

ATOMIC TRUTH

by Chris Beckett

Chris Beckett lives in Cambridge, England, with his wife Maggie, his youngest daughter Nancy, and sundry furry animals. His first short story was published in the UK in 1990 in *Interzone*, which has since published twenty more. The author's US appearances have included: four previous tales in *Asimov's*, six stories in "year's best" collections, his first novel *The Holy Machine* (Wildside, 2004)—described here as "a triumph" by Paul Di Filippo—and, most recently, his second novel, *Marcher* (Cosmos Books). Chris's short story collection *The Turing Test*, which includes three tales first seen in *Asimov's*, was published last summer by Elastic Press. His latest *Asimov's* story takes a look at a social condition that isn't necessarily all that far away.

Jenny Philips emerged from the revolving doors of Rigby, Rigby, & Stile into the dirty drizzle and the glistening lights of a London November night. It was a Friday and she'd been working late, clearing her desk in preparation for a week's leave. This time tomorrow she and Ben would be in Jamaica, dining under palm trees and stars.

She badly wanted to call him now, to make some kind of contact. But she knew he was busy wrapping things up at *his* work and he'd quite specifically told her he didn't want to be disturbed until he was done. Ben could get quite cross about things like that. He'd promised to call her as soon as he was through and she'd have to be content with that.

Jenny looked up and down the busy street, judging the severity of the rain, turning up her collar, opening her pink umbrella and then, of course, putting on a pair of large hemispherical goggles. She was pretty, smartly dressed, twenty-eight years old, the p.a. to the senior partner in a City law firm. The goggles made her look like a fruit fly but she didn't mind because so did everyone else on the street. Ocular implants were on their way, but there were still unresolved safety issues—a small but unacceptable percentage of laboratory animals were still going blind—and for the moment everyone wore bug eyes.

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Or almost everyone. In the burger bar next to Jenny's office, Richard Pegg slid off his stool, pushed a dog-eared notebook into his pocket, zipped up his very large anorak that stretched down almost to his knees and pulled his woolly hat even lower down over his head. He was one of the few people in London under seventy who didn't even own a set of bugs. Even the people who slept in shop doorways had bugs, but Richard still went out into the rainy street with a bare face and naked eyes. The truth was he didn't need bugs to provide him with phantoms and visions and voices. In fact he had to take pills to keep that stuff at bay.

Richard was twenty-eight, like Jenny, but he'd never had a job. He'd come up to town from his little one-bedroom flat in Surrey for one of his trips round the museums with his notebook and pencils. "Doing research" was what he called it to himself, looking for the hidden meaning of the world among the fossils and the hieroglyphs, the crystals and the cuneiform tablets. He'd filled up another notebook with his dense scrawlings in three different colors about clues and mysteries and conspiracies, full of capitals and underlinings and exclamation marks.

Emerging from the burger bar, Richard too confronted the drizzle and the electric lights: orange, white, green, red, blue. But while Jenny had taken the everyday scene for granted, for him, as ever, it posed an endless regress of troubling questions. What was rain? What were cars? What was electricity? What was this strange thing called space that existed in between one object and the next? What was air? What did those lights mean, what did they *really* mean as they shifted from green to amber to red and back again, over and over again?

Unlike Jenny, he also saw Electric Man. Four meters tall and outlined in white fire, Electric Man towered over the passing people and cars and stared straight at Richard with its light bulb eyes because it knew that he could see it, even if no one else could. Pursing his lips and hunching down into his anorak, Richard avoided its gaze as he headed off towards the station.

"Atomic truth," he muttered to himself, drawing together the fruits of his day's work. "Atomic truth. Hidden by the world's leaders. Hidden *from* the world's leaders because none of them has atomic eyes. They can't see it, not truth in its correct atomic form. Or not as far as I know."

He laughed loudly, opening his gap-toothed mouth. People turned to look at him. He ignored their bug-eyed stares.

"Hi, Sue, it's Jenny!" The slender woman waiting in front of him for the pedestrian crossing sign to change from red to green had taken the opportunity to put through a bug call to one of her friends, an older woman who she used to work with in a previous job. "Ben is too busy to talk and I *had* to phone someone. I'm so excited! But nervous too. Our first holiday together. Do you think it's all going to be all right?"

Thanks to her bug eyes, Jenny could see and hear her friend right in front of her. Richard couldn't see or hear the friend at all, of course, but he gathered up whatever fragments of the conversation that he could and stored them in his mind with the same reverence with which he copied down hieroglyphs in the British Museum. The way people talked to each other, were at ease with one another, the way they shared things and held one another's attention, these were as much a mystery to him as the inscriptions on the mummy cases of pharaohs: a mystery, but like the hieroglyphs, pregnant with mysterious meaning.

“ ‘Hi, Sue, it’s Jenny!’ “ he muttered.

He laughed. It struck him as funny. And then he tried just repeating the name, “Jenny, Jenny, Jenny.”

It had such a sweet sound, that name, such a sweet, sweet sound.

“Jenny, Jenny, Jenny.”

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Jenny had her bug eyes set at low opacity. She could still see the world that Richard saw—the traffic lights, the taxis, the cars throwing up their fans of brown water, the shops like glowing caves of yellow light—but for her, soothingly, all this was enclosed in a kind of frame. Wearing bug eyes was cozy, like being inside a car. It reduced the city streets to a movie on a screen, a view seen through a window.

Near the bottom of her field of vision—and seemingly in front of her in space—was a toolbar with a row of icons that allowed her to navigate the bug eye system. Near the top of the field there was an “accessories bar” with a clock and a variety of pieces of information of the kind that people find comforting, like the many blades of a Swiss penknife, even if they never use them: things like the air temperature, the Dow-Jones Index, a five-year calendar, the TV highlights of the evening ahead, the local time in Sydney and Hong Kong...

Above the accessories bar, advertisements rolled by:

“*Even Detectives Cry*, the powerful new novel from Elgar Winterton, now in bug-book format at Finlay and Barnes for just (British pounds) 2.99.... *Froozli*, the great new snack idea from Nezco. Because being healthy needn’t mean doing without...”

Of course Jenny wasn’t paying any attention to the ads.

“Ben’s spent so much money on this,” she said to Sue. “You wouldn’t believe it! Jet-skiing, and diving, and rafting, and ... well, loads of things he’s booked up for us. I keep worrying that he’s done *too* much and that it’s going to be hard to ... I mean, I keep saying he doesn’t have to...”

A young couple passed by in the other direction, arm in arm. Although physically together, thanks to their bugs they were at that moment in entirely different worlds. He was blink-surfing the net. She was chatting animatedly into the air.

Sue regarded her friend Jenny. Bug eyes did not transmit a visual image requiring a camera, but a virtual image in which movement and expression were reconstructed from facial muscle movements. Now Sue's virtual face regarded her gentle friend Jenny with narrowed, worried eyes.

"Just try and enjoy it, Jenny!" she said. "Grab it while you can and enjoy it!"

She hesitated, wanting to say more, but unable to find quite the right words. She was nine years older than Jenny, and rather tougher.

"Enjoy it, Jenny dear," she ended up repeating. "It's not every day you get a trip to Jamaica with everything paid for by someone else."

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Communicating through bug eyes, paradoxically, allowed you to see other people bug eye free. But since he never used bugs himself and since he never entered other people's homes where folk removed their bugs to watch TV, Richard saw people with bug eyes on most of the time. He inhabited a world of human fruit flies. They saw his naked face and looked away.

"Jenny," he whispered, "Jenny."

And he laughed, not mockingly but with delight.

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Jenny finished her call with Sue. She crossed a busy road, then glanced at the mail icon on her toolbar and blinked twice. Her e-mail window opened and she skipped through the unread messages. One came from a bug-book club she subscribed to and needed a quick answer or she'd have to pay for a book she didn't want.

She blinked her message on its way. A relay station half a mile away picked it up, extracted its cargo of digital code and translated this into tiny flashes of light which traveled underground, at three hundred thousand kilometers per second, along filaments of glass, to a satellite station down on the Cornish coast which turned the light flashes back into a radio signal, a single phrase in a never-ending stream, and beamed it into space. Five hundred kilometers out, a satellite received Jenny's signal, along with hundreds of thousands of others, amplified it and sent it back down again to Earth.

"101011101001010010100010111010111010100101010010101000..." called down the satellite, high up there on its lonely vigil at the edge of the void. "...10001010100011101..." it called down to the busy surface of the Earth:

"No thank you," it was saying on Jenny's behalf. "Please do *not* rush me my discounted bug-book edition of *Even Detectives Cry*."

A satellite dish in Cape Cod picked up the signal, and sent it on its way.

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Richard looked down a little side alley and saw two foxes. They'd knocked down a pile of wooden pallets at the back of a restaurant, and were now rummaging for scraps of meat and fish. In the electric light of the city, they were pale and colorless and not at all like those foxes in storybooks with their merry faces and their cunning eyes. No one but Richard had even noticed these foxes were here.

"Hey, look! Foxes!" he said out loud, stopping, and hoping that Jenny might turn and look.

He'd picked up that she was worried and he thought the foxes might cheer her up. Women liked animals, didn't they? He was pretty sure they liked things like that.

"Look at that!" called Richard again, "Two foxes! Right in the middle of a city!"

Behind and above the foxes he also saw Jackal Head, the presiding spirit of dogs and foxes and other doggy creatures. Jackal Head regarded him with its shining eyes, but Richard looked away and said nothing. He knew from long experience that no one else could see the likes of Jackal Head, bug eyes on or not, so he concentrated on the foxes.

“Two foxes!” he called out again.

A man in a brown raincoat glanced at Richard quizzically but didn't bother to look where he was pointing. You didn't have to look at Richard for very long to realize there was something odd about him. His anorak was several sizes too big. His hair was lank. He had two days' growth of stubble on his chin. He had no bug eyes.

“Two foxes!”

No one else took any notice. A sense of weariness and desolation swept over Richard. They were all so busy with their bugs, that was the problem, talking to people far away about things that he couldn't really understand, no matter how hard he tried.

Then he noticed that Jenny was some way ahead of him—he could see her umbrella bobbing along above the crowds: pink with white polka dots—and he ran to catch up. He liked the feeling of being near her. She made him feel warm.

“Jenny,” he said to himself, “Jenny, Jenny, Jenny.”

And once again he laughed with pleasure, showing his gap teeth.

“Jenny, Penny, Henny,” he said out loud.

* * * *

“Zero, the only yogurt with less than one tenth of a calorie per serving...”

Jenny walked quickly, checking through in her mind the things she still needed to do before tomorrow. Ben would get cross with her if she ended up having to run around looking for things at the last minute. He hated disorder. He hated inefficiency of any kind. She herself was a very successful p.a. and spent all of her working days doing pretty well nothing but imposing order. But for some reason Ben made her feel bumbling and incompetent.

“*Fateful Summer*, the heartrending story of doomed love in the shadow of a global war...”

Jenny’s bug eye provider knew she was twenty-eight, single and a member of the “aspirant middle-upper clerico-professional” class—and it knew from her purchasing record that she liked low fat yogurt and middle-brow novels—so it told her many times each day about interesting new diet products and exciting new books, as well as about all the other things that aspirant middle-upper clerico-professionals were known to like or be concerned about.

“Is one pound a day so *very* much to pay for life-long security...?”

“Single, childless, and fancy-free? The *best* time to think about school fees! Talk to *School Plan*. Because life’s too short...”

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But if Jenny was “aspirant middle-upper clerico-professional,” what was Richard? He wasn’t even a typical member of the “chronically unemployed/unemployable welfare claimant” class—a low-income class that nevertheless, in aggregate, constituted a distinct and lucrative market—for he’d been adopted at the age of one and grown up in a well-to-do professional family, and had never associated with other claimants who lived apart from the population at large in social housing projects. In fact, since he had no bug eyes, no computer, no phone, and no credit card, there was hardly enough of a trace of him out in the public domain on which to base a valid class evaluation.

Richard was an isolate, a one-off. He had been a strange introverted child who his adoptive parents had never entirely learned to love. He’d left them at seventeen and now had very little contact with them, though they had bought him his little flat in Guildford, and his mother still sent money and food parcels.

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Three young men in suits came by, walking briskly and overtaking first Richard and then Jenny. They worked in the City as commodity traders. They’d all got bugs on, and they were using the setting called LCV—or Local Consensual View—which allowed bug eye wearers to retransmit the signals they were receiving on an open channel, so that others in their immediate vicinity could pick them up. This enabled all three of the young men to banter with a fourth young commodity trader called Freddy who wasn’t physically present.

“Freddy, you stupid fuck. Is it true you lost 90K in one hour yesterday?”

“*Freddy you stupid fuck,*” muttered Richard under his breath, storing away for later examination this strange and utterly bewildering combination of affection and abuse.

“Freddy you stupid fuck,” he said out loud.

He laughed. One of the young men turned round and glared at him.

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Richard couldn't see Freddy, of course, or hear his reply. But Jenny, out of momentary curiosity, blinked on LCV in her bugs to get a look at him. (This was the principle behind the bug eye boom: the one who *isn't* there is always more interesting than the one who is.)

“Yeah, I lost 90K,” Freddy was saying. “But last week I netted fifty mill. Being a decent trader's about taking risks, my children. Watch Uncle Freddy and learn.”

So he was just a boastful little boy in a suit like his friends, Jenny concluded, glancing at the clock on her tool bar, then blinking up the internet to check the train times. Options were offered down the left hand side of her field of vision. She blinked first the “travel information” folder, and then “rail.” A window appeared, inviting her to name the start and end points of her proposed journey. She mumbled the names of the stations, blinked, and was given details of the next two trains. It seemed she was cutting it a bit fine, so she paid for a ticket as she walked—it only took four blinks—and walked a little faster.

Suddenly a famous TV show host called Johnny Lamb was right in front of her. His famous catchphrase was “Come on in.” Now he invited her to “come on in” to a chain store right behind him that specialized in fashion accessories. Jenny smiled. Shops had only recently taken to using LCV to advertise to passers-by and it was still a novelty to see these virtual beings appearing in front of you in the street. She walked right through Johnny Lamb, blinking LCV off again as she did so.

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Richard, of course, had no means of knowing that Johnny Lamb was there at all, but he noticed Jenny's increase in speed and hurried to match it. They were almost at the station. He felt in his pocket for his ticket—his cardboard off-peak return ticket paid for with cash—and entered the station concourse.

Two police officers called Kenneth and Chastity were waiting below the departures board. They wore heavy-duty bug eyes with specially hardened surfaces, night vision, and access to encrypted personal security data, and they were watching for illegals in the crowd.

ID cards contained tiny transmitters that could be located by sensors mounted in streets and public places. A recent innovation linked these sensors directly to police bug eyes, so that Ken's and Chas's bugs saw little green haloes over the heads of people who had valid ID and giant red arrows above people who didn't—illegal immigrants, for instance, or escaped prisoners. The amusing thing was that the illegals hadn't yet cottoned on to this. It was rather entertaining to watch them trying to slip unnoticed through the crowd, with one of those red arrows bouncing up and down over their heads all the while.

Jenny (of course) had a halo. Richard had a yellow question mark. It indicated that he was carrying a valid ID card but that he'd either got a criminal record or a record of ID problems of some sort, and therefore should be questioned if he was behaving suspiciously in any way.

Well, he *was* behaving suspiciously, thought Constable Kenneth Wright, nudging his partner. The man didn't even have a set of bugs!

"What kind of Neanderthal goes around with a bare face these days?" he said.

It was almost obscene.

Chas nodded grimly and pulled up Richard's file by looking straight at the amber question mark above his head and double-blinking.

"Mental health issues. Diagnosed schizophrenic. Detained in hospital three times. Cautioned two years ago for failing to carry an ID card," she read from the file.

Not the crime of the century, as even she would reluctantly have to admit.

"Probably left his card at home on principle," Ken said with a sigh. "Probably some stupid nutty principle. Probably the same reason why he doesn't wear bugs. No need to pull him up, Chas. He's got his card on him today."

Chastity found Ken's attitude very lax. This was not a perfect world, of course—one had to accept that there were liberals in it, and bleeding hearts, and human rights lawyers—but why let potential troublemakers walk on by when you were perfectly entitled to haul them up, ask them questions and, at the very least, let them know you were watching them?

“Excuse me, Mr. Pegg,” she said, stepping forward. (She loved the way this new technology let you have people's names before you'd even spoken to them: it put them on the back foot straight away.) “Would you mind telling me why you aren't wearing bug eyes?”

Richard blinked at her, glancing anxiously round at the receding figure of Jenny, who he might never see again.

Why didn't he wear bugs? It was hard to explain. He only knew that if he possessed bugs he would drown in them.

“There isn't a law that people have to wear them, is there?” he muttered, glancing again at Jenny with her pink polka dot umbrella, who, cruelly, was getting onto the very same train that Richard would normally travel on.

Chastity didn't like his tone one bit.

“Maybe not yet,” she said, “but there soon will be, like carrying an ID. And while we're on that subject, I'd like to see your...”

But here her colleague nudged her. Away across the concourse, a big red arrow was jiggling into view, pointing down at a young man from Malawi called Gladstone Muluzi, whose visa had expired the previous week.

“Bingo!” breathed Chas.

“Gotcha!” hissed Ken.

“Can I go then?” interrupted Richard, glancing longingly across at the sacred train that now contained the sweet and gentle Jenny.

“Oh, off you go,” Chas snapped at him without shifting her gaze from her prey.

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Richard ran for the train and climbed on just before the sliding doors locked shut. Then he barged through three carriages looking for Jenny, stepping over suitcases and pushing rudely past people stowing their possessions on the luggage rack. He upset several of them, because it didn't occur to him to say “excuse me” or “sorry.”

But who cared? Not Richard. He didn't notice the reaction he was getting. There was Jenny, that was the important thing, there was Jenny sitting all on her own in a set of facing seats. Richard approached her and, with beating heart, spoke to her for the very first time.

“Are these seats free?”

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“Yes. They are,” said Jenny.

Her voice was like music. He laughed. Jenny gave a small clipped smile and looked away, reading him as odd but harmless, wondering why he wasn't wearing bugs and noticing with distaste the faint sour smell on him of slept-in clothes. Her older brother was autistic so she was used to oddness, and her feelings toward Richard were not unfriendly ones, as many people's might have been. But all the same she didn't want the bother of thinking about him just now. And she could have done without the whiff.

Then the train began to move and she glanced at the opacity icon on her toolbar and blinked it up to 80 percent. Out on the street she'd kept opacity low to let her negotiate traffic safely and avoid walking into other people. But now it was the train driver's job to watch the way ahead. Jenny no longer needed reality and could reduce accordingly its net contribution to the nervous signals reaching her visual cortex. Now, objects and people in the physical world were thin and ghostlike. It was the bug world that was solid and real.

“Shame you can't shut out smell as well as vision,” she thought, glancing at Richard and screwing up her nose.

Richard, incongruously, laughed, and Jenny glanced at him, or at the dim ghost of him she could see with 20 percent of her vision, and wondered what it was that had amused him. He wasn't looking at her. It was something he'd seen outside the window. This struck her as endearing somehow, and she smiled.

To varying degrees—75 percent, 90 percent—almost everyone in the carriage, having settled in their seats, had made a similar adjustment to the opacity of their bug eyes. A soft tide of voices rose up from passengers calling husbands and wives and children and friends to tell them they were on their way.

But Jenny looked at the clock on her status bar.

“Ben will be calling soon,” she thought. “Best not to call anyone else until then, or he won't be able to get through.”

Ben had a bit of a short fuse when it came to things like not being able to get through.

So she blinked up mail instead and sent a quick message to her boss.

“Remember to talk to Mr. Jackson in Data Services before the staff meeting!” she reminded him.

It was already in his diary, but he'd grown so used to being reminded about everything that he often forgot to look. Imposing order, she did it all day. But when it came to Ben she felt like a fool.

Around the carriage the tide of voices receded as, one by one, calls came to a conclusion and passengers settled down into their own bug-eye worlds. Some watched bug TV. Some read bug newspapers and bug books. A Canadian student picked up on a game of bug chess she was playing with a bug friend across the Atlantic. A young boy from Woking played a bug shoot-'em-up game. A woman lawyer with red hair had a look at the balance on her bug bank account. An insurance broker surfed bug porn, having first double checked that his LCV was properly switched off. (He'd had an embarrassing experience last week with a group of leering schoolboys.)

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Outside the window a building site passed by, lit by icy halogen spotlights. Diggers and cranes were still

at work and would be through the night.

“UCF London,” read giant banners all round the site. “*Building the Dream.*”

It was a new kind of bug transmitter station, one of a ring around the city, which would create the new Urban Consensual Field. When it was done, every bug-wearer in London could inhabit a kind of virtual city—or one of several virtual cities—superimposed upon the city of brick and stone.

There would be ghosts in the Tower of London; there would be writing in the sky; there would be virtual bobbies on every corner.... The past would be made visible; the future would rise like a phoenix from the concrete and tarmac of now; and people could, if they wanted, safely stay at home and send out their digital avatars to walk the city streets.

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The door at the end of the carriage slid open. A ticket inspector entered. His rail company bug eyes showed giant tickets hovering above every passenger in the carriage except one and he could see at a glance that every one of these tickets was in order. Only Richard had an empty space above his head. The inspector came to look at his piece of cardboard.

“Forget your bugs today, sir?” he inquired pleasantly, feeling in his pocket for his little-used clippers.

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Jenny jumped slightly, startled by the inspector’s voice. She had been vaguely aware of him entering the carriage, but he had been a barely visible presence, remote, out there, like a parent moving late at night on the landing outside the bedroom of a sleepy child. So she had quite forgotten him and gone back into her bug dream without noticing him coming close.

Not just for Jenny, but for almost everyone in it the carriage, with its white lights and its blue seats and its aluminum luggage racks, was now no more than a hazy dream. As to the used car lots and crumbling factory units that were flitting by in the dark outside, they were too insubstantial to make out at all with bugs set anything above 70 percent.

Richard was alone in the atomic world, the world of matter and space.

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“One day they won’t see it at all,” Richard thought. “It’ll just be me that keeps it going.”

He laughed.

“One day aliens will invade the earth, and only I will be able to see them. Like I see the foxes and those mice that run around under the trains. Like I saw that deer.”

That was a powerful memory. One night he’d woken at 2 AM feeling a need to go to the window of his little bedroom and look outside. The street had been empty, the traffic lights changing from red to yellow to green and back again, secretly, privately, as if signaling to themselves.

But a white deer had come trotting down the middle of the road: a pure white stag, with great branching antlers, trotting past the convenience store with its ads for bug card top-ups, past the silent pub, past the shop that sold discounted greeting cards and remaindered books, past the darkened laundromat. It had trotted past them and on, round the corner and out of his sight again.

A solitary car came by straight afterward, way too fast, screeching its brakes round the corner, shooting across a red light and roaring off in the opposite direction to the deer. And then silence returned again, and nothing moved at all except the traffic lights, shifting every few minutes from green to yellow to red and back again.

“It had a rider on its back,” Richard said out loud in the railway carriage, suddenly remembering this fact. “It had a...”

Then he stopped, for Jenny had looked at him and smiled.

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It was a lovely smile, even when partially obscured by bug eyes. It was a smile of tenderness and delight.

Richard laughed his gap-toothed laugh.

“Hello sweetheart!” whispered Jenny to the 3D image of her boyfriend Ben, suspended in the space where Richard was sitting. “Have you had a good day, darling? I am *so* looking forward to spending this time with you!”

Of course Richard couldn't see Ben frown back at her and tell her he hoped she wasn't going to be silly and girly and go over the top about everything.

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After she'd hung up, Jenny turned opacity right up to ninety-five and watched the new fly-on-the-wall documentary called *Janey* about the daily life of a young secretary like herself.

“Just remember I'm on national TV,” Janey was saying to her boyfriend Ray. “All over the country people are watching me on their bugs. So now tell me the truth. Are you really going to *commit*?”

According to a recent poll, nine million out of eleven million bug viewers agreed that Ray wasn't good enough for her, but tragically, heroically, crazily, she stayed with him anyway.

Jenny thought about Ben and his sharp tongue. It really hurt her, it made her feel small and foolish and insignificant. Were they going to be all right in Jamaica? Was that even a possibility? Was there really any chance of it at all?

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Richard meanwhile was looking out of the window at abandoned industrial estates.

“No one sees this. No one sees this except for me.”

He looked at ruined factories and warehouses and engine sheds.

“I know who’ll show up now,” he thought with an inward sigh.

And sure enough there was Steel Man, with its iron hands, suspended by magnetic forces in the orange city sky. And of course it spotted Richard at once, regarding him intently with its burning eyes.

Richard turned away uncomfortably, like a child avoiding the gaze of an adult who once told him off. He hunched down in his seat, with a wince and a tightening of his lips, and turned his attention determinedly to the smoke-blackened walls of Victorian tenement buildings, with buddleia sprouting from the chimney stacks, and to old billboards with their fading and peeling ads for obsolete products. (No one would ever again be bothered to paste up wrinkly paper images. Any day now advertisers would be able to use the Urban Consensual Field to put pictures in the sky.)

“If it wasn’t for me,” muttered Richard Pegg out loud, glancing at the opaque goggles that covered Jenny’s eyes and avoiding the gaze of Steel Man. “This would all just...”

He broke off.

A tear had rolled out from under Jenny’s bug eyes, a mascara-stained tear. Richard watched, fascinated and profoundly moved, as it rolled down her right cheek.

Jenny flipped down the opacity of her bugs and began to fumble in her bag.

But Richard beat her to it, retrieving a squashed packet of tissues from under the notebook in his right anorak pocket, and leaning forward to offer it to her.

Jenny lifted her bugs right off her eyes, smiled at him, accepted the packet from him.

“Thank you,” she said, pulling out a tissue and dabbing at her eyes, “thank you so much. That’s very kind of you.”

Richard laughed.

“It was an invisible man,” he offered.

“Sorry?”

“Riding on the back of that deer. An invisible man with horns.”

He didn't normally speak of such things, but Jenny he knew he could trust.

“Wow,” Jenny exclaimed. “That sounds like quite something.”

Richard laughed.

“It was,” he said. “That's why the Need woke me. It was an atomic truth.”

Jenny smiled, handed him back his tissues. Then more tears came, and Richard handed the tissues back again and watched her, fascinated, uncomprehending, but full of tenderness while she once more dried her eyes.

“I'll tell you something,” Jenny sniffled. “I'm *going* to have a good time in Jamaica, whatever old misery guts decides to do. I'm going to have a good time no matter what.”

She smiled.

“Is that an atomic truth, do you reckon?”

Richard laughed loudly.

At the far end of the carriage someone else laughed too, but it was nothing to do with Richard or Jenny, nothing to do with anything that was physically present at all.

“Thank you,” Jenny said again. “You really are very kind.”

She had done with crying. She passed Richard his packet of tissues, smiled at him one more time, and pulled her goggles back down over her eyes.

Richard settled into his seat, trying to avoid looking at Night Man, who he couldn't help noticing was out there hovering over the dark fields like a giant owl, and staring gloomily in at him with its enormous eyes. Gloomy old Night Man he could do without, but he felt he'd had a good day all the same.