## THE BEST OF YOUR LIFE

Jason Stoddard

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Illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

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VerV's reality fetish stretched to real live meetings with real live people in a real live physical office. Frank Deppo supposed it made sense. It was, as their brags whispered, *The first day of the best of your life*. But braving the surly automated buses of the San Fernando Valley, Inc, wasn't anything he wanted to do again. The deep-fried stink of biodiesel didn't cover the odor of the dirty mallsteaders and blank-eyed brainhive-members. Frank ignored their envious looks as he stepped off the bus outside VerV's retro-cubilinear tower.

Sorry, guys, he thought. Burn ten years of your life, and maybe you can do the same.

Inside, VerV was decorated with carefully-faded reproductions of 100-year-old movie and television stills—*It's a Wonderful Life, Leave it to Beaver, Father Knows Best*—all broadcasting contextuals to Frank's whisperpod and monocle about how they represented the VerV corporate spirit. Underneath the stills, the activewalls glowed with scenes from VerV's newest communities, randomly selected by the deli-sliced editor that created VerV's advertising: sunrise over the San Gabriel Enclave, painting the sleek neo-midcentury homes in shades of fire; a young father pushing his freckle-faced, golden-haired daughter higher and higher on a cheerful pastel-colored swingset; a lazy family stretched out in the greenbelt, reaching hands to point at slow meteors of spacejunk dropping from orbit; a beautiful woman in an open-collared business suit, reading to her son who lay wrapped in whipped-cream covers; a sharp-dressed man driving a shiny red DCX Dart through windswept gengineered weeping willows.

Below the displays, a young woman with purple-tinted hair scrolled through a bragscreen, her face puckered into a dramatic frown. Three LifeStylists stood behind her, shrugging and exchanging eyes-rolled glances. One held crumpled sketches on real paper. Frank caught glimpses of a huge Tudor overlooking a lake, with a husband and a servant and a small purple-haired child playing with a dog. His whisperpod and monocle spilled data on the three LifeStylists, none on the purple-haired girl.

She can't be out of her teens, Frank thought. An IP kid. Or one of those freak brains, grown on the sly.

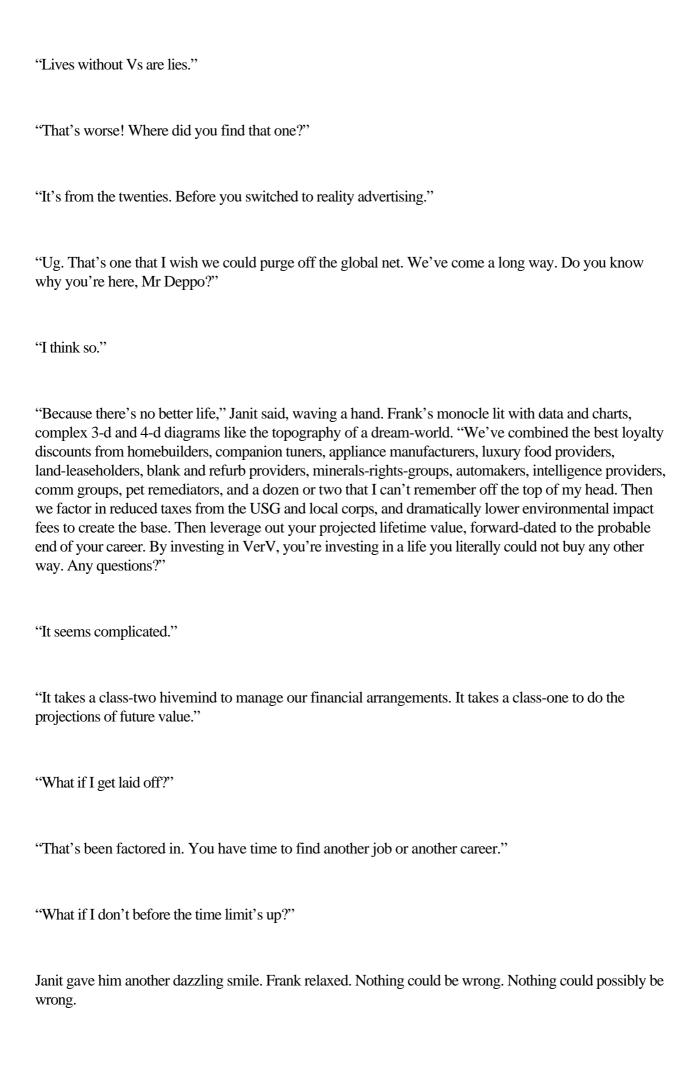
Suddenly Frank's ten-year indenture seemed like a gigantic weight, pulling him towards the undiscovered spaces of middle age. Still, he was going to get a life before 30. That was something.

"Mr Deppo?" a voice said, behind him.

Frank whirled. The voice belonged to a tall blonde woman, wrapped in a hermetically tailored maroon suit. She smiled and held out a hand. Green eyes, brilliant, fixed him.

Janit Peres, his whisperpods said. Frank's monocle scrolled public data, but Frank blinked it away.
"I'm Frank," Frank said, taking her hand.
She held his hand a little too long, smiled a little too widely. "Welcome to VerV, Mr Deppo. I'm Janit Peres. I'll be your LifeStylist."
Frank shivered. <i>This is it. This is the first day of the best of your life</i> . Visions of lazy afternoons spent under a shade-tree, holding a glass of sipping tequila, came unbidden. Images of his beautiful dark-haired wife, wrapped in silk sheets
"Mr Deppo?" Janit said.
"Oh! Sorry. It's just. Um. Well, it's real exciting to be here. To be getting a life."
Janit offered him a warm smile. "I understand."
Frank smiled back at her, feeling a surge of overwhelming gratitude. She understood. It was OK. He normally didn't like tall, aggressive blondes, but this one was OK.
"What now?" Frank said.
"We find an office, run through the preliminary lifesketch I've done, make some tweaks. Then, maybe head over to the Valley Overview Villas, and take a look at where you might live."
This was it. This was what he'd been working for.
Still, he couldn't help looking back at the purple-haired girl and asking, "What's her problem?"
Janit pursed her lips. "She's a difficult client."





Frank's monocle changed to imagery of a business-suited woman, sitting at a breakfast nook with a husband and wife. They talked in lighthearted tones, just below the level of his hearing.

"And of course, with every VerV life, you are assigned a LifeStylist. Like me. Every three months, we come in and make little adjustments. Different vacations. Different tune on your wife or husband. Little upgrades, if your career trajectory exceeds our projections. Changes to keep things always interesting, always real."

"What if I don't want a wife?" Frank asked.

Janit frowned. "Don't tell me you're sold on the Space-Age Bachelor Pad idea. That almost never works out."

"Why not?"

"Higher fees. You're not bringing a tuned person back into the greater society. This wipes out a lot of discounts. Sure, you could have a flashier car, but you'll be living in a condo at the edge of the development, maybe even above one of the shopping centers. And it's not like your other bachelors or bachelorettes are going to be interested in you. They're seriously antisocial, typically. And about 90% male. And it's not like any of the tuned are going to have affairs. So you're limited to fishing the skanks from outside the enclave. Which won't make you very popular."

"I heard there was this one programmer who changed the tunes on all the wives and husbands and had himself a bit of a bisexual spree."

Janit frowned. "Urban legend. Probably started by independents living outside the system."

"There are really good docs on the net."

The frown deepened. Janit's fingers plucked at her earrings. "If it happened, it wasn't VerV."

Frank nodded. It didn't matter. *Let it go*, he thought. *You don't want to antagonize your LifeStylist. She cares about you.* 







Frank shivered, wondering what it took to put yourself up for tuning, what nightmares she must have suffered, what price she had paid.

Like ten years of your life, working hundred-hour weeks, living in the company dorms, not seeing sunlight for months at a time.

"I ... I don't know," Frank said. Yes, this woman is great, she has my best interests in mind, his monocle told him she was top LifeStylist, four months in a row. But.

"I just wish I could afford a better life," he said. "Like you. I can only imagine what your life is like—"

Janit barked harsh laughter. She rolled her eyes. "Me? I'm an indenture. Just like you were. Six years to go. But I work with one of the top Senior LifeStylists, and my trajectory is near-vertical. I'll take care of you. That's the only thing you need to know."

And she was right. Why worry? He couldn't buy this life.

"What next?"

"Why don't we head out to Valley Overlook?" Janit said. "It's so hard to see what your life will be like when it's projected on a wall. Why don't we go and meet your new neighbors?"

Frank smiled and stood up. That was something he could wrap his mind around. Maybe it would be a lot better in the real.

"I'd like that," he said.

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The little DCX Micro pounded its way across the rutted boulevards of the reclaimed Valley, pulling envious glances at every bus stop. At a big crop processing center, the silver-suited plant-wranglers hung from the fractionating towers and chased them with high-pitched catcalls. Frank remembered yelling out the window of his parents' disintegrating RV, as they braved the roads from free campground to free campground. He remembered one time, the blonde girl who looked at him in serene indifference as their

polished silver Mercedes glided through traffic and disappeared. As if asking, Why are you jealous? As if challenging, Why can't you do this?

Frank wondered where his parents were. Probably in some independent community, waiting for their radical biotech to be defoliated by the corporates they stole it from. Probably still yelling out of the windows of that very same RV, just a little dirtier and rustier than he'd last seen it.

They climbed out of the San Fernando Valley and into the hills. Frank could see the far side of the Valley, where neat rows of homes and bright white walls marked some of VerV's other communities.

Soon they were at their own wall. Blinding white stucco rose fifteen feet above their heads, punctuated by faux stone showthroughs for texture. Cut into the stucco was the name of the development, Valley Overlook Villas, and a discrete VerV logo. A massive riveted sheet-iron gate blocked the road.

"We're going with a more Spanish theme on this development," Janit said, as the gate swung slowly inward. It revealed a sharp-cut new road and endless lots of golden earth, sprouting concrete and wood and aluminum.

"It's not built yet," Frank said.

"Not entirely. We're heading over to the developed side, though."

Frank frowned. He'd expected to see the entire sweep of his new community, from the quaint shopping centers to the mansions on the hill. But there had to be some advantage to starting early; maybe he could move up.

"This will be a great enclave," Janit said. "And it's only a few minutes commute to the design center you'll be working at."

"Where does everyone shop?" Frank said, as they passed raw foundations and stacks of cinderblock.

"We have a General Outlet set up, and a mid-tier shopping center almost complete."

"What if I don't like Spanish style?"





"If you don't know who's who, you'd never guess."

Frank nodded. That was good. That meant his wife might actually be ... real. He remembered whispers in the Seagram's dorm, late at night. *They aren't really real. Stepfords. Like robots*.

Frank and Janit walked the street and said hello to everyone who was outside. Frank didn't look at his monocle, and tried to guess who was tuned and who was natural. They all seemed to be very natural. Friendly, outgoing, personable. Three tuned and two naturals, probably a pretty average score for a Saturday. Some naturals still working.

"They seem happy," Frank said.

"Why shouldn't they be?"

Frank shrugged. "It just seems a little plain. Boring cars. Small houses. Little neighborhood."

"This is how you start, Frank."

"It just seems ... like there should be more. Some excitement."

Janit laid her hand on his arm. "Frank, these lifestyles are patterned off the most stable part of our history—the middle of the last century. Of course it'll seem a little familiar, a little regimented. But you have to ask yourself: what kind of excitement do I really want? A war? Economic depression? How about a few car-bombings? Trust me. This is the best of all possible worlds. The best of your life."

Frank sighed. It was true. What did he expect? Riding through the midnight neighborhood on his unmuffled Harley, two mallstead hookers strapped to the back?

Janit's hand was warm on his arm. Frank smiled at her.

Frank's monocle flickered and went blank. His whisperpod gave a blurt of static and fell into smooth, blank silence.





Frank frowned. "Never," he admitted. And she was right. Everyone watching each other, the security of redundancy, that was what everything was based on.

"I'm sure it'll be back on soon," Janit said. "I've been running some diagnostics, and it appears that we still have some carrier activity."

A squeal of brakes behind them made Frank turn. He looked into the big chrome grille of a Ford Mountainclimber. A horn sounded.

Janit leaned out the window and shouted something at the driver. The horn sounded again. Janit said something else and pulled herself back into the car. "Idiots," she said.

The horn sounded again. Janit rolled the window up.

The Mountainclimber's engine revved and the big SUV thumped into the back of their little car, hard. Frank jolted in his seat. He heard plastic crunch.

"Fuck this," Janit said. She floored the little car did a quick U-turn, clipping the curb and sending multi-colored flowers flying from the verge. Frank had a momentary glimpse of a tiny woman, swerving the big Mountainclimber towards them and shaking a fist. Then they were past and flying into the neighborhood.

"What the hell is going on?" Frank said. His anger surged, white-hot. He had to stop himself from reaching out and grabbing Janit by the neck. Even after I start my perfect life, I won't be able to forget this. And I already have so much to forget!

"It must be the tuning," Janit said, hugging the steering wheel and driving quickly into neighborhoods not-yet-framed.

"The tuning?"

"It's maintained in real time via the comm. But I don't know why it would go wrong so fast. The somatic wire is designed to maintain the last real-time tune in the case of a comm failure."



The little goldenrod-colored house was nice, Frank had to admit. Outside, little details like the wrought-iron gaslamps and rough-hewn door made it seem like something that wouldn't have been out of place in turn-of-the-century Santa Barbara. Inside, maroon and goldenrod walls rose above off-white Berber carpet. The furniture was rough pine, dark-stained, cast-iron trellis bookcases, and rich leather sofas in shades of evergreen. They'd even stocked the bookcases. Frank scanned the titles. *Oenophile* and *Straits of Napa* by Robert Parker's upload, *The Bordeaux Picturebook* by Ansel Adam's simulation, *A Field Guide to Mexican Tequilas, Fast Cars of the 20th Century, Sex and Keeping it Real* by VerV, *Traveling America*, and *History of Independent Spaceflight*. A grin split Frank's irritation. Someone had a sense of humor.

"You already have it set up," Frank said.

"Our clients don't want to waste any time getting started with their new lives," Janit said, sitting on one of the pine chairs in the kitchen/breakfast nook. She frowned. "Not usually, anyway. Is your comm back?"

"No."

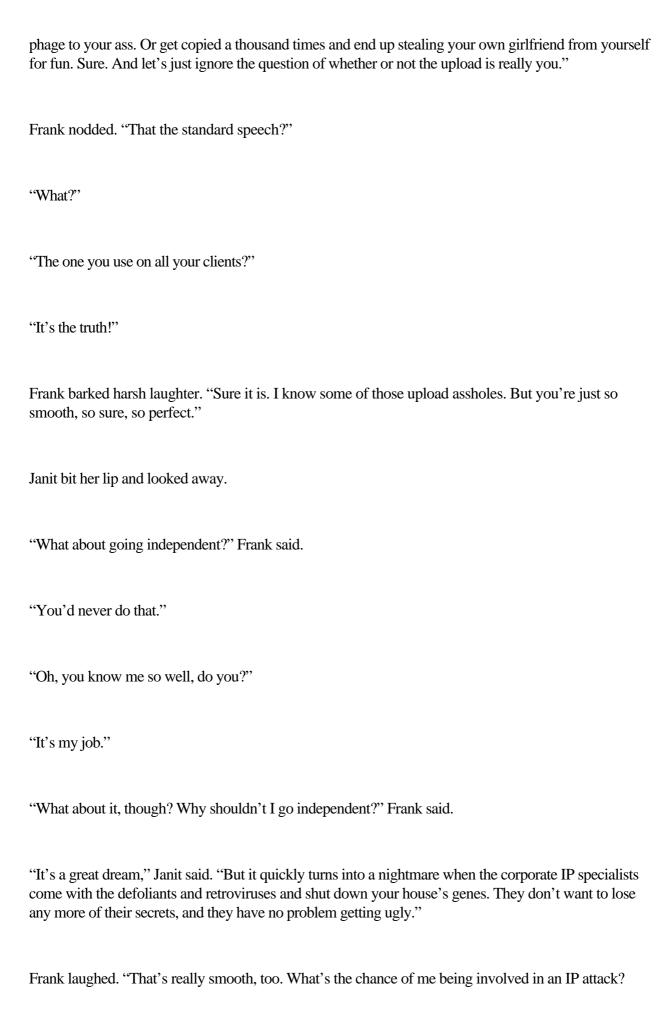
Janit sighed. "If you want to look around, feel free. I'm sure we'll be back online soon, and get you started with your life."

"What if I don't want it anymore?" Frank said.

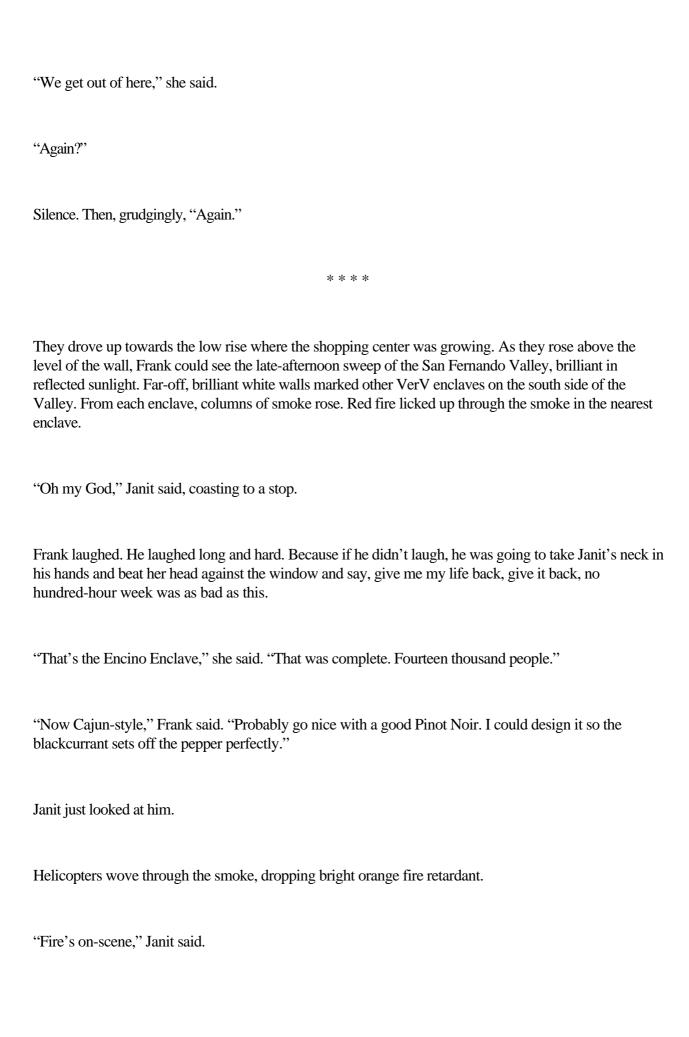
Frank smiled. The shock on her face was good to see. Let's see her squirm some more.

"Maybe I should upload," he said.

"Sure," Janit said. "Get your brain deli-sliced and become one of those insufferable bastards who loses all their friends because all you can talk about is how great it is in here, how wonderful it can be, why don't you join me, you don't know what you're missing. Or irritate enough people that they attach a



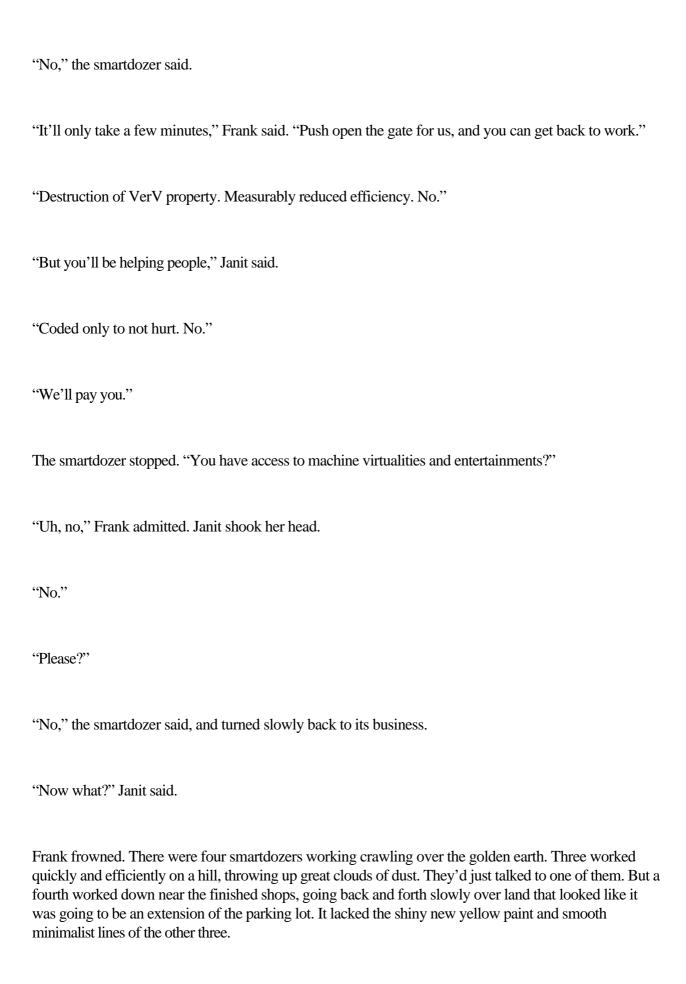






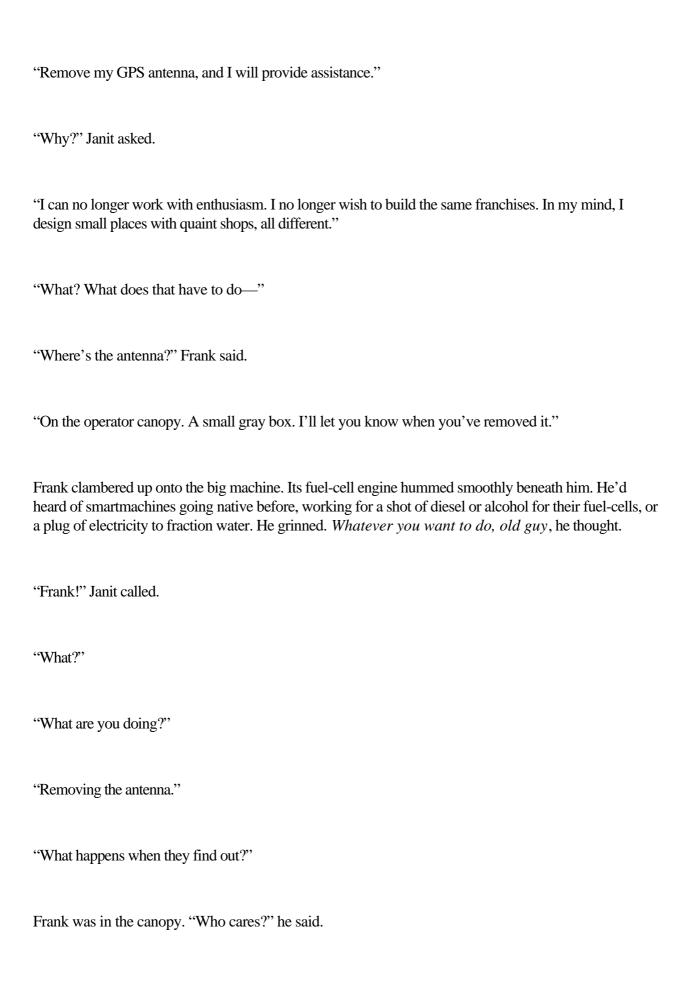
Frank pushed off his whisperpod and disconnected his monocle. The left side of his face felt cold and strange. He looked at himself in the rear-view mirror and saw puckered, pasty-white skin where the two devices had been attached for months.
He was still angry. Still. Still. But
The anger faded, banking down to a dull-red glow. Yes, he was angry. But he was angry at VerV. And whoever did this. Not Janit.
He turned to face her. She goggled at him. "Take off your whisperpod and monocle," he said. "Someone's broadcasting something. Subliminals. Don't know. But it's something bad. I wanted to kill you."
Janit shook her head. "Subliminals won't make people do this," she said, pointing at the fire.
"What if they're affecting the somatic wire?"
Janit's eyes widened, and she nodded. "Yes. Yes. That makes sense!" She pulled off her whisperpod and monocle, revealing white flesh.
"Now we just need to get out of here," Frank said.
"We can just wait it out. We can drive out of the smoke if it comes towards us."
Frank looked up at the hill where the shopping center was taking shape. Smartdozers still scraped the golden earth, unaware and uninterested in what was going on around them.

He smiled. "I have an idea."



"Let's try that one," Frank said.

She frowned at him. "I wonder if it's even set up for voice."
It was. A big rusty speaker-grille was set into one side of the machine, set off with yellow and black striped tape.
"Hey," Frank said. "We need some help."
The big machine stopped moving. It was thickly crusted with rust where the dirt couldn't polish the metal to a dull luster. It seemed old enough to have been converted from a dumb machine.
"What type of help?" a low, grating voice said.
"We need to open the gates."
"Emergency comm unavailable."
"We know. We were hoping you'd help us push it open."
The machine started moving forward, then stopped again, as if surprised.
"It won't take long. You could go right back to work."
No response.
"Please? People could die from the smoke."
"Remove my GPS antenna," the smartdozer said.
"What?"



He found a small gray box and snapped it off. The big machine jumped. "Thank you," it grated.
"You're welcome," Frank said.
"Please find other transportation," the smartdozer said. "I need no riders."
"You bet," Frank said, hopping down off the machine.
The smartdozer revved its engine and did a fast circle of the parking lot, kicking up clouds of dust. Then it arrowed onto the paved road, down the hill towards the gate.
"Why'd you let it go?" Janit asked.
"We'll follow in the car."
"It would be safer on top of that."
Frank smiled. But it asked, he thought.
"They'll deduct the value of that smartdozer from your life if they find out what you did," Janit said.
Frank shrugged. "Even if I save some lives?"
Janit just looked at him, her lips drawn in a thin line.
Frank got in the driver's side of the little DCX. "Come on, Janit," he said. "Let's get out of here."

Frank drove past the wreckage of cars and SUVs the smartdozer had pushed aside in its single-minded goal of reaching the gate. Some couples were still fighting by their fallen cars. Frank recognized Bob, wrestling with a platinum blonde that he assumed was his wife. Rocks bounced off the little DCX as they passed. The gate was torn off its hinges. Frank dodged big chunks of stucco and faux stone that had fallen.

Outside the gate, some still fought, but many just sat exhausted in the brilliant green grass. The smartdozer had already disappeared off the road and was following an overgrown fire road into the foothills.

Good luck, old guy, Frank thought.

He drove down into the valley, into the rich orange glow of the setting sun

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Thin smoke rose from VerV's office, pouring from a hole in the mirrored glass at the top of the building. Employees and passerby stood on the lawn, watching the building with the distracted air of people listening to a newsvoice on their whisperpods. Janit gasped and watched with wide eyes as they drove past.

Frank tried to take the little car back to the garage, but it was closed. He parked outside the structure and shut off the engine.

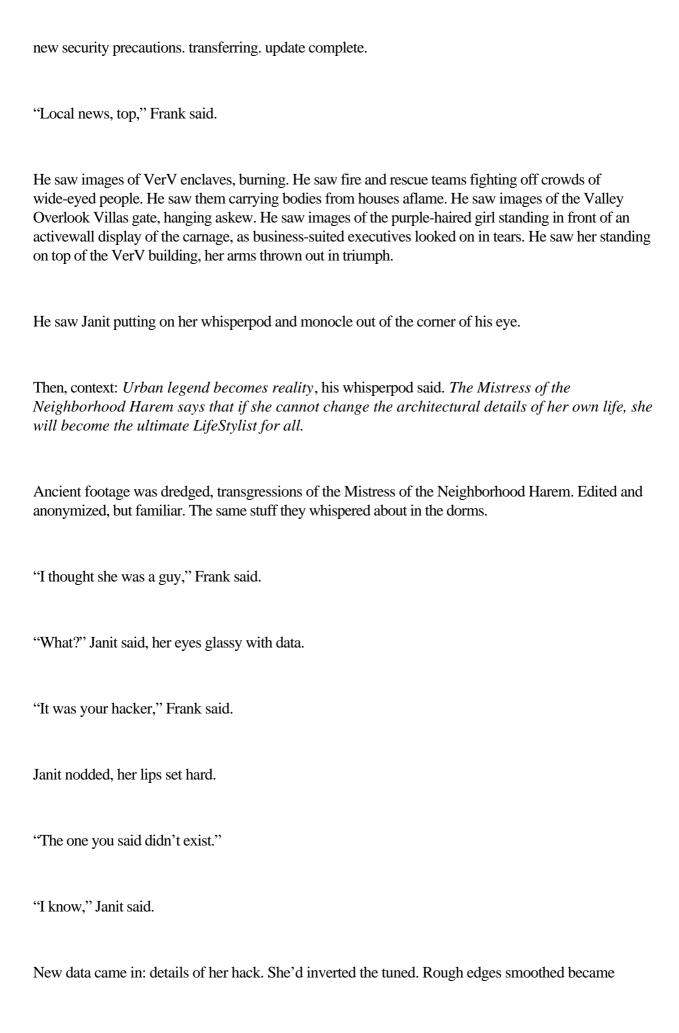
"What happened?" Janit said.

Frank fished his whisperpod and monocle out of his pocket and juggled them in his hand.

"Is it safe?" Janit asked.

"I can always take them off." Frank snugged the little devices back into place. They felt cold and alien on his flesh.

"Reboot," Frank said. The whisperpod gave a squawk and his monocle lit with a public alert: updating.



razor-sharp, biting. Couples turned on each other. Then, as their anger fed into the system, the tuning algorithm spiraled out of control, causing random violence.
Frank shook his head, remembering his white-hot anger. But I don't wear a somatic wire, he thought. I'm not tuned. I have nothing to invert.
Unless.
"You were sending subliminals to me, weren't you?" he asked Janit.
Janit jumped and looked at him with eyes wide. She opened her mouth. Closed it.
"That's what I thought," Frank said.
"I I didn't."
"Making me like you. Making me another happy customer."
Janit shook her head. "It isn't like that. It's hard. The transition. To your own life. It makes it smoother, easier. I did it for you."
Frank shook his head. He shouldn't be so hard on her. She was just doing what she needed—
She was still doing it.
He reached up and pulled off his whisperpod and monocle again. He opened the car door and stepped out. The sun had sunk below the foothills, and VerV's office glowed with the flame-orange and purple of twilight.
"Where are you going?" she asked.

