

Downtown

by John Kessel

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600 Words.*

So at the end of the week I shut down my left brain, got charged, and told anyone who would listen that I was going Downtown.

“And who is it that’s supposed to care?” the Group Average said.

“Certainly not you,” I said, pulling on my weekend skin. GA and I used to be featured, and they still held it against me.

“What you gonna do down there?” the Duck asked. The Duck was puny and naïve.

“Tell me something I *ain’t* gonna do,” I shot back.

Well, that seemed to intrigue the Duck. “Can I come too?”

“It’s a free domain,” I said. “Long as you got your own charge.” We left the Group in the locker space and walked out of there. The sun was dying and on the horizon the murder trees were stirred by the offshore breeze. We walked up to the transit stop, plugged in, bought a couple of passages, and stood on the platform in the sultry evening waiting for the slip. Far down the slipway glowed the lights of the city.

“Will there be boys and girls there?” the Duck asked.

“You bet your feathers,” I replied. “Ducks, too.”

When the slip drew up we settled in and before we knew it we were stepping out into the colorful Calle Rosinante. Boys! Girls! Snakes! Metatron the Archangel, Available for 23 Amps! Ducks!

Hot jazz filled my right brain, singing Go! Go!, along with the Four Noble Truths:

Life sucks.

It sucks because you’re stuck on things.

This can be remedied.

Fake left, fake right, go up the Middle.

Just like Downtown to kill your buzz while pushing it. Stuck on things? I wasn't going to be stuck on anything tonight longer than it took me to drink it or smoke it or poke it. Remedy me no remedies, Chaz.

First, food. We got some food. A CosmicBoy accosted us in front of the cheesetaurant. "You're outliers, right? For a very reasonable price, I can provide an interstellar experience."

"How much?" the Duck asked.

Before Cosmic could answer I put the bigger of my two hands—my pushing hand—on his chest. I pushed. "We aren't interested, Chaz. My friend may look like a Duck, but he wasn't fledged yesterday."

Cosmic sauntered off. "Why did you chase him away?" the Duck asked.

My right brain informed me that I regretted saying the Duck could come. Thanks, right brain. "Look, Duck, Let's split up. I'll meet you back here at daybreak and a half."

His display feathers drooped, but he didn't protest.

So I had me a night and a day and a night. Various transactions were made, physical and psychological. Fluids were transferred. Charges were discharged. Frankly, I don't remember most of it.

What I do remember is waking in an alley between a Tavern and a Frothel. The Duck was leaning over me. He had lost most of his feathers; his downy cheeks made him look like a girl. Holy calamity—he *was* a girl.

"Duck?" I said groggily.

"The one and only," she replied. She levered herself under my arm and helped me to stand. My weekend skin was ruined. My right brain whirled. "Come on, Schmee," she said. "Time to slip home."

"I can't slip," I croaked. "I'm completely discharged."

"I'll loan you."

We limped through the street. Downtown was just as bright and attractive as it had been when we arrived, in a completely meretricious sort of way. Meretricious. That was my left brain coming back.

We stood on the platform waiting for the slip. Ahead: another week in the reality mines. "Life sucks," I muttered.

"This can be remedied," the Duck said. To my utter and complete surprise, she kissed me sweetly on the cheek.

She is really quite attractive, for a duck.

About the Author

[John Kessel](#) is director of Creative Writing at North Carolina State University. His novella “Another Orphan” received the 1982 Nebula Award, and his short story “Buffalo” won the 1991 Theodore Sturgeon Award and the Locus Poll. In 2002 his novella “Stories for Men” shared the James Tiptree Jr. Award for sf dealing with gender issues. His books include the novels *Good News from Outer Space* and *Corrupting Dr. Nice* and the story collections *Meeting in Infinity* and *The Pure Product*. *Science Fiction Weekly*, in a fit of inexcusable madness, called him “quite possibly the best short story writer working in science fiction today.”

That was many years ago. More recently, he co-edited the slipstream anthology *Feeling Very Strange* with James Patrick Kelly. His new collection, *The Baum Plan for Financial Independence and Other Stories* will be published by Small Beer Press in 2008.

He does not know any ducks, but he shares the guardianship of four chickens.