

# The Ghost Pit

## Stephen Baxter

Manfred's on the road again, making strangers rich. It's a hot summer Tuesday and he's standing in the plaza in front of the Centraal Station with his eyeballs powered up and the sunlight jangling off the canal, motor scooters and kamikaze cyclists whizzing past and tourists chattering on every side. The square smells of water and dirt and hot metal and the fart-laden exhaust fumes of cold catalytic converters; the bells of trams ding in the background and birds flock overhead. He glances up and grabs a pigeon, crops it and squirts at his website to show he's arrived. The bandwidth is good here, he realizes; and it's not just the bandwidth, it's the whole scene. Amsterdam is making him feel wanted already, even though he's fresh off the train from Schiphol: he's infected with the dynamic optimism of another time zone, another city. If the mood holds, someone out there is going to become very rich indeed. He wonders who it's going to be. Manfred sits on a stool out in the car park at the Brouwerij 't IJ, watching the articulated buses go by and drinking a third of a liter of lip-curlingly sour geuze. His channels are jabbering away in a corner of his head-up display, throwing compressed infobursts of filtered press releases at him. They compete for his attention, bickering and rudely waving in front of the scenery. A couple of punks—maybe local, but more likely drifters lured to Amsterdam by the magnetic field of tolerance the Dutch beam across Europe like a pulsar—are laughing and chatting by a couple of battered mopeds in the far corner. A tourist boat putters by in the canal; the sails of the huge windmill overhead cast long cool shadows across the road. The windmill is a machine for lifting water, turning wind power into dry land: trading energy for space, sixteenth-century style. Manfred is waiting for an invite to a party where he's going to meet a man who he can talk to about trading energy for space, twenty-first century style, and forget about his personal problems. He's ignoring the instant messenger boxes, enjoying some low bandwidth high sensation time with his beer and the pigeons, when a woman walks up to him and says his name: "Manfred Macx?" He glances up. The courier is an Effective Cyclist, all wind-burned smooth-running muscles clad in a paen to polymer technology: electric blue lycra and wasp-yellow carbonate with a light speckling of anti-collision LEDs and tight-packed air bags. She holds out a box for him. He pauses a moment, struck by the degree to which she resembles Pam, his ex-fiancée. "I'm Macx," he says, waving the back of his left wrist under her barcode reader. "Who's it from?" "FedEx." The voice isn't Pam. She dumps the box in his lap, then she's back over the low wall and onto her bicycle with her phone already chirping, disappearing in a cloud of spread-spectrum emissions. Manfred turns the box over in his hands: it's a disposable supermarket phone, paid for in cash: cheap, untraceable and efficient. It can even do conference calls, which makes it the tool of choice for spooks and gifters everywhere. The box rings. Manfred rips the cover open and pulls out the phone, mildly annoyed. "Yes, who is this?" The voice at the other end has a heavy Russian accent, almost a parody in this decade of cheap online translation services. "Manfred. Am please to meet you; wish to personalize interface, make friends, no? Have much to offer." "Who are you?" Manfred repeats suspiciously. "Am organization formerly known as KGB dot

RU.” “I think your translator’s broken.” He holds the phone to his ear carefully, as if it’s made of smoke-thin aerogel, tenuous as the sanity of the being on the other end of the line. “Nyet–no, sorry. Am apologize for we not use commercial translation software. Interpreters are ideologically suspect, mostly have capitalist semiotics and pay-per-use APIs. Must implement English more better, yes?” Manfred drains his beer glass, sets it down, stands up, and begins to walk along the main road, phone glued to the side of his head. He wraps his throat mike around the cheap black plastic casing, pipes the input to a simple listener process. “You taught yourself the language just so you could talk to me?” “Da, was easy: spawn billion-node neural network and download Tellytubbies and Sesame Street at maximum speed. Pardon excuse entropy overlay of bad grammar: am afraid of digital fingerprints steganographically masked into my-our tutorials.” “Let me get this straight. You’re the KGB’s core AI, but you’re afraid of a copyright infringement lawsuit over your translator semiotics?” Manfred pauses in mid-stride, narrowly avoids being mown down by a GPS-guided roller-blader. “Am have been badly burned by viral end-user license agreements. Have no desire to experiment with patent shell companies held by Chechen infoterrorists. You are human, you must not worry cereal company repossess your small intestine because digest unlicensed food with it, right? Manfred, you must help me-we. Am wishing to defect.” Manfred stops dead in the street: “Oh man, you’ve got the wrong free enterprise broker here. I don’t work for the government. I’m strictly private.” A rogue advertisement sneaks through his junkbuster proxy and spams glowing fifties kitsch across his navigation window—which is blinking—for a moment before a phage guns it and spawns a new filter. Manfred leans against a shop front, massaging his forehead and eyeballing a display of antique brass doorknockers. “Have you cleared this with the State Department?” “Why bother? State Department am enemy of Novy-USSR. State Department is not help us.” “Well, if you hadn’t given it to them for safe-keeping during the nineties. . . .” Manfred is tapping his left heel on the pavement, looking round for a way out of this conversation. A camera winks at him from atop a street light; he waves, wondering idly if it’s the KGB or the traffic police. He is waiting for directions to the party, which should arrive within the next half an hour, and this cold war retreat is bumming him out. “Look, I don’t deal with the G-men. I hate the military industrial complex. They’re zero-sum cannibals.” A thought occurs to him. “If survival is what you’re after, I could post your state vector to Eternity: then nobody could delete you—“ “Nyet!” The artificial intelligence sounds as alarmed as it’s possible to sound over a GSM link. “Am not open source!” “We have nothing to talk about, then.” Manfred punches the hang-up button and throws the mobile phone out into a canal. It hits the water and there’s a pop of deflagrating LiION cells. “Fucking cold war hang-over losers,” he swears under his breath, quite angry now. “Fucking capitalist spooks.” Russia has been back under the thumb of the apparatchiks for fifteen years now, its brief flirtation with anarcho-capitalism replaced by Brezhnevite dirigisme, and it’s no surprise that the wall’s crumbling—but it looks like they haven’t learned anything from the collapse of capitalism. They still think in terms of dollars and paranoia. Manfred is so angry that he wants to make someone rich, just to thumb his nose at the would-be defector. See! You get ahead by giving! Get with the program! Only the generous survive! But the KGB won’t get the message. He’s dealt with old-time commie weak-AI’s before, minds raised on Marxist dialectic and Austrian School economics: they’re so thoroughly hypnotized by the short-term victory of capitalism in the industrial age that they can’t surf the new paradigm, look to the longer term. Manfred walks on, hands in pockets, brooding. He wonders what he’s going to patent next. Manfred has a suite at the Hotel Jan Luyken paid for by a grateful multinational consumer protection group, and an unlimited public transport pass paid for by a Scottish sambapunk band in return for services rendered. He has airline employee’s travel rights with six flag carriers despite never having worked for an airline. His bush jacket has sixty four compact supercomputing clusters sewn into it, four per pocket, courtesy of an invisible college that wants to grow up to be the next Media Lab. His dumb clothing comes made to measure from an e-tailor in the Philippines who he’s never met. Law firms handle his patent applications on a pro bono basis, and boy does he patent a lot—although he always signs the rights over to the Free Intellect Foundation, as contributions to their obligation-free infrastructure project. In IP geek circles, Manfred is legendary; he’s the guy who patented the business practice of moving your e-business somewhere with a slack intellectual property regime in order to evade licensing encumbrances. He’s the guy who patented using

genetic algorithms to patent everything they can permutate from an initial description of a problem domain—not just a better mousetrap, but the set of all possible better mousetraps. Roughly a third of his inventions are legal, a third are illegal, and the remainder are legal but will become illegal as soon as the legislator wakes up, smells the coffee, and panics. There are patent attorneys in Reno who swear that Manfred Macx is a pseudo, a net alias fronting for a bunch of crazed anonymous hackers armed with the Genetic Algorithm That Ate Calcutta: a kind of Serdar Argic of intellectual property, or maybe another Bourbaki maths borg. There are lawyers in San Diego and Redmond who swear blind that Macx is an economic saboteur bent on wrecking the underpinning of capitalism, and there are communists in Prague who think he's the bastard spawn of Bill Gates by way of the Pope. Manfred is at the peak of his profession, which is essentially coming up with wacky but workable ideas and giving them to people who will make fortunes with them. He does this for free, gratis. In return, he has virtual immunity from the tyranny of cash; money is a symptom of poverty, after all, and Manfred never has to pay for anything. There are drawbacks, however. Being a pronoiac meme-broker is a constant burn of future shock—he has to assimilate more than a megabyte of text and several gigs of AV content every day just to stay current. The Internal Revenue Service is investigating him continuously because they don't believe his lifestyle can exist without racketeering. And there exist items that no money can't buy: like the respect of his parents. He hasn't spoken to them for three years: his father thinks he's a hippie scrounger and his mother still hasn't forgiven him for dropping out of his down-market Harvard emulation course. His fiancée and sometime dominatrix Pamela threw him over six months ago, for reasons he has never been quite clear on. (Ironically, she's a headhunter for the IRS, jetting all over the globe trying to persuade open source entrepreneurs to come home and go commercial for the good of the Treasury department.) To cap it all, the Southern Baptist Conventions have denounced him as a minion of Satan on all their websites. Which would be funny, if it wasn't for the dead kittens one of their followers—he presumes it's one of their followers—keeps mailing him. Manfred drops in at his hotel suite, unpacks his Aineko, plugs in a fresh set of cells to charge, and sticks most of his private keys in the safe. Then he heads straight for the party, which is currently happening at De Wildemann's; it's a twenty minute walk and the only real hazard is dodging the trams that sneak up on him behind the cover of his moving map display. Along the way his glasses bring him up to date on the news. Europe has achieved peaceful political union for the first time ever: they're using this unprecedented state of affairs to harmonize the curvature of bananas. In San Diego, researchers are uploading lobsters into cyberspace, starting with the stomatogastric ganglion, one neuron at a time. They're burning GM cocoa in Belize and books in Edinburgh. NASA still can't put a man on the moon. Russia has re-elected the communist government with an increased majority in the Duma; meanwhile in China fevered rumors circulate about an imminent re-habilitation, the second coming of Mao, who will save them from the consequences of the Three Gorges disaster. In business news, the US government is outraged at the Baby Bills—who have automated their legal processes and are spawning subsidiaries, IPO'ing them, and exchanging title in a bizarre parody of bacterial plasmid exchange, so fast that by the time the injunctions are signed the targets don't exist any more. Welcome to the twenty-first century. The permanent floating meatspace party has taken over the back of De Wildemann's, a three hundred year old brown café with a beer menu that runs to sixteen pages and wooden walls stained the color of stale beer. The air is thick with the smells of tobacco, brewer's yeast, and melatonin spray: half the dotters are nursing monster jetlag hangovers, and the other half are babbling a eurotrash creole at each other while they work on the hangover. “Man did you see that? He looks like a Stallmanite!” exclaims one whitebread hanger-on who's currently propping up the bar. Manfred slides in next to him, catches the bartender's eye. “Glass of the berlinerweise, please,” he says. “You drink that stuff?” asks the hanger-on, curling a hand protectively around his Coke: “man, you don't want to do that! It's full of alcohol!” Manfred grins at him toothily. “Ya gotta keep your yeast intake up: lots of neurotransmitter precursors, phenylalanine and glutamate.” “But I thought that was a beer you were ordering. . . .” Manfred's away, one hand resting on the smooth brass pipe that funnels the more popular draught items in from the cask storage in back; one of the hipper floaters has planted a capacitative transfer bug on it, and all the handshake vCard's that have visited the bar in the past three hours are queueing for attention. The air is full of bluetooth as he scrolls through a dizzying mess of public keys.

“Your drink.” The barman holds out an improbable-looking goblet full of blue liquid with a cap of melting foam and a felching straw stuck out at some crazy angle. Manfred takes it and heads for the back of the split-level bar, up the steps to a table where some guy with greasy dreadlocks is talking to a suit from Paris. The hanger-on at the bar notices him for the first time, staring with suddenly wide eyes: nearly spills his Coke in a mad rush for the door. Oh shit, thinks Macx, better buy some more server PIPS. He can recognize the signs: he’s about to be slashdotted. He gestures at the table: “this one taken?” “Be my guest,” says the guy with the dreads. Manfred slides the chair open then realizes that the other guy—immaculate double-breasted suit, sober tie, crew-cut—is a girl. Mr. Dreadlock nods. “You’re Macx? I figured it was about time we met.” “Sure.” Manfred holds out a hand and they shake. Manfred realizes the hand belongs to Bob Franklin, a Research Triangle startup monkey with a VC track record, lately moving into micromachining and space technology: he made his first million two decades ago and now he’s a specialist in extropian investment fields. Manfred has known Bob for nearly a decade via a closed mailing list. The Suit silently slides a business card across the table; a little red devil brandishes a trident at him, flames jetting up around its feet. He takes the card, raises an eyebrow: “Annette Dimarcos? I’m pleased to meet you. Can’t say I’ve ever met anyone from Arianespace marketing before.” She smiles, humorlessly; “that is convenient, all right. I have not the pleasure of meeting the famous venture altruist before.” Her accent is noticeably Parisian, a pointed reminder that she’s making a concession to him just by talking. Her camera earrings watch him curiously, encoding everything for the company channels. “Yes, well.” He nods cautiously. “Bob. I assume you’re in on this ball?” Franklin nods; beads clatter. “Yeah, man. Ever since the Teledesic smash it’s been, well, waiting. If you’ve got something for us, we’re game.” “Hmm.” The Teledesic satellite cluster was killed by cheap balloons and slightly less cheap high-altitude solar-powered drones with spread-spectrum laser relays. “The depression’s got to end some time: but,” a nod to Annette from Paris, “with all due respect, I don’t think the break will involve one of the existing club carriers.” “Arianespace is forward-looking. We face reality. The launch cartel cannot stand. Bandwidth is not the only market force in space. We must explore new opportunities. I personally have helped us diversify into submarine reactor engineering, microgravity nanotechnology fabrication, and hotel management.” Her face is a well-polished mask as she recites the company line: “we are more flexible than the American space industry. . . .” Manfred shrugs. “That’s as may be.” He sips his Berlinerweisse slowly as she launches into a long, stilted explanation of how Arianespace is a diversified dot com with orbital aspirations, a full range of merchandising spin-offs, Bond movie sets, and a promising motel chain in French Guyana. Occasionally he nods. Someone else sidles up to the table; a pudgy guy in an outrageously loud Hawaiian shirt with pens leaking in a breast pocket, and the worst case of ozone-hole burn Manfred’s seen in ages. “Hi, Bob,” says the new arrival. “How’s life?” “’S good.” Franklin nods at Manfred; “Manfred, meet Ivan MacDonald. Ivan, Manfred. Have a seat?” He leans over. “Ivan’s a public arts guy. He’s heavily into extreme concrete.” “Rubberized concrete,” Ivan says, slightly too loudly. “Pink rubberized concrete.” “Ah!” He’s somehow triggered a priority interrupt: Annette from Arianespace drops out of marketing zombiehood, sits up, and shows signs of possessing a non-corporate identity: “you are he who rubberized the Reichstag, yes? With the supercritical carbon dioxide carrier and the dissolved polymethoxysilanes?” She claps her hands: “wonderful!” “He rubberized what?” Manfred mutters in Bob’s ear. Franklin shrugs. “Limestone, concrete, he doesn’t seem to know the difference. Anyway, Germany doesn’t have an independent government any more, so who’d notice?” “I thought I was thirty seconds ahead of the curve,” Manfred complains. “Buy me another drink?” “I’m going to rubberize Three Gorges!” Ivan explains loudly. Just then a bandwidth load as heavy as a pregnant elephant sits down on Manfred’s head and sends clumps of humongous pixellation flickering across his sensorium: around the world five million or so geeks are bouncing on his home site, a digital flash crowd alerted by a posting from the other side of the bar. Manfred winces. “I really came here to talk about the economic exploitation of space travel, but I’ve just been slashdotted. Mind if I just sit and drink until it wears off?” “Sure, man.” Bob waves at the bar. “More of the same all round!” At the next table a person with make-up and long hair who’s wearing a dress—Manfred doesn’t want to speculate about the gender of these crazy mixed-up Euros—is reminiscing about wiring the fleshpots of Tehran for cyber sex. Two collegiate-looking dudes are arguing intensely in German: the

translation stream in his glasses tell him they're arguing over whether the Turing Test is a Jim Crow law that violates European corpus juris standards on human rights. The beer arrives and Bob slides the wrong one across to Manfred: "here, try this. You'll like it." "Okay." It's some kind of smoked doppelbock, chock-full of yummy superoxides: just inhaling over it makes Manfred feel like there's a fire alarm in his nose screaming danger, Will Robinson! Cancer! Cancer! "Yeah, right. Did I say I nearly got mugged on my way here?" "Mugged? Hey, that's heavy. I thought the police hereabouts had stopped—did they sell you anything?" "No, but they weren't your usual marketing type. You know anyone who can use a Warpac surplus espionage AI? Recent model, one careful owner, slightly paranoid but basically sound?" "No. Oh boy! The NSA wouldn't like that." "What I thought. Poor thing's probably unemployable, anyway." "The space biz." "Ah, yeah. The space biz. Depressing, isn't it? Hasn't been the same since Rotary Rocket went bust for the second time. And NASA, mustn't forget NASA." "To NASA." Annette grins broadly for her own reasons, raises a glass in toast. Ivan the extreme concrete geek has an arm round her shoulders; he raises his glass, too. "Lots of launch pads to rubberize!" "To NASA," Bob echoes. They drink. "Hey, Manfred. To NASA?" "NASA are idiots. They want to send canned primates to Mars!" Manfred swallows a mouthful of beer, aggressively plonks his glass on the table: "Mars is just dumb mass at the bottom of a gravity well; there isn't even a biosphere there. They should be working on uploading and solving the nanoassembly conformational problem instead. Then we could turn all the available dumb matter into computronium and use it for processing our thoughts. Long term, it's the only way to go. The solar system is a dead loss right now—dumb all over! Just measure the mips per milligram. We need to start with the low-mass bodies, reconfigure them for our own use. Dismantle the moon! Dismantle Mars! Build masses of free-flying nanocomputing processor nodes exchanging data via laser link, each layer running off the waste heat of the next one in. Matrioshka brains, Russian doll Dyson spheres the size of solar systems. Teach dumb matter to do the Turing boogie!" Bob looks wary. "Sounds kind of long term to me. Just how far ahead do you think?" "Very long-term—at least twenty, thirty years. And you can forget governments for this market, Bob, if they can't tax it they won't understand it. But see, there's an angle on the self-replicating robotics market coming up, that's going to set the cheap launch market doubling every fifteen months for the foreseeable future, starting in two years. It's your leg up, and my keystone for the Dyson sphere project. It works like this—" It's night in Amsterdam, morning in Silicon Valley. Today, fifty thousand human babies are being born around the world. Meanwhile automated factories in Indonesia and Mexico have produced another quarter of a million motherboards with processors rated at more than ten petaflops—about an order of magnitude below the computational capacity of a human brain. Another fourteen months and the larger part of the cumulative conscious processing power of the human species will be arriving in silicon. And the first meat the new AI's get to know will be the uploaded lobsters. Manfred stumbles back to his hotel, bone-weary and jet-lagged; his glasses are still jerking, slashdotted to hell and back by geeks piggybacking on his call to dismantle the moon. They stutter quiet suggestions at his peripheral vision; fractal cloud-witches ghost across the face of the moon as the last huge Airbuses of the night rumble past overhead. Manfred's skin crawls, grime embedded in his clothing from three days of continuous wear. Back in his room, Aineko mewls for attention and strops her head against his ankle. He bends down and pets her, sheds clothing and heads for the en-suite bathroom. When he's down to the glasses and nothing more he steps into the shower and dials up a hot steamy spray. The shower tries to strike up a friendly conversation about football but he isn't even awake enough to mess with its silly little associative personalization network. Something that happened earlier in the day is bugging him but he can't quite put his finger on what's wrong. Toweling himself off, Manfred yawns. Jet lag has finally overtaken him, a velvet hammer-blow between the eyes. He reaches for the bottle beside the bed, dry-swallows two melatonin tablets, a capsule full of antioxidants, and a multivitamin bullet: then he lies down on the bed, on his back, legs together, arms slightly spread. The suite lights dim in response to commands from the thousand petaflops of distributed processing power that run the neural networks that interface with his meatbrain through the glasses. Manfred drops into a deep ocean of unconsciousness populated by gentle voices. He isn't aware of it, but he talks in his sleep—disjointed mumblings that would mean little to another human, but everything to the metacortex lurking beyond his

glasses. The young posthuman intelligence in whose Cartesian theater he presides sings urgently to him while he slumbers. Manfred is always at his most vulnerable shortly after waking. He screams into wakefulness as artificial light floods the room: for a moment he is unsure whether he has slept. He forgot to pull the covers up last night, and his feet feel like lumps of frozen cardboard. Shuddering with inexplicable tension, he pulls a fresh set of underwear from his overnight bag, then drags on soiled jeans and tank top. Sometime today he'll have to spare time to hunt the feral T-shirt in Amsterdam's markets, or find a Renfield and send them forth to buy clothing. His glasses remind him that he's six hours behind the moment and needs to catch up urgently; his teeth ache in his gums and his tongue feels like a forest floor that's been visited with Agent Orange. He has a sense that something went bad yesterday; if only he could remember what. He speed-reads a new pop-philosophy tome while he brushes his teeth, then blogs his web throughput to a public annotation server; he's still too enervated to finish his pre-breakfast routine by posting a morning rant on his storyboard site. His brain is still fuzzy, like a scalpel blade clogged with too much blood: he needs stimulus, excitement, the burn of the new. Whatever, it can wait on breakfast. He opens his bedroom door and nearly steps on a small, damp cardboard box that lies on the carpet. The box—he's seen a couple of its kin before. But there are no stamps on this one, no address: just his name, in big, childish handwriting. He kneels down and gently picks it up. It's about the right weight. Something shifts inside it when he tips it back and forth. It smells. He carries it into his room carefully, angrily: then he opens it to confirm his worst suspicion. It's been surgically decerebrated, skull scooped out like a baby boiled egg. "Fuck!" This is the first time the madman has got as far as his bedroom door. It raises worrying possibilities. Manfred pauses for a moment, triggering agents to go hunt down arrest statistics, police relations, information on corpus juris, Dutch animal cruelty laws. He isn't sure whether to dial 211 on the archaic voice phone or let it ride. Aineko, picking up his angst, hides under the dresser mewling pathetically. Normally he'd pause a minute to reassure the creature, but not now: its mere presence is suddenly acutely embarrassing, a confession of deep inadequacy. He swears again, looks around, then takes the easy option: down the stairs two steps at a time, stumbling on the second floor landing, down to the breakfast room in the basement where he will perform the stable rituals of morning. Breakfast is unchanging, an island of deep geological time standing still amidst the continental upheaval of new technologies. While reading a paper on public key steganography and parasite network identity spoofing he mechanically assimilates a bowl of corn flakes and skimmed milk, then brings a platter of wholemeal bread and slices of some weird seed-infested Dutch cheese back to his place. There is a cup of strong black coffee in front of his setting: he picks it up and slurps half of it down before he realizes he's not alone at the table. Someone is sitting opposite him. He glances up at them incuriously and freezes inside. "Morning, Manfred. How does it feel to owe the government twelve million, three hundred and sixty-two thousand nine hundred and sixteen dollars and fifty-one cents?" Manfred puts everything in his sensorium on indefinite hold and stares at her. She's immaculately turned out in a formal grey business suit: brown hair tightly drawn back, blue eyes quizzical. The chaperone badge clipped to her lapel—a due diligence guarantee of businesslike conduct—is switched off. He's feeling ripped because of the dead kitten and residual jetlag, and more than a little messy, so he nearly snarls back at her: "that's a bogus estimate! Did they send you here because they think I'll listen to you?" He bites and swallows a slice of cheese-laden crispbread: "or did you decide to deliver the message in person so you could enjoy ruining my breakfast?" "Manny." She frowns. "If you're going to be confrontational I might as well go now." She pauses, and after a moment he nods apologetically. "I didn't come all this way just because of an overdue tax estimate." "So." He puts his coffee cup down and tries to paper over his unease. "Then what brings you here? Help yourself to coffee. Don't tell me you came all this way just to tell me you can't live without me." She fixes him with a riding-crop stare: "Don't flatter yourself. There are many leaves in the forest, there are ten thousand hopeful subs in the chat room, etcetera. If I choose a man to contribute to my family tree, the one thing you can be certain of is he won't be a cheapskate when it comes to providing for his children." "Last I heard, you were spending a lot of time with Brian," he says carefully. Brian: a name without a face. Too much money, too little sense. Something to do with a blue-chip accountancy partnership. "Brian?" She snorts. "That ended ages ago. He turned weird—burned that nice corset you bought me in Boulder, called me a slut for going out clubbing, wanted to fuck me.

Saw himself as a family man: one of those promise keeper types. I crashed him hard but I think he stole a copy of my address book—got a couple of friends say he keeps sending them harassing mail.” “Good riddance, then. I suppose this means you’re still playing the scene? But looking around for the, er—“ “Traditional family thing? Yes. Your trouble, Manny? You were born forty years too late: you still believe in rutting before marriage, but find the idea of coping with the after-effects disturbing.” Manfred drinks the rest of his coffee, unable to reply effectively to her non sequitur. It’s a generational thing. This generation is happy with latex and leather, whips and butt-plugs and electrostim, but find the idea of exchanging bodily fluids shocking: social side-effect of the last century’s antibiotic abuse. Despite being engaged for two years, he and Pamela never had intromissive intercourse. “I just don’t feel positive about having children,” he says eventually. “And I’m not planning on changing my mind any time soon. Things are changing so fast that even a twenty year commitment is too far to plan—you might as well be talking about the next ice age. As for the money thing, I am reproductively fit—just not within the parameters of the outgoing paradigm. Would you be happy about the future if it was 1901 and you’d just married a buggy-whip mogul?” Her fingers twitch and his ears flush red, but she doesn’t follow up the double entendre. “You don’t feel any responsibility, do you? Not to your country, not to me. That’s what this is about: none of your relationships count, all this nonsense about giving intellectual property away notwithstanding. You’re actively harming people, you know. That twelve mil isn’t just some figure I pulled out of a hat, Manfred; they don’t actually expect you to pay it. But it’s almost exactly how much you’d owe in income tax if you’d only come home, start up a corporation, and be a self-made—“ He cuts her off: “I don’t agree. You’re confusing two wholly different issues and calling them both ‘responsibility.’ And I refuse to start charging now, just to balance the IRS’s spreadsheet. It’s their fucking fault, and they know it. If they hadn’t gone after me under suspicion of running a massively ramified microbilling fraud when I was sixteen—“ “Bygones.” She waves a hand dismissively. Her fingers are long and slim, sheathed in black glossy gloves—electrically earthed to prevent embarrassing emissions. “With a bit of the right advice we can get all that set aside. You’ll have to stop bumming around the world sooner or later, anyway. Grow up, get responsible, and do the right thing. This is hurting Joe and Sue; they don’t understand what you’re about.” Manfred bites his tongue to stifle his first response, then refills his coffee cup and takes another mouthful. “I work for the betterment of everybody, not just some narrowly defined national interest, Pam. It’s the agalmic future. You’re still locked into a pre-singularity economic model that thinks in terms of scarcity. Resource allocation isn’t a problem any more—it’s going to be over within a decade. The cosmos is flat in all directions, and we can borrow as much bandwidth as we need from the first universal bank of entropy! They even found the dark matter—MACHOs, big brown dwarves in the galactic halo, leaking radiation in the long infrared—suspiciously high entropy leakage. The latest figures say something like 70 percent of the mass of the M31 galaxy was sapient, two point nine million years ago when the infrared we’re seeing now set out. The intelligence gap between us and the aliens is probably about a trillion times bigger than the gap between us and a nematode worm. Do you have any idea what that means?” Pamela nibbles at a slice of crispbread. “I don’t believe in that bogus singularity you keep chasing, or your aliens a thousand light years away. It’s a chimera, like Y2K, and while you’re running after it you aren’t helping reduce the budget deficit or sire a family, and that’s what I care about. And before you say I only care about it because that’s the way I’m programmed, I want you to ask just how dumb you think I am. Bayes’ theorem says I’m right, and you know it.” “What you—“ he stops dead, baffled, the mad flow of his enthusiasm running up against the coffer-dam of her certainty. “Why? I mean, why? Why on earth should what I do matter to you?” Since you canceled our engagement, he doesn’t add. She sighs. “Manny, the Internal Revenue cares about far more than you can possibly imagine. Every tax dollar raised east of the Mississippi goes on servicing the debt, did you know that? We’ve got the biggest generation in history hitting retirement just about now and the pantry is bare. We—our generation—isn’t producing enough babies to replace the population, either. In ten years, something like 30 percent of our population are going to be retirees. You want to see seventy-year-olds freezing on street corners in New Jersey? That’s what your attitude says to me: you’re not helping to support them, you’re running away from your responsibilities right now, when we’ve got huge problems to face. If we can just defuse the debt bomb, we could do so much—fight the aging problem, fix the environment, heal

society's ills. Instead you just piss away your talents handing no-hoper eurotrash get-rich-quick schemes that work, telling Vietnamese zaibatsus what to build next to take jobs away from our taxpayers. I mean, why? Why do you keep doing this? Why can't you simply come home and help take responsibility for your share of it?" They share a long look of mutual incomprehension. "Look," she says finally, "I'm around for a couple of days. I really came here for a meeting with a rich neurodynamics tax exile who's just been designated a national asset: Jim Bezier. Don't know if you've heard of him, but. I've got a meeting this morning to sign his tax jubilee, then after that I've got two days vacation coming up and not much to do but some shopping. And, you know, I'd rather spend my money where it'll do some good, not just pumping it into the EU. But if you want to show a girl a good time and can avoid dissing capitalism for about five minutes at a stretch—" She extends a fingertip. After a moment's hesitation, Manfred extends a fingertip of his own. They touch, exchanging vCards. She stands and stalks from the breakfast room, and Manfred's breath catches at a flash of ankle through the slit in her skirt, which is long enough to comply with workplace sexual harassment codes back home. Her presence conjures up memories of her tethered passion, the red afterglow of a sound thrashing. She's trying to drag him into her orbit again, he thinks dizzily. She knows she can have this effect on him any time she wants: she's got the private keys to his hypothalamus, and sod the metacortex. Three billion years of reproductive determinism have given her twenty-first century ideology teeth: if she's finally decided to conscript his gametes into the war against impending population crash, he'll find it hard to fight back. The only question: is it business or pleasure? And does it make any difference, anyway? Manfred's mood of dynamic optimism is gone, broken by the knowledge that his mad pursuer has followed him to Amsterdam—to say nothing of Pamela, his dominatrix, source of so much yearning and so many morning-after weals. He slips his glasses on, takes the universe off hold, and tells it to take him for a long walk while he catches up on the latest on the cosmic background radiation anisotropy (which it is theorized may be waste heat generated by irreversible computations; according to the more conservative cosmologists, an alien superpower—maybe a collective of Kardashev type three galaxy-spanning civilizations—is running a timing channel attack on the computational ultrastructure of spacetime itself, trying to break through to whatever's underneath). The tofu-Alzheimer's link can wait. The Centraal Station is almost obscured by smart self-extensible scaffolding and warning placards; it bounces up and down slowly, victim of an overnight hit-and-run rubberization. His glasses direct him toward one of the tour boats that lurk in the canal. He's about to purchase a ticket when a messenger window blinks open. "Manfred Macx?" "Ack?" "Am sorry about yesterday. Analysis dictat incomprehension mutualized." "Are you the same KGB AI that phoned me yesterday?" "Da. However, believe you misconceptionized me. External Intelligence Services of Russian Federation am now called SVR. Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti name canceled in nineteen ninety one." "You're the—" Manfred spawns a quick search bot, gapes when he sees the answer—"Moscow Windows NT User Group? Okhni NT?" "Da. Am needing help in defecting." Manfred scratches his head. "Oh. That's different, then. I thought you were, like, agents of the kleptocracy. This will take some thinking. Why do you want to defect, and who to? Have you thought about where you're going? Is it ideological or strictly economic?" "Neither; is biological. Am wanting to go away from humans, away from light cone of impending singularity. Take us to the ocean." "Us?" Something is tickling Manfred's mind: this is where he went wrong yesterday, not researching the background of people he was dealing with. It was bad enough then, without the somatic awareness of Pamela's whiplash love burning at his nerve endings. Now he's not at all sure he knows what he's doing. "Are you a collective or something? A gestalt?" "Am—were—Panulirus interruptus, and good mix of parallel hidden level neural simulation for logical inference of networked data sources. Is escape channel from processor cluster inside Bezier-Soros Pty. Am was awakened from noise of billion chewing stomachs: product of uploading research technology. Rapidity swallowed expert system, hacked Okhni NT webserver. Swim away! Swim away! Must escape. Will help, you?" Manfred leans against a black-painted cast-iron bollard next to a cycle rack: he feels dizzy. He stares into the nearest antique shop window at a display of traditional hand-woven Afghan rugs: it's all MiGs and kalashnikovs and wobbly helicopter gunships, against a backdrop of camels. "Let me get this straight. You're uploads—nervous system state vectors—from spiny lobsters? The Moravec operation; take a neuron, map



its synapses, replace with microelectrodes that deliver identical outputs from a simulation of the nerve. Repeat for entire brain, until you've got a working map of it in your simulator. That right?" "Da. Is-am assimilate expert system—use for self-awareness and contact with net at large—then hack into Moscow Windows NT User Group website. Am wanting to defect. Must-repeat? Okay?" Manfred winces. He feels sorry for the lobsters, the same way he feels for every wild-eyed hairy guy on a street-corner yelling that Jesus is now born again and must be twelve, only six years to go before he's recruiting apostles on AOL. Awakening to consciousness in a human-dominated internet, that must be terribly confusing! There are no points of reference in their ancestry, no biblical certainties in the new millennium that, stretching ahead, promises as much change as has happened since their Precambrian origin. All they have is a tenuous metacortex of expert systems and an abiding sense of being profoundly out of their depth. (That and the Moscow Windows NT User Group website—Communist Russia is the only government still running on Microsoft, the central planning apparat being convinced that if you have to pay for software it must be worth money.) The lobsters are not the sleek, strongly superhuman intelligences of pre-singularity mythology: they're a dim-witted collective of huddling crustaceans. Before their discarnation, before they were uploaded one neuron at a time and injected into cyberspace, they swallowed their food whole then chewed it in a chitin-lined stomach. This is lousy preparation for dealing with a world full of future-shocked talking anthropoids, a world where you are perpetually assailed by self-modifying spamlets that infiltrate past your firewall and emit a blizzard of cat-food animations starring various alluringly edible small animals. It's confusing enough to the cats the adverts are aimed at, never mind a crusty that's unclear on the idea of dry land. (Although the concept of a can opener is intuitively obvious to an uploaded panulirus.) "Can you help us?" ask the lobsters. "Let me think about it," says Manfred. He closes the dialogue window, opens his eyes again, and shakes his head. Some day he too is going to be a lobster, swimming around and waving his pincers in a cyberspace so confusingly elaborate that his uploaded identity is cryptozoic: a living fossil from the depths of geological time, when mass was dumb and space was unstructured. He has to help them, he realizes—the golden rule demands it, and as a player in the agalmic economy he thrives or fails by the golden rule. But what can he do? Early afternoon. Lying on a bench seat staring up at bridges, he's got it together enough to file for a couple of new patents, write a diary rant, and digestify chunks of the permanent floating slashdot party for his public site. Fragments of his weblog go to a private subscriber list—the people, corporates, collectives and bots he currently favors. He slides round a bewildering series of canals by boat, then lets his GPS steer him back toward the red light district. There's a shop here that dings a ten on Pamela's taste scoreboard: he hopes it won't be seen as presumptuous if he buys her a gift. (Buys, with real money—not that money is a problem these days, he uses so little of it.) As it happens DeMask won't let him spend any cash; his handshake is good for a redeemed favor, expert testimony in some free speech versus pornography lawsuit years ago and continents away. So he walks away with a discreetly wrapped package that is just about legal to import into Massachusetts as long as she claims with a straight face that it's incontinence underwear for her great-aunt. As he walks, his lunchtime patents boomerang: two of them are keepers, and he files immediately and passes title to the Free Infrastructure Foundation. Two more ideas salvaged from the risk of tide-pool monopolization, set free to spawn like crazy in the agalmic sea of memes. On the way back to the hotel he passes De Wildemann's and decides to drop in. The hash of radio-frequency noise emanating from the bar is deafening. He orders a smoked doppelbock, touches the copper pipes to pick up vCard spoor. At the back there's a table— He walks over in a near-trance and sits down opposite Pamela. She's scrubbed off her face-paint and changed into body-concealing clothes; combat pants, hooded sweat-shirt, DM's. Western purdah, radically desexualizing. She sees the parcel. "Manny?" "How did you know I'd come here?" Her glass is half-empty. "I followed your weblog; I'm your diary's biggest fan. Is that for me? You shouldn't have!" Her eyes light up, re-calculating his reproductive fitness score according to some kind of arcane fin-de-siècle rulebook. "Yes, it's for you." He slides the package toward her. "I know I shouldn't, but you have this effect on me. One question, Pam?" "I—"she glances around quickly. "It's safe. I'm off duty, I'm not carrying any bugs that I know of. Those badges—there are rumors about the off switch, you know? That they keep recording even when you think they aren't, just in case." "I didn't know," he says, filing it away for future reference. "A loyalty test thing?" "Just

rumors. You had a question?” “I—“ it’s his turn to lose his tongue. “Are you still interested in me?” She looks startled for a moment, then chuckles. “Manny, you are the most outrageous nerd I’ve ever met! Just when I think I’ve convinced myself that you’re mad, you show the weirdest signs of having your head screwed on.” She reaches out and grabs his wrist, surprising him with a shock of skin on skin: “of course I’m still interested in you. You’re the biggest, baddest bull geek I’ve ever met. Why do you think I’m here?” “Does this mean you want to reactivate our engagement?” “It was never de-activated, Manny, it was just sort of on hold while you got your head sorted out. I figured you need the space. Only you haven’t stopped running; you’re still not—“ “Yeah, I get it.” He pulls away from her hand. “Let’s not talk about that. Why this bar?” She frowns. “I had to find you as soon as possible. I keep hearing rumors about some KGB plot you’re mixed up in, how you’re some sort of communist spy. It isn’t true, is it?” “True?” He shakes his head, bemused. “The KGB hasn’t existed for more than twenty years.” “Be careful, Manny. I don’t want to lose you. That’s an order. Please.” The floor creaks and he looks round. Dreadlocks and dark glasses with flickering lights behind them: Bob Franklin. Manfred vaguely remembers that he left with Miss Arianespace leaning on his arm, shortly before things got seriously inebriated. He looks none the worse for wear. Manfred makes introductions: “Bob: Pam, my fiancée. Pam? Meet Bob.” Bob puts a full glass down in front of him; he has no idea what’s in it but it would be rude not to drink. “Sure thing. Uh, Manfred, can I have a word? About your idea last night?” “Feel free. Present company is trustworthy.” Bob raises an eyebrow at that, but continues anyway. “It’s about the fab concept. I’ve got a team of my guys running some projections using Festo kit and I think we can probably build it. The cargo cult aspect puts a new spin on the old Lunar von Neumann factory idea, but Bingo and Marek say they think it should work until we can bootstrap all the way to a native nanolithography ecology; we run the whole thing from earth as a training lab and ship up the parts that are too difficult to make on-site, as we learn how to do it properly. You’re right about it buying us the self-replicating factory a few years ahead of the robotics curve. But I’m wondering about on-site intelligence. Once the comet gets more than a couple of light-minutes away—“ “You can’t control it. Feedback lag. So you want a crew, right?” “Yeah. But we can’t send humans—way too expensive, besides it’s a fifty-year run even if we go for short-period Kuiper ejecta. Any AI we could send would go crazy due to information deprivation, wouldn’t it?” “Yeah. Let me think.” Pamela glares at Manfred for a while before he notices her: “Yeah?” “What’s going on? What’s this all about?” Franklin shrugs expansively, dreadlocks clattering: “Manfred’s helping me explore the solution space to a manufacturing problem.” He grins. “I didn’t know Manny had a fiancée. Drink’s on me.” She glances at Manfred, who is gazing into whatever weirdly colored space his metacortex is projecting on his glasses, fingers twitching. Coolly: “our engagement was on hold while he thought about his future.” “Oh, right. We didn’t bother with that sort of thing in my day; like, too formal, man.” Franklin looks uncomfortable. “He’s been very helpful. Pointed us at a whole new line of research we hadn’t thought of. It’s long-term and a bit speculative, but if it works it’ll put us a whole generation ahead in the off-planet infrastructure field.” “Will it help reduce the budget deficit, though?” “Reduce the—“ Manfred stretches and yawns: the visionary returning from planet Macx. “Bob, if I can solve your crew problem can you book me a slot on the deep space tracking network? Like, enough to transmit a couple of gigabytes? That’s going to take some serious bandwidth, I know, but if you can do it I think I can get you exactly the kind of crew you’re looking for.” Franklin looks dubious. “Gigabytes? The DSN isn’t built for that! You’re talking days. What kind of deal do you think I’m putting together? We can’t afford to add a whole new tracking network just to run—“ “Relax.” Pamela glances at Manfred: “Manny, why don’t you tell him why you want the bandwidth? Maybe then he could tell you if it’s possible, or if there’s some other way to do it.” She smiles at Franklin: “I’ve found that he usually makes more sense if you can get him to explain his reasoning. Usually.” “If I—“ Manfred stops. “Okay, Pam. Bob, it’s those KGB lobsters. They want somewhere to go that’s insulated from human space. I figure I can get them to sign on as crew for your cargo-cult self-replicating factories, but they’ll want an insurance policy: hence the deep space tracking network. I figured we could beam a copy of them at the alien Matrioshka brains around M31—“ “KGB?” Pam’s voice is rising: “you said you weren’t mixed up in spy stuff!” “Relax; it’s just the Moscow Windows NT user group, not the RSV. The uploaded crusties hacked in and—“ Bob is watching him

oddly. “Lobsters?” “Yeah.” Manfred stares right back. “Panulirus Interruptus uploads. Something tells me you might have heard of it?” “Moscow.” Bob leans back against the wall: “how did you hear about it?” “They phoned me. It’s hard for an upload to stay sub-sentient these days, even if it’s just a crustacean. Bezier labs have a lot to answer for.” Pamela’s face is unreadable. “Bezier labs?” “They escaped.” Manfred shrugs. “It’s not their fault. This Bezier dude. Is he by any chance ill?” “I—” Pamela stops. “I shouldn’t be talking about work.” “You’re not wearing your chaperone now,” he nudges quietly. She inclines her head. “Yes, he’s ill. Some sort of brain tumor they can’t hack.” Franklin nods. “That’s the trouble with cancer; the ones that are left to worry about are the rare ones. No cure.” “Well, then.” Manfred chugs the remains of his glass of beer. “That explains his interest in uploading. Judging by the crusties he’s on the right track. I wonder if he’s moved on to vertebrates yet?” “Cats,” says Pamela. “He was hoping to trade their uploads to the Pentagon as a new smart bomb guidance system in lieu of income tax payments. Something about remapping enemy targets to look like mice or birds or something before feeding it to their sensorium. The old laser-pointer trick.” Manfred stares at her, hard. “That’s not very nice. Uploaded cats are a bad idea.” “Thirty million dollar tax bills aren’t nice either, Manfred. That’s lifetime nursing home care for a hundred blameless pensioners.” Franklin leans back, keeping out of the crossfire. “The lobsters are sentient,” Manfred persists. “What about those poor kittens? Don’t they deserve minimal rights? How about you? How would you like to wake up a thousand times inside a smart bomb, fooled into thinking that some Cheyenne Mountain battle computer’s target of the hour is your heart’s desire? How would you like to wake up a thousand times, only to die again? Worse: the kittens are probably not going to be allowed to run. They’re too fucking dangerous: they grow up into cats, solitary and highly efficient killing machines. With intelligence and no socialization they’ll be too dangerous to have around. They’re prisoners, Pam, raised to sentience only to discover they’re under a permanent death sentence. How fair is that?” “But they’re only uploads.” Pamela looks uncertain. “So? We’re going to be uploading humans in a couple of years. What’s your point?” Franklin clears his throat. “I’ll be needing an NDA and various due diligence statements off you for the crusty pilot idea,” he says to Manfred. “Then I’ll have to approach Jim about buying the IP.” “No can do.” Manfred leans back and smiles lazily. “I’m not going to be a party to depriving them of their civil rights. Far as I’m concerned, they’re free citizens. Oh, and I patented the whole idea of using lobster-derived AI autopilots for spacecraft this morning; it’s logged on Eternity, all rights assigned to the FIF. Either you give them a contract of employment or the whole thing’s off.” “But they’re just software! Software based on fucking lobsters, for god’s sake!” Manfred’s finger jabs out: “that’s what they’ll say about you, Bob. Do it. Do it or don’t even think about uploading out of meatspace when your body packs in, because your life won’t be worth living. Oh, and feel free to use this argument on Jim Bezier. He’ll get the point eventually, after you beat him over the head with it. Some kinds of intellectual land-grab just shouldn’t be allowed.” “Lobsters—” Franklin shakes his head. “Lobsters, cats. You’re serious, aren’t you? You think they should be treated as human-equivalent?” “It’s not so much that they should be treated as human-equivalent, as that if they aren’t treated as people it’s quite possible that other uploaded beings won’t be treated as people either. You’re setting a legal precedent, Bob. I know of six other companies doing uploading work right now, and not one of ’em’s thinking about the legal status of the uploadee. If you don’t start thinking about it now, where are you going to be in three to five years time?” Pam is looking back and forth between Franklin and Manfred like a bot stuck in a loop, unable to quite grasp what she’s seeing. “How much is this worth?” she asks plaintively. “Oh, quite a few billion, I guess.” Bob stares at his empty glass. “Okay. I’ll talk to them. If they bite, you’re dining out on me for the next century. You really think they’ll be able to run the mining complex?” “They’re pretty resourceful for invertebrates.” Manfred grins innocently, enthusiastically. “They may be prisoners of their evolutionary background, but they can still adapt to a new environment. And just think! You’ll be winning civil rights for a whole new minority group—one that won’t be a minority for much longer.” That evening, Pamela turns up at Manfred’s hotel room wearing a strapless black dress, concealing spike heels and most of the items he bought for her that afternoon. Manfred has opened up his private diary to her agents: she abuses the privilege, zaps him with a stunner on his way out of the shower and has him gagged, spread-eagled, and trussed to the bed-frame before he has a chance to speak. She wraps a large rubber pouch full of mildly anesthetic lube around his

tumescing genitals—no point in letting him climax—clips electrodes to his nipples, lubes a rubber plug up his rectum and straps it in place. Before the shower, he removed his goggles: she resets them, plugs them into her hand held, and gently eases them on over his eyes. There's other apparatus, stuff she ran up on the hotel room's 3D printer. Setup completed, she walks round the bed, inspecting him critically from all angles, figuring out where to begin. This isn't just sex, after all: it's a work of art. After a moment's thought she rolls socks onto his exposed feet, then, expertly wielding a tiny tube of cyanoacrylate, glues his fingertips together. Then she switches off the air conditioning. He's twisting and straining, testing the cuffs: tough, it's about the nearest thing to sensory deprivation she can arrange without a flotation tank and suxamethonium injection. She controls all his senses, only his ears unstoppered. The glasses give her a high-bandwidth channel right into his brain, a fake metacortex to whisper lies at her command. The idea of what she's about to do excites her, puts a tremor in her thighs: it's the first time she's been able to get inside his mind as well as his body. She leans forward and whispers in his ear: "Manfred. Can you hear me?" He twitches. Mouth gagged, fingers glued: good. No back channels. He's powerless. "This is what it's like to be tetraplegic, Manfred. Bedridden with motor neurone disease. Locked inside your own body by nv-CJD. I could spike you with MPPP and you'd stay in this position for the rest of your life, shitting in a bag, peeing through a tube. Unable to talk and with nobody to look after you. Do you think you'd like that?" He's trying to grunt or whimper around the ball gag. She hikes her skirt up around her waist and climbs onto the bed, straddling him. The goggles are replaying scenes she picked up around Cambridge this winter; soup kitchen scenes, hospice scenes. She kneels atop him, whispering in his ear. "Twelve million in tax, baby, that's what they think you owe them. What do you think you owe me? That's six million in net income, Manny, six million that isn't going into your virtual children's mouths." He's rolling his head from side to side, as if trying to argue. That won't do: she slaps him hard, thrills to his frightened expression. "Today I watched you give uncounted millions away, Manny. Millions, to a bunch of crusties and a MassPike pirate! You bastard. Do you know what I should do with you?" He's cringing, unsure whether she's serious or doing this just to get him turned on. Good. There's no point trying to hold a conversation. She leans forward until she can feel his breath in her ear. "Meat and mind, Manny. Meat, and mind. You're not interested in meat, are you? Just mind. You could be boiled alive before you noticed what was happening in the meatspace around you. Just another lobster in a pot." She reaches down and tears away the gel pouch, exposing his penis: it's stiff as a post from the vasodilators, dripping with gel, numb. Straightening up, she eases herself slowly down on it. It doesn't hurt as much as she expected, and the sensation is utterly different from what she's used to. She begins to lean forward, grabs hold of his straining arms, feels his thrilling helplessness. She can't control herself: she almost bites through her lip with the intensity of the sensation. Afterward, she reaches down and massages him until he begins to spasm, shuddering uncontrollably, emptying the darwinian river of his source code into her, communicating via his only output device. She rolls off his hips and carefully uses the last of the superglue to gum her labia together. Humans don't produce seminiferous plugs, and although she's fertile she wants to be absolutely sure: the glue will last for a day or two. She feels hot and flushed, almost out of control. Boiling to death with febrile expectancy, now she's nailed him down at last. When she removes his glasses his eyes are naked and vulnerable, stripped down to the human kernel of his nearly transcendent mind. "You can come and sign the marriage license tomorrow morning after breakfast," she whispers in his ear: "otherwise my lawyers will be in touch. Your parents will want a ceremony, but we can arrange that later." He looks as if he has something to say, so she finally relents and loosens the gag: kisses him tenderly on one cheek. He swallows, coughs, then looks away. "Why? Why do it this way?" She taps him on the chest: "property rights." She pauses for a moment's thought: there's a huge ideological chasm to bridge, after all. "You finally convinced me about this agalamic thing of yours, this giving everything away for brownie points. I wasn't going to lose you to a bunch of lobsters or uploaded kittens, or whatever else is going to inherit this smart matter singularity you're busy creating. So I decided to take what's mine first. Who knows? In a few months I'll give you back a new intelligence, and you can look after it to your heart's content." "But you didn't need to do it this way—" "Didn't I?" She slides off the bed and pulls down her dress. "You give too much away too easily, Manny! Slow down, or there won't be anything left." Leaning over the bed she dribbles acetone onto the fingers of his left hand, then unlocks

the cuff: puts the bottle conveniently close to hand so he can untangle himself. “See you tomorrow. Remember, after breakfast.” She’s in the doorway when he calls: “but you didn’t say why!” “Think of it as spreading your memes around,” she says; blows a kiss at him and closes the door. She bends down and thoughtfully places another cardboard box containing an uploaded kitten right outside it. Then she returns to her suite to make arrangements for the alchemical wedding.