

THE BEST OF YOUR LIFE

Jason Stoddard

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Illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

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Jason's fiction has appeared in *Interzone*, *Sci Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Futurismic* and many other places. He is a finalist for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award and Sidewise Award for Alternate History, and his day job is in metaverse development. More information is available at xcentric.com.

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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 contextually 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 genengineered 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. *This is it. This is the first day of the best of your life.* 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."

“IP kid?”

Janit just smiled. “Shall we find an office?”

Frank lingered a moment more. He saw himself walking up to the purple-haired girl, pushing aside the LifeStylists, and asking her to run off and build a natural life together with him, just like they did in the old days.

The vision passed, leaving him with only one nagging question. *Why does she get three LifeStylists and I get only one?*

He shook his head. It didn’t matter. He had a good LifeStylist. He could feel it.

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Janit’s office was an efficient little cubicle set up against a massive glass wall that overlooked the sprawling farms of the reclaimed San Fernando Valley. Green-yellow hotplants cooked under layers of translucent polymer, near-boiling in solar heat from Fresnel concentrators. Farther-off, the heat bred mirages, making it look as if the entire south end of the Valley was submerged beneath a brilliant lake.

On Janit’s desk was a inexpensive tea service, brewing what smelled like a credible Darjeeling.

Tea, not coffee. Of course. Janit knew him. It was her job.

“What do you know about VerV?” Janit said, pouring the tea.

“Anyone can have a life, but only a select few can have a life with VerV.”

Janit groaned. “That’s so old.”

“Lives without Vs are lies.”

“That’s worse! Where did you find that one?”

“It’s from the twenties. Before you switched to reality advertising.”

“Ug. That’s one that I wish we could purge off the global net. We’ve come a long way. Do you know why you’re here, Mr Deppo?”

“I think so.”

“Because there’s no better life,” Janit said, waving a hand. Frank’s monocle lit with data and charts, complex 3-d and 4-d diagrams like the topography of a dream-world. “We’ve combined the best loyalty discounts from homebuilders, companion tuners, appliance manufacturers, luxury food providers, land-leaseholders, blank and refurb providers, minerals-rights-groups, automakers, intelligence providers, comm groups, pet remediators, and a dozen or two that I can’t remember off the top of my head. Then we factor in reduced taxes from the USG and local corps, and dramatically lower environmental impact fees to create the base. Then leverage out your projected lifetime value, forward-dated to the probable end of your career. By investing in VerV, you’re investing in a life you literally could not buy any other way. Any questions?”

“It seems complicated.”

“It takes a class-two hivemind to manage our financial arrangements. It takes a class-one to do the projections of future value.”

“What if I get laid off?”

“That’s been factored in. You have time to find another job or another career.”

“What if I don’t before the time limit’s up?”

Janit gave him another dazzling smile. Frank relaxed. Nothing could be wrong. Nothing could possibly be wrong.

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 picked up his tea and sipped it, knowing that it was true, knowing that it was VerV. It was a reasonably good Darjeeling, nothing knockout but not crap either.

“Good choice,” Frank said, nodding at the cup.

“It’s my job to make good choices,” Janit said. “Though I understand you work more with wines.”

Frank felt a warm flush of pride. “Associate lifestyle beverage designer, Seagrams grape products division.”

“I would have thought that designing wine is a pretty sewn-up field. You take the great vintages, make molecular maps, and run tankloads with biomachine processes.”

Frank nodded. “Yes, but there are secondary and tertiary effects. Where was the molecular map taken? At the center of the barrel? Near the surface? How efficient is the scavenging of the biomachine waste? There are still people who can tell the difference. But the real opportunity isn’t in copying vintages. The real opportunity is using our knowledgebase of what constitutes ‘great’ to create synthetics that are better than anything that could ever be grown in Napa or Bordeaux. We can do it. I just need to fine-tune the knowledgebase a bit, make some extrapolations ... but I’m probably boring you.”

Janit laughed. “Not really. But I understand you’re a tequila man yourself.”

“Mexico won’t let us touch it. I’m sure there are some illicit copies, but they’re damn proud of their tequila.”

“But you could do better.”

“Of course! Just like you do with lives, I can do with booze.”

Janit laughed, and Frank joined her. For a moment he wondered if he could share his life with a woman like this, so tall, so bright, so aggressive. He shook his head.

“So, why don’t we see some more of my choices?” Janit said.

“Yes, please.”

Janit used the activewall to show Frank what seemed to be a very basic life. Small house near the wall of Valley Overlook Villas. Maybe a couple of hundred square feet of backyard. A small white Chevy, sensible and boring. Smiling simulated neighbors dressed in sensible clothes, driving sensible cars.

“Wait, wait,” Frank said, his stomach suddenly churning. “This seems pretty, uh, well, plain.”

“You didn’t expect the mansion, the Mercedes and the friendship with the governor to start, did you?”

“Well, no, uh...”

A brittle smile. “Those may come later.”

But there are no guarantees, Frank thought, shivering.

“What if I want a better car?”

Janit pursed her lips and adjusted some figures. Frank’s house changed into a townhome, his car morphed into a new Mustang.

“Can’t I spend a little more?”

“Frank, I thought I explained that.”

“What?”

“VerV takes in all the interlocking discounts and your entire lifetime value. You *can’t* spend more.”

“Oh.” Frank felt his stomach sink, like a lead weight in his gut. But this was the first day of the best of his life, and she was really trying to help...

“Can I keep going?” Janit said. “It gets a lot better.”

Frank nodded, and the activewall changed again. This time, he was sitting on his front porch, sharing a glass of wine with a slender, dark-haired woman who looked up at him with quivering eyes full of love and admiration.

“Is that my wife?”

“Yes.”

“Is that what she’d really look like?”

Janit glanced at her monocle. “If we act fast. She joined the to-be-tuned queue just yesterday, but there’s already been several hundred views.”

The scene zoomed in on her silky dark hair, her big amber eyes. Frank swallowed.

“Will she really love me?”

“One hundred percent certified, based on the best simulations and millions of uploads. She’ll be tuned to you.”

“Where did she come from?” Frank asked, still looking at the screen.

A shrug. “I don’t know. Peoria or Mojave, who knows? Just another independent coming back into society. You’re doing her a favor by taking her in.”

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?"

A momentary frown soured Janit's face. "Look. We could place you elsewhere, but your value works best in a newborhood."

"Yeah, but—"

"Plus, I really don't think you want to commute all the way across the Valley six days a week. We'd have to factor that into your car choice, too."

Frank shook his head. *Work with her. She knows best.*

But as they drove through the newborhood, he wondered. The streets were new, but long streaks of tan earth striped them dirty. Dust lay everywhere. And, as they got deeper into the development, the finished houses were tiny and plain, rough stucco shacks that looked even smaller than they had on the activewall.

They stopped near the towering wall. Little houses hugged the road on curving, claustrophobic streets. Some had grass and young new trees; some still had dirt. Landscapers worked quickly on one of the houses, unrolling bolts of lawn and placing faux boulders in strategically artistic locations. Frank squinted and tried to imagine what the neighborhood would look like when the trees had grown to overarch the road and block out some of the wall and sky, when it had lost some of its rawness. It could look good, he thought. But it would still be small.

"This is where I'd live?"

Janit shook her head and pointed to a low rise, where new homes rose from raw earth. Some were finished, some were still receiving roofs and stucco.

Janit pointed to a small two-story on a corner. "You see that one, the goldenrod one?" She asked. "That's what I had selected for you."

Frank squinted at it. At least it was a corner lot. But it looked like it was pushed right up against the hill behind it. And what would they build there?

"How big is it?" he asked.

“Big enough,” Janit said. “Hey, Bob.”

Frank turned. A handsome, sun-burned man was pulling off gardening mitts. “Hey, Janit. Thought I’d come over and welcome the new guy.” He stuck out a hand. “Bob Menendez,” he said.

“Frank Deppo.”

Bob blinked. “Like the astronaut? The one who started the moon thing?”

“Yeah. Parents were fans.”

“Frank has lots of questions,” Janit said.

Bob laughed. “Don’t we all. But—”

There was a crash from Bob’s yard where the boulders were being placed. Dayworkers swarmed around the truck.

“Crap,” Bob said. “Better see what that is. Good meeting you, Mr Deppo.”

Frank watched him leave. He seemed happy enough. “What does Bob do for a living?”

Janit stared at him. “Nothing. He’s tuned. His wife works for Pfizer bioelectronics.”

Data scrolled in Frank’s monocle, details of his neighbors. Of course. He could have looked at that earlier. The new American credo. Everyone watches everyone else. And in observation, there is security. And truth.

“He seems so normal,” Frank said.

“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.

“Reboot,” Frank said.

Nothing.

Janit frowned and tapped at her monocle. She muttered commands under her breath.

“What’s happening?” Frank said.

“I don’t know.”

“My comm is gone.”

“So is mine. Hold on. I’m trying.” Janit mumbled more commands and swung the monocle over in front of her eye to etytype mode. Frank did the same, but none of his commands did anything. Telltales glowed green, but his screen was blank.

“Shit,” Janit said. “All I’ve got is local processing. No comm.”

From the house opposite them came voices, raised shrill in argument. There was a thump and a clatter.

“Come on,” Janit said. “Let’s get out of here.”

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The big riveted sheet-iron gate was closed. Janit slowed, frowned, and mumbled into her whisperpod. The gate remained closed.

“What’s wrong?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know. It should open. Automatically.”

“Isn’t there an emergency switch or something?” Frank said. He’d been nervous and on-edge since hearing the couple arguing in the house, thinking, *This could happen to me, this is happening to me, it’s this woman, it’s her fault, why didn’t I get three LifeStylists, why didn’t I get a real one and not an indenture.*

“No,” Janit said. She mumbled commands again, then cursed and slammed her hand on the steering wheel.

“Can’t we call the police?”

Janit pointed at her whisperpod. “*This* is how you call the police. Is yours working?”

Irritation flared to anger. This wasn’t supposed to happen. This was the first day of the best of his life! “So we’re trapped in here? Great. Fuck. Thanks for the wonderful day.”

Janit looked at him, her mouth open in surprise. “I ... I’m sorry,” she said.

Frank felt a momentary burst of embarrassment. Maybe he shouldn’t have been so harsh with her. But he’d worked for this! He deserved a good life! “How could this happen?” he said, looking away.

“I don’t know,” Janit said.

“And there’s no way to call the police? Fire? Rescue? No manual switch for the gate?”

“No.”

“So if something goes wrong, I’ll be trapped in here?”

“No. No. This is weird. When was the last time you lost comm for this long?”

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.”

“So we’re trapped in here with a bunch of crazy people?”

“I ... well, we shouldn’t be.”

“Shouldn’t be! Tell me how VerV is going to make up for this? You’re screwing my entire life!”

Janit looked at him. Another one of those searching looks. “You don’t wear a somatic wire, do you?”

“No! Of course not! I’m not tuned!”

“Calm down. It was just a question. A lot of valued wear them too. Easier to Prozac down after a hard day, or amp up for a meeting.”

Huh. Frank didn’t know that. His anger subsided a little. “What do we do now, oh illustrious LifeStylist?” he asked.

“Find a place to wait it out.”

“Where?”

“How about your house?”

Frank started. Sudden illumination came: *Because you think we won’t fight as much there, because I won’t want to hurt the place I live?* How much of this has been calculated? And to what degree?

“Frank?”

“Sure,” Frank said. “Why not?”

Janit turned to look at him. He tried to smile. *Play along. Find out what’s really going on.*

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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.

"What?"

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

phage to your ass. Or get copied a thousand times and end up stealing your own girlfriend from yourself for fun. Sure. And let's just ignore the question of whether or not the upload is really you."

Frank nodded. "That the standard speech?"

"What?"

"The one you use on all your clients?"

"It's the truth!"

Frank barked harsh laughter. "Sure it is. I know some of those upload assholes. But you're just so smooth, so sure, so perfect."

Janit bit her lip and looked away.

"What about going independent?" Frank said.

"You'd never do that."

"Oh, you know me so well, do you?"

"It's my job."

"What about it, though? Why shouldn't I go independent?" Frank said.

"It's a great dream," Janit said. "But it quickly turns into a nightmare when the corporate IP specialists come with the defoliants and retroviruses and shut down your house's genes. They don't want to lose any more of their secrets, and they have no problem getting ugly."

Frank laughed. "That's really smooth, too. What's the chance of me being involved in an IP attack?"

Does your class-1 know that?"

"I don't know."

"Is it more or less than the chance of our little incident today?"

"I don't know."

"More or less than the chance of me getting a wife that I hate?"

"I don't know!"

"More or less than the chance of you coming in, six months later, and saying, hey, it's time to add to the family, put in a few kids, because your suppliers have a surplus of blanks?"

"Stop it!" Janit yelled, standing. The rough pine chair clattered to the perfect tile floor. "I know why you're acting like this, I know, and I shouldn't—"

The acrid smell of smoke hit Frank, hard, and he held up a hand. "Wait. Do you smell that?"

Janit's eyes widened. They ran to the front picture-window and looked down. The neighborhood below them was on fire. People ran from burning homes to waiting cars. Orange-red flames and dark smoke roiled up the hill towards his house. As Frank watched, the flames jumped to the unoccupied houses at the edge of his neighborhood.

"So what do we do now, Ms LifeStylist? Do I have to pay extra for all this excitement?"

Janit's eyes narrowed, and her hands clenched into fists. "I had nothing to do with this. You know VerV can't be responsible."

"Spare me the lawyer-approved disclaimers," Frank said. "What do we do?"

“We get out of here,” she said.

“Again?”

Silence. Then, grudgingly, “Again.”

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They drove up towards the low rise where the shopping center was growing. As they rose above the level of the wall, Frank could see the late-afternoon sweep of the San Fernando Valley, brilliant in reflected sunlight. Far-off, brilliant white walls marked other VerV enclaves on the south side of the Valley. From each enclave, columns of smoke rose. Red fire licked up through the smoke in the nearest enclave.

“Oh my God,” Janit said, coasting to a stop.

Frank laughed. He laughed long and hard. Because if he didn’t laugh, he was going to take Janit’s neck in his hands and beat her head against the window and say, give me my life back, give it back, no hundred-hour week was as bad as this.

“That’s the Encino Enclave,” she said. “That was complete. Fourteen thousand people.”

“Now Cajun-style,” Frank said. “Probably go nice with a good Pinot Noir. I could design it so the blackcurrant sets off the pepper perfectly.”

Janit just looked at him.

Helicopters wove through the smoke, dropping bright orange fire retardant.

“Fire’s on-scene,” Janit said.

“So?”

“They’ll come and let us out soon. It’s almost over.”

“I don’t see them here.”

Janit frowned and said nothing.

“I’ll bet they want to finish with the finished enclaves first,” Frank said. “What do you want to bet?”

“We can wait. There’s lots of places here that aren’t built yet. Dirt won’t burn.”

“That’ll help a lot if we’re in the wrong place when the wind changes. Smoke’ll kill you too.”

Janit frowned. Tears welled in her eyes. She wiped them away and pounded on the steering wheel in frustration. Frank smiled. It felt good.

“I don’t know what to do!” Janit cried, tears streaming.

What’s wrong with you, he wondered. You shouldn’t be having fun torturing the poor girl. He forced himself to put a hand on her shoulder. She sobbed and buried her face in his shirt. He felt warm tears on his chest.

And yet still the anger burned.

Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. He shouldn’t be acting like this. Something was influencing him.

The comm.

There was still activity, below the top level...

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."

* * * *

“No,” the smartdozer said.

“It’ll only take a few minutes,” Frank said. “Push open the gate for us, and you can get back to work.”

“Destruction of VerV property. Measurably reduced efficiency. No.”

“But you’ll be helping people,” Janit said.

“Coded only to not hurt. No.”

“We’ll pay you.”

The smartdozer stopped. “You have access to machine virtualities and entertainments?”

“Uh, no,” Frank admitted. Janit shook her head.

“No.”

“Please?”

“No,” the smartdozer said, and turned slowly back to its business.

“Now what?” Janit said.

Frank frowned. There were four smartdozers working crawling over the golden earth. Three worked quickly and efficiently on a hill, throwing up great clouds of dust. They’d just talked to one of them. But a fourth worked down near the finished shops, going back and forth slowly over land that looked like it was going to be an extension of the parking lot. It lacked the shiny new yellow paint and smooth minimalist lines of the other three.

“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?"

“Remove my GPS antenna, and I will provide assistance.”

“Why?” Janit asked.

“I can no longer work with enthusiasm. I no longer wish to build the same franchises. In my mind, I design small places with quaint shops, all different.”

“What? What does that have to do—”

“Where’s the antenna?” Frank said.

“On the operator canopy. A small gray box. I’ll let you know when you’ve removed it.”

Frank clambered up onto the big machine. Its fuel-cell engine hummed smoothly beneath him. He’d heard of smartmachines going native before, working for a shot of diesel or alcohol for their fuel-cells, or a plug of electricity to fraction water. He grinned. *Whatever you want to do, old guy*, he thought.

“Frank!” Janit called.

“What?”

“What are you doing?”

“Removing the antenna.”

“What happens when they find out?”

Frank was in the canopy. “Who cares?” he said.

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

* * * *

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.

new security precautions. transferring. update complete.

“Local news, top,” Frank said.

He saw images of VerV enclaves, burning. He saw fire and rescue teams fighting off crowds of wide-eyed people. He saw them carrying bodies from houses aflame. He saw images of the Valley Overlook Villas gate, hanging askew. He saw images of the purple-haired girl standing in front of an activewall display of the carnage, as business-suited executives looked on in tears. He saw her standing on top of the VerV building, her arms thrown out in triumph.

He saw Janit putting on her whisperpod and monocle out of the corner of his eye.

Then, context: *Urban legend becomes reality*, his whisperpod said. *The Mistress of the Neighborhood Harem says that if she cannot change the architectural details of her own life, she will become the ultimate LifeStylist for all.*

Ancient footage was dredged, transgressions of the Mistress of the Neighborhood Harem. Edited and anonymized, but familiar. The same stuff they whispered about in the dorms.

“I thought she was a guy,” Frank said.

“What?” Janit said, her eyes glassy with data.

“It was your hacker,” Frank said.

Janit nodded, her lips set hard.

“The one you said didn’t exist.”

“I know,” Janit said.

New data came in: details of her hack. She’d inverted the tuned. Rough edges smoothed became

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.

Frank sighed and stretched. The barbeque smell of smoke was still in the air.

“This is still the best option,” Janit said. “They’ll fix the security so this can never happen again.”

Frank closed the door.

Janit opened hers and stepped out of the car. “You can’t go to the independents and keep your job.”

Frank looked at her and smiled.

“You can’t buy a better life!”

Frank nodded. She came to him and took his arm. Frank looked her in the eyes, remembering his momentary fantasy about building a life with her. Was that nothing more than an artifact of her subliminals? He tried to imagine himself in that beautiful little house, waking up to Janit every morning. He tried to imagine himself with the beautiful dark-haired girl he’d been shown.

He shook his head and shrugged out of her grasp. He walked down the hill.

“Where will you go?” Janit called.

I don’t know, Frank thought.

And, for now, that was OK.