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INANE RAMBLINGS

Well friends, here we are in the last month of 2004. The bleak cyberpunk future predicted by Saint Gibson in the 80's, which was then scoffed at by the kind-hearted folks at Salon.com in the 90's, is finally coming to pass. Well, it's coming to pass in a slightly different way. When Y2K came around I never did get a chance to ride around in a post-apocalyptic deathmobile wearing an umpire outfit with spiked shoulder pads and waving around a pike with doll heads impaled on it. I did, however, witness something almost as interesting—the fabled dot com crash and the death of the so-called “New Economy.” While not as exhilarating as fighting mutant zombies with a sawed off shotgun, our present scenario is the end result of the same herd mentality that could have brought about the aforementioned dystopia. In other words, we got lucky. We pulled the trigger and the chamber was empty.

Are we out of the woods just yet? Not in my opinion. The global economy is becoming more and more unstable, the greenback is falling like a brick of lead, and the probability of another market crash is higher than it was in the past. Toss in a fundamentalist ideal-driven proto World War III and you have the ingredients for a good old-fashioned dystopia.

Is this a cause for concern for me? No, not really. Even if California drops into the ocean, polar bears become extinct, and I can no longer walk the streets of Chicago without a badge that says I'm not a terrorist, life will go on. We are, after all, a very versatile species of ape. As a matter of fact, the microcosm of my own life right now could not be better. I'm no longer waking in the middle of the night every night having a panic attack, I'm gainfully employed at a company that kind of treats me like a human being, and I have you guys... my dear, deceived (I mean devoted) followers.

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In fact, I'm fucking elated that we've made it to issue #3, seeing as how every week I drop everything I'm doing in my life to go chasing after some other shiny object. And this magazine has given me a chance to communicate with people all over the world and understand where they are coming from. For example, I found that we are all united in our loathing of Redneck Fatballs (I mean President Bush). Oh well, I guess I can't be too hard on the guy for stealing money from the poor and giving it to the rich, just as long as he keeps the country free from terrorists and our civil liberties safe and locked away from us.

So what to do and what to say? For one thing, keep sending me your stories and articles! I don't care if it's "cyberpunk" or not. Some day maybe I'll run into you on the Chicago-Milwaukee mag-lev train and we'll have a good discussion about how a small group of brilliant minds in the late 20th century had a vision of a future where humanity and technology blended past the point of discernability, and then some marketing douche bag had to come along and give it a label, make it into something that can be sold. Names are names; ideas, visions—these are something holy, unsoiled by words. To label an idea/vision is to grab an archangel from the clouds and chain him to the earth.

Or maybe I'm wrong. Perhaps this is unavoidable. After all, that may be the real intent of all writing/art—to grab a hold of something divine and bring it down to earth like Prometheus bringing the fire of the gods down from the mountain to the people. Speaking of which, this reminds me of a conversation I had on an Internet messageboard with a hack writer named Steve Miller. When I put forth the proposition that writing is an art he had the audacity to call me an amateur. I was about to tell the dildo to change his goddamn name so that I could stop confusing him with the band but then I realized it would just be wasted keystrokes. I came to understand that clowns like him are necessary in this industry, because they are the backdrop against which real creativity shines. Don't get me wrong, I see writing as an industry and a profession as well, and if you can make money off of it then God bless. But writing is first and foremost an abstract form of expression, and that, to me, is art.

But I'm getting critical and off-topic again. The point is that this great medium—the Internet—has changed everything. For the up and coming writer the problem is no longer getting your work "out there," it's getting your masterpiece to stand out from the unfathomable volume of other media that's already out there. The Internet, it seems, is acting like some kind of wide scale decommercializing agent, spreading ideas and copyrighted media alike with amoral abandon. Just look at the shit fit the movie and music industries are throwing over it! Anything you want, be it a film or rare album, is free if you know where to find it. Sure, they can label you a "pirate," trace your IP address, and toss you in the slammer with a bunch of violent criminals. After all, isn't it just as bad to steal a movie that's overpriced by about \$20 as it is to kill someone? Come on people, this is capitalism, not a democracy!

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Then again you can be crafty about it and steal bandwidth from the café down the street using your trusty cantenna, in which case the feds will come and apprehend the poor guy that's selling lattes behind the counter. You'll be okay, they won't be able to pin anything on the guy selling lattes, and everyone is happy except for the MPAA/RIA, who can at last know for themselves what it's like to get fucked in the pooper.

It's like the whole wireless craze is an egalitarian force, a vehicle of power in the hands of the meek and proletariat. With the ability to link up from any place on the globe we all are equal, we are all connected. Like in John Shirley's short story "Wolves of the Plateau," a new vista is opening up to us, and the existing powers are frightened because they know that their time is coming to an end.

I think I've rambled enough for this issue, and Overmind knows I've stepped on enough toes. In leaving you, I tell you all to be good little postmodern citizens. Take your Soma (I mean Prozac/Ritalin/Aderol) every day. Put all of your 401k savings into your company's stock, because that is what good workers do, and undying loyalty to your company will be equally repaid. Watch the Republican Channel (I mean Fox News) so you can get a clear and unbiased view of the world around you. And always, always have your Little Red Book (I mean Neometropolis Magazine) on hand, because without it you are just another lost, hapless 21st century refugee, asleep/awake in a world whose paradigms are about to come into question, and what we perceive as 'real' is finally put on trial.

CUT AND PASTICHE

By Ian Creasey

Electronic pickets lurked outside the Online Gallery. As I tried to log on for my shift, a tall bearded figure grabbed my shoulder, and the wallpaper changed to a huge *Sunflowers* crossed out in red, like a road sign.

"Have you considered joining the New Movement?" Surely it was —

"Nash? Edwin Nash?"

"Walter —" he said, letting it hang.

"Walter Buckland. I was in the year below you at college."

He nodded. "How's things? Sold any work?"

"Nothing," I said firmly, having long stopped being defensive about it.

"How many people even came to your degree show?"

"Counting the dog?" I shrugged.

"We're in the same boat, then — I only got people to my show by handing out flyers promising Live Nudes. How can we build a career when we have to compete with the whole of art history? The dead won't even stay dead when you can buy style templates for them. Join the campaign against zombie art!" The background changed to a picture of Jurgen Freytag, leader of the Movement, driving a stake through the corpse of Andy Warhol.

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I hate being lectured. "If you want a career you should have studied accountancy. You don't have to tell me it's a hard time for new talent — I know damn well it is — but a period of neglect will sort out those who have something to say from those who only long for the spotlight." I pointed to the camera icon, guessing that all this was being recorded in anticipation of a Movement retrospective.

"Maybe so. But how can you work here, at the Temple of Pastiche?"

"I didn't say I like it. But I have to pay the rent on my garret."

"You're colluding in your own oppression," he said.

"So are you. Look at that Stalinesque portrait of Freytag: it's a masterpiece of Socialist Realism."

As he turned round to look, I dodged past him and entered the Gallery, which thickened into tangibility as the software recognised me, delivered a reprimand for lateness, and dumped me into the nineteenth century. Four tourists waited in the Kent countryside.

"Welcome to the Online Gallery," I said. "I'll be your guide on the Pre-Raphaelite tour. Because virtual time runs so fast, you can see as much as you like and ask as many questions as you like, all in only a few minutes of real time. So let's start by getting acquainted. I'm Walter Buckland, and you are —?"

"Daisy Miller."

"Freda Miller." The two old ladies were probably veterans of the museum circuit, and here for a bit of novelty.

"Henry and Anne," said a man clearly used to speaking for both of them. He returned my gaze with a hint of challenge in his eye, but the woman hardly seemed to have heard me, instead looking towards the building with a distracted air. I asked her if she recognised it.

"It's the Red House, isn't it? Built by William Morris."

I smiled. "It is. He wanted it to be a palace of art, so we've used it as a framework for all the Pre-Raphaelite interior paintings. We'll see a selection of those first, then come back out and have a look at the landscapes."

I led them inside to a richly appointed Victorian room, where a man idly fingered a piano with one hand, his other arm restraining a woman from rising out of the easy chair in which they were both entwined. The frilly hem of her long white dress always reminded me of a tablecloth set with matching doilies. "This is *The*

Awakening Conscience, by William Holman Hunt." I stood by the door while the tourists moved around the room, exclaiming at the novel sensation of being inside a painting. They seemed reluctant to touch anything, so I bent down to stroke the cat. "Amazing tactual effects," I said. "Every hair separately and distinctly felt. Can anyone sight read?" I pointed to the sheet music on the piano, 'Oft in the stilly night'. They shook their heads. "Some day I'll get around to learning it. The music is symbolic, as is the cat playing with the bird. These people are adulterers!" I banged out a dramatic chord. "But her conscience has stirred. It's a narrative painting, implying a history and inviting us to wonder what happens next. Do they part forever? Or do they overcome whatever obstacles prevent their marrying, and succumb to convention in the end?" I walked over to the French windows.

"Perhaps these are their children." Out on the terrace, four girls poured baskets of leaves onto a huge pile. The sombre light felt as if we'd stepped from afternoon into evening, or from summer to autumn.

The elderly sisters gasped. "Millais!" said one.

"*Autumn Leaves*, I believe," said the other. I'd already forgotten which one was which.

I nodded, and the first spoke up again. "Aren't the girls just *darling*? Whenever I take a photo of my grandchildren, I always scan it into the Millais program, and I get such lovely pictures."

"When they grow older, we'll try the Rossetti template, though I suppose it will turn their hair red," said the other.

"Why not commission a living artist to do a portrait?" I asked. I'm not supposed to tout for custom, even on behalf of my friends, but my employers needn't have worried — the Millers looked at me as if I'd spoken in Etruscan. I shrugged and moved the group along to the next room.

"Here we have *Christ in the House of His Parents*, another work by John Everett Millais. You've seen his later, sentimental stage. This early painting was hugely controversial for its realism, showing Jesus's family with dirty fingernails. The Pre-Raphaelites began as rebels and idealists, with a slogan of 'Truth to Nature'...."

A dozen or so paintings later, when I judged that the tourists had had enough of the interiors, I tried to return to the front door by which we'd entered. Yet I found it curiously elusive. I knew the layout of the house well enough, but every time I thought we must reach the main hall, the corridor would twist and writhe, depositing us in *Trust Me* or *Proclaiming Claudius Emperor*, or any of a hundred others, and soon I could no longer pretend we weren't lost.

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Apologetically I pulled the remote control from my pocket and punched the Map key. Nothing happened. I pressed Com and said, "Hello? Anyone there?" No response. Apprehensively, already anticipating failure, I hit Exit. Again, nothing happened.

I turned to the group and said, "We appear to have a slight problem. Can you all try your own logoffs?"

Anne took off her right shoe and fiddled with a catch in the heel; Henry shouted 'Fiddlesticks!'; the Millers reached into their handbags. They all failed to disappear.

"What's happening here?" demanded Henry.

I could only say, "Some technical hitch, I guess."

"You don't sound too concerned."

"Oh, I'll be claiming overtime if it isn't fixed before the end of my shift."

"What about us?" he said.

"Don't worry — there's an automatic fail-safe. Even if the system's crashed, we'll time-out eventually."

"How long will that be?"

"An hour in real time. In here, it'll feel longer: maybe a few days."

"Days?" said Henry incredulously.

"That's anticipating the worst — I'm sure the problem will be sorted out much sooner than that."

"It had better be, or I'll be seeing my lawyer."

I barely restrained a shrug. To me, this was a minor irritation: I didn't exactly have appointments with Cork Street dealers on my schedule.

"What'll we do now?" said Anne.

"No point standing around. Why don't we go up to the tower and visit *The Lady of Shalott*?"

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That took some time, as the shifting layout continued to flummox my expectations. It was as if the Red House had been taken over by the Red Queen. But by always climbing when we could, we eventually reached the winding stair leading to the Lady's tower.

Hunt took twenty years to finish this painting, and looking in at the wonderfully cluttered room, I could almost see why. Aside from the shoes, flowers, balls of thread and miscellaneous knick-knacks — what on earth was that silver thing? — every surface was over-designed to an insane degree: the walls, the carpet, the half-finished tapestry on its horizontal frame, the magic mirror showing a romantic countryside complete with knights, pages, and a river flowing down to the horizon. The Lady stood inside the low tapestry frame, poised in the act of whirling a thread around herself in abandon, her hair flying out like dark streamers.

I picked up one of the wooden shoes, then leapt onto the tapestry, bounced as if on a trampoline, and smashed the mirror with the shoe. Or rather, I would have done, but I met no resistance and stumbled deep into the mirror.

The next few moments passed in slow motion, like a nightmare of being chased. In those dreams I always try to turn and see the monster, though I never can, and now I turned and saw the tourists staring at me with jaws agape, their faces blurred as if I were underwater and looking out onto land. Then I fell. I smiled, sure that I would wake up before I hit the bottom.

Thud! It's a good job the rig filters out pain stimuli. I felt like a superhero as I got up and brushed myself off after a fall of at least a hundred feet. I looked around, and saw the countryside we'd seen in the mirror. A nearby heroic knight made me feel inadequate and incompetent for failing to lead my charges to safety. Yet his all-encasing armour gave him a sinister aspect: if I opened the visor, would I see a human form inside?

Behind me the Red House had become a huge castle. Looking up I could only see grey stone, but beckoned anyway. Then I made a bet with myself. *Henry first, to show his masculinity and allow him to catch Anne in his arms. Then the Millers, though it'll be a good five minutes before they work up the courage.*

I began counting, and Henry fell out of the sky after only ten seconds, so I mentally awarded him points for decisiveness. After he had caught Anne, he turned to me and shouted, "What the hell are you doing?"

I was abashed, and showed it. "Sorry. I had a crazy idea — the magic mirror symbolises the imprisonment of the Lady of Shalott, and we're also imprisoned, so I thought maybe breaking the mirror would break the curse, and get us out. I should have realised it wouldn't be so simple: if it were, the Lady herself would have done it already."

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The Miller sisters arrived as I spoke, and cried out with the shock of landing. Although most rigs don't transmit pain, anything will hurt if subconsciously expected to. And it's hard not to expect a hundred-foot drop to hurt: in that respect, I'd had the advantage of being taken unawares.

Anne said, "It didn't work, but perhaps you're on the right lines. I'm sure I've seen a painting of *The Sleeping Beauty* — what if we find her and you give her a kiss? Mightn't we then wake up?"

Henry snorted. "Why should that work?"

I was impressed by Anne's quick thinking. "It might not, but it's worth a try. If someone's deliberately trapped us, there might be an escape route fitting the scenario."

"But who would imprison us?"

"None of you are billionaires who might be ransomed?"

All four of them shook their heads.

"If only," muttered Henry.

I sighed. "I don't know. Maybe we haven't been targeted, and it's just a general breakdown. I've no idea what's happening. All we can do is hope that someone somewhere is working to fix it, or that we can find a way out on our own."

No-one looked satisfied with this, but then neither was I. Anne's suggestion, while superficially plausible, felt like a wish that couldn't come true after being spoken aloud. I brought out the remote control, and tried to summon the floater that normally transported us around the landscape paintings. The functions still didn't work.

"The Sleeping Beauty is in the middle of the wood. And I don't want to go in there without the map and the floater — have you seen *The Knights and the Briar Rose*? The tangles and thorns —" I winced as if already pricked and bleeding. "Any other suggestions?"

We looked around, seeking a direction, and Anne pointed to a boat down by the riverbank. We trudged towards it in silence. The Millers in particular radiated a fierce resentment, as if they were mentally composing letters of complaint and had already reached page seventeen.

When we reached the boat I laughed, recognising the Lady of Shalott again, this time in the painting by Waterhouse. Her white dress seemed to glow, and her

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intent gaze made me turn to see what she was looking at. I saw only the grassy slope rising from the waterside. But figures in paintings often look out of the canvas to meet the eye of the beholder, and I had a sudden weird notion that I could dig into the cold hill's side and emerge in Tate Britain. I suppressed the thought; my physical body was nowhere near London.

My fractious charges watched as I walked down the three gray steps and gingerly clambered in. The boat rocked but seemed sturdy. The lady, of course, did not stir. I picked her up and threw her over the side. She sank straight to the bottom. I almost felt guilty, but according to Tennyson's poem she was just about to die anyway.

Getting all of us in the boat was a bit of a squeeze, and I had to tell the others to squash up and sit still. As I arranged our seating, I found a plastic bottle in the bilge. 'Pre-Raphaelite Shampoo,' it said. 'Gives your hair a lustrous glow, and helps transform you from artist's model to artist's mistress.' A programmer's joke? I tossed it onto the bank, then lit the lamp hanging from the prow. I gave the order to cast off, and we began to drift away.

It felt strange to sit inside a boat from a famous painting, snuggled under the tapestry woven by a fictional character. Two years ago, when I still harboured unrealistic ambitions, I'd laughed when the Online Gallery announced a virtual theme-park for punters bored of only looking at digital reproductions of famous paintings. But walking around the Pre-Raphaelite world marvellously evoked the movement's atmosphere, especially that of the degenerate second phase when artists such as Edward Burne-Jones retreated ever further into an idealised past. The castle we'd left behind was a frozen medieval relic, surrounded by rolling green pastures and dark mysterious woods in which ancient heroes quested eternally. It was pleasant in its way, for a brief visit. But now we were stranded, as lost as any of Arthur's knights destined never to find the Grail.

The Grail, I thought. Was that the key we needed? Where would it be? Or was I on the wrong track?

We floated peacefully downstream. I couldn't recall any waterfall paintings, so there seemed little to worry about. Wherever we were going, at least it was somewhere. And somewhere, there had to be a way out of this.

A few minutes after drifting past Millais's drowned Ophelia, we noticed the air ahead darkening. The meandering river was fringed on either side with trees and bushes, so we couldn't see what might be causing it.

"Shouldn't we stop?" said Henry.

"What's the point?" I said. "We're not going to escape by sitting on the grass and having a picnic. It's probably just another painting."

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I didn't want to call a vote in case I lost, but again they accepted my authority, and we drifted onward into the thickening haze.

Everyone gasped as we rounded a bend and emerged in the centre of a city. The landscape changed from rural to urban as suddenly as if we'd crossed the edge of a canvas. But this was no ethereal Pre-Raphaelite vision. The smoke rose from factories and thousands of small ugly houses packed too close together. The river was choked with floating turds and decomposing litter of all kinds, from rotting vegetables to dead cats. The choleric stench of sewage and poverty made us retch.

"It's like something out of Dickens," said Anne, coughing.

We swept past a pier, where the children scavenging for scraps in a pile of fish-heads weren't rosy-cheeked visions of innocence, but grubby pinch-faced waifs caught in an endless frozen moment of destitution and desolation. Yet I recognised the style of Millais. And the prostitute standing on the docks looked like one of Rossetti's flame-haired beauties, though worn and faded like the tattered shift she wore.

"Shouldn't we stop?" said Henry again.

"I'd rather not," said Anne, and even the Miller sisters stopped rehearsing their grievances for long enough to shake their heads sharply.

The current carried us through the scene. Trees lined the banks again, and we left the compressed city behind. We looked at each other as if to confirm what we'd seen. Then I realised they wanted me to explain it.

"I think you were right," I said to Anne. "That was what the Pre-Raphaelites didn't paint: the view from their windows."

"You *think*?" said Henry. "So that's not part of the tour?"

"No... though maybe it should be." I smiled. "Don't you think it was an interesting corrective to the sentimentalised pretty women and pastoral landscapes we saw earlier — the Victorian nostalgia for the countryside they were destroying?"

"But who painted it?"

"No-one. It was all a mock-up, someone's idea of how the Pre-Raphaelites might have painted the city, if they'd wanted to. If there'd been a market for it. It's easy to criticise them for retreating from reality, but that was what the public demanded."

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I tried to pass it off as an educational experience, but in truth I was worried. That scene had never been in the gallery before. If it had just appeared, what else might be happening? This wasn't just a breakdown, but a subversion. Who was responsible? I remembered the Movement's pickets, but the vile city had clearly been created using the Pre-Raphaelite style templates Nash had railed against.

To distract the tourists, I began discussing the marketplace realities of creating art. "The Pre-Raphaelites began as dangerous young radicals, but couldn't make a living at it. It's a shock to artists when they realise the world is indifferent to their vision. I know: I'm one myself. A lot of the tour guides are art college students, or graduates supporting themselves while they scavenge for commissions. It's a standing joke that this is the only way we'll ever get into a gallery. There's a lot of bitterness — it's always been hard for the new generation to find an audience, but it's even harder now that computers can pastiche the Old Masters to order. When anyone can have the genius of the past on tap, who wants the latest raw talent?"

"That's you, is it?" said Henry.

Ignoring his disdainful tone, I described my own series of installations collectively titled *Before* — scenes of famous places, depicted in the final peaceful moments before they became notorious. Viewers could wander through the streets of Dallas, the underpass in Paris, the harbours of Hiroshima, and savour the anticipation of waiting for the event that would change the world forever, and which would never quite arrive.

"Have you sold any?" said Anne.

"No. Anyone who's interested always wants an *After* as well. But the whole point of the series is that the aftermath is already an iconic image, and contemplating *Before* should evoke *After* in the mind's eye. My work demonstrates the fragility of history. You've heard of the quantum principle and the chaos effect: I depict the instant before the observer collapses the wave function, before the butterfly flaps its wings."

Henry's lips curled up in a sneer, and I heard him mutter, "Bollocks."

"Well, obviously I can't be any good," I said to Anne, "because I'm not dead."

She looked away, unwilling to contradict her husband. I was familiar with this kind of response: I'd become a tour guide partly in hopes of selling to the tourists, but few of them ever showed any genuine interest in art as art, rather than art as tourist attraction. Even the art-lovers only wanted the authenticated genius of history, which saved them from having to make their own judgment on anything original. I'd always believed that merit finds its own reward in time, but that was before I'd had much experience of the market. Now I understood better the

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motives of the New Movement, who opposed plundering art history. Most of them had so little talent that they'd never make a mark unless the past was completely erased.

The boat glided on, down the widening river. I half-expected to see more intrusions on the landscape — railways perhaps, or open-cast mining — but Henry's flat tones interrupted my survey of our surroundings.

"I've had enough of this. I don't know if it's a TV set-up or someone's idea of a joke, but I'm sick of it." He looked at me. "Turn it off. Turn it all off, right now."

I shook my head. "I don't know anything about it. I'm as much a prisoner as you are."

"You're enjoying it too much," he accused. "You must be in on it. You've had your fun: now let us go home. Or at least let the women go."

"I'm sorry if I'm insufficiently miserable. But I've done the same old boring tour so often that for me this is a welcome break in routine, with an overtime bonus on top. You ought to look on the bright side yourselves — think what a tabloid gift this story is. You can all cash in! 'My Gallery Hell: how a five-minute tour turned into a three-week nightmare.'"

He punched me on the chin. The force of the blow rocked me back over the edge of the boat. Reflexively I stretched out my arms, and Henry grabbed them. He wrapped a rope around my wrists, ignoring my feeble kicks, and then tied my legs together. He must have spent a lot of time playing combat games. Or maybe I was just feeble.

The others tried to intervene, but Henry ordered them back to keep the boat balanced, for my struggles threatened to overturn it. When I was securely bound he said, "We'll see how much of a prisoner you are. Save yourself if you can, or let your friends save you."

He tied an oar lengthways to my body. Keeping hold of my feet, he tossed me over the side. "Drown, boy!"

For a few moments I panicked and struggled in the water, but the oar kept my body straight and I couldn't twist enough to get my head to the surface. Then I thought, why resist? Death was a standard exit. I imagined waking up at home and calling the software people to give them a roasting. Maybe I'd even wait for a few minutes, and make Henry stew a few hours longer.

I exhaled a long stream of bubbles and let the blackness overcome me.

#

I awoke coughing, disappointed to see the sky rather than the grimy ceiling of my bedsit. I felt sore, but knew it was only psychological and dismissed it. I stood up and looked around. We had reached the sea. A level beach stretched away to either side, devoid of seaweed or sandcastle or any interruption to its geometric perfection. Peculiar clouds floated in the brightly coloured sky like blobs in a sensurround lava lamp. It seemed that we had travelled a long way, and I wondered if we'd actually got anywhere.

"Still with us?" said Henry sarcastically.

"Looks like it," I said. I thought about going for him, but knew it was pointless. Nobody could really hurt anyone; the fact that his stupid stunt had failed was revenge enough.

Anne grabbed my arm, and pointed to what I thought was a bird. Then the apparition came closer. That wasn't supposed to happen. It didn't look like a bird any more: a tenuous connection with the ground made me think it must be a kite.

Then it walked closer still. It wasn't a kite. Immense, impossibly elongated legs supported a greyish body, over which hovered a stone column carved with a staring eye. Slime dripped from the elephant's trunk and side, evaporating in the heat before it hit the ground.

Now I knew where we were, and I remembered the publicity. Unlike the Pre-Raphaelite world, where the paintings were mere tableaux, Dali's Domain had fully animated figures. Watch the metamorphosis of Narcissus! See the stilted animals wander across the surreal scenery of Dali's diseased mind! The elephant didn't look too steady on those ridiculous legs; if it fell over we could be crushed. I wondered if there was a danger of being drowned in sperm ejaculated by a Great Masturbator. Anything could happen in a sabotaged gallery. And if we couldn't find a way out, we could be watching the soft clocks tick, forever.

Or until the time-out, of course. Yet already it was growing difficult to even remember reality, let alone believe we would ever return.

Not daring to move for fear of attracting its attention, we watched the elephant totter down the beach and disappear into the horizon. There looked to be a village along the coast, probably Cadaqués.

"You realise you'll be surcharged when we get out," I said to the others. "This tour is much more expensive."

That almost raised a smile. "What now?" asked Anne.

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"The village," I said. "And much as I'd like to arrive on the back of a burning giraffe, we'll have to walk. So we may as well start now."

The sand was compact and unyielding, and we left no footprints to mar the smooth surface. The sky's radiance dazzled us, as we'd come to southern Spain straight from the British autumn gloom of the Pre-Raphaelite world. I noticed that the light was gradually changing from reddish to a clear blue. This wasn't due to sunrise, because there was no sun: only a tiny moon hovering like a thrown tennis ball at the top of its arc, just about to fall. The sky simply had its moods.

Pressing onward, we found that the occasional wandering figures posed no real threat, whether they were giant women full of desk drawers, or flying tigers erupting from a pomegranate. Each one looked less interesting than the last, the endless procession of weird images having a numbing effect on the eye.

The air darkened and a dry rain began. Small pieces of paper fluttered down from the heavens. They looked like —

"Money!" said Henry. "First time I heard of kidnapped people being given a ransom."

I plucked a note out of the air. It was a dollar bill, but George Washington had been replaced by a portrait of Dali, looking suitably distinguished with his magnificent moustache. And instead of 'In God We Trust,' the bill said, 'Avida Dollars.' I crumpled it up and dropped it into the rising tide of paper lapping at our legs.

"It's another subversion, like the Pre-Raphaelite city," I said. "Avida Dollars is an anagram of Salvador Dali — he was criticised for making money by recycling the gimmicks that made him famous. So he became his own style template and painted surreal portraits of rich Americans: so what?"

The paper blizzard made the going treacherous, as the accumulating layers of notes slipped and slid underfoot. "You've made your point!" I shouted into the air.

I didn't expect a reply, but I got one. The strange downpour stopped, and a disembodied voice said, *Good.*

Surprised, I fell silent for a moment, while all the fallen dollar bills turned into tiny crabs and scuttled into the sea. Then I said, "What's happening?"

You know what's happening. 'An interesting corrective,' you said. You're obviously a sympathiser — I'll send you a membership card.

NEOMETROPOLIS

The New Movement! I recognised the voice of Jurgen Freytag, whom I'd often seen on campus clutching a manifesto or a megaphone. The self-appointed resident rebel, he had a clique of supporters, but I'd never thought he had the resources to mount an action like this.

"What's with the city and the funny money? I thought you were against pastiche."

Only mindless sentimentality. Creative pastiche is a good way to mock the other kind.

So he would drop his principles when it suited him. "Merit will out, Jurgen!" I shouted. "You'd achieve some recognition if you spent more time building up your own work and less time knocking other people's down. You're no artist, you're just a clueless critic."

We heard the huge reverberating click of an imaginary phone being hung up. Freytag was better at stunts than debate. And the best way for a fanatic to get media attention is to kidnap a few innocent bystanders. I felt sorry for the tourists, now that I knew they'd been dragged into the schemes of some jumped-up little radical whose hunger for fame far exceeded his talent. Still, maybe this would show them that art isn't just pretty pictures — it's also passion and ideology and petty jealousy.

"Whose voice was that?" said Henry petulantly. He had a touching faith in the power of being annoying.

I briefly sketched out the beliefs of the New Movement. "All artists are rivals, if only for attention. But the past is the worst rival of all. The Movement believes that in the face of constant change, people are looking backwards for culture as comfort-blanket. A lot more people decorate their homes with reproductions or pastiches than seek out the new, the cutting edge."

"That's because the new is mostly crap," said Henry.

"In Freytag's case, I'll agree with you. He was always obsessed with art history — he used to exhibit tabloid-style exposés of dead painters' love-lives: Rossetti cuckolds William Morris, Burne-Jones sleeps with his models, that kind of thing. But they didn't sell, so he started the Movement to abolish 'unfair' competition from reproductions, style templates and the like."

At last we reached Cadaqués, the village showcasing the interior paintings. We visited each house, and rested for a while in *Mae West's Face which May Be Used as a Surrealist Apartment*. Even I wanted to sit on the famous lip-shaped sofa, and bounce up and down inside the actress's head.

NEOMETROPOLIS

Anne pointed out to me that the view from the side window wasn't the outside we'd come in from. I recognised it as *Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire*, which is both Voltaire's skull and two women in Dutch costume. Every house had a window overlooking one of Dali's *trompe l'oeil* paintings, no doubt because the illusion only worked from one angle. I wondered what would happen if we climbed through a window into one of these worlds within a world, but I decided not to attempt it. We wanted to escape, not fall deeper into illusion.

I might have tried it anyway in desperation, but we eventually found my goal. I knew that Dali occasionally featured in his own paintings, and here he was, painting himself painting his wife Gala. As we entered the room he saw us in the mirror. If he'd been just another animated figure he'd have carried on working, but instead he turned round.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

"I think you've found out," he said.

"So what are you doing about it? When can we leave?"

"You don't like it here?"

Henry prodded me. "Who's this?"

I sighed. It seemed I couldn't escape being a tour guide, even outside the Pre-Raphaelite realm. I had a sudden vision of us getting back to the real world, and the tourists following me out of habit. *This is Leeds. That's my house. This is the bathroom — no, please wait outside.*

"This is Salvador Dali. *Surrealisme, c'est lui.* Tonight the role of Dali will be played by a reconstruction, what with him being dead. In this domain, there are no human guides, as Dali himself conducts the tour of his oeuvre." I turned to the seated figure. "You should have appeared as soon as we came in!"

"As you've already noticed, *should* no longer melts any watches."

"Why not?"

He waved his hand dismissively, and a tiny fleck of paint flew across the room from his brush. "The gallery is being disrupted. We're working on it."

"How long are we going to be stuck here?" said Anne.

"I really have no idea." Another vague gesture flicked paint onto the wall.

NEOMETROPOLIS

"But that just isn't good enough!" said one of the Miller sisters. "I insist on prompt action to resolve this appalling mess. We've been dragged hither and yon by this rude young man, heard mysterious voices in the sky, and seen far too many sick and twisted —" Words failed her at the shock of seeing art that wasn't irredeemably twee. I wondered what had specifically upset her. Certainly the *Enigma of William Tell* had made them both blanch at the sight of Lenin's enormous elongated buttocks.

Dali stood up. "You want prompt action? You don't like my paintings? Follow me!"

We trailed out of the village and back down to the beach. He herded us to an empty spot on the sand and said, "Stand there, close together. No, not you."

I moved away, and watched as he muttered to himself. He still had the paintbrush in his hand, and he waved it at the four tourists, as if making broad first strokes on a canvas. They smiled in anticipation and relief, and huddled together. Dali continued to move the brush, frowning in concentration. The tourists started frowning as well, as they pressed closer in a tight mass. They melted together like four fried eggs in a small pan.

"Is this supposed —" said Henry. His face disappeared into the amorphous brown blob, which began to swell alarmingly. I stood back, convinced it would pop like an overblown balloon. But it continued to expand, sprouting crutches to support itself, and acquiring features: a nose, a mouth saying, "— to happen?" in a voice both deeper, due to the figure's immense size, and possessing treble overtones from the three women.

"Sleep!" said Dali in a commanding tone, and I recognised the painting now. The vast eyelids closed and melted into the cheeks. It struck me that this implied the tourists might never wake up.

"I've always been very fond of your work," I said hastily.

"I heard your defence of it earlier — it's gratifying to see that the younger generation aren't all radical iconoclasts. Do I take it you know this Freytag who's leading the assault on the gallery?"

"We've exchanged views," I said.

"I'll give it to you straight. He's causing us a lot of trouble and bad publicity. We're trying to repair the damage and block him out, but is there any way he could be persuaded to back off?" The change in conversational style made me suspect that the gallery's human management were now operating the Dali-persona.

NEOMETROPOLIS

"The noisiest rebels against the Establishment are those who most want to join it. He'll only be satisfied when he's got equal billing with the star names of history. And he's got a point, you know, even if he's making it badly. There's too much reverence for the past. Why does the Gallery stop at the twentieth century? It's not like you're stuck for space: there's infinite room in virtuality. Why not have a wing where the 'younger generation', as you put it, can show their work?"

"It all boils down to money," said Dali. "The older stuff is out of copyright, and dead artists don't demand a cut. The living aren't so easy to exploit."

"Well if that's all it is, why not negotiate? I'm sure plenty of artists would be willing to exhibit on the cheap, as a loss leader. It's good advertising for anyone hoping to sell the physical originals, for those who still bother with physical originals." I couldn't quite stifle my contempt for artists who persist in clinging to the outmoded forms of the past. Even now, some people still like to paint and sculpt and do touchy-feely crap. We're in the Third Millennium — wake up and smell the pollution!

"It's too late for that. We can't be seen to give in to blackmail."

"Do I have to tell you everything? Say you'd always planned to have a modern wing, but were keeping it under wraps for maximum impact on opening day. Say all this has been a publicity stunt that went wrong. Say anything you like: no-one will care as long as you say it with cash. Just compensate the tourists and pay a few rising stars to exhibit, and all this will become a footnote faster than you can say 'scholars and pedants'."

"You make it all sound so easy. Perhaps we should let you sort it out."

"Me?"

"It's your plan. You know the contemporary scene: you must know lots of struggling young artists like yourself. We'll get you a budget. Go to it."

Dali handed me the paint-brush, winked, and faded like the Cheshire Cat into a *trompe l'oeil* of himself composed of distant stone formations. When I shifted my gaze the illusion evaporated and I was alone, save for the giant sleeping head that had been my four charges. I assumed the tourists would wake up when the disruption stopped and they were free to leave. *If* the disruption stopped. I had to get Freytag to agree to all this. I was sure he'd been listening in, so I just shouted into the air.

"How about it, Jurgen? Will you stop breaking through the back door if you're invited through the front?"

NEOMETROPOLIS

I'll have to propose it to the Democratic Committee of the Revolution. But count me in.

All the student tour guides dreamed of fame and having their own wing in the gallery one day. Now I walked in it with Salvador Dali's paint-brush in my hand. I'd been promoted from tour guide to curator, but if there was going to be a new wing, I would damn well be the first to show in it. Now was my chance to make art history.

I waved the wand.

(FOR PEOPLE ONLY)

By Greg Beatty

I pulled my coat tight against my body, shivering, then wondered why. There was no wind...? Oh. Out of the corner of my eye I'd seen one of the little signs the food bank set out on Tuesdays and Thursdays to guide "customers" when they were giving away stale bread and surplus cheese. My mind had told my body what a cold, cruel world it was, and my body had translated that into a shiver.

I didn't blame it. The sight of those poor bastards standing in line always brought me down, and I was just glad I had enough of a handle on things to be sure I'd never end up there.

"Excuse me," I said, bobbing a scrupulously polite half bow to the patiently disenfranchised. The line parted to let me through, but otherwise, no one acknowledged that I existed. Like always.

I was heading on down the block when I saw the first new sight of the day: a clean young man, dressed neatly but insufficiently, who stood a building and a half away, staring at the supplicants who were pawing half-heartedly through a bin of red potatoes while they waited for the choicer goods. He stared at them as if he were a dog and they were either dinner or the master that would give him dinner. He licked his lips.

"It's okay," I said, making sure my voice was gentle. "You can go get some food too."

"But the sign," he said, pointing.

NEOMETROPOLIS

I followed the line of his arm to read the sign on the side of the potato bin. "Take all you can Eat. (For people Only)."

"Hey," I said. "That just means don't take the food and then give it to your pets..." My voice trailed off as I looked back at him. His arm was still raised from pointing at the sign, and the motion had caused his sleeve to ride up a bit. Below the band of his mass-produced digital watch his skin looked normal, but above it, in the newly exposed area, all was shiny and false, and I swear I saw a bar code, right above the Monsanto trademark. What the?

He saw me staring, and he dropped his arm, and his sleeve, and everything appeared normal again. "Do you think?" he whispered. "I could eat? With people?"

I turned back to look at the welfare recipients and illegal immigrants, the schizophrenic and the jonesing, all the hungry masses who this other regarded with such desperate hunger.

"Sure," I said. "Keep your sleeves down, and nobody will notice."

I walked on. Behind me I heard the footsteps of the future, walking either towards or away from the poor. I couldn't tell which, or where I stood in relation to it. I shivered as I walked, and this time I knew why.

NIGHT SHIFT IN THE AUTOMART, THE GODDESS DANCING

by Andrew Gudgel

A little after one a.m. the monitor beeped, and Jeremy put his magazine down to see what was going on outside.

A couple of kids were hosing down the paint-encrusted side of the building with portable sprayguns. Jeremy scuttled the external spider-cam over to get a better look at the commotion. The ten-year-old girls saw the camera taping them and ran off into the dark. Yet another "Eastside Warriors" gang tag. Sometimes instead of tags, the kids would spray "Autoerotic Mart" on the wall. For some reason the Tajik guy who owned the place got all pissed off when he saw those two words, and Jeremy would have to drop everything and go out with a can of pressurized thinner to strip the concrete. But the owner let gang tags stay, figuring the kids wouldn't torch a building they'd marked as part of their turf.

Now that he'd set his magazine down, he might as well do the mid-shift aisle check. Jeremy reached under the counter for the aluminum bat and canister of micro-tag spray. He clipped the black cylinder to his jeans. He'd never considered actually using the spray, but it was policy that everyone carried it when checking the aisles. The microscopic, serial-numbered tags were covered with sea-urchin-like spines that were supposed to stick to a shoplifter and mark them for the cops, and at the same time be as irritating as tear gas. But that wasn't strong enough to stop a junkie. Hence the baseball bat.

Jeremy started at the back of the store, straightening the shelves as he checked for stiffies who might have wandered in earlier and then keeled over. Some of the new uppers caused a kind of rigor mortis when they peaked, and it was easier to drag a paralyzed junkie out of the store than to deal with them when they came back down, sweaty and paranoid. But there were no junkies laying in the aisles;

NEOMETROPOLIS

just two frozen burritos that had been gnawed and dropped on the floor. He tossed them in the trash and made a mental note to write them off on the inventory control log.

When he finished his check, Jeremy put away the bat and spray, made note of the burritos on the cash register's screen, and went back to his magazine. An interview with a girl band and a photo-spread later, the door chimed. Jeremy looked up. The armorglass panels in the doors were covered with a gray haze of old scratches. He shook his head in disgust. The goddamned Tajik was too cheap to have them replaced with the new scratchless stuff, and all he could tell was that a group of people waited outside. Could be anybody on the other side of that door. He checked to make sure there were shells in the antique sawed-off shotgun wired under the counter, then pushed the button to de-mag the door locks that came on automatically after midnight.

The doors whooshed open and the Goddess Kali strode up to the counter. She stopped in front of him, grinning wickedly. Straight platinum-blond hair spilled down over her shoulders and high bare breasts, contrasting with her inky black skin. Jeremy noticed a necklace of tiny, perfectly-formed ceramic skulls hung around her neck.

"Hi, Jeremy."

"Lo, Suzy."

The Goddess Kali's eyes flashed red with anger. "Don't call me that!" Behind her, a whole pantheon wandered the aisles, looking for late-night snacks.

"Nice effect."

The Goddess looked annoyed. "New contacts. I am Kali, the Destroyer of Worlds." She looked around at the other gods and goddesses scattered through the aisles, then lowered her voice. "When I come in for soy milk and bread, you can call me Suzy. But not now; not in front of everybody."

Suzy was a regular at the Automart. Jeremy had seen her once or twice a week when he worked days. This was the first time she'd come in since he started the night shift. "I didn't know you were a Hindu-Rocker. I thought you were a Dark Circle Vampire."

Suzy shushed him. "I *used* to run with the Vampires. Not anymore. I've found a new crew to hang with."

Jeremy nodded and kept his eyes locked on her face, trying not to stare at her tits. Even with the new subdermal dye-job, she was beautiful. "So, whatcha been up to tonight?"

NEOMETROPOLIS

Suzy tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Clubbing. Now we're going to Vishnu's to hang out. Could I get a pack of Puffins, no-carcinogen?"

"Sure. Didn't know you were a dope fiend."

Kali looked at the ground. "I, uh, just started. Everyone else in the crew takes Soma, but I'm not into illegal drugs, so I thought I could at least, well, you know..."

"Since everyone else was getting twisted..."

"Yeah."

He pushed the pack of joints and a book of matches across the counter. "That'll be five bucks."

She fumbled in the waistband of her loincloth and handed him a crumpled bill.

"Thanks," said Jeremy. He licked his lips, nervous. "Suzy, I mean Kali, I was wondering if..."

A skinny blue God with a fiery nimbus around his head came up and stood behind her. Thunder rumbled. "Kali, is this mortal bothering you?" He put a protective hand on her shoulder and shook his silver flute.

Jeremy's face darkened. "Nice special effects, God-boy, but the lady and I were having a private conversation, if you don't mind."

Lightning split the air. "I am Krishna, worm, and you will not speak to me like that."

Jeremy reached under the counter, held up the can of tag spray. "And I am the fryer of eyeballs, so beat it, Buddha." The Godling turned and wandered back down towards the beer cooler.

"You didn't have to talk to him like that," said Suzy. "He was just looking out for me."

"He was hanging all over you like he owned you or something. Pissed me off."

Suzy smiled. "Actually, Kali is Shiva's, not Krishna's consort."

"Oh," said Jeremy, trying not to sound disappointed. "So you and Shiva are like an item, then?"

NEOMETROPOLIS

"When we're clubbing, but not all the time."

He looked relieved. "Oh. Um, then would you like to maybe sometime..."

Just then the shoplift alarm buzzed. Jeremy looked over to see a monkey-faced Hindu-Rocker tossing a case of beer past the sensors and into the waiting arms of another god outside. Reflexively, he slapped the lockdown button and the doors slammed shut. He turned back to stare at Suzy. His eyes narrowed. "You were keeping me distracted..."

"No."

"Yes, you were."

Suzy looked over her shoulder and rumbled to the pantheon. "I will take care of this mortal--alone."

She stepped close to the counter and lowered her voice. "We were on our way from the club to Vishnu's. I needed to get a pack of joints, that's all. I didn't know Hanuman was going to do something dumb, honest. Jeremy, please."

He saw the look on her face: fright mixed with embarrassment. A single tear rolled down her ebony cheek. Damn! She was cute even when she cried. Jeremy crossed his arms, fighting the urge to just cave in. "Ok Kali, so maybe you weren't playing me for a fool. What about the beer, though? Somebody's got to pay for it. Somehow, I don't think your God-buddy is still out in the parking lot, waiting to bring it back."

"I'll give you the money for it tomorrow. I swear. Just let us go. Lakshmi and Brahma both have a couple of priors for dealing Soma, and the cops would lean on them if you called this in."

Jeremy looked at the ceiling for a moment, then nodded brusquely. "Alright. But tell them that if any of them ever come back in here all Godded-out, I *will* call the cops."

Suzy smiled. "Thanks." She turned to the pantheon assembled at the doors and raised her arms. "I have dealt with this mortal, and he crawls before me. Go, while he is still in my grasp." Everyone shuffled out of the store until only she was left.

"The answer is yes," said the Goddess of Destruction.

Jeremy looked confused. "The answer to what is yes?"

NEOMETROPOLIS

“Yes, I’d love to go out with you. That was what you were going to ask me, right?”

He swallowed. “Because I let all your friends go?”

The skulls around her neck rattled as she shook her head. “No, because you’re cute. Even when you’re angry. *Especially* when you’re angry.” She kissed him then, a brief peck tasting of anise, and was gone. Jeremy grinned. He reached over and unplugged the surveillance recording unit, entirely dumping its memory, then dug a twenty out of his wallet and rang up one case of beer.

A half block away, the pantheon sat on a low concrete wall and drank cold cans of beer, grumbling about the audacity of mortals. All except one goddess, who sat apart from the others and looked forward to a first date.

RESURRECTION OF BROKEN DREAMS

By Jerry J. Davis

Before him stood the reincarnation of Marilyn Monroe.

Beyond a replica, beyond an actress in a Cinematia clone body – she had the touch, the grace, and the voice. The whole persona. It all had the ring of truth.

George couldn't take his eyes off her.

They introduced her as Bernadette Petrezov. From the company's database he found she was 26 years old, single, and under contract. For three days he worked with her and the others on the Cinematia shoot. It started with an air yacht, moved on to jet skis, and then they spent two golden hours on an artificial green-screen beach. George got radiation burns from the mock sunlight, but of course Bernadette's body was immune. The second day they shot on a genuine Hollywood set. Bernadette wore The White Dress and stood above a fan for six hours.

Today's schedule was indoors. Four hours of slick, over-produced erotica. This part had to be perfect – it was to be the hook at the beginning, and the payoff at the end. All this footage, all this work, just to promote three simple lines during a thirty second commercial:

*You can live...
You can dream...
You can live your dream!*

Then fade to black and show the Cinematia logo.

NEOMETROPOLIS

George worked the camera controls like a master painter using a brush. He was known in the business as a talented cineholographer, but for the past three days he'd been riding the edge. He surfed the crest of his abilities. It was all due to Bernadette; she inspired him.

When the director called it a wrap, and the lights faded, George Zcavowitz sat for a moment, unable to move. It was over. They had finished the commercial.

It's now or never, he thought.

George tried to will himself to approach her, but he couldn't. *What's the point?* he thought. This was *Marilyn Monroe*, a movie star goddess! George was a short, pudgy man with a head shaped like a potato.

She saw him watching her as she looped on her rotary skirt and pulled on her shorts – no panties, no bra – and on her way out she deliberately walked passed and gave him a smile. She pointed her PDA at him and pushed a button, and George's PDA went *beep*.

"It was nice working with you," she said in her sultry voice.

"Yes," he said back, "I enjoyed it."

"Maybe I'll see you again some time. Bub-bye." She gave him her smile again, then walked slowly off.

He looked at his PDA. She'd beamed him her URL.

#

George's apartment was small, neat, and sparsely furnished. He'd covered the walls with Hollywood memorabilia. In his bedroom hung a classic – Helnwein's *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* – which depicted James Dean, Humphrey Bogart, and Marilyn Monroe in a in a diner with Elvis behind the counter. They all looked at George as he came in, and Elvis waved.

"Hey George," Elvis said. "How was the shoot?"

"It went well," George told the painting. "I got her URL."

"You did?" Marilyn said. The AI program animating the characters did a fair imitation of her voice, but not her inflections. "That's great!"

Dean and Bogart mumbled congratulations, and Elvis hopped over the counter, sitting to face him. "You gonna call her now?"

NEOMETROPOLIS

"Oh, well ... I don't know." George shuffled toward his closet, and began pulling off clothes. "It's a bit soon."

"If she gave you her URL," Bogart said, "she wants you to call her."

"That's right," Elvis said. "There's no point in waiting."

"She's probably as lonely as you are, George," Marilyn told him. "Go ahead."

George paused in his undressing, looking at the little James Dean standing and facing him from within the painting. Dean was his favorite – always had been. He wished *he* could be James Dean. "What do you think?" George asked him.

Dean nodded. "Call her," he said.

"You really think so?"

All four of them said yes. George sighed, feeling pathetic. The AI program had a point, though – she wouldn't have given him her URL if she didn't want him to call. It wasn't like he'd asked her for it, either. But still...

As George changed into a tee-shirt and shorts, he deliberated whether or not to make the call. The characters in the computerized painting lost interest, and went back to their regular positions.

What the hell, George thought. I don't have anything to lose. Picking up his PDA, he recalled Bernadette's URL and made the connection.

It rang six times, then a computer voice told George the person at that URL was unavailable at the moment. "Would you like to leave a voice mail?" it asked.

"Yes, please," he told it.

"Begin recording at the tone."

The moment the tone sounded, George's mind went blank. "Uh ... this is, um, George Zcavowitz. You gave me your URL after shooting wrapped today. I was just wondering if, um..." Silence. There were no more words in his head. He grasped for something, anything. "Dinner!" he said. "If you were up for dinner, sometime. In the next day or so." More silence. Just end it, he told himself. "Anyway, you should have my URL. Give me a call, if, um..." The words ran out again. George cut the connection.

"All right, George!" said Elvis's voice. The characters in the painting applauded.

NEOMETROPOLIS

#

Cigarettes were harmless to Bernadette Petrezov's new body. She took a long drag, delighted in the luxurious intake of a full lungful of smoke, and held it in a moment before letting it go in a cool stream of white. She was thinking of that cameraman she'd met. He had the warmest, most genuine smile she'd seen on a man in Hollywood – he reminded her of her father; a good-natured, soft-spoken guy. A real person. She wondered if he'd have anything to do with a bit-part clone like her.

Bernadette took another long, sad drag, then let the smoke leak through her nose. She was standing on the veranda of her agent's condo, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Piles of concrete rubble marked the ruins of large buildings, where half of Old L.A. eroded underwater.

Finished, she flicked the cigarette out into the air and watched it fall.

The top of the railing was wide and smooth. She'd stood on it more than once, looking over. It was a good drop down to jagged rock, concrete, and broken glass. Bernadette wondered if the suicidal urge had leaked in from Norma Jean's DNA, or was something of her own. Something born in the realization that nothing really mattered, and there was no point in anything. Success did not lead to happiness. A new body did not lead to self-worth.

She heard the door behind her slide open, and the mixed voices of a dozen other people. "Marilyn, darling," said a voice. "You want another drink."

"No." She hated it when people called her Marilyn.

The woman came up beside her. Marguerite was her name; she looked like a young Elizabeth Taylor. "You feeling sick?"

"Just smoking."

The woman held out a little silver and black PDA. "This was on the table in there. It's yours, isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah. Thanks." Bernadette took it and went to put it into her purse. At the last second she stopped, and pushed a few buttons to see if there were messages. "Oh!" she said. "He called me!"

"Who, darling?"

Bernadette gave her a look. "Just a guy." Like hell if I'm telling you, she thought. You might go after him to spite me.

NEOMETROPOLIS

"Just a guy, huh?"

"Yeah," Bernadette said, nodding. "I gotta go. Bub-bye." She went inside without another glance at the Taylor clone. PDA still in hand, Bernadette waved at the other guests, said goodbye to her agent, and stepped out the front door. By the time she reached her car she was listening to George's message.

He actually sounded *nervous*. She felt herself melting inside. What a sweetheart! She got into her car and dialed George back, and lit a cigarette while she listened to it ring. Hearing him pick up, she said, "Hello?"

"Yes?"

"George, you called me! Thank you!" She was gushing, she knew – but she didn't care. She felt comfortable with this guy. "Are you free tomorrow night?"

"Yes. Sure. I mean—"

"Why don't we meet at Sal's? You like Sal's, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Of course."

"Okay! I'll meet you there at seven. I can't wait!" She made a girlish squeal. "Bub-bye!" She hung up, dropped the PDA into the passenger seat, and took a good drag on the cigarette. Then she started the car and told it to drive her home.

#

The restaurant, *Sal's by the Water*, was on the banks of the Los Angeles River. The river was so full it was close to flooding the parking lot. Despite the run-down look it was a chic place, complete with doormen guarding the entrance.

Inside, Marilyn greeted him at the door. "Your name?" she asked.

George stared at her a moment, waiting for her to recognize him. Then he realized it wasn't Bernadette. The place was full of Cinematia clones, and one of the most popular was Marilyn. There were at least three of them. He spotted them all throughout the restaurant, mingling in with the likenesses of Cary Grant, Burt Reynold, Raquel Welch, and two Bridgette Bardots.

George gave his name and asked if Bernadette Petrezov had arrived. She hadn't, so George took a seat at the bar and ordered a \$50 beer. Several minutes later Bernadette made her entrance.

NEOMETROPOLIS

Heads turned. There was an eruption of whispers. George bit his lower lip – she was wearing *The White Dress*. Bernadette smiled, looking around, and waved at George with white gloves that went to her elbows. The other Marilyn clones faded into the background like 3rd rate impersonators. Cheap copies. Bernadette wore the persona as well as Norma Jean herself.

"Ooo, you're here!" she said. "You showed up."

"Of course I did. How could I not?"

"Very easily, I'm afraid."

"Nonsense!" George's hands were shaking so that he nearly spilled his beer. "Not a chance."

She smiled. "You're nervous too."

"No, uh ... well, yes. I am."

"Feel my hands," she said, reaching out. He took them. "They're shaking too," she said.

"I can't tell." He laughed.

"First date jitters. It's been a long time since I've been nervous about a first date."

"Yes, me too."

"This *is* a date, right?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

"Yes," George said quickly. "I mean, I consider it one."

"Our first date." She smiled. "You make me feel like a teenager again."

"The, uh ... the first of many, I hope." His own words sounded clumsy and awkward.

Bernadette moved her Marilyn lips perfectly; an encouraging smile. "I hope so, too," she said.

They moved from the bar to dinner. Dinner went well. I can't believe this, George thought. I'm sitting across the table from *Marilyn Monroe*, holding her hand, and she likes me. Me!

NEOMETROPOLIS

Bernadette was thinking he was a wonderful person. So warm, so genuine. And, she thought, he likes me for who I am *inside*, not because of the body I happen to be wearing. This is the kind of guy I can share the rest of my life with.

"Would you like to go to a movie or something?" he asked.

"I'd like that," she told him.

#

George had a hard time keeping up with her. Not only was Bernadette younger, but her Cinematia body was much more efficient. Especially climbing all the stairs to her apartment, he cursed his own pudgy, wheezy frame. Whenever they were together, he spent so much time holding his gut in he was sure it would lead to a hernia.

They dated for several months. Bernadette seemed happy, and George was ecstatic. The sex was good, though he had to take pills to make sure it lasted longer than fifteen seconds. When one or both were off on location, they called each other several times a day.

George got a call from her while he was in Alaska, and she in Hawaii. They had George helping with background footage of glaciers to be used in a action-adventure movie, and he was freezing despite his electric coat, underwear, and socks. Bernadette was shooting a commercial for sunglasses.

"Hey," she said, "did you ever try dunking a potato chip in champagne? It's real crazy!"

"What? Really?" He was having trouble holding his PDA in his thick gloves. "Are you having fun?"

"Yes, but I miss you." Her image on his PDA screen blew a kiss at him. She was topless on a beach, and the sun was setting. "They're treating me well. It's like I'm a real star."

"The pay on this one's good, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "I'm not interested in money. I just want to be wonderful."

"You are. You know that." He had to grin. "You're *beautiful*."

"Am I?"

"Of course."

NEOMETROPOLIS

"No one ever told me I was pretty when I was a little girl. All little girls should be told they are pretty, even if they aren't."

"Well you are. And you're not a little girl, either."

"I am inside."

George remembered a James Dean line: "I guess you're just about the best looking gal we've seen around here in a *long time*."

Bernadette was giggling – she loved it when he tried his James Dean impressions. Meanwhile, the gaffer and the best boy were looking over George's shoulder at Bernadette's breasts. George frowned and moved away, his feet scrunching on the permafrost. "You know," he said, "starting next month we're going to have six weeks together. Have you thought more about moving in?"

"Haven't you bothered me about that enough, you big banana-head?" She was still giggling. "Yes, George. I've been thinking about it."

"And?"

"Well, isn't it something we should be discussing together? In person?" She bit her lower lip. "Pillow talk?"

"Well, I'm flying back into town next week for the *Publitz Awards*. You're going to be around for that, right?"

"I'm going to try."

"We'll talk about it then, okay?" He lusted intensely at the little image of her on his PDA screen. "Some pillow talk?"

"Sounds dreamy," she said, and blew him another kiss.

#

During the *Publitz Awards*, George won *Best Cinematographer* for the work he did on the *Cinematia* commercial. To his amazement, his income increased tenfold overnight. For the first time in his life, George felt his career was really on track.

He and Bernadette had their pillow talk, and she agreed they should move in together. Her big surprise was that she already had a place picked out: a condo inside a luxurious underground facility in Brentwood, with a patio that opened into a huge community cavern where the facilities projected a holographic view of a virgin beach. Sophisticated air vents gave them an ocean breeze, along with the sounds and smells of the surf. Clothing was optional.

NEOMETROPOLIS

They settled in, and George's bank account swelled. They worked their schedules to have more time with each other. They spent entire days in bed.

Life was good, better than George ever dreamed, but whenever George spotted himself in a reflection, his lumpy, ugly body reminded him that all was not perfect. Not yet. But, he thought, now I have the means do something about it. Secretly, so as to surprise Bernadette, George made a call.

I can live, he thought. I can dream.

I can live my dream.

At the offices of the local Cinematia franchise, they collected cell samples from which to fashion his new body. His sales rep presented him with an interactive catalog, and encouraged him to take as much time as he needed. Not all of the DNA templates were of famous people – there were thousands of handsome, anonymous models from which to choose. But George already knew. In his mind, it made perfect sense. Marilyn and James Dean, just like in his painting. It seemed so right. So perfect.

"This one," he said, speaking to the interactive catalog software.

"You have 48 hours in which to change your mind. After that, your new body will be ready in two weeks."

George didn't change his mind. He also succeeded in keeping it a secret from Bernadette. He could hardly wait – it was going to be a wonderful surprise.

Two weeks and two days later, and they introduced him to his new body. It stood naked and soul-less in the presentation room, ready for inspection. "Perfect," he told the Cinematia associate. "When can I move in?"

"Right after your brain backup," she said. "Right this way."

George had the idea that they were going to cut his head open, scoop out his brain, and slop it into the head of his new body. It didn't work that way. An interface helmet with ten-billion triangulation pattern receptors systematically stimulated every synapse in George's brain and took a reading. Once they finished this recording, they injected George with an anti-freeze compound and placed his body in storage at absolute zero. The recording was decoded into the bionic brain of George's new body, and then a specially trained Catholic priest blessed the new body and asked God to transfer over George's soul.

Within hours, they brought George to consciousness and presented him with a full-length mirror.

NEOMETROPOLIS

His eyesight was better than ever, and he sucked in his stomach and flexed his muscles. "Look at that!" he exclaimed. "Look at me!" The voice was just right, too. He thought of something Dean had said, and pointed at himself in the mirror:

"Dream as if you'll live forever. Live as if you'll die today." He grinned.

They gave him a complimentary set of clothes and, once dressed, George headed home to surprise Bernadette. He found her watching television, and a Cinematia commercial was on. It wasn't the one George and Bernadette had made – it was a new one, featuring a Randy Mantooth clone.

"You can live!" the announcer said. "You can dream! You can *live your dream!*"

"So," George said. "What do you think?" He smiled as she swung around in surprise.

"What are you doing in my house? Who are you?"

"It's *me*," he said. "George!" He grinned at her. "Surprise!" He loved his new voice. It sounded great.

There were several long, alarming seconds of silence, and then she said, "Oh no. No. No, you didn't..." She turned away from him.

"What?"

"You didn't ... you didn't have to do *anything*," she said, sobbing. "I love you for you. Now you're not *you*, you're ... you're just another one of ... you're just like all the *others*."

"But..."

Sobbing, Bernadette ran out of the room. From down the hall came the sound of a door slamming. George stood there, gaping after her. *What the hell?* he thought. *What happened?*

"George, is that you?" said a small voice.

He turned his head slowly. His painting was talking to him. All four of the characters stood in front of the bar, staring at him.

James Dean looked shocked. "George, what did you *do?*"

NEOMETROPOLIS

"What do you *think?*" he yelled at the painting.

Dean threw his hands up, and pointedly turned his back. The others looked at each other, then returned to their usual places. Marilyn paused and said, "You better go after her."

George took a breath, and then heeded her advice. One Marilyn, he thought, should know another. But Bernadette wasn't inside or outside, or on the balcony, and he couldn't find her anywhere in the commons. He searched for over an hour, then returned to the empty condo.

"She didn't stop back by here, did she?" he asked the painting.

Elvis shook his head. Marilyn said, "We didn't see her." Dean still had his back turned to George, and refused to acknowledge him.

"You know, if I was you," Bogart said, "I'd go see if I could fix my mistake. That is, if there's still a chance."

"There might be," George said. He started nodding, and he repeated himself, louder this time. "There might be!" He turned and hurried toward the door.

"You go get 'em, George!" Elvis said.

#

Bernadette had the car drive around at random while she huddled in the back seat and cried. She knew it was stupid to feel betrayed. It was still George, after all. It was the same man. But to think of him, the one genuine person she knew, the one she trusted – to see him succumb to the counterfeit life of Hollywood, it broke her heart.

I didn't think it could break any more, she thought. The words in her own mind sounded pathetic, but they kept repeating, like a litany, and each time it felt like she were bashing herself against a rock.

That old feeling came back, stronger than ever. She knew she needed help. She also knew she wouldn't seek it. In a way, this gave her some amount of calm. At least she'd made a decision.

The car drove around for hours, then Bernadette finally pushed herself up and looked out the window. She recognized the street, and gave a sad little laugh. Seeing a small shop, she ordered the car to pull over. It stopped, and the door obediently popped open.

NEOMETROPOLIS

Bernadette emerged onto the sidewalk, wiping her eyes, and walked unsteadily into the shop. The robot behind the counter twitched, taking notice of her. She bought cigarettes, asked for matches, then turned and went back outside. A trio of women were passing, and a couple of them laughed at her. They, like her, were all in Marilyn bodies, but they were nearly naked.

With shock, Bernadette realized they were prostitutes.

With trembling hand she opened the cigarettes and pulled one out, lit it, and walked off in the other direction. Despite the renovations, the area still looked dirty and ugly to her. The sidewalks were clean but the windows were smudged and greasy. The other people were dressed in rags or god-awful neon tourist shirts. Some guy grabbed her butt, mistaking her for one of the whores. She yelled at him, then quickened her pace.

The Chinese Theater was two blocks up. It took her three cigarettes to get there. She stopped in front, looking down at the familiar bit of concrete. There were high-heel footprints, and handprints that matched Bernadette's perfectly. It was below Sophia Loren and right next to Danny Thomas. The handwritten inscription read:

Marilyn Monroe
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes
6-26-53

Bernadette's tears were spotting the cement. She looked up and over at the Hollywood sign. It wasn't the original – that had been destroyed in a fire years ago. This one was a hologram. It glowed, bright and vibrant, and looked exactly like the real thing.

But it wasn't.

#

It was after four in the morning when George came stumbling back into the condo. He was alternately trembling with cold, and then hit with suffocating hot flashes. They told him, in rather irate tones, that this condition would last for a few days. It was the result of his body – his *original* body – having been in deep freeze. He was back to normal, considering.

He noticed the painting yelling at him. All four voices, every one sounding distraught. They waved and jumped, frantic to get his attention.

"What?" George said, walking up to it. "Have you seen her? Did she come back?"

NEOMETROPOLIS

"She's here," the James Dean character said. "But we think something is wrong. She was crying and writing a note."

"What?"

"You didn't connect us to the net," Bogart said. "There was no way for us to call for help."

"She's in the bedroom!" Elvis said. "Quick!"

Afraid of what he would see, George rushed down the hall. He saw her through the doorway, face down on the bed. No clothes on. Her skin was a shocking blue.

He saw an empty prescription bottle on the nightstand, sitting on top of a smeared, hand-written note. George forgot to breathe. He stared at her in shock until he suddenly gasped. "No!" he bellowed. "Bernadette! No!"

Pulling out his PDA, he sent the URL for the paramedics dispatch. He stated the emergency, showed them video, and they had him try to resuscitate her while they sent help. It was useless – she was cold. She'd been dead for hours.

Help arrived and he backed off, and they made a half-hearted attempt with the paddles just to show they tried. One of them declared her dead, then they packed her out of the room. It was only after she was gone that he picked up the note. He found it hard to read, because it trembled in his hands.

Dear sweet George—

I'm tired of living this lie. I'm tired of being someone who I am not. I was on my last leg when I met you – I thought you might be my savior. You were, for a while. I almost had myself convinced. But no, it was just delaying the inevitable. You see, it isn't about you, it's about me. I tried to live the dream, but the dream is over. I can't live.

Bye bye.

Marilyn

Marilyn? he thought *What?* George read the note over and over as he sobbed, unable to make sense of it. She *never* called herself Marilyn. Then it dawned on him – it was obvious. It really wasn't Bernadette who had died. It was her dream.

NEOMETROPOLIS

George turned off the lights, closed the door to the room, and went to cry on the sofa.

Up in the painting, the Hollywood figures looked sad. The tiny, platinum blonde image of Marilyn Monroe was quietly sobbing. Bogey, Elvis, and Dean all crowded around, trying to console her.

#

Nine days later Bernadette returned from the dead. She let herself into the condo, looking around with a bit of fear and wonder in her eyes. George thought she was from the moving company.

Looking up from his packing, he was startled to see a short, plump woman with a pretty face and long brown hair. Her eyes were sparkling green. George didn't care that she didn't knock – it barely registered in his mind. "Hi," he said. "I'm almost done with the list. Most of this stuff is staying."

"Pardon?"

"It's not mine. It, well, belongs..." George trailed off, staring. It dawned on him that she wasn't from the moving company.

"Are you George?"

"Y-yes." He stood and walked to her, and stared into her eyes. They were the wrong color, but he recognized them. "Bernadette. It's you."

"I'm sorry, I just walked in—"

"The place is half yours. You have every right."

"You're not staying here?"

"I didn't think you'd, well..." He shrugged. "I was told you'd lost two years of memories."

"I wasn't good at getting myself backed up. Silly me." She smiled. "I'm sorry about that."

George sighed. "Yeah."

"Well, anyway, I had to come by and meet you. After all, you obviously were a big part of my life." She reached out and touched him. "I obviously loved you."

"Yes," he said. He could feel himself choking up, so he didn't say any more.

Seeing he was upset, Bernadette backed off. She turned and walked around the room, looking at the walls, and stopped in front of the painting. *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams*. The painting was empty – the characters gone. George had switched it off.

Turning back to George, she said, "You don't have to move."

"I don't?"

Bernadette shook her head. "I don't think it's necessary. I'm staying with my parents for the time being."

"Are you sure?"

"There's no rush, we can work something out." Bernadette was eyeing him with a slight smile, and, reaching into her purse, she pulled out her PDA and pushed a button. George's PDA beeped. "I'm very curious about you," she said. "Call me later, we'll go out and talk."

"Okay," George said. He tried to mask his surprise, but didn't do a good job.

She stepped up to him, gave him a hug, and then walked off down the hall. He watched her leave, wondering if he were imaging things. Her voice, her mannerisms ... they were pure Norma Jean. After he heard the door close, he pulled out his PDA and looked at it. She'd beamed him her URL.

George immediately went to the painting and turned it on. He had to ask them how long he should wait before calling her.

NEOMETROPOLIS

About Neometropolis...

Neometropolis is a free (downloadable in PDF format) 'zine dedicated to the proliferation of good science fiction, articles and insights about technology and cyberculture, as well as general insanity and disinformation throughout this postmodern world we find ourselves in. You can find us on the web at <http://www.neometropolis.com>. The editor can be contacted at overmind@neometropolis.com.