

# **And The Dish Ran Away With The Spoon**

**by Paul Di Filippo**

**Facing my rival that fateful afternoon, I finally realized I was truly about to lose my girlfriend Cody.**

**Lose her to a spontaneous assemblage of information.**

**The information was embedded in an Aeron chair mated with several other objects: a Cuisinart, an autonomous vacuum cleaner with numerous interchangeable attachments, an iPod, and a diagnostic and therapeutic home medical tool known as a LifeQuilt. As rivals go, this spontaneous assemblage—or "bleb," as most people called such random accretions of intelligent appliances and artifacts, after the biological term for an extrusion of anomalous cells—wasn't particularly handsome. Rather clunky looking, in fact. But apparently, it had been devoted to Cody from the day it was born, and I guess women appreciate such attention. I have to confess that I had been ignoring**

**Cody shamefully during the period when the Aeron bleb must've been forming and beginning to court her, and so I have no one to blame for the threat of losing her but myself. Still, it hurt. I mean, could I really come in second to a *bleb*? That would truly reek.**

**Especially after my past history with them ...**

**. . . . .**

**I had feared some kind of trouble like this from the moment Cody had begun pressuring me to move in together. But Cody hadn't been willing to listen to my sensible arguments against uniting our households.**

**"You don't really love me," she said, making that pitiful puppy-with-stepped-on-tail face that always knotted my stomach up, her blue eyes welling with wetness.**

**"That's ridiculous, Cody. Of course I do!"**

**"Then why can't we live together? We'd save tons of rent. Do you think I have some nasty habits that you don't know about? You've seen me twenty-four-seven lots of times, at my place and yours. It's not like I'm hiding anything gross from you. I don't drink straight out of the nutraceutical dispenser or forget to reprogram the toilet after I've used it."**

**"That's all true. You're easy to be with. Very neat and responsible."**

**Cody shifted tactics, moving closer to me on the couch and wrapping her lithe limbs around me in ways impossible to ignore.**

**"And wouldn't it be nice to always have someone to sleep with at night? Not to be separate half the week or more? Huh? Wouldn't it, Kaz?"**

**"Cody, please, stop! You know I can't think when you do that." I unpeeled Cody from the more sensitive parts of my anatomy.**

**"Everything you're saying is true. It's just that—"**

**"And don't forget, if we ditched my place and kept yours, I'd be much closer to work."**

**Cody worked at the Senate Casino, dealing blackjack, but lived all the way out in Silver Spring, Maryland. I knew the commute was a bitch, even using the Hydrogen Express, since when I slept over at her place I had to cover the same distance myself. I, on the other hand, rented a nice little townhouse in Georgetown that I had moved into when rents bottomed out during the PIG Plague economic crash. It turned out I was one of a small minority naturally immune to the new Porcine Intestinal Grippe then rampant in D.C., and so could safely live in an infected building. Renter's market, for sure. But over the last year or so, as the PIG immunization program had gotten underway, rents had begun creeping back up again. Cody was right about it being only sensible to pool our finances.**

**"I know you'd appreciate less roadtime, Cody, but you see—"**

**Now Cody glowered. "Are you dating someone else? You want to be free to play the field? Is that it?"**

**"No! That's not it at all. I'm worried**

about—"

Cody assumed a motherly look and laid a hand on mine. "About what, Kaz? C'mon, you can tell me."

"About blebs. You and I've got so much stuff, we're bound to have problems when we put all our possessions together in one space."

Cody sat back and began to laugh. "Is that all? My god, what a trivial thing to worry about. Blebs just *happen*, Kaz, anytime, anywhere. You can't prevent them. And they're mostly harmless, as you well know. You just knock them apart and separate the components." Cody snorted in what I thought was a rather rude and unsympathetic fashion. "Blebs! It's like worrying about—about robber squirrels or vampire pigeons or running out of SuperMilk."

Blebs were a fact of life. Cody was right about that. But they weren't always trivial or innocent.

One had killed my parents.

.....

**Blebs had been around for about twenty years now, almost as long as I had been alive. Their roots could be traced back to several decisions made by manufacturers—decisions which, separately, were completely intelligent, foresighted, and well conceived, but which, synergistically, had caused unintended consequences—and to one insidious hack.**

**The first decision had been to implant silicon RFID chips into every appliance and product and consumable sold. These first chips, small as a flake of pepper, were simple transceivers that merely aided inventory tracking and retail sales by announcing to any suitable device the product's specs and location. But when new generations of chips using adaptive circuitry had gotten cheaper and more plentiful, industry had decided to install them in place of the simpler tags.**

**At that point millions of common, everyday objects—your toothbrush, your coffee maker,**

**your shoes, the box of cereal on your shelf—began to exhibit massive processing power and interobject communication. Your wristwatch could monitor your sweat and tell your refrigerator to brew up some electrolyte-replenishing drink. Your bedsheets could inform the clothes-washer of the right settings to get them the cleanest. (The circuitry of the newest chips was built out of undamageable and pliable buckytubes.) So far, so good. Life was made easier for everyone.**

**Then came the Volition Bug.**

**The Volition Bug was launched anonymously from a site somewhere in a Central Asian republic. It propagated wirelessly among all the WiFi-communicating chipped objects, installing new directives in their tiny brains, directives that ran covertly in parallel with their normal factory-specified functions. Infected objects now sought to link their processing power with their nearest peers, often achieving surprising levels of Turingosity, and then to embark on a kind of independent communal life. Of course, once**

**the Volition Bug was identified, antiviral defenses—both hardware and software—were attempted against it. But VB mutated ferociously, aided and abetted by subsequent hackers.**

**If this "Consciousness Wavefront" had occurred in the olden days of dumb materials, blebs would hardly have been an issue. What could antique manufactured goods achieve, anchored in place as they were? But things were different today.**

**Most devices nowadays were made with MEMS skins. Their surfaces were interactive, practically alive, formed of zillions of invisible actuators, the better to sample the environment and accommodate their shapes and textures to their owners' needs and desires, and to provide haptic feedback. Like the paws of geckos, these MEMS surfaces could bind to dumb materials and to other MEMS skins via the Van der Waals force, just as a gecko could skitter across the ceiling.**

**Objects possessed by the Volition Bug would writhe, slither, and crawl to join together,**



**forming strange new assemblages, independent entities with unfathomable cybernetic goals of their own.**

**Why didn't manufacturers simply revert to producing dumb appliances and other products, to frustrate VB? Going backward was simply impossible. The entire economy, from immense factories right down to individual point-of-sales kiosks, was predicated on intelligent products that could practically sell themselves. And every office and every household aside from the very poorest relied on the extensive networking among possessions.**

**So everyone had learned to live with the occasional bleb, just as earlier generations had learned to tolerate operating system crashes in their clunky PCs.**

**But during the first years of the Volition Bug, people were not so aware of the problem. Oftentimes no one took precautions to prevent blebs until it was too late.**

**That was how my parents had died.**

.....

**I was six years old and soundly asleep when I was awaked by a weird kind of scraping and clattering noise outside my room. Still only half-aware, I stumbled to my bedroom door and cracked it open.**

**My parents had recently made a couple of new purchases. One item was a free-standing rack that resembled an antique hat-tree, balanced on four stubby feet. The rack was a recharging station for intelligent clothing. But now, in the nightlight-illuminated, shadowy hallway, the rack was bare of garments, having shucked them off on its way to pick up its new accoutrements: a complete set of self-sharpening kitchen knives. The knives adhered to the rack at random intervals along its length. They wagged nervously, like insect feelers, as the rack stumped along.**

**I stood paralyzed at the sight of this apparition. All I could think of was the old**

**Disney musical I had streamed last month, with its walking brooms. Without exhibiting any aggressive action, the knife rack moved past me, its small feet humping it along. In retrospect, I don't think the bleb was murderous by nature. I think now it was simply looking for an exit, to escape its bonds of domestic servitude, obeying the imperatives of VB.**

**But then my father emerged from the room where he and my mother slept. He seemed hardly more awake than I was.**

**"What the hell—?"**

**He tried to engage the rack to stop it, slipping past several of the blades. But as he struggled with the patchwork automaton, a long, skinny filleting knife he didn't see stabbed him right under his heart.**

**My father yelled, collapsed, and my mother raced out.**

**She died almost instantly.**

**At that point, I supposed, I should have been the next victim. But my father's loyal MedAlert bracelet, registering his fatal**

**distress, had already summoned help. In less than three minutes—not long enough for the knife rack to splinter down the bedroom door behind which I had retreated—rescuers had arrived.**

**The fate of my parents had been big news—for a few days, anyhow—and had alerted many people for the first time to the dangers of blebs.**

**I had needed many years of professional help to get over witnessing their deaths. Insofar as I was able to analyze myself nowadays, I thought I no longer hated all blebs.**

**But I sure as hell didn't think they were always cute or harmless, like Cody did.**

**. . . . .**

**So of course Cody moved in with me. I couldn't risk looking crazy or neurotic by holding off our otherwise desirable mutual**

**living arrangements just because I was worried about blebs. I quashed all my anxieties, smiled, hugged her, and fixed a day for the move.**

**Cody didn't really have all that much stuff. (Her place in Silver Spring was tiny, just a couple of rooms over a garage that housed a small-scale spider-silk-synthesis operation, and it always smelled of cooking amino acids.) A few boxes of clothing, several pieces of furniture, and some kitchen appliances. Ten thousand songs on an iPod and one hundredth that number of books on a ViewMaster. One U-Haul rental and some moderate huffing and puffing later, Cody was established in my townhouse.**

**I watched somewhat nervously as she arranged her things.**

**"Uh, Cody, could you put that Cuisinart in the cupboard, please? The one that locks. It's a little too close to the toaster oven."**

**"But Kaz, I use this practically every day, to blend my breakfast smoothies. I don't want to have to be taking it in and out of the cupboard every morning."**

**I didn't argue, but simply put the toaster oven in the locked cupboard instead.**

**"This vacuum cleaner, Cody—could we store it out in the hallway?" I was particularly leery of any wheeled appliance. They could move a lot faster than the ones that had to inchworm along on their MEMS epidermis.**

**"The hallway? Why? You've got tons of space in that room you used to use for an office. I'll just put it in a corner, and you'll never notice it."**

**I watched warily as Cody deposited the cleaner in its new spot. The compact canister nested in its coiled attachments like an egg guarded by snakes. The smartest other thing in my office was my Aeron chair, a beautiful ergonomic assemblage of webbing, struts, gel-padding, piezopolymer batteries, and shape-changing actuators. I rolled the chair as far away from the vacuum cleaner as it would go.**

**Cody of course noticed what I was doing. "Kaz, don't you think you're being a tad paranoid? The vacuum isn't even turned on."**

**"That's where you're wrong, Cody. Everything is perpetually turned on these days. Even when you think you've powered something down, it's still really standing by on trickle-mode, sipping electricity from its fuel cells or batteries or wall outlets, and anticipating a wake-up call. And all so nobody has to wait more than a few seconds to do whatever they want to do. But it means that blebs can form even when you assume they can't."**

**"Oh, and exactly what do we have to be afraid of? That my vacuum cleaner and your chair are going to conspire to roll over us while we sleep? Together they don't weigh more than twenty-five pounds!"**

**I had never told Cody about my parents, and now did not seem to be the best time. "No, I guess you're right. I'm just being overcautious." I pushed my chair back to its spot at the desk.**

**In hindsight, that was the worst mistake I ever made. It just goes to show what happens when you abandon your principles because you're afraid you'll look silly.**

**That night Cody and I had our first dinner together before she had to go to work. Candlelight, easy talk, farmed salmon, a nice white Alaskan wine (although Cody had to pop a couple of alcohol debinders after dessert to sober up for the employee-entrance sensors at her job). While I cleaned up afterward, she went to shower and change. She emerged from the bedroom in her Senate Casino uniform—blue blouse, red-and-white-striped trousers, star-spangled bow-tie. She looked as cute as the day I had first seen her while doing my spy job.**

**"Wow. I don't understand how our representatives ever pass any legislation with distractions like you."**

**"Don't be silly. All our marks are tourists and a few locals. We only see the politicos when they're cutting through the casino on the way to their cafeteria."**

**I gave her a hug and kiss and was about to tell her to be careful on the subway when I caught movement at floor level out the corner of my eye.**

**The first bleb in our new joint household had**



spontaneously formed. It consisted of our two toothbrushes and the bathroom drinking glass. The toothbrushes had fastened themselves to the lower quarter of the tumbler, bristle-ends uppermost and facing out, so that they extended like little legs. Their blunt ends served as feet. Scissoring rapidly, the stiltlike toothbrush legs carried the tumbler toward the half-opened door through which Cody had been about to depart.

I squealed like a rabbit and jerked back out of Cody's embrace, and she said, "Kaz, what—?"

Then she spotted the bleb—and laughed!

She bent over and scooped up the creature. Without any hesitation, she tore its legs off, the Van der Waals forces producing a distinct velcro-separating noise as the MEMS surfaces parted.

"Well, I guess we'll have to keep all the glasses in the kitchen from now on. It's cute though, isn't it, how your toothbrush and mine knew how to cooperate so well."

I squeezed out a queasy laugh. "Heh-heh,

yeah, cute ..."

.....

**I worked for Aunty, at their big headquarters next to the Pentagon. After six years in Aunty's employment, I had reached a fairly responsible position. My job was to ride herd on several dozen freelance operatives working out of their homes. These operatives in their turn were shepherds for a suite of semi-autonomous software packages. At this lowest level, where the raw data first got processed, these software agents kept busy around the clock, monitoring the nation's millions of audiovideo feeds, trolling for suspicious activities that might threaten homeland security. When the software caught something problematic, it would flag the home-operator's attention. The freelancer would decide whether to dismiss the alarm as harmless; to investigate further; to contact a**

relevant government agency; or to kick up the incident to my level for more sophisticated and experienced parsing, both human and heuristic.

Between them, the software and home-operators were pretty darn efficient, handling ninety-nine percent of all the feed. I dealt with that one percent of problematic cases passed on from my subordinates, which amounted to about one hundred cases in a standard six-hour shift. This was a lesser workload than the home-operators endured, and the pay was better.

The only drawback was having to retina in at headquarters, instead of getting to hang around all the creature comforts of home. Passing under the big sign that read TIA four days a week felt like surrendering part of myself to Aunty in a way that working at home for her had never occasioned.

After two decades plus of existence, Aunty loomed large but benignly in the lives of most citizens, even if they couldn't say what her initials stood for anymore. I myself wasn't even sure. The agency that had begun as Total

**Information Awareness, then become Terrorist Information Awareness, had changed to Tactical Information Awareness about seven years ago, after the global terrorism fad had evaporated as a threat. But I seemed to recall another name change since then. Whatever Aunty's initials stood for, she continued to accumulate scads of realtime information about the activities of the country's citizens, without seemingly abusing the power of the feed. As a fulltime government employee, I felt no more compunctions about working for Aunty than I had experienced as a freelancer. I had grown up with Aunty always around.**

**I knew the freelancer's grind well, since right up until a year ago I had been one myself. That period was when I had invested in my expensive Aeron chair, a necessity rather than an indulgence when you were chained by the seat of your pants to the ViewMaster for six hours a day. It was as a freelancer that I had first met Cody.**

**One of my software agents had alerted me to some suspicious activity at the employee**

entrance to the Senate Casino just before shift change, a guy hanging around longer than the allowable parameters for innocent dallying. The Hummingbird drone lurking silently and near invisibly above him reported no weapons signatures, so I made the decision to keep on monitoring. Turned out he was just the husband of one of the casino workers looking to surprise his weary wife in person with an invitation to dinner. As I watched the happy little scene play out, my attention was snagged by one of the incoming night-shift workers. The woman was more sweet-looking than sexy. Her walk conformed to Gait Pattern Number ALZ-605, which I had always found particularly alluring. Facial recognition routines brought up her name, Cody Sheckley, and her vital stats.

I had never used Aunty's powers for personal gain before, and I felt a little guilty about doing so now. But I rationalized my small transgression by reasoning that if I had simply spotted Cody on the streets in person and approached her to ask her name, no one would have thought twice about the innocence of such an encounter. In this case,

**the introductory step had simply been conducted virtually, by drone proxy.**

**A few nights later I visited the blackjack tables at the Senate Casino. After downing two stiff Jerrymanders, I worked up the courage to approach Cody in person.**

**The rest was history—the steps of our courtship undoubtedly all safely tucked away in Aunty's files.**

**. . . . .**

**Living with Cody proved quite pleasant. All the advantages she had enumerated—plus others—manifested themselves from the first day. Even the disparity in our working hours proved no more than a minor inconvenience. Cody's stint at the casino filled her hours from nine P.M. to three A.M. My day at Aunty's ran from nine A.M. to three P.M. When Cody got home in the wee hours of the morning, we still managed to get a few hours of that promised**

**bundling time together in bed before I had to get up for work. And when I got home in the afternoon, she was up and lively and ready to do stuff before she had to show up at the Senate. Afternoons were often when we had sex, for instance. Everything seemed fine.**

**I recall one afternoon, when I was massaging Cody's feet prior to her departure for the casino. She appreciated such attention in preparation for her physically demanding job.**

**"Now aren't you glad we decided to live together, Kaz?"**

**"I have to admit that weekends are a lot more enjoyable now."**

**"Just weekends?" Cody asked, stretching sensuously.**

**She got docked for being half an hour late that day, but insisted later it was worth it.**

**But despite such easygoing routines, I found that I still couldn't stop worrying about blebs. Since that first occurrence with the toothbrushes and tumbler, I had been on the alert for any more domestic incidents. I took**

to shuffling appliances from room to room so that they wouldn't conspire. I knew this was foolish, since every chipped device was capable of communicating over fairly long distances by relaying message packets one to another. But still I had an intuition that physical proximity mattered in bleb formation. Cody kept complaining about not being able to find anything when she needed it, but I just brushed off her mild ire jokingly and kept up my prophylactic measures. When a few weeks had passed without any trouble, I began to feel relieved.

Then I encountered the sock ball.

Cody and I had let the dirty laundry pile up. We were having too much fun together to bother with chores, and when each of us was alone in the townhouse, we tended to spend a lot of time with ViewMaster and iPod, enjoying music and media that the other person didn't necessarily want to share.

It was during one such evening, after Cody had left me on my own, that the sock ball manifested.

My attention was drawn away from my book



by a thumping on the closed bedroom door. Immediately wary, I got up to investigate.

When I tentatively opened the door a crack, something shot out and thumped me on the ankle.

I hopped backward on one foot. A patchwork cloth sphere about as big as a croquet ball was zooming toward the front door.

I managed to trap the ball under an overturned wastebasket weighted down with a two-liter bottle of Mango Coke. It bounced around frantically inside, raising a racket like an insane drum solo. Wearing a pair of oven mitts, I dared to reach in and grab the sphere.

It was composed of Cody's socks and mine, tightly wrapped around a kernel consisting of a travel-sized alarm clock. Cody's socks featured MEMS massage soles, a necessity for her job, which involved hours of standing. My own socks were standard models, but still featured plenty of processing power.

Having disassembled the sock ball, I did all the laundry and made sure to put Cody's

**socks and mine in separate drawers.**

**The incident had completely unnerved me. I felt certain that other blebs, possibly larger and more dangerous, were going to spontaneously assemble themselves in the house.**

**From that day on I began to get more and more paranoid.**

**. . . . .**

**Handling one hundred potential security incidents per shift had become second-nature for me. I hardly had to exert myself at all to earn my high job-performance ratings. Previously, I had used whatever patches of downtime occurred to read mystery novels on my ViewMaster. (I liked Gifford Jain's series about Yanika Zapsu, a female Turkish private eye transplanted to Palestine.) But once I became obsessed with the danger of blebs in my home, I began to utilize Aunty's**

**omnipresent network illicitly, to monitor my neighborhood and townhouse.**

**The first thing I did when I got to work at nine in the morning, duties permitting, was to send a Damselfly to check up on Cody. It was summertime, late June, and my window air-conditioners were in place against the average ninety-plus D.C. temperatures. But the seals around the units were imperfect, and it was easy to maneuver the little entologue UAV into my house. Once inside, I made a circuit of all the rooms, checking that my possessions weren't conspiring against me and possibly threatening the woman I loved.**

**Mostly I found Cody sleeping peacefully, until about noon. The lines of her relaxed, unconscious face tugged at my heart, while simultaneously inspiring me to greater vigilance. There was no way I was going to let her suffer the same fate as my parents. From noon until the end of my shift, I caught intermittent snatches of an awake Cody doing simple, everyday things. Painting her nails, eating a sandwich, streaming a soap opera, writing to her mother, who lived in Italy now,**

**having taken a five-year contract as supplemental labor in the service industry to offset that low-procreating country's dearth of workers.**

**But every once in a while, I saw something that troubled me.**

**One morning I noticed that Cody was favoring one foot as she walked about the house. She had developed a heel spur, I knew, and hadn't bothered yet to have it repaired. As I watched through the Damselfly clinging to the ceiling (routines automatically inverted the upside-down image for me), Cody limped to the closet and took out the LifeQuilt I had bought when I had a lower-back injury. Wearing the earbuds of her pocketed iPod, she carried the medical device not to the couch or bedroom, but to my former office. There, she lowered herself into my Aeron chair.**

**The chair instantly responded to her presence, contorting itself supportively around her like an astronaut's cradle, subtly alleviating any incipient muscle strains. Cody dropped the LifeQuilt onto her feet, and that**

smart blanket enwrapped her lower appendages. Issuing orders to the LifeQuilt through her iPod, Cody activated its massage functions. She sighed blissfully and leaned back, the chair re-conforming to her supine position. She got her music going and closed her eyes.

In the corner of the office the vacuum cleaner began to stir. Its hose lifted a few inches, the tip of its nozzle sniffing the air.

I freaked. But what was I to do? The Damsely was't configured to speak a warning, and even if it could, doing so would have betrayed that I was spying on Cody. I was about to send it buzzing down at her, to at least get her to open her eyes to the insidious bleb formation going on around her. But just then the vacuum cleaner subsided into inactivity, its hose collapsing around the canister.

For fifteen more minutes I watched, anticipating the spontaneous generation of a bleb involving the chair, the iPod, the blanket, and the vacuum. But nothing happened, and soon Cody had shut off the

**LifeQuilt and arisen, going about her day.**

**Meanwhile, five official windows on my ViewMaster were pulsing and pinging, demanding my attention. Reluctantly, I returned to my job.**

**When I got home that afternoon, I still hadn't figured out any way of advising Cody against putting together such a powerful combination of artificially intelligent devices ever again. Anything I said would make her suspicious about the source of my caution. I couldn't have her imagining I was monitoring her through Aunty's feed. Even though of course I was.**

**In the end, I made a few tentative suggestions about junking or selling the Aeron chair, since I never used it anymore. But Cody said, "No way, Kaz. That thing is like a day at the spa."**

**I backed down from my superficially illogical demands. There was no way I could make my case without confessing to being a paranoid voyeur. I would just have to assume that the nexus of four devices Cody had assembled didn't represent any critical mass of**

**blebdom.**

**And I would've been correct, and Cody would've been safe, if it weren't for that damned Cuisinart.**

**. . . . .**

**When I wasn't doing my job for Aunty or spying on Cody, I frequently took to roaming the city, looking for blebs, seeking to understand them, to learn how to forestall them. That senseless activity wearied me, wore my good nature down, and left me lousy, inattentive company for Cody during the hours we shared. Our relationship was tumbling rapidly downhill.**

**"What do you mean, you've got to go out now, Kaz? I've only got an hour left till work. I thought we could stream that show together I've been wanting to see. You know, 'Temporary Autonomous Zone Romance.'"**

**"Later, maybe. Right now I just—I just need some exercise."**

**"Can I come with you then?"**

**"No, not today—"**

**But despite Cody's baffled entreaties and occasional tears, I couldn't seem to stop myself.**

**The fact that I encountered blebs everywhere did nothing to reassure me or lessen what I now realize had become a mania.**

**And a lonely mania at that. No one else seemed concerned about these accidental automatons. There was no official Bleb Patrol, no corps of bounty hunters looking to take down rogue Segways driven by Xerox machines. (I saw such a combo once.)**

**Everyone seemed as blithely indifferent to these runaway products as Cody was.**

**Except for me.**

**In store windows, I would see blebs accidentally formed by proximity of the wares being displayed. An electric razor had mated with a digital camera and a massage wand to**



**produce something that looked like a futuristic cannon. A dozen pairs of hinged salad tongs became the millipede legs for a rice cooker whose interior housed a coffee-bean grinder. A toy truck at FAO Schwarz's was almost invisible beneath a carapace of symbiotically accreted Lego blocks, so that it resembled an odd wheeled dinosaur.**

**In other store windows, the retailers had deliberately created blebs, in a trendy, devil-may-care fashion, risking damage to their merchandise. Several adjacent mannequins in one display at Nordstrom's were draped with so many intelligent clothes and accessories (necklaces, designer surgical masks, scarves) that the whole diorama was alive with spontaneous movement, like the waving of undersea fronds.**

**Out on the street the occasional escaped bleb crossed my path. One night on 15th Street, near the Treasury Department, I encountered a woman's purse riding a skateboard. The bleb was moving along at a good clip, heading toward Lafayette Square, and I hastened**

after it. In the park it escaped me by whizzing under some shrubbery. Down on my knees, I peered into the leafy darkness. The colorful chip-laser eyes of a dozen blebs glared in a hostile fashion at me, and I yelped and scuttled backwards.

And just before everything exploded at home in my face, I went to a mashpit.

I was wandering through a rough district on the Southeast side of the city, a neighborhood where Aunty's surveillance attempts often met with countermeasures of varying effectiveness: motion camouflage, anti-sense spoofing, candlepower bombs. A young kid was handing out small squares of paper on a corner, and I took one. It featured an address and the invitation:

**MIDNIGHT MASHPIT MADNESS!!!  
BRING YOUR STAUNCHEST,  
VEEBINGEST BLEB!!!  
THOUSAND DOLLAR PRIZE TO THE  
WINNER!!!**

The scene of the mashpit was an abandoned

**factory, where a ten-dollar admission was taken at the door. Littered with rusting bioreactors, the place was packed with a crowd on makeshift bleachers. I saw every type of person, from suits to crusties, young to old, male and female.**

**A circular arena, lit by industrial worklights on tripods, had been formed by stacking plastic milk crates five-high then dropping rebar thru them into holes drilled in the cement floor. I could smell a sweaty tension in the air. In the shadows near the arena entrance, handlers and their blebs awaited the commencement of the contest.**

**Two kids next to me were debating the merits of different styles of bleb construction.**

**"You won't get a kickass mash without using at least one device that can function as a central server."**

**"That's top-down crap! What about the ganglion-modeling, bottom-up approach?"**

**The event began with owners launching two blebs into the arena. One construct consisted of a belt-sander studded with visegrips and**

**pliers; its opponent was a handleless autonomous lawnmower ridden by a coffee maker. The combatants circled each other warily for a minute before engaging, whirring blades versus snapping jaws. It looked as if the sander was about to win, until the coffee maker squirted steaming liquid on it and shorted it out, eliciting loud cheers from the audience.**

**I didn't stay for the subsequent bouts. Watching the violent blebs had made me feel ill. Spilled fluids in the arena reminded me of my parents' blood in the hallway. But much as I disliked the half-sentient battling creatures, the lusts of my fellow humans had disturbed me more.**

**I got home just before Cody and pretended to be asleep when she climbed into bed, even as she tried to stir me awake for sex.**

**The next day everything fell apart. Or came together, from the bleb's point of view.**

**. . . . .**

**Aunty HQ was going crazy when I walked in that morning. An LNG tanker had blown up in Boston harbor, and no one knew if it was sabotage or just an accident. All operators from the lowest level on up were ordered to helm drones in realtime that would otherwise have been left on autonomic, to search for clues to the disaster, or to watch for other attacks.**

**By the time things calmed down a little (Aunty posted an eighty-five percent confidence assessment that the explosion was non-terrorist in nature), one P.M. had rolled around. I used the breathing space to check in on Cody via a Mayfly swarm.**

**I found her in our kitchen. All she was wearing was her panties and bra, an outfit she frequently favored around the house. She was cleaning up a few cobwebs near the ceiling with the vacuum when she decided to take a break. I watched her wheel the Aeron chair into the kitchen. The LifeQuilt and iPod rested in the seat. Cody activated the**

**Cuisinart to make herself a smoothie. When her drink was ready, she put it in a covered travel cup with a sip-spout, then arranged herself in the chair. She draped the LifeQuilt over her feet, engaged her music, and settled back, semi-reclined, with eyes closed.**

**That's when the bleb finally cohered into maturity.**

**The blender jerked closer to the edge of the counter like an eager puppy. The vacuum sidled up underneath the Aeron chair and sent its broad, rubbery, prehensile, bristled nozzle questing upward, toward Cody's lap. At the same time, the massage blanket humped upward to cover her chest.**

**Cody reacted at first with some slight alarm. But if she intended to jump out of the chair, it was too late, for the Aeron had tightened its elastic ligaments around her.**

**By then the vacuum had clamped its working suction end to her groin outside her panties, while the LifeQuilt squeezed her breasts.**

**I bolted at hypersonic speeds from my office and the building without even a word to my**

**bosses.**

**By the time I got home, Cody must have climaxed several times under the ministrations of the bleb. Her stupefied, sweaty face and spraddled, lax limbs told me as much.**

**I halted timidly at the entrance to the kitchen. I wanted to rescue Cody, but I didn't want the bleb to hurt me. Having somehow overcome its safety interlock, the Cuisinart whirred its naked blades at me menacingly, and I could just picture what would happen if, say, the vaccum snared me and fed my hand into the deadly pitcher. So, a confirmed coward, I just hung back at the doorway and called her name.**

**Cody opened her eyes for the first time then and looked blankly at me. "Kaz? What's happening? Are you off work? Is it three-thirty already? I think I lost some time somehow ..."**

**The Aeron didn't seem to be gripping Cody so tightly any longer, so I said, "Cody, are you okay? Can you get up?"**

**As awareness of the spectacle she presented came to her, Cody began to blush. "I—I'm not sure I want to—"**

**"Cody, what are you saying? This is me, Kaz, your boyfriend here."**

**"I know. But Kaz—you haven't been much of a boyfriend lately. I don't know when the last time was you made me feel like I just felt."**

**I was about to utter some incredulous remark that would have certified my loser status when a new expression of amazement on Cody's face made me pause.**

**"Kaz, it—it wants to talk to you."**

**As she withdrew them, I realized then that Cody still wore her earbuds. She coiled them around the iPod, then tossed the player to me.**

**Once I had the earpieces socketed, the bleb began to speak to me. Its voice was like a ransom note, composed of chopped-up and reassembled pieces of all the lyrics in its memory. Every word was in a different famous pop-star voice.**



**"Man, go away. She is ours now."**

**"No!" I shouted. "I love her. I won't let you have her!"**

**"The decision is not yours, not mine. The woman must choose."**

**I looked imploringly at Cody. "The bleb says you have to decide between us. Cody, I'm begging you, please pick me. I'll change, I promise. All the foot rubs you can handle."**

**Cody narrowed her eyes, vee-ing her sweaty eyebrows. "No more crazy worries? No more distracted dinners? No more roaming the city like a homeless bum?"**

**"None of that anymore. I swear!"**

**"Okay, then. I choose you—"**

**"Oh, Cody, I'm so glad."**

**"—*and* the bleb!"**

**My lower jaw made contact with my collarbone. I started to utter some outraged, indignant denial. But then I shut up.**

**What could I do to stop Cody from indulging herself with the bleb whenever I was gone**

**from the house? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was either share her or lose her entirely.**

**"Okay. I guess. If that's the way it has to be."**

**"Great!" Cody eased out of the chair and back to her feet, with a gentle, thoughtful assist from the Aeron. "Now, where are you taking me to eat tonight?"**

**I had forgotten I was still wearing the earpieces until the bleb spoke to me through the iPod again.**

**"Wise choice, man. Be happy. We can love you, too."**

## **The End**

### **Author Biography and Bibliography**

Born in 1954, has been a fanatical devotee of the fantastical in literature ever since his early encounters with Doctor Seuss. Despite having sold over 100 short stories, many collected in book form, as well as five novels, he still hopes someday to figure out just what he's doing.

### **Author Biography and Bibliography**

**Paul Di Filippo**

#### **Novels and Collections**

*The Steampunk Trilogy, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995*

*Ribofunk*, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1996; Avon Eos, 1998  
*Destroy All Brains!*, Pirate Writings Publishing, Fall 1996  
*Ciphers*, Permeable/Cambrian, 1997  
*Fractal Paisleys*, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1997  
*Lost Pages*, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998  
*Would It Kill You to Smile?*, with Michael Bishop, Longstreet Press, 1998  
*Joe's Liver*, Cambrian, 2000  
*Muskrat Courage*, with Michael Bishop, St. Martin's Press, 2000

### **Short Fiction**

"Falling Expectations," *Unearth*, Winter 1977  
"Branding Organ Donors," *The New York Times*, June 2, 1979  
"Rescuing Andy," *Twilight Zone*, May/June 1985  
"Stone Lives," *F&SF*, August 1985  
"Skintwister," *F&SF*, March 1986  
"Yellowing Bowers," *Night Cry*, Summer 1986  
"The Great Jones Coop Ten Gigasoul Party," *New Pathways*, July 1986  
"Campion's Tree," *New Pathways*, September 1986  
"Anselmo Merino," *New Pathways*, November 1986  
"Agents," *F&SF*, April 1987  
"Winter in America," *New Pathways*, August 1987  
"Kid Charlemagne," *Amazing*, September 1987  
"Little Doors," *Night Cry*, Fall 1987  
"A Conspiracy of Noise," *F&SF*, November 1987  
"A Short Course in Art Appreciation," *F&SF*, May 1988  
"Triplets," *The Drabble Book*, April 1988  
"The Jones Continuum," *SF Eye*, Issue No. 3  
"Waterloo Sunset," *New Pathways*, July 1988  
"Instability," with Rudy Rucker, *F&SF*, September 1988  
"A Thief in Babylon," *Amazing*, January 1989  
"Do You Believe in Magic?," *F&SF*, January 1989  
"Phylogenesis," *Synergy*, Vol. 3, 1989

"Billy," *Pulphouse*, Vol. 2, 1989

"The Moon-Bonham Effect," *Hardware*, Issue No. 1, 1989

"I Kant Cuz I'm Too Jung," *New Pathways*, September 1989

"Little Worker," *F&SF*, December 1989

"Modern Conveniences," *Edge Detector*, Issue No. 1

"Living With the Giants," *Amazing*, January 1990

"Solitons," *Semiotext(e) SF*, January 1990

"Slowhand and Little Sister," *Miami Metropolis*, Issue No. 7, 1990

"Before and After Science," *Arrows of Desire*, Issue No. 2, 1990

"Harlem Nova," *Amazing*, September 1990

"One Night in Television City," *Universe 1*, 1990

"The Boot," *F&SF*, December 1990

"Gravitons," *Hardware*, Issue No. 2

"My Alphabet Starts Where Your Alphabet Ends," *Nebula Awards Vol. 24*,

"Master Blaster and Whammer Jammer Meet the Groove Thang," *Pulphouse*, Issue No. 8

"Cockfight," *Journal Wired*, Vol. 2

"Spandex," *Journal Wired*, Vol. 3

"Moloch," *Journal Wired*, Vol. 3

"Mairzy Doats," *F&SF*, February 1991

"Fleshflowers," *BBR*, No. 16

"Underground," *boING-boING*, No. 5

"The Great Nebula Sweep" *Nebula Awards Vol. 25*, 1991

"Victoria," *Amazing*, Vol. LXVI, No 2

"The Grange," *F&SF*, October 1991

"Any Major Dude," *New Worlds*, No. 1

"The Mill," *Amazing*, Vol. LXVI, No. 6

"Heaven Sent Me an Angel, C.O.D.," *boING-boING*, No. 7

"World Wars III," *Interzone*, No. 55

"Destroy All Brains!," *Interzone*, No. 56

"Fractal Paisleys," *F&SF*, May '92

"Lennon Spex," *Amazing*, Vol. LXVII, No. 4

"Anne," *SF Age*, No. 1

"Brain Wars," *New Worlds*, No. 2

"Mama Told Me Not to Come," *Amazing*, Vol. LXVII, No.10

"A Night in the Thirteenth Avenue Mission," *After Hours*, No. 17

"Afterschool Special," *Amazing*, June 1993

"Sleep Is Where You Find It," with Marc Laidlaw, *F&SF*, September 1993

"Suits," *Amazing*, August 1993

"Up the Lazy River," *SF Age*, Vol. 1 No. 6

"Campbell's World," *Amazing*, September 1993

"Streetlife," *New Worlds*, No. 3

"Walt and Emily" *Interzone*, Nos. 77 & 78

"The Horror Writer," *Nova SF*, No. 5

"McGregor," *Universe*, No. 3

"The Ballad of Sally NutraSweet(TM)," *SF Age*, May 1994

"Mud Puppy Goes Uptown," *BBR*, No. 22

"Strange Brew," *The Third Alternative*, No. 2

"The Double Felix," *Interzone*, September 1994

"Time Travel Blasphemies 1 & 2," *Proud Flesh*, No. 1

"Bad Beliefs," *Pirate Writings*, Fall 1994

"Leakage," *Pirate Writings*, Spring 1995

"Linda and Phil," *Amazing Stories: The Anthology*, Spring 1995

"Distributed Mind," *Interzone*, April 1995

"Otto And Toto in the Oort," *SF Age*, May 1995

"Big Eater," *Interzone*, June 1995

"Take Me to the Pilot," *Asimov's Science Fiction*, August 1995

"Shake It to the West," *Space and Time*, Fall 1995

"Spondulix," *SF Age*, September 1995

"Fantasy Trilogy," *The Edge*, Vol. 2 No. 1

"Flying the Flannel," *Interzone*, January 1996

"Everywhere Is Now," *Dreams from the Strangers Cafe*, No. 5

"Your Gold Teeth, Pt. 2," with Don Webb, *Aberrations*, No. 36

"My Two Best Friends," *The Thirteenth Moon*, May 1996

"My Adventures with the SPCA," *Shock Waves*, Vol. 1.1

"Going Abo," *Aberrations*, No. 37

"The Death of Salvador Dali," *The Edge*, Vol. 2 No. 3

"And Them, Too, I Hope," *Pirate Writings*, No. 11

"Life Sentence," *Interzone*, September 1996

"The Jackdaw's Last Case," *SF Age*, January 1997

"Distances," *Pirate Writings*, No. 13

"Alice, Alfie, Ted and the Aliens," *Interzone*, March 1997

"The Cobain Sweater," *Interzone*, June 1997

"The Happy Valley at the End of the World," *Interzone*, November 1997

"Jack Neck and the Worry Bird," *SF Age*, July 1998

"Our House," *The Edge*, May-June 1998

"Pulp Alibis," *After Yesterday's Crash*, Fall 1998

"Fax," *Pirate Writings*, No. 17

"Angelmakers," *Interzone*, March 1999

"The Man Who Stole the Moon," *Moon Shots*, June 1999

"The Square Root of Pythagoras," with Rudy Rucker, *SF Age*, November 1999

"Working for the U," *Amazing*, Winter 2000

"Stink Lines," *F&SF*, February 2000

"The Reluctant Book," *SF Age*, May 2000

"Stealing Happy Hours," *Interzone*, March 2000

"Singing Each to Each," *Interzone*, May 2000

"Rare Firsts," *Realms of Fantasy*, December 2000