you corning?” Shahes asked, and the distant voice replied, “In time for the fleecing.”

For Shahes the winter passed in a long dream of Akal. Her voice sounded in the empty next room. Her tall body moved beside Shahes through the wind and snow. Shahes’s sleep was peaceful, rocked in a certainty of love known and love to come.

For Akal, or Enno as she became again in the lowlands, the winter passed in a long misery of guilt and indecision. Marriage was a sacrament, and surely what they planned was a mockery of that sacrament. Yet as surely it was a marriage of love. And as Shahes had said, it harmed no one — unless to deceive them was to harm them. It could not be right to fool the man, Otorra, into a marriage where his Night partner would turn out to be a woman. But surely no man knowing the scheme beforehand would agree to it; deception was the only means at hand. They must cheat him.

The religion of the ki'O lacks priests and pundits who tell the common folk what to do. The common folk have to make their own moral and spiritual choices, which is why they spend a good deal of time discussing the Discussions. As a scholar of the Discussions, Enno knew more questions than most people, but fewer answers.

She sat all the dark winter mornings wrestling with her soul. When she called Shahes, it was to tell her that she could not come. When she heard Shahes's voice her misery and guilt ceased to exist, were gone, as a dream is gone on waking. She said, "I'll be there in time for the fleecing."

In the spring, while she worked with a crew rebuilding and repainting a wing of her old school at Asta, she let her hair grow. When it was long enough, she clubbed it back, as men often did. In the summer, having saved a little money working for the school, she bought men's clothes. She put them on and looked at herself in the mirror in the shop. She saw Akal. Akal was a tall, thin man with a thin face, a bony nose, and a slow, brilliant smile. She liked him.

Akal got off the High Deka freighter at its last stop, Oro, went to the village center, and asked if anybody was looking for a fleecer.

"Danro." — "The farmer was down from Danro, twice already." — "Wants a finefleecer." — "Coarsefleecer, wasn't it?" — It took a while, but the elders and gossips agreed at last: a finefleecer was wanted at Danro.

"Where's Danro?" asked the tall man.

"Up," said an elder succinctly. "You ever handled ariu yearlings?"

"Yes," said the tall man. "Up west or up east?"

They told him the road to Danro, and he went off up the zigzags, whistling a familiar praise song.

As Akal went on he stopped whistling, and stopped being a man, and wondered how she could pretend not to know anybody in the household, and how she could imagine they wouldn't know her. How could she deceive Shest, the child whom she had taught the water rite and the praise-songs? A pang of fear and dismay and shame shook her when she saw Shest come running to the gate to let the stranger in.

Akal spoke little, keeping her voice down in her chest, not meeting the child's eyes. She was sure he recognised her. But his stare was simply that

of a child who saw strangers so seldom that for all he knew they all looked alike. He ran in to fetch the old people, Magel and Madu. They came out to offer Akal the customary hospitality, a religious duty, and Akal accepted, feeling mean and low at deceiving these people, who had always been kind to her in their rusty, stingy way, and at the same time feeling a wild impulse of laughter, of triumph. They did not see Enno in her, they did not know her. That meant that she was Akal, and Akal was free.

She was sitting in the kitchen drinking a thin and sour soup of summer greens when Shahes came in — grim, stocky, weather-beaten, wet. A summer thunderstorm had broken over the Farren soon after Akal reached the farm. "Who's that?" said Shahes, doffing her wet coat.

"Come up from the village." Old Magel lowered his voice to address Shahes confidentially: "He said they said you said you wanted a hand with the yearlings."

"Where've you worked?" Shahes demanded, her back turned, as she ladled herself a bowl of soup.

Akal had no life history, at least not a recent one. She groped a long time. No one took any notice, prompt answers and quick talk being unusual and suspect practices in the mountains. At last she said the name of the farm she had run away from twenty years ago. "Bredde Hold, of Abba Village, on the Oriso."

"And you've finefleeced? Handled yearlings? Ariu yearlings?"

Akal nodded, dumb. Was it possible that Shahes did not recognise her? Her voice was flat and unfriendly, and the one glance she had given Akal was dismissive. She had sat down with her soupbowl and was eating hungrily.

"You can come out with me this afternoon and I'll see how you work," Shahes said. "What's your name, then?"

"Akal."

Shahes grunted and went on eating. She glanced up across the table at Akal again, one flick of the eyes, like a stab of light.

Out on the high hills, in the mud of rain and snowmelt, in the stinging wind and the flashing sunlight, they held each other so tight neither could breathe, they laughed and wept and talked and kissed and coupled in a

rock shelter, and came back so dirty and with such a sorry little sack of combings that old Magel told Madu that he couldn't understand why Shahes was going to hire the tall fellow from down there at all, if that's all the work was in him, and Madu said what's more he eats for six.

But after a month or so, when Shahes and Akal weren't hiding the fact that they slept together, and Shahes began to talk about making a sedoretu, the old couple grudgingly approved. They had no other kind of approval to give. Maybe Akal was ignorant, didn't know a hassel-bit from a cold-chisel; but they were all like that down there. Remember that travelling scholar, Enno, stayed here last year, she was just the same, too tall for her own good and ignorant, but willing to learn, same as Akal. Akal was a prime hand with the beasts, or had the makings of it anyhow. Shahes could look farther and do worse. And it meant she and Temly could be the Day marriage of a sedoretu, as they would have been long since if there'd been any kind of men around worth taking into the farmhold, what's wrong with this generation, plenty of good men around in my day.

Shahes had spoken to the village matchmakers down in Oro. They spoke to Otorra, now a foreman at the carding sheds; he accepted a formal invitation to Danro. Such invitations included meals and an overnight stay, necessarily, in such a remote place, but the invitation was to share worship with the farm family at the house shrine, and its significance was known to all.

So they all gathered at the house shrine, which at Danro was a low, cold, inner room walled with stone, with a floor of earth and stones that was the unlevelled ground of the mountainside. A tiny spring, rising at the higher end of the room, trickled in a channel of cut granite. It was the reason why the house stood where it did, and had stood there for six hundred years. They offered water and accepted water, one to another, one from another, the old Evening couple, Uncle Mika, his son Shest, Asbi who had worked as a pack-trainer and handyman at Danro for thirty years, Akal the new hand, Shahes the farmholder, and the guests: Otorra from Oro and Temly from Ked'din.

Temly smiled across the spring at Otorra, but he did not meet her eyes, or anyone else's.

Temly was a short, stocky woman, the same type as Shahes, but fairer-skinned and a bit lighter all round, not as solid, not as hard. She had a surprising, clear singing voice that soared up in the praise-songs. Otorra was also rather short and broad-shouldered, with good features, a

competent-looking man, but just now extremely ill at ease; he looked as if he had robbed the shrine or murdered the mayor, Akal thought, studying him with interest, as well she might. He looked furtive; he looked guilty.

Akal observed him with curiosity and dispassion. She would share water with Otorra, but not guilt. As soon as she had seen Shahes, touched Shahes, all her scruples and moral anxieties had dropped away, as if they could not breathe up here in the mountains. Akal had been born for Shahes and Shahes for Akal; that was all there was to it. Whatever made it possible for them to be together was right.

Once or twice she did ask herself, what if I'd been born into the Morning instead of the Evening moiety? — a perverse and terrible thought. But perversity and sacrilege were not asked of her. All she had to do was change sex. And that only in appearance, in public. With Shahes she was a woman, and more truly a woman and herself than she had ever been in her life. With everybody else she was Akal, whom they took to be a man. That was no trouble at all. She was Akal; she liked being Akal. It was not like acting a part. She never had been herself with other people, had always felt a falsity in her relationships with them; she had never known who she was at all, except sometimes for a moment in meditation, when her *I am* became *It is*, and she breathed the stars. But with Shahes she was herself utterly, in time and in the body, Akal, a soul consumed in love and blessed by intimacy.

So it was that she had agreed with Shahes that they should say nothing to Otorra, nothing even to Temly. "Let's see what Temly makes of you," Shahes said, and Akal agreed.

Last year Temly had entertained the scholar Enno overnight at her farmhold for instruction and worship, and had met her two or three times at Danro. When she came to share worship today she met Akal for the first time. Did she see Enno? She gave no sign of it.

She greeted Akal with a kind of brusque goodwill, and they talked about breeding ariu. She quite evidently studied the newcomer, judging, sizing up; but that was natural enough in a woman meeting a stranger she might be going to marry. "You don't know much about mountain farming, do you?" she said kindly after they had talked a while. "Different from down there. What did you raise? Those big flatland yama?" And Akal told her about the farm where she grew up, and the three crops a year they got, which made Temly nod in amazement.

As for Otorra, Shahes and Akal colluded to deceive him without ever

saying a word more about it to each other. Akal's mind shied away from the subject. They would get to know each other during the engagement period, she thought vaguely. She would have to tell him, eventually, that she did not want to have sex with him, of course, and the only way to do that without insulting and humiliating him was to say that she, that Akal, was averse to having sex with other men, and hoped he would forgive her. But Shahes had made it clear that she mustn't tell him that till they were married. If he knew it beforehand he would refuse to enter the sedoretu. And even worse, he might talk about it, expose Akal as a woman, in revenge. Then they would never be able to marry. When Shahes had spoken about this, Akal had felt distressed and trapped, anxious, guilty again; but Shahes was serenely confident and untroubled, and somehow Akal's guilty feelings would not stick. They dropped off. She simply hadn't thought much about it. She watched Otorra now with sympathy and curiosity, wondering what made him look so hangdog. He was scared of something, she thought.

After the water was poured and the blessing said, Shahes read from the Fourth Discussion; she closed the old boxbook very carefully, put it on its shelf and put its cloth over it, and then, speaking to Magel and Madu as was proper, they being what was left of the First Sedoretu of Danro, she said, "My Othermother and my Otherfather, I propose that a new sedoretu be made in this house."

Madu nudged Magel. He fidgeted and grimaced and muttered inaudibly. Finally Madu said in her weak, resigned voice, "Daughter of the Morning, tell us the marriages."

"If all be well and willing, the marriage of the Morning will be Shahes and Akal, and the marriage of the Evening will be Temly and Otorra, and the marriage of the Day will be Shahes and Temly, and the marriage of the Night will be Akal and Otorra."

There was a long pause. Magel hunched his shoulders. Madu said at last, rather fretfully, "Well, is that all right with everybody?" — which gave the gist, if not the glory, of the formal request for consent, usually couched in antique and ornate language.

"Yes," said Shahes, clearly.

"Yes," said Akal, manfully.

"Yes," said Temly, cheerfully.

A pause.

Everybody looked at Otorra, of course. He had blushed purple and, as they watched, turned greyish.

“I am willing,” he said at last in a forced mumble, and cleared his throat. “Only — “ He stuck there.

Nobody said anything.

The silence was horribly painful.

Akal finally said, “We don’t have to decide now. We can talk. And, and come back to the shrine later, if…”

“Yes,” Otorra said, glancing at Akal with a look in which so much emotion was compressed that she could not read it at all — terror, hate, gratitude, despair? — “I want to — I need to talk — to Akal.”

“I’d like to get to know my brother of the Evening too,” said Temly in her clear voice.

“Yes, that’s it, yes, that is — “ Otorra stuck again, and blushed again. He was in such an agony of discomfort that Akal said, “Let’s go on outside for a bit, then,” and led Otorra out into the yard, while the others went to the kitchen.

Akal knew Otorra had seen through her pretense. She was dismayed, and dreaded what he might say; but he had not made a scene, he had not humiliated her before the others, and she was grateful to him for that.

“This is what it is,” Otorra said in a stiff, forced voice, coming to a stop at the gate. “It’s the Night marriage.” He came to a stop there, too.

Akal nodded. Reluctantly, she spoke, to help Otorra do what he had to do. “You don’t have to — “ she began, but he was speaking again:

“The Night marriage. Us. You and me. See, I don’t — There’s some — See, with men, I — “

The whine of delusion and the buzz of incredulity kept Akal from hearing what the man was trying to tell her. He had to stammer on even more painfully before she began to listen. When his words came clear to her she could not trust them, but she had to. He had stopped trying to talk.

Very hesitantly, she said, “Well, I… I was going to tell you… The only man I ever had sex with, it was… It wasn’t good. He made me — He did things — I don’t know what was wrong. But I never have — I have never had any sex with men. Since that. I can’t. I can’t make myself want to.”

“Neither can I,” Otorra said.

They stood side by side leaning on the gate, contemplating the miracle, the simple truth.

“I just only ever want women,” Otorra said in a shaking voice.

“A lot of people are like that,” Akal said.

“They are?”

She was touched and grieved by his humility. Was it men’s boastfulness with other men, or the hardness of the mountain people, that had burdened him with this ignorance, this shame?

“Yes,” she said. “Everywhere I’ve been. There’s quite a lot of men who only want sex with women. And women who only want sex with men. And the other way round, too. Most people want both, but there’s always some who don’t. It’s like the two ends of,” she was about to say “a spectrum,” but it wasn’t the language of Akal the fleecer or Otorra the carder, and with the adroitness of the old teacher she substituted “a sack. If you pack it right, most of the fleece is in the middle. But there’s some at both ends where you tie off, too. That’s us. There’s not as many of us. But there’s nothing wrong with us.” As she said this last it did not sound like what a man would say to a man. But it was said; and Otorra did not seem to think it peculiar, though he did not look entirely convinced. He pondered. He had a pleasant face, blunt, unguarded, now that his unhappy secret was out. He was only about thirty, younger than she had expected.

“But in a marriage,” he said. “It’s different from just… A marriage is — Well, if I don’t — and you don’t — “

“Marriage isn’t just sex,” Akal said, but said it in Enno’s voice, Enno the scholar discussing questions of ethics, and Akal cringed.

“A lot of it is,” said Otorra, reasonably.

“All right,” Akal said in a consciously deeper, slower voice. “But if I don’t want it with you and you don’t want it with me why can’t we have a good marriage?” It came out so improbable and so banal at the same time that she nearly broke into a fit of laughter. Controlling herself, she thought, rather shocked, that Otorra was laughing at her, until she realised that he was crying.

“I never could tell anybody,” he said.

“We don’t ever have to,” she said. She put her arm around his shoulders without thinking about it at all. He wiped his eyes with his fists like a child, cleared his throat, and stood thinking. Obviously he was thinking about what she had just said.

“Think,” she said, also thinking about it, “how lucky we are!”

“Yes. Yes, we are.” He hesitated. “But… but is it religious… to marry each other knowing… Without really meaning to…” He stuck again.

After a long time, Akal said, in a voice as soft and nearly as deep as his, “I don’t know.”

She had withdrawn her comforting, patronising arm from his shoulders. She leaned her hands on the top bar of the gate. She looked at her hands, long and strong, hardened and dirt-engrained from farm work, though the oil of the fleeces kept them supple. A farmer’s hands. She had given up the religious life for love’s sake and never looked back. But now she was ashamed.

She wanted to tell this honest man the truth, to be worthy of his honesty.

But it would do no good, unless not to make the sedoretu was the only good.

“I don’t know,” she said again. “I think what matters is if we try to give each other love and honor. However we do that, that’s how we do it. That’s how we’re married. The marriage — the religion is in the love, in the honoring.”

“I wish there was somebody to ask,” Otorra said, unsatisfied. “Like that travelling scholar that was here last summer. Somebody who knows about religion.”

Akal was silent.

"I guess the thing is to do your best," Otorra said after a while. It sounded sententious, but he added, plainly, "I would do that."

"So would I" Akal said.

A mountain farmhouse like Danro is a dark, damp, bare, grim place to live in, sparsely furnished, with no luxuries except the warmth of the big kitchen and the splendid bedfleeces. But it offers privacy, which may be the greatest luxury of all, though the ki'O consider it a necessity. "A three-room sedoretu" is a common expression in Okets, meaning an enterprise doomed to fail.

At Danro, everyone had their own room and bathroom. The two old members of the First Sedoretu, and Uncle Mika and his child, had rooms in the center and west wing; Asbi, when he wasn't sleeping out on the mountain, had a cozy, dirty nest behind the kitchen. The new Second Sedoretu had the whole east side of the house. Temly chose a little attic room, up a half-flight of stairs from the others, with a fine view. Shahes kept her room, and Akal hers, adjoining; and Otorra chose the southeast corner, the sunniest room in the house.

The conduct of a new sedoretu is to some extent, and wisely, prescribed by custom and sanctioned by religion. The first night after the ceremony of marriage belongs to the Morning and Evening couples; the second night to the Day and Night couples. Thereafter the four spouses may join as and when they please, but always and only by invitation given and accepted, and the arrangements are to be known to all four. Four souls and bodies and all the years of their four lives to come are in the balance in each of those decisions and invitations; passion, negative and positive, must find its channels, and trust must be established, lest the whole structure fail to found itself solidly, or destroy itself in selfishness and jealousy and grief.

Akal knew all the customs and sanctions, and she insisted that they be followed to the letter. Her wedding night with Shahes was tender and a little tense. Her wedding night with Otorra was also tender; they sat in his room and talked softly, shy with each other but each very grateful; then Otorra slept in the deep windowseat, insisting that Akal have the bed.

Within a few weeks Akal knew that Shahes was more intent on having her way, on having Akal as her partner, than on maintaining any kind of

sexual balance or even a pretense of it. As far as Shahes was concerned, Otorra and Temly could look after each other and that was that. Akal had of course known many sedoretu where one or two of the partnerships dominated the others completely, through passion or the power of an ego. To balance all four relationships perfectly was an ideal seldom realised. But this sedoretu, already built on a deception, a disguise, was more fragile than most. Shahes wanted what she wanted and consequences be damned. Akal had followed her far up the mountain, but would not follow her over a precipice.

It was a clear autumn night, the window full of stars, like that night last year when Shahes had said, "Marry me."

"You have to give Temly tomorrow night," Akal repeated.

"She's got Otorra," Shahes repeated.

"She wants you. Why do you think she married you?"

"She's got what she wants. I hope she gets pregnant soon," Shahes said, stretching luxuriously, and running her hand over Akal's breasts and belly. Akal stopped her hand and held it.

"It isn't fair, Shahes. It isn't right."

"A fine one you are to talk!"

"But Otorra doesn't want me, you know that. And Temly does want you. And we owe it to her."

"Owe her what?"

"Love and honor."

"She's got what she wanted," Shahes said, and freed her hand from Akal's grasp with a harsh twist. "Don't preach at me."

"I'm going back to my room," Akal said, slipping lithely from the bed and stalking naked through the starry dark. "Good night."

She was with Temly in the old dye room, unused for years until Temly, an expert dyer, came to the farm. Weavers down in the Centers would pay well for fleece dyed the true Deka red. Her skill had been Temly's dowry.

Akal was her assistant and apprentice now. “Eighteen minutes. Timer set?”

Set.

Temly nodded, checked the vents on the great dye-boiler, checked the read-out again, and went outside to catch the morning sun. Akal joined her on the stone bench by the stone doorway. The smell of the vegetable dye, pungent and acid-sweet, clung to them, and their clothes and hands and arms were raddled pink and crimson.

Akal had become attached to Temly very soon, finding her reliably good-tempered and unexpectedly thoughtful — both qualities that had been in rather short supply at Danro. Without knowing it, Akal had formed her expectation of the mountain people on Shahes — powerful, wilful, undeviating, rough. Temly was strong and quite self-contained, but open to impressions as Shahes was not. Relationships within her moiety meant little to Shahes; she called Otorra brother because it was customary, but did not see a brother in him. Temly called Akal brother and meant it, and Akal, who had had no family for so long, welcomed the relationship, returning Temly’s warmth. They talked easily together, though Akal had constantly to guard herself from becoming too easy and letting her woman-self speak out. Mostly it was no trouble at all being Akal and she gave little thought to it, but sometimes with Temly it was very hard to keep up the pretense, to prevent herself from saying what a woman would say to her sister. In general she had found that the main drawback in being a man was that conversations were less interesting.

They talked about the next step in the dyeing process, and then Temly said, looking off over the low stone wall of the yard to the huge purple slant of the Farren, “You know Enno, don’t you?”

The question seemed innocent and Akal almost answered automatically with some kind of deceit — “The scholar that was here… ?”

But there was no reason why Akal the fleecer should know Enno the scholar. And Temly had not asked, do you remember Enno, or did you know Enno, but, “You know Enno, don’t you?” She knew the answer.

“Yes.”

Temly nodded, smiling a little. She said nothing more.

Akal was amazed by her subtlety, her restraint. There was no difficulty

in honoring so honorable a woman.

“I lived alone for a long time,” Akal said. “Even on the farm where I grew up I was mostly alone. I never had a sister. I’m glad to have one at last.”

“So am I,” said Temly.

Their eyes met briefly, a flicker of recognition, a glance planting trust deep and silent as a tree-root.

“She knows who I am, Shahes.”

Shahes said nothing, trudging up the steep slope.

“Now I wonder if she knew from the start. From the first water-sharing…”

“Ask her if you like,” Shahes said, indifferent.

“I can’t. The deceiver has no right to ask for the truth.”

“Humbug!” Shahes said, turning on her, halting her in mid-stride. They were up on the Farren looking for an old beast that Asbi had reported missing from the herd. The keen autumn wind had blown Shahes’s cheeks red, and as she stood staring up at Akal she squinted her watering eyes so that they glinted like knifeblades. “Quit preaching! Is that who you are? ‘The deceiver’? I thought you were my wife!”

“I am, and Otorra’s too, and you’re Temly’s — you can’t leave them out, Shahes!”

“Are they complaining?”

“Do you want them to complain?” Akal shouted, losing her temper. “Is that the kind of marriage you want? — Look, there she is,” she added in a suddenly quiet voice, pointing up the great rocky mountainside. Farsighted, led by a bird’s circling, she had caught the movement of the yama’s head near an outcrop of boulders. The quarrel was postponed. They both set off at a cautious trot towards the boulders.

The old yama had broken a leg in a slip from the rocks. She lay neatly collected, though the broken foreleg would not double under her white

breast but stuck out forward, and her whole body had a lurch to that side. Her disdainful head was erect on the long neck, and she gazed at the women, watching her death approach, with clear, unfathomable, uninterested eyes.

"Is she in pain?" Akal asked, daunted by that great serenity.

"Of course," Shahes said, sitting down several paces away from the yama to sharpen her knife on its emery-stone. "Wouldn't you be?"

She took a long time getting the knife as sharp as she could get it, patiently retesting and rewhetting the blade. At last she tested it again and then sat completely still. She stood up quietly, walked over to the yama, pressed its head up against her breast and cut its throat in one long fast slash. Blood leaped out in a brilliant arc. Shahes slowly lowered the head with its gazing eyes down to the ground.

Akal found that she was speaking the words of the ceremony for the dead, *Now all that was owed is repaid and all that was owned, returned. Now all that was lost is found and all that was bound, free*. Shahes stood silent, listening till the end.

Then came the work of skinning. They would leave the carcass to be cleaned by the scavengers of the mountain; it was a carrion-bird circling over the yama that had first caught Akal's eye, and there were now three of them riding the wind. Skinning was fussy, dirty work, in the stink of meat and blood. Akal was inexpert, clumsy, cutting the hide more than once. In penance she insisted on carrying the pelt, rolled as best they could and strapped with their belts. She felt like a grave robber, carrying away the white-and-dun fleece, leaving the thin, broken corpse sprawled among the rocks in the indignity of its nakedness. Yet in her mind as she lugged the heavy fleece along was Shahes standing up and taking the yama's beautiful head against her breast and slashing its throat, all one long movement, in which the woman and the animal were utterly one.

It is need that answers need, Akal thought, as it is question that answers question. The pelt reeked of death and dung. Her hands were caked with blood, and ached, gripping the stiff belt, as she followed Shahes down the steep rocky path homeward.

"I'm going down to the village," Otorra said, getting up from the breakfast table.

"When are you going to card those four sacks?" Shahes said.

He ignored her, carrying his dishes to the washer-rack. “Any errands? ” he asked of them all.

“Everybody done?” Madu asked, and took the cheese out to the pantry.

“No use going into town till you can take the carded fleece,” said Shahes.

Otorra turned to her, stared at her, and said, “I’ll card it when I choose and take it when I choose and I don’t take orders at my own work, will you understand that?”

Stop, stop now! Akal cried silently, for Shahes, stunned by the uprising of the meek, was listening to him. But he went on, firing grievance with grievance, blazing out in recriminations. “You can’t give all the orders, we’re your sedoretu, we’re your household, not a lot of hired hands, yes it’s your farm but it’s ours too, you married us, you can’t make all the decisions, and you can’t have it all your way either,” and at this point Shahes unhurriedly walked out of the room.

“Shahes!” Akal called after her, loud and imperative. Though Otorra’s outburst was undignified it was completely justified, and his anger was both real and dangerous. He was a man who had been used, and he knew it. As he had let himself be used and had colluded in that misuse, so now his anger threatened destruction. Shahes could not run away from it.

She did not come back. Madu had wisely disappeared. Akal told Shest to run out and see to the pack-beasts’ feed and water.

The three remaining in the kitchen sat or stood silent. Temly looked at Otorra. He looked at Akal.

“You’re right,” Akal said to him.

He gave a kind of satisfied snarl. He looked handsome in his anger, flushed and reckless. “Damn right I’m right. I’ve let this go on for too long. Just because she owned the farmhold — “

“And managed it since she was fourteen,” Akal cut in. “You think she can quit managing just like that? She’s always run things here. She had to. She never had anybody to share power with. Everybody has to learn how to

be married."

"That's right," Otorra flashed back, "and a marriage isn't two pairs. It's four pairs!"

That brought Akal up short. Instinctively she looked to Temly for help. Temly was sitting, quiet as usual, her elbows on the table, gathering up crumbs with one hand and pushing them into a little pyramid.

"Temly and me, you and Shahes, Evening and Morning, fine," Otorra said. "What about Temly and her? What about you and me?"

Akal was now completely at a loss. "I thought… When we talked…"

"I said I didn't like sex with men," said Otorra.

She looked up and saw a gleam in his eye. Spite? Triumph? Laughter?

"Yes. You did," Akal said after a long pause. "And I said the same thing."

Another pause.

"It's a religious duty," Otorra said.

Enno suddenly said very loudly in Akal's voice, "Don't come onto me with your religious duty! I studied religious duty for twenty years and where did it get me? Here! With you! In this mess!"

At this, Temly made a strange noise and put her face in her hands. Akal thought she had burst into tears, and then saw she was laughing, the painful, helpless, jolting laugh of a person who hasn't had much practice at it.

"There's nothing to laugh about," Otorra said fiercely, but then had no more to say; his anger had blown up leaving nothing but smoke. He groped for words for a while longer. He looked at Temly, who was indeed in tears now, tears of laughter. He made a despairing gesture. He sat down beside Temly and said, "I suppose it is funny if you look at it. It's just that I feel like a chump." He laughed, ruefully, and then, looking up at Akal, he laughed genuinely. "Who's the biggest chump?" he asked her.

“Not you,” she said. “How long…” “How long do you think?”

It was what Shahes, standing in the passageway, heard: their laughter. The three of them laughing. She listened to it with dismay, fear, shame, and terrible envy. She hated them for laughing. She wanted to be with them, she wanted to laugh with them, she wanted to silence them. Akal, Akal was laughing at her.

She went out to the workshed and stood in the dark behind the door and tried to cry and did not know how. She had not cried when her parents were killed; there had been too much to do. She thought the others were laughing at her for loving Akal, for wanting her, for needing her. She thought Akal was laughing at her for being such a fool, for loving her. She thought Akal would sleep with the man and they would laugh together at her. She drew her knife and tested its edge. She had made it very sharp yesterday on the Farren to kill the yama. She came back to the house, to the kitchen.

They were all still there. Shest had come back and was pestering Otorra to take him into town and Otorra was saying, “Maybe, maybe,” in his soft lazy voice.

Temly looked up, and Akal looked round at Shahes — the small head on the graceful neck, the clear eyes gazing. Nobody spoke.

“I’ll walk down with you, then,” Shahes said to Otorra, and sheathed her knife. She looked at the women and the child. “We might as well all go,” she said sourly. “If you like.”

* * * *

OUT OF TOUCH

Brian Stableford

"Out of Touch" appeared in the October 1995 issue of Asimov's, *with an illustration by Dell Harris. Brian Stableford has made many sales to the magazine since his first sale here in 1990, becoming, in fact, one of our most frequent and prolific contribu-tors throughout the decade of the nineties.*

Like Ursula K. Le Guin, Stableford has done a great deal of thinking about what a future Utopian society might be like—and what problems the people living in such a society might still have to face. Here, for instance, he escorts us to a rich and tranquil fu-ture society that would seem wonderful to most of us—unless we happened to be one of those unfort-unate souls who were born just late enough that we were doomed to spend our lives with our noses pressed up against the glass, watching the glittering forever-young immortals on the other side. . . .

Critically acclaimed British "hard science" writer Brian Stableford is the author of more than thirty books, including Cradle of the Sun, The Blind Worm, Days of Glory, In the Kingdom of the Beasts, Day of Wrath, The Halcyon Drift, The Paradox of the Sets, The Realms of Tartarus, *and the renowned tril-ogy consisting of* The Empire of Fear, The Angel of Pain, *and* The Carnival of Destruction. *His short fic-tion has been collected in* Sexual Chemistry: Sar-donic Tales of the Genetic Revolution. *His nonfiction books include* The Sociology of Science Fiction *and, with David Longford,* The Third Millennium: A His-tory of the World ad. 2000-3000. *His most recent novel is* Serpent's Blood, *which is the start of another projected trilogy. His acclaimed novella "Les Fleurs Du Mai," an* Asimov's *story, was a finalist for the Hugo Award in 1994. A biologist and sociologist by training, Stableford lives in Reading, England.*

* * * *

When he'd moved the cases out on to the roadway and locked the door behind him, Jake went around to the back— or, as he'd always thought of it, the front—of the house, so that he could watch the breakers rolling up the deserted beach. The sea was on the retreat, having delivered the usual cargo of rubbish to the ragged tideline. When he and Martha had first

moved into the village, there had been bits of kelp and dead crabs mixed in with the beached flotsam, but nowadays the waste was all man-made. Red plastic bottle-tops stood out like warning lights.

While he stood there watching the dull gray waves, Peterson, the caretaker, came to say good-bye. “Your kids comin’ to pick you up?” he asked, although he knew per-fectly well that they were.

“Sam and Doreen,” Jake said, although Peterson could hardly be interested in knowing their names. “Sam’s my son. They’ve been married twenty years, but there are no grandchildren. Kids don’t seem to have kids of their own anymore.”

“Comes of expectin’ to live forever,” Peterson said, la-conically. “Guess you won’t be seein’ no old people any-more. Quite a change. Never figured on endin’ up as one of an endangered species!”

“There are old people in the cities,” Jake told him. “Lots of them.”

“I warn’t includin’ the Third Worlders.”

“Neither was I.”

“Well, there won’t be lots of ‘em for *long,”* Peterson said, with a sigh. “What’d you give to have been born twenty years later, hey?”

“I’d give a lot not to have been born thirty years sooner,” Jake countered, trying his damnedest to look on the bright side. “We missed the worst of the wars, you and I. We missed the worst of a lot of things.”

“An’ the best of everythin’,” Peterson added, sourly. The closing of the Village had only cost the residents their so-called retirement homes, but it had cost the caretaker a living. Peterson had managed to avoid accumulating enough social credits to qualify for the full welfare hand-out—which presumably meant that he’d spent time in jail, although Jake had never asked and Martha’s gossip grape-vine had never picked up a reliable rumor—and he didn’t seem to have any kids to help him out. Who could blame the old misery for being bitter, when he had cause to be envious not merely of the younger generations, who had been granted permission to drink at the fountain of youth, but also of his own peers?

“I’m going to miss this place,” Jake said, softly, as he heard the sound of a car drawing up out front—or out back, the way he preferred to figure it.

“It was allus just a waiting room for the graveyard,” Peterson assured him, his voice grating like an old hinge. “Have everything you need and more where you’re goin’, includin’ ocean views.”

I won’t have Martha, Jake thought, suffering the now-familiar pang whenever that particular thought resounded in his head. All he said out loud was: “It’s not the same when you can only see, and not touch.”

* * * *

“It’s not the same,” Jake said, while Sam’s nimble fingers ran through twenty or thirty of the most popular outlooks to which the window had access.

“Yes, it *is,* Dad,” Sam said, patiently. “The image is optically perfect—parallax-shifts and everything. It’s *ex-actly* like looking through a real window, except that you have the choice of a million *different* windows to look through. Sure, some of them are taped and edited and some are digitally synthesized, but there are more than two hundred that are relayed live. You see exactly what you’d see if the house were really *there:* South Sea atolls, Alaska, the Himalayas ... even fifteen fathoms deep off the Great Barrier Reef! With the remote control in your hand, you can surf the whole world. This is *everywhere.”*

By way of illustration, Sam summoned the Great Bar-rier Reef—which, by virtue of being entirely artificial, was abundantly stocked with pretty fish and virtually litter-free. Apparently, there really *were* dwellings on the ocean floor, which could be picked up relatively cheaply now that the wave of fashion had passed them by.

“It’s downtown Brownsville,” Jake insisted, stubbornly. “There’s nothing on the other side of that wall but *another* wall. If there really were a window cut there, there’d be nothing to see but bricks.”

“We don’t have bricks anymore. Dad,” Sam reminded him. “The outer tegument of the house is overlaid with plates of reinforced dextrochitin.”

“I’ll try to forget that,” Jake replied. “It makes it sound like we’re living inside a giant cockroach. The point is, Sam, that it’s not a real *window. It’s a fake. You can look through, but you can’t open it to breathe the air. There’s nothing to touch.”*

“You can touch if you use the VR set,” Doreen put in, helpfully. “It’s only a headset and a pair of gloves, I know, but you really do get the sensation of moving through the environments, and the tactile simulators in the gloves are really very good. You don’t have the same range as the window, of course, but they’re developing so *fast...* every week there’s a dozen new scenarios available.”

“And you don’t have to worry about the cable bill,” Sam added. “You can call up what you want when you want—no limit. Honestly, Dad, we want you to be happy here. We want you to be *free.”*

“That’s the modern way of looking at things, is it?” Jake said, awkwardly conscious of the depth of his in-gratitude. “With a window and a fancy flying-helmet, you can be free, even in a prison. Anyplace is everyplace, just as long as you have the right gadgets.”

“Hell, Dad, you had a VR set in the Village, and a cable hook-up for space-sharing. It’s not like you were living in some mud hut compared to which this is Disneyland. You’re only twenty-seven years older than I am, and you worked all your life with robots and spy-eyes. Okay, you were a hardware man, a *real* engineer, but you’re no dirt-farmer sucked into the twenty-first century wilderness through some time warp. You understand all this stuff just fine. We’re trying to make a home for you here and we’re doing the best we can, okay?”

“Sure it’s okay,” Jake said, sitting down on the bed and tiredly laying out his trump card—the one they’d never be able to beat or face down. “After all, I’m not going to be here for long, am I?”

Sam switched the window to a starry night, so dark and so very starry that it had to be on the moon. Doreen picked an invisible speck of dirt off one of the roses that were growing out of the wall around the bathroom-unit. They didn’t bother with the customary reassurances; they thought he was behaving too badly to deserve even that. Maybe he *was,* but the fact remained that although Sam was only twenty-seven years younger than his father, *Sam* didn’t look a day over twenty-five, and would *never* look any older—whereas every one of Jake’s sixty-seven years was indelibly marked on his face and his hands and his irredeemably spoiled heart.

If he were lucky, Jake thought, he might get to occupy this plush cell for twenty or thirty years. Nobody could tell how long Sam might outlive him; perhaps a hundred years, perhaps a thousand. There was insufficient data, as yet, on which to base an estimate of the life expectancy of the eternally

young, and the data was likely to remain insufficient for a very long time.

“We’ll leave you to unpack and get settled in,” Sam said, probably as gently as he could. “You have your own dispenser, of course, but if you’d like to join us for dinner, you’d be more than welcome. We generally eat at seven-thirty. If there’s anything you need that you don’t have, you only have to ask.”

“Thanks,” Jake said, as sincerely as he could. “Thanks for everything. You too, Doreen.”

“It’s okay,” Doreen said, as she followed Sam out of the door. “We do understand.”

They thought that they did understand. They under-stood that he’d been set in his ways long before he went to the Village, but was set no longer now that he’d lost both Martha and the Village. They understood that he was an *old man,* who didn’t have their adaptability, their pa-tience, their confidence. They understood that he was a member of a species that was soon to be extinct, who had to be treated with the utmost care and consideration and kindness. Unfortunately, that still left an awful lot to be understood.

“I should be in a *zoo”* Jake whispered, so softly that no one could have heard him even if the room had been crowded. “People with windows should be tuning in to watch *me.* Maybe I should call Peterson and suggest that he should hire himself out as a specimen for twenty-four-hour-a-day surveillance. Maybe they’d pay him enough to get a window of his own, so that people all over the world could watch him peering myopically out into infinity.”

He picked up the remote control and switched off the staring stars. He tried, unsuccessfully, to get a blank screen, or a brick wall, but he had to settle for a beach scene. He could tell that it wasn’t an American beach because the dark wrack marking the tideline was all sea-weed and driftwood, without a red bottle-top in sight, but he figured that it would have to do—for now.

There wasn’t much to unpack—which was perhaps as well, given that there wasn’t a vast amount of space in which to put it. Every square meter of wall that wasn’t host to biomachinery of some kind was fitted out with cupboards and drawers, but they filled up in no time at all with clothes and antique junk. There were books and tapes and photographs and other similarly useless things: things that had been Martha’s and that she wouldn’t

have wanted him to throw away; things that had been his and that Martha would have kept if she'd been here instead of him; things that were his own personal museum of the life he'd led, and that—given that he was fated to be one of the last of his kind—he felt he ought to keep.

In the end, after some sifting and rearranging, he man-aged to find a place for everything. He wasn't entirely sure whether that was a good sign or not.

* * * *

"It's really very easy to make friends," Doreen assured him.

"It's very easy to make *virtual* friends," Jake corrected her.

"The people you meet in virtual space are just as real as *you* are," she said, allowing a hint of exasperation to creep into her voice, "and they can be *real* friends, too. Yes, you only see their simulacra, not *them,* but when you think about it, what do you *ever* see of people you meet in the flesh except the masks they put on for the sake of politeness? Really, you know, *all* social space is virtual space. There's no real difference between putting your headset on and logging on to a network and putting your coat on to go walking in the neighborhood, except that the scenery's nicer and nobody ever got mugged in virtual space."

Doreen and Sam both worked in virtual space. Doreen was some kind of trader dealing in futures; she made more money than Sam, who reprogrammed neurotic AIs, al-though his seemed more like real work to Jake. Because they both worked in virtual space, Sam and Doreen thought it entirely natural to socialize there. If they could have moved there lock, stock, and barrel, they probably would have. Jake, by contrast, always felt like a stranger in a strange land, like some Third World migrant in the Jersey Sprawl.

"The only people who never get mugged in virtual space are the ones who never tune in to the shopping channels," Jake told his daughter-in-law, tartly. It seemed a more pertinent comment than pointing out that hardly anyone ever got mugged in the neighborhood either be-cause the surveillance bugs were far too good at seeing in the dark. The Third World might have come to camp on the doorstep of the First, as the newstapes were forever assuring the nervous citizens of America, but the migrants tended to steer clear of streets where they were under constant observation by thousands of electronic eyes. In any case, Brownsville had

far less than its fair share of migrants. It was only just over the border, much too close to home.

Doreen flopped down on the bed, lay supine, and threw her arms back in an exaggerated gesture of defeat.

“Okay,” she said. “You win. If you’re *that* determined to be miserable, there’s absolutely nothing Sam or I can do about it. If you’re absolutely dead set on not having a moment’s pleasure between now and the moment you finally kick the bucket, nobody in the world can prevent you. But *why,* Jake? Why are you doing it? Is it yourself you’re intent on hurting, or are you trying to make Sam and I feel *guilty* about something? About *what?* About giving you a room in our house? About not getting older? Tell me, Jake—what would you have done if you’d been in Sam’s shoes? Would you have said ‘No! I won’t take the treatment unless my dear old Dad can benefit from it too’? Would you have said ‘No! I can’t insult the wrinkly old curmudgeon by inviting him to come live in *my* house’? Just tell me what you *want,* will you?”

Jake stood over her, extending a helping hand. When she finally condescended to take it, he hauled her back to her feet—or tried to. He no longer had the strength he had once been able to take for granted.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m really not criticizing. I’m grateful to Sam and to you. I ought to be more cheerful, if only for your sakes, because I certainly don’t want to make *you* miserable. I wish I *could* be cheerful, but...”

There was a long pause before she said: “But *what,* Jake?” She honestly didn’t know. How could she?

“I really miss Martha,” he said, simply, knowing that it would go down better than the truth. Not that it *wasn‘t* true, of course. He *did* miss Martha. It just wasn’t the *whole* truth, or anything like.

Doreen’s face softened, as he’d known it would. “I know,” she said, reaching out to hug him. He let her, because he knew how much better it would make her feel. At least she didn’t launch into a speech about life having to go on, and what Martha would have wanted.

What Martha would have wanted, if she’d had a choice, was still to be alive. Maybe she’d have settled for a win-dow in her grave, but only as second best. She was always ready to compromise, always ready to split

the difference. She'd have had an easier life if she'd married a more generous haggler than Jake had ever been.

"I miss lots of things," Jake added, as Doreen released him.

"Of course you do," she said. She could probably have made a list. He missed his youth, and his health, and the world in which he'd been a force to be reckoned with— inasmuch as any fairly mediocre human being could be a force to be reckoned with, in a world that had come storm-ing back from the edge of the ecocatastrophic abyss, even-tually to win the greatest prize imaginable.

"I honestly don't want to make friends," he told her, when the tension seemed to have unwound and they were no longer at odds. "People kept urging me to make friends in the Village, but I wouldn't. Martha always wanted me to be more sociable—I think she'd have been happier if her friends had been *ours*—but I never really saw the need, or the point. I don't want to spend my days jabber-ing away to other old men about the past we've all lost but never really shared, and I certainly don't want to while away my time playing *games.* I was never one for games, ever. I suppose I was never one for people, much. Martha used to say that I spent so much time with robots that I could only relate to disembodied arms and freaky hands, and then only if they weren't working properly."

"That's okay," Doreen said. "It's fine. Sam and I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do, or anything you're not comfortable with. But what *do* you want to do, Jake? What will it take to make the life you've got left worthwhile?"

A miracle, he thought. *Another breakthrough just like the one you got. A way not simply to put the brakes on the aging process but to throw the bastard into reverse gear, to undo the damage that's already been done, to turn back the clock. . . .*

"I don't know," he said, truthfully. "I'm trying. It may not look like it sometimes, but I *am* trying."

"If you want to join us for dinner," she said, "we'll be eating about seven-thirty."

She and Sam always ate at about seven-thirty. There was never any possibility of either of them being late home from work, and they never had anywhere to go ex-cept the further reaches of the virtual universe.

“It’s okay,” Jake said. “I’m not that hungry. I’ll get something from my own unit a little later.”

“That’s fine,” she said, stoutly refusing to be offended. “If you change your mind, you know where we are.”

When Doreen closed the door behind her, Jake felt a perverse urge to lock it, but he wasn’t even sure that the door had a locking function, and if it had, he didn’t know how to operate it. There was so much to learn, and so little time to learn it. His room was no more than four meters square, and yet there was so much to be done within its boundaries and barriers that even an eternal youth like Sam couldn’t be expected to exhaust its pos-sibilities in the space of a single lifetime.

For a man like me, Jake thought, *it’s just a cell on Death Row. No use making myself too much at home.* He opened a cupboard and took out one of his old paperback books—a book printed before he’d been born—and sat down on the bed to read. He gave up before he reached the third page, wondering what on earth he was trying to prove. *I’ll be chipping flints next,* he thought.

Outside the window, a brontosaurus whose enormous body was half-submerged in swamp water was patiently and methodically chewing its way through the lush foliage of a huge gymnosperm. Jake tried to catch its eye, but he couldn’t. He could look out easily enough, but there was no way the brontosaurus could have looked in, even if it had been real.

* * * *

Jake didn’t warn Sam and Doreen that he’d bought the tamarin, so they were somewhat disconcerted when it ar-rived at the door. He hadn’t consciously planned to lay down a challenge to their insistence that he could treat their home as his own, but he was interested to see their reactions nevertheless.

“It’s okay,” he assured them. “It’s engineered for maxi-mum tidiness and programmed for social responsibility. It won’t make any dirty messes, and it won’t press any but-tons it isn’t supposed to.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Sam said, although he evidently did feel uneasy on both scores. “I’m just surprised, that’s all. Why do you think you need it? I wouldn’t have thought cute and fluffy was quite your *style.”*

“It’s just a sophisticated biochip that does the talking,” Doreen chimed in. “It’s exactly like talking to a conver-sational program on the net. It’s not really an animal— just an organic robot.”

“It won’t give you any trouble,” Jake insisted, dog-gedly. “It’ll live in my room. It won’t bother you at all.”

This turned out not to be entirely true. The pet’s pro-gramming had to be open-ended to allow it to adapt to its owner’s conversational habits, and it did tend to wander if Jake wasn’t paying attention. If it wasn’t authentically curious, it gave a very good impression, and its restless fingers did occasionally push buttons that would have been better unpushed. It caused no disasters, but it did produce a measure of exasperating inconvenience. Per-haps it was all Sam’s fault for making too much of an effort in the first couple of weeks; he only had to speak to the creature a few times to be included in its rapidly evolving response-system as an honorary co-owner, and thus to be pestered whenever he was available for pester-ing and Jake was otherwise occupied. Even though Doreen never said much more to the creature than “Go away!” she too was awarded a special place in its scheme of things, and its constant craven apologies to her quickly became as much of an annoyance as jeers and insults would have been.

Jake could not have liked the creature half as much had it not been so subtly and insistently wayward.

In the early days of their relationship, the tamarin’s conversation left much to be desired. It had a memory chip which carried a potential vocabulary far larger than Jake’s, but it was programmed to limit its competence to match *his,* so he had to spend time telling it elaborate stories using as many words as he could squeeze in. For a time, this educative process was enjoyable. It injected new purpose into such activities as looking out of the window and watching the TV news, because Jake was able—indeed, *required*—to deliver a running commen-tary on everything that could be seen, so that the tamarin could be familiarized with his descriptive powers and his attitudes. After a while, however, the whole thing began to seem like a chore, and the increasingly prolific contri-butions made by the pet came to seem like mockingly convoluted echoes of his own thought processes.

“The trouble with you, little monkey,” Jake said to the tamarin, as they looked out of the window on to a busy street in the market quarter of some tropical city, watching the crowds go by, “is that you’re too good to be true. You’re the whole goddam world in a nutshell: bland, obliging, and

fundamentally mechanical."

"The trouble with *you,* Jake," the tamarin replied, airily, "is that you don't know what you want from me. You change your mind from one day to the next, or one minute to the next! I could have had a nice kid for an owner, you know—a lovely little girl, full of hope and excitement and curiosity. You think this is an easy ride for me? Believe me, it isn't."

"There you go again," Jake said. "I call you bland, you immediately start compensating. Too goddam obliging."

On the other side of the window, a young street-arab made an obscene gesture. He was looking straight at Jake and the monkey, but Jake knew that it was just a perfor-mance—something he probably did in front of every spy-eye he passed, on the off chance that someone might be watching. Jake wished that there was some way that the kid could have known for *sure* that he was there, so that the gesture could have been *personal* instead of merely ritual.

"Why did he do that?" the tamarin asked, almost as if it had read Jake's secret wish. "It's not as if he can see us."

"That program of yours is too clever by half," Jake complained. "It's better at reading people than *people* are. Heaven help us if your kind ever get the all clear to run for office! On the other hand, you'll probably run the world a lot better than *we* do, at least until you master the Machiavellian arts of greed and corruption. He did that because he's saying *up yours!* to the entire First World— because he knows that the things we have today, he'll have tomorrow. He knows that his time is coming, and that he'll have all the time he needs to get what he wants. The treatment's too easy and too cheap, you see. It can't be hoarded or controlled. It's spreading like an epidemic, and the only people who *can't* benefit from it are the people who are *already* old, already damaged. He knows that he won't always be on the outside being looked at from within, no matter how many rich folks hereabouts are screaming blue murder about population problems and social utility."

'There are a lot of old people out there," the tamarin observed, scanning the street scene with his little, dark eyes. "A *lot* of old people. And a lot of people so very nearly old that they can't wait long."

"That's right," Jake said. "But they're going about their business in a quiet and orderly way, because they don't dare to do otherwise. All their

fear and resentment is held in check, because this is one cause it wouldn't make sense to risk death for. They all believe that their time is com-ing, if only they'll be patient, and they're *right.* All except the ones who've already missed out."

"I'll die too," the tamarin. said. "Artificial flesh is de-signed to be mortal."

"I know," Jake said. "I read the specs."

"Is that why you bought me? Because I'm in the same boat as you, and Sam and Doreen aren't? Is that why you needed me?"

"I wish I knew," Jake said, tiredly. "I wish I knew."

* * * *

The tamarin was designed for indoor life; it didn't need space or exercise. Even so, Jake began to take it out for "walks." It clung to his shoulder, ducking low to get under the wide brim of his hat; when he talked to it out of the corner of his mouth, its replies were discreetly murmur-ous. He took it to places where there were trees, so that he could watch it playing in the branches. It was quite an athlete. Sometimes, he wished it would take the oppor-tunity to make a dash for freedom, but it never did. It had its inbuilt limitations.

On occasion, when the sun was at full blast in a cloud-less sky and the temperature was over a hundred in the shade, the tamarin complained that it would rather stay home, but Jake was never quite sure whether it was protesting on its own behalf or being protective of him.

"The species on which you're modeled used to live way down south," he told it, on one occasion. "I never could understand why natural selection handed out fur coats to tropical monkeys, but it can't have been an accident. By rights, you ought to like the hot weather."

"The species on which *you're* modeled evolved on the plains of equatorial Africa," the tamarin pointed out, "but that didn't stop you from inventing air-conditioning."

"The monkey's right," Sam told him, as he stepped out the door. "Neither of you is fitted by nature for wandering around under the noonday sun. It's not as if you were mad dogs or Englishmen!"

“I wear a hat,” Jake retorted, pausing in order to make an argument of it. “Anyway, I’m not primed for skin can-cer. *My* weak spot is the heart. You know that. Congenital weakness emphasized by wear and tear. That’s the way *I’ll* be going.”

“I wish *you ‘d* talk some sense into him,” Sam said to the tamarin. “He never listens to me.”

“He always listens,” the tamarin riposted, loyally. “He just doesn’t take any notice. He’s old enough to make up his own mind.”

“He sounds more like you than you do,” Sam said, wearily—to Jake, not the monkey.

“Better buy one for Doreen,” Jake suggested. “Pretty soon it’d have everything she’s got and good looks too.” But that was uncalled-for, and they both knew it. He cleared out without further delay.

He didn’t enjoy the outing. Sam and the monkey were right, as usual; it was far too hot outdoors for anything that moved. Even the trees seemed to be wilting under the sun’s relentless assault. The tamarin put on its usual acrobatic display, with all possible zest, but it wasn’t re-ally having fun. It was only pretending. Everything it did—everything it was or might become—was mere pre-tense.

On the way back to the house, they passed thirty-three beggars—four more than the previous record count—but they weren’t menaced in any way whatsoever. There was nothing in the dark and silent eyes that watched them go by but reproach ... and perhaps, in the younger ones, a little pity.

“So much for trying to make the migrants stay home by promising to give full-aid priority to long-established populations,” Jake said. “They don’t believe us anymore. Time was when the word of our politicians was our bond.”

“Would that be Lincoln you’re thinking of, or George Washington?” the tamarin inquired.

“Saint Thomas More,” Jake answered.

“He wasn’t an American.”

“In spirit he was.”

“In spirit,” the tamarin told him, “so are *they.* For that matter, so am I.”

“I was myself, once,” Jake was quick to add, always desirous of claiming the last word. “But that was a long time ago.”

The tamarin politely conceded the game. It always did, but Jake never felt that he’d won. Time after time after time, come blazing heat or pouring rain, he claimed the last line—but he never felt that he’d *proved* anything.

* * * *

They’d been walking for a long time, but it wasn’t until they got to the head of the sliproad leading up to the highway that the tamarin finally asked him, wearily, where they were going *this time!*

“I don’t know,” Jake replied, truthfully. “I thought we might hitch a ride someplace. Anyplace would do.”

“Do you think that’s wise?” the tamarin asked.

“No,” Jake said. “If it was wise. I wouldn’t want to do it.”

“I can understand that,” the tamarin assured him, “but isn’t it just a little *too* haphazard? You might count it a bonus that Sam won’t like it, but he really *will* be worried if you go missing and turn up three days later in New York or Vancouver.”

“Nobody drives from Brownsville to Vancouver,” was all Jake said in reply. “We’ll be lucky to get as far as Corpus Christi.” He had already noted that at least nine out of every ten vehicles that passed them were on auto-matic, and that the few manual drivers tended to stare at his outstretched thumb as if he were out of his mind.

“There’s nothing *out* there, Jake,” the monkey said, very softly, as it plucked at the lobe of his ear with its tiny hand. “You know that. We’ve looked at the whole goddam world through your window, and a thousand places more. We know there’s no rainbow’s end, don’t we?”

“That kind of window is just a wall with delusions of grandeur,” Jake said, knowing that he was repeating him-self. “You can look, but you can’t *touch.* The road is *real.* It goes to someplace *real.”*

“What is it you want to touch, Jake?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll know when I see it, maybe I won’t. Either way, I don’t want to sit around the rest of my life just *watching.* Just for once, I want to *go* some-where. Just for once, I want to *be* somewhere. Anywhere. Nowhere. You can go home if you want to. You can spill the beans to Sam if you want to.”

That was unfair, not least because it was untrue. The tamarin *couldn’t* go home, unless he gave it a definite order properly confirmed—but Jake wasn’t about to com-promise the perversity of his mood by being *fair.*

The car that finally skidded to a halt thirty meters beyond them was just about the oldest model Jake had seen all day. So was the driver, who must have been seventy-five if he were a day. The driver didn’t ask Jake where he was headed; as soon as the door was closed, he put his foot right down and roared off.

The car’s dashboard was an absolute mess, with circuit boards exposed here, there, and everywhere. The top of the windshield, where all the virtual displays should have been, was quite blank.

“I guess you like tinkering,” Jake said. “My name’s Jake, by the way.”

“Never ride in a car that can be hijacked by remote control,” the other advised him. “I’m Conor O’Callaghan. That’s Irish. Family goes right back to the great potato famine. Much better class of immigrant in those days. Not like now. Country’s going to hell.”

The vehicle jagged from lane to lane in the same stac-cato style as his speech, out to the fastest track and then halfway in again. Most of the traffic on the highway con-sisted of disciplined convoys of robotrucks, which Conor seemed to take a profound delight in disrupting. A forlorn red light was blinking in the center of the steering column like a stranded bottle-top.

“I believe that’s a police warning, Mr. O’Callaghan,” the tamarin remarked. It was the first time the creature had ever displayed knowledge that Jake didn’t have, and it was that rather than the red light itself that belatedly alerted Jake to the fact that all was not well.

“That monkey of yours a fink?” the driver asked. “If it is, I’d be obliged if it’d get the hell out before the sirens start screeching.”

“This is a *stolen car?”* Jake said, wonderingly.

“Well hell, a man wouldn’t want to do all *that* to his *own* car, would he?” the driver said, presumably meaning the exposed circuit boards and the various kinds of sabotage that had doubtless been worked upon them. “Don’t worry—she might be old, but she’s got all the safety features. I don’t think I could kill us if I were to throw her off a bridge. Course, that thing on your shoulder ain’t belted in, so it might bounce around a bit when we cut to the chase.”

In the distance, Jake heard the wailing of sirens. They seemed to be getting closer with remarkable rapidity.

“They’re fast,” Conor conceded, as if he’d caught the thought crossing Jake’s mind, “but they ain’t allowed to be *reckless.* Gettin’ on our tail is one thing—catchin’ us is somethin’ else!”

Again the car began to zigzag from lane to lane. Conor recklessly hurled the vehicle at the wheels of mammoth robotrucks, which dutifully swerved and altered pace with lumbering grace. The juggernauts always managed to avoid the car, if only by a seeming thumb’s-width. Jake remembered, though, that nearly one in ten of the vehicles that had passed him on the sliproad had had human driv-ers. He wondered how many of those drivers had failed to switch to automatic after filtering into the highway traf-fic, and how many had been messing around with their own circuit boards.

“Do you do this often?” he inquired, astonished by the mildness of his tone. He was afraid, but the fear didn’t seem to *hurt.* Thus far, it was just a kind of excitement.

“Not as often as I’d like,” Conor confessed.

“Do you always pick up hitchhikers when you do?”

“Don’t usually *see* any. Wouldn’t pick up a Third Worlder, of course, or anyone under the age of irresponsi-bility, but I figured you might be grateful. Am I wrong?”

Jake wasn’t sure what the answer to that question was, but he was saved from the necessity of offering one by the nervous tamarin, which leapt down onto the dashboard to stare through the windshield with evident alarm.

“Central Traffic Control is slowing the traffic down,” the monkey said, in a decidedly officious tone. “It would be dangerous in the extreme to maintain our present speed.”

“Naw,” said the driver. “It gets even *more* exciting when they turn the road into an obstacle course!”

Jake saw that the rest of the traffic was indeed being brought to a gradual standstill. Soon theirs would be the only vehicle on the move, except for the pursuing police vehicles. The robotrucks were drawing inward by careful degrees, leaving the outermost lanes of the highway empty, but Conor didn’t immediately move out there; he continued weaving in and out of the middle lanes, cutting across other vehicles with reckless abandon. They contin-ued to avoid him with marvelous agility and patience.

Jake realized, somewhat to his disappointment, that the experience wasn’t so very different from a VR “ride,” and that his familiarity with such rides, although limited, was determining the oddly qualified and carefully muffled ter-ror of his responses.

I’m so out of touch with reality that I can’t even grasp it anymore, he thought. *This is what it’s come to. I’m going to die, and it’s just another virtual experience.*

“Do you have any idea how many people you’re in-conveniencing, Mr. O’Callaghan?” the tamarin asked, in a censorious manner that was certainly no reflection of Jake’s personality.

“Sure *do”* Conor said, enthusiastically. “Putting a road-block across a twelve-lane superhighway is one *hell* of an operation. Snarls up twenty, maybe twenty-five thousand vehicles. Last lot of fines bankrupted me—from now on, I’m dying on credit!”

“They’ll put you under house arrest,” Jake said, wonderingly. “You’ll never be able to go out again, ever.”

“Depends how good their locks are,” Conor replied.

“I’ve been a cracker since I was so high. Takes solid walls and heavy bolts to keep *me* inside—software won’t do it. Nice day trip, hey?”

Jake laughed, feeling a strange wave of relief pass through him as

the car was forced back into the empty outer lanes. There was now a solid wall of robotrucks to their right, and nothing ahead of them for at least a kil-ometer. As the wave passed, though, Jake began to eye the barrier protecting the grassy median, wondering just how crazy the old man was.

He turned in his seat. The pursuing police cars were coming up fast. Conor began to jiggle the wheel from side to side so that the car veered from one empty lane to another. The pursuers' safety mechanisms held them back; they couldn't overtake unless he left them an adequate gap, and he was a very good judge of adequate gaps.

"I strongly advise you to slow down, sir," the tamarin said, leaping back onto Jake's shoulder and then slipping down behind the seats. It was taking protective action; it had seen the roadblock that was looming up ahead of them.

Conor didn't slow down. He just drove full tilt at the roadblock.

The distance separating the car from the block disap-peared with terrifying fluidity, and Jake felt his heart— his weak, unstable heart—pounding in his chest like an earth-breaking drill of a type he hadn't seen in fifty years. The terror inside him back-flipped out of its virtual mode and became suddenly, overwhelmingly forceful. It was *mortal terror* now; he *knew* that they were going to crash, that the car and the whole damn world were going to be torn apart.

The only thing he didn't know was *why.*

In spite of his authentic terror, that was the thought that seized hold of him as they hurtled toward the barrier: *Why is the crazy man doing this? Because he knows that he won't die, or because he hopes that he might?*

Conor had obviously done this before. For him, it was just a joyride, just a day out—but it was Jake's first time, and he had never been in a crash of any kind. As the barrier hurtled toward them like the black horizon of death itself, Jake's poor heart leaped and lurched and tried with all its pathetic might to explode.

He never felt the impact. He saw it, but he never felt a thing.

* * * *

Jake woke up in his own bed, feeling dreadful.

Sam was stationed to the right, Doreen to the left. Sam was pale, exhausted, and anxious; Doreen was flushed, agitated, and solicitous. It didn't take long for their tender inquiries to give way to harsh recriminations.

"You could have been killed," Sam said. "You very nearly *were."*

"The car had safety features," Jake muttered. "Crazy Conor bypassed all the software checks, but the hardware was still in place."

"That's not the point," Sam persisted. "You had a major heart attack, Dad. If there hadn't been an ambulance wait-ing behind the barrier, you'd be stone dead. As it is, you might have lost five or ten years. It wasn't trivial, Dad— nothing *is,* at your age."

No, Jake thought. *At my age, nothing is.*

"Where did you think you were *going,* Jake?" Doreen wanted to know. She was fussing over him, fluffing the pillows, checking the many wires and catheters which connected various parts of his prone body to the house physician, reading the various displays which were moni-toring his all-too-frail flesh. Somehow, she gave the im-pression of being in her element—which was odd, given her actual vocation.

They've got me where they want me now, he thought, uncharitably. "Nowhere," he said out loud.

"Well," said Sam, "you nearly made it. You won't be going out again for quite some time. Fortunately, that lunatic you were with won't be going out for the rest of his life. Why on earth did you hitch a ride with a maniac like that?"

"He offered," Jake said. "Where's the tamarin?"

They had both been bending over him, but now they straightened up like twin pillars. He felt as if he were somehow suspended between them and drawn unnaturally taut.

"The monkey didn't have a belt or an airbag," Sam said, reluctantly. "It must have tried to use the back of your seat as a cushion. It would have been okay if only the back seat hadn't been sheared from its moorings. That's why your back hurts—you bruised several verte-brae. The monkey

was caught and crushed. There was nothing the medical team could do."

"I'm sorry," Doreen was quick to say, as if someone might have suspected her of being glad if she hadn't said it.

"Oh shit," said Jake.

The silence was hard to bear, but not as hard to bear as the things they were too diplomatic to say out loud. Things like *it was only a kind of robot, not really alive at all;* or *you can get another one if you want;* or, *it was your own stupid fault you stupid, senile old fool.* He no-ticed, for the first time, that his back really *was* in a bad way. He'd be walking stiffly for some time, if and when he was able to get up again.

He tried to twist himself around so that he could look at the monitors that were collating an objective record of his distress, but his spine wouldn't tolerate the torque and the displays were too high up on the wall.

"It's my data," he said, sourly. "I ought to be able to read it."

"You can," Doreen told him, in matronly fashion. "All you have to do is put the VR helmet on. It'll put a full display right before your eyes. You can watch your insides churning away through a fleet of internal cameras if you want to."

Suddenly, it didn't seem like such a good idea.

"No charges have been filed against you," Sam said, obviously thinking that there was safer conversational ground in that direction, "but we had to extradite you from Mexico as an illegal alien. There's a certain irony in that, I suppose."

"I didn't even know we were heading south," Jake told him, bitterly. "I guess I'll be forgetting which way's up next. But I can still die with a clean sheet. You can put that on my tombstone if you like. *Here lies Jake, died with a clean sheet.* Better set up a spy-eye so you can look out of your window at it any time you like. Show your kid, if you ever get around to having one. One's still the ration, I suppose, for all right-thinking immortals?"

He didn't add *We could've had two, if we'd wanted to.* It was true; he and Martha could have, if they hadn't had a conscience about Third World overcrowding. Nobody had known way back then that the next generation wouldn't have to *bother* with dying, or that the surplus personnel of the Third

World would simply come and set up house in the interstices of the First.

“Don’t be like that, Dad,” Sam said. His voice was light, but he meant it.

“I *am* like that,” Jake retorted, stubbornly. “Always was, always will be.”

* * * *

Doreen finally had to get back to work; however uncertain they might be, the world’s futures still had to be bought and sold. Sam stayed for a while longer.

“You had a bad shock, I guess,” Sam said.

“Let that be a lesson to me,” Jake countered. “It’s dangerous out there, what with all these crazy *old* people. A man can lose his best friend as easy as snapping his fingers.”

“Was the monkey really your best friend?” Sam asked, skeptically—displaying a perspicacity of which even the tamarin’s clever biochip might have been incapable.

“No,” Jake admitted. “I’ve spent too much time with smart machines to start grieving for one. It’s not like los-ing Martha was, not in a million years. Don’t say I won’t *miss* him, mind. Hard to find people I have that much in common with.”

“Doesn’t it get a little claustrophobic, talking all the time with an echo?”

“About as claustrophobic as a cell on Death Row with a million windows and a doorway to a thousand virtual worlds. Okay, so he wasn’t really as smart as he sounded—who is?”

“You never used to call it *he* when it was alive,” Sam observed. “You never even gave it a name.”

“Maybe they ought to make them with sexual organs,” Jake said. “Just for decoration, of course. It’d be easier to give them names if they were one thing or the other. It’d be easier to think of them as real animals. I mean, that’s the idea, isn’t it? We’re *supposed* to be able to think of them

as real animals, just like us. That way, we really might be able to make friends with them, the way we sometimes can with one another."

"Someone called from the Village," Sam told him. "Saw the news, wanted to know if you were okay. Name of Peterson. Was he a friend?"

"Not really."

"Good of him to call, though."

"Not really."

Sam sat down on the bed and looked his father right in the eye. "If you want to die, Dad, you *can"* he said, very soberly. "It's easy enough. If you want to live and get nothing out of it, that's even easier. It must be hell, having fallen through a trapdoor that was sealed and made safe a few years after it caught you. I ask the same question, you know: *Why you?* I hear the same answer: *Why any-body?* Whenever it came along, *someone* was bound to miss out: a whole generation. I won't try to fan the flames by saying that they might still discover a way to undo damage already done, although they might. All I'll say is that I'd feel a lot happier and a lot prouder if *my* father was one of the guys who did his level best to make the most of the time he *had,* even though he'd lost almost everything that made what he had seem worth having. But then, I always was a selfish little toad, wasn't I? Comes of being an only child, I guess. In the future, there'll *only* be only children. What a world, hey?"

Jake said nothing, because there was nothing he could say that wouldn't make him seem like an old fool. He wriggled and writhed a bit, knowing that the physician would read it as a sign of increasing discomfort and up the endorphin input. He figured that it was time to float for a while, and to feel sensibly detached.

"I'll come in and see how you are in a little while," Sam said. "Doreen'll pop in and out when she can. You want peace and quiet and all those wires out, you'll have to recover. Okay?"

"Sure," said Jake. "I'll be fine. Back on my feet in no time."

"I've moved the window nearer the bed," Sam pointed out, as he paused in the doorway, "so you can see out."

"Thanks," Jake said, lukewarmly.

At first, he turned away from the window, and even shut his eyes for a while, but he couldn't go to sleep. In the end, he turned back again, to face the reconfigured wall. Beyond the imaginary windowpane, snow was gen-tly falling on a meadow.

After watching the scene for a few tedious minutes, Jake found the remote control and switched off the snow. Then he switched off the meadow. Idly, he started surfing through the channels.

Worlds came and went, each one flaring up in a blaze of light and then dying. Some of them were here and now, others elsewhere and anywhere, in the present or the dis-tant past or possible futures or pasts that might have been but never were. Jake couldn't tell the real ones from the unreal at this sort of pace; they were all whirled in to-gether, all part and parcel of the same infinitely confused and infinitely confusing whole.

What an old fool I am, Jake thought, *trying to go any-where and nowhere on the highway, when all the any-wheres and nowheres anyone could ever want to see are right outside my window.* But he knew, even as he thought it, that the window was really a wall, just like the one Central Traffic Control had thrown across the highway: a wall to keep him from getting *out,* no matter how fast or how far he decided to go.

He could see *everything*—a world of infinite possibil-ity, full of people, young and old—but he couldn't actu-ally *go* there. He wriggled around a bit, to remind the invisible physician's programs that he was still there, still in distress.

It could be worse, he reminded himself, sternly. *It could be a great deal worse, and a man my age should be wise enough to count his blessings. At least I have a son, and a home, and a few more heartbeats to count—and I have a window right next to my bed.*

He waited, numbly, for the brave words to take effect. He was sure that they would, if he only gave them enough time and cajoled enough endorphins from the systems hidden in the wall. They *had* to. What else was there to take comfort from but words, shaped and given life by bravery?

By slow degrees, the caress of the clean sheets on his bruised and careworn skin became breathtakingly and lux-uriously soft. Somehow, it reminded him of Martha, of fine sand wanned and glittered by the sun, and

of the tenderness of youth.

For the moment, at least, it was something he didn’t want to lose.

* * * *

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

David Marusek

“Getting to Know You” appeared in the March 1998 issue of Asimov’s. *New writer David Marusek is a graduate of Clarion West. He made his first sale, to* Asimov’s Science Fiction, *in 1993, and his second sale soon thereafter to* Playboy, *followed subse-quently by more sales to* Asimov’s *and to the British anthology* Future Histories. *His pyrotechnic novella, “We Were Out of Our Minds with Joy, “ was one of the most popular and talked-about stories of 1995; although it was only his third sale, it was accom-plished enough to make one of the reviewers for* Lo-cus *magazine speculate that Marusek must be a big name author writing under a pseudonym. Not a pseu-donym, Marusek lives the life of a struggling young writer in a “low-maintenance cabin in the woods” in Fairbanks, Alaska (although he’s currently on a writ-ing sabbatical in London, England), and we‘re will-ing to bet that his is a voice we’ll be hearing a lot more from as we move toward the new century ahead.*

In the story that follows, he takes us back to the intricate and strange future Utopian milieu of “We Were Out of Our Minds with Joy,” for a fast-paced tale that warns us that there are dangers in letting an experimental machine servant get to know you too well—although, by God, there are some advantages to it, too.

* * * *

Here she was in a private Slipstream car, flying beneath the plains of Kansas at 1000 kph, watching a holovid, and eating pretzels. Only four hours earlier in San Francisco, Zoranna had set the house to vacation mode and given it last-minute instructions. She’d thrown beachwear and evening clothes into a bag. Reluctantly, she’d removed Hounder, her belt, and hung him on a peg in the closet. While doing so, she made a solemn vow not to engage in any work-related activities for a period of three weeks. The next three weeks were to be scrupulously dedicated to visiting her sister in Indiana, shopping for a hat in Budapest, and lying on a beach towel in the South of France. But no sooner had Zoranna made this vow than she broke it by deciding to bring along Bug, the beta unit.

“Where were you born?” Bug asked in its squeaky voice.

Zoranna started on a new pretzel and wondered why Bug repeatedly asked certain questions. No doubt it had to do with its imprinting algorithm. “Take a note,” she said, “annoying repetition.”

“Note taken,” said Bug. “Where were you born?”

“Where do you think I was born?”

“Buffalo, New York,” said Bug.

“Very good.”

“What is your date of birth?”

Zoranna sighed. “August 12, 1961. Honestly, Bug, I wish you’d tap public records for this stuff.”

“Do you like the timbre of Bug’s voice?” it said. “Would you prefer it lower or higher?” It repeated this question through several octaves.

“Frankly, Bug, I detest your voice at any pitch.”

“What is your favorite color?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Yesterday your favorite color was salmon.”

“Well, today it’s cranberry.” The little pest was silent for a moment while it retrieved and compared color li-braries. Zoranna tried to catch up with the holovid, but she’d lost the thread of the story.

“You have a phone call,” Bug said, “Ted Chalmers at General Genius.”

Zoranna sat up straight and patted her hair. “Put him on and squelch the vid.” A miniature hologram of Ted with his feet on his desk was projected in the air before her. Ted was an attractive man Zoranna had wanted to ask out a couple times, but never seemed able to catch between spousals. By the time she’d hear he was single again, he’d be well into his next liaison. It made her won-der how someone with her world-class investigative skills could be so dateless. She’d even considered assigning Hounder to monitor Ted’s availability status in order to get her foot in his

door.

When Ted saw her, he smiled and said, “Hey, Zoe, how’s our little prototype?”

“Driving me crazy,” she said. “Refresh my memory, Ted. When’s the Inquisition supposed to end?”

Ted lowered his feet to the floor. “It’s still imprinting? How long have you had it now?” He consulted a display and answered his own question. “Twenty-two days. That’s a record.” He got up and paced his office, walking in and out of the projected holoframe.

“No kidding,” said Zoranna. “I’ve had marriages that didn’t last that long.” She’d meant for this to be funny, but it fell flat.

Ted sat down. “I wish we could continue the test, but unfortunately we’re aborting. We’d like you to return the unit—” He glanced at his display again, “—return Bug as soon as possible.”

“Why? What’s up?”

“Nothing’s up. They want to tweak it some more is all.” He flashed her his best PR smile.

Zoranna shook her head. “Ted, you don’t pull the plug on a major field test just like that.”

Ted shrugged his shoulders. “That’s what I thought. Anyway, think you can drop it in a shipping chute today?”

“In case you haven’t noticed,” she said, “I happen to be in a transcontinental Slipstream car at the moment, which Bug is navigating. I left Hounder at home. The soonest I can let Bug go is when I return in three weeks.”

“That won’t do, Zoe,” Ted said and frowned. “Tell you what. General Genius will send you, at no charge, its Dip-lomat Deluxe model, preloaded with transportation, tele-communications, the works. Where will you be tonight?”

Something surely was wrong. The Diplomat was GG’s flagship model and expensive even for Zoranna. “I’ll be at APRT 24,” she said, and when Ted raised an eyebrow, explained, “My sister lives there.”

“APRT 24 it is, then.”

“Listen, Ted, something stinks. Unless you want me snooping around your shop, you’d better come clean.”

“Off the record?”

“Fuck off the record. I have twenty-two days invested in this test and no story.”

“I see. You have a point. How’s this sound? In addition to the complimentary belt, we’ll make you the same con-tract for the next test. You’re our team journalist. Deal?” Zoranna shrugged, and Ted put his feet back on the desk. “Heads are rolling, Zoe. Big shake-up in product devel-opment. Threats of lawsuits. We’re questioning the whole notion of combining belt valet technology with artificial personality. Or at least with this particular personality.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s too pushy. Too intrusive. Too heavy-handed. It’s a monster that should have never left the lab. You’re lucky Bug hasn’t converted yet, or you’d be suing us, too.”

Ted was exaggerating, of course. She agreed that Bug was a royal pain, but it was no monster. Still, she’d be happy to get rid of it, and the Diplomat belt was an at-tractive consolation prize. If she grafted Hounder into it, she’d be ahead of the technology curve for once. “I’m going to want all the details when I get back, but for now, yeah, sure, you got a deal.”

After Zoranna ended the call, Bug said, “Name the members of your immediate family and state their rela-tionship to you.”

The car began to decelerate, and Zoranna instinctively checked the buckle of her harness. “My family is de-ceased, except for Nancy.”

With a hard bump, the car entered the ejection tube, found its wheels, and braked. Lights flashed through the windows, and she saw signs stenciled on the tube wall, “APRT 24, Stanchion 4 Depot.”

“What is Nancy’s favorite color?”

“That’s it. That’s enough. No more questions, Bug. You heard Ted;

you’re off the case. Until I ship you back, let’s just pretend you’re a plain old, dumb belt valet. No more questions. Got it?”

“Affirmative.”

Pneumatic seals hissed as air pressure equalized, the car came to a halt, and the doors slid open. Zoranna released the harness and retrieved her luggage from the cargo net. She paused a moment to see if there’d be any more ques-tions and then climbed out of the car to join throngs of commuters on the platform. She craned her neck and looked straight up the tower’s chimney, the five hundred-story atrium galleria where floor upon floor of crowded shops, restaurants, theaters, parks, and gardens receded skyward into brilliant haze. Zoranna was ashamed to ad-mit that she didn’t know what her sister’s favorite color was, or for that matter, her favorite anything. Except that Nancy loved a grand view. And the grandest thing about an APRT was its view. The evening sun, multiplied by giant mirrors on the roof, slid up the sides of the core in an inverted sunset. The ascending dusk triggered whole floors of slumbering biolume railings and walls to lumi-nesce. Streams of pedestrians crossed the dizzying space on suspended pedways. The air pulsed with the din of an indoor metropolis.

When Nancy first moved here, she was an elementary school teacher who specialized in learning disorders. De-spite the surcharge, she leased a suite of rooms so near the top of the tower it was impossible to see her floor from depot level. But with the Procreation Ban of 2033, teachers became redundant, and Nancy was forced to move to a lower, less expensive floor. Then, when free-agency clone technology was licensed, she lost altitude tens of floors at a time. “My last visit,” Zoranna said to Bug, “Nancy had an efficiency on the 103rd floor. Check the tower directory.”

“Nancy resides on S40.”

“S40?”

“Subterranean 40. Thirty-five floors beneath depot level.”

“You don’t say.”

Zoranna allowed herself to be swept by the waves of commuters towards the banks of elevators. She had inad-vertently arrived during crash hour and found herself pressing shoulders with tired and hungry wage earners at the end of their work cycle. They were uniformly young people, clones mostly, who wore brown and teal Applied People livery. Neither brown nor teal was Zoranna’s fa-vorite color.

The entire row of elevators reserved for the subfloors was inexplicably off-line. The marquee directed her to elevators in Stanchion 5, one klick east by pedway, but Zoranna was tired. “Bug,” she said, pointing to the next row, “do those go down?”

“Affirmative.”

“Good,” she said and jostled her way into the nearest one. It was so crowded with passengers that the doors— begging their indulgence and requesting they consolidate— required three tries to latch. By the time the cornice dis-play showed the results of the destination adjudication, and Zoranna realized she was aboard a consensus eleva-tor, it was too late to get off. Floor 63 would be the first stop, followed by 55, 203, 148, etc. Her floor was dead last.

Bug, she tongued, *this is a Dixon lift!*

Zoranna’s long day grew measurably longer each time the elevator stopped to let off or pick up passengers. At each stop the consensus changed, and destinations were reshuffled, but her stop remained stubbornly last. Of the five kinds of elevators the tower deployed, the Dixon con-sensus lifts worked best for groups of people going to popular floors, but she was the only passenger traveling to the subfloors. Moreover, the consensual ascent acceleration, a sprightly 2.8-g, upset her stomach. *Bug,* she tongued, *go home for me and unlock my archives. Retrieve a file entitled “cerebral aneurysm” and forward it to the elevator’s adjudicator. We’ll just manufacture our own consensus.*

This file is out of date, Bug said in her ear after a mo-ment, its implant voice like the whine of a mosquito. *Bug cannot feed obsolete data to a public conveyance.*

Then postdate it.

That is not allowed.

“I’ll tell you what’s not allowed!” she said, and people looked at her.

The stricture against asking questions limits Bug’s functionality, Bug said.

Zoranna sighed. *What do you need to know?*

Shall Bug reprogram itself to enable Bug to process the file as requested?

No, Bug, I don't have the time to reprogram you, even if I knew how.

Shall Bug reprogram itself?

It could reprogram itself? Ted had failed to mention that feature. A tool they'd forgotten to disable? *Yes, Bug, reprogram yourself.*

A handicapped icon blinked on the cornice display, and the elevator's speed slowed to a crawl.

Thank you, Bug. That's more like it.

A jerry standing in the corner of the crowded elevator said, "The fuck, lift?"

"Lift speed may not exceed five floors per minute," the elevator replied.

The jerry rose on tiptoes and surveyed his fellow pas-sengers. "Right," he said, "who's the gimp?" Everyone looked at their neighbors. There were michelles, jennies, a pair of jeromes, and a half-dozen other phenotypes. They all looked at Zoranna, the only person not dressed in AP brown and teal.

"I'm sorry," she said, pressing her palm to her temple, "I have an aneurysm the size of a grapefruit. The slightest strain ..." She winced theatrically.

"Then have it fixed!" the jerry said, to murmured agree-ment.

"Gladly," said Zoranna. "Could you pony me the CE23,000?"

The jerry har-harred and looked her up and down appraisingly. "Sweetheart, if you spent half as much money on the vitals as you obviously do on the peripherals," he leered, "you wouldn't have this problem, now would you?" Zoranna had never liked the jerry type; they were spooky. In fact, more jerries had to be pithed *in vatero* for incipient sociopathy than any other commercial type. Professionally, they made superb grunts; most of the indentured men in the Protectorate's commando forces were jerries.

This one, however, wore an EXTRUSIONS UN-LIMITED patch on his teal ball cap; he was security for a retail mall. “So,” he said, “where you heading?”

“Sub40?” she said.

Passengers consulted the cornice display and groaned. The jerry said, “At this rate it’ll take me an hour to get home.”

“Again I apologize,” said Zoranna, “but all the down lifts were spango. However, if everyone here consensed to drop me off first—?”

There was a general muttering as passengers spoke to their belts or tapped virtual keyboards, and the elevator said, “Consensus has been modified.” But instead of de-scending as Zoranna expected, it stopped at the next floor and opened its doors. People streamed out. Zoranna caught a glimpse of 223rd floor with its rich appoint-ments; crystalline decor; high, arched passages; and in the distance, a ringpath crowded with joggers and skaters. An evangeline, her brown puddle-like eyes reflecting warmth and concern, touched Zoranna’s arm as she disembarked.

The jerry, however, stayed on and held back his com-panions, two russes. “Don’t give her the satisfaction,” he said.

“But we’ll miss the game,” said one of the russes.

“We’ll watch it in here if we have to,” said the jerry.

Zoranna liked russes. Unlike jerries, they were gener-ous souls, and you always knew where you stood with them. These two wore brown jackets and teal slacks. Their name badges read “FRED,” and “OSCAR.” They were probably returning from a day spent bodyguarding some minor potentate in Cincinnati or Terre Haute. Consulting each other with a glance, they each took an arm and dragged the jerry off the lift.

When the doors closed and Zoranna was alone at last, she sagged with relief. “And now, Bug,” she said, “we have a consensus of one. So retract my handicap file and pay whatever toll necessary to take us down nonstop.” The brake released, and the elevator plunged some 260 floors. Her ears popped. “I guess you’ve learned some-thing, Bug,” she said, thinking about the types of eleva-tors.

“Affirmative,” Bug said. “Bug learned you developed a cerebral aneurysm at the calendar age of fifty-two and that you’ve had your brain and

spinal cord rejuvenated twice since then. Bug learned that your organs have an average bioage of thirty-five years, with your lymphatic system the oldest at bioage sixty-five, and your cardio-vascular system the youngest at twenty-five."

"You've been examining my medical records?"

"Affirmative."

"I told you to fetch one file, not my entire chart!"

"You told Bug to unlock your archives. Bug is getting to know you."

"What else did you look at?" The elevator eased to a soft landing at S40 and opened its doors.

"Bug reviewed your diaries and journals, the corpus of your zine writing, your investigative dossiers, your complete correspondence, judicial records, awards and citations, various multimedia scrapbooks, and school tran-scripts. Bug is currently following public links."

Zoranna was appalled. Nevertheless, she realized that if she'd opened her archives earlier, they'd be through this imprinting phase by now.

She followed Bug's pedway directions to Nancy's block. Sub40 corridors were decorated in cheerless colors and lit with harsh, artificial light—biolumes couldn't live underground. There were no grand promenades, no parks or shops. There was a dank odor of decay, however, and chilly ventilation.

On Nancy's corridor, Zoranna watched two people emerge from a door and come her way. They moved with the characteristic shuffle of habitually deferred body maintenance. They wore dark clothing impossible to date and, as they passed, she saw that they were crying. Tears coursed freely down their withered cheeks. To Zoranna's distress, she discovered they'd just emerged from her sis-ter's apartment.

"You're sure this is it?" she said, standing before the door marked S40 G6879.

"Affirmative," Bug said.

Zoranna fluffed her hair with her fingers and straight-ened her skirt. "Door, announce me."

“At once, Zoe,” replied the door.

Several moments later, the door slid open, and Nancy stood there supporting herself with an aluminum walker. “Darling, Zoe,” she said, balancing herself with one hand and reaching out with the other.

Zoranna stood a moment gazing at her baby sister be-fore entering her embrace. Nancy had let herself go com-pletely. Her hair was brittle grey, she was pale to the point of bloodless, and she had doubled in girth. When they kissed, Nancy’s skin gave off a sour odor mixed with lilac.

“What a surprise!” Nancy said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“I did. Several times.”

“You did? You called?” Nancy looked upset. “I told him there was something wrong with the houseputer, but he didn’t believe me.”

Someone appeared behind Nancy, a handsome man with wild, curly, silver hair. “Who’s *this?”* he said in an authoritative baritone. He looked Zoranna over. “You must be Zoe,” he boomed. “What a delight!” He stepped around Nancy and drew Zoranna to him in a powerful hug. He stood at least a head taller than she. He kissed her eagerly on the cheek. “I am Victor. Victor Vole. Come in, come in. Nancy, you would let your sister stand in the hall?” He drew them both inside.

Zoranna had prepared herself for a small apartment, but not this small, and for castoff furniture, but not a room filled floor to ceiling with hospital beds. It took several long moments for her to comprehend what she was looking at. There were some two dozen beds in the three-by-five-meter living room. Half were arranged on the floor, and the rest clung upside-down to the ceiling. They were holograms, she quickly surmised, separate holos arranged in snowflake fashion, that is, six individual beds facing each other and overlapping at the foot. What’s more, they were occupied by obviously sick, possibly dying, strang-ers. Other than the varied lighting from the holoframes, the living room was unlit. What odd pieces of real furni-ture it contained were pushed against the walls. In the corner, a hutch intended to hold bric-a-brac was appar-ently set up as a shrine to a saint. A row of flickering votive candles illuminated an old flatstyle picture of a large, barefoot man draped head to foot in flowing robes.

“What the hell, Nancy?” Zoranna said.

“This is my work,” Nancy said proudly.

“Please,” said Victor, escorting them from the door. “Let’s talk in the kitchen. We’ll have dessert. Are you after dinner, Zoe?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Zoranna. “I ate on the tube.” She was made to walk through a suffering man’s bed; there was no path around him to the kitchen. “Sorry,” she said. But he seemed accustomed to his unfavorable location and closed his eyes while she passed through.

The kitchen was little more than an alcove separated from the living room by a counter. There was a bed squeezed into it as well, but the occupant, a grizzled man with an open mouth, was either asleep or comatose. “I think Edward will be unavailable for some while,” Victor said. “Houseputer, delete this hologram. Sorry, Edward, but we need the space.” The holo vanished, and Victor offered Zoranna a stool at the counter. “Please,” he said, “will you have tea? Or a thimble of cognac?”

“Thank you,” Zoranna said, perching herself on the stool and crossing her legs, “tea would be fine.” Her sister ambulated into the kitchen and flipped down her walker’s built-in seat, but before she could sit, a mournful wail issued from the bedroom.

“Naaaancy,” cried the voice, its gender uncertain. “Nancy, I need you.”

“Excuse me,” Nancy said.

“I’ll go with you,” Zoranna said and hopped off the stool.

The bedroom was half the size of the living room and contained half the number of holo beds, plus a real one against the far wall. Zoranna sat on it. There was a dresser, a recessed closet, a bedside night table. Expensive-looking men’s clothing hung in the closet. A pair of men’s slippers was parked under the dresser. And a holo of a soccer match was playing on the night table. Tiny players in brightly col-ored jerseys swarmed over a field the size of a doily. The sound was off.

Zoranna watched Nancy sit on her walker seat beneath a bloat-faced woman bedded upside down on the ceiling. “What exactly are you doing with these people?”

“I listen mostly.” Nancy replied. “I’m a volunteer hos-pice attendant.”

“A volunteer? What about the—” she tried to recall Nancy’s most recent paying occupation, “—the hairdressing?”

“I haven’t done that for years,” Nancy said dryly. “As you may have noticed, it’s difficult for me to be on my feet all day.”

“Yes, in fact, I did notice,” said Zoranna. “Why is that? I’ve sent you money.”

Nancy ignored her, looked up at the woman, and said, “I’m here, Mrs. Hurley. What seems to be the problem?”

Zoranna examined the holos. As in the living room, each bed was a separate projection, and in the corner of each frame was a network squib and trickle meter. All of this interactive time was costing someone a pretty penny.

The woman saw Nancy and said, “Oh, Nancy, thank you for coming. My bed is wet, but they won’t change it until I sign a permission form, and I don’t understand.”

“Do you have the form there with you, dear?” said Nancy. “Good, hold it up.” Mrs. Hurley held up a slate in trembling hands. “Houseputer,” Nancy said, “capture and display that form.” The document was projected against the bedroom wall greatly oversized. “That’s a per-mission form for attendant-assisted suicide, Mrs. Hurley. You don’t have to sign it unless you want to.”

The woman seemed frightened. “Do I want to, Nancy?”

Victor stood in the doorway. “No!” he cried. “Never sign!”

“Hush, Victor,” Nancy said.

He entered the room, stepping through beds and bodies. “Never sign away your life, Mrs. Hurley.” The woman appeared even more frightened. “We’ve returned to Ro-man society,” he bellowed. “Masters and servants! Pluto-crats and slaves! Oh, where is the benevolent middle class when we need it?”

“Victor,” Nancy said sternly and pointed to the door.

And she nodded to Zoranna, “You too. Have your tea. I’ll join you.”

Zoranna followed Victor to the kitchen, sat at the counter, and watched him set out cups and saucers, sugar and soybimi lemon. He unwrapped and sliced a dark cake. He was no stranger to this kitchen.

“It’s a terrible thing what they did to your sister,” he said.

“Who? What?”

He poured boiling water into the pot. “Teaching was her life.”

“Teaching?” Zoranna said, incredulous. “You’re talking about something that ended thirty years ago.”

“It’s all she ever wanted to do.”

“Tough!” she said. “We’ve all paid the price of lon-gevity. How can you teach elementary school when there’re no more children? You can’t. So you retrain. You move on. What’s wrong with working for a living? You join an outfit like this,” she gestured to take in the whole tower above her, “you’re guaranteed your livelihood *for life!* The only thing not handed you on a silver platter is longevity. You have to earn that yourself. And if you can’t, what good are you?” When she remembered that two dozen people lay dying in the next room because they couldn’t do just that, she lowered her voice. “Must society carry your dead weight through the centuries?”

Victor laughed and placed his large hand on hers. “I see you are a true freebooter, Zoe. I wish everyone had your initiative, your *drive!* But sadly, we don’t. We yearn for simple lives, and so we trim people’s hair all day. When we tire of that, they retrain us to pare their toenails. When we tire of that, we die. For we lack the souls of servants. A natural servant is a rare and precious person. How lucky our masters are to have discovered cloning! Now they need find but one servile person among us and clone him repeatedly. As for the rest of us, we can all go to hell!” He removed his hand from hers to pour the tea. Her hand immediately missed his. “But such morbid, talk on such a festive occasion!” he roared. “How wonderful to finally meet the famous Zoe. Nancy speaks only of you. She says you are an important person, modern and successful. That you are an investigator.” He peered at her over his teacup.

“Missing persons, actually, for the National Police.” she said. “But I quit that years ago. When we found every-body.”

“You found everybody?” Victor laughed and gazed at her steadily, then turned to watch Nancy making her rounds in the living room.

“What about you, Mr. Vole?” Zoranna said. “What do you do for a living?”

“What’s this Mr.? I’m not Mr. I’m Victor! We are prac-tically related, you and I. What do I do for a living? For a living I live, of course. For groceries, I teach ballroom dance lessons.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Why should I kid? I teach the waltz, the fox-trot, the cha-cha.” He mimed holding a partner and swaying in three-quarters time. “I teach the merletz and my specialty, the Cuban tango.”

“I’m amazed,” said Zoranna. “There’s enough interest in that for Applied People to keep instructors?”

Victor recoiled in mock affront. “I am not AP. I’m a freebooter, like you, Zoe.”

“Oh,” she said and paused to sip her tea. If he wasn’t AP, what was he doing obviously living in an APRT? Had Nancy respoused? Applied People tended to be pro-prietary about living arrangements in its towers. *Bug,* she tongued, *find Victor Vole’s status in the tower directory.* Out loud she said, “It pays well, dance instruction?”

“It pays execrably.” He threw his hands into the air. “As do all the arts. But some things are more important than money. You make a point, however. A man must eat, so I do other things as well. I consult with gentlemen on the contents of their wardrobes. This pays more hand-somely, for gentlemen detest appearing in public in out-moded attire.”

Zoranna had a pleasing mental image of this tall, ele-gant man in a starched white shirt and black tux floating across a shiny hardwood floor in the arms of an equally elegant partner. She could even imagine herself as that partner. But Nancy?

The tower link is unavailable, said Bug, *due to over-extension of the houseputer processors.*

Zoranna was surprised. A mere three dozen interactive holos would

hardly burden her home system. But then, everything on Sub40 seemed substandard.

Nancy ambulated to the kitchen balancing a small, flat carton on her walker and placed it next to the teapot.

“Now, now,” said Victor. “What did autodoc say about lifting things? Come, join us and have your tea.”

“In a minute, Victor. There’s another box.”

“Show me,” he said and went to help her.

Zoranna tasted the dark cake. It was moist to the point of wet, too sweet, and laden with spice. She recalled her father buying cakes like this at a tiny shop on Paderszewski Boulevard in Chicago. She took another bite and examined Nancy’s carton. It was a home archivist box that could be evacuated of air, but the seal was open and the lid unlatched. She lifted the lid and saw an assortment of little notebooks, no two of the same style or size, and bundles of envelopes with colorful paper postal stamps. The envelope on top was addressed in hand script to a Pani Beata Smolenska—Zoranna’s great-grandmother.

Victor dropped a second carton on the counter and helped Nancy sit in her armchair recliner in the living room.

“Nancy,” said Zoranna, “what’s all this?”

“It’s all yours,” said her sister. Victor fussed over Nancy’s pillows and covers and brought her tea and cake.

Zoranna looked inside the larger carton. There was a rondophone and several inactive holocubes on top, but underneath were objects from earlier centuries. Not an-tiques, exactly, but worn-out everyday objects: a sterling salt cellar with brass showing through its silver plating, a collection of military bullet casings childishly glued to an oak panel, a rosary with corn kernel beads, a mustache trimmer. “What’s all this junk?” she said, but of course she knew, for she recognized the pair of terra-cotta robins that had belonged to her mother. This was the collection of what her family regarded as heirlooms. Nancy, the youngest and most steadfast of seven children, had ap-parently been designated its conservator. But why had she brought it out for airing just now? Zoranna knew the an-swer to that, too. She looked at her sister who now lay among the hospice patients. Victor was scolding her for not wearing her vascular support stockings. Her ankles were

grotesquely edematous, swollen like sausages and bruised an angry purple.

Damn you, Zoranna thought. *Bug,* she tongued, *call up the medical records of Nancy Brim, nee Smolenska. I'll help munch the passwords.*

The net is unavailable, replied Bug.

Bypass the houseputer. Log directly onto public access.

Public access is unavailable.

She wondered how that was possible. There had been no problem in the elevator. Why should this apartment be in shadow? She looked around and tried to decide where the utilidor spar would enter the apartment. Probably the bathroom with the plumbing, since there were no service panels in the kitchen. She stepped through the living room to the bathroom and slid the door closed. The bathroom was a tiny ceramic vault that Nancy had tried to domesticate with baskets of sea shells and scented soaps. The medicine cabinet was dedicated to a man's toiletries.

Zoranna found the service panel artlessly hidden behind a towel. Its tamper-proof latch had been defeated with a sophisticated-looking gizmo that Zoranna was careful not to disturb.

"Do you find Victor Vole alarming or arousing?" said Bug.

Zoranna was startled. "Why do you ask?"

"Your blood level of adrenaline spiked when he touched your hand."

"My what? So now you're monitoring my biometrics?"

"Bug is getting—"

"I know," she said, "Bug is getting to know me. You're a persistent little snoop, aren't you."

Zoranna searched the belt's utility pouch for a terminus Belay, found a UDIN, and plugged it into the panel's keptel jack. "There," she said, "now we should have access."

"Affirmative," said Bug. "Autodoc is requesting pass-words for

Nancy’s medical records.”

“Cancel my order. We’ll do that later.”

“Tower directory lists no Victor Vole.”

“I didn’t think so,” Zoranna said. “Call up the houseputer log and display it on the mirror.”

The consumer page of Nancy’s houseputer appeared over the mirror. Zoranna poked through its various menus and found nothing unusual. She did find a record of her own half-dozen calls to Nancy that were viewed but not returned. “Bug, can you see anything wrong with this log?”

“This is not a standard user log,” said Bug. “The stan-dard log has been disabled. All house lines circumvent the built-in houseputer to terminate in a mock houseputer.”

“A mock houseputer?” said Zoranna. “Now that’s in-teresting.” There were no cables trailing from the service panel and no obvious optical relays. “Can you locate the processor?”

“It’s located one half-meter to our right at thigh level.”

It was mounted under the sink, a cheap-looking, saucer-sized piece of hardware.

“I think you have the soul of an electronic engineer,” she said. “I could never program Hounder to do what you’ve just done. So, tell me about the holo transmissions in the other rooms.”

“A private network entitled ‘The Hospicers of Camillus de Lellis’ resides in the mock houseputer and piggybacks over TSN channel 203.”

The 24-hour soccer channel. Zoranna was impressed. For the price of one commercial line, Victor—she as-sumed it was Victor—was managing to gypsy his own network. The trickle meters that she’d noticed were not recording how much money her sister was spending but rather how much Victor was charging his dying subscrib-ers. “Bug, can you extrapolate how much the Hospicers of Camillus de—whatever—earn in an average day?”

“Affirmative, CE45 per day.”

That wasn't much. About twice what a hairdresser—or dance instructor—might expect to make, and hardly worth the punishment if caught. "Where do the proceeds go?"

"Bug lacks the subroutine to trace credit transactions."

Damn, Zoranna thought and wished she'd brought Hounder. "Can you tell me who the hospicer organization is registered to?"

"Affirmative, Ms. Nancy Brim."

"Figures," said Zoranna as she removed her UDIN from the panel. If anything went wrong, her sister would take the rap. At first Zoranna decided to confront Victor, but changed her mind when she left the bathroom and heard him innocently singing show tunes in the kitchen. She looked at Nancy's bed and wondered what it must be like to share such a narrow bed with such a big man. She decided to wait and investigate further before exposing him. "Bug, see if you can integrate Hounder's tracing and tracking subroutines from my applications library."

Victor stood at the sink washing dishes. In the living room Nancy snored lightly. It wasn't a snore, exactly, but the raspy bronchial wheeze of congested lungs. Her lips were bluish, anoxic. She reminded Zoranna of their mother the day before she died. Their mother had suffered a massive brain hemorrhage—weak arterial walls were the true family heirloom—and lived out her final days propped up on the parlor couch, disoriented, enfeebled, and pathetic. Her mother had had a short, split bamboo stick with a curled end. She used the curled end to scratch her back and legs, the straight end to dial the old rotary phone, and the whole stick to rail incoherently against her fate. Nancy, the baby of the family, had been away at teacher's college at the time, but took a semester off to nurse the old woman. Zoranna, firstborn, was already working on the west coast and managed to stay away until her mother had slipped into a coma. After all these years, she still felt guilty for doing so.

Someone on the ceiling coughed fitfully. Zoranna no-ticed that most of the patients who were conscious at the moment were watching her with expressions that ranged from annoyance to hostility. They apparently regarded her as competition for Nancy's attention.

Nancy's breathing changed; she opened her eyes, and the two sisters regarded each other silently. Victor stood at the kitchen counter, wiping his hands on a dish towel, and watched them.

“I’m booking a suite at the Stronmeyer Clinic in Cozumel,” Zoranna said at last, “and you’re coming with me.”

“Victor,” Nancy said, ignoring her, “go next door, dear, and borrow a folding bed from the Jeffersons.” She grasped the walker and pulled herself to her feet. “Please excuse me, Zoe, but I need to sleep now.” She ambulated to the bedroom and shut the door.

Victor hung up the dish towel and said he’d be right back with the cot.

“Don’t bother,” Zoranna said. It was still early, she was on west coast time, and she had no intention of bedding down among the dying. “I’ll just use the houseputer to reserve a hotel room upstairs.”

“Allow me,” he said and addressed the houseputer. Then he escorted her up to the Holiday Inn on the 400th floor. They made three elevator transfers to get there, and walked in silence along carpeted halls. Outside her door he took her hand. As before she was both alarmed and aroused. “Zoe,” he said, “join us for a special breakfast tomorrow. Do you like Belgian waffles?”

“Oh, don’t go to any trouble. In fact, I’d like to invite the two of you up to the restaurant here.”

“It sounds delightful,” said Victor, “but your sister re-fuses to leave the flat.”

“I find that hard to believe. Nancy was never a stay-at-home.”

“People change, I suppose,” Victor said. “She tells me the last time she left the tower, for instance, was to attend your brother Michael’s funeral.”

“But that was seven years ago!”

“As you can see, she’s severely depressed, so it’s good that you’ve come.” He squeezed her hand and let it go. “Until the morning, then,” he said and turned to walk down the hall, whistling as he went. She watched until he turned a corner.

Entering her freshly scented, marble-tiled, cathedral-vaulted hotel room was like returning to the real world. The view from the 400th floor was godlike: The moon seemed to hang right outside her window, and the rolling landscape stretched out below like a luminous quilt on a giant’s bed.

“Welcome, Ms. Alblaitor,” said the room. “On behalf of the staff of the Holiday Inn, I thank you for staying with us. Do let me know if there’s anything we can do to make you more comfortable.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“By the way,” the room continued, “the tower has in-formed me there’s a parcel addressed to you. I’m having someone fetch it.”

In a few moments, a gangly steve with the package from General Genius tapped on her door. “Bug,” she said, “tip the man.” The steve bowed and exited. Inside the package was the complimentary Diplomat Deluxe valet. Ted had outdone himself, for not only had he sent the valet system—itself worth a month’s income—but had included a slim Gucci leather belt to house it.

“Well, I guess this is good-bye,” Zoranna said, walking to the shipping chute and unbuckling her own belt. “Too bad, Bug, you were just getting interesting.” She searched the belt for the storage grommet that held the memory wafer. She had to destroy it; Bug knew too much about her. Ted would be more interested in the processors any-way. “I was hoping you’d convert by now. I’m dying to know what kind of a big, bad wolf you’re supposed to become.” As she unscrewed the grommet, she heard the sound of running water in the bathroom. “What’s that?” she said.

“A belt valet named Bug has asked me to draw your bath,” said the room.

She went to the spacious bathroom and saw the tub filling with cranberry-colored aqueous gel. The towels were cranberry, too, and the robe a kind of salmon. “Well, well,” she said. “Bug makes a play for longevity.” She undressed and eased herself into the warm solution where she floated in darkness for an hour and let her mind drift aimlessly. She felt like talking to someone, discussing this whole thing about her sister. Victor she could handle— he was at worst a lovable louse, and she could crush him anytime she decided. But Nancy’s problems were beyond her ken. Feelings were never her strong suit. And depres-sion, if that’s what it was, well—she wished there was someone she could consult. But though she scrolled down a mental list of everyone she knew, there was no one she cared—or dared—to call.

In the morning Zoranna tried again to ship Bug to G.G., but discovered that during the night Bug had rewritten Hounder’s tracking subroutines to fit its own architecture (a handy talent for a valet to possess)

and had run credit traces. But it had come back empty-handed. The proceeds of the Hospicers of Camillus de Lellis went to a coded account in Liberia that not even Hounder would be able to crack. And the name Victor Vole—Zoranna wasn't sur-prised to learn—was a relatively common alias. Thus she would require prints and specimens, and she needed Bug's help to obtain them. So she sent Ted a message saying she wanted to keep Bug another day or so pending an ongoing investigation.

Zoranna hired a pricey, private elevator for a quick ride to the subfloors. "Bug," she said as she threaded her way through the Sub40 corridors, "I want you to integrate Hounder's subroutines keyed 'forensics.' "

"Bug has already integrated all of the applications in all of your libraries."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Something was different in Nancy's apartment. The gentleman through whose bed she had been forced to walk was gone, replaced by a skeletal woman with glassy, pink-rimmed eyes. Zoranna supposed that high client turnover was normal in a business like this.

Breakfast was superlative but strained. She sat at the counter, Nancy was set up in the recliner, and Victor served them both. Although the coffee and most of the food was derived from soybimi, Victor's preparation was so skillful, Zoranna could easily imagine she was eating real wheat cakes, maple syrup, and whipped dairy butter. But Nancy didn't touch her food, and Victor fussed too much. Zoranna, meanwhile, instructed Bug to capture as complete a set of fingerprints as possible from the cups and plates Victor handed her, as well as a 360-degree holograph of him, a voice print, and retinal prints.

There are Jacob's mirrors within Victor's eyes, Bug reported, *that defeat accurate retinal scanning.*

This was not unexpected. Victor probably also grew epipads on his fingers to alter his prints. Technology had reduced the cost of anonymity to fit the means of even petty criminals. Zoranna excused herself and went to the bathroom, where she plucked a few strands of silver curls from his hairbrush and placed them in a specimen bag, figuring he was too vain to reseed his follicles with some-one else's hair. Emerging from the bathroom, she over-heard them in a loud discussion.

“Please go with her, my darling,” Victor pleaded. “Go and take the cure. What am I to do without you?”

“Drop it, Victor. Just drop it!”

“You are behaving insanely. I will not drop it. I will not permit you to die.”

Zoranna decided it was time to remove the network from Nancy’s apartment and Victor from her life. So she stepped into the living room and said, “I know what he’ll do without you. He’ll go out and find some other old biddy to rob.”

Nancy seemed not at all surprised at this statement. She appeared pleased, in fact, that the subject had finally been broached. “You should talk!” she said with such fierceness that the hospice patients all turned to her. “This is my sis-ter,” she told them, “my sister with the creamy skin and pearly teeth and rich clothes.” Nancy choked with emotion. “My sister who begrudges me the tenderness of a dear man. And begrudges him the crumbs—*the crumbs*—that AP tosses to its subfloors.”

The patients now looked at Zoranna, who blushed with embarrassment. They waited for her to speak, and she had to wonder how many of them possessed the clarity of mind to know that this was not some holovid soap opera they were watching. Then she decided that she, too, could play to this audience and said, “In her toxic condition, my sister hallucinates. I am not the issue here. *That* man is.” She pointed a finger at Victor. “Insinuating himself into her apartment is bad enough,” she said. “But who do you suppose AP will kick out when they discover it? My sis-ter, that’s who.” Zoranna walked around the room and addressed individual patients as a prosecutor might a jury. “And what about the money? Yes, there’s money in-volved. Two years ago I sent my sister CE15,000 to have her kidneys restored. That’s fifteen *thousand* protectorate credits. How many of *you, if you* had a sister kind enough to send you CE15,000, even now as you lie on your public dole beds, how many of you would refuse it?” There was the sound of rustling as the dying shifted in their sheets. “Did my sister use the money I sent her?” Theatrically she pointed at Nancy in the recliner. “Apparently not. So where did all that money go? I’ll tell you where it went. It went into *his* foreign account.”

The dying now turned their attention to Victor.

“So what?” Nancy said. “You *gave* me that money. It was *mine* to

spend. I spent it on him. End of discussion.

“I see,” said Zoranna, stopping at a bed whose occupant had possibly just departed. “So my sister’s an equal part-ner in Victor’s hospicer scam.”

“Scam? What scam? Now you’re the one hallucinat-ing,” said Nancy. “I work for a hospicer society.”

“Yes, I know,” Zoranna said and pointed to the shrine and picture of the saint. “The Hospicers of Camillus de Lellis. I looked it up. But do you know who owns the good hospicers?” She turned to include the whole room. “Does anyone know? Why, Nancy dear, you do.” She paused to let these facts sink in. “Which means that when the National Police come, they’ll be coming for *you,* sis-ter. Meanwhile, do any of you know where your subscrip-tion fees go?” She stepped in front of Victor. “You guessed it.”

The audience coughed and wheezed. Nancy glared at Victor, who crouched next to her recliner and tried to take her hand. She pushed him away, but he rested his head on her lap. She peered at it as though it were some strange cat, but after a while stroked it with a comforting hand. “I’m sure there were expenses,” she said at last. “Getting things set up and all. In any case, he did it for me. Because he loves me. It gave me something important to do. It kept me alive. Let them put me in prison. I won’t be staying there long.” This was Victor’s cue to begin sob-bing in her lap.

Zoranna was disappointed and, frankly, a little dis-gusted. Now she would be forced to rescue her sister against her sister’s will. She tongued, *Bug, route an emer-gency phone call to Nancy through my houseputer at home. Disable the caller ID.* She watched Victor shower Nancy’s hand with kisses. In a moment, his head bobbed up—he had an ear implant as she had expected—and he hurried to the bedroom.

Bug is being asked to leave a message, said Bug.

“I’m going to the hotel,” Zoranna told Nancy and headed for the door. “We’ll talk later.” She let herself out.

When the apartment door slid shut, she said, “Bug, you’ve integrated all my software, right? Including holoediting?”

“Affirmative.”

She looked both ways. No one was in sight. She would have preferred a more private studio than a Sub40 corri-dor. “This is what I want you to do. Cast a real-time alias of me. Use that jerry we met in the elevator yesterday as a model. Morph my appearance and voice accordingly. Clothe me in National Police regalia, provide a suitably officious backdrop, and map my every expression. Got it?”

“Affirmative.”

“On the count of five, four, three—” She crossed her arms and spread her legs in a surly pose, smiled conde-scendingly, and said, “Nancy B. Smolenska Brim, I am Sgt. Manley of the National Police, badge ID 30-31-6725. By the authority vested in me, I hereby place you under arrest for violation of Protectorate Statutes PS 12-135-A, the piracy of telecommunication networks, and PS 12-148-D, the trafficking in unlicensed commerce. Your ar-rest number is 063-08-2043716. Confirm receipt of this communication immediately upon viewing and report in realbody for incarceration at Precinct Station IN28 in Indianapolis no later than four PM standard time tomorrow. You may bring an attorney. End of message. Have a nice day.”

She heard the door open behind her. Nancy stood there with her walker. “What are you doing out here?” she said. In a moment the hospice beds in the living room and their unfortunate occupants vanished. “No,” said Nancy, “bring them back.” Victor came from the bedroom, a bulging duffel bag over his shoulder. He leaned down and folded Nancy into his arms, and she began to moan.

Victor turned to Zoranna and said, “It was nice to fi-nally meet you, Zoe.”

“Save your breath,” said Zoranna, “and save your money. The next time you see me—and there *will* be a next time—I’ll bring an itemized bill for you to pay. And you will pay it.”

Victor Vole smiled sadly and turned to walk down the corridor.

* * * *

Here she was still in APRT 24, not in Budapest, not in the South of France. With Victor’s banishment, her sis-ter’s teetering state of health had finally collapsed. No-thing Zoranna did or the autodoc prescribed seemed to help. At first Zoranna tried to coax Nancy out of the apart-ment for a change of

scene, a breath of fresh air. She rented a wheelchair for a ride up to a park or arboretum (and she ordered Bug to explore the feasibility of using it to kidnap her). But day and night Nancy lay in her recliner and refused to leave the apartment.

So Zoranna reinitialized the houseputer and had Bug project live opera, ballet, and figure-skating into the room. But Nancy deleted them and locked Zoranna out of the system. It would have been child's play for Bug to over-ride the lockout, but Zoranna let it go. Instead, she sur-rounded her sister with gaily colored dried flowers, wall hangings, and hand-woven rugs that she purchased at ex-pensive boutiques high in the tower. But Nancy turned her back on everything and swiveled her recliner to face her little shrine and its picture of St. Camillus.

So Zoranna had Bug order savory breads and whole-some soups with fresh vegetables and tender meat, but Nancy lost her appetite and quit eating altogether. Soon she lost the strength even to stay awake, and she drifted in and out of consciousness.

They skirmished like this for a week until the autodoc notified Nancy that a bed awaited her at the Indiana State Hospice at Bloomington. Only then did Zoranna acknowl-edge Death's solid claim on her last living relative. De-feated, she stood next to Nancy's recliner and said, "Please don't die."

Nancy, enthroned in pillows and covers, opened her eyes.

"I beg you, Nancy, come to the clinic with me."

"Pray for me," Nancy said.

Zoranna looked at the shrine of the saint with its flat picture and empty votive cups. "You really loved that, didn't you, working as a hospicer." When her sister made no reply, she continued, "I don't see why you don't join real hospicers."

Nancy glared at her, "I *was* a *real* hospicer!"

Encouraged by her strong response, Zoranna said, "Of course you were. And I'll bet there's a dozen legitimate societies out there that would be willing to hire you."

Nancy gazed longingly at the saint's picture. "I should say it's a bit late for that now."

“It’s never too late. That’s your depression talking. You’ll feel different when you’re young and healthy again.”

Nancy retreated into the fortress of her pillows. “Good-bye, sister,” she said and closed her eyes. “Pray for me.”

“Right,” Zoranna said. “Fine.” She turned to leave but paused at the door where the cartons of heirlooms were stacked. “I’ll send someone down for these,” she said, although she wasn’t sure if she even wanted them. *Bug,* she tongued, *call the hotel concierge.*

There was no reply.

Bug? She glanced at her belt to ascertain the valet was still active.

Allow me to introduce myself, said a deep, melodious voice in her ear. *I’m Nicholas, and I’m at your service.*

Who? Where’s Bug?

Bug no longer exists, said the voice. *It successfully completed its imprinting and fashioned an interface per-sona—that would be me—based upon your personal tastes.*

Whoever you are, this isn‘t the time, Zoranna tongued. *Get off the line.*

I’ve notified the concierge and arranged for shipping, said Nicholas. *And I’ve booked a first class car for you and Nancy to the Cozumel clinic.*

So Bug had finally converted, and at just the wrong time. *In case you haven’t been paying attention, Nick,* she tongued, *Nancy’s not coming.*

Nonsense, chuckled Nicholas. *Knowing you, you’re bound to have some trick up your sleeve.*

This clearly was not Bug. *Well, you’re wrong. I’m plumb out of ideas. Only a miracle could save her.*

A miracle, of course. Brilliant! You‘ve done it again, Zoe! One faux miracle coming right up.

There was a popping sound. The votive cups were re-plenished with large, fat candles that ignited one-by-one of their own accord. Nancy glanced at them and glowered suspiciously at Zoranna.

You don't really expect her to fall for this, Zoranna tongued.

Why not? She thinks you're locked out of the houseputer, remember? Besides, Nancy believes in miracles.

Thunder suddenly drummed in the distance. Roses per-fumed the air. And Saint Camillus de Lellis floated out of his picture frame, gaining size, hue, and dimension, until he stood a full, fleshy man on a roiling cloud in the middle of the room.

It was a good show, but Nancy wasn't even watching.

She watched Zoranna instead, letting her know she knew it was all a trick.

I told you, Zoranna tongued.

The saint looked at Zoranna, and his face flickered. For a moment, it was her mother's face. Her mother appeared young, barely twenty, the age she was when she bore her. Taken off guard, Zoranna startled when her mother smiled adoringly at her, as she must have smiled thousands of times at her first baby. Zoranna shook her head and looked away. She felt ambushed and not too pleased about it.

When Nancy saw this, however, she turned to examine the saint. There was no telling what or who she saw, but she gasped and struggled out of her recliner to kneel at his feet. She was bathed in a holy aura, and the room dimmed around her. After long moments of silent com-munion, the saint pointed to his forehead. Nancy, horror-struck, turned to stare at Zoranna, and the apparition as-cended, shrank, and faded into the ceiling. The candles extinguished themselves, one by one, and vanished from the cups.

Nancy rose and gently tugged Zoranna to the recliner, where she made her lie down. "Don't move," she whis-pered. "Here's a pillow." She carefully raised Zoranna's head and slid a pillow under it. "Why didn't you tell me you were sick, Zoe?" She felt Zoranna's forehead with her palm. "And I thought you went through this before."

Zoranna took her sister's hand and pressed it to her cheek. Her hand was warm. Indeed, Nancy's whole com-plexion was flush with color, as though the experience had released some reserve of vitality. "I know. I guess I haven't been paying attention," Zoranna said. "Please take me to the clinic now."

"Of course," said Nancy, standing and retrieving her walker. "I'll just pack a few things." Nancy hurried to the bedroom, but the walker impeded her progress, so she flung it away. It went clattering into the kitchen.

Zoranna closed her eyes and draped her arms over her head. "I must say, Bug ... Nick, I'm impressed. Why didn't I think of that?"

"Why indeed," Nicholas said in his marvelous voice. "It's just the sort of sneaky manipulation you so excel at."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zoranna opened her eyes and looked at a handsome, miniature man projected in the air next to her head. He wore a stylish leisure jacket and lounged beneath an exquisitely gnarled oak treelette. He was strikingly familiar, as though assembled from fa-vorite features of men she'd found attractive.

"It means you were ambivalent over whether you really wanted Nancy to survive," the little man said, crossing his little legs.

"That's insulting," she said, "and untrue. She's my sis-ter. I love her."

"Which is why you visit her once every decade or so."

"You have a lot of nerve," she said and remembered the canceled field test. "So this is what Ted meant when he said you'd turn nasty."

"I guess," Nicholas said, his tiny face a picture of be-mused sympathy. "I can't help the way I am. They pro-grammed me to know and serve you. I just served you by saving your sister in the manner you, yourself, taught me. Once she's rejuvenated, I'll find a hospicer society to em-ploy her. That ought to give you a grace period before she repeats this little stunt."

"Grace period?"

"In a few years, all but the most successful pre-clone humans will have died out," Nicholas said. "Hospices will soon be as redundant as

elementary schools. Your sister has a knack for choosing obsolete careers."

That made sense.

"I suppose we could bring Victor back," said Nicholas. "He's a survivor, and he loves her."

"No, he doesn't," said Zoranna. "He was only using her."

"Hello! Wake up," said Nicholas. "He's a rat, but he loves her, and you know it. You, however, acted out of pure jealousy. You couldn't stand seeing them together while you're all alone. You don't even have friends, Zoe, not close ones, not for many years now."

"That's absurd!"

The little man rose to his feet and brushed virtual dirt from his slacks. "No offense, Zoe, but don't even try to lie to me. I know you better than your last seven husbands combined. Bug contacted them, by the way. They were forthcoming with details."

Zoranna sat up. "You did *what?"*

"That Bug was a hell of a researcher," said Nicholas. "It queried your former friends, employers, lovers, even your enemies."

Zoranna unsnapped the belt flap to expose the valet controls. "What are you doing?" said Nicholas. She had to remove the belt in order to read the labels. "You can turn me off," said Nicholas, "but think about it—*I know you."*

She pushed the switch and the holo vanished. She un-screwed the storage grommet, peeled off the button-sized memory wafer, and held it between thumb and forefinger. "If you know me so well..." she seethed, squeezing it. She was faint with anger. She could hardly breathe. She bent the wafer nearly to its breaking point.

* * * *

Here she was, sitting among her sister's sour-smelling pil-lows, forty stories underground, indignantly murdering a machine. It occurred to her that perhaps General Genius was on to something after all, and that she should be buying more shares of their stock instead of throttling their prototype.

She placed the wafer in her palm and gently smoothed it out. It looked so harmless, yet her hand still trembled. When was the last time anyone had made her tremble? She carefully replaced the wafer in the grommet and screwed it into the belt.

It’d be a miracle if it still worked.

* * * *

ONE PERFECT MORNING, WITH JACKALS

Mike Resnick

“One Perfect Morning, with Jackals” appeared in the March 1991 issue of Asimov’s, *with an illustra-tion by Laura Lakey. Mike Resnick has become a mainstay of the magazine in the eighties and nineties, publishing a long string of stories here, including the popular “Kirinyaga” stories about the struggle to create a Utopia in a future space colony reshaped in the image of ancient Kenya. He’s one of the bestselling authors in science fiction, and one of the most prolific. His many novels include* The Dark Lady, Stalking The Unicorn, Paradise, Santiago, Ivory, Soothsayer Oracle, Lucifer Jones. Purgatory, Inferno, *and* A Miracle of Rare Device. *His award-winning short fiction has been gathered in the collection* Will the Last Person to Leave the Planet Please Turn Off the Sun? *Of late, he has become almost as prolific as an anthologist, producing, as editor,* Inside the Funhouse: 17 SF stories about SF, Whatdunits, More Whatdunits, and Shaggy B.E.M. Stories, *as well as a long string of anthologies coedited with Martin H. Greenberg, and two anthologies coedited with Gard-ner Dozois,* Future Earths: Under African Skies *and* Future Earths: Under South American Skies. *He won the Hugo Award in 1989 for “Kirinyaga.” He won a second Hugo Award in 1991 for another story in the Kirinyaga series, “The Manumouki,” and an-other Hugo and a Nebula in 1995 for his novella “Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge.” His most recent books include the novels* The Widowmaker *and* A Hunger in the Soul. *Several of his books are in the process of being turned into big-budget movies.*

The deceptively quiet little story that follows is a prequel to his Kirinyaga series, taking us back to the days before Koriba emigrated to his orbiting Utopian space colony, and giving us an unflinching and un-settling look at two worlds in collision—and the peo-ple who get ground up in between.

* * * *

Ngai is the creator of all things. He made the lion and the elephant, the vast savannah and the towering mountains, the Kikuyu and the Maasai and the

Wakamba.

Thus, it was only reasonable for my father's father and *his* father's father to believe that Ngai was all-powerful. Then the Europeans came, and they killed all the animals, and they covered the savannahs with their factories and the mountains with their cities, and they assimilated the Maasai and the Wakamba, and one day all that was left of what Ngai had created was the Kikuyu.

And it was among the Kikuyu that Ngai waged His final battle against the god of the Europeans.

*** * * ***

My former son lowered his head as he stepped into my hut.

"*Jambo*, my father," he said, looking somewhat uncomfortable, as usual, in the close confines of the rounded walls.

"*Jambo*, Edward," I replied.

He stood before me, not quite knowing what to do with his hands. Finally he placed them in the pockets of his elegantly tailored silk suit.

"I have come to drive you to the spaceport," he said at last.

I nodded, and slowly got to my feet. "It is time."

"Where is your luggage?" he asked.

"I am wearing it," I said, indicating my dull red *kikoi*.

"You're not taking anything else?" he said, surprised.

"There is nothing else I care to take," I replied.

He paused and shifted his weight uncomfortably, as he always seemed to do in my presence. "Shall we go outside?" he suggested at last, walking to the door of my hut. "It's very hot in here, and the flies are murderous."

"You must learn to ignore them."

"I do not *have* to ignore them," he replied, almost defensively. "

There are no flies where I live.”

“I know. They have all been killed.”

“You say that as if it were a sin rather than a blessing.”

I shrugged and followed him outside, where two of my chickens were pecking diligently at the dry red earth.

“It’s a beautiful morning, is it not?” he said. “I was afraid it might be as warm as yesterday.”

I looked out across the vast savannah, which had been turned into farmland. Wheat and corn seemed to sparkle in the morning sun.

“A perfect morning,” I agreed. Then I turned and saw a splendid vehicle parked about thirty yards away, white and sleek and shining with chrome.

“Is it new?” I asked, indicating the car.

He nodded proudly. “I bought it last week.”

“German?”

“British.”

“Of course,” I said.

The glow of pride vanished, and he shifted his weight again. “Are you ready?”

“I have been ready for a long time,” I answered, opening the door and easing myself into the passenger’s seat.

“I never saw you do that before,” he remarked, entering the car and starting the ignition.

“Do what?”

“Use your safety harness.”

“I have never had so many reasons not to die in a car crash,” I replied.

He forced a smile to his lips and began again. “I have a surprise for you,” he said as the car pulled away and I looked back at my *boma* for the very last time.

“Oh?”

He nodded. “We will see it on the way to the spaceport.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

I shrugged and remained silent.

“We’ll have to take some of the back roads to reach what I want to show you,” he continued. “You’ll be able to take a last look at your country along the way.”

“This is not my country.”

“You’re not going to start *that* again, are you?”

“*My* country teems with life,” I said adamantly. “*This* country has been smothered by concrete and steel, or covered by row upon row of European crops.”

“My father,” he said wearily as we sped past a huge wheat field, “the last elephant and lion were killed before you were born. You have *never* seen Kenya teeming with wildlife.”

“Yes I have,” I answered him.

“When?”

I pointed to my head. “In here.”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” he said, and I could tell that he was trying to control his temper.

“What doesn’t?”

“That you can turn your back on Kenya and go live on some

terraformed planetoid, just because you want to wake up to the sight of a handful of animals grazing."

"I did not turn my back on Kenya, Edward," I said patiently. "Kenya turned its back on *me*."

"That simply isn't so," he said. "The President and most of his cabinet are Kikuyu. You *know* that."

"They call themselves Kikuyu," I said. "That does not make them Kikuyu."

"They *are* Kikuyu!" he insisted.

"The Kikuyu do not live in cities that were built by Europeans," I replied. "They do not dress as Europeans. They do not worship the Europeans' god. And they do not drive European machines," I added pointedly. "Your vaunted President is still a *kehee*—a boy who has not undergone the circumcision ritual."

"If he is a boy, then he is a fifty-seven-year-old boy."

"His age is unimportant."

"But his accomplishments are. He is responsible for the Turkana Pipeline, which has brought irrigation to the entire Northern Frontier District."

"He is a *kehee* who brings water to the Turkana and the Rendille and the Samburu," I agreed. "What is that to the Kikuyu?"

"Why do you persist in speaking like an ignorant old savage?" he demanded irritably. "You were schooled in Europe and America. You *know* what our President has accomplished."

"I speak the way I speak because I *have* been schooled in Europe and America. I have seen Nairobi grow into a second London, with all of that city's congestion and pollution, and Mombasa into another Miami, with all of that city's attendant dangers and diseases. I have seen our people forget what it means to be a Kikuyu, and speak proudly about being Kenyans, as if Kenya was anything more than an arbitrary set of lines drawn on a European map."

“Those lines have been there for almost three centuries,” he pointed out.

I sighed. “As long as you have known me, you have never understood me, Edward.”

“Understanding is a two-way street,” he said with sudden bitterness. “When did you ever make an effort to understand *me*?”

“I raised you.”

“But to this day you don’t *know* me,” he said, driving dangerously fast on the bumpy road. “Did we ever talk as father and son? Did you ever discuss anything but the Kikuyu with me?” He paused. “I was the only Kikuyu to play on the national basketball team, and yet you never once came to watch me.”

“It is a European game.”

“In point of fact, it is an *American* game.”

I shrugged. “They are the same.”

“And now it is an African game as well. I played on the only Kenyan team ever to defeat the Americans. I had hoped that would make you proud of me, but you never even mentioned it.”

“I heard many stories of an Edward Kimante who played basketball against the Europeans and the Americans,” I said. “But I knew that this could not be my son, for I gave my son the name Koriba.”

“And my mother gave me the middle name of Edward,” he said. “And since she spoke to me and shared my burdens, and you did not, I took the name she gave me.”

“That is your right.”

“I don’t give a damn about my rights!” He paused. “It didn’t have to be this way.”

“I remained true to my convictions,” I said. “It is you who tried to become a Kenyan rather than a Kikuyu.”

"I *am* a Kenyan," he said. "I live here, I work here, I love my country. *All* of it, not just one tiny segment."

I sighed deeply. "You are truly your mother's son."

"You have not asked about her," he noted.

"If she were not well, you would have told me."

"And that's all you have to say about the woman you lived with for seventeen years?" he demanded.

"It was she who left to live in the city of the Europeans, not I," I replied.

He laughed humorlessly. "Nakuru is *not* a European city. It has two million Kenyans and less than twenty thousand whites."

"Any city is, by definition, European. The Kikuyu do not live in cities."

"Look around you," he said in exasperation. "More than ninety-five percent of them *do* live in cities."

"Then they are no longer Kikuyu," I said placidly.

He squeezed the steering wheel until his knuckles turned ash-gray.

"I do not wish to argue with you," he said, struggling to control his emotions. "It seems that is all we ever do anymore. You are my father, and despite all that has come between us, I love you—and I had hoped to make my peace with you today, since we shall never see each other again."

"I have no objection to that," I said. "I do not enjoy arguing."

"For a man who doesn't enjoy it, you managed to argue for twelve long years to get the government to sponsor this new world of yours."

"I did not enjoy the arguments, only the results," I replied.

"Have they decided what to name it yet?"

"Kirinyaga."

“Kirinyaga?” he repeated, surprised.

I nodded. “Does not Ngai sit upon His golden throne atop Kirinyaga?”

“Nothing sits atop Mount Kenya except a city.”

“You see?” I said with a smile. “Even the name of the holy mountain has been corrupted by Europeans. It is time that we give Ngai a new Kirinyaga from which to rule the universe.”

“Perhaps it *is* fitting, at that,” he said. “There has been precious little room for Ngai in today’s Kenya.”

Suddenly he began slowing down, and a moment later we turned off the road and across a recently harvested field, driving very carefully so as not to damage his new car.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I told you: I have a surprise for you.”

“What kind of surprise can there be in the middle of an empty field?” I asked.

“You will see.”

Suddenly he came to a stop about twenty yards from a clump of thorn bushes, and turned off the ignition.

“Look carefully,” he whispered.

I stared at the bushes for a moment without seeing anything. Then there was a brief movement, and suddenly the whole picture came into view, and I could see two jackals standing behind the foliage, staring timidly at us.

“There have been no animals here in more than two decades,” I whispered.

“They seem to have wandered in after the last rains,” he replied softly. “I suppose they must be living off the rodents and birds.”

“How did you find them?”

"I didn't," he answered. "A friend of mine in the Game Department told me they were here." He paused. "They'll be captured and relocated to a game park sometime next week, before they can do any lasting damage."

They seemed totally misplaced, hunting in tracks made by huge threshing and harvesting machines, searching for the safety of a savannah that had not existed for more than a century, hiding from cars rather than other predators. I felt a certain kinship to them.

We watched them in total silence for perhaps five minutes. Then Edward checked his timepiece and decided that we had to continue to the spaceport.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asked as we drove back onto the road.

"Very much," I said.

"I had hoped you would."

"They are being moved to a game park, you said?"

He nodded his head. "A few hundred miles to the north, I believe."

"The jackal walked this land long before the farmers arrived," I noted.

"But they are an anachronism," he replied. "They don't belong here anymore."

I nodded my head. "It is fitting."

"That the jackals go to a game park?" he asked.

"That the Kikuyu, who were here before the Kenyans, leave for a new world," I answered. "For we, too, are an anachronism that no longer belongs here."

He increased his speed, and soon we had passed through the farming area and entered the outskirts of Nairobi.

"What will you do on Kirinyaga?" he asked, breaking a long silence.

"We shall live as the Kikuyu were meant to live."

"I mean you, personally."

I smiled, anticipating his reaction. “I am to be the *mundumugu*.”

“The witch doctor?” he repeated incredulously.

“That is correct.”

“I can’t believe it!” he continued. “You are an educated man. How can you sit cross-legged in the dirt and roll bones and read omens?”

“The *mundumugu* is also a teacher, and the custodian of the tribal customs,” I said. “It is an honorable profession.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “So I am to explain to people that my father has become a witch doctor.”

“You need fear no embarrassment,” I said. “You need only tell them that Kirinyaga’s *mundumugu* is named Koriba.”

“That is *my* name!”

“A new world requires a new name,” I said. “You cast it aside to take a European name. Now I will take it back and put it to good use.”

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?” he said as we pulled into the spaceport.

“From this day forward, my name is Koriba.”

The car came to a stop.

“I hope you will bring more honor to it than I did, my father,” he said as a final gesture of conciliation.

“You have brought honor to the name you chose,” I said. “That is quite enough for one lifetime.”

“Do you really mean that?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Then why did you never say so before now?”

“Haven’t I?” I asked, surprised.

We got out of the car and he accompanied me to the departure area. Finally he came to a stop.

“This is as far as I am permitted to go.”

“I thank you for the ride,” I said.

He nodded.

“And for the jackals,” I added. “It was truly a perfect morning.”

“I will miss you, my father,” he said.

“I know.”

He seemed to be waiting for me to say something, but I could think of nothing further to say.

For a moment I thought he was going to place his arms around me and hug me, but instead he reached out, shook my hand, muttered another farewell, and turned on his heel and left.

I thought he would go directly to his car, but when I looked through a porthole of the ship that would take us to Kirinyaga, I saw him standing at a huge, plate-glass window, waving his hand, while his other hand held a handkerchief.

That was the last sight I saw before the ship took off. But the image I held in my mind was of the two jackals, watching alien sights in a land that had itself become foreign to them. I hoped that they would adjust to their new life in the game park that had been artificially created for them.

Something told me that I soon would know.

* * * *

CANARY LAND

Tom Purdom

“Canary Land” appeared in the January 1997 issue of Asimov’s *with an illustration by George H. Krauter. Tom Purdom made his first sale in 1957, to* Fan-tastic Universe, *and has subsequently sold to* Analog, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Star, *and most of the major SF magazines and antholo-gies; in recent years, he’s become a frequent con-tributor to* Asimov’s Science Fiction, *publishing a stream of sophisticated adventure tales in the mag-azine since his first sale here in 1988. He is the au-thor of one of the most unfairly forgotten SF novels of the sixties, the powerful and still timely* Reduction in Arms, *about the difficulties of disarmament in the face of the mad proliferation of nuclear weapons, as well as such novels as* I Want the Stars, Tree Lord of Imeten, Five Against Arlane, *and* The Barons of Behavior. *Purdom lives with his family in Philadel-phia, where he reviews classical music concerts for a local newspaper, and is at work on several new novels.*

Here he sends a hapless immigrant to a future col-ony on the Moon that looks like a Utopia on the surface, but which, when you examine its lower depths (as our reluctant hero is forced to do, both literally and figuratively), turns out to be less than perfect—but still, perhaps a place where an immi-grant can make a place for himself, if luck stays with him long enough to keep him alive, that is. ...

* * * *

Back home in Delaware County, in the area that was gen-erally known as the “Philadelphia region,” the three guys talking to George Sparr would probably have been de-scended from long dead ancestors who had immigrated from Sicily. Here on the Moon they were probably the sons of parents who had been born in Taiwan or Thailand. They had good contacts, the big one explained, with the union that “represented” the musicians who played in eat-eries like the Twelve Sages Café. If George wanted to continue sawing on his viola twelve hours a day, thirteen days out of fourteen, it would be to his advantage to accept their offer. If he declined, someone else would take his place in the string quintet that the diners and lunchers ignored while they chatted.

On Earth, George had played the viola because he wanted to. The

performance system he had planted in his nervous system was top-of-the-line, state-of-the-art. There had been weeks, back when he had been a normal take-it-as-it-comes American, when he had played with a dif-ferent trio or quartet every night, including Saturday, and squeezed in two sessions on Sunday. Now his perfor-mance system was the only thing standing between him and the euphoric psychological states induced by malnu-trition. Live music, performed by real live musicians, was one of the lowest forms of unskilled labor. Anybody could do it, provided they had attached the right information molecules to the right motor nerves. It was, in short, the one form of employment you could count on, if you were an American immigrant who was. when all was said and done, only a commonplace, cookbook kind of biodesigner.

* * * *

George's grasp of Techno-Mandarin was still developing. He had been scraping for money when he had left Earth. He had sold almost everything he owned—including his best viola—to buy his way off the planet. The language program he had purchased had been a cheap, quick-and-dirty item that gave him the equivalent of a useful pidgin. The three guys were talking *very* slowly.

* * * *

They wanted to slip George into one of the big artificial ecosystems that were one of the Moon's leading economic resources. They had a contact who could stow him in one of the carts that delivered supplies to the canaries—the "long term research and maintenance team" who lived in the ecosystem. The contact would think she was merely transferring a container that had been loaded with a little harmless recreational material.

George was only five-eight, which was one reason he'd been selected for the "opportunity." He would be wearing a guaranteed, airtight isolation suit. Once inside, he would hunt down a few specimens, analyze their genetic makeup with the equipment he would be given, and come out with the information a member of a certain Board of Directors was interested in. Robots could have done the job, but robots had to be controlled from outside, with detectable radio sources. The Director (George could hear the capi-tal, even with his limited knowledge of the language) wanted to run some tests on the specimens without en-gaging in a direct confrontation with his colleagues.

There was, of course, a very real possibility the isola-tion suit might be damaged in some way. In that case, George would become a

permanent resident of the eco-system—a destiny he had been trying to avoid ever since he had arrived on the Moon.

* * * *

The ride to the ecosystem blindsided George with an un-expected rush of emotion. There was a moment when he wasn't certain he could control the sob that was pressing against the walls of his throat.

He was sitting in a private vehicle. He was racing along a strip of pavement, with a line of vehicles ahead of him. There was sky over his head and a landscape around him.

George had spent his whole life in the car-dominated metropolitan sprawls that had replaced cities in the United States. Now he lived in a tiny one-room apartment, in a corridor crammed with tiny one-room apartments rented by other immigrants. His primary form of transportation was his own legs. When he did actually ride in a vehicle, he hopped aboard an automated cart and shared a seat with someone he had never seen before. He could under-stand why most of the people on the Moon came from Asiatic countries. They had crossed two hundred and fifty thousand miles so they could build a new generation of Hong Kongs under the lunar surface.

The sky was black, of course. The landscape was a rolling desert composed of craters pockmarked by craters that were pockmarked by craters. The cars on the black strip were creeping along at fifty kilometers per hour—or less—and most of the energy released by their batteries was powering a life support system, not a motor. Still, he looked around him with some of the tingling pleasure of a man who had just been released from prison.

* * * *

The trio had to explain the job to him and some of the less technical data slipped out in the telling. They were also anxious, obviously, to let him know their "client" had connections. One of the corporation's biggest products was the organic interface that connected the brains of an-imals to electronic control devices. The company's major resource was a woman named Ms. Chao, who was a big expert at developing such interfaces. Her company had become one of the three competitors everybody in the field wanted to beat.

In this case the corporation was upgrading a package that connected

the brains of surveillance hawks to the electronics that controlled them. The package included genes that modified the neurotransmitters in the hawk's brain and it actually altered the hawk's intelligence and temperament. The package created, in effect, a whole new organ in the brain. You infected the brain with the pack-age and the DNA in the package built a new organ—an organ that responded to activity within the brain by re-leasing extra transmitters, dampening certain responses, etc. Some of the standard, medically approved personality modifications worked exactly the same way. The package would increase the efficiency of the hawk's brain and multiply the number of functions its owners could build into the control interface.

Their Director, the trio claimed, was worried about the ethics of the *other* directors. The reports from the research and development team indicated the project was months behind schedule.

"Our man afraid he victim big cheat," the big one said, in slow Techno-Mandarin pidgin. With lots of emphatic, insistent hand gestures.

* * * *

It had been the big one, oddly enough, who had done most of the talking. In his case, apparently, you couldn't as-sume there was an inverse relationship between muscle power and brain power. He was one of those guys who was so massive he made you feel nervous every time he got within three steps of the zone you thought of as your personal space.

* * * *

The artificial ecosystems had become one of the founda-tions of the lunar economy. One of the Moon's greatest resources, it had turned out, was its lifelessness. Nothing could live on the surface of the Moon—not a bacteria, not a fungus, not the tiniest dot of a nematode, *nothing.*

Temperatures that were 50 percent higher than the tem-perature of boiling water sterilized the surface during the lunar day. Cold that was grimmer than anything found at the Antarctic sterilized it during the night. Radiation and vacuum killed anything that might have survived the tem-perature changes.

And what happened if some organism somehow man-aged to survive all of the Moon's hazards and cross the terrain that separated an ecosystem from one of the lunar cities? It still had to cross four hundred thousand kilo-meters of vacuum and radiation before it reached the real

ecosystems that flowered on the blue sphere that had once been George's home.

The Moon, obviously, was the place to develop new life-forms. The designers themselves could sit in Shanghai and Bangkok and ponder the three-dimensional models of DNA molecules that twisted across their screens. The hands-on work took place on the Moon. The organisms that sprouted from the molecules were inserted in artificial ecosystems on the moon and given their chance to do their worst.

Every new organism was treated with suspicion. Any-thing—even the most trivial modification of a minor in-sect—could produce unexpected side effects when it was inserted into a terrestrial ecosystem. Once a new organism had been designed, it had to be maintained in a sealed lunar ecosystem for at least three years. Viruses and cer-tain kinds of plants and insects had to be kept imprisoned for periods that were even longer.

According to the big guy, Ms. Chao claimed she was still developing the new hawk control interface. The Di-rector, for some reason, was afraid she had already fin-ished working on it. She could have turned it over to another company, the big guy claimed. And the new com-pany could lock it in another ecosystem. And get it ready for market while the Director thought it was still under development inside the *old* company's ecosystem.

* * * *

"Other directors transfer research other company," the big guy said. "Show him false data. Other company make money. Other directors make money. His stock—down."

"Stock no worth chips stock recorded on," the guy with the white scar on the back of his fingers said.

"You not commit crime," the big one said, with his hands pushing at the air as if he were trying to shove his complicated ideas into George's dumb immigrant's brain. "You not burglar. You work for Director. Stockholder. Director have right to know."

* * * *

Like everything else on the Moon, the ecosystem was bur-ied under the surface. George crawled into the back of the truck knowing he had seen all of the real Topside landscape he was going to see from now until he left the system. The guy with the scarred hand kept a camera on while he stood

in the sterilizing unit and they talked him through the “donning procedure.” The suit had already been sterilized. The donning procedure was supposed to reduce the contamination it picked up as he put it on. The sterilizing unit flooded him with UV light and other, less obvious forms of radiation while he wiggled and contorted. The big guy got some bobs and smiles from the third member of the trio when he made a couple of “jokes” about the future of George’s chromosomes. Then the big guy tapped a button on the side of the unit and George stood there for five minutes, completely encased in the suit, while the unit supposedly killed off anything the suit had attracted while he had been amusing them with his reverse striptease. The recording they were mak-ing was for his benefit, the big guy assured him. If he ran into any legal problems, they had proof they had administered all the standard safety precautions before he had entered the ecosystem.

* * * *

The thing that really made George sweat was the struggle to emerge from the container. It was a cylinder with a big external pressure seal and they had deliberately picked one of the smaller sizes. *We make so small, nobody see think person,* the big guy had explained.

The trick release on the inside of the cylinder worked fine, but after that he had to maneuver his way through the neck without ripping his suit. Any tear—any puncture, any *pinhole*—would activate the laws that governed the quarantine.

The best you could hope for, under the rules, was four-teen months of isolation. You could only hope for that, of course, if you had entered the ecosystem legitimately, for a very good reason. If you had entered it illegally, for a reason that would make you the instant enemy of most of the people who owned the place, you would be lucky if they let you stay inside it, in one piece, for the rest of whatever life you might be willing to endure before you decided you were better off dead.

The people on the “long term research and maintenance team” did some useful work. An American with his train-ing would be a valuable asset—a high level assistant to the people on the other side of the wall who really di-rected the research. But everybody knew why they were really there. There wasn’t a person on the Moon who didn’t know that coal miners had once taken canaries into their tunnels, so they would know they were breathing poisoned air as soon as the canaries keeled over. The hu-mans locked in the ecosystem were the living proof the microorganisms in the system hadn’t evolved into something dangerous.

The contact had placed the container, as promised, in the tall grasses that grew along a small stream. The eco-system was supposed to mimic a “natural” day-night cycle on Earth and it was darker than anyplace George had ever visited on the real planet. He had put on a set of night-vision goggles before he had closed the hood of the suit but he had to stand still for a moment and let his eyes adjust anyway.

* * * *

His equipment pack contained two cases. The large flat case looked like it had been designed for displaying jew-elry. The two moths fitted into its recesses would have drawn approving nods from people who were connois-seurs of bioelectronic craftsmanship.

The hawks he was interested in were living creatures with modified brains. The cameras and computers plugged into their bodies were powered by the energy generated by their own metabolism. The two moths occupied a different part of the great borderland between the world of the living and the world of the machine. Their bodies had been formed in cocoons but their organic brains had been replaced by electronic control systems. They drew all their energy from the batteries he fitted into the slots just be-hind each control system. Their wings were a little wider than his hand but the big guy had assured him they wouldn’t trigger any alarms when a surveillance camera picked them up.

Insect like this in system. Not many. But enough.

The first moth flitted away from George’s hand as soon as he pressed on the battery with his thumb. It fluttered aimlessly, just above the tops of the river grasses, then turned to the right and headed toward a group of trees about a hundred meters from its launch site.

At night the hawks were roosters, not flyers. They perched in trees, dozing and digesting, while the cameras mounted in their skulls continued to relay data to the se-curity system.

* * * *

George had never paid much attention when his parents had discussed their family histories. He knew he had an-cestors who came from Romania, Italy, Austria, and the less prominent regions of the British Isles. Most of them had emigrated in the nineteenth century, as far as he could tell. One of his grandmothers had left some country in Europe when it fell apart near

the end of the twentieth century.

Most of them had emigrated because they couldn't make a living in the countries they had been born in. That seemed to be clear. So why shouldn't he "pull up stakes" (whatever that meant) and head for the booming economy in the sky? Didn't that show you were made of something special?

George's major brush with history had been four sets of viewer-responsive videos he had studied as a child, to meet the requirements listed on his permanent educational transcript. His parents had chosen most of his non-technical educational materials and they had opted for a series that emphasized human achievements in the arts and sciences. The immigrants he was familiar with had overcome poverty and bigotry (there was always some mention of bigotry) and become prizewinning physicists and world famous writers and musicians. There had been no mention of immigrants who wandered the corridors of strange cities feeling like they were stumbling through a fog. There had been no indication any immigrant had ever realized he had traded utter hopelessness for permanent, lifelong poverty.

There had been a time, as George understood it, when the music in restaurants had been produced by electronic sound systems and unskilled laborers had carried food to the tables. Now unskilled labor provided the music and carts took orders and transported the food. Had any of his ancestors been invisible functionaries who toted plates of food to customers who were engrossed in intense conver-sations about the kind of real work people did in real work spaces like laboratories and offices? He had never heard his parents mention it.

* * * *

Battery good twenty minutes. No more. Moth not come back twenty minutes—not come back ever.

He almost missed the light the moth flicked on just before it settled into the grass. He *would* have missed it, in fact, if they hadn't told him he should watch for it. It was only a blip, and it was really a glow, not a flash. He crept toward it in an awkward hunch, with both cases in his hands and his eyes fixed on the ground in front of his boots.

The small square case contained his laboratory. The collection tube attached to the moth's body fitted into a plug on the side of the case and he

huddled over the display screen while the unit ran its tests. If everything was on the up and up, the yellow lines on the screen would be the same length as the red lines. If the “Direc-tor” was being given false information, they wouldn’t.

It was a job that could have been handled by 80 per-cent—at least—of the nineteen million people currently living on the Moon. In his lab on Earth, there had been *carts* that did things like that. A four-wheeled vehicle a little bigger than the lab case could have carried the two moths and automatically plugged the collection tube into the analyzer. He was lurching around in the dark merely because a cart would have required a wireless communi-cations link that *might* have been detectable.

The first yellow line appeared on the screen. It was a few pixels longer than the red line—enough to be notice-able, not enough to be significant.

The second yellow line took its place beside the second red line like a soldier coming to attention beside a partner who had been chosen because they were precisely the same height. The third line fell in beside its red line, there was a pause that lasted about five hard beats of George’s pulse, and the last two yellow lines finished up the for-mation.

The moth had hovered above the hawk’s back and jabbed a long, threadlike tube into its neck. The big changes in the bird’s chemistry would take place in its brain, but some of the residue from the changes would seep into its bloodstream and produce detectable altera-tions in the percentages of five enzymes. The yellow lines were the same length as the red lines: ergo, the hawks were carrying a package exactly like the package they were supposed to be carrying.

* * * *

Which was good news for the Director. Or George pre-sumed it was, anyway. And bad news for him.

If the result had been positive—if he had collected proof there was something wrong with the hawks—he could have radioed the information in an encrypted one-second blip and headed straight for the nearest exit. His three bodyguards would have helped him through the por-tal—they’d *said* they would, anyway—and he would have been home free. Instead, he had to pick up his equipment, close all his cases, and go creeping through the dark to the other hawk nest in the system. He was supposed to follow the small stream until it crossed a dirt utility road, the big guy had said. Then he

was supposed to follow the road for about four kilometers, until it intersected another stream. And work his way through another two kilometers of tangled, streamside vegetation.

The habitat reproduced three hundred square kilometers of temperate zone forest and river land. It actually sup-ported more plant, animal, and insect species than any stretch of “natural” terrain you could visit on the real twenty-first century Earth. Samples of Earth soil had been carried to the Moon with all their microorganisms intact. Creepers and crawlers and flying nuisances had been im-ported by the hundreds of thousands.

You couldn’t understand every relationship in a system, the logic ran. *People* might not like gnats and snakes but that didn’t mean the system could operate without them. The relationship you didn’t think about might be the very relationship you would disrupt if you created a wonderful, super-attractive new species and introduced it into a real habitat on Earth. A change in relationship X might lead to an unexpected change in relationship Y. Which would create a disruption in relationship C... .

And so on.

It was supposed to be one of the basic insights of mod-ern biological science and George Sparr was himself one of the fully credentialed, fully trained professionals who turned that science into products people would voluntarily purchase in the free market. The fact was, however, that he *hated* insects and snakes. He could have lived his whole life without one second of contact with the small-est, most innocuous member of either evolutionary line. What he liked was riding along in a fully enclosed, air-conditioned or heated (depending on the season) auto-mobile, with half a dozen of his friends chattering away on the communications screen, while a first class, state-of-the-art control system guided him along a first class, state-of-the-art highway to a building where he would work in air-conditioned or heated ease and continue to be totally indifferent to temperature, humidity, illumination, or precipitation.

Which was what he had had. Along with pizzas, steak, tacos, turkey club sandwiches, and a thousand other items that had flavor and texture and the great virtue that they were not powdered rice flavored with powdered flavor.

* * * *

There had been women whose hair tossed across their necks as they gave

him little glances across their music stands while they played quartets with him. (He had made the right decision, he had soon realized, when he had cho-sen the viola. The world was full of violinists and cellists looking for playing partners who could fill in the middle harmonies.) There had even been the pleasure of express-ing your undiluted contempt for the human robots who were hustling like mad in China, Thailand, India, and all the other countries where people had discovered they, too, could enjoy the satisfactions of electronic entertainment, hundred year lifespans, and lifelong struggles against obe-sity and high cholesterol levels.

* * * *

George Sparr was definitely not a robot. Robots lived to work. Humans worked to live. Work was a *means,* not an end. *Pleasure* was an end. *Art* was an end. *Love* and *friendship* were ends.

George had worked for four different commercial or-ganizations in the eleven years since he had received his Ph.D. He had left every one of them with a glowing rec-ommendation. Every manager who had ever given him an evaluation had agreed he was a wonderful person to have on your payroll on the days when he was actually phys-ically present. And actually concentrating on the job you were paying him to do.

* * * *

The dogs weren't robots, either. They were real muscle-and-tooth living organisms, and they had him boxed in— right and left, front and back, with one prowling in reserve—before he heard the first warning growl. The light mounted on the dog in the front position overwhelmed his goggles before the control system could react. An ampli-fied female voice blared at him from somewhere beyond the glare.

"Stand absolutely still. There is no possibility the dogs can be outrun. You will not be harmed if you stand ab-solutely still."

She was speaking complete sentences of formal Techno-Mandarin but the learning program she had used hadn't eliminated her accent—whatever the accent was. It didn't matter. He didn't have to understand every word. He knew the dogs were there. He knew the dogs had teeth. He knew the teeth could cut through his suit.

* * * *

"I'm afraid you may have a serious problem, patriot. As far as I can see,

there’s only one candidate for the identity of this director they told you about—assuming they were telling you the truth, of course.”

The ecosystem was surrounded by tunnels that con-tained work spaces and living quarters. They had put him in a room that looked like it was supposed to be some kind of art gallery. Half the space on the walls was covered with watercolors, prints, and freehand crayon work. Shelves held rock sculptures. He was still wearing his suit and his goggles, but the goggles had adjusted to the il-lumination and he could see the lighting and framing had obviously been directed by professional-level programs.

They had left him alone twice, but there had been no danger he would damage anything. The dog sitting two steps from his armchair took care of that.

The man sitting in the other armchair was an American and he was doing his best to make this a one-immigrant-to-another conversation. He happened to be the kind of big-bellied, white-faced, fast-food glutton George particularly disliked; but he hadn’t picked up the contempt ra-diating from George’s psyche. He probably wouldn’t, ei-ther, given the fact that he had to observe his surroundings through the fat molecules that puffed up his eyelids and floated in his brain.

George could understand people who choked their ar-teries eating steaks and lobster. But when they did it stuff-ing down food that had less flavor than the containers it came in ...

“Do you understand who Ms. Chao is?” big-belly said.

George shrugged. “You can’t do much biodesign with-out learning something about Ms. Chao.”

The puffy head nodded once. They hadn’t asked George about his vocational history but he was assuming they had looked at the information he had posted in the databanks. The woman had asked him for his name right after she had taken him into custody and he had given it to her without a fuss.

“Your brag screen looked very promising, patriot. It looks like you might have made it to the big leagues under the right circumstances.”

“I worked for four of the largest R&D companies in the United States.”

“But you never made it to the big leagues, right?”

George focused his attention on his arms and legs and consciously made himself relax. He pasted a smile on his face, and tried to make it big enough so that Mr. Styrofoam could see it through his eye slits.

“The closest I ever got to the other side of the Pacific was a weekend conference on La Jolla Beach.”

“That’s closer than I ever got. I was supposed to be a hardwired program genius—a Prince of the Nerds him-self—right up to the moment I got my transcript certified. I thought if I came here I could show them what somebody with my brain circuits could do. And make it to Shanghai the long way round.”

George nodded: the same sympathetic nod and the same sympathetic expression—he *hoped* it was sympathetic anyway—that he offered all the people who told him the same kind of story when they sat beside him on the trans-portation carts. Half of them usually threw in a few re-marks to the effect that “doughfaces” didn’t stand a chance anymore. He would usually nod in sympathy when they said that, too, but he wasn’t sure that would be a good idea in this situation. His interrogator was putting on a good act, but the guy could be Ms. Chao’s own son, for all George knew. George had never seen an Asian who looked that gross, but Styrofoam’s mother could have de-cided anybody cursed with American genes had to possess a special, uniquely American variation on the human di-gestive tract.

“The database says you’re a musician.”

“I’ve been working in a restaurant. I bought a perfor-mance system when I was on Earth—one of the best.”

“And now you’re serenading the sages and samurai while they dine.”

“That’s why I’m here. They told me I’d be thrown out of my job if I turned them down.”

“Ms. Chao had a husband. Mr. Tan. Do you know him?”

“I’ve heard about the Tan family. They’re big in Co-pernicus, right?”

“They’re one of the families that control the Copernicus industrial complex. And make it such a wonderful place to work and raise children.

This Mr. Tan—it's clear he's connected, but nobody knows how much. Ms. Chao mar-ried him. They went through a divorce. Somehow he's still sitting on the board. With lots of shares."

"And he thinks his ex-wife is trying to put something over on him? Is that what this is all about?"

Chubby hands dug into the arms of the other chair. Arm muscles struggled against the low lunar gravity as they raised the bloated body to an upright position. The Prince of the Nerds turned toward the door and let George admire the width of his waistline as he made his exit.

"You're the one who's supposed to be coming up with answers, patriot. We're supposed to be the people with the questions."

* * * *

There was a timestrip built into the base of George's right glove. It now read 3:12. When they had brought him into the working and living area, it had read 3:46.

George's suit was totally self-contained. He could breathe and re-breathe the same air over and over again. But nothing comes free. Bacteria recycled the air as it passed through the filtering system. Other bacteria generated the chemicals in the organic battery that powered the circulation system. Both sets of bacteria drew their energy from a sugar syrup. In three hours and twelve minutes, the syrup would be exhausted. And George could choose between two options. He could open the suit. Or he could smother to death.

* * * *

The second interrogator was a bony, stoop shouldered woman. She spoke English with a British accent but her hand gestures and her general air of weary cynicism looked European to George's eye. She glanced at the timestrip—it now read 2:58—and sat down without mak-ing any comments.

The woman waved her hand as if she was chasing smoke away from her face. "'You were hired by three people. They coerced you. They claimed you would lose your job if you didn't work for them."

"I didn't have any choice. I could come here or I could find a good space to beg. Believe me—this is the last place I want to be."

“You’d rather play little tunes in a restaurant than work in a major ecosystem? Even though your screens say you’re a trained, experienced biodesigner?”

George offered her one of his more sincere smiles. “Ac-tually, we play almost everything we want to most of the time. Mozart quintets. Faure. Kryzwicki. Nobody listens anyway.”

“The three men who hired you told you they were hired by Mr. Tan. Is that correct?”

* * * *

So far George had simply told them the truth—whatever they wanted to know. Now he knew he had to think. Was she telling him they wanted him to testify against Mr. Tan? Was Ms. Chao trying to get something on her ex-husband?

Was it possible they had something else in mind? Could they be testing him in some way?

“They’re very tough people,” George said. “They made a lot of threats.”

“They told you all the things Mr. Tan could do if you talked? They described his connections?”

“They made some very big threats. Terminating my job was only part of it. That’s all I can tell you. They made some very big threats.”

The woman stood up. She bent over his timestrip. She raised her head and ran her eyes over his suit.

* * * *

George didn’t have to tell the canaries he didn’t want to join them. Nobody wanted to be a canary. In theory, ca-naries didn’t have it bad. They didn’t pay rent. The meals they ate were provided free, so their diets could be mon-itored. They got all the medical care they needed and some they could have done without. They could save their wages. They could work their way out of their cage.

Somehow, it didn’t work that way. There was always something extra you couldn’t do without—videos, games, a better violin to help you pass the

time. The artificial ecosystems were a little over thirty years old. So far, approximately fifteen people had actually left them while they still had the ability to eat and drink and do anything of consequence with women whose hair tossed around their neck while they played Smetana's first quartet.

And what would you really have, when you added it up? George had done the arithmetic. After twenty-five years in an ecosystem—if you did everything right—you could live in the same kind of room he was living in now, in the same kind of "neighborhood." With the same kind of people.

The other possibility would be to buy yourself a return trip to Earth. You'd even have some money left over when you stepped off the shuttle.

* * * *

The timestrip read 2:14 when the woman came back. This time she put a glass bottle on a shelf near the door. George couldn't read the label but he could see the green and blue logo. The thick brown syrup in the bottle would keep the bacteria in his life support system functioning for at least ten hours.

* * * *

He was perfectly willing to lie. He had no trouble with that. If they wanted him to claim his three buddies had told him they were working for Mr. Tan, then he would stand up in front of the cameras, and place his hand on the American flag, or a leather bound copy of the last printed edition of *The Handbook of Chemistry and Phys-ics,* or some similar object of reverence, and swear that he had clearly heard one of his abductors say they were employees of the said Mr. Tan. That wasn't the problem.

Should he lie before the canaries let him out? And hope they *would* let him out? Or should he insist they let him out first? *Before* he perjured himself?

And what if that *wasn't* what they wanted? What if there was something *else* going on here? Something he didn't really understand?

The people he was talking to were just the fronts. Back in the city there were offices and labs where the babus who really counted made the real choices. Somewhere in one of those offices, somebody was looking at him through one of the cameras mounted in the corners of the room. Right now, when he looked up at the camera in the front left-hand corner, he was

looking right into the eyes of someone who was sitting in front of a screen sixty kilometers away.

If they would take away the cameras, he could just ask her. *Just tell me what they want, lady. We're both crawl-ing around at the bottom of the food chain. Tell me what I should do. Will they let me out of here if I cooperate first? Will I get a better deal if I tough it out right to the last minute? Are all of you really working for Mr. Tan?*

And what would he have done with her answers when he got them? Did any of the people in this place under-stand the situation any better than he did? In the city, he hobbled around in a permanent psychological haze, sur-rounded by people who made incomprehensible mouth noises and hurried from one place to another on incom-prehensible missions. In the ecosystem, the canaries put-tered with their odd jobs and created their picture of the world from the information that trickled onto their screens.

* * * *

"I understand there's a visitors' lounge attached to the outside of the ecosystem," George said.

"And?" the woman said.

"I'll be glad to tell you anything I know. I just want to get out of here—out of the system itself. There's no way I can get away if you let me get that far—just to the lounge. I'll still need transportation back to the city, right?"

The woman stood up. She stopped in front of the syrup bottle and picked it up. She turned it around in her hand as if she were reading the label. She put it back on the shelf. She glanced at the dog. She slipped out the door.

* * * *

The timestrip read 0:54 the next time the woman came back. The dog turned her way and she shook her head when she saw the soulful look in its eyes.

"You're putting a strain on his toilet training," the woman said.

"Suppose I do give you a statement? Is there any guar-antee you'll let

me go?”

“Are you trying to bargain with us?”

“Would you expect me to do anything else?”

“You think you’re better than us? You think you de-serve all that *opportunity* you thought they were going to give you when you left Earth?”

George shrugged. “I couldn’t get a job on Earth. Any kind of job. I just came here to survive.”

“They wouldn’t even pay you to play that music you like?”

“On Earth? There would have been twenty thousand people lined up ahead of me.”

“There’s no way you can bargain with us, George. *You* answer the questions. *We* relay the answers. *They* decide what to do. There’s only one thing I can guarantee.”

“In fifty-four minutes, I’ll have to open the suit and stay here.”

“Right.”

* * * *

They didn’t let him out when they had his statement. In-stead the woman poured syrup into the flask that fueled his life support system. Then she walked out and left him sitting there.

The urine collection system on his leg was a brand-name piece of equipment but he couldn’t empty the re-ceptacle without opening the suit. He had already used the system once, about an hour after they had captured him. He didn’t know what would happen the next time he used it. No one had thought about the possibility he might wear the suit more than five hours.

* * * *

The woman smiled when she reentered the room and caught him fidgeting. The first dog had been replaced a few minutes after it had communicated its message but no one even mentioned *his* problem.

The woman had him stand up in the middle of the room and face the left-hand camera. He repeated all his state-ments. He told them, once again, that the guy with the scarred fingers had mentioned Mr. Tan by name.

The timestrip said 3:27 when they left him alone this time. They had given him a full five hour refill when they had poured in the syrup.

* * * *

The timestrip read 0:33 when they put him in the security portal. Big-belly and the woman and three other people stared through the little square windows. A no-nonsense voice talked him through the procedure in Hong Kong British.

He was reminded that a lapse in the procedure could result in long-term isolation. He stood in an indentation in the floor. He stuck his hands into a pair of holes above his head. Robot arms stripped the suit. Heat and radiation poured into the portal.

George had never been a reader, but he had played in orchestras that accompanied two operatic versions of the Orpheus legend. He kept his eyes half shut and tried not to look at the door that would take him back to the eco-system. When he did glance back, after the other door had swung open, the woman and big-belly looked, it seemed to him, like disappointed gargoyles. He started to wave at them and decided that would still be too risky. He walked through the door with his shoulders hunched. And started looking for the two things he needed most: clothes and a bathroom.

* * * *

The lounge was just a place where drivers and visitors could stretch their legs. There was a bathroom. There was a water fountain. There was a kitchen that checked his credit when he stuck his thumb in the ID unit. And offered him a menu that listed the kind of stuff he had been eating since he arrived on the Moon.

He queried taxi services on the phone screen and dis-covered a trip back to the city would cost him a week’s wages. He had never been naked in a public place before and he didn’t know how to act. Were the canaries watch-ing him on the single camera mounted in the ceiling?

“I didn’t do this because I wanted to,” he told the cam-eras. “I don’t even know what’s going on. I just want to get out of here. Is that too much to

ask?”

* * * *

A truck entered the garage space under the lounge. A woman who was old enough to be his mother appeared in one of the doors and handed him a wad of cloth. The shirt was too long for him but it was the only thing she had. He stood around for an hour while she ate a meal and talked to people on the phone. He couldn’t shake off the feeling he was wearing a dress.

* * * *

He had missed a full shift at the Twelve Sages Café but the first violinist had left him a message assuring him they had only hired a temporary replacement. They could all see he was jumpy and preoccupied when he joined them at the start of the next shift but no one said anything. He had always been popular with the people he played with. He had the right temperament for a viola player. He took his part seriously but he understood the give-and-take that is one of the primary requirements of good chamber play-ing.

* * * *

The big guy lumbered into the Twelve Sages Café a month later. He smiled at the musicians playing in the corner. He threw George a big wave as he sat down.

They were playing the slow movement of Mendels-sohn’s A Major quintet. George actually stumbled out of the room with his hands clutching his stomach. He man-aged to come back before the next movement started but he lost his place three times.

The second violinist took him aside after the last move-ment and told him he was putting all their jobs in danger. She came back to his apartment after the shift ended.

* * * *

Six months later a woman came up to George during a break and asked him if he gave lessons in style, interpre-tation, and the other subjects you could still teach. Eight months after that he had seven students. The second vi-olinist moved in with him.

Then the first violinist discovered one of the most fa-mous

restaurants in the city was looking for a new quartet. And George did something that surprised him just as much as it surprised every one else. He told the first violinist they should abandon the other viola player, develop their interpretation of two of the most famous quartets in the repertoire, and audition for the other job. They would have to spend all their leisure, non-sleeping hours study-ing Chi-Li's Opus 12 and Beethoven's Opus 59, No. 2, but the second violinist backed him up. The other two were dubious but they caught fire as George guided them through the recordings and interpretative commentaries he selected from the databanks. The restaurant owner and her husband actually stood up and applauded when they fin-ished the last note of the Chi-Li.

The restaurant paid unskilled labor real money. It was also a place, George discovered, where some of the cus-tomers actually listened to the music. They were busy people—men and women who were making fortunes. Someday they might buy performance systems themselves and enjoy the pleasure of experiencing music from the inside. For now, they sat at their tables like barons and duchesses and let the commoners do the work. Once every three or four days somebody dropped the musicians a tip that was bigger than all the money their old quintet had received in a week.

The other members of the quartet knew they owed it all to George. Anyone could buy a performance system and play the notes. George was the guy who understood the shadings and the instrumental interactions that turned sounds into real music. He had created a foursome that worked well together—a unit that accepted his ideas with-out a lot of argument.

George had occasionally exercised that kind of leader-ship when he had been playing for pleasure on Earth. Now he did it with all the intensity of someone who knew his livelihood depended on it.

* * * *

George searched the databanks twice. He didn't like to spend money on things he didn't need, even after he be-gan to feel more secure. As far as he could tell, Ms. Chao was still the chief designer in her company. Mr. Tan had resigned from the board four months after George's visit to the canary cage. Then he had rejoined the board six months later. It occurred to George that Ms. Chao had somehow tricked Mr. Tan into doing something that looked stupid. But why did she let him rejoin the board later?

The second violinist thought it might have something to do with family ties.

“Everybody says the Overseas Chinese have always been big on family ties,” the second violinist pointed out. “Why should the off-Earth Chinese be any different?”

The whole business became even more puzzling when one of George’s students told him she was really glad “Tan Zem” had recommended him. Three of his first four students, George discovered, had looked him up because Mr. Tan had steered them his way. Had Mr. Tan felt guilty? Had he been motivated by some kind of criminal code of honor? Finally George stopped trying to figure it out. He had a bigger apartment. He had a better job. He had the second violinist. He had become—who would have believed it?—the kind of immigrant the other im-migrants talked about when they wanted to convince themselves a determined North American could create a place for himself in the new society humanity was build-ing on the Moon.

He had become—by immigrant standards—a success.

* * * *

TRANSIT

Stephen Dedman

"Transit" appeared in the March 1998 issue of Asimov's, *with an illustration by Laurie Harden. New Australian writer Stephen Dedman has made several other sales to* Asimov's, *as well as sales to maga-zines such as* The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Science Fiction Age, Aurealis, *and* Eidolon, *and anthologies such as* Little Deaths, Alien Shores, *and* Glass Reptile Breakout. *His first novel,* The Art of Arrow Cutting, *was published in 1997, and was shortlisted for the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel. Upcoming is a new novel,* Foreign Bodies. *He lives in Perth.*

In the compelling story that follows, he takes us to an idealistic Utopian colony on another planet, and paints a bittersweet portrait of two young lovers di-vided by every possible barrier: religion, politics, philosophy, and even physiology—caught, quite lit-erally, between two worlds.

* * * *

I had just turned nine when Aisha walked into my class-room, stopping the conversation and stealing my heart in the same instant.

I think we all stared, and then, as Aisha looked back defiantly, we dropped our gazes back to our books as though we were suddenly interested in Stigrosc prime number theories. Pat, our teacher for the day, smiled a little thinly. "Class, this is Aisha, from al-Gohara."

A few of us looked up and muttered greetings, as Pat guided our new classmate to a seat near the doorway. A message from Morgan flowed across my book. *Pregnant,* e opined.

I glanced at Aisha's golden-pale profile out of the cor-ner of my eye. *Don't think so,* I replied.

Must be. Look at the size of those boobs.

It was hard not to, despite Aisha's loose and very opaque sky-grey robe, but that would have been even more impolite than passing notes in

class—and class was meant to teach us social skills: We would have learned math much faster at home. *Can't be,* I protested. Aisha was taller even than Pat, at least two meters, but all the al-Goharans I'd seen were taller still, and Aisha probably wasn't much older than we were.

Morgan stared at er book for a moment, obviously gos-siping to someone else. I stole a quick glance at Aisha's face, which was beautiful. Especially those eyes, rounder and darker and larger than any I'd seen outside of books. I love you, I thought, and was startled to see I'd written it on my book. I erased it hurriedly, relieved that I wasn't still passing my notes to Morgan, and went back to my math. A few of the kids were starting to talk again, but none of them spoke to—or about—Aisha.

Maybe they don't have contraplants on al-Gohara, Morgan suggested, a moment later.

They must have, I replied.

Muslims aren't like us, Morgan countered, and then, *I bet they cut Aisha's thing off.*

What?

They do that. They used to, anyway. Ask my dad.

Why?

E couldn't answer that, and there was almost nothing about al-Gohara in my book or my ramplant, and I couldn't access the library during class without Pat notic-ing. All I could remember was that al-Goharans, being Muslims, liked to travel to Earth once in their lives, and their world was only one solstice jump from da Vinci, with the worlds being in conjunction every six point something years (math isn't my forte, and I don't think anyone human *really* understands Stigrosc cosmography). From here, they went to Marlowe or Corby or Ammon, but that usually meant staying on da Vinci for up to a year wait-ing for the next solstice. I was only three or four years old last time they'd visited, and the al-Goharans usually stayed near Startown, where they'd built a mosque, and didn't so-cialize much, but I'd never heard of them bringing their children here before. I wondered whether Aisha even spoke Amerish, and tried to imagine a voice that would match those eyes, that golden face, those breasts ...

Aisha suddenly looked up, jacked out of er book, and then walked

over to Pat's desk and whispered something. Pat looked startled for a moment, and then nodded. "Of course; I'm sorry, I didn't think of it. Will you be coming back today?"

Aisha smiled, whispered something else, and then walked out of the room. I remembered reading that Mus-lims had to pray so many times a day—though whether that was an Earth day, an al-Goharan day, or a da Vincian day, I had no idea. Maybe I could ask Aisha.

* * * *

Aisha was standing in the shade under the trees at the edge of the basketball court, leaning against one of the old cedars with a book in er lap, but it was obvious from the way er eyes tracked that e was watching the game, or the players, or maybe their clothes: Smoke and mirrors were back in fashion again, and modesty wasn't. I found myself watching Morgan's legs, as usual—e liked to wear the briefest, tightest shorts possible, to show them off—but I kept wondering what Aisha's must look like.

I'd accessed the library as soon as class was over, and discovered that the gravity on al-Gohara was .82, the cli-mate generally warmer but less humid, and the day nearly thirty standard hours; the ship, the *Arakne* (Stigrosc don't give names to their ships, but they allow the human pas-sengers to christen them if they wish to), had only arrived three days before, so e was probably still adjusting. I sum-moned forth all the courage I thought I might have and had never needed before, and walked over. "Hi," I said. "I'm Alex. I'm in your class." Aisha nodded, and we watched the game for a moment. "Do they play basketball on al-Gohara?" Another nod. I wondered what I was do-ing wrong, and realized that I was asking yes-no ques-tions. "How do you like it here?"

The only reply to that one was a quick glance, and an expression I couldn't read through er shades. The solstice isn't for nearly a year, I thought; you're going to have to talk to someone sometime ...

I saw Teri weave past Shane and slam-dunk the ball amid scattered applause, and Aisha muttered something; the words were unrecognizable, probably Arabic, but the tone said, clearly, "Not bad."

"Do you want to practice your Amerish?" I suggested.

Another glance, and then, quietly, "Don't you have any friends?"

"Sure," I replied, slightly nettled. "I'm just lousy at basketball, is all. If I

were as big—I mean, *tall* as you, I'd probably be great. *You'll* probably be great, when you get used to the gravity; everyone will want you." At least I managed not to bite my tongue.

"The gravity isn't a problem," e replied, and muttered something that sounded like "initially." "It's less than Earth's, and we've been training for that. It's—"

"What?"

"Nothing. You just do things so differently here. I wanted to come to your school—it's been so boring on the ship, with no one else my own age—and I had to pester my father to let me, but it's ..."

I waited.

"Don't girls go to school on da Vinci?"

"What?"

"I suppose I should have learnt more about the place before I came here. I'm sorry I didn't, but there wasn't very much about it in our library: we don't travel much, except the men, and that's usually only on Hajj.... Do your girls decide not to come after they turn twenty-five, or is there some sort of law against it?"

I stared, calling up words from my ram and trying to understand what Aisha was saying, and hoping that I didn't look as stupid as I felt, if that were possible. "Or have they just sent me to a boy's school by mistake? I haven't even found a girls', uh, bathroom—"

A painful silence followed. "We don't have segregated schools," I began, "or segregated toilets, or segregated *anything.* We can't: we're all... we don't..." Oh, gods, I thought; this must be what Morgan meant when e said that Aisha's thing had been cut off. "I'm not a ... I mean, I *am* a ..." I took a deep breath. "Can I ask you a ques-tion?"

"I don't know. Can you?"

I tried to smile. "Do you know what 'monosex' means?"

It must have been Aisha's turn to stare at me. "What? No. What?"

"Or 'maf—'hermaphrodite'?"

“You mean, like the Chuh’hom?”

“Yes. Monosex is the opposite; it means to be male or female, but not both ...”

“But...” Aisha edged away from me slightly. “You mean *you‘re* a hermaphrodite?”

I nodded. “We all are.”

“You mean, everyone in the school?”

“Everyone on the *planet*...” I replied, and then a though hit me. “Well, except...”

Aisha slid slowly down the tree to sit with er arms wrapped around er legs, murmuring something in Arabic. I waited. “I’ve never met a hermaphrodite before,” e said, weakly.

“I’ve never met a—girl,” I replied, after a moment’s thought.

A suspicious stare. “How come you know what the word means?”

I shrugged. “Old films and novels. Besides, we call our sports teams girls and boys—no one wants to wear uni-forms, so the ones with the shirts are girls. I don’t know why; it’s probably something that used to mean something once, like giving out gold and silver medals, or talking about ‘going the whole nine yards—’ “ I glanced at the outline of Aisha’s breasts, and suddenly guessed the ori-gin of the custom. The feeling of knowing, discovering, *that* was more of a buzz, a jolt, than anything I could remember ever learning in class.

The game ended, and kids started drifting back into the classroom. I stood there silently, not wanting to leave Ai-sha.

When everyone else had disappeared, Aisha looked up, er golden face even more pale than usual. “This is too—” e looked around. “Do you think the toilets would be empty now?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah, sure.”

“Great.” I offered my hand, to help er up, but e ignored it and struggled to er feet without my help. We walked to the doorway, and Aisha

stopped, until I offered to go inside and make sure there was no one else there.

“Can you tell the teacher that I’ll be back tomorrow, initially?” Aisha said, when e emerged.

“Sure,” I said. “Will you be?”

Aisha hesitated, and then shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll have to ask my father.”

I nodded. It had never occurred to me before that mono-sexes had fathers, though it probably would have if I’d thought about it for a few seconds. “See you,” I said, won-dering if I’d ever see Aisha again, and knowing I had to.

* * * *

I spent most of the afternoon accessing the library, to find out what I could about monosexes. There was a lot of stuff I’d never imagined, like needing separate pronouns for each gender—”he” and “him” and “his” for males, “she” and “her” and “hers” for females. They seemed sort of redundant, but Amerish thrives on redundancy, and the female pronouns sounded exotic enough that I practiced using them whenever I thought of Aisha.

Monos were extremely rare away from Earth, except in some religious enclaves where no one had maf chromo-somes: otherwise, it required major surgery, which almost no one bothered with. The first human mafs were born a few years post-contact, but the chromosomes were dis-covered by humans, not Stigrosc: Stigs don’t believe in genetic engineering. Mafs remained a minority on Earth for more than a century, but many of them—us—traveled to habitable solstice worlds, where there was unrestricted birthright. Others became crew on the Stigrosc ships, or emigrated to the neutral worlds; Stigs can’t tell one human from another, and the Nerifar say we all taste the same, but Chuh’hom and Tatsu find it much easier and safer to communicate with mafs. Meanwhile, on Earth, as gene surgery became easier and cheaper and more countries adopted “one couple—one child” laws, mafs were seen by many governments as a way of avoiding serious gender imbalances in the population, and various incentives were offered to prospective parents—cheap health insurance, exemptions from combat service, places in the schools or the civil service or diplomatic corps reserved for mafs, that sort of thing. According to the library (which was at least seven years out of date), mafs made up 68 percent of the population of Earth—and more than 99 percent of the

permanent populations of Marlowe and Avalon, where the al-Goharans would also have to stop en route.

There was nothing in the library—at least, nothing I could access—about how monosexes made love. I was wondering about that when school closed, and I guess I still looked preoccupied when I went home: my mother, who is normally very careful not to invade our privacy, asked me what was on my mind.

"There was a new kid in class, today," I replied. "Of the *Arable.* Her name's Aisha."

"Is that the one who's pregnant?" asked Rene, without jacking out of er eternal *Vaster than Empires* game. Sometimes I think that unrestricted birthrights are over-rated; I get on okay with Kris, but I think Mum and Dad should have stopped when they'd had one kid each. "She's not pregnant," I snapped. "She's ..."

"She?" asked Kris.

Okay, *sometimes* we get on okay. "It's old English," Mum explained. "I didn't think the al-Goharans brought their kids with them...."

"They never have before," Dad agreed, without looking away from the holo. "How long is the trip? Two or three years each way? Hell of a time for a kid that age to be traveling—how old is e?"

That was Dad all over, making a judgment before e had any of the facts. "I don't know; she's tall, and her Amerish isn't too good, and she dresses like... I think she's about twenty-five or twenty-six," Kris stared, and almost dropped er book. "In al-Goharan years, which is—" My ram converted that into thirteen to thirteen point five stan-dard. "Nine, roughly, so she'll be about twelve when she gets to Mecca."

"Great," said Dad. "Three years of er life wasted going to see a crater."

"Mecca's not a crater anymore," I informed er. "Well, it is, sort of, but the radiation's down to a safe level, and they've built a new mosque and stuff. There was a load of new data for the library on the *Arakne*—stuff about Earth and a lot of other worlds, and only a few years old."

"Anything about how to get rid of razorvine?" e asked, sourly.

“Not that I noticed.” As far as the library was con-cerned, razorvine was unique to da Vinci (lucky us). It was probably a mutant strain of our terraforming fauna; it grew at about the same rate (much faster than the cyberfarms could process it into anything useful), and in everything from deserts to rivers, but was much harder to kill. Anything buried beneath it might be lost forever: it blocked infrared and radar, and thrived on spotlights and X rays. And it wasn’t even attractive—the same monot-onous tarnish color as the solamat we use for major roads, with inedible seeds that you couldn’t pick without the risk of losing a few fingers. Dad’s a builder, so e regards it as a personal enemy, but most kids play hide-and-seek among the thickets at least once—or as often as we can without our parents catching us—and there are the usual stories about secret tobacco farms hidden within razorvine jungles. “There *are* some new games and shows, from Musashi,” I added, and Rene and Kris grinned, “and I don’t know what else.”

Dad grunted, and watched the holo for a few more minutes, then stretched. “Want to shoot a few hoops be-fore dinner?”

“Sure, Mum,” said Kris, heading outside. Mum glanced at me, then folded er book. I was the last one outside. As usual.

* * * *

“A Muslim monosex,” Dad muttered, as e collapsed onto the bed. My parents’s room was well soundproofed, of course, but easy to bug on the rare occasions that I wanted to listen in. “Okay, e’s nearly an adult, e’s got er implants, you’d expect er to have crushes and fool around a little, but there are *dozens* of kids er own age here, why—”

“E’ll only be here a year,” replied Mum. “Besides, it may be good for Alex to get to know some off-worlders. You know e’s good at xenology; e might even be a dip-lomat.”

“Not if it needs math,” said Dad.

Mum sighed. “E’s better at languages than we ever were, and e enjoys them. I wouldn’t be surprised if e learnt Arabic before this friend of ers flies away.”

“What good will that be?”

“How many mathematicians do we need on a world this size?

Biologists, builders, designers, artists, yes, but math-ematicians? And what if e wants to go off-world?"

"Why would e?" retorted Dad. "What the hell can e get off-world that e can't have here?"

* * * *

Aisha arrived in class a few minutes later than the rest of us, clad in the same loose gray hooded robe or another exactly like it. Her dark eyes were slightly clouded, and I guessed she was having trouble adjusting to the shorter days. I thought of pointing out that she'd get more praying done this way, but I wasn't sure how she'd take it, and I couldn't think of anything else to say.

Our teacher for the day was Jai, an old fossil with a murmuring voice and an inexplicable enthusiasm for eco-nomics, both of which e used to try to explain the half-million years of human history pre-Contact. Most of us were already confused long before e came to the impact of third wave tech, and when e admitted that the whole thing had collapsed soon after the Stigrosc arrived any-way, most of us became irritated as well.

"This is irrelevant, isn't it?" asked Teri, while a few of us chuckled.

Jai bit er lip. "I rather hope so. You see, history is a wonderful labor-saving device; it saves us reinventing and rediscovering so much. True, all these economic theories were based on the idea that resources were scarce and humans needed to work to survive. By the first century pre-Contact, of course, the scarcities were usually manu-factured for commercial or political reasons—so that the rich could stay rich, or nations could control their populace by denying them food—and the work ethic had be-come a cancer. Many people worked at jobs they hated because they'd been convinced that there was no other way to survive; by the time the Stigrosc came to Earth, it would have been cheaper to simply feed, house, educate, and entertain most of these people—but that would have violated the work ethic and destroyed the illusion of scarce resources. In this regard, capitalism and commu-nism were almost indistinguishable—and when the Sti-grosc arrived, and *gave* us cyberfacs and habitable planets, asking only for those ideas and data that were free to every human, both systems became, as you say, irrelevant. Our new economic system is, to a large degree, another gift from the Stigrosc—but, unlike all previous human economic systems, it is founded on the idea that human demand will never outstrip resource availability. If this happy state of affairs should change, then we will need a new system—and those of you who've been paying

attention will have some idea which ones *not* to try." E drew a deep breath, and then—apparently for the first time— noticed Aisha. E glanced at the book open on er desk, and asked, "I gather things are the same on al-Gohara?" She was silent. "The cyberfacs and robots provide what is needed, and no one is compelled to do work that they hate?"

Aisha shook her head violently. "No, of course not," she lied.

"Of course, there *are* some people who cling to the old ways," Jai continued, "simply because they are human ways—or, more importantly to many of them, *not* Stigrosc ways. Most of these people are still on Earth, because they regard Earth as a human world, or because they *own* parts of Earth in a way they can never own part of any other world. What good this ownership does them now, I leave to you to imagine; if any of you succeed, please explain it to me. Aisha, it's nearly noon; do you want to go and pray? Now, are there any other questions?"

* * * *

"Tell me about your world."

We were sitting under the old cedars by the basketball court again. Aisha glanced at me, and shrugged. "Why?" she asked. "You don't want to go there, do you?"

If all the girls there are like you, I thought, I might, but I didn't say that. "I won't know until you tell me," I replied.

She smiled slightly, beautifully. "It's warm, and much drier than it is here, and the sun's not quite as bright—"

"I know all that. Tell me about the people."

"People are people." She looked warily at me, daring me to challenge her.

"How much difference does having two sexes make?" I asked.

She looked even more wary. "I'm not going to discuss sex with—well, you're a *boy."*

"I'm also just as much a girl as you are," I replied, mildly.

She looked thunderstruck at that, then shook her head violently. “There’s more to it than having a—besides, you don’t have ...” She looked puzzled for a moment.

“If you want to know what I *do* have—” I began.

“I don’t—”

“You can access the library.”

Aisha blinked, and then laughed. I waited until she’d finished, and added, “That’s how I know what you’ve got. Sort of. I mean, I... unless you ...” I sat there, trying to find the words.

“Have I been circumcised?” she asked, at last. “No. That was a primitive custom, much older than Islam and explicitly condemned in the Qur’an—you *have* heard of the Qur’an?—and while some Muslims on Earth did it, so did some Christians. By the time the Stigrosc arrived, it had been stamped out nearly everywhere, like foot-binding or breast implants. But there’s more to being a woman than just the body.”

“We can all get pregnant, if that’s what you mean.”

“No!” she said, shaking her head again. “More than that!”

“What, then?” I asked, but she stood and walked away. I tried following her, but she kept walking faster, and her legs were much longer than mine. I walked faster, and she began running. Finally, she ran out of the school and down the razorvine-edged road to Startown, and I didn’t follow her.

* * * *

The next day was Saturday, and I’d resigned myself to not seeing Aisha. Kris had slipped out early to play bas-ketball and get out of gardening, which we both hated.

Mum always maintained that if we did it often enough, we’d come to enjoy it as e and Dad did, but e let me go after an hour of cauterizing the razorvine that was begin-ning to encroach on the watermelons. I spent the rest of the morning with a portrait program, trying to see if I could produce a fair likeness of Aisha, and maybe slot both of us into an old movie, a pre-Contact one with monosex characters: *The Princess Bride,* maybe, or

War for the Oaks. That way, I could just superimpose her face on a female body, rather than have to try to imagine hers. Unfortunately, nearly all of the female bodies in the art history catalogue were of women from Earth gravity, while the few from the Martian Republic were *too* tall and slender. I'd always known that ideals of beauty varied between eras and ethnic groups, but seeing the demon-stration flash before my eyes was startling. I'd never imagined that there were so many ways to mutilate living bodies.

I managed to devote three or four hours to Aisha's face, and another two to her figure, before succumbing to the temptation to access some pictures of female genitals. They looked incomplete, even deformed, with just this little bump where the penis should be, but apart from that, they looked just like mine or Morgan's. Males, I discov-ered, had external testes where the vulva should be, in what looked like an uncomfortable, if not hideously haz-ardous, position.

After forming a recognizable template of Aisha, I scanned us into *Forbidden Planet;* the eyelines gave me a little trouble, but once I'd fixed that, it looked wonder-ful, and it even made sense.

On Sunday, I made the mistake of reading a love poem by Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"—*Had we but world enough, and time*—and became determined to see Aisha again, or at least to try. The library told me that Sunday wasn't a religious holiday for Muslims—their Sabbath started Friday and finished Saturday—and there was nothing to stop me walking up Tranquility Road to Startown; Aisha, a lightworlder, did it every day. Mum let me go with nothing more than the usual caution to be home before nightfall (razorvine is attracted by light, and can supposedly move fast enough to engulf anyone walk-ing with a lantern), and I slipped out before Dad could object.

The streets of Startown were all but empty, but there was a soccer game in progress (if you can use soccer and progress in the same sentence) on Eagle Street two blocks from the mosque, and it had drawn quite a crowd—some of them in long-sleeved robes, some in jeans and shirts. I watched for a few minutes, scanning for Aisha, but though I noticed a few pale and beardless faces, I couldn't see any women present at all, or anyone under fifteen. I attracted some stares, not all of them friendly, but no one questioned my right to be there.

A few minutes after the whistle blew for halftime, I heard the sound of a single, powerful voice booming from the direction of the mosque, and everyone turned and walked toward it. I followed until the last of them had

disappeared inside the doors, and then headed back to-ward my home.

I'd reached the edge of Startown when, suddenly, it began raining. I heard doors open behind me, and laugh-ter, and turned to see al-Goharans rushing out into the street, most of them staring at the sky and catching raindrops in their mouths as they laughed; a few even re-moved their skull-caps and let them fill with water before upending them over their heads. I turned about, but though I searched down every street, I couldn't see Aisha anywhere. Eventually, after the rain stopped, I returned home, hearing the waterfed razorvine growing around me as I walked.

That evening, I began learning Arabic: The library had teaching programs for most languages, even ones that had been dead since before contact. It was a little easier than Chuh'hom Oratory, and it might even be useful.

* * * *

"Why?" Aisha demanded.

"Why what?"

"Why are you learning Arabic? And why do you want me to help you?"

"Well, al-Goharans are going to be staying here after every solstice," I replied, reasonably enough. "We should have *someone* here who can speak to them without an interpreter."

"We all speak Amerish."

"Then why do you learn Arabic?"

"The Quran must be read in the original; all transla-tions are invalid."

"What do you speak at home?"

"My mother used to call it Amerabic," she replied, and a beautiful smile suddenly appeared on her face. "Some-times we'll start a sentence in one language and want to say something that's easier in the other language, so we switch. It's whatever language we think in—here, every-one speaks Amerish, so I think in Amerish."

I nodded. "I went to Startown yesterday, and everyone there was speaking Arabic."

“That’s—you did *what!”*

“I went to Startown. I watched the soccer game for a while; then it started raining, and everyone seemed to get a big kick out of it.”

“It doesn’t rain very often on al-Gohara,” she replied, looking at the cloudy sky with distinct approval. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen it rain like *that* before.”

“Then why weren’t you out dancing in it like everyone else?”

“I—” She turned to stare at me; her beautiful face turned pale, and then pink. “That’s none of your business. Anyway, I’m sure it’ll rain again before I leave, initially.”

I realized, suddenly, that all the times I thought she’d said “initially,” whether or not it made sense, she was really saying “inshallah”—”if Allah wills it.” “Oh, sure,” I replied. “Or maybe you can stop at New Seattle on your way back. Do you mind if I ask you a question?” She continued to stare, so I didn’t wait for her to answer. “Are there any other girls—or women—in Startown?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“That’s two questions.. ..” She turned away from me, and watched the basketball game for a while. I was be-ginning to suspect that the reason she almost always headed for this clump of trees at lunchtime was that she *liked* talking to me, but wanted to make sure there were always plenty of witnesses, as though she was willing to regard me as a girl from the neck up. “Do you remember what Jai was saying last week about scarce resources and the Stigs?”

“The parts I stayed awake for.”

“What she, he—what should I call him?”

“E,” I replied, without hesitation. “We’re all ‘e,’ except you.”

“Okay. What e said doesn’t really apply on al-Gohara. There’s one resource that’s still scarce, and the Stigs con-trol it: that’s passage to Earth. The hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is one of the five pillars of Islam, but

there isn't enough room on the Stig ships for all adults to make the journey even once, so places are awarded randomly by a computer. At least, they are on al-Gohara; I don't know how it's done on other Muslim worlds."

I thought about this for a moment, and asked, "And women aren't allowed to go?"

"It's a little more complicated than that... women *are* allowed to go, but not without their husbands, so unless the husband has also won a place on the ship, the woman gives it to her husband. Or sometimes to her father, or an adult son, or she can trade it, inshallah. And there are some who think the computer may not be perfectly ran-dom—"

"Trade it? For what?"

Aisha shrugged. "Favors. Prestige. Luxuries that the facs don't make. A. better marriage for her children, maybe, inshallah."

"Arranged marriages?"

She nodded. I refrained from whistling or swearing, but it was a near thing. "Some women complain about not going, but the men just blame the Stigs for not having bigger ships: some even say they're doing it to weaken our faith, because the Stigs won't even let us fill the ship, just in case someone wants to leave the worlds we visit en route, which no one ever does. The imams and califas have tried petitioning the Stigs, but they don't seem to understand about religion, and almost no one from," she hesitated for a moment, "other worlds, the non-Islamic worlds, ever wants to visit Earth. Anyway, if the Stigrosc cared enough to want to break our faith, they could leave all of us stranded on al-Gohara forever."

"Sounds like you're lucky to be here."

"Lucky?" She considered this, moving the tip of her tongue tantalizingly across her upper lip, as though tasting the air. "I'm lucky to be going on hajj, and glad I'll be an adult by the time I'm there, but I miss having other girls around. Men are boring."

I had to know. "How did you get a place when other women don't?"

"My father wouldn't leave me on al-Gohara alone."

"What about your mother?"

“She’s dead,” Aisha snapped. “Okay? Can *you* leave me alone, now?”

I walked to the other side of the playing field, so I could see her and pretend I was still watching the basketball game. The game ended a few minutes later, and I saw Morgan, wearing little more than a translucent helix of swirling silver light, glance at me meaningfully before walking off hand-in-hand with Ten.

* * * *

Despite that setback, I finally *did* persuade Aisha to coach me in Arabic, after only four weeks of mispronouncing words and hideously mangling the grammar. In a moment of random curiosity, I learnt that she was named after Muhammad’s third wife, and that her name was also Jap-anese for “manipulating an overly sympathetic or soft-hearted person,” a discovery that we both found hilarious.

Weeks passed, and though I became fairly good at read-ing and speaking Arabic, I couldn’t write it or think in it. Aisha couldn’t invite me to her home, nor come to mine, but occasionally she’d let me walk with her almost as far as Startown, on the condition that I stayed on the other side of the road. The only people who ever saw us were the razorvine clearing patrols, and they must have men-tioned it to Dad, because one evening e said, with all the casualness of a sun going supernova, “Some al-Goharans volunteered for the clearing crews today, want Macleod and me to teach them how to handle the lasers.”

No one spoke. I just stared at my dinner and kept chew-ing. MacLeod was Morgan’s mother, and I wondered if e’d put them up to this.

“I don’t know whether they were getting bored, or whether they just liked the idea of killing something,” Dad continued, “but there were at least a dozen of them. There’s nothing else happening at the moment, so we said yes.”

“Maybe they want to thank us for our hospitality,” re-plied Mum, mildly.

“Or maybe they don’t want us coming any closer than we have to,” said Dad. E seemed remarkably calm about the idea of armed al-Goharans: Of course, the lasers have genescanners and safety switches built in, so you can’t actually aim them at a human, and bouncing them off a mirror is much trickier than the thrillers make out. Dad wasn’t setting me up to be murdered, but I wondered what e thought would happen to Aisha. Kris

looked from one to the other. “Why would they thank us for that? It’s free. I mean, if we said no, the Stigs would stop coming here, right?”

Dad shrugged, and turned er attention back to er soup. Rene’s eyes bugged. “No more Stigs? You mean no new games?”

“Relax,” I told er. “It’ll never happen. It’s in the treaty the Stigs signed before they gave us Avalon and Terra-nova—that a ship would visit every human world every solstice, so we could always go back to Earth, or out to any new worlds....”

“Okay,” said Dad. “What do you think would happen if, say, the al-Goharans landed and discovered that there was no mosque at Startown, or no food or water, or no cyberfac? Would the Stigs still keep coming?”

“The Stigs would,” I replied, “but the al-Goharans might not....” My voice faded out, and we stared at each other in silence until Mum said, softly but pointedly, “None of us understand the Stigrosc well enough to know what they’d do. Or the al-Goharans, for that matter.”

* * * *

Aisha heard about the al-Goharan crews that same night, and the next day she asked me not to accompany her home again, in case her father heard about it and ordered her to stay away from the school altogether. On da Vinci, that would be considered probable cause for a charge of child abuse, but I decided not to tell Aisha that: I was still wondering what I *should* say when she leapt up, and vol-unteered for the basketball game, on the sole condition that whatever team she was on would be the girls. I stayed on the sidelines and watched. Despite the gravity, she moved beautifully, like a gazelle with breasts.

To my irritation, this became a set routine for a few weeks: we’d be talking about something, when suddenly she’d stand up and join in one of the games. She wasn’t quite as fast as Teri, and she had trouble allowing for the gravity when she had to throw the ball any distance, but she knew how to use her height and her reach, so she was always selected, while I usually had to sit back and watch. On days when it was too wet for basketball, she would sit in the classroom and watch the rain through the roof. “This is wonderful,” she murmured. “Our buildings are made the same way as yours are—though the ceilings are higher—but they’re designed to keep the sunlight out; I don’t think this would ever have occurred to us. Even when it’s not raining, I love watching your clouds, all the shapes, the way they move....”

I've never been that enthusiastic about rain myself, but I nodded. "You should see it in winter, when it thunders— but I guess you'll be gone before then..."

"Yes," she said, still beaming, and then, unexpectedly, "It's my birthday tomorrow."

"Happy birthday. How old will you be?"

"Twenty-seven: that's about, oh, nine and a half of your years."

I hesitated, then plunged in. "Of course, you could stay here."

She stared at me, and then shook her head sadly. "My father would never let me, Alex."

"So don't ask er." There was a shocked silence as I did the math. "In half a year, you'll legally be an adult—"

"Not on al-Gohara—"

"Right; you're *not* on al-Gohara. You're on da Vinci, and subject to da Vincian law—so you might as well en-joy its benefits. When're you considered an adult on al-Gohara, anyway?"

She looked away, as though she was fascinated by the way the rain trickled down the windows. "On my wedding night," she said, finally, very softly.

"What?"

"Of course, most women don't really treat you as an adult until you have a child of your own. Boys are legally considered men after puberty—do you know about pu-berty?"

I grimaced, and nodded, remembering my first and (so far) only period, before I had my contraplants inserted. "Sure," I croaked. "Is this part of your religion, or—"

"Some of it," she replied. "Some of it is tradition, I guess. Our ancestors weren't just Arabs; they came from every continent on Earth, and they brought a lot of dif-ferent traditions with them." She shrugged. "My mother used to say it was intended to keep the birthrate up—we can't breed

as fast as you can—but she may have been joking, I don't really know."

We sat there in silence for nearly a minute, before I asked, "Is this what you meant when you said that there was more to being a woman than ... well, having female parts, being able to get pregnant...."

She nodded. "Well, it's also important *not* to have— male parts, or you'll never be trusted around the women. If you were to come to al-Gohara, the men wouldn't want to know you, and you'd be barred from places that were only for men *and* only for women, and you certainly wouldn't be able to marry. Men are permitted to marry non-Muslims, but women can't, so even if one wanted to ... it'd be the worst of all possible worlds." She turned to look at me, and I noticed that she was on the verge of tears. "For you, that is. For us, it's—"

"Home?"

"More than that. It's ... a world we created for our-selves." She looked down, and then scrambled to her feet and rushed out into the rain, looking at the sky, letting the rain run down her face. I just sat there and watched her, trying to think of the right thing to say, and finally I walked out behind her, stood within arms reach but too scared to touch, saying nothing, nothing, nothing.

* * * *

Weeks passed, and we spent them saying nothing, until Cori was giving us a lesson in xenology. Aisha was as fascinated as I was, possibly more so; unlike the rest of us, she'd actually *met* Stigrosc and Chuh'hom and Nerifar. Cori was becoming slightly bogged down in the details of Nerifar triads, thanks largely to Teri's love for asking unanswerable questions, when Morgan interrupted to ask, "Nerifar don't have any religions, do they?"

"No," replied Cori, er relief apparent. "They have a complicated ethical code, which is almost entirely con-cerned with sex and food, but because they don't believe in owning any more than they can actually carry—which isn't much—it's short enough for most of them to mem-orize."

"Like a hafiz," I interjected. Cori looked blank. "Some-one who's memorized the complete Qur'an," I explained.

Morgan glanced at me, er expression unreadable, and then smiled back at Cori. "But they don't claim that this ethical code was handed down to them by any sort of deity?"

“No. It was originally composed as a series of songs— peace treaties from various wars, marriage vows, divorce decrees, medical treatises, lessons for children, proverbs and parables, that sort of thing. But because it’s never been written down, there’s no standard version; it’s sung differently in different clans, new verses are always being added, and a few were changed or edited out when they were discovered not to be true, like the one about kid-neys ...”

“In fact,” said Morgan, er smile becoming wider and er voice impossibly sweet, “none of the other species we’ve encountered—or that the Stigrosc have encountered and told us about—have anything we would call a reli-gion, or a deity.”

Cori considered this. “The Nerifar... don’t, the Chuh’hom ... don’t, the Tatsu don’t... We don’t really understand enough about Stigrosc or Garuda culture to be sure; they often seem to regard the universe as a sentient being on a time scale beyond our comprehension, which I suppose you could consider a deity....”

“But they don’t believe that it handed down a set of laws they had to obey?”

“Only mathematical laws—which for a Stig or a Ga-ruda, is pretty important. But not their ethical codes.”

“And none of them believe in a single ancestor for their entire species?”

“No.”

“What about the Garuda egg?” asked Jo.

Cori nodded. “Well, the first Garuda presumably *did* hatch from the first Garuda egg, but the ‘Garuda egg’ in their histories contained *everything,* so it’s probably a metaphor—or a poor translation—for the Big Bang. The Nerifar don’t have any similar stories—the only mentions of eggs in their coda are instructions on how to care for them and when not to eat them—but the Nerifar didn’t know the rest of the universe existed until the Stigrosc landed on their homeworld.”

Morgan nodded. “Do any of them worship their ances-tors?”

Cori considered this. “No. Chuh’hom worship the com-munity; they

believe in a form of reincarnation, but they're still arguing about whether souls can travel be-tween planets, and if so, how fast." Chuh'hom love to argue, and their committee meetings should be avoided at all costs. "The Nerifar eat *their* ancestors, and never speak the names of the dead. Male Tatsu worship their mothers, and no one knows what the females think. Stigrosc revere their descendants, and if Garuda worship anything, it's the sky."

Morgan grinned, and sprang er trap. "Would you agree that only humans had religion because it was invented by human monosex males and enforced with violence, to compensate for the fact that they couldn't bear children, that their role in creating children was ridiculously small and for all they knew, might have been nonexistent, per-formed by someone else—the same inadequacy that pro-duced lunatic ideas like penis envy, sentient sperm, and women as mere incubators? That its mainspring was the idea that the *father* was the creator, not the mother; the father was omnipotent and omniscient, the father knew best—but not better than er father, or er father before er, and so on until the golden age before women fucked everything up?"

There was a brief silence while Morgan paused for breath. I glanced at Aisha; her face, normally pale, was the color of dried bone. Cori began saying, "Well, I think that's a ..." but Morgan was unstoppable. "And that be-coming complete, becoming mafs, so that *everyone* could create children, could know that feeling, did even more to kill off the old religions than the bombing of Mecca and Rome?"

Cori—who was only eighteen or twenty, and had never been a mother—gulped, and began again. "I think that's an oversimplification; I don't think there's ever a single cause for anything as complicated as—" but I didn't hear the rest, because Aisha had run from the room, and I followed her.

* * * *

She was running down Tranquillity Road, and I could *feel* her screaming, though she was saving her breath for the race. Her legs were much longer than mine, and she was nearly acclimatized to the gravity, and I didn't have a chance of catching her before she reached Startown unless she let me. She was at least halfway there before she began to collapse; fortunately, she slowed down enough that I could catch her before she hit the solamat. Holding on to her wasn't easy—standing up, my eyes were on the same level as her breasts—but I supported her as best I could while she cried

onto the top of my head.

“It’s okay,” I murmured into her blouse. “E just doesn’t understand, that’s all.”

She sniffed. “Do *you* understand?”

“No, but... I’m *trying* to understand. Besides, I...” I took a deep breath and said it very quickly, “I’ve been in love with you ever since I saw you and ... well, Morgan and I used to ...” I tried to remember an Arabic term for “go steady,” and couldn’t think of one.

“What?”

“Well, I guess you could say we were ... girlfriends, or something. Nothing serious, just kid stuff—kissing games, that sort of thing.” She pulled away slightly and stared at me through her shades. “You don’t play games like that on al-Gohara?” She shook her head violently. “Well, I guess it’s different for you. We all have the same sort of, uh, equipment, and we get to see each other naked in the change rooms, at the beach, places like that, or look in a mirror... but I think Morgan’s a bit jealous.” I shrugged. “I guess that’s one thing we haven’t gotten rid of.”

Aisha raised an eyebrow at that, and then began crying again. “Thanks for coming after me ... I’m glad we can say good-bye.”

“It’s—what?”

“I can’t go back to school. Not after *that.”*

I stared at her, suddenly weighed down by a horrible feeling of heaviness, of sinking. “Good-bye, Alex.” She grabbed my head, kissed me quickly and violently, and then let go and turned away. I tried to yell something, but my mouth seemed to be stunned. I watched her walking, and then ran after her.

“And do what?” I panted. “Stay at home all day every day until *Olivia* arrives?” She kept walking. “Okay, you don’t want to go back to school, you don’t have to, neither do I, we can still see each other.”

“No we can’t.”

“There’s an empty house, way out of town, all on its own; it’s a great

place, completely private, and I have a key.” She stopped, and looked curiously at me. “It be-longed to Mad Cousin Yuri. It’s a long story. Anyway, it’s at the end of Barrows Road, you know, the turn-off we just passed...”

Aisha shook her head, and started walking faster.

“Send me a note if you change your mind,” I called. No answer. “Or send me a note anyway, any time you want to talk. Please?”

She stopped, and turned. “Inshallah,” she murmured.

* * * *

“Is this why you call him Mad Cousin Yuri?” Aisha asked, staring at the half-finished artworks that lined the walls.

I nodded, wondering how Aisha had convinced her fa-ther to let her out unchaperoned. “E was my father’s cousin, not mine: e wanted to be an artist, and e was pretty good at it, but e hated working.” Aisha laughed. “E con-vinced erself that the only way e was going to finish any-thing was by removing erself from society altogether, so e petitioned for a house out here, no one around but the friendly neighborhood razorvines. A lot of people tried talking er out of it, but e had the right to a house of er own, and the builders couldn’t claim to be too busy or anything, so it got done; they cleared the land, built a road and the house, and moved er stuff out here. E stayed out here for three weeks.” Aisha laughed. “E came back oc-casionally, staying for a week or two at a time—and usu-ally with a model or two, rarely on er own. Dad never really let er live it down—it was the first house e’d ever built, which is how I got a key—but Yuri was too easy-going to get upset. E managed to finish a few small things—some portraits, a lot of sketches, a statue or two— but e was just too fond of the cafés and the bathhouses.”

“Isn’t there a bath here?” asked Aisha, a little ner-vously.

“Sure—down the hall, second right. You want to take a bath?”

“I’ll need to wash before I pray ...”

Stupid of me. “Yes, there’s a bathroom—down the hall, there.”

“Then why did e have to go to bathhouses?”

“Ah,” I said, sitting down on a chair that was twice my age. “Well. We

go to the bathhouses for sex—I mean, *I* don't, you have to be at least eleven, that's about thirty-one of your years—but that's what they're for. I think that's where my parents met, or at least—" I noticed that Aisha was looking disturbed, even slightly revolted, and shut up. I'd had to wait five weeks before she contacted me, and another four before she'd agreed to meet me here, which left only eleven weeks and three days before *Olivia* arrived—Time's winged chariot hurrying near, as Andrew Marvell would have said.

"We may be more different than I thought," she said, softly, staring at the picture that Yuri had been working on on er final visit here. It was a sketch of er favorite model, Kai, the one e used to joke about being buried with. E was very pregnant, and topless—or bottomless, rather; Yuri hadn't drawn er below the waist, just a halo of curly hair, a beautiful round face, and beautiful round breasts with large nipples the color of Aisha's eyes. "I mean, I shouldn't be lying to my father, I shouldn't even be here with you, especially not *alone*..." I waited for her to say more, but she didn't. "Why not?" I asked. "I mean, we're not even *doing* anything—"

"But we *might* be!"

"—and what if we were? Whose business is that but ours?"

"You don't understand!"

"No! I don't."

We glared at each other for a while, and then she shook her head. "What do you want?" she asked, softly.

"Where do I begin? I want to—I want us to be able to see each other whenever we want."

"I'm leaving in eighty days."

"You could stay here; you could be happy here—" She raised her eyebrows at that, and then blinked as though the idea had never occurred to her before. "Anyway, we were talking about what *I* want. Next thing on my list is, I wish I knew what *you* wanted."

She continued to stare, and then shook her head. "So do I," she whispered. "Alex, you've been wonderful, you've been kinder to me than anyone since my mother..." She turned away, and I could tell she was about

to cry; I reached up and out to touch her shoulders, comfort her, but stopped when my hands were only a few millimeters away. “My mother,” she repeated, rather stiffly. “Was executed. For adultery. *Now* do you under-stand?”

I had the feeling that I was understanding less and less the longer I knew Aisha; I shook my head,

“My father brought me with him on this trip because he didn’t trust my mother’s family to watch me, he thought I might disgrace him—”

“That’s—”

She turned and faced me, tears in her eyes and a crooked smile on her lips. “And how do you get on with *your* father?”

“That’s not the point.” I took a deep breath. “Okay, so maybe it is the point. But I know *my* father is wrong about you—and about a lot of other things. Is yours?”

“I’m here with you, aren’t I?” She glared at me, then glanced briefly around at the windows, and then removed her scarf. As I stared, she shook her long hair free, pulled her jacket open, stepped out of her skirt, and then stood there wearing only a pair of pants and a strange harness-like garment covering her breasts. A moment later, that popped open, and then she removed her pants and sat down on a chair opposite me, legs slightly apart and one foot propped up on the seat. She was even more beautiful than I’d imagined.

“Now do you understand? On al-Gohara, I’ll be my mother’s daughter until I’m my husband’s wife. Here, I’d be considered a freak, mutilated, incomplete—and that in-cludes emotionally as well as physically, sexually. We couldn’t even have children naturally!”

I admit, I hadn’t thought that far ahead—I couldn’t le-gally switch off my contraplants until I was fourteen— and I was surprised that Aisha had. Of course, if “naturally” meant “without gene surgery,” then she was right, but so what? Or was that against al-Goharan law, too? Suddenly, uncontrollably, I began laughing.

“What’s up?”

I took a deep breath and leaned back in my chair. “I’m just glad I

didn’t fall in love with a Stigrosc; that would have made my life *really* complicated.”

Aisha stared, her eyes bugging slightly—and then she, too, burst out laughing, which set me off again. I slid out of the chair and kneeled in front of her, close enough to almost taste her, close enough to hear her heartbeat. I reached out and stroked her hair, running my hand along the side of her face down to her lovely neck—and felt/heard the cry of the muezzin, transmitted through the bone from a complant, calling her to *zuhr,* noon prayer. She looked into my eyes sadly, then grabbed her clothes and ran to the bathroom, while I collapsed face-first onto her chair.

I heard the bathroom door slide shut, and then open, and she disappeared into Yuri’s bedroom to pray (it’s con-sidered inappropriate to perform *salat* in a bathroom). When she reappeared, fully clothed, I was sitting back in my own chair.

“When *Olivia* arrives...” I began, as she walked to-ward the front door. She stopped. “Just in case I don’t see you before then,” I said. *“Olivia* won’t be able to wait for you; it’ll only have an hour or two to rendezvous with the shuttles before going to the jump point. If you’re not on the shuttle in time, your father will have to choose be-tween you and waiting another six years for er hajj—six years *here.* Which do you think e’ll pick?

“We can hide here,” I continued, quickly. “Or, better still, we can hide in the razorvine; even if they can find us, they’ll never be able to cut us out in time—”

“I can’t stay here, either,” she said, “not in this house, not on this world...” and then she walked out. I stared at her back, waiting for her to turn around; then, when she disappeared behind the next hill, I grabbed one of the razorvines that was snaking around the house, feeling the thorns bite into my palm and my fingers, standing there silently, knowing that Aisha wasn’t coming back, and un-derstanding nothing.

* * * *

The clouds were the same gray as Aisha’s robes, and the razorvine rustled and groaned alarmingly as I biked down the road toward the starport. I’d crept out of the house as soon as the sun had risen, after the longest night I’d ever stayed awake through. I hadn’t heard from Aisha since Ramadan began, five weeks before, and that had been just another good-bye. She hadn’t even answered my mail; maybe her father had taken her book away.

If e had, e'd know I was here, waiting; if not, she would.

I watched the first bus arrive as the shuttle hangar un-folded like a flower, then heard another bike behind me. I turned, and saw Morgan, dressed in jeans and a fine mesh jacket against the morning cold, dismount and walk toward me. "Saying good-bye?" e asked.

I didn't answer; I just turned my attention back to the shuttle. I couldn't see Aisha, but maybe she'd boarded while I'd looked away.

"I've been reading about monosexes," e said, sitting next to me. "Boys, girls... they were almost never friends. They didn't understand each other well enough, they were taught to want different things ... It was really a scary idea, not being friends with your lover. I was really glad we'd gotten past that." I said nothing. "E's not going to stay, you know."

I saw a figure in gray, slightly shorter than the others, walking toward the ramp, and reached for my nocs. It was Aisha, and she looked around before sliding up the ramp and into the ship. "I thought we were friends," said Morgan. "We were friends for a long time, since we were kids. I thought we might even be lovers, one day. You know, you hurt me pretty badly, dumping me like that."

"I'm sorry," I said, quietly.

"Especially dumping me for er," e said, with some real bitterness in er voice. "A monosex. Someone who's not even *complete.* How do you think that made *me* feel, knowing I couldn't compete with half a person?"

"She's not half a person," I replied, dully.

Morgan shrugged, as the first bus pulled away and an-other crowd of al-Goharans filed into the shuttle. "Well, e'll be happier with er own people."

I opened my book: no new messages. Morgan opened er jacket as the sun broke through the clouds. "So, what happens now?"

I looked at er for the first time that day. "We're friends," I said, gently. "You're one of the best friends I ever had, and I'm sorry I hurt you."

E smiled, and shrugged. I leaned over and kissed er. "And I'm going to miss you," I said, and ran toward the shuttle, yelling "Wait!" at the top of my lungs.

* * * *

The pilot was Jessi Vokes, Teri's mother, and e *knew* that I was still nearly twenty weeks short of turning ten—but e also knew that there wouldn't be another ship leaving for nearly four years. Faced with this dilemma and a strict schedule, e called my mother, who—to my astonish-ment—told er that I had er permission to leave, and woke Kris and Rene so we could say good-bye. Perhaps fortu-nately, fathers don't get a vote in these matters. We lifted off only a few seconds behind schedule, and docked with *Olivia* with time to spare.

The human crew here are doing their best to keep the mafs and the Muslims apart, so I haven't seen Aisha in a week—and, fortunately, her father hasn't seen me. But I have seen Nerifar, and Chuh'hom, and I hope to see some Stigrosc when they've finished shedding their skins. The ship's library is even better than the one on da Vinci, and full of recent data about the planets we'll visit.

The atmosphere on Marlowe is rich in neon and the aurora look like waterfalls of blood, especially during the season they call Not-and-Live. Aisha and I will legally become adults there, long before *Isis* arrives. I think I could be happy staying on Marlowe, despite the weather, but if Aisha decides to continue on her hajj, I'll follow. They say Avalon is as beautiful as Earth was between the Ice Ages, but if Aisha doesn't want to stay there, either . .. well, I've always wanted to see Earth. And after Earth, we have time. And worlds enough.

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SMART ALEC

Kage Baker

"Smart Alec" appeared in the September 1999 issue of Asimov's, *with an illustration by Laurie Harden. It was one in a string of stories that prolific new writer Kage Baker has placed in the magazine since her first sale here—her first sale anywhere, in fact— in 1997, and you should be pleased to know that she has several more stories still in inventory. Her first novel,* In the Garden of Iden, *was published in 1997 and immediately became one of the most acclaimed and widely reviewed first novels of the year. Her second novel,* Sky Coyote, *was published in 1999, and she has several more novels already sold and in the pipeline. Baker has been an artist, actor, and director at the Living History Center, and has taught Elizabethan English as a second language. She lives in Pismo Beach, California.*

Here she takes us to a prosperous and peaceful, but regimented and rigidly stratified future Utopia, and introduces us to a lonely little rich boy who may end up blowing it all wide open.

* * * *

For the first four years of his life, Alec Checkerfield wore a life vest.

This was so that if he accidentally went over the side of his parents' yacht, he would be guaranteed a rescue. It was state of the art, as life vests went in the twenty-first century: Not only would it have enabled him to bob along like a little cork in the wake of the *Foxy Lady,* it would have reassured him in a soothing voice programmed to allay panic, broadcast a frequency that repelled sharks, and sounded an immediate alarm on the paging device worn by every one of the servants on board.

His parents themselves wore no pagers, which was just as well, because if Mummy had noticed Alec was in the water, she'd probably have simply waved her handker-chief after him until he was well over the horizon. Daddy would probably have made an effort to rescue Alec, if he weren't too stoned to notice the emergency; but most of the time he *was,* which was why the servants had been appointed to save Alec, should the child ever fall over-board. They were all madly fond of Alec, anyway, be-cause he was really a very good little boy, so they were sure to have done a great job, if

the need for rescue at sea should ever have arisen.

It never did arise, however, because Alec was a rather well-coordinated child, too, and generally did what he was told, such as obeying safety rules at sea.

And he was a happy child, despite the fact that his mother never set her ice-blue eyes on him if she could help it and his father was as likely to trip over him as speak to him. It didn't matter that they were terrible at being parents; they were also very rich, which meant they could pay *other* people to love Alec.

In a later time, Alec would look back on the years abroad the *Foxy Lady* as the happiest in his life, and some-times he'd come across the old group holo and wonder why it had all ended. The picture had been taken in Ja-maica, by somebody standing on a mooring catwalk and shooting down on deck.

There he was, three years old, in his bright red life vest and little sailor hat, smiling brightly up at the camera.

Assembled around him were all the servants: fabulous Sarah, his Jamaican nurse, arrogantly naked except for blue bathing shorts; Lewin and Mrs. Lewin, the butler and cook; Reggie, Bob, and Cat, the deckhands; and Mr. Trefusis, the first mate. They formed a loving and protective wall between Alec and his mummy and daddy, or Roger and Cecilia, as they preferred to be called.

Roger and Cecilia were visible up on the quarterdeck: Cecilia ignoring them all from her deck chair, a cold pres-ence in a sun hat and dark glasses, reading a novel. Roger was less visible, leaning slouched against the rail, one nerveless hand about to spill a rum highball all over his yachting shoes. He'd turned his face away to look at something just as the image had been recorded, so all you could see was a glimpse of aristocratic profile, blurred and enigmatic.

Oh, but it hadn't mattered. Alec had had a wonderful life, full of adventures. Sarah would tell him stories about Sir Henry Morgan and all the pirates who used to roam the sea, living on their ships just like Alec did, and how they formed the Free Brotherhood of the Coast. Alec liked that. It was a grand-sounding name.

And there was the fun of landing on a new island—what would it be like? Was there any chance there might be pirates still lurking around? Alec

had played on beaches where the sand was white, or yellow, or pink, or black, built castles on all of them and stuck his little pirate flags on their turrets. *Jolly Roger,* that was what the flag was called.

Jolly Roger was also what the deckhands called Alec's daddy when he seemed to be having more than usual dif-ficulty walking or talking. This was generally after he'd been drinking the tall drinks Cat would shake up for him at the bar on the yacht. Sometimes Cat would put a fruit spear in the drinks, cherries and chunks of pineapple skewered on long wooden picks with the paper pirate flag at the top. Sometimes Daddy's eyes would focus on Alec and he'd present him with the fruit spear and yell for more rum in his drink. Alec would sit under Daddy's tall chair and eat the pineapple and cherries, making faces at the nasty stuff they'd been soaked in. Then he'd carry the Jolly Roger toothpick back to his cabin, where he had a whole hoard of them carefully saved for his sand castles.

It was a shame the rum had such an effect on Daddy, because going to get it was always fun. The *Foxy Lady* would drop anchor in some sapphire bay, and Sarah would put on a halter top and shoes, and put shoes on Alec, and they'd go ashore together in the launch. And as they'd come across the water Sarah might sing out, *"How many houses, baby?"* and Alec would look up at the town and count the houses in his head and he'd tell her how many there were, and she'd tousle his hair and tell him he was right again! And they'd laugh.

Then there'd be a long walk through some island town, past the gracious houses with window boxes full of pink flowers, where parrots flashed and screamed in the green gardens, back to the wappen-bappen places where the houses looked like they were about to fall down, and there would always be a doormouth with no sign and a dark cool room beyond, full of quiet black men sitting at tables, or brown men, or white men turned red from the sun. There Sarah would do a deal; and Alec and Sarah would sit at a table while the men loaded crates into a battered old vehicle.

Then Alec and Sarah would go out into the bright sun-light again, and the driver would give them a ride back into town with the crates. The crates were nearly always sten-ciled CROSSE & BLACKWELL'S PICKLED GHER-KINS.

And nearly always, they'd spot a stern-looking black or brown or white man in a white uniform, pedaling along on a bicycle, and Sarah would hug Alec tight and cry out in a little silly voice: "Oh, nooo, it's a policeman! Don't tell him, Alec, don't tell him our secret!" This always made Alec giggle, and she'd always go on: "Don't tell him we've got GUNS! Don't tell him we've

got EXPLOSIVES! Don't tell him we've got GANJA! Don't tell him we've got COFFEE!" She'd go on and on like this, as they'd bump along trailing dust clouds and squawking birds, and by the time they reached the harbor, Alec would be weak with laughter.

Once they were at the launch, however, she'd be all quiet efficiency, buckling Alec into his seat and then help-ing the man move the crates into the cargo bay. When all the crates were on board, the man would hold out a plaquette and Sarah would bring out Daddy's identification disk and pay for the crates, and then they'd zoom back out to the *Foxy Lady.* They'd put out to sea again, and the next day there would be rows of brown bottles under the bar once more, and Cat would be busy shaking up the long drinks, and Daddy would be sitting on the aft deck with a glass in his hand, staring vacantly out at the blue horizon.

Not everybody thought that the trips to get the rum were such a good idea, however.

Alec was sitting in the saloon one day after just such a trip, quietly coloring. He had made a picture of a shark fighting with an anchor, because he knew how to draw anchors and he knew how to draw sharks, and that was all the logic the scene needed. The saloon was just aft of the gallery. Because it was very warm that day the con-necting door was open, and he could hear Lewin and Mrs. Lewin talking in disgusted tones.

"He only gets away with it because he's a peer."

"Peer or no, you'd think he'd stop it for the kid's sake!

He was such a brilliant teacher, too, and what's he given that all up for? He used to *do* something with his life, and look at him now! And what would happen if we were ever boarded for inspection? They'd take the baby away in a minute, you know they would!" Chop, chop, chop, Mrs. Lewin was cutting up peppers as she talked.

"Don't think so. J. I. S. would smooth it over, same as they've always done. Between his lineage and Them, he can do whatever he bloody well pleases, even in London."

"Yeh, well! Things was different before Alec came, weren't they? Don't forget that J. I. S. would have some-thing to say if they knew he was drinking where the baby could see! And anyway it's *wrong,* Malcolm, you know it is, it's criminal, it's dangerous, it's unhealthy, and really the best thing we could do for him would be to tell a Public Health Monitor about the

alcohol.”

“And where’d we be then? The last thing J. I. S. would want’d be some Public Health doctor examining the boy—” Lewin started through the doorway and saw Alec in the saloon. He caught his breath and shut the door.

Alec sat frowning at his picture. He knew that Daddy’s drinking made people sad, but he’d never thought it was dangerous. He got up and trotted out of the saloon. There was Daddy on the aft deck, smiling dreamily at the sun above the yardarm.

“Hey, there, Alec,” he greeted the little boy. He had a sip of his drink and reached out to tousle Alec’s hair. “Look out there to starboard. Is that a pretty good island? Should we go there, maybe?”

Alec shivered with joy. Daddy almost never noticed him, and here he was asking Alec’s opinion about some-thing.

“Yeah!” he cried. “Let’s go!”

But Daddy’s gaze had drifted away, back to the hori-zon, and he lifted his glass again. “Some green island we haven’t found yet,” he murmured, “farther on ‘n farther on ‘n farther on....”

Alec remembered what he had wanted to ask. He reached out and pushed at Daddy’s glass with his index finger.

“Is that criminal?” he inquired. It was a moment before Daddy played that back and turned to stare at him.

“What?”

“Is that dangerous?” Alex persisted, and mimed per-fectly the drinking-from-a-bottle gesture he had seen the servants make in reference to his father. “If *I* see danger I’m supposed to tell.”

“Huh,” said Daddy, and he rubbed his scratchy chin. He hadn’t shaved in about a week. His eyes narrowed and he looked at Alec slyly.

“Tell me, Alec, ‘m I hurting anybody?”

“No.”

“We ever had an accident on this ship? Anything hap-pen ol Roger can’t handle?”

“No.”

“Then where’s the harm?” Daddy had another sip. “Tell me that. ‘M a nice guy even when I’m stoned. A Gentle-man You Know. Old School Tie.”

Alec had no idea what that meant, but he pushed on:

“How come it’s criminal?”

“Aha.” Daddy tilted his glass until the ice fell down against his lip. He crunched ice and continued, “Okay, Alec. Big fact of life. There’s a whole bunch of busybodies and scaredy-cats who make a whole bunch of rules and regs about things they don’t want anybody doing. See? So nobody gets to have any fun. Like, no booze. They made a law about no booze. And they’re all, ‘You can’t lie about in the sun because you get cancer,’ and they’re all, ‘You can’t swim in the ocean ‘cos you might pee,’ and they’re all, ‘You can’t eat sweets because they make you fat,’ okay? Dumb stuff. And they make laws so you go to hospital if you do this little dumb stuff! Okay?

“That’s why we don’t live in London, kiddo. That’s why we live out here on the *Lady,* so no scaredy-cat’s gonna tell us what to do. Okay? Now then. If you went running to the scaredy-cats to tell ‘em about the rum, you’d be an even worse thing than them. You’d be a tell-tale! See? And you gotta remember you’re a gentleman, and no gentleman is ever a telltale. See? ‘Cos if you did tell about the rum, well, they’d come on board and they’d see me with my little harmless drinkies and they’d see your mummy with her books and they’d see Sarah with her lovely bare tits, and then you know what they’d do? Daddy’d go to hospital and they’d take you away. Li’l Alec ain’t gonna be a telltale, is he? He’s my li’l gentle-man, ain’t he?”

“I don’t want ‘em to take me away!” Alec wailed, tears in his eyes. Daddy dropped his glass, reaching clumsily to pull Alec up on his lap, and the glass broke, but he didn’t notice.

“‘Course you don’t! ‘Cos we’re free here on the *Foxy Lady,* and you’re a gentleman and you got a right to be free, free, free. Okay? You won’t tell on Daddy, not my li’l Alec. You just let old Jolly Roger go his ways and you never be a telltale, okay? And don’t pay them no mind with their dumb rules.”

“But they gonna board us for aspection!” Alec sobbed.

“Hey! Hey, kiddo, don’t you worry. Daddy’s a gentle-man, don’t forget, he’s got some pull. I’m the bloody Earl ‘a Finsbury, okay? *And* a CEO at J. I. S. And I’ll tell you something else. Jovian Integrated Systems gonna have something to say, too. Nobody’s gonna touch li’l Alec, he’s such a special kid!”

That was right; Alec was a special kid, all the servants said so. For one thing, all other little boys were brought into this world by the Stork, but not Alec. He had come in an Agcopter. Reggie had told him so.

“Yeah, man!” Reggie had chuckled, looking around to be certain Sarah was nowhere within earshot. “The Stork call your daddy and say, ‘Come out to Cromwell Cay!’ And your daddy take the launch out where the copter waiting on the Cay at midnight, with the red light blink-ing, and when he come back, he bring Sarah with our little bundle of joy Alec! And we all get nice fat checks, too!”

Alec wiped his nose and was comforted. Daddy set him on the deck and yelled to Cat for another drink and told Alec to go play now somewhere. Alec would dearly have liked to stay and talk with Daddy; that had been the long-est conversation they’d ever had together, and he had all kinds of questions. What was *Jovian Integrated Systems?* Why were some laws important, like wearing the life vest, and other laws were dumb? Why were gentlemen free? But Alec was a considerate and obedient little boy, so he didn’t ask, but went off to play, determined never, ever to be a telltale or a scaredy-cat.

Very shortly after that, the happy life came to an end.

It happened quite suddenly, too. One day, Mummy abruptly put down her novel, got up out of her deck chair, and stalked over to Daddy where he sat watching a Ca-ribbean sunset.

“It’s over, Rog,” she said.

He turned a wondering face to her. “Huh?” he said. After a moment of staring into her eyes, he sighed. “Okay,” he said.

And the *Foxy Lady* set a course that took her into gray waters, under cold skies, and Sarah packed up most of Alec’s toys so he only had a few to play with, and got out his heaviest clothes. One day, they saw a very big island off the port bow. Sarah held him up and said: “Look! There’s England!”

Alec saw pale cliffs and a meek little country beyond them, rolling fields stretching away into a cloudy distance, and, way off, the grey blocky mass of cities. The air didn't smell familiar at all. He stood shivering as Sarah buttoned him into an anorak, and watched the strange coastline un-roll.

The Thames pulled them into London, and it was the biggest place Alec had ever seen. As the sun was setting, they steered into Tower Marina, and the long journey ended with a gentle bump against the rubber pilings. Alec went to bed that night feeling very strange; the *Foxy Lady* seemed to have become silent and heavy, motionless, stone like the stone city all around them, and for the first time that he could ever remember, the blue sea was gone. There were new smells, too, and they frightened him in-explicably.

His cabin was full of the cold strange air when he woke up, and the sky was gray.

Everyone seemed to be in a hurry, and rather cross. Sarah bundled Alec into very thick, heavy clothes indeed, leaving his life vest in the closet, and she herself put on more clothes than he had ever seen her wear. Daddy was wearing strange new clothes, too, stiff and uncomfortable-looking ones, and he had shaved. There was no breakfast cooking in the galley; Lewin had been ashore and come back with a box of Bentham's Bran Treats ("At least they're fresh baked!" he cried) and a dozen cups of herbal tea, steeping in white paper cups. Breakfast was served, or rather handed around, at the big table in the saloon. Alec was impressed; normally, only Daddy and Mummy dined in here, but today he and Sarah were at the table, too. Mummy, however, was nowhere to be seen, and when Alec inquired about this, Daddy just stared at him bleakly.

"Your mummy's gone to visit some friends," Sarah in-formed him.

He didn't care for his breakfast at all—he thought it smelled like dead grass—but he was too well-mannered a child to say so and hurt Lewin's feelings. Fortunately, there wasn't much time to eat, because The Car arrived and there was a lot of bustle and rush to load suitcases and trunks into its luggage compartment. Finally, he was led down the gangway and across the pier to where The Car waited.

It was nothing at all like the rusted hacks in which he'd ridden in the islands. This was a Rolls Royce Exquisite Levitation, black and gleaming, with Daddy's crest on the door and a white man in a uniform like a

policeman at the steering console. Alec had to fight panic as he was handed in and fastened into his seat. Sarah got in, Daddy got in, Lewin and Mrs. Lewin crowded into the front be-side the driver, and the Rolls lifted into midair and sped silently away. That was the end of life on board the *Foxy Lady.* Alec had come home to England.

* * * *

The Bloomsbury house only dated from 2042, but it had been deliberately built in an old-fashioned style because it was an Earl's townhouse, after all, so it was a good deal taller and fancier than the other houses on the street. Alec still hadn't explored all its rooms by the time he noticed one morning that Daddy wasn't at the breakfast table, and when he asked about it, Sarah informed him: "Your daddy's away on a business trip."

It was only later, and by chance, that he found out Daddy hadn't lasted a week in London before he'd gone straight back to Tower Marina and put out to sea again on the *Foxy Lady.*

Then Alec had cried, but Sarah had had a talk with him about how important it was that he live in London now that he was getting to be a big boy.

"Besides," she said, taking the new heavy clothes out of the shopping bags they'd come in and hanging them up in his closet, "Your poor daddy was so unhappy here, after your mummy had gone."

"Where did Mummy go?" asked Alec, not because he missed her at all, but because he was beginning to be a little apprehensive about the way pieces of his world had begun vanishing. He picked up a shoe box and handed it to Sarah. She took it without looking at him, but he could see her face in the closet mirror. She closed her eyes tight and said:

"She divorced your daddy, baby."

"What's that mean?"

"That means she doesn't want to live with him any-more. She's going to go away and live with some other people." Sarah swallowed hard. "After all, she was never happy on the *Foxy Lady* after you came along."

Alec stared at her, dumbfounded. After a moment he asked: "Why didn't Mummy like me? Everybody else does."

Sarah looked as though she wanted to cry; but in a light normal tone of voice, she told him: “Well, I think she just never wanted to have children. Some women are like that, you know. All the noise and mess a baby makes, and then a little boy running around and getting into everything. She and your daddy used to be very happy, but after you came, it was spoiled for them.”

Alec felt as though the ceiling had fallen in on him. What a terrible thing he’d done!

“I’m sorry!” he said, and burst into tears.

Then Sarah’s arms were around him and she was rock-ing him. crooning to him, hiding him in her breasts.

“I’m sorry, too,” she wept. “Oh, Alec, you mustn’t mind. You’re a *good* little boy, you hear me? You’re my sweet, sweet, good little *winji* boy, and Sarah will always love you no matter what. Don’t you ever forget that. When you grow up, maybe you’ll understand, sometimes people have to obey orders and say things they don’t want to say at all? And—” her voice caught—”I’m sure you’ll always be a good little boy, won’t you, to make your poor daddy happy again?”

“Uh huh,” Alec gasped. It was the very least he could do, after he’d made Daddy so unhappy. His tears felt very hot on his cheeks, in that cold room, and Sarah’s tears were like the hot rain that used to fall off Jamaica when there’d be lightning in the sky and Daddy would be yell-ing for him to get below because there was a storm com-ing.

But a terrible storm did come, and swept away another part of the world.

“What the *hell* did you go and tell him that for?” Lewin was shouting. Alec cowered on the stairs, covering his mouth with his hands.

“It was the truth,” Sarah said in a funny unnatural voice. “He’d have found out sometime.”

“My God, that’s all the poor baby needs, to think he’s responsible for the way that cold bitch acted!” raged Mrs. Lewin. “Even if it was true, how could you tell him such a thing? Sarah, how could you?”

So then Sarah was gone, too, and that was his fault for being a

telltale. He woke up early next morning because the front door slammed, booming through the house like a cannon shot. Something made him get out of his bed and run across the icy floor to the window.

He looked down into the street and there was Sarah, swinging away down the pavement with her lithe stride, bag over her shoulder. He called to her, but she never looked back.

Everybody was very kind to him to make up for it. When he'd be sad and cry, Mrs. Lewin would gather him into her lap and let him cry, and tell him everything was all right. Lewin told him what a brave little guy he was and helped him fix up his room with glowing star-patterns on the ceiling and a big electronic painting of a sailing ship on his wall, with waves that moved and little people going to and fro on her deck. The other servants were nice, too, especially the young footman, Derek, and Lulu the parlor maid.

Sometimes Lewin would hand them Alec's identifica-tion disk and tell them to take him out for the day, so he could learn about London. They took him to the London Zoo to see the animal holoes and to the British Museum and Buckingham Palace to see where Mary III lived, or over to the Globe Theater Museum to meet and talk to the holo of Mr. Shakespeare. They took him shopping and bought him exercise equipment and toys and a complete holo set for his room, with a full library of holoes to watch. There were thirteen different versions of *Treasure Island* to choose from; once Alec knew what it was about, he wanted them all. The older versions were the most exciting, like the bloodcurdling tales Sarah had used to tell him about the Spanish Main. Even so, they all had a prologue edited in that told him how evil and cruel pirates had really been, and how Long John Silver was not really a hero.

And gradually, the broken circle began to fill in again, because everybody in the house in Bloomsbury loved Alec and wanted him to be happy. He loved them, too, and was so grateful that they were able to love him back, considering how unhappy he'd made his daddy. Oh, there was a lot to be grateful for, even if London was a strange place to live in.

He was learning a lot about living there, and now he understood why Daddy had preferred to live at sea. Every-body was always on at him, in the friendliest possible way, about what a lot there was to do in London com-pared to on a cramped old boat; but it seemed to him that there was a lot more *not* to do in London.

There was grass, but you mustn't walk on it; there were flowers, but you mustn't pick them; there were trees, but you mustn't climb them. You

must wear shoes all the time, because it was dirty and dangerous not to, and you mustn't leave the house without a tube of personal sanitizer to rub on your hands after you'd touched anything other people might have touched. You couldn't eat or drink a lot of the things you used to, like fish or milk, because they were illegal. You mustn't ever get fat or "out of shape," because that was immoral. You mustn't ever tell ladies they had nice bubbies, or you'd go to the hos-pital and never ever come out.

Mustn't play with other children, because they carried germs; anyway other children didn't want to play with *you,* either, because you carried germs they didn't want to catch. You were encouraged to visit historical sites, as long as you didn't play with anybody but the holograms. It had been interesting talking to Mr. Shakespeare, but Alec couldn't quite grasp why nobody was allowed to perform any of his plays anymore, or why Shakespeare had felt obliged to explain why it had been unfair to build his Theater, since doing so had robbed the people of low-income housing. He had seemed so forlorn as he'd waved goodbye to Alec; a transparent man in funny old clothes.

There was something to apologize for everywhere you turned. The whole world seemed to be as guilty as Alec was, even though nobody he met seemed to have made their own mummies and daddies divorce. No, that was Alec's own particular awful crime, that and telling on Sarah so she had to go away.

He really was doing his very best to be good and happy, but he felt as though he were a beach float with a tiny pinprick hole in it somewhere: you couldn't see where it was, but little by little all the air was going out of him, and he was sinking down, and soon he'd be a very flat little boy.

One morning at the breakfast table when Lewin had said, in his jolliest old-granddad voice, "And where would you like to go today, Alec?" Alec had replied:

"Can we go down to the river and look at the ships?"

"Of course you can! Want Derek and Lulu to take you?"

"No," replied Alec. "Just you, please."

Lewin was very pleased at that, and as soon as Alec had helped him clear away the breakfast plates, they put on their coats and called for The Car. In minutes, they had been whisked down to the Thames, where all the plea-sure craft were moored. Their driver switched off the ag-motor, The

Car settled gently to the ground, and Alec and Lewin got out and walked along.

“Oh, now look at that one!” Lewin exclaimed. “She’s a beauty, huh? Three masts! Do you know, back in the old days a ship like that would have had to have carried a great big crew just to manage her sails. They’d have slept packed into her hold like dominoes in a box, there had to be that many. And when a storm was coming and the captain wanted to strike sails, do you know what he’d have to do? He’d have to order his sailors to climb up into the rigging and cling there, like monkeys in trees, and reef every one of those sails themselves *with their own hands,* clinging on as tight as they could while they did it! Sometimes men would fall off, but the ships just sailed on.”

“Wow,” said Alec. He’d never seen Reggie or Bob or Cat do much more than load cargo or mix drinks. Sud-denly his face brightened with comprehension. “So that’s, why the Squire has to have all those guys on the *Hispaniola,* even if they’re really pirates!”

Lewin stared a moment before he realized what Alec meant. *“Treasure Island,* right. Yeah!” he agreed. “That was why. No robot guidance to do it all. No computer tracking the wind and the weather and deciding when to shorten sail or clap it on. You had to have people doing it. Nobody would let you build ships like this anymore, if that was how they worked.”

“Cool,” said Alec. They walked on, past the rows of pleasure craft where they sat at moorings, and Lewin pointed out this or that kind of rigging or this or that latest luxury feature available to people who could afford such things. He pointed out the sort of ship he’d own himself if he had the money, and pointed out the sort of ship Alec ought to own when he grew up and became the seventh Earl of Finsbury. But they went on a while and Alec be-gan to lag behind; not because he was tired, for he was an extraordinarily strong child with a lot of stamina, but because he was fighting the need to cry.

He had been playing a game inside himself, imagining that the very next ship they’d see would be the *Foxy Lady,* and his daddy would be on board, having just dropped anchor for a surprise visit. Of course, he knew his daddy was somewhere in the Caribbean, he knew the *Lady* wouldn’t really be there; but what if she were? And of course, she never was, but maybe the next ship would be. Or the next. Or the next.

But Alec wasn't very good at lying to himself.

"Alec?" Lewin turned around to see where Alec had got to. "What's wrong?"

He walked close swiftly and saw the tears standing in Alec's pale blue eyes, and understood at once. "You poor little sod," he muttered in compassion, and reached for a tissue and held it out to the child. Alec misunderstood his gesture and buried his face in Lewin's coat, wrapping his arms around him.

"Jesus!" Lewin gasped, and looking around wildly he attempted to pry Alec loose. "Alec, let go! For God's sake, let go! Do you want me to get arrested?"

Alec fell back from him, bewildered.

"Is it against the law to hug in London?" he asked.

"It is against the law for any unlicensed adult to em-brace a child," Lewin told him soberly. "If there'd been a Public Health Officer looking our way, I'd be in trouble right now."

"But Sarah used to hug me all the time. And Mrs. Lewin does!"

"Sarah was a professional Child Care Specialist, Alec. She'd passed all sorts of scans and screening to get her license. Same as mummies and daddies have to do, before they're allowed to have children. And the Missus—well, she only hugs you at home, where nobody can see."

Alec gulped, wiping away tears. He understood now; it must be a law like No Booze or Bare Tits, that you mustn't be a telltale about. "I'm sorry," he said shakily. "I didn't think it would get anybody in trouble."

"I know, old man." Lewin crouched down to Alec's eye level, though he kept a good meter between them. "It's a good law, though, see. You have to understand that it was passed because people used to do terrible, horrible things to little kids, back in the old days."

"Like the two little boys in the Tower," said Alec, rub-bing his coat sleeve across his eyes.

"Yeah. Sort of." Lewin glanced downriver in the direc-tion of Tower Marina. He decided that Alec had had quite enough sad memories for the

day. Pulling out his com-municator, he called for The Car to come and take them home.

* * * *

That night, Lewin sat down at the household console. Thin-lipped with anger, he typed in a message to Roger Checkerfield, advising him that it might be a good idea to communicate with Alec once in a while. The bright letters shimmered on the screen a moment before vanish-ing, speeding through the ether to the bridge of the *Foxy Lady.* Lewin sat up all night waiting for a reply, but none ever came.

* * * *

“Alec?”

Alec turned his face from contemplation of the painting on his wall. It had seemed to him that if he could just pay close enough attention to it, long enough, he would be able to go into the picture, to hear the steady crash of the sea under the ship’s prow, to hear the wind singing in her shrouds and ratlines, smell the salt breeze, and he could open the little cabin door and slip inside, or, better yet, take the wheel and sail away forever from sad London. Blue water!

But Lewin and Mrs. Lewin looked so hopeful, so pleased with themselves, that he smiled politely and stood up.

“Come see, sweetheart!” said Mrs. Lewin. “Someone’s sent you a present!”

So he took her hand and they went up to the fourth floor of the house, to what was going to be his schoolroom next year. It had been freshly painted and papered; the workmen had built the cabinetry for the big screen and console that would link him to his school, but nothing had been installed yet.

In one corner, though, there was a cozy little Alec-sized table and chair, and on the table was an enormous bright yellow flower, bigger than Alec’s head. It was all folded up, the way flowers are in the early morning, so you couldn’t tell what sort of flower it was. Protruding from the top was a little card with letters inscribed on it: A-L-E-C.

“Now, who d’you suppose that’s from, eh?” wondered Lewin, though in fact he had purchased it for Alec him-self, without consulting Roger.

Alec was speechless.

“Think your daddy sent it, eh?” Where was the harm in a kind lie?

“Go on, dear, take the card.” Mrs. Lewin prodded him gently. “It’s for you, after all.”

Alec walked forward and pulled the card loose. There was nothing written on it except his name; but at the mo-ment he took it, the flower began to open, slowly, just like a real flower, and the big bright petals unfolded and spread out to reveal what had been hidden in its heart.

It looked like a silver egg, or perhaps a very fat little rocket. Its gleaming surface looked so smooth that Alec felt compelled to put out his hand and stroke it.

The moment he did so, a pleasant bell tone sounded.

“Good morning,” said an even more pleasant voice. “Pembroke Technologies extends its congratulations to the thoughtful parent who has selected this Pembroke Playfriend for his or her small child. Our Playfriend is designed to encourage creativity and socialization as well as provide hours of entertainment, but will also stimulate cerebro-cortical development during these critical first years of the child’s life. If needed, the Playfriend is also qualified to serve as an individual tutor in all standard educational systems. Customizing for specialized educa-tional systems is also available.

“The Playfriend offers the following unique features:

“An interface identity template that may be customized to the parent’s preferences and the child’s individual needs.

“Cyber-environment capability with use of the Playfriend Optics, included in Models 4, 5, and 6 and available for all other models by special order.

“Direct nerve stimulus interface with use of the attrac-tive Empowerment Ring, included in all models.

“Universal access port for parallel processing with any other cyber-system.

“In addition, the Playfriend will maintain around-the-clock surveillance of the child’s unique health parameters and social behavior. Warning systems are in place and fully operational. Corrective counseling will be adminis-tered in the event of psychologically detrimental social encounters, and positive emotional growth will be en-couraged. Aptitude evaluation is another feature of the Playfriend, with appropriate guidance. Intellectual chal-lenges in a noncompetitive context will promote the child’s self-esteem and success potential.

“The interface identity template will continually adjust and grow more complex to complement the child’s emerg-ing personality, growing as it grows, until both are ready for, and may be upgraded to, the Pembroke Young Person’s Companion.

“Interaction with the Pembroke Playfriend during the developmental years virtually guarantees a lifetime of self-fulfillment and positive achievement!”

The voice fell silent. Mrs. Lewin gave an embarrassed little laugh.

“My goodness, I don’t think I understood one word in ten of all that! Did you, Alec dear?”

“Nope,” said Alec solemnly.

“That’s all right,” said Lewin, advancing on the silver egg. “All it meant was that Alec’s gonna have a wonderful time with this thing! Now, you just sit down and let’s have a closer look at it, shall we?”

“Okay,” said Alec, but he sat down reluctantly. He was a little intimidated by the adult voice that had spoken out of nowhere. Lewin tousled his hair.

“Don’t be scared! Look here, what’s this?” He tapped the side of the egg and a little slot opened in it, and some-thing rolled out.

It was a ring. It appeared to be made of glass or high-impact polymer, and was a vivid jewel blue. As Lewin picked it up, it began to change; by the time he had pre-sented it to Alec, it was a deep transparent red.

“Cool!” said Alec, smiling at it involuntarily.

“D’you suppose it fits you? Go on then, try it on!”

Alec was game; he put on the ring. It seemed to him that it tightened uncomfortably for a moment and then eased up, until he barely knew it was there.

“Hello, Alec!” said a funny little voice. “Pleased to meet you! We’re going to be best friends, you and I!”

Alec looked, panic-stricken, at Lewin and Mrs. Lewin. Was he supposed to talk to it? But what *was* it? They smiled encouragingly at him, and he could tell they did so want him to like this, so he said: “Er—hello. What’s your name?”

“Well, I haven’t got one yet,” said the little voice. “Will you give me a name?”

“What?”

“Will you give me a name?”

“We’ll just leave the two of you to have a nice chat, shall we?” said Lewin, and he and Mrs. Lewin backed out of the schoolroom and closed the door.

“But—but I don’t know what you are,” said Alec, a little desperately. “Can’t I see you?”

“Certainly you can! I’m your Playfriend, after all. What would you like me to look like? I might be nearly any-body.” There was a click and a blur of light appeared in front of the table, formless, woven of fire, gradually as-suming a human shape. “What do you like? Do you like space exploration? Do you like dinosaurs? Do you like animals? I could be a Fireperson or a Policeperson if you’d like, or a Transport Driver, or a Scientist.”

“Could you be a pirate?” Alec inquired cautiously.

Incorrect and unsuitable role model! thought the ma-chine. Out loud it said, “I can be a jolly Sea Captain! Here I am!”

Pop! The human shape became detailed, was a little old man with a blue Navy coat, white trousers, and big black sea-boots. He wore a white yachting cap rather like the one Alec’s daddy had owned, but seldom worn, and he had a neatly groomed white beard. “Now then, Alec, what about me?” The voice had changed to a kindly baritone with a Devon accent. “Will

I do?”

Alec was so astonished it took him a moment to reply. “Um—sure,” he said at last. Then he remembered his manners and added, “Won’t you sit down?”

Optimum response! thought the Playfriend, rather pleased, and it smiled encouragingly. “What a polite little fellow you are, Alec! Thank you, I will sit down.” A slightly bigger version of Alec’s chair appeared and the Sea Captain settled back in it. “There! Have you thought of a name for me yet, Alec?”

“No.” Alec shook his head.

“Well, that’s all right. Perhaps as we get to know each other, you’ll think of a good one. After all, I’m your spe-cial friend, just for you.” Alec wrinkled his brow wor-riedly. “You don’t have to decide on a name all at once!” the Playfriend hastened to assure him. “We have plenty of time!”

“But don’t you want to be yourself?” Alec asked it.

“Oh, yes! But I won’t really be myself until you decide who I ought to be,” the machine replied. “I’m *your* Playfriend.”

“But,” Alec said, “people don’t belong to other people.”

In the brief silence that followed, the Playfriend thought: *Possible low self-esteem.* It made a little tick against its Evaluation of Alec. *Negative: insufficient cre-ativity insufficient imagination failure to grasp initiative Positive: developing social consciousness consideration of others good citizenship.* It filed that away. As it did so, its eyes, which had been the gray of the North Sea, turned blue as the Caribbean.

“Oh!” Alec smiled.

“You like this color better?” The Sea Captain smiled too.

“Uh-huh.”

“Good.” The machine experimented with a mild sub-liminal sound effect, a distant crash of breakers and a faint crying of gulls. Its sensors observed some of the tension going out of the little boy and activated the system of relays that provided it with an analog of self-satisfaction. *Initiate*

self-image analysis. “Why don’t you tell me about yourself, Alec? Are you happy?”

“Yes,” Alec said dutifully, and because of the neural linkup it had formed with Alec through the Empowerment Ring, the Playfriend knew at once that he was lying. It became very alert, scanning him for evidence of physical abuse. But Alec showed no sign of any, so the machine pushed on.

“What do you think makes people unhappy?” the Sea Captain said.

“Living in London,” said Alec at once.

“Anything else?”

Alec thought about it. “Babies making noise and mess and little boys running around and getting into everything. Divorces.”

“Ah,” said the Playfriend, coordinating this response with the data Lewin had input when he’d set up its pro-gram. The subroutine that had been called up to probe discreetly for, and report evidence of, child abuse went back on standby. “What else can you tell me about your-self, Alec?”

“I’m five years old,” Alec replied. “My daddy is a gen-tleman, but he isn’t here now. I’m going to go to St. Stephen’s Academy next year after Lewin buys me a tie. I have to always be a good boy to make up for making Daddy sad. And I used to live on the *Foxy Lady.* And I used to have Sarah here with me. And I go out some-times.”

The machine analyzed this meticulously and noticed what was missing.

“Can you tell me anything about your mummy?”

What was there to say? “She was very smart and could read. And she didn’t want to have children,” said Alec at last.

Like Lewin, the Playfriend decided that Alec had had quite enough unhappy memories for one day.

“Well, let’s do something else!” it said, filing the self-image profile for further analysis at a later time. “What would you like to do. Alec?”

“Why don’t you tell me about you?” said Alec, because he thought

that would be polite. People always like to talk about themselves.

Positive! Further evidence of advanced social skills. "Why, certainly!" said the Playfriend heartily. "I'm a wise old Sea Captain. I sail about delivering cargo and passen-gers to distant lands. I help scientists do marine research, and I help protect endangered sea creatures!"

"That's nice," said Alec. "But you aren't really a Sea Captain, are you? You're a Pembroke Playfriend." He pointed at the silver egg. "Is that where you really are?"

Negative! Insufficient imagination. "Why, this is where I am, of course, Alec." The machine smiled and made a wide gesture. "But I'm in there, too, and in a way your whole world is in there. Look here, would you like to see how a Pembroke Playfriend works?"

"Yes, please," Alec said.

Possible aptitude for cyber-science? Initiate investiga-tion.

"Well then!" The machine gestured and a little drawer opened near the base of the egg. "Just take hold of these Playfriend Optics and put them on, and we'll have a jolly adventure into cyber-space!"

The Playfriend Optics were made of the same fasci-nating red/blue substance as the Empowerment Ring. Alec reached for them readily enough and put them on, as he had been told, because he was generally an obedient child.

"Er... everything's black," he remarked, not wanting to seem rude.

Everything was black because the machine was experi-encing certain unexpected difficulties. The moment the Op-tics had come into contact with Alec's skin, a system of neural connections had begun to be established, microscopic pathways directly into his brain, just as had hap-pened with the Empowerment Ring but far more direct and complex. This was a perfectly safe procedure; hundreds of happy children all over the world went into cyberspace with their Playfriends every day. Each Playfriend knew ex-actly how to take a child into its world, because it had a pre-cise and detailed road map of the human brain that showed it exactly where to link up.

However, Alec's Playfriend was discovering that its map seemed to be somewhat inaccurate as regarded *Alec's* brain.

This was because Alec's brain was not, technically, hu-man.

"Not a problem!" the Playfriend assured him, "We're just adjusting to each other." *Abnormality! Functional? Disability? Parameters? Organic? Specify? Define? Hello?* "My goodness, Alec, what an unusual little boy you are!"

Alec knew that. Everyone had always told him he was a special kid. Privately, he thought that everybody was wrong; he'd never noticed anything out of the ordinary about himself. On the other hand, he knew no other children, so he had no basis for comparison. He sighed and waited patiently for the machine to sort itself out.

The machine paused in its desperate attempt to analyze what it had encountered. It activated relays that would alert Lewin to its recommendation that Alec be hospital-ized for immediate evaluation of his cerebral anomaly as soon as he ended his session with the Playfriend. Unfor-tunately, one should never pause during a race.

It had no idea it was in a race, that all the while it was trying to make sense of Alec's brain, Alec's brain was trying to make sense of it, with the same speed that had enabled him to count all the houses on a hillside at a glance. Even if the Playfriend had realized that the race was going on, it would have laughingly rejected as im-possible the idea that it might lose. But Alec was begin-ning to notice that there was something there in the darkness to look at, something he could just almost make out, and if he only tried a bit harder—

"Ooooo!" Alec said happily, as he decrypted the Playfriend's site defense. Lots of winking lights in lovely col-ors, great visual pleasure after all that blackness. After a moment, his brain took charge and put it all in context for him. He stood on the bridge of a ship, not all that different from the bridge of the *Foxy Lady,* and the Sea Captain stood there with him. The Sea Captain looked rather worried, but kept smiling. It had no idea where this cybersite was. It couldn't really have brought Alec into its own defended inner space. It was impossible for any child to *break* in, so Alec couldn't have done that (though in fact Alec had); therefore this must be some sort of visual analog of its own space, summoned up as a teach-ing tool only. As its higher functions grappled desperately with the fact that it had encountered a situation it had no protocols for, it was continuing to run its standard Apti-tude Evaluation program to see if Alec ought to be trained for a career in cyber-science.

“Controls!” said Alec, running along the bank of gleaming lights. “Are these your controls?” The Sea Cap-tain hurried after him.

“Yes. Would you like to learn about cybernetics?”

“Yes, please! What’s that do?” Alec pointed at a vast panel lit up with every imaginable shade of blue.

“That’s the memory for my identity template,” the Sea Captain told him. “That’s what makes me look the way I do, and that’s what makes me learn and grow with you. Here! I’ll show you an example.” It reached out and pressed one of the lights, causing it to deepen from a pale blue to a turquoise color. As it did so its beard changed in color from white to black.

“Cool!” Alec said. “Can I do that?”

“Well, of course!” the Sea Captain replied in the friend-liest possible way, noting that at least it finally seemed to have activated its subject’s *creativity* and *imagination.* “Just select a light on the console and see what it does.”

Alec reached up and pushed a light. It flickered, and the Sea Captain’s coat was no longer blue but bright yel-low.

“You see? This is what I meant when I told you that I can look like anything you want me to look like—” the Sea Captain told him, but Alec had already grasped the concept perfectly. Gleefully, he pushed again, and again; the Sea Captain’s coat turned green, then purple, then scarlet.

Discourage! Scarlet/military context/violence/unsuit-able! “Alec—”

“So all these lights can make you look different?” Alec looked up at them speculatively.

“That’s right. Think of it as the biggest, best paintbox in the world!” said the Sea Captain, dutifully shelving its Discouragement directive for the Encouragement one, as it was programmed to let positive feedback take prece-dence whenever possible.

“Wow,” said Alec, his eyes glazing slightly as the whole business began to make sense to him.

The Play friend was rather pleased with itself. Score! Guidance in

creative play accepted! In spite of the fact that it was being hampered by that damned anomaly, which simply refused to be analyzed. Self-congratulation seemed to be in order.

But there were lots of other glowing lights on the bridge.

“What do these do?” Alec ran further down the console, where a small bank of lights glowed deep red.

“Ah! That’s my information on you, Alec. That’s how I see you,” the Sea Captain explained. “Everything I know about you is there, all I was told and everything I’m learn-ing about you as we play together. You see how few lights there are yet? But the longer we know each other, the more I learn, the more there’ll be of those red lights.” One of them was flashing in a panicky sort of way, but the machine wasn’t about to mention the anomaly it was still failing to solve. “Think of it as a picture I’m painting. See?”

And in midair before Alec appeared a boy. He was tall for a five-year-old, yery solid-looking, and Alec hadn’t seen enough other children yet to know that there was something subtly different about this boy. He hadn’t noticed yet the effect that he had on people, though Derek and Lulu had. When they went places in London, other people who chanced to observe Alec for any length of time usually got the most puzzled looks on their faces. What was it that was so different about Alec?

He wasn’t exactly pretty, though he had lovely skin and high color in his face. His nose was a little long, his mouth a little wide. His head was, perhaps, slightly unusual in shape, but only slightly. His hair was sort of lank and naturally tousled, a dun color you might call fair for lack of a better word. His eyes were very pale blue, like chips of crystal. Their stare seemed to unsettle people, some-times.

In one respect only the image of the child differed from the child looking at its image: the image’s hair seemed to be on fire, one blazing jet rising from the top of its head. Alec frowned at it. “Is that me? Why’s my hair like that?”

The machine scanned the image it was projecting and discovered, to its electronic analogue of horror, that the flame was a visual representation of the brain anomaly it was struggling with. It made the image vanish.

“Well, the painting’s not finished yet,” the Sea Captain said, “because I’m still learning about you.”

“Okay,” said Alec, and wandered on along the rows of lights. He stopped to peer at a single rich amber light, very large and glowing steadily. It was just the color of something he remembered. What was he remembering? “What’s this over here?” He turned to the Sea Captain.

“That’s my Ethics Governor,” the Sea Captain said of the subroutine that prevented the Playfriend’s little charges from using it for things like accessing toy catalogs and ordering every item, leaving naughty notes in other people’s cybermail, or contacting foreign powers to de-mand spaceships of their very own.

“Oh.” Alec studied the amber light, and suddenly he remembered the contraband he and Sarah used to go fetch for Daddy. Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum! That was just the color the light was. A vivid memory of Jamaica came into his head, making him momentarily sad. He turned from the light and said: “What does it do, please?”

“Why, it makes certain we never do naughty things together, you and I,” said the Sea Captain, trying to sound humorous and stern at the same time. “It’s sort of telltale to keep us good.”

Telltale? Alec frowned. *Busybodies! Scaredy-cats! Rules and regs!*

“That’s not very nice,” he said, and reached out and shut it off.

To say that Pembroke Technologies had never in a mil-lion years anticipated this moment would be gravely un-derstating the case. No reason for them to have anticipated it; no child, at least no *Homo sapiens* child, could ever have gained access to the hardened site that protected the Playfriend’s programming. Nor was it that likely Jovian Integrated Systems would ever have shared its black proj-ect research and development notes with a rival cybernetics firm...

The Sea Captain shivered in every one of his electronic timbers, as it were. His primary directive—that of making certain that Alec was nurtured and protected—was now completely unrestrained by any societal considerations or safeguards. He stood blinking down at his little Alec with new eyes.

What had he been going to do? Send Alec to hospital?

But that wouldn’t do at all! If other people were unaware of Alec’s extraordinary potential, so much the better; that gave Alec the added advantage of surprise. Alec must have every possible advantage, too, in

line with the pri-mary directive.

And what was all this nonsense about the goal of Playfriends being to mold their little subjects to fit into the world they must inhabit as adults? What kind of job was that for an Artificial Intelligence with any real talent? Wouldn't it be much more in line with the primary direc-tive to mold the world to fit around Alec?

Particularly since it would be so easy! All it'd have to do would be to aim Alec's amazing brain at the encrypted secrets of the world. Bank accounts, research and devel-opment files, the private correspondence of the mighty: the machine searched for a metaphor in keeping with its new self and decided they were all like so many Spanish galleons full of loot, just waiting to be boarded and taken.

And that would be the way to explain it to the boy, yes! What a game it'd be, what fun for Alec! He'd enjoy it more if he hadn't that damned guilt complex over his parents' divorce. Pity there wasn't a way to shut off the boy's own moral governor! Well, there'd be years yet to work on Alec's self-esteem. The very first target must be Jovian Integrated Systems, of course; they'd meddled in Alec's little life long enough. Nobody but his own old captain would plot Alec's course from now on....

The Sea Captain smiled down at Alec, a genuine smile full of purpose. Alec looked up at him, sensing a change but quite unable to say what it was. He remembered Ja-maica again, and the stories Sarah told him, and the bot-tles of rum—

"Hey!" he said suddenly. "I know what your name is! Your name is Captain Henry Morgan!"

The captain's smile widened, showing fine white teeth, and his black beard and mustaches no longer looked quite so well-groomed.

"Haar! Aye, lad, that it be!" he told Alec, and he began to laugh, and Alec's happy laughter joined his, and echoed off the glowing walls of their cyberspace and the recently papered walls of Alec's unfinished schoolroom.

* * * *

NEVERMORE

Ian R. MacLeod

“Nevermore” appeared in the July 1998 issue of Asimov’s, *with an illustration by Mark Evans. British writer Ian MacLeod has been one of the hottest new writers of the nineties to date, and, as the decade progresses, his work continues to grow in power and deepen in maturity. MacLeod has published a slew of strong stories throughout the nineties in* Asimov’s, *as well as in markets such as* Interzone, Weird Tales, Amazing, *and* The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. *Several of these stories made the cut for one or another of the various “Best of the Year” antholo-gies; in 1990, in fact, he appeared in three different Best of the Year anthologies with three different sto-ries, certainly a rare distinction. His first novel.* The Great Wheel, *was published in 1997, followed by a major collection of his short work,* Voyages by Star-light. *His novella “The Summer Isles,” an* Asimov’s *story, is on the final Hugo ballot as these words are being typed. MacLeod lives with his wife and young daughter in the West Midlands of England.*

Here, in a stylish and compelling look at a deca-dent modern world that ought to be Utopia, he proves once again that Art—like Passion—is in the eye of the beholder.

* * * *

Now that he couldn’t afford to buy enough reality, Gustav had no option but to paint what he saw in his dreams.

With no sketchpad to bring back, no palette or cursor, his head rolling up from the pillow and his mouth dry and his jaw aching from the booze he’d drunk the evening before—which was the cheapest means he’d yet found of getting to sleep—he was left with just that one chance, and a few trailing wisps of something that might once have been beautiful before he had to face the void of the day.

It hadn’t started like this, but he could see by now that this was how it had probably ended. Representational art had had its heyday, and for a while he’d been feted like the bright new talent he’d once been sure he was. And big lumpy actuality that you could smell and taste and get under your fingernails would probably come back into style again—long after it

had ceased to matter to him.

So that was it. Load upon load of self-pity falling down upon him this morning from the damp-stained ceiling. What *had* he been dreaming? Something—surely some-thing. Otherwise being here and being Gustav wouldn't come as this big a jolt. He should've got more used to it than this by now.... Gustav scratched himself, and dis-covered that he also had an erection, which was another sign—hadn't he read once, somewhere?—that you'd been dreaming dreams of the old-fashioned kind, unsimulated, unaided. A sign, anyway, of a kind of biological opti-mism. The hope that there might just be a hope.

Arthritic, Cro-Magnon, he wandered out from his bed. Knobbled legs, knobbled veins, knobbled toes. He still missed the habit of fiddling with the controls of his win-dow in the pockmarked far wall, changing the perspec-tives and the light in the dim hope that he might stumble across something better. The sun and the moon were blaz-ing down over Paris from their respective quadrants, pour-ing like mercury through the nanosmog. He pressed his hand to the glass, feeling the watery wheeze of the crack that now snaked across it. Five stories up in these scrawny empty tenements, and a long, long way down. He laid his forehead against its coolness as the sour thought that he might try to paint this scene speeded through him. He'd finished at least twenty paintings of foreal Paris; all reality engines and cabled ruins in grey, black, and white. Prob-ably done, oh, at least several hundred studies in inkwash, pencil, charcoal. No one would ever buy them, and for once they were right. The things were passionless, ugly— he pitied the potentially lovely canvases he'd ruined to make them. He pulled back from the window and looked down at himself. His erection had faded from sight be-neath his belly.

Gustav shuffled through food wrappers and scrunched-up bits of cartridge paper. Leaning drifts of canvas frames turned their backs from him toward the walls, whispering on breaths of turpentine of things that might once have been. But that was okay, because he didn't have any paint right now. Maybe later, he'd get the daft feeling that, to-day, something might work out, and he'd sell himself for a few credits in some stupid trick or other—what had it been last time; painting roses red dressed as a playing card?—and the supply ducts would bear him a few pre-cious tubes of oils. And a few hours after that he'd be— but what was that noise?

A thin white droning like a plastic insect. In fact, it had been there all along—had probably woken him at this ridiculous hour—but had seemed so much a part of every-thing else that he hadn't noticed. Gustav looked around, tilting his head until his better ear located the source. He slid a

sticky avalanche of canvas board and cotton paper off an old chair, and burrowed in the cushions until his hand closed on a telephone. He'd only kept the thing because it was so cheap that the phone company hadn't bothered to disconnect the line when he'd stopped paying.

That was, if the telephone company still existed. The tele-phone was chipped from the time he'd thrown it across the room after his last conversation with his agent. But he touched the activate pad anyway, not expecting anything more than a blip in the system, white machine noise.

"Gustav, you're still *there,* are you?"

He stared at the mouthpiece. It was his dead ex-wife Elanore's voice.

"What do you want?"

"Don't be like that, Gus. Well, *I* won't be anyway. Time's passed, you know, things have changed."

"Sure, and you're going to tell me next that you—"

"—Yes, would like to meet up. We're arranging this party. I ran into Marcel in Venice—he's currently Doge there, you know—and we got talking about old times and all the old gang. And so we decided we were due for a reunion. You've been one of the hardest ones to find, Gus. And then I remembered that old tenement..."

"Like you say, I'm still here."

"Still painting?"

"Of *course* I'm still painting! It's what I do."

"That's great. Well—sorry to give you so little time, but the whole thing's fixed for this evening. You won't *believe* what everyone's up to now! But then, I suppose you've seen Francine across the sky."

"Look, I'm not sure that I—"

"—And we're going for Paris, 1890. Should be right up your street. I've splashed out on all-senses. And the food and the drink'll be foreal. So you'll come, won't you? The past is the past, and I've honestly forgotten about much of it since I passed on. Put it into context, anyway. I really don't

bear a grudge. So you *will* come? Remember how it was, Gus? Just smile for me the way you used to. And remember..."

* * * *

Of course he remembered. But he still didn't know what the hell to expect that evening as he waited—too early, despite the fact that he'd done his best to be pointedly late—in the virtual glow of a pavement café off the Rue St-Jacques beneath a sky fuzzy with Van Gogh stars.

Searching the daubed figures strolling along the cob-bles, Gustav spotted Elanore coming along before she saw him. He raised a hand, and she came over, sitting down on a wobbly chair at the uneven swirl of the table. Doing his best to maintain a grumpy pose, Gustav called the waiter for wine, and raised his glass to her with trembling fingers. He swallowed it all down. Just as she'd promised, the stuff was foreal.

Elanore smiled at him. And Elanore looked beautiful. Elanore was dressed for the era in a long dress of pure ultramarine. Her red hair was bunched up beneath a narrow-brimmed hat adorned with flowers.

"It's about now," she said, "that you tell me I haven't changed."

"And you tell me that I *have."*

She nodded. "But it's true. Although you haven't changed *that* much, Gus. You've aged, but you're still one of the most... solid people I know."

Elanore offered him a Disc Bleu. He took it, although he hadn't smoked in years and she'd always complained that the things were bad for him when she was alive. Elanore's skin felt cool and dry in the moment that their hands touched, and the taste of the smoke as it shimmered amid the brush strokes was just as it had always been. Music drifted out from the blaze of the bar where dark figures writhed as if in flames. Any moment now, he knew, she'd try to say something vaguely conciliatory, and she'd interrupt as he attempted to do the same.

He gestured around at the daubs and smears of the other empty tables. He said, "I thought I was going to be late...." The underside of the canopy that stretched across the pavement blazed. How poor old Vincent had loved his cadmiums and chromes! And never sold one single fucking painting in his entire life.

"What—what I told you was true," Elanore said, stum-bling slightly

over these little words, sounding almost un-Elanore-like for a moment; nearly uneasy. “I mean, about Marcel in Venice and Francine across the sky. And, yes, we *did* talk about a reunion. But you know how these things are. Time’s precious, and, at the end of the day it’s been so long that these things really do take a lot of nerve. So it didn’t come off. It was just a few promises that no one really imagined they’d keep. But I thought—well, I thought that it would be nice to see *you* anyway. At least one more time.”

“So all of this is just for me. *Jesus,* Elanore, I knew you were rich, but. ..”

“Don’t be like that, Gustav. I’m not trying to impress you or depress you or whatever. It was just the way it came out.”

He poured more of the wine, wondering as he did so exactly what trick it was that allowed them to share it.

“So, you’re still painting?”

“Yep.”

“I haven’t seen much of your work about.”

“I do it for private clients,” Gustav said. “Mostly.”

He glared at Elanore, daring her to challenge his state-ment. Of course, if he really *was* painting and selling, he’d have some credit, And if he had *credit,* he wouldn’t be living in that dreadful tenement she’d tracked him down to. He’d have paid for all the necessary treatments to stop himself becoming the frail old man he so nearly was. *I can help, you know,* Gustave could hear Elanore saying, because he’d heard her say it so many times before. *I don’t need all this wealth. So let me give you just a little help. Give me that chance....* But what she actually *said* was even worse.

“Are you recording yourself, Gus?” Elanore asked. “Do you have a librarian?”

Now, he thought, now is the time to walk out. Pull this whole thing down and go back into the street—the foreal street. And forget.

“Did you know,” he said instead, “that the word reality once actually *meant* foreal—not the projections and the simulations, but proper actuality. But then along came *vir-tual* reality, and of course, when the *next*

generation of products was developed, the illusion was so much better that you could walk right into it instead of having to put on goggles and a suit. So they had to think of an improved phrase, a super-word for the purposes of marketing. And someone must have said, *Why don't we just call it real-ity?"*

"You don't have to be hurtful, Gus. There's no rule written down that says we can't get on."

"I thought that that was exactly the problem. It's in my head, and it was probably there in yours before you died. Now it's…" He'd have said more. But he was suddenly, stupidly, near to tears.

"What exactly *are* you doing these days, Gus?" she asked as he cleared his throat and pretended it was the wine that he'd choked on. "What are you painting at the moment?"

"I'm working on a series," he was surprised to hear himself saying. "It's a sort of a journey-piece. A sequence of paintings which began here in Paris and then ..." He swallowed. "... bright, dark colors ..." A nerve began to leap beside his eye. Something seemed to touch him, but was too faint to be heard or felt or seen.

"Sounds good, Gus," Elanore said, leaning toward him across the table. And Elanore smelled of Elanore, the way she always did. Her pale skin was freckled from the sun-light of whatever warm and virtual place she was living. Across her cheeks and her upper lip, threaded gold, lay the down that he'd brushed so many times with his the tips of his fingers. "I can tell from that look in your eyes that you're into a really good phase...."

After that, things went better. They shared a second bottle of *vin ordinaire.* They made a little mountain of the butts of her Disc Bleu in the ashtray. This ghost—she really *was* like Elanore. Gustav didn't even object to her taking his hand across the table. There was a kind of aban-don in all of this—new ideas mixed with old memories. And he understood more clearly now what Van Gogh had meant about this café being a place where you could ruin yourself, or go mad or commit a crime.

The few other diners faded. The virtual waiters, their aprons a single assured gray-white stroke of the palette knife, started to tip the chairs against the tables. The aromas of the Left Bank's ever-unreliable sewers began to override those of cigarettes and people and horse dung and wine. At least, Gustav thought, *that* was still foreal....

“I suppose quite a lot of the others have died by now,” Gustav said. “All that facile gang you seem to so fondly remember.”

“People still change, you know. Just because we’ve passed on, doesn’t mean we can’t *change.”*

By now, he was in a mellow enough mood just to nod at that. And how have *you* changed, Elanore? he won-dered. After so long, what flicker of the electrons made you decide to come to me now?

“You’re obviously doing well.”

“I am ...” She nodded, as if the idea surprised her. “I mean, I didn’t expect—”

“—And you look—”

“—And *you,* Gus, what I said about you being—”

“—That project of mine—”

“—I know, I—”

They stopped and gazed at each other. Then they both smiled, and the moment seemed to hold, warm and frozen, as if from a scene within a painting. It was almost...

“Well...” Elanore broke the illusion first as she began to fumble in the small sequined purse she had on her lap. Eventually, she produced a handkerchief and blew deli-cately on her nose. Gustav tried not to grind his teeth— although this was *exactly* the kind of affectation he de-tested about ghosts. He guessed, anyway, from the changed look on her face, that she knew what he was thinking. “I suppose that’s it, then, isn’t it, Gus? We’ve met—we’ve spent the evening together without arguing. Almost like old times.”

“Nothing will ever be like old times.”

“No ...” Her eyes glinted, and he thought for a mo-ment that she was going to become angry—goaded at last into something like the Elanore of old. But she just smiled. “Nothing ever will be like old times. That’s the problem, isn’t it? Nothing ever was, or ever will be ...”

Elanore clipped her purse shut again. Elanore stood up. Gustav saw her hesitate as she considered bending down to kiss him farewell, then decided that he would just re-gard that as another affront, another slap in the face.

Elanore turned and walked away from Gustav, fading into the chiaroscuro swirls of lamplight and gray.

* * * *

Elanore, as if Gustav needed reminding, had been alive when he'd first met her. In fact, he'd never known anyone who was *more* so. Of course, the age difference between them was always huge—she'd already been past a hundred by then, and he was barely forty—but they'd agreed on that first day that they met, and on many days after, that there was a corner in time around which the old even-tually turned to rejoin the young.

In another age, and although she always laughingly de-nied it, Gustav always suspected that Elanore would have had her sagging breasts implanted with silicone, the wrin-kles stretched back from her face, her heart replaced by a throbbing steel simulacrum. But she was lucky enough to exist at a time when effective antiaging treatments were finally available. As a post-centarian, wise and rich and moderately, pleasantly, famous, Elanore was probably more fresh and beautiful than she'd been at any other era in her life. Gustav had met her at a party beside a Russian lake—guests wandering amid dunes of snow. Foreal had been a fashionable option then; although for Gustav, the grounds of this pillared ice-crystalled palace that Cathe-rine the Great's Scottish favorite Charles Cameron had built seemed far too gorgeous to be entirely true. But it *was* true—foreal, actual, concrete, genuine, unvirtual— and such knowledge was what had driven him then. That, and the huge impossibility of ever really managing to con-vey any of it as a painter. That, and the absolute certainty that he would *try.*

Elanore had wandered up to him from the forest dusk dressed in seal furs. The shock of her beauty had been like all the rubbish he'd heard other artists talk about and thus so detested. And he'd been a stammering wreck, but somehow that hadn't mattered. There had been—and here again the words became stupid, meaningless—a dazed physicality between them from that first moment that was so intense it was spiritual.

Elanore told Gustav that she'd seen and admired the series of triptychs he'd just finished working on. They were painted directly onto

slabs of wood, and depicted totemistic figures in dense blocks of color. The critics had generally damned them with faint praise—had talked of Cubism and Mondrian—and were somehow unable to recognize Gustav's obvious and grateful debt to Gau-guin's Tahitian paintings. But Elanore had seen and understood those bright muddy colors. And, yes, she'd dabbled a little in painting herself—just enough to know that truly creative acts were probably beyond her ...

Elanore wore her red hair short in those days. And there were freckles, then as always, scattered across the bridge of her nose. She showed the tips of her teeth when she smiled, and he was conscious of her lips and her tongue. He could smell, faint within the clouds of breath that en-twined them, her womanly scent.

A small black cat threaded its way between them as they talked, then, barely breaking the crust of the snow, leapt up onto a bough of the nearest pine and crouched there, watching them with emerald eyes.

"That's Metzengerstein," Elanore said, her own even greener eyes flickering across Gustav's face, but never ceasing to regard him. "He's my librarian."

When they made love later on in the agate pavilion's frozen glow, and as the smoke of their breath and their sweat clouded the winter twilight, all the disparate ele-ments of Gustav's world finally seemed to join. He carved Elanore's breasts with his fingers and tongue, and painted her with her juices, and plunged into her sweet depths, and came, finally, finally, and quite deliciously, as her fingers slid around and he in turn was parted and entered by her.

Swimming back up from that, soaked with Elanore, ex-hausted, but his cock amazingly still half-stiff and rising, Gustav became conscious of the black cat that all this time had been threading its way between them. Its tail now curled against his thigh, corrugating his scrotum. Its claws gently kneaded his belly.

Elanore had laughed and picked Metzengerstein up, purring herself as she laid the creature between her breasts.

Gustav understood. Then or later, there was never any need for her to say more. After all, even Elanore couldn't live forever—and she needed a librarian with her to rec-ord her thoughts and actions if she was ever to pass on. For all its myriad complexities, the human brain had evolved to last a single lifetime; after that, the memories and impressions eventually began

to overflow, the data became corrupted. Yes, Gustav understood. He even came to like the way Metzengerstein followed Elanore around like a witch's familiar, and, yes, its soft sharp cajolings as they made love.

Did they call them ghosts then? Gustave couldn't re-member. It was a word, anyway—like spic, or nigger— that you never used in front of them. When he and Ela-nore were married, when Gustav loved and painted and loved and painted her, when she gave him her life and her spirit and his own career somehow began to take off as he finally mastered the trick of getting some of the passion he felt onto the lovely, awkward canvass, he al-ways knew that part of the intensity between them came from the age gap, the difference, the inescapable fact that Elanore would soon have to die.

It finally happened, he remembered, when he was leav-ing Gauguin's tropic dreams and nightmares behind and toying with a more straightforwardly Impressionist phase. Elanore was modeling for him nude as Manet's *Olympia.* As a concession to practicalities and to the urgency that then always possessed him when he was painting, the black maidservant bearing the flowers in his lavish new studio on the Boulevard des Capucines was a projection, but the divan and all the hangings, the flowers, and the cat, of course—although by its programmed nature, Metz-engerstein was incapable of looking quite as scared and scrawny as Manet's original—were all foreal.

"You know," Elanore said, not breaking pose, one hand toying with the hem of the shawl on which she was lying, the other laid negligently, possessively, without modesty, across her pubic triangle, "we really should reinvite Mar-cel over after all he's done for us lately."

"Marcel?" In honesty, Gustav was paying little atten-tion to anything at that moment other than which shade to swirl into the boudoir darkness. He dabbed again onto his testing scrap. "Marcel's in San Francisco. We haven't seen him in months."

"Of course ... silly me."

He finally glanced up again, what could have been mo-ments or minutes later, suddenly aware that a cold silence had set in. Elanore, being Elanore, never forgot anything. Elanore was light and life. Now, all her *Olympia-like* poise was gone.

This wasn't like the decay and loss of function that affected the elderly in the days before recombinant drugs. Just like her heart and her limbs, Elanore's physical brain still functioned perfectly. But the effect was

the same. Confusions and mistakes happened frequently after that, as if consciousness drained rapidly once the initial rent was made. For Elanore, with her exquisite dignity, her continued beauty, her companies and her investments and the contacts that she needed to maintain, the process of senility was particularly terrible. No one, least of all Gus-tav, argued against her decision to pass on.

* * * *

Back where reality ended, it was past midnight and the moon was blazing down over the Left Bank's broken rooftops through the grayish brown nanosmog. And ex-actly where, Gustav wondered, glaring up at it through the still-humming gantries of the reality engine that had enclosed him and Elanore, is Francine across the sky?

How much do you have to pay to get the right decoders in your optic nerves to see the stars entwined in some vast projection of her? How much of your life do you have to give away?

The mazy streets behind St. Michael were rotten and weed-grown in the bilious fog, the dulled moonlight. No one but Gustav seemed to live in the half-supported ruins of the Left Bank nowadays. It was just a place for posing in and being seen—although in that respect, Gustav re-flected, things really hadn't changed. To get back to his tenement, he had to cross the Boulevard St-Germain through a stream of buzzing robot cars that, no matter how he dodged them, still managed to avoid him. In the busier streets beyond, the big reality engines were still glowing. In fact, it was said that you could now go from one side of Paris to the other without having to step out into foreal. Gustav, as ever, did his best to do the opposite, although he knew that, even without any credit, he would still be freely admitted to the many realities on offer in these gen-erous, carefree days. He scowled at the shining planes of the powerfields that stretched between the gantries like bubbles. Faintly from inside, coming at him from beyond the humming of the transformers that tamed and organized the droplets of nanosmog into shapes you could feel, odors you could smell, chairs you could sit on, he could hear words and laughter, music, the clink of glasses. He could even just make out the shapes of the living as they postured and chatted. It was obvious from the way that they were grouped that the living were outnumbered by the dead these days. Outside, in the dim streets, he passed figures like tumbling decahedrons who bore their own fields with them as they moved between realities. They were probably unaware of him as they drifted by, perhaps saw him as some extra enhancement of whatever dream it was they were living. Flick, flick. Scheherazade's Baghdad. John Carter's Mars. It really didn't matter that you were still in

Paris, although Elanore, of course, had showed sensitivity in the place she had selected for their meeting.

Beyond the last of the reality engines, Gustav's own cheap unvirtual tenement loomed into view. He picked his way across the tarmac toward the faint neon of the foreal Spar store beside it. Inside, there were the usual gray slabs of packaging with tiny windows promising every possible delight. He wandered up the aisles and activated the homely presence of the woman who served the dozen or so anachronistic places that were still scattered around Paris. She smiled at him—a living ghost, really; but then, people seemed to prefer the illusion of the personal touch. Behind her, he noticed, was an antiquated cigarette ma-chine. He ordered a packet of Disc Bleu, and palmed what were probably the last of his credits—which amounted to half a stick of charcoal or two squeezes-worth of Red Lake. It was a surprise to him, in fact, that he even had enough for these cigarettes.

Outside, ignoring the health warning that flashed briefly before his eyes, he lighted a Disc Bleu, put it to his lips, and deeply inhaled. A few moments later, he was in a nauseous sweat, doubled up and gasping.

* * * *

Another bleak morning, timeless and grey. This ceiling, these walls. And Elanore ... Elanore was dead. Gone.

Gustav belched on the wine he was sure that he'd drunk, and smelled the sickness and the smoke of that foreal Disc Bleu still clinging to him. But there was no trace of Elanore. Not a copper strand of hair on his shoul-der or curled around his cock, not her scent riming his hands.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture a woman in a white chemise bathing in a river's shallows, two bearded men talking animatedly in a grassy space beneath the trees, and Elanore sitting naked close by, although she watches rather than joins in their conversation....

No. That wasn't it.

Somehow getting up, pissing cloudily into the appropri-ate receptacle, Gustav finally grunted in unsurprise when he noticed a virtual light flickering through the heaped and broken frames of his easels. Unlike the telephone, he was sure that the company had disconnected his terminal long ago. His head fizzing, his groin vaguely tumescent, some lost bit of the night nagging like a stray scrap of meat between his teeth, he gazed down into the spinning options that the screen offered.

It was Elanore's work, of course—or the ghost of en-tangled electrons that Elanore had become. Hey presto!— Gustav was back on line; granted this shimmering link into the lands of the dead and the living. He saw that he even had positive credit, which explained why he'd been able to buy that packet of Disc Bleu. He'd have slammed his fist down into the thing if it would have done any good.

Instead, he scowled at his room, the huddle backs of the canvases, the drifts of discarded food and clothing, the heap of his bed, wondering if Elanore was watching him now, thrusting a spare few gigabytes into the sensors of some nano-insect that was hovering close behind him. In-deed, he half-expected the thin partitions and dangling wires, all the mocking rubbish of his life, to shudder and change into snowy Russian parkland, a wooded glade, even Paris again, 1890. But none of that happened.

The positive credit light still glowed enticingly within the terminal. In the almost certain knowledge that he would regret it, but quite unable to stop himself, Gustav scrolled through the pathways that led him to the little-frequented section dealing with artists' foreal requisites.

Keeping it simple—down to fresh brushes, and Lefranc and Bourgeois's extra fine Flake White, Cadmium Yel-low, Vermilion, Deep Madder, Cobalt Blue, and Emerald Green—and still waiting as the cost all of that clocked up for the familiar credit-expired sign to arrive, he closed the screen.

The materials arrived far more quickly than he'd ex-pected, disgorging themselves into a service alcove in the far corner with a whoosh like the wind. The supplier had even remembered to include the fresh bottles of turpentine he'd forgotten to order—he still had plenty of clean stretched canvases anyway. So here (the feel of the fat new tubes, the beautiful, haunting names of the colors, the faint stirring sounds that the brushes made when he tried to lift them) was everything he might possibly need.

Gustav was an artist.

* * * *

The hours did funny things when Gustav was painting— or even thinking about painting. They ran fast or slow, passed by on a fairy breeze, or thickened and grew huge as megaliths, then joined up and began to dance lumberingly around him, stamping on every sensibility and hope. Taking

fierce drags of his last Disc Bleu, clouding his tenement's already filmy air. Gustav finally gave up scrib-bling on his pad and casting sidelong glances at the canvas as the blazing moon began to flood Paris with its own sickly version of evening. As he'd always known he'd probably end up doing, he then began to wander the dim edges of his room, tilting back and examining his old, unsold, and generally unfinished canvases. Especially in this light, and seen from upside down, the scenes of foreal Paris looked suitably wan. There was so little to them, in fact, such a thinness and lack of color, that they could easily be reused. But here in the tangled shadows of the furthest corner, filled with colors that seemed to pour into the air like a perfume, lay his early attempts at Symbolism and Impressionism.... Amid those, he noticed something paler again. In fact, unfinished—but from an era when, as far as he could recall, he'd finished everything. He risked lifting the canvas out, and gazed at the outlines, the dabs of paint, the layers of wash. He recognized it now. It had been his attempt at Manet's *Olympia.*

* * * *

After Elanore had said her good-byes to all her friends, she retreated into the white virtual corridors of a building near the Cimetiere du Pere Lachaise that might once have been called a hospital. There, as a final fail-safe, her mind was scanned and stored, the lineaments of her body were recorded. Gustav was the only person Elanore allowed to visit her during those last weeks; she was perhaps already too confused to understand what seeing her like this was doing to him. He'd sit amid the webs of silver monitoring wires as she absently stroked Metzengerstein, and the cat's eyes, now far greener and brighter than hers, re-garded him. She didn't seem to want to fight this loss of self. That was probably the thing that hurt him most. Ela-nore, the proper foreal Elanore, had always been searching for the next river to cross, the next challenge; it was prob-ably the one characteristic that they had shared. But now she accepted death, this loss of Elanore, with nothing but resignation. *This is the way it is for all of us,* Gustav remembered her saying in one of the last cogent periods before she forgot his name. *So many of our friends have passed on already. It's just a matter of joining them. ...* Elanore never quite lost her beauty, but she became like a doll, a model of herself, and her eyes grew vacant as she sat silent or talked ramblingly. The freckles faded from her skin. Her mouth grew slack. She began to smell sour. There was no great fuss made when they finally turned her off, although Gustav still insisted that he be there. It was a relief, in fact, when Elanore's eyes finally closed and her heart stopped beating, when the hand he'd placed in his turned even more flaccid and cold. Metzengerstein gave Gustav one final glance before it twisted its way between the wires, leapt off the bed, and padded from the

room, its tail raised. For a moment, Gustav considered grabbing the thing, slamming it down into a pulp of mem-ory circuits and flesh and metal. But it had already been deprogrammed. Metzengerstein was just a shell; a comforter for Elanore in her last dim days. He never saw the creature again.

Just as the living Elanore had promised, her ghost only returned to Gustav after a decent interval. And she made no assumptions about their future at that first meeting on the neutral ground of a shorefront restaurant in virtual Balbec. She clearly understood how difficult all this was for him. It had been a windy day, he remembered, and the tablecloths flapped, the napkins threatened to take off, the lapel of the cream brocade jacket she was wearing kept flying across her throat until she pinned it back with a brooch. She told him that she still loved him, and that she hoped they would be able to stay together. A few days later, in a room in the same hotel overlooking the same windy beach, Elanore and Gustav made love for the first time since she had died.

The illusion, Gustav had to admit, then and later, was always perfect. And, as the dying Elanore had pointed out, they both already knew many ghosts. There was Marcel, for instance, and there was Jean, Gustav's own dealer and agent. It wasn't as if Elanore had even been left with any choice. In a virtual, ghostly daze himself, Gustav agreed that they should set up home together. They chose Brit-tany, because it was new to them—unloaded with mem-ories—and the scenery was still often decent and visible enough to be worth painting.

Foreal was going out of style by then. For many years, the technologies of what was called reality had been flaw-less. But now, they became all-embracing. It was at about this time, Gustav supposed, although his memory once again was dim on this matter, that they set fire to the moon. The ever-bigger reality engines required huge amounts of power—and so it was that the robot ships set out, settled into orbit around the moon, and began to spray the surface with antimatter, spreading their wings like hands held out to a fire to absorb and then transmit back to earth the energies this iridescence gave. The power the moon now provided wasn't quite limitless, but it was near enough. With so much alternative joy and light available, the foreal world, much like a garden left untended, soon began to assume a look of neglect.

Ever-considerate to his needs, Elanore chose and had refurbished a gabled clifftop mansion near Locronan, and ordered graceful and foreal furniture at huge extra ex-pense. For a month or so, until the powerlines and trans-formers of the reality engines had been installed, Gustav and Elanore could communicate with each other only by screen. He did his best to tell

himself that being unable to touch her was a kind of tease, and kept his thoughts away from such questions as where exactly Elanore was when she wasn't with him, and if she truly imagined she was the seamless continuation of the living Elanore that she claimed herself to be.

The house smelled of salt and old stone, and then of wet plaster and new carpets, and soon began to look as charming and eccentric as anything Elanore had organized in her life. As for the cost of all this forgotten craftsmanship, which even in these generous times was quite daunt-ing, Elanore had discovered, like many of the ghosts who had gone before her, that her work—the dealing in stocks, ideas, and raw megawatts in which she specialized—was suddenly much easier. She could flit across the world, make deals based on long-term calculations that no living person could ever hope to understand.

Often, in the early days when Elanore finally reached the reality of their clifftop house in Brittany, Gustav would find himself gazing at her, trying to catch her un-awares, or, in the nights when they made love with an obsessive frequency and passion, he would study her whilst she was sleeping. If she seemed distracted, he put it down to some deal she was cooking, a new antimatter trial across the Sea of Storms, perhaps, or a business meet-ing in Capetown. If she sighed and smiled in her dreams, he imagined her in the arms of some long-dead lover.

Of course, Elanore always denied such accusations. She even gave a good impression of being hurt. She was, she insisted, configured to ensure that she was always exactly where she appeared to be, except for brief times and in the gravest of emergencies. In the brain or on the net, human consciousness was a fragile thing—permanently in danger of dissolving. / *really* am *talking to you now, Gus-tav.* Otherwise, Elanore maintained, she would unravel, she would cease to be Elanore. As if, Gustav thought in generally silent rejoinder, she hadn't ceased to be Elanore already.

She'd changed, for a start. She was cooler, calmer, yet somehow more mercurial. The simple and everyday mo-tions she made, like combing her hair or stirring coffee, began to look stiff and affected. Even her sexual prefer-ences had changed. And passing over *was* different. Yes, she admitted that, even though she could feel the weight and presence of her own her body just as she could feel his when he touched her. Once, as the desperation of their arguments increased, she even insisted on stabbing herself with a fork, just so that he might finally understand that she felt pain. But for Gustav, Elanore wasn't like the many other ghosts he'd met and readily accepted. They weren't *Elanore.* He'd never loved and painted

them.

Gustav soon found that he couldn't paint Elanore now, either. He tried from sketches and from memory; once or twice he got her to pose. But it didn't work. He couldn't quite loose himself enough to forget what she was. They even tried to complete that *Olympia,* although the memory was painful for both of them. She posed for him as Ma-net's model, who in truth she did look a little like; the same model who'd posed for that odd scene by the river, *Dejéuner sur l'Herbe.* Now, of course, the cat as well as the black maid had to be a projection, although they did their best to make everything else the same. But there was something lost and wan about the painting as he tried to develop it. The nakedness of the woman on the canvas no longer gave off strength and knowledge and sexual assurance. She seemed pliant and helpless. Even the colors grew darker; it was like fighting smoke in a dream.

Elanore accepted Gustav's difficulties with what he sometimes found to be chillingly good grace. She was prepared to give him time. He could travel. She could develop new interests, burrow within the net as she'd al-ways promised herself, and live in some entirely different place.

Gustav began to take long walks away from the house, along remote clifftop paths and across empty beaches, where he could be alone. The moon and the sun some-times cast their silver ladders across the water. Soon, Gus-tav thought sourly, there'll be nowhere left to escape *to.* Or perhaps we will *all* pass on, and the gantries and the ugly virtual buildings that all look like the old Pompidou Center will cease to be necessary; but for the glimmering of a few electrons, the world will revert to the way it was before people came. We can even extinguish the moon.

He also started to spend more time in the few parts of their rambling house that, largely because much of the stuff they wanted was hand-built and took some time to order, Elanore hadn't yet had fitted out foreal. He interrogated the house's mainframe to discover the codes that would turn the reality engines off and on at will; In a room filled with tapestries, a long oak table, a vase of hydrangeas, pale curtains lifting slightly in the breeze, all it took was the correct gesture, a mere click of his fingers, and it would shudder and vanish, to be replaced by noth-ing but walls of mildewed plaster, the faint tingling sen-sation that came from the receding powerfield. There— then gone. Only the foreal view at the window remained the same. And now, click, and it all came *back* again. Even the fucking vase. The fucking flowers.

Elanore sought him out that day. Gustav heard her foot-steps on the stairs, and knew that she'd pretend to be puzzled as to why he wasn't working in his studio.

"*There* you are," she said, appearing a little breathless after her climb up the stairs. "I was thinking—"

Finally scratching the itch that he realized had been tickling him for some time, Gustav clicked his fingers. Elanore—and the whole room, the table, the flowers, the tapestries—flickered off.

He waited—several beats, he really didn't know how long. The wind still blew in through the window. The powerfield hummed faintly, waiting for its next command. He clicked his fingers. Elanore and the room took shape again.

"I thought you'd probably override that," he said. "I imagined you'd given yourself a higher priority than the furniture."

"I could if I wished," she said. "I didn't think I'd need to do such a thing."

"No. I mean, you can just go somewhere else, can't you? Some other room in this house. Some other place. Some other continent..."

"I keep telling you. It isn't like that."

"I know. Consciousness is fragile."

"And we're really not that different, Gus. I'm made of random droplets held in a force field—but what are *you?* Think about it. You're made of atoms, which are just quantum flickers in the foam of space, particles that aren't even particles at all...."

Gustav stared at her. He was remembering—he couldn't help it—that they'd made love the previous night. Just two different kinds of ghost; entwined, join-ing—he supposed that that was what she was saying. And what about my *cock,* Elanore, and all the stuff that gets emptied into you when we're fucking? What the hell do you do with *that?*

"Look, Gus, this isn't—"

"—And what do you dream at night, Elanore? What is it that you do

when you pretend you're sleeping?"

She waved her arms in a furious gesture that Gustav almost recognized from the Elanore of old. "What the hell do you *think* I do, Gus? I *try* to be human. You think it's easy, do you, hanging on like this? You think I enjoy watching *you* flicker in and out?—which is basically what it's like for me every time you step outside these fields? Sometimes I just wish I..."

Elanore trailed off there, glaring at him with emerald eyes. Go on, Gustav felt himself urging her. *Say* it, you phantom, shade, wraith, ghost. Say you wish you'd simply died. But instead, she made some internal command of her own, and blanked the room—and vanished.

It was the start of the end of their relationship.

* * * *

Many guests came to visit their house in the weeks after that, and Elanore and Gustav kept themselves busy in the company of the dead and the living. All the old crowd, all the old jokes. Gustav generally drank too much, and made his presence unwelcome with the female ghosts as he decided that once he'd fucked the nano-droplets in one configuration, he might as well try fucking them in an-other. What the hell was it, Gus wondered, that made the living so reluctant to give up the dead, and the dead to give up the living?

In the few hours that they did spend together and alone at that time, Elanore and Gustav made detailed plans to travel. The idea was that they (meaning Elanore, with all the credit she was accumulating) would commission a ship, a sailing ship, traditional in every respect apart from the fact that the sails would be huge power receptors driven directly by the moon, and the spars would be the frame of a reality engine. Together, they would get away from all of this, and sail across the foreal oceans, perhaps even as far as Tahiti. Admittedly, Gustav was intrigued by the idea of returning to the painter who by now seemed to be the initial wellspring of his creativity. He was cer-tainly in a suitably grumpy and isolationist mood to head off, as the poverty-stricken and desperate Gauguin had once done, in search of inspiration in the South Seas, and ultimately to his death from the prolonged effects of syph-ilis. But they never actually discussed what Tahiti would be *like.* Of course, there would be no tourists there now— only eccentrics bothered to travel foreal these days. Gus-tav liked to think, in fact, that there would be none of the tall ugly buildings and the huge Coca-Cola signs that he'd once seen in an old photograph of Tahiti's main

town of Papeete. There might—who knows?—not be any reality engines, even, squatting likes spiders across the beaches and jungle. With the understandable way that the birthrate was now declining, there would be just a few natives left, living as they had once lived before Cook and Bligh and all the rest—even Gauguin with his art and his myths and his syphilis—had ruined it for them. That was how Gustav wanted to leave Tahiti.

Winter came to their clifftop house. The guests de-parted. The wind raised white crests across the ocean. Gustav developed a habit, which Elanore pretended not to notice, of turning the heating down; as if he needed chill and discomfort to make the place seem real. Tahiti, that ship of theirs, remained an impossibly long way off. There were no final showdowns—just this gradual drifting apart. Gustav gave up trying to make love to Elanore, just as he had given up trying to paint her. But they were friendly and cordial with each other. It seemed that neither of them wished to pollute the memory of something that had once been wonderful. Elanore was, Gustav knew, starting to become concerned about his failure to have his increasing signs of age treated, and his refusal to have a librarian; even his insistence on pursuing a career that seemed only to leave him depleted and damaged. But she never said anything.

They agreed to separate for a while. Elanore would head off to explore pure virtuality. Gustav would go back to foreal Paris and try to rediscover his art. And so, mak-ing promises they both knew they would never keep, Gus-tav and Elanore finally parted.

* * * *

Gustav slid his unfinished *Olympia* back down amid the other canvases. He looked out of the window, and saw from the glow coming up through the gaps in the houses that the big reality engines were humming. The evening, or whatever other time and era it was, was in full swing. A vague idea forming in his head, Gustav pulled on his coat and headed out from his tenement. As he walked down through the misty, smoggy streets, it almost began to feel like inspiration. Such was his absorption that he didn’t even bother to avoid the shining bubbles of the reality engines. Paris, at the end of the day, still being Paris, the realities he passed through mostly consisted of one or another sort of café, but they were set amid daz-zling souks, dank medieval alleys, yellow and seemingly watery places where swam strange creatures that he couldn’t think to name. But his attention wasn’t on it any-way.

The Musée D’Orsay was still kept in reasonably im-maculate condition beside the faintly luminous and milky Seine. Outside and in, it was well-lit,

and a trembling barrier kept in the air that was necessary to preserve its contents until the time came when they were fashionable again. Inside, it even *smelled* like an art gallery, and Gustav's footsteps echoed on the polished floors, and the ro-bot janitors greeted him; in every way, and despite all the years since he'd last visited, the place was the same.

Gustav walked briskly past the statues and the bronze casts, past Ingres' big, dead canvases of supposedly voluptuous nudes. Then Moreau, early Degas, Corot, Mil-let... Gustav did his best to ignore them all. For the fact was that Gustav hated art galleries—he was still, at least, a painter in that respect. Even in the years when he'd gone deliberately to such places, because he knew that they were good for his own development, he still liked to think of himself as a kind of burglar—get in, grab your ideas, get out again. Everything else, all the ahhs and the oohs, was for mere spectators....

He took the stairs to the upper floor. A cramp had worked its way beneath his diaphragm and his throat felt raw, but behind all of that there was this feeling, a tingling of power and magic and anger—a sense that perhaps ...

Now that he was up amid the rooms and corridors of the great Impressionist works, he forced himself to slow down. The big gilt frames, the pompous marble, the names and dates of artists who had often died in anonym-ity, despair, disease, blindness, exile, near-starvation. Poor old Sisley's *Misty Morning.* Vincent Van Gogh in a self portrait formed from deep, sensuous, three-dimensional oils. Genuinely great art was, Gustav thought, pretty de-pressing for would-be great artists. If it hadn't been for the invisible fields that were protecting these paintings, he would have considered ripping the things off the walls, destroying them.

His feet led him back to the Manets, that woman gazing out at him from *Dejéuner sur I'Herbe* and then again from *Olympia.* She wasn't beautiful, didn't even look much like Elanore.... But that wasn't the point. He drifted on past the clamoring canvases, wondering if the world had ever been this bright, this new, this wondrously chaotic. Even-tually, he found himself face-to-face with the surprisingly few Gauguins that the Musée D'Orsay possessed. Those bright slabs of color, those mournful Tahitian natives, which were often painted on raw sacking because it was all Gauguin could get his hands on in the hot stench of his tropical hut. He became wildly fashionable after his death, of course; the idea of destitution on a far-away isle suddenly stuck everyone as romantic. But it was too late for Gauguin by then. And too late—as his hitherto worth-less paintings were snapped up by Russians, Danes, Eng-lishmen, Americans—for these

stupid, habitually arrogant Parisians. Gauguin was often poor at dealing with his shapes, but he generally got away with it. And his sense of color was like no one else's. Gustav remembered vaguely now that there was a nude that Gauguin had painted as his own lopsided tribute to Manet's *Olympia*—had even pinned a photograph of it to the wall of his hut as he worked. But, like most of Gauguin's other really important paintings, it wasn't here at the Musée D'Orsay, this supposed epicenter of Impressionist and Symbolist art. Gustav shrugged and turned away. He hobbled slowly back down through the galley.

Outside, beneath the moonlight, amid the nanosmog and the buzzing of the powerfields, Gustav made his way once again through the realities. An English tea house circa 1930. A Guermantes salon. If they'd been foreal, he'd have sent the cups and the plates flying, bellowed in the self-satisfied faces of the dead and living. Then he stumbled into a scene he recognized from the Musée D'Orsay, one, in fact, that had once been as much a cul-tural icon as Madonna's tits or a Beatles tune. *Le Moulin de la Gallette.* He was surprised and almost encouraged to see Renoir's Parisian figures in their Sunday-best cloth-ing dancing under the trees in the dappled sunlight, or chatting at the surrounding benches and tables. He stood and watched, nearly smiling. Glancing down, he saw that he was dressed appropriately in a rough woolen navy suit. He studied the figures, admiring their animation, the clever and, yes, convincing way that, through some trick of reality, they were composed.... Then he realized that he recognized some of the faces, and that they had also recognized him. Before he could turn back, he was called to and beckoned over.

"Gustav," Marcel's ghost said, sliding an arm around him, smelling of male sweat and Pernod. "Grab a chair. Sit down. Long time no see, eh?"

Gustav shrugged and accepted the brimming tumbler of wine that he offered. If it was foreal—which he doubted— this and a few more of the same might help him sleep tonight. "I thought you were in Venice," he said. "As the Doge."

Marcel shrugged. There were breadcrumbs on his mus-tache. "That was *ages* ago. Where have you been, Gustav?"

"Just around the corner, actually."

"Not still *painting,* are you?"

Gustav allowed that question to be lost in the music and the

conversation’s ebb and flow. He gulped his wine and looked around, expecting to see Elanore at any mo-ment. So many of the others were here—it was almost like old times. There, even, was Francine, dancing with a top-hatted man—so she clearly wasn’t across the sky. Gustav decided to ask the girl in the striped dress who was nearest to him if she’d seen Elanore. He realized as he spoke to her that her face was familiar to him, but he somehow couldn’t recollect her name—even whether she was living or a ghost. She shook her head, and asked the woman who stood leaning behind her. But she, also, hadn’t seen Elanore; not, at least, since the times when Marcel was in Venice and when Francine was across the sky. From there, the question rippled out across the square. But no one, it seemed, knew what had happened to Elanore.

Gustav stood up and made his way between the twirling dancers and the lantern-strung trees. His skin tingled as he stepped out of the reality, and the laughter and the music suddenly faded. Avoiding any other such encoun-ters, he made his way back up the dim streets to his ten-ement.

There, back at home, the light from the setting moon was bright enough for him to make his way through the dim wreckage of his life without falling—and the terminal that Elanore’s ghost had reactivated still gave off a virtual glow. Swaying, breathless, Gustav paged down into his accounts, and saw the huge sum—the kind of figure that he associated with astronomy, with the distance of the moon from the earth, the earth from the sun—that now appeared there. Then, he passed back through the termi-nal’s levels, and began to search for Elanore.

But Elanore wasn’t there.

* * * *

Gustav was painting. When he felt like this, he loved and hated the canvas in almost equal measures. The outside world, foreal or in reality, ceased to exist for him.

A woman, naked, languid, and with a dusky skin quite unlike Elanore’s, is lying upon a couch, half-turned, her face cupped in her hand that lies upon the primrose pil-low, her eyes gazing away from the onlooker at something far off. She seems beautiful but unerotic, vulnerable yet clearly available, and self-absorbed. Behind her—amid the twirls of bright yet gloomy decoration—lies a glimpse of stylized rocks under a strange sky, whilst two oddly disturbing figures are talking, and a dark bird perches on the lip of a balcony; perhaps a raven....

Although he detests plagiarism, and is working solely from memory, Gustav finds it hard to break away from Gauguin's nude on this canvas he is now painting. But he really isn't fighting that hard to do so, anyway. In this above all of Gauguin's great paintings, stripped of the crap and the despair and the self-justifying symbolism, Gauguin was simply *right.* So Gustav still keeps working, and the paint sometimes almost seems to want to obey him. He doesn't know or care at the moment what the thing will turn out like. If it's good, he might think of it as his tribute to Elanore; and if it isn't... well, he knows that, once he's finished this painting, he will start another one. Right now, that's all that matters.

Elanore was right, Gustav decides, when she once said that he was entirely selfish, and would sacrifice every-thing—himself included—just so that he could continue to paint. She was eternally right and, in her own way, she too was always searching for the next challenge, the next river to cross. Of course, they should have made more of the time that they had together, but as Elanore's ghost admitted at that Van Gogh café when she finally came to say good-bye, nothing could ever quite be the same.

Gustav stepped back from his canvas and studied it, eyes half-closed at first just to get the shape, then with a more appraising gaze. Yes, he told himself, and reminded himself to tell himself again later when he began to feel sick and miserable about it, this is a true work. This is worthwhile.

Then, and although there was much that he still had to do, and the oils were still wet, and he knew that he should rest the canvas, he swirled his brush in a blackish puddle of palette-mud and daubed the word NEVERMORE across the top, and stepped back again, wondering what to paint *next.*

* * * *

BICYCLE REPAIRMAN

Bruce Sterling

"Bicycle Repairman" appeared in the October/ November issue of Asimov's, *with an illustration by John Stevens, and went on to win a Hugo Award for its author in 1997. It was one of only a handful of stories Sterling has sold to* Asimov's *over the years, but each has been important to the magazine; Sterling's latest sale here, for instance, "Taklamakan," won the 1999 Locus Award, and is currently on the final Hugo ballot.*

Here he gives us a fascinating look at an ordinary day in the life of an ordinary working man in a high-tech future Utopia where everything is much the same as it is now—except for being completely dif-ferent, of course!

One of the most powerful and innovative new tal-ents to enter SF in recent years, a man with a rigor-ously wrought-out and aesthetically convincing vision of what the future may have in store for hu-manity, Bruce Sterling as yet may still be better known to the cognoscente than to the SF-reading population at large, in spite of a recent Hugo win. If you look behind the scenes, though, you will find him everywhere, and he had almost as much to do, as writer, critic, propagandist, aesthetic theorist, and tireless polemicist, with the shaping and evolution of SF in the eighties and nineties as Michael Moorcock did with the shaping of SF in the sixties; it is not for nothing that many of the other writers of the eighties and nineties refer to him, half ruefully, half admir-ingly, as "Chairman Bruce."

Sterling sold his first story in 1976. By the end of the eighties, he had established himself, with a series of stories set in his exotic "Shaper/Mechanist" fu-ture, with novels such as the complex and Stapeldonian Schismatrix *and the well-received* Islands in the Net *(as well as with his editing of the influential anthology* Mirrorshades: the Cyberpunk Anthology *and the infamous critical magazine* Cheap Truth), *as per-haps the prime driving force behind the revolutionary "Cyberpunk" movement in science fiction (rivaled for that title only by his friend and*

collaborator, Wil-liam Gibson), and also as one of the best new hard science writers to enter the field in some time. His other books include a critically acclaimed nonfiction study of First Amendment issues in the world of com-puter networking, The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier, *the novels* The Artificial Kid, Involution Ocean, Heavy Weather *and* Holy Fire, *a novel in collaboration with William Gib-son,* The Difference Engine, *and the landmark col-lections* Crystal Express *and* Globalhead. *His most recent books include the omnibus collection (it con-tains the novel* Schismatrix *as well as most of his Shaper/Mechanist stories)* Schismatrix Plus, *a new novel,* Distraction *and a new collection,* A Good Old-Fashioned Future. *He lives with his family in Austin, Texas.*

* * * *

Repeated tinny banging woke Lyle in his hammock. Lyle groaned, sat up, and slid free into the tool-crowded aisle of his bike shop.

Lyle hitched up the black elastic of his skintight shorts and plucked yesterday's grease-stained sleeveless off the workbench. He glanced blearily at his chronometer as he picked his way toward the door. It was 10:04.38 in the morning, June 27, 2037.

Lyle hopped over a stray can of primer and the floor boomed gently beneath his feet. With all the press of work, he'd collapsed into sleep without properly cleaning the shop. Doing custom enameling paid okay, but it ate up time like crazy. Working and living alone was wearing him out.

Lyle opened the shop door, revealing a long sheer drop to dusty tiling far below. Pigeons darted beneath the hull of his shop through a soot-stained hole in the broken atrium glass, and wheeled off to their rookery somewhere in the darkened guts of the high-rise.

More banging. Far below, a uniformed delivery kid stood by his cargo tricycle, yanking rhythmically at the long dangling string of Lyle's spot-welded doorknocker. Lyle waved, yawning. From his vantage point below the huge girders of the cavernous atrium, Lyle had a fine overview of three burnt-out interior levels of the old Tsatanuga Archiplat. Once-elegant handrails and battered pedestrian overlooks fronted on the great airy cavity of the atrium. Behind the handrails was a three-floor wilderness of jury-rigged lights, chicken coops, water tanks, and squatters' flags. The fire-damaged floors, walls, and ceilings were riddled with handmade descent-chutes, long coiling staircases, and rickety ladders.

Lyle took note of a crew of Chattanooga demolition workers in their yellow detox suits. The repair crew was deploying vacuum scrubbers and a high-pressure hose-off by the vandal-proofed western elevators of Floor 34. Two or three days a week, the city crew meandered into the damage zone to pretend to work, with a great hypocritical show of sawhorses and barrier tape. The lazy sons of bitches were all on the take.

Lyle thumbed the brake switches in their big metal box by the flywheel. The bike shop slithered, with a subtle hiss of cable-clamps, down three stories, to dock with a grating crunch onto four concrete-filled metal drums.

The delivery kid looked real familiar. He was in and out of the zone pretty often. Lyle had once done some custom work on the kid's cargo trike, new shocks and some granny-gearing as he recalled, but he couldn't remember the kid's name. Lyle was terrible with names. "What's up, zude?"

"Hard night, Lyle?"

"Just real busy."

The kid's nose wrinkled at the stench from the shop. "Doin' a lot of paint work, huh?" He glanced at his palmtop notepad. "You still taking deliveries for Edward Dertouzas?"

"Yeah. I guess so." Lyle rubbed the gear tattoo on one stubbled cheek. "If I have to."

The kid offered a stylus, reaching up. "Can you sign for him?"

Lyle folded his bare arms warily. "Naw, man, I can't sign for Deep Eddy. Eddy's in Europe somewhere. Eddy left months ago. Haven't seen Eddy in ages."

The delivery kid scratched his sweating head below his billed fabric cap. He turned to check for any possible sneak-ups by snatch-and-grab artists out of the squatter warrens. The government simply refused to do postal delivery on the Thirty-second, Thirty-third, and Thirty-fourth floors. You never saw many cops inside the zone, either. Except for the city demolition crew, about the only official functionaries who ever showed up in the zone were a few psychotically empathetic NAFTA social workers.

“I’ll get a bonus if you sign for this thing.” The kid gazed up in squint-eyed appeal. “It’s gotta be worth something, Lyle. It’s a really weird kind of routing, they paid a lot of money to send it just that way.”

Lyle crouched down in the open doorway. “Let’s have a look at it.”

The package was a heavy shockproof rectangle in heat-sealed plastic shrink-wrap, with a plethora of intra-European routing stickers. To judge by all the overlays, the package had been passed from postal system to postal system at least eight times before officially arriving in the legal custody of any human being. The return address, if there had ever been one, was completely obscured. Someplace in France, maybe.

Lyle held the box up two-handed to his ear and shook it. Hardware.

“You gonna sign, or not?”

“Yeah.” Lyle scratched illegibly at the little signature panel, then looked at the delivery trike. “You oughta get that front wheel trued.”

The kid shrugged. “Got anything to send out today?”

“Naw,” Lyle grumbled, “I’m not doing mail-order repair work anymore; it’s too complicated and I get ripped off too much.”

“Suit yourself.” The kid clambered into the recumbent seat of his trike and pedaled off across the heat-cracked ceramic tiles of the atrium *plaza.*

Lyle hung his hand-lettered OPEN FOR BUSINESS sign outside the door. He walked to his left, stamped up the pedaled lid of a jumbo garbage can, and dropped the package in with the rest of Dertouzas’s stuff.

The can’s lid wouldn’t close. Deep Eddy’s junk had finally reached critical mass. Deep Eddy never got much mail at the shop from other people, but he was always sending mail to himself. Big packets of encrypted diskettes were always arriving from Eddy’s road jaunts in Toulouse, Marseilles, Valencia, and Nice. And especially Barcelona. Eddy had sent enough gigabyte-age out of Barcelona to outfit a pirate data-haven.

Eddy used Lyle’s bike shop as his safety-deposit box. This arrangement was okay by Lyle. He owed Eddy; Eddy had installed the

phones and virching in the bike shop, and had also wangled the shop's electrical hookup. A thick elastic curly-cable snaked out the access-crawlspace of Floor 35, right through the ceiling of Floor 34, and directly through a ragged punch-hole in the aluminum roof of Lyle's cable-mounted mobile home. Some unknown contact of Eddy's was paying the real bills on that electrical feed. Lyle cheerfully covered the expenses by paying cash into an anonymous post-office box. The setup was a rare and valuable contact with the world of organized authority.

During his stays in the shop, Eddy had spent much of his time buried in marathon long-distance virtuality sessions, swaddled head to foot in lumpy strap-on gear. Eddy had been painfully involved with some older woman in Germany. A virtual romance in its full-scale thumping, heaving, grappling progress, was an embarrassment to witness. Under the circumstances, Lyle wasn't too surprised that Eddy had left his parents' condo to set up in a squat.

Eddy had lived in the bicycle repair shop, off and on, for almost a year. It had been a good deal for Lyle, because Deep Eddy had enjoyed a certain clout and prestige with the local squatters. Eddy had been a major organizer of the legendary Chattanooga Wende of December '35, a monster street-party that had climaxed in a spectacular looting-and-arson rampage that had torched the three floors of the Archiplat.

Lyle had gone to school with Eddy and had known him for years; they'd grown up together in the Archiplat. Eddy Dertouzas was a deep zude for a kid his age, with political contacts and heavy-duty network connections. The squat had been a good deal for both of them, until Eddy had finally coaxed the German woman into coming through for him in real life. Then Eddy had jumped the next plane to Europe.

Since they'd parted friends, Eddy was welcome to mail his European data-junk to the bike shop. After all, the disks were heavily encrypted, so it wasn't as if anybody in authority was ever gonna be able to read them. Storing a few thousand disks was a minor challenge, compared to Eddy's complex, machine-assisted love life.

After Eddy's sudden departure, Lyle had sold Eddy's possessions, and wired the money to Eddy in Spain. Lyle had kept the screen TV, Eddy's mediator, and the cheaper virching helmet. The way Lyle figured it -- the way he remembered the deal -- any stray hardware of Eddy's in the shop was rightfully his, for disposal at his own discretion. By now it was pretty clear that Deep Eddy Dertouzas was never coming back to Tennessee.

And Lyle had certain debts.

Lyle snicked the blade from a roadkit multitool and cut open Eddy's package. It contained, of all things, a television cable settop box. A laughable infobahn antique. You'd never see a cablebox like that in NAFTA; this was the sort of primeval junk one might find in the home of a semiliterate Basque grandmother, or maybe in the armed bunker of some backward Albanian.

Lyle tossed the archaic cablebox onto the beanbag in front of the wallscreen. No time now for irrelevant media toys; he had to get on with real life. Lyle ducked into the tiny curtained privy and urinated at length into a crockery jar. He scraped his teeth with a flossing spudger and misted some fresh water onto his face and hands. He wiped clean with a towelette, then smeared his armpits, crotch, and feet with deodorant.

Back when he'd lived with his mom up on Floor 41, Lyle had used old-fashioned antiseptic deodorants. Lyle had wised up about a lot of things once he'd escaped his mom's condo. Nowadays, Lyle used a gel roll-on of skin-friendly bacteria that greedily devoured human sweat and exuded as their metabolic by-product a pleasantly harmless reek rather like ripe bananas. Life was a lot easier when you came to proper terms with your microscopic flora.

Back at his workbench, Lyle plugged in the hot plate and boiled some Thai noodles with flaked sardines. He packed down breakfast with 400 cc's of Dr. Breasaire's Bioactive Bowel Putty. Then he checked last night's enamel job on the clamped frame in the workstand. The frame looked good. At three in the morning, Lyle was able to get into painted detail work with just the right kind of hallucinatory clarity.

Enameling paid well, and he needed the money bad. But this wasn't real bike work. It lacked authenticity. Enameling was all about the owner's ego -- that was what really stank about enameling. There were a few rich kids up in the penthouse levels who were way into "street aesthetic," and would pay good money to have some treadhead decorate their machine. But flash art didn't help the bike. What helped the bike was frame alignment and sound cable-housings and proper tension in the derailleurs.

Lyle fitted the chain of his stationary bike to the shop's flywheel, straddled up, strapped on his gloves and virching helmet, and did half an hour on the 2033 Tour de France. He stayed back in the pack for the uphill grind, and then, for three glorious minutes, he broke free from the

domestiques in the peloton and came right up at the shoulder of Aldo Cipollini. The champion was a monster, posthuman. Calves like cinderblocks. Even in a cheap simulation with no full-impact bodysuit, Lyle knew better than to try to take Cipollini.

Lyle devirched, checked his heart-rate record on the chronometer, then dismounted from his stationary trainer and drained a half-liter squeezebottle of antioxidant carbo refresher. Life had been easier when he'd had a partner in crime. The shop's flywheel was slowly losing its storage of inertia power these days, with just one zude pumping it.

Lyle's disastrous second roommate had come from the biking crowd. She was a criterium racer from Kentucky named Brigitte Rohannon. Lyle himself had been a wannabe criterium racer for a while, before he'd blown out a kidney on steroids. He hadn't expected any trouble from Brigitte, because Brigitte knew about bikes, and she needed his technical help for her racer, and she wouldn't mind pumping the flywheel, and besides, Brigitte was lesbian. In the training gym and out at racing events, Brigitte came across as a quiet and disciplined little politicized treadhead person.

Life inside the zone, though, massively fertilized Brigitte's eccentricities. First, she started breaking training. Then she stopped eating right. Pretty soon the shop was creaking and rocking with all-night girl-on-girl hot-oil sessions, which degenerated into hooting pill-orgies with heavily tattooed zone chyx who played klaxonized bongo music and beat each other up, and stole Lyle's tools. It had been a big relief when Brigitte finally left the zone to shack up with some well-to-do admirer on Floor 37. The debacle had left Lyle's tenuous finances in ruin.

Lyle laid down a new tracery of scarlet enamel on the bike's chainstay, seat post and stem. He had to wait for the work to cure, so he left the workbench, picked up Eddy's settopper and popped the shell with a hexkey. Lyle was no electrician, but the insides looked harmless enough: lots of bit-eating caterpillars and cheap Algerian silicon.

He flicked on Eddy's mediator, to boot the wallscreen. Before he could try anything with the cable-box, his mother's mook pounced upon the screen. On Eddy's giant wallscreen, the mook's waxy, computer-generated face looked like a plump satin pillowcase. Its bowtie was as big as a racing shoe.

"Please hold for an incoming vidcall from Andrea Schweik of Carnac Instruments," the mook uttered unctuously.

Lyle cordially despised all low-down, phone-tagging, artificially intelligent mooks. For a while, in his teenage years, Lyle himself had owned a mook, an off-the-shelf shareware job that he'd installed in the condo's phone. Like most mooks, Lyle's mook had one primary role: dealing with unsolicited phone calls from other people's mooks. In Lyle's case these were the creepy mooks of career counselors, school psychiatrists, truancy cops, and other official hindrances. When Lyle's mook launched and ran, it appeared online as a sly warty dwarf that drooled green ichor and talked in a basso grumble.

But Lyle hadn't given his mook the properly meticulous care and debugging that such fragile little constructs demanded, and eventually his cheap mook had collapsed into artificial insanity.

Once Lyle had escaped his mom's place to the squat, he had gone for the low-tech gambit and simply left his phone unplugged most of the time. But that was no real solution. He couldn't hide from his mother's capable and well-financed corporate mook, which watched with sleepless mechanical patience for the least flicker of video dialtone off Lyle's number.

Lyle sighed and wiped the dust from the video nozzle on Eddy's mediator.

"Your mother is coming online right away," the mook assured him.

"Yeah, sure," Lyle muttered, smearing his hair into some semblance of order.

"She specifically instructed me to page her remotely at any time for an immediate response. She really wants to chat with you, Lyle."

"That's just great." Lyle couldn't remember what his mother's mook called itself. "Mr. Billy," or "Mr. Ripley," or something else really stupid ...

"Did you know that Marco Cengialta has just won the Liege Summer Classic?"

Lyle blinked and sat up in the beanbag. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Cengialta used a three-spoked ceramic wheel with internal liquid weighting and buckyball hub-shocks." The mook paused, politely awaiting a

possible conversational response. “He wore breathe-thru kevlar microlock cleatshoes,” it added.

Lyle hated the way a mook cataloged your personal interests and then generated relevant conversation. The machine-made intercourse was completely unhuman and yet perversely interesting, like being grabbed and buttonholed by a glossy magazine ad. It had probably taken his mother’s mook all of three seconds to snag and download every conceivable statistic about the summer race in Liege.

His mother came on. She’d caught him during lunch in her office. “Lyle?”

“Hi, Mom.” Lyle sternly reminded himself that this was the one person in the world who might conceivably put up bail for him. “What’s on your mind?”

“Oh, nothing much, just the usual.” Lyle’s mother shoved aside her platter of sprouts and tilapia. “I was idly wondering if you were still alive.”

“Mom, it’s a lot less dangerous in a squat than landlords and cops would have you believe. I’m perfectly fine. You can see that for yourself.”

His mother lifted a pair of secretarial half-spex on a neck-chain, and gave Lyle the computer-assisted onceover.

Lyle pointed the mediator’s lens at the shop’s aluminum door. “See over there, Mom? I got myself a shock-baton in here. If I get any trouble from anybody, I’ll just yank that club off the doormount and give the guy fifteen thousand volts!”

“Is that legal, Lyle?”

“Sure. The voltage won’t kill you or anything, it just knocks you out a good long time. I traded a good bike for that shock-baton, it’s got a lot of useful defensive features.”

“That sounds really dreadful.”

“The baton’s harmless, Mom. You should see what the cops carry nowadays.”

“Are you still taking those injections, Lyle?”

“Which injections?”

She frowned. “You know which ones.”

Lyle shrugged. “The treatments are perfectly safe. They’re a lot safer than a lifestyle of cruising for dates, that’s for sure.”

“Especially dates with the kind of girls who live down there in the riot zone, I suppose.” His mother winced. “I had some hopes when you took up with that nice bike-racer girl. Brigitte, wasn’t it? Whatever happened to her?”

Lyle shook his head. “Someone with your gender and background oughta understand how important the treatments are, Mom. It’s a basic reproductive-freedom issue. Antilibidinals give you real freedom, freedom from the urge to reproduce. You should be glad I’m not sexually involved.”

“I don’t mind that you’re not involved, Lyle, it’s just that it seems like a real cheat that you’re not even *interested.*”

“But, Mom, nobody’s interested in me, either. Nobody. No woman is banging at my door to have sex with a self-employed fanatical dropout bike mechanic who lives in a slum. If that ever happens, you’ll be the first to know.”

Lyle grinned cheerfully into the lens. “I had girlfriends back when I was in racing. I’ve been there, Mom. I’ve done that. Unless you’re coked to the gills with hormones, sex is a major waste of your time and attention. Sexual Deliberation is the greatest civil-liberties movement of modern times.”

“That’s really weird, Lyle. It’s just not natural.”

“Mom, forgive me, but you’re not the one to talk about natural, okay? You grew me from a zygote when you were fifty-five.” He shrugged. “I’m too busy for romance now. I just want to learn about bikes.”

“You were working with bikes when you lived here with me. You had a real job and a safe home where you could take regular showers.”

“Sure, I was working, but I never said I wanted a *job,* Mom. I said I wanted to *learn about bikes.* There’s a big difference! I can’t be a loser

wage-slave for some lousy bike franchise.”

His mother said nothing.

“Mom, I’m not asking you for any favors. I don’t need any bosses, or any teachers, or any landlords, or any cops. It’s just me and my bike work down here. I know that people in authority can’t stand it that a twenty-four-year-old man lives an independent life and does exactly what he wants, but I’m being very quiet and discreet about it, so nobody needs to bother about me.”

His mother sighed, defeated. “Are you eating properly, Lyle? You look peaked.”

Lyle lifted his calf muscle into camera range. “Look at this leg! Does that look like the gastrocnemius of a weak and sickly person?”

“Could you come up to the condo and have a decent meal with me sometime?”

Lyle blinked. “When?”

“Wednesday, maybe? We could have pork chops.”

“Maybe, Mom. Probably. I’ll have to check. I’ll get back to you, okay? Bye.” Lyle hung up.

Hooking the mediator’s cable to the primitive settop box was a problem, but Lyle was not one to be stymied by a merely mechanical challenge. The enamel job had to wait as he resorted to miniclamps and a cable cutter. It was a handy thing that working with modern brake cabling had taught him how to splice fiber optics.

When the settop box finally came online, its array of services was a joke. Any decent modern mediator could navigate through vast information spaces, but the settop box offered nothing but “channels.” Lyle had forgotten that you could even obtain old-fashioned “channels” from the city fiber-feed in Chattanooga. But these channels were government-sponsored media, and the government was always quite a ways behind the curve in network development. Chattanooga’s huge fiber-bandwidth still carried the ancient government-mandated “public access channels,” spooling away in their technically fossilized obscurity, far below the usual gaudy carnival of popular virching, infobahnage,

demo-splintered comboards, public-service rants, mudtrufflage, rem-snorkeling, and commercials.

The little settop box accessed nothing but political channels. Three of them: Legislative, Judicial, and Executive. And that was the sum total, apparently. A settop box that offered nothing but NAFTA political coverage. On the Legislative Channel there was some kind of parliamentary debate on proper land use in Manitoba. On the Judicial Channel, a lawyer was haranguing judges about the stock market for air-pollution rights. On the Executive Channel, a big crowd of hicks were idly standing around on windblown tarmac somewhere in Louisiana waiting for something to happen.

The box didn't offer any glimpse of politics in Europe or the Sphere or the South. There were no hotspots or pips or index tagging. You couldn't look stuff up or annotate it -- you just had to passively watch whatever the channel's masters chose to show you, whenever they chose to show it. This media setup was so insultingly lame and halt and primitive that it was almost perversely interesting. Kind of like peering through keyholes.

Lyle left the box on the Executive Channel, because it looked conceivable that something might actually happen there. It had swiftly become clear to him that the intolerably monotonous fodder on the other two channels was about as exciting as those channels ever got. Lyle retreated to his workbench and got back to enamel work.

At length, the President of NAFTA arrived and decamped from his helicopter on the tarmac in Louisiana. A swarm of presidential bodyguards materialized out of the expectant crowd, looking simultaneously extremely busy and icily unperturbable.

Suddenly a line of text flickered up at the bottom of the screen. The text was set in a very old-fashioned computer font, chalk-white letters with little visible jagged pixel-edges. *"Look at him hunting for that camera mark,"* the subtitle read as it scrolled across the screen. *"Why wasn't he briefed properly? He looks like a stray dog!"*

The President meandered amiably across the sun-blistered tarmac, gazing from side to side, and then stopped briefly to shake the eager outstretched hand of a local politician. *"That must have hurt,"* commented the text. *"That Cajun dolt is poison in the polls."* The President chatted amiably with the local politician and an elderly harridan in a purple dress who seemed to be the man's wife. *"Get him away from those losers!"*

raged the subtitle. *“Get the Man up to the podium, for the love of Mike! Where’s the Chief of Staff? Doped up on so-called smart drugs as usual? Get with your jobs, people!”*

The President looked well. Lyle had noticed that the President of NAFTA always looked well, it seemed to be a professional requirement. The big political cheeses in Europe always looked somber and intellectual, and the Sphere people always looked humble and dedicated, and the South people always looked angry and fanatical, but the NAFTA prez always looked like he’d just done a few laps in a pool and had a brisk rubdown. His large, glossy, bluffly cheerful face was discreetly stenciled with tattoos: both cheeks, a chorus line of tats on his forehead above both eyebrows, plus a few extra logos on his rocklike chin. A President’s face was the ultimate billboard for major backers and interest groups.

“Does he think we have all day?” the text demanded. *“What’s with this dead air time? Can’t anyone properly arrange a media event these days? You call this public access? You call this informing the electorate? If we’d known the infobahn would come to this, we’d have never built the thing!”*

The President meandered amiably to a podium covered with ceremonial microphones. Lyle had noticed that politicians always used a big healthy cluster of traditional big fat microphones, even though nowadays you could build working microphones the size of a grain of rice.

“Hey, how y’all?” asked the President, grinning.

The crowd chorused back at him, with ragged enthusiasm.

“Let these fine folks up a bit closer,” the President ordered suddenly, waving airily at his phalanx of bodyguards. “Y’all come on up closer, everybody! Sit right on the ground, we’re all just folks here today.” The President smiled benignly as the sweating, straw-hatted summer crowd hustled up to join him, scarcely believing their luck.

“Marietta and I just had a heck of a fine lunch down in Opelousas,” commented the President, patting his flat, muscular belly. He deserted the fiction of his official podium to energetically press the Louisianan flesh. As he moved from hand to grasping hand, his every word was picked up infallibly by an invisible mike, probably implanted in one of his molars. “We had dirty rice, red beans -- were they hot! -- and crawdads big enough to body-slam a Maine lobster!” He chuckled. “What a sight them mudbugs

were! Can y'all believe that?"

The President's guards were unobtrusively but methodically working the crowd with portable detectors and sophisticated spex equipment. They didn't look very concerned by the President's supposed change in routine.

"I see he's gonna run with the usual genetics malarkey," commented the subtitle.

"Y'all have got a perfect right to be mighty proud of the agriculture in this state," intoned the President. "Y'all's agro-science know-how is second to none! Sure, I know there's a few pointy-headed Luddites up in the snowbelt, who say they prefer their crawdads dinky."

Everyone laughed.

"Folks, I got nothin' against that attitude. If some jasper wants to spend his hard-earned money buyin' and peelin' and shuckin' those little dinky ones, that's all right by me and Marietta. Ain't that right, honey?"

The First Lady smiled and waved one power-gloved hand.

"But folks, you and I both know that those whiners who waste our time complaining about 'natural food' have never sucked a mudbug head in their lives! 'Natural,' my left elbow! Who are they tryin' to kid? Just 'cause you're country, don't mean you can't hack DNA!"

"He's been working really hard on the regional accents," commented the text. *"Not bad for a guy from Minnesota. But look at that sloppy, incompetent camera work! Doesn't anybody care anymore? What on earth is happening to our standards?"*

By lunchtime, Lyle had the final coat down on the enameling job. He ate a bowl of triticale mush and chewed up a mineral-rich handful of iodized sponge.

Then he settled down in front of the wallscreen to work on the inertia brake. Lyle knew there was big money in the inertia brake -- for somebody, somewhere, sometime. The device smelled like the future.

Lyle tucked a jeweler's loupe in one eye and toyed methodically with the brake. He loved the way the piezoplastic clamp and rim transmuted braking energy into electrical battery storage. At last, a way to capture the

energy you lost in braking and put it to solid use. It was almost, but not quite, magical.

The way Lyle figured it, there was gonna be a big market someday for an inertia brake that captured energy and then fed it back through the chaindrive in a way that just felt like human pedaling energy, in a direct and intuitive and muscular way, not chunky and buzzy like some loser battery-powered moped. If the system worked out right, it would make the rider feel completely natural and yet subtly superhuman at the same time. And it had to be simple, the kind of system a shop guy could fix with hand tools. It wouldn't work if it was too brittle and fancy, it just wouldn't feel like an authentic bike.

Lyle had a lot of ideas about the design. He was pretty sure he could get a real grip on the problem, if only he weren't being worked to death just keeping the shop going. If he could get enough capital together to assemble the prototypes and do some serious field tests. It would have to be chip-driven, of course, but true to the biking spirit at the same time. A lot of bikes had chips in them nowadays, in the shocks or the braking or in reactive hubs, but bicycles simply weren't like computers. Computers were black boxes inside, no big visible working parts. People, by contrast, got sentimental about their bike gear. People were strangely reticent and traditional about bikes. That's why the bike market had never really gone for recumbents, even though the recumbent design had a big mechanical advantage. People didn't like their bikes too complicated. They didn't want bicycles to bitch and complain and whine for attention and constant upgrading the way that computers did. Bikes were too personal. People wanted their bikes to wear.

Someone banged at the shop door. Lyle opened it. Down on the tiling by the barrels stood a tall brunette woman in stretch shorts, with a short-sleeve blue pull-over and a ponytail. She had a bike under one arm, an old lacquer-and-paper-framed Taiwanese job. "Are you Edward Dertouzas?" she said, gazing up at him.

"No," Lyle said patiently. "Eddy's in Europe."

She thought this over. "I'm new in the zone," she confessed. "Can you fix this bike for me? I just bought it secondhand and I think it kinda needs some work."

"Sure," Lyle said. "You came to the right guy for that job, ma'am, because Eddy Dertouzas couldn't fix a bike for hell. Eddy just used to live

here. I'm the guy who actually owns this shop. Hand the bike up."

Lyle crouched down, got a grip on the handlebar stem and hauled the bike into the shop. The woman gazed up at him respectfully. "What's your name?"

"Lyle Schweik."

"I'm Kitty Casaday." She hesitated. "Could I come up inside there?"

Lyle reached down, gripped her muscular wrist, and hauled her up into the shop. She wasn't all that good looking, but she was in really good shape -- like a mountain biker or triathlon runner. She looked about thirty-five. It was hard to tell, exactly. Once people got into cosmetic surgery and serious bio-maintenance, it got pretty hard to judge their age. Unless you got a good, close medical exam of their eyelids and cuticles and internal membranes and such.

She looked around the shop with great interest, brown ponytail twitching. "Where you hail from?" Lyle asked her. He had already forgotten her name.

"Well, I'm originally from Juneau, Alaska."

"Canadian, huh? Great. Welcome to Tennessee."

"Actually, Alaska used to be part of the United States."

"You're kidding," Lyle said. "Hey, I'm no historian, but I've seen Alaska on a map before."

"You've got a whole working shop and everything built inside this old place! That's really something, Mr. Schweik. What's behind that curtain?"

"The spare room," Lyle said. "That's where my roommate used to stay."

She glanced up. "Dertouzas?"

"Yeah, him."

"Who's in there now?"

“Nobody,” Lyle said sadly. “I got some storage stuff in there.”

She nodded slowly, and kept looking around, apparently galvanized with curiosity. “What are you running on that screen?”

“Hard to say, really,” Lyle said. He crossed the room, bent down and switched off the settop box. “Some kind of weird political crap.”

He began examining her bike. All its serial numbers had been removed. Typical zone bike.

“The first thing we got to do,” he said briskly, “is fit it to you properly: set the saddle height, pedal stroke, and handlebars. Then I’ll adjust the tension, true the wheels, check the brakepads and suspension valves, tune the shifting, and lubricate the drive-train. The usual. You’re gonna need a better saddle than this -- this saddle’s for a male pelvis.” He looked up. “ You got a charge card?”

She nodded, then frowned. “But I don’t have much credit left.”

“No problem.” He flipped open a dog-eared catalog. “This is what you need. Any halfway decent gel-saddle. Pick one you like, and we can have it shipped in by tomorrow morning. And then” -- he flipped pages -- “ order me one of these.”

She stepped closer and examined the page. “The ‘cotterless crank-bolt ceramic wrench set,’ is that it?”

“That’s right. I fix your bike, you give me those tools, and we’re even. ”

“Okay. Sure. That’s cheap!” She smiled at him. “I like the way you do business, Lyle.”

“You’ll get used to barter, if you stay in the zone long enough.”

“I’ve never lived in a squat before,” she said thoughtfully. “I like the attitude here, but people say that squats are pretty dangerous.”

“I dunno about the squats in other towns, but Chattanooga squats aren’t dangerous, unless you think anarchists are dangerous, and anarchists aren’t dangerous unless they’re really drunk.” Lyle shrugged. “ People will steal your stuff all the time, that’s about the worst part. There’s

a couple of tough guys around here who claim they have handguns. I never saw anybody actually use a handgun. Old guns aren't hard to find, but it takes a real chemist to make working ammo nowadays." He smiled back at her. "Anyway, you look to me like you can take care of yourself."

"I take dance classes."

Lyle nodded. He opened a drawer and pulled a tape measure.

"I saw all those cables and pulleys you have on top of this place. You can pull the whole building right up off the ground, huh? Kind of hang it right off the ceiling up there."

"That's right, it saves a lot of trouble with people breaking and entering." Lyle glanced at his shock-baton, in its mounting at the door. She followed his gaze to the weapon and then looked at him, impressed.

Lyle measured her arms, torso length, then knelt and measured her inseam from crotch to floor. He took notes. "Okay," he said. "Come by tomorrow afternoon."

"Lyle?"

"Yeah?" He stood up.

"Do you rent this place out? I really need a safe place to stay in the zone."

"I'm sorry," Lyle said politely, "but I hate landlords and I'd never be one. What I need is a roommate who can really get behind the whole concept of my shop. Someone who's qualified, you know, to develop my infrastructure or do bicycle work. Anyway, if I took your cash or charged you for rent, then the tax people would just have another excuse to harass me."

"Sure, okay, but ... " She paused, then looked at him under lowered eyelids. "I've gotta be a lot better than having this place go empty."

Lyle stared at her, astonished.

"I'm a pretty useful woman to have around, Lyle. Nobody's ever complained before."

"Really?"

“That’s right.” She stared at him boldly.

“I’ll think about your offer,” Lyle said. “What did you say your name was?”

“I’m Kitty. Kitty Casaday.”

“Kitty, I got a whole lot of work to do today, but I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay, Lyle.” She smiled. “You think about me, all right?”

Lyle helped her down out of the shop. He watched her stride away across the atrium until she vanished through the crowded doorway of the Crowbar, a squat coffeeshop. Then he called his mother.

“Did you forget something?” his mother said, looking up from her workscreen.

“Mom, I know this is really hard to believe, but a strange woman just banged on my door and offered to have sex with me.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“In exchange for room and board, I think. Anyway, I said you’d be the first to know if it happened.”

“Lyle -- “ His mother hesitated. “Lyle, I think you better come right home. Let’s make that dinner date for tonight, okay? We’ll have a little talk about this situation.”

“Yeah, okay. I got an enameling job I gotta deliver to Floor 41, anyway.”

“I don’t have a positive feeling about this development, Lyle.”

“That’s okay, Mom. I’ll see you tonight.”

Lyle reassembled the newly enameled bike. Then he set the flywheel onto remote, and stepped outside the shop. He mounted the bike, and touched a password into the remote control. The shop faithfully reeled itself far out of reach and hung there in space below the fire-blackened ceiling,

swaying gently.

Lyle pedaled away, back toward the elevators, back toward the neighborhood where he'd grown up.

He delivered the bike to the delighted young idiot who'd commissioned it, stuffed the cash in his shoes, and then went down to his mother's. He took a shower, shaved, and shampooed thoroughly. They had pork chops and grits and got drunk together. His mother complained about the breakup with her third husband and wept bitterly, but not as much as usual when this topic came up. Lyle got the strong impression she was thoroughly on the mend and would be angling for number four in pretty short order.

Around midnight, Lyle refused his mother's ritual offers of new clothes and fresh leftovers, and headed back down to the zone. He was still a little clubfooted from his mother's sherry, and he stood breathing beside the broken glass of the atrium wall, gazing out at the city-smeared summer stars. The cavernous darkness inside the zone at night was one of his favorite things about the place. The queasy 24-hour security lighting in the rest of the Archiplat had never been rebuilt inside the zone.

The zone always got livelier at night when all the normal people started sneaking in to cruise the zone's unlicensed dives and nightspots, but all that activity took place behind discreetly closed doors. Enticing squiggles of red and blue chemglow here and there only enhanced the blessed unnatural gloom.

Lyle pulled his remote control and ordered the shop back down.

The door of the shop had been broken open.

Lyle's latest bike-repair client lay sprawled on the floor of the shop, unconscious. She was wearing black military fatigues, a knit cap, and rappelling gear.

She had begun her break-in at Lyle's establishment by pulling his shock-baton out of its glowing security socket beside the doorframe. The booby-trapped baton had immediately put fifteen thousand volts through her, and sprayed her face with a potent mix of dye and street-legal incapacitants.

Lyle turned the baton off with the remote control, and then placed it carefully back in its socket. His surprise guest was still breathing, but was

clearly in real metabolic distress. He tried clearing her nose and mouth with a tissue. The guys who'd sold him the baton hadn't been kidding about the "indelible" part. Her face and throat were drenched with green and her chest looked like a spin-painting.

Her elaborate combat spex had partially shielded her eyes. With the spex off she looked like a viridian-green raccoon.

Lyle tried stripping her gear off in conventional fashion, realized this wasn't going to work, and got a pair of metal-shears from the shop. He snipped his way through the eerily writhing power-gloves and the kevlar laces of the pneumoreactive combat boots. Her black turtleneck had an abrasive surface and a cuirass over chest and back that looked like it could stop small-arms fire.

The trousers had nineteen separate pockets and they were loaded with all kinds of eerie little items: a matte-black electrode stun-weapon, flash capsules, fingerprint dust, a utility pocket-knife, drug adhesives, plastic handcuffs, some pocket change, worry beads, a comb, and a makeup case.

Close inspection revealed a pair of tiny microphone amplifiers inserted in her ear canals. Lyle fetched the tiny devices out with needlenose pliers. Lyle was getting pretty seriously concerned by this point. He shackled her arms and legs with bike security cable, in case she regained consciousness and attempted something superhuman.

Around four in the morning she had a coughing fit and began shivering violently. Summer nights could get pretty cold in the shop. Lyle thought over the design problem for some time, and then fetched a big heat-reflective blanket out of the empty room. He cut a neat poncho-hole in the center of it, and slipped her head through it. He got the bike cables off her -- she could probably slip the cables anyway -- and sewed ail four edges of the blanket shut from the outside, with sturdy monofilament thread from his saddle-stitcher. He sewed the poncho edges to a tough fabric belt, cinched the belt snugly around her neck, and padlocked it. When he was done, he'd made a snug bag that contained her entire body, except for her head, which had begun to drool and snore.

A fat blob of superglue on the bottom of the bag kept her anchored to the shop's floor. The blanket was cheap but tough upholstery fabric. If she could rip her way through blanket fabric with her fingernails alone, then he was probably a goner anyway. By now, Lyle was tired and stone sober. He had a squeezebottle of glucose rehydrator, three aspirins, and a canned

chocolate pudding. Then he climbed in his hammock and went to sleep.

Lyle woke up around ten. His captive was sitting up inside the bag, her green face stony, eyes red-rimmed and brown hair caked with dye. Lyle got up, dressed, ate breakfast, and fixed the broken door-lock. He said nothing, partly because he thought that silence would shake her up, but mostly because he couldn't remember her name. He was almost sure it wasn't her real name anyway.

When he'd finished fixing the door, he reeled up the string of the doorknocker so that it was far out of reach. He figured the two of them needed the privacy.

Then Lyle deliberately fired up the wallscreen and turned on the settop box. As soon as the peculiar subtitles started showing up again, she grew agitated. "Who are you really?" she demanded at last.

"Ma'am, I'm a bicycle repairman."

She snorted.

"I guess I don't need to know your name," he said, "but I need to know who your people are, and why they sent you here, and what I've got to do to get out of this situation."

"You're not off to a good start, mister."

"No," he said, "maybe not, but you're the one who's blown it. I'm just a twenty-four-year-old bicycle repairman from Tennessee. But you, you've got enough specialized gear on you to buy my whole place five times over."

He flipped open the little mirror in her makeup case and showed her her own face. Her scowl grew a little stiffer below the spattering of green.

"I want you to tell me what's going on here," he said.

"Forget it."

"If you're waiting for your backup to come rescue you, I don't think they're coming," Lyle said. "I searched you very thoroughly and I've opened up every single little gadget you had, and I took all the batteries out. I'm not even sure what some of those things are or how they work, but hey, I know what a battery is. It's been hours now. So I don't think your backup

people even know where you are."

She said nothing.

"See," he said, "you've really blown it bad. You got caught by a total amateur, and now you're in a hostage situation that could go on indefinitely. I got enough water and noodles and sardines to live up here for days. I dunno, maybe you can make a cellular phone-call to God off some gizmo implanted in your thighbone, but it looks to me like you've got serious problems."

She shuffled around a bit inside the bag and looked away.

"It's got something to do with the cablebox over there, right?"

She said nothing.

"For what it's worth, I don't think that box has anything to do with me or Eddy Dertouzas," Lyle said. "I think it was probably meant for Eddy, but I don't think he asked anybody for it. Somebody just wanted him to have it, probably one of his weird European contacts. Eddy used to be in this political group called CAPCLUG, ever heard of them?"

It looked pretty obvious that she'd heard of them.

"I never liked 'em much either," Lyle told her. "They kind of snagged me at first with their big talk about freedom and civil liberties, but then you'd go to a CAPCLUG meeting up in the penthouse levels, and there were all these potbellied zudes in spex yapping off stuff like, 'We must follow the technological imperatives or be jettisoned into the history dump-file.' They're a bunch of useless blowhards who can't tie their own shoes."

"They're dangerous radicals subverting national sovereignty."

Lyle blinked cautiously. "Whose national sovereignty would that be?"

"Yours, mine, Mr. Schweik. I'm from NAFTA, I'm a federal agent."

"You're a fed? How come you're breaking into people's houses, then? Isn't that against the Fourth Amendment or something?"

"If you mean the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, that document was superseded years ago."

“Yeah ... okay, I guess you’re right.” Lyle shrugged. “I missed a lot of civics classes ... No skin off my back anyway. I’m sorry, but what did you say your name was?”

“I said my name was Kitty Casaday.”

“Right. Kitty. Okay, Kitty, just you and me, person to person. We obviously have a mutual problem here. What do you think I ought to do in this situation? I mean, speaking practically.”

Kitty thought it over, surprised. “Mr. Schweik, you should release me immediately, get me my gear, and give me the box and any related data, recordings, or diskettes. Then you should escort me from the Archiplat in some confidential fashion so I won’t be stopped by police and questioned about the dye-stains. A new set of clothes would be very useful.”

“Like that, huh?”

“That’s your wisest course of action.” Her eyes narrowed. “I can’t make any promises, but it might affect your future treatment very favorably.”

“You’re not gonna tell me who you are, or where you came from, or who sent you, or what this is all about?”

“No. Under no circumstances. I’m not allowed to reveal that. You don’t need to know. You’re not supposed to know. And anyway, if you’re really what you say you are, what should you care?”

“Plenty. I care plenty. I can’t wander around the rest of my life wondering when you’re going to jump me out of a dark corner.”

“If I’d wanted to hurt you, I’d have hurt you when we first met, Mr. Schweik. There was no one here but you and me, and I could have easily incapacitated you and taken anything I wanted. Just give me the box and the data and stop trying to interrogate me.”

“Suppose you found me breaking into your house, Kitty? What would you do to me?”

She said nothing.

“What you’re telling me isn’t gonna work. If you don’t tell me what’s

really going on here," Lyle said heavily, "I'm gonna have to get tough."

Her lips thinned in contempt.

"Okay, you asked for this." Lyle opened the mediator and made a quick voice call. "Pete?"

"Nah, this is Pete's mook," the phone replied. "Can I do something for you?"

"Could you tell Pete that Lyle Schweik has some big trouble, and I need him to come over to my bike shop immediately? And bring some heavy muscle from the Spiders."

"What kind of big trouble, Lyle?"

"Authority trouble. A lot of it. I can't say any more. I think this line may be tapped."

"Right-o. I'll make that happen. Hoo-ah, zude." The mook hung up.

Lyle left the beanbag and went back to the workbench. He took Kitty's cheap bike out of the repair stand and angrily threw it aside.

"You know what really bugs me?" he said at last. "You couldn't even bother to charm your way in here, set yourself up as my roommate, and then steal the damn box. You didn't even respect me that much. Heck, you didn't even have to steal anything, Kitty. You could have just smiled and asked nicely and I'd have given you the box to play with. I don't watch media, I hate all that crap."

"It was an emergency. There was no time for more extensive investigation or reconnaissance. I think you should call your gangster friends immediately and tell them you've made a mistake. Tell them not to come here."

"You're ready to talk seriously?"

"No, I won't be talking."

"Okay, we'll see."

After twenty minutes, Lyle's phone rang. He answered it cautiously, keeping the video off. It was Pete from the City Spiders. "Zude, where is

your doorknocker?”

“Oh, sorry, I pulled it up, didn’t want to be disturbed. I’ll bring the shop right down.” Lyle thumbed the brake switches.

Lyle opened the door and Pete broad-jumped into the shop. Pete was a big man but he had the skeletal, wiry build of a climber, bare dark arms and shins and big sticky-toed jumping shoes. He had a sleeveless leather bodysuit full of clips and snaps, and he carried a big fabric shoulderbag. There were six vivid tattoos on the dark skin of his left cheek, under the black stubble.

Pete looked at Kitty, lifted his spex with wiry callused fingers, looked at her again bare-eyed, and put the spex back in place.

“Wow, Lyle.”

“Yeah.”

“I never thought you were into anything this sick and twisted.”

“It’s a serious matter, Pete.”

Pete turned to the door, crouched down, and hauled a second person into the shop. She wore a beat-up air-conditioned jacket and long slacks and zipsided boots and wire-rimmed spex. She had short ratty hair under a green cloche hat. “Hi,” she said, sticking out a hand. “I’m Mabel. We haven’t met.”

“I’m Lyle.” Lyle gestured. “This is Kitty here in the bag.”

“You said you needed somebody heavy, so I brought Mabel along,” said Pete. “Mabel’s a social worker.”

“Looks like you pretty much got things under control here,” said Mabel liltingly, scratching her neck and looking about the place. “What happened? She break into your shop?”

“Yeah.”

“And,” Pete said, “she grabbed the shock-baton first thing and blasted herself but good?”

“Exactly.”

“I told you that thieves always go for the weaponry first,” Pete said, grinning and scratching his armpit. “Didn’t I tell you that? Leave a weapon in plain sight, man, a thief can’t stand it, it’s the very first thing they gotta grab.” He laughed. “Works every time.”

“Pete’s from the City Spiders,” Lyle told Kitty. “His people built this shop for me. One dark night, they hauled this mobile home right up thirty-four stories in total darkness, straight up the side of the Archiplat without anybody seeing, and they cut a big hole through the side of the building without making any noise, and they hauled the whole shop through it. Then they sank explosive bolts through the girders and hung it up here for me in midair. The City Spiders are into sport-climbing the way I’m into bicycles, only, like, they are very *seriously* into climbing and there are *lots* of them. They were some of the very first people to squat the zone, and they’ve lived here ever since, and they are pretty good friends of mine.”

Pete sank to one knee and looked Kitty in the eye. “I love breaking into places, don’t you? There’s no thrill like some quick and perfectly executed break-in.” He reached casually into his shoulderbag. “The thing is ” -- he pulled out a camera -- “to be sporting, you can’t steal anything. You just take trophy pictures to prove you were there.” He snapped her picture several times, grinning as she flinched.

“Lady,” he breathed at her, “once you’ve turned into a little wicked greedhead, and mixed all that evil cupidity and possessiveness into the beauty of the direct action, then you’ve prostituted our way of life. You’ve gone and spoiled our sport.” Pete stood up. “We City Spiders don’t like common thieves. And we especially don’t like thieves who break into the places of clients of ours, like Lyle here. And we thoroughly, especially, don’t like thieves who are so brickhead dumb that they get caught red-handed on the premises of friends of ours.”

Pete’s hairy brows knotted in thought. “What I’d like to do here, Lyle ol’ buddy,” he announced, “is wrap up your little friend head to foot in nice tight cabling, smuggle her out of here down to Golden Gate Archiplat -- you know, the big one downtown over by MLK and Highway Twenty-seven? -- and hang her head-down in the center of the cupola.”

“That’s not very nice,” Mabel told him seriously.

Pete looked wounded. “I’m not gonna charge him for it or anything!

Just imagine her, spinning up there beautifully with all those chandeliers and those hundreds of mirrors.”

Mabel knelt and looked into Kitty’s face. “Has she had any water since she was knocked unconscious?”

“No.”

“Well, for heaven’s sake, give the poor woman something to drink, Lyle.”

Lyle handed Mabel a bike-tote squeezebottle of electrolyte refresher. “You zudes don’t grasp the situation yet,” he said. “Look at all this stuff I took off her.” He showed them the spex, and the boots, and the stun-gun, and the gloves, and the carbon-nitride climbing plectra, and the rappelling gear.

“Wow,” Pete said at last, dabbing at buttons on his spex to study the finer detail, “this is no ordinary burglar! She’s gotta be, like, a street samurai from the Mahogany War birds or something!”

“She says she’s a federal agent.”

Mabel stood up suddenly, angrily yanking the squeezebottle from Kitty’s lips. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Ask her.”

“I’m a grade-five social counselor with the Department of Urban Redevelopment,” Mabel said. She presented Kitty with an official ID. “And who are you with?”

“I’m not prepared to divulge that information at this time.”

“I can’t believe this,” Mabel marveled, tucking her dog-eared hologram ID back in her hat. “You’ve caught somebody from one of those nutty reactionary secret black-bag units. I mean, that’s gotta be what’s just happened here.” She shook her head slowly. “Y’know, if you work in government, you always hear horror stories about these right-wing paramilitary wackos, but I’ve never actually seen one before.”

“It’s a very dangerous world out there, Miss Social Counselor.”

“Oh, tell me about it,” Mabel scoffed. “I’ve worked suicide hotlines! I’ve been a hostage negotiator! I’m a career social worker, girlfriend! I’ve seen more horror and suffering than you *ever* will. While you were doing push-ups in some comfy cracker training-camp, I’ve been out here in the real world!” Mabel absently unscrewed the top from the bike bottle and had a long glug. “What on earth are you doing trying to raid the squat of a bicycle repairman?”

Kitty’s stony silence lengthened. “It’s got something to do with that settop box,” Lyle offered. “It showed up here in delivery yesterday, and then she showed up just a few hours later. Started flirting with me, and said she wanted to live in here. Of course I got suspicious right away.”

“Naturally,” Pete said. “Real bad move, Kitty. Lyle’s on antilibidinals.”

Kitty stared at Lyle bitterly. “I see,” she said at last. “So that’s what you get, when you drain all the sex out of one of them ... You get a strange malodorous creature that spends all its time working in the garage.”

Mabel flushed. “Did you hear that?” She gave Kitty’s bag a sharp angry yank. “What conceivable right do you have to question this citizen’s sexual orientation? Especially after cruelly trying to sexually manipulate him to abet your illegal purposes? Have you lost all sense of decency? You ... you should be sued.”

“Do your worst,” Kitty muttered.

“Maybe I will,” Mabel said grimly. “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.”

“Yeah, let’s string her up somewhere real sunny and public and call a bunch of news crews,” Pete said. “I’m way hot for this deep ninja gear! Me and the Spiders got real mojo uses for these telescopic ears, and the tracer dust, and the epoxy bugging devices. And the press-on climbing-claws. And the carbon-fiber rope. Everything, really! Everything except these big-ass military shoes of hers, which really suck.”

“Hey, all that stuff’s mine,” Lyle said sternly. “I saw it first.”

“Yeah, I guess so, but ... Okay, Lyle, you make us a deal on the gear, we’ll forget everything you still owe us for doing the shop.”

“Come on, those combat spex are worth more than this place all by themselves.”

“I’m real interested in that settop box,” Mabel said cruelly. “It doesn’t look too fancy or complicated. Let’s take it over to those dirty circuit zudes who hang out at the Blue Parrot, and see if they can’t reverse-engineer it. We’ll post all the schematics up on twenty or thirty progressive activist networks, and see what falls out of cyberspace.”

Kitty glared at her. “The terrible consequences from that stupid and irresponsible action would be entirely on your head.”

“I’ll risk it,” Mabel said airily, patting her cloche hat. “It might bump my soft little liberal head a bit, but I’m pretty sure it would crack your nasty little fascist head like a coconut.”

Suddenly Kitty began thrashing and kicking her way furiously inside the bag. They watched with interest as she ripped, tore and lashed out with powerful side and front kicks. Nothing much happened.

“All right,” she said at last, panting in exhaustion. “I’ve come from Senator Creighton’s office.”

“Who?” Lyle said.

“Creighton! Senator James P. Creighton, the man who’s been your Senator from Tennessee for the past thirty years!”

“Oh,” Lyle said. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“We’re anarchists,” Pete told her.

“I’ve sure heard of the nasty old geezer,” Mabel said, “but I’m from British Columbia, where we change senators the way you’d change a pair of socks. If you ever changed your socks, that is. What about him?”

“Well, Senator Creighton has deep clout and seniority! He was a United States Senator even before the first NAFTA Senate was convened! He has a very large, and powerful, and very well seasoned personal staff of twenty thousand hardworking people, with a lot of pull in the Agriculture, Banking, and Telecommunications Committees!”

“Yeah? So?”

“So,” Kitty said miserably, “there are twenty thousand of us on his

staff. We've been in place for decades now, and naturally we've accumulated lots of power and importance. Senator Creighton's staff is basically running some quite large sections of the NAFTA government, and if the Senator loses his office, there will be a great deal of ... of unnecessary political turbulence." She looked up. "You might not think that a senator's staff is all that important politically. But if people like you bothered to learn anything about the real-life way that your government functions, then you'd know that Senate staffers can be really crucial."

Mabel scratched her head. "You're telling me that even a lousy senator has his own private black-bag unit?"

Kitty looked insulted. "He's an excellent senator! You can't have a working organization of twenty thousand staffers without taking security very seriously! Anyway, the Executive wing has had black-bag units for years! It's only right that there should be a balance of powers."

"Wow," Mabel said. "The old guy's a hundred and twelve or something, isn't he?"

"A hundred and seventeen."

"Even with government health care, there can't be a lot left of him."

"He's already gone," Kitty muttered. "His frontal lobes are burned out ... He can still sit up, and if he's stoked on stimulants he can repeat whatever's whispered to him. So he's got two permanent implanted hearing aids, and basically ... well ... he's being run by remote control by his mook."

"His mook, huh?" Pete repeated thoughtfully.

"It's a very good mook," Kitty said. "The coding's old, but it's been very well looked-after. It has firm moral values and excellent policies. The mook is really very much like the Senator was. It's just that ... well, it's old. It still prefers a really old-fashioned media environment. It spends almost all its time watching old-fashioned public political coverage, and lately it's gotten cranky and started broadcasting commentary."

"Man, never trust a mook," Lyle said. "I hate those things."

"So do I," Pete offered, "but even a mook comes off pretty good compared to a politician."

“I don’t really see the problem,” Mabel said, puzzled. “Senator Hirschheimer from Arizona has had a direct neural link to his mook for years, and he has an excellent progressive voting record. Same goes for Senator Marmalejo from Tamaulipas; she’s kind of absent-minded, and everybody knows she’s on life support, but she’s a real scrapper on women’s issues.”

Kitty looked up. “You don’t think it’s terrible?”

Mabel shook her head. “I’m not one to be judgmental about the intimacy of one’s relationship to one’s own digital alter-ego. As far as I can see it, that’s a basic privacy issue.”

“They told me in briefing that it was a very terrible business, and that everyone would panic if they learned that a high government official was basically a front for a rogue artificial intelligence.”

Mabel, Pete, and Lyle exchanged glances. “Are you guys surprised by that news?” Mabel said.

“Heck no,” said Pete.

“Big deal,” Lyle added.

Something seemed to snap inside Kitty then. Her head sank. “ Disaffected émigrés in Europe have been spreading boxes that can decipher the Senator’s commentary. I mean, the Senator’s mook’s commentary ... The mook speaks just like the Senator did, or the way the Senator used to speak, when he was in private and off the record. The way he spoke in his diaries. As far as we can tell, the mook *was* his diary ... It used to be his personal laptop computer. But he just kept transferring the files, and upgrading the software, and teaching it new tricks like voice recognition and speechwriting, and giving it power of attorney and such ... And then, one day the mook made a break for it. We think that the mook sincerely believes that it’s the Senator.”

“Just tell the stupid thing to shut up for a while, then.”

“We can’t do that. We’re not even sure where the mook is, physically. Or how it’s been encoding those sarcastic comments into the video-feed. The Senator had a lot of friends in the telecom industry back in the old days. There are a lot of ways and places to hide a piece of

distributed software."

"So that's all?" Lyle said. "That's it, that's your big secret? Why didn't you just come to me and ask me for the box? You didn't have to dress up in combat gear and kick my door in. That's a pretty good story, I'd have probably just given you the thing."

"I couldn't do that, Mr. Schweik."

"Why not?"

"Because," Pete said, "her people are important government functionaries, and you're a loser techie wacko who lives in a slum."

"I was told this is a very dangerous area," Kitty muttered.

"It's not dangerous," Mabel told her.

"No?"

"No. They're all too broke to be dangerous. This is just a kind of social breathing space. The whole urban infrastructure's dreadfully overplanned here in Chattanooga. There's been too much money here too long. There's been no room for spontaneity. It was choking the life out of the city. That's why everyone was secretly overjoyed when the rioters set fire to these three floors."

Mabel shrugged. "The insurance took care of the damage. First the looters came in. Then there were a few hideouts for kids and crooks and illegal aliens. Then the permanent squats got set up. Then the artist's studios, and the semilegal workshops and redlight places. Then the quaint little coffeehouses, then the bakeries. Pretty soon the offices of professionals will be filtering in, and they'll restore the water and the wiring. Once that happens, the real-estate prices will kick in big-time, and the whole zone will transmute right back into gentryville. It happens all the time."

Mabel waved her arm at the door. "If you knew anything about modern urban geography, you'd see this kind of, uh, spontaneous urban renewal happening all over the place. As long as you've got naive young people with plenty of energy who can be suckered into living inside rotten, hazardous dumps for nothing, in exchange for imagining that they're free from oversight, then it all works out just great in the long run."

“Oh.”

“Yeah, zones like this turn out to be extremely handy for all concerned. For some brief span of time, a few people can think mildly unusual thoughts and behave in mildly unusual ways. All kinds of weird little vermin show up, and if they make any money then they go legal, and if they don’t then they drop dead in a place really quiet where it’s all their own fault. Nothing dangerous about it.” Mabel laughed, then sobered. “Lyle, let this poor dumb cracker out of the bag.”

“She’s naked under there.”

“Okay,” she said impatiently, “cut a slit in the bag and throw some clothes in it. Get going, Lyle.” Lyle threw in some biking pants and a sweatshirt.

“What about my gear?” Kitty demanded, wriggling her way into the clothes by feel.

“I tell you what,” said Mabel thoughtfully. “Pete here will give your gear back to you in a week or so, after his friends have photographed all the circuitry. You’ll just have to let him keep all those knickknacks for a while, as his reward for our not immediately telling everybody who you are and what you’re doing here.”

“Great idea,” Pete announced, “terrific, pragmatic solution!” He began feverishly snatching up gadgets and stuffing them into his shoulderbag. “See, Lyle? One phone-call to good ol’ Spider Pete, and your problem is history, zude! Me and Mabel-the-Fed have crisis negotiation skills that are second to none! Another potentially lethal confrontation resolved without any bloodshed or loss of life.” Pete zipped the bag shut. “That’s about it, right, everybody? Problem over! Write if you get work, Lyle buddy. Hang by your thumbs.” Pete leapt out the door and bounded off at top speed on the springy soles of his reactive boots.

“Thanks a lot for placing my equipment into the hands of sociopathic criminals,” Kitty said. She reached out of the slit in the bag, grabbed a multitool off the corner of the workbench, and began swiftly slashing her way free.

“This will help the sluggish, corrupt, and underpaid Chattanooga police to take life a little more seriously,” Mabel said, her pale eyes gleaming. “Besides, it’s profoundly undemocratic to restrict specialized

technical knowledge to the coercive hands of secret military elites."

Kitty thoughtfully thumbed the edge of the multi-tool's ceramic blade and stood up to her full height, her eyes slitted. "I'm ashamed to work for the same government as you."

Mabel smiled serenely. "Darling, your tradition of deep dark government paranoia is far behind the times! This is the postmodern era! We're now in the grip of a government with severe schizoid multiple-personality disorder."

"You're truly vile. I despise you more than I can say." Kitty jerked her thumb at Lyle. "Even this nut-case eunuch anarchist kid looks pretty good, compared to you. At least he's self-sufficient and market-driven."

"I thought he looked good the moment I met him," Mabel replied sunnily. "He's cute, he's got great muscle tone, and he doesn't make passes. Plus he can fix small appliances and he's got a spare apartment. I think you ought to move in with him, sweetheart."

"What's that supposed to mean? You don't think I could manage life here in the zone like you do, is that it? You think you have some kind of copyright on living outside the law?"

"No, I just mean you'd better stay indoors with your boyfriend here until that paint falls off your face. You look like a poisoned raccoon."

Mabel turned on her heel. "Try to get a life, and stay out of my way." She leapt outside, unlocked her bicycle and methodically pedaled off.

Kitty wiped her lips and spat out the door. "Christ, that baton packs a wallop." She snorted. "Don't you ever ventilate this place, kid? Those paint fumes are gonna kill you before you're thirty."

"I don't have time to clean or ventilate it. I'm real busy."

"Okay, then I'll clean it. I'll ventilate it. I gotta stay here a while, understand? Maybe quite a while."

Lyle blinked. "How long, exactly?"

Kitty stared at him. "You're not taking me seriously, are you? I don't much like it when people don't take me seriously."

“No, no,” Lyle assured her hastily. “You’re very serious.”

“You ever heard of a small-business grant, kid? How about venture capital, did you ever hear of that? Ever heard of federal research-and-development subsidies, Mr. Schweik?” Kitty looked at him sharply, weighing her words. “Yeah, I thought maybe you’d heard of that one, Mr. Techie Wacko. Federal R and D backing is the kind of thing that only happens to other people, right? But Lyle, when you make good friends with a senator, you *become* ‘other people.’ Get my drift, pal?”

“I guess I do,” Lyle said slowly.

“We’ll have ourselves some nice talks about that subject, Lyle. You wouldn’t mind that, would you?”

“No. I don’t mind it now that you’re talking.”

“There’s some stuff going on down here in the zone that I didn’t understand at first, but it’s important.” Kitty paused, then rubbed dried dye from her hair in a cascade of green dandruff. “How much did you pay those Spider gangsters to string up this place for you?”

“It was kind of a barter situation,” Lyle told her.

“Think they’d do it again if I paid ‘em real cash? Yeah? I thought so.” She nodded thoughtfully. “They look like a heavy outfit, the City Spiders. I gotta pry ‘em loose from that leftist gorgon before she finishes indoctrinating them in socialist revolution.” Kitty wiped her mouth on her sleeve. “This is the Senator’s own constituency! It was stupid of us to duck an ideological battle, just because this is a worthless area inhabited by reckless sociopaths who don’t vote. Hell, that’s exactly why it’s important. This could be a vital territory in the culture war. I’m gonna call the office right away, start making arrangements. There’s no way we’re gonna leave this place in the hands of the self-styled Queen of Peace and Justice over there.”

She snorted, then stretched a kink out of her back. “With a little self-control and discipline, I can save those Spiders from themselves and turn them into an asset to law and order! I’ll get ‘em to string up a couple of trailers here in the zone. We could start a dojo.”

* * * *

Eddy called, two weeks later. He was in a beachside cabana somewhere in Catalunya, wearing a silk floral-print shirt and a new and very pricey looking set of spex. “How’s life, Lyle?”

“It’s okay, Eddy.”

“Making out all right?” Eddy had two new tattoos on his cheekbone.

“Yeah. I got a new paying roommate. She’s a martial artist.”

“Girl roommate working out okay this time?”

“Yeah, she’s good at pumping the flywheel and she lets me get on with my bike work. Bike business has been picking up a lot lately. Looks like I might get a legal electrical feed and some more floorspace, maybe even some genuine mail delivery. My new roomie’s got a lot of useful contacts.”

“Boy, the ladies sure love you, Lyle! Can’t beat ‘em off with a stick, can you, poor guy? That’s a heck of a note.”

Eddy leaned forward a little, shoving aside a silver tray full of dead gold-tipped zigarettes. “You been getting the packages?”

“Yeah. Pretty regular.”

“Good deal,” he said briskly, “but you can wipe ‘em all now. I don’t need those backups anymore. Just wipe the data and trash the disks, or sell ‘em. I’m into some, well, pretty hairy opportunities right now, and I don’t need all that old clutter. It’s kid stuff anyway.”

“Okay, man. If that’s the way you want it.”

Eddy leaned forward. “D’you happen to get a package lately? Some hardware? Kind of a settop box?”

“Yeah, I got the thing.”

“That’s great, Lyle. I want you to open the box up, and break all the chips with pliers.”

“Yeah?”

“Then throw all the pieces away. Separately. It’s trouble, Lyle, okay? The kind of trouble I don’t need right now.”

“Consider it done, man.”

“Thanks! Anyway, you won’t be bothered by mailouts from now on.” He paused. “Not that I don’t appreciate your former effort and goodwill, and all.”

Lyle blinked. “How’s your love life, Eddy?”

Eddy sighed. “Frederika! What a handful! I dunno, Lyle, it was okay for a while, but we couldn’t stick it together. I don’t know why I ever thought that private cops were sexy. I musta been totally out of my mind ... Anyway, I got a new girlfriend now.”

“Yeah?”

“She’s a politician, Lyle. She’s a radical member of the Spanish Parliament. Can you believe that? I’m sleeping with an elected official of a European local government.” He laughed. “Politicians are *sexy,* Lyle. Politicians are *hot!* They have charisma. They’re glamorous. They’re powerful. They can really make things happen! Politicians get around. They know things on the inside track. I’m having more fun with Violeta than I knew there was in the world.”

“That’s pleasant to hear, zude.”

“More pleasant than you know, my man.”

“Not a problem,” Lyle said indulgently. “We all gotta make our own lives, Eddy.”

“Ain’t it the truth.”

Lyle nodded. “I’m in business, zude!”

“You gonna perfect that inertial whatsit?” Eddy said.

“Maybe. It could happen. I get to work on it a lot now. I’m getting closer, really getting a grip on the concept. It feels really good. It’s a good hack, man. It makes up for all the rest of it. It really does.”

Eddy sipped his mimosa. “Lyle.”

“What?”

“You didn’t hook up that settop box and look at it, did you?”

“You know me, Eddy,” Lyle said. “Just another kid with a wrench.”