

I had her in a ring. In those days, you carried around pieces of a person. Not like today.

A strand of hair, a drop of blood, a lipsticked kiss on paper—those things were *real*. You could put them in a locket or pocket case or ring, you could carry them around, you could fondle them. None of this hologram stuff. Who can treasure laser shadows? Or the nanotech “re-creations”—even worse. Fah. Did the Master of the Universe “re-create” the world after it got banged up a little? Never. He made do with the original, like a sensible person.

So I had her in a ring. And I had the ring for forty-two years before it was eaten by the modern world. Literally eaten, so tell me where is the justice in that?

And oh, she was so beautiful! Not genemod misshapen like these modern girls, with their waists so skinny and their behinds huge and those repulsive breasts. No, she was natural, a real woman, a goddess. Black hair wild as stormy water, olive skin, green eyes. I remember the exact shade of green. Not grass, not emerald, not moss. Her own shade. I remember. I—

“Grampops?”

—met her while I was on shore leave on Cyprus. The Mid-East war had just ended, one of the wars, who can keep them all straight? I met Daria in a *taverna* and we had a week together. Nobody will ever know what glory that week was. She was a nice girl, too, even if she was a... People do what they must to survive. Nobody knows that better than me. Daria—

“Grampops!”

—gave me a lock of hair and a kiss pressed on paper. Back then I kept them in a cheap plastolux bubble, all I could afford, but later I had the hair and tiny folded paper set into a ring. Much later, when I had money and Miriam had died and—

“Dad!”

And that’s how it started up again. With my son, my grandchildren. Life just never knows when enough is enough.

“Dad, the kids spoke to you. Twice.”

“So this creates an obligation for me to answer?”

My son Geoffrey sighs. The boys—six and eight, what business does a fifty-five-year-old man have with such young kids, but Gloria is his second wife—have vanished into the hall. They come, they go. We sit on a Sunday afternoon in my room—a nice room, it should be for what I pay—in the Silver Star Retirement Home. Every Sunday Geoff comes, we sit, we stare at each other. Sometimes Gloria comes, sometimes the boys, sometimes not. The whole thing is a strain.

Then the kids burst back through the doorway, and this time something follows them in.

“Reuven, what the shit is *that*?”

Geoffrey says, irritated, “Don’t curse in front of the children, and—”

“ ‘Shit’ is cursing? Since when? ”

“—and it’s ‘Bobby,’ not ‘Reuven.’ ”

“It’s ‘zaydeh,’ not ‘Grampops,’ and I could show you what cursing is. Get that thing away from me!”

“Isn’t it *astronomical*?” Reuven says. “I just got it!”

The thing is trying to climb onto my lap. It’s not like their last pet, the pink cat that could jump to the ceiling. Kangaroo genes in it, such foolishness. This one isn’t even real, it’s a ’bot of some kind, like

