

penumbra



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Interview with

Anna Mocikat

Creator of Angels—
Cyborg Angels, that is

plus

toeken • Oliver Smith • Jack
Fielding • Christina Sng • Mary
Soon Lee • Arlen Feldman • Rin
Kelly • Madeline Barnicle • Carl
Scharwath • Anne Carly Abad •
Michael Rook • Jamie Hittman
• Rob Hartzell • Marge Simon •
Tom Howard • Rickey Rivers Jr.
• Denny E. Marshall • Moses
Ojo • Anahita Ramoutar • Brian
Hugenbruch • Jesper Nordqvist

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From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Twenty years ago I wrote an article in this very magazine claiming that cyberpunk was not, despite popular (Western) opinion, dead, and proceeded to list all sorts of then-current or recent books and stories (and even, very obliquely, video games) as some sort of irrefutable evidence that I was right. And, insofar as I listed a lot of anime and manga as part of my evidence, I was right ... but I told a very limited part of the story.

So my 2003 article was very ... unaware. Of things politically, of the appropriation of Asian everything as background, of the centering of male characters and the reduction of female roles to those of “basic pleasure model,” sexualized versions of the boss’s niece, and (even though once part of an “off-world kick-murder squad”) exotic dancer. And unaware of the fact that the Asian examples I do mention are from that cultural perspective, rather than a Western one. Politics, gender, otherness, race ... all, somehow, was blissfully la lala’d out of it; instead, my focus was on the low-hanging fruit of evil megacorporations and their misdeeds. And that’s because, growing up as a middle class white kid in the middle of America in the middle of the 80s, my focus was elsewhere. I’d bought into the idyllic vision fed us in my childhood in the 70s that everything was being solved, that the Civil Rights Act from before I was born and the ERA that was being fought over in Congress were all just examples of the country going in an inevitably more inclusive and equal direction, that the Black people and strong women on television were just more indication of this, and that even though Reagan was in the White House people’s rights wouldn’t be rolled back for anything; our “only” worries were global thermonuclear war and the power of growing megacorporations—and the 90s seemed to do away with the thermonuclear war. I wasn’t fully cognizant of the inherent and continuing centering of the white male in the science fiction I read, the actual ways in which the established order could pay lip service to equality while also winking

and nodding at white supremacy, all while telling us to fear the Other (which I thought was ancient history once Communism was “defeated” and was relegated to old films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, even though America continued ... and continues ... to call anyone approaching its borders an “alien” or worse).

I suppose I’m wallowing in my own ignorance; and indeed, it’s not like I didn’t read female scifi authors like Anne McCaffrey and Ursula Le Guin, not like I didn’t see and absorb stories that centered female protagonists (like Motoko Kusanagi in the original *Ghost in the Shell* film, or all four central characters in *Bubblegum Crisis*, or *Serial Experiments Lain*), but somehow in some, or many, ways I was just, again, unaware.

So in addition to our amazing interview with Anna Mocikat (author of *Behind Blue Eyes* and other stories), I was going to write an article discussing Western cyberpunk and its decentering and fetishization of both women and Asian culture and people while also pointing out that all of these groups have been writing a different kind of cyberpunk all along. Actually, I flatter myself: I was likely going to go in this sort of direction, but it really came into focus when my best friend (who is Asian-European) and I talked about it in more depth.

So, being me, I barreled ahead with research and writing, and even though there were a thousand other things to get done as well, I did in fact finish a couple of drafts of that article. And I touched on all those things we’d discussed: The original backgrounding of female characters and fetishization of Asianness in *Blade Runner*, the simultaneous (or actually prior) version of cyberpunk in Japan as done by Sogo Ishii in *Crazy Thunder Road*, leading into a host of cyberpunk anime with *Akira*, *Bubblegum Crisis*, *Lain*, and of course Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell*. I then went back to Hollywood

and pointed out how it still, even now, isn't getting this right, with the whitewashing and Asian stereotyping in the 2017 live action *Ghost in the Shell* and the continued white-male-centering in *Blade Runner 2049*. I wrapped up by talking about all the female and Asian American authors and artists who are contributing to the cyberpunk scene now, from Larissa Lai (*The Salt Fish Girl*; *The Tiger Flu*) to Marie Lu (*Warcross*). Oh, and then (because apparently "wrapping up" means something different to me) I talked about the same sorts of issues in videogames, because one can't ignore *Cyberpunk 2077* and its host of ills, and the Asian creators who have made games different than this and with a different sensibility.

And yes, the article came across as just that sort of whirlwind tour, which seems typical of some of the things I've written in this magazine and really doesn't offer much new (and I really could just offer a list of good titles and let you all go read/watch them, yes?). And it all seemed to be missing something ...

Oh, right. The culture I'm talking about—actual Asian voices. And female voices (excepting that interview, which you should go read!).

I had managed to talk at length about all the things that decentered Asianness and femaleness, while talking about Asian and female works but ALSO decentering that culture and group by, in effect, talking at or about them rather than WITH them. And why was I talking about it at all, especially since, as I said, I wasn't really adding anything to the discussion but a list, with a few choice comments here and there about what I thought good or not so good. And I'd managed to do it this way, blinders on, deadlines approaching, all the way until it was too late to rescue this train wreck of an article, too late to contact Asian or female writers (again, beyond our interview) about these issues, or better yet, ask someone more appropriate to write about it.

I feel absolutely terrible about this. There is a need for this discussion, but that will need to wait, in this magazine, for another time, when it can be done right. I am not throwing up my hands like Hollywood and giving up, whining that it's just sooo hard; I promise you that *Penumbra*

will cover this, but it will do it much better than it was about to.

In this issue we also have other cyberpunk (or cyberpunkish) works, all very, very good stories that I am proud to publish. Jamie Hittman's "Hunger in America" speaks to exactly the kinds of class and technology issues cyberpunk is famous for ("high-tech, low life"). Mary Soon Lee's "Forms of Address 2050," Marge Simon's "Tomorrow Woman," Rickey Rivers Jr's "Creator and Creation," and Anne Carly Abad's "The Tuning" can be read as living the mechanical/cyborg/virtual life, while Rob Hartzell's "Where Phantoms Touch and Spirits Dance," Michael Rook's "Boundless Vendettas," and Arlen Feldman's "Bit Parts" give us very different looks at our virtual afterlives. Oliver Smith's "Holiday Traffic" drives us through a neon world; Madeline Barnicle's "Letter to a Young Mathematician" speaks to more than just the human; and "Rocket Ship Temple Blues" by Jack Fielding takes us into both cyberpunk and the *Twilight Zone*—which then becomes the surreal in the late Rin Kelly's "Breaking News." We finish the text portion of our show with Brian Hugenbruch's "Droplets," in which all our cyberpunk dreams may be just that.

In addition to the amazing cover art by toeken (*Charcot Foundry*), we feature cyberpunk-ish works by Carl Scharwath (*Polish*) and Denny E. Marshall (*Human Stride*). Our other art is probably best linked by calling it "cyberpunk-adjacent": it takes on cyberpunk qualities by being amongst the other works. These include amazing art by Marge Simon (*Migraine*), Anahita Ramoutar (*Regret*), Christina Sng (*They Cut Me Up*), and Moses Ojo (*Birds of Prey*). Jesper Nordqvist's continuing cyberpunk saga *Mondo Mecho* rounds out the issue.

See you in December!

Jeffrey Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra



Angels Ascending

Anna Mocikat's cyborgs are no heavenly hosts, but reveal humanity in a cyberpunk dystopia

A ANNA MOCIKAT HAS ALREADY been many things—a television and film writer, video game writer, and now, finally, an author. She has also lived many places—she was born in Warsaw, Poland, lived in Germany for many years and then moved to the US in 2016. A self-professed geek, she has now found her home both in the US and in science fiction and cyberpunk writing. We were honored to sit down and chat about her cyberpunk series *Behind Blue Eyes*, her life, the dangers of artificial intelligence, and more for this month's *Penumbric*. What follows is a transcript of that conversation.

* * *

How did you end up getting into cyberpunk in the first place?



PICTURED: Anna Mocikat

and did other writing as well. So what other genres did you work in?

The first main genre I got into was horror, because I wanted to do science fiction, but if you were a screenwriter, and you go to film school like I did when I was 22 and totally motivated, the first thing they will tell you is, it's way too expensive, nobody will ever produce your sci-fi movie, so you need to scale down a little bit. So you go into drama or romcom or something like that, which is cheaper to make, which I hate, or you go into horror, because horror is relatively cheap to produce but it's still fun. So that's what I did. I did a couple of screenplays and short films and that kind of stuff.

Basically because of *Ghost in the Shell*. So when I saw the movie (I think I saw it in 1999 the first time), for me, this was like a revelation. I only understood half of it, because it is a very complex story and a very unusual story ... the Asian storytelling, it was quite complicated. It was much later that I really understood the whole philosophy behind it and everything when I got more into the Asian mindset, storytelling, so that was when I really understood *Ghost in the Shell*, but I was absolutely blown away. I had the poster, the iconic poster where she sits there and has all the tubes coming out of her back. This poster, I had it in my bedroom for years, almost 20 years. So I'm a huge huge fan of *Ghost in the Shell* and I always wanted to create something like that, but it took me, unfortunately, 20 years until I finally got to it. I got distracted by other stuff, other genres, but now I'm finally there and I don't think I will leave anytime soon.

I listened to the podcast interview that you'd done with Céline Terranova (theparttimeartist.com/podcast/), so I know that you were a scriptwriter and you worked in the German videogames industry

It's really funny. I worked in the writer's room for one of the biggest German TV stations, and we developed a horror series. From the beginning I was very skeptical—when do you want to screen that? I mean, you can't do it prime time. Back in the time when there wasn't streaming, you had your program at 8pm or something. 8pm is the time when you screen the most expensive stuff because most people are watching. So I was convinced that can't work, because you can't do a horror series, a real horror series which should be horrifying, at that time. But I still was working in the writer's room to develop the whole series and we got paid and they never produced it (laughs). Because they realized, yeah, it might not fit for our audience.

But yeah, that was my work in the movie and TV industry, and later I worked in the videogame industry, but that was completely different; I can't really say that there is a certain genre you work on. It's like, you work on the game, and that's it. Then when I started publishing books, which was back in Germany, I got a book deal from one of the top five publishers in Germany. They gave me a three-book deal, and

PICTURED: Iconic *Ghost in the Shell* anime poster

it was more like dystopian stuff, because they wouldn't let me do science fiction because ... as a female author you can't do science fiction, you need to do YA dystopia.

Okaaaay ...

So that's what I did, I have this trilogy in German that is completely not like me. I wrote a trilogy I wouldn't even read myself.

Oh no!

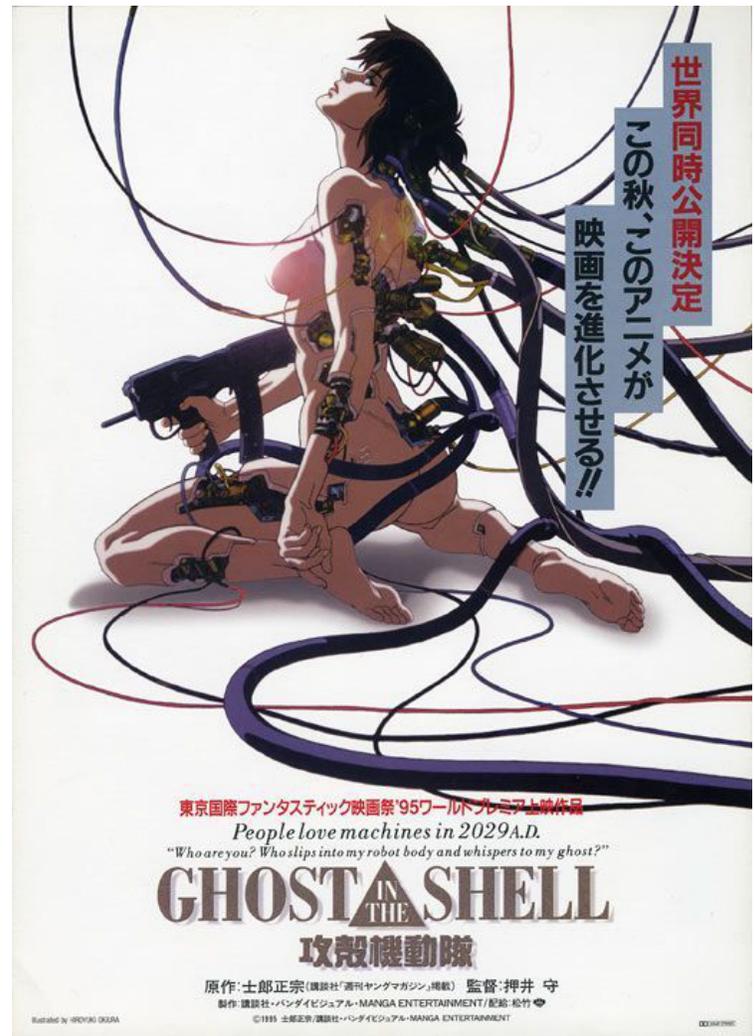
I mean, it's not bad, it's good ... otherwise a big publisher wouldn't have brought it out, but it's just nothing I enjoy. So I was at the point where I need to start over and go away from traditional publishing.

When was this that they were not happy with a female author doing science fiction?

That was 2013.

Wow, that seems so recent.

It is. I'll tell you something ... now I understand. I was at first completely outraged about it. "Oh my, that's sexism!" And then they wanted me to write under a male pen name when I would write real science fiction, and I had a story about artificial intelligence that was really hard scifi, so they wanted to give me a male pen name and I said I don't want that, and meanwhile I have to admit that they weren't so wrong, because when I look at myself now, I am an established cyberpunk author, but it's still difficult for me to convince the audience to read my books because readers have a massive prejudgment against female authors of science fiction, and especially in cyberpunk. That has several reasons. I don't want to blame the evil male sexist readers on that at all. I think it also has to do with that a lot of female authors write young adult or science



fiction romance, so you know, all those books with the shirtless guys abducted by an alien and stuff sell like crazy. But that's a point where readers who want to read serious science fiction are skeptical when they see a female author, and I only half can blame them for that.

So anyway, it is not easy. It is definitely much easier for my male



PICTURED: Cover of *Cyber Squad*

colleagues to sell their books than for me.

Do you think it's getting better? Or is it still a struggle to get that recognition?

Yeah, I don't think it's getting better. I get the recognition because once people decide to give my books a chance, they will love them. *Behind Blue Eyes* has only good reviews and I get a lot of feedback from readers, emails or on social media, and they are all telling me how much they love the books. But it takes effort to convince them to give the books a chance. I'm not sure if this is going to change anytime soon. Most female authors are smarter than me, because I have my female pride and I will publish under my real name. Other authors publish under a gender-neutral name, like initials or something like that, and that instantly makes it much easier.

Wow. For whatever reason that just doesn't even occur to me, to think that a female author wouldn't be writing science fiction.

It wouldn't for me, either, but you have to imagine the typical reader, the person sitting out there who knows nothing about the book industry and so on, they are just the consumers, and they see what Amazon is showing them and see what is coming from what direction and that's just the image we get, you know.

Shifting gears, would you say that we're kind of entering a cyberpunk world today?

Yes (laughs). Absolutely. I think we are really on the brink of a cyberpunk world. Very much so. A lot of stuff

that was written about 50 years ago is already here. ... What is absolutely concerning in my opinion is the incredible power the tech corporations are gaining. They have gained a momentum which is really scary. And that is an aspect of cyberpunk ... people say cyberpunk is political, but it's not necessarily political. What is an important aspect is basically the power grab of the corporations over individual life. So that's a very very important trope of cyberpunk, which almost all cyberpunk work shows. This is something we can already see happening. The thing is, it doesn't happen from one day to another; it is like the frog in the boiling water.

Another thing that [shows me] we're already there is, last week, I don't know if you saw it, Elon Musk presented his robot. Have you seen that?

Yeah, where he didn't really present the robot?

I'm not sure. There were rumors that there wasn't actually a robot but a person in a suit, but it doesn't matter. What matters is he says he wants to bring those robots into production very very soon, like next year or within the next five years. People say, yeah, Terminator and so on, they will all kill us, but not necessarily. What they will kill is our way of life, because they will destroy probably 50% of the jobs. So this is the first step into another very important aspect of cyberpunk, which is "high tech, low life." You get the low life when everything is automated and everything is done by robots, and you have a massive amount of the population who have nothing, or only a little, or only what they will give us.

Yeah, you already see massive changes in society where the gulf between rich and poor becomes greater and greater, and the corporations become not only international but megacorporations ...

Yes. And that's cyberpunk.

Yeah. And corporations now, they don't even need you to jack into something or whatever ... In reality, they just ask for your data, and

you give it to them.

Oh, we will jack in. There is the neural implant also coming from Elon Musk. So, yeah, this technology is coming. We will all be connected by our brains. And that's another point—in my books, everybody has those implants in their heads, and what people don't understand, is people only see the positive things because they will sell us "Hey that's awesome!" [But] you will have a tracking device in your head.

Right. I mean, we walk around with our phones right now and get tracked already.

Yes, but in your head. You can leave your phone at home. I mean, they have conditioned us so we never do that, we take our phones in the bathroom, that's how we have been conditioned already. But still, if we decide we've had enough of Facebook or whatever, I'm leaving my phone at home, then they can't find me, but if I have it in my head, there is absolutely no escape. They have you tracked all the time. They know what you're doing, where you are, who you're talking to, who's close to you, and so on and so on.

Because today is so close to being cyberpunk anyway, is there a difference trying to write cyberpunk now as opposed to when Gibson was writing Neuromancer and Idoru?

Absolutely. I think one of the big problems cyberpunk has, why people often say that cyberpunk is dead, is that it's basically stuck in the 80s. It's still stuck in the time of Gibson and of *Blade Runner* and of cyberpunk the game, the tabletop game, which was *Cyberpunk 2020* originally ... that was all in the 80s, so it has this 80s touch. It's also called punk, because punk back then was like a term for counterculture. It's not necessarily what we'd see as punk now, it was different. I recently spoke to Bruce Bethke, who was one of the big names back then, and he said when he wrote about it, punk had a completely different meaning than now. So the problem is cyberpunk is a little stuck in there, with the neon and the clothes and everything, and the way of jacking yourself in, and I think it is very important for

the genre to evolve from that and to adjust to what we have now and spin that into the future. This was a very important aspect for me when I wrote *Behind Blue Eyes*. I was always more inspired by *Ghost in the Shell* and the Japanese cyberpunk culture than by Gibson and so on. For me, it was always this direction. And I think that back then they were already more progressive in their storytelling, and are now. I took *Ghost in the Shell* as an example, but I combined it with more dystopian stuff, and I wrote a 1984 feeling into it. But the technology and the way of life, urban society, I oriented myself more on *Ghost in the Shell* and Japan itself than what we know from here. So people say it is different than most cyberpunk stuff because I deliberately wanted to spin it further, starting at our point where we are now and then going 50 years into the future and developing this future, but based on what we have now, based on today, not on the 80s.

I really enjoyed that about your book! In the last issue of our magazine, we did an article on trying to build worlds. So how did you go about creating all these well-developed characters and well-developed world? Did you just sort of jump right in or did it take a lot of planning?

Yes, it took a lot of planning. So I had the idea for the story for many years actually, and I always had more ideas coming in, and once I sat down and decided to write it, I usually put a lot of time and effort into world-building before I start writing the actual book. And in this case it was really important because it has all the aspects of the society, how it works politically and economically and so on. I gave a lot of thought to it so it's logical why they have those cyborgs, why they hunt people down, why they can't allow people living outside ... because that was the first premise of the book, that's how the book starts, they are going out and killing those people, and it needed to make sense why they're doing it.

What I put the most time into was developing the cyborgs, because I wanted them to be realistic, I wanted everything to be, OK, it could work that way, so that's why I put so much effort into designing them—how many artificial parts they have, and what parts are artificial. They're designed for combat, so they have their lungs, for example,

sealed, so they cannot be attacked with any form of biological weapons or gas or something like that. And so on. They don't sweat. A lot of little stuff ... if you read the book you will see that information spread all over the book. Most people don't even notice it, but it is very important that everything could work like that.

Right. I feel like, especially if you're developing the world over the course of not one book, but two or three, the reader is going to be able to tell if you skipped part of your world-building ...

Yeah, it's the plotter and pantsers problem. (laughs)

Yes, exactly! So, what are your plans for that series in the future? You've written the second book.

Yes. The next book will be out in March, because I am also writing another series [Cyber Squad] where I have now published the first book and the second book will be out this year in November, so the next *Behind Blue Eyes* book will be out in March. I see the first book as the first chapter of a much bigger story; it's like the prologue. I look at it as seasons, because I come from TV, so the first season will probably be six books. And there will be a point of no return, and everything will be turned around—nobody can imagine what will happen because this is going to be a big shock. And then there will be another season. And I'm also planning origin stories for different characters. So there's a universe. I'm hoping people keep enjoying it, because this is a universe I can keep writing books in until the end of my life.

*Wow. I know that you helped to put together an anthology, Neo Cyberpunk, and I think in there you have a story that takes place in the *Behind Blue Eyes* world. Does that have the same characters, or is it just in the world as a whole?*

There's a technique I used in the book itself where I switched to the victim's [point of view], so suddenly you jump into the perspective of this random person, this random hacker guy and how he runs away and [the Angels] chase him. I did that because I wanted to show how

scary they really are, because if you tell it through their perspective all the time you start thinking, “Well, they’re not so bad.” So when you shift into the perspective of a normal person, then you see that they are actually monsters. The short story is also something like that. Like a young guy who is unlucky and gets into a financial crisis and gets involved with the wrong people who are the spies who are also in the main book, but it’s only if you have read the book that you will know, OK OK, he is falling into that trap. So he is used like a data mule, and that is how [some groups] communicate, so they stay hidden—people actually carry data devices from place to place because they can’t just use the internet. So they use this guy as a data mule. But eventually he gets caught, and he is waiting for a contact person and Nephilim and Ariel show up. So it’s completely from his perspective, the whole story, and they are the boogeyman, they show up and then chase him.

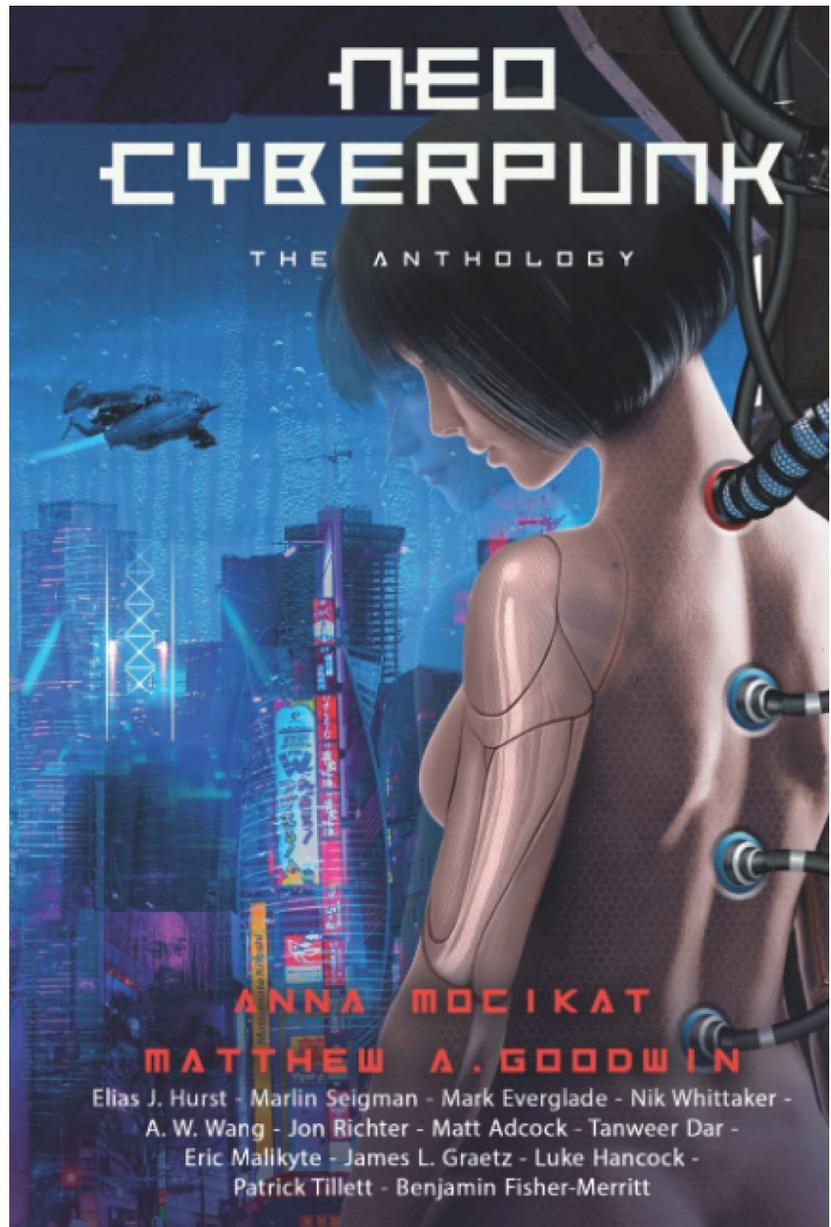
There is a second anthology, I am just putting it together, it will be out in January, another 15 stories, and so I am very excited about that. It will be again of high quality. I have a story in there again from the Behind Blue Eyes universe and again from the perspective of a random person, but it is something that is taken from the second book, so I won’t tell you what it is, because maybe you want to read the second book ...

I do have the second book already, so ...

So I won’t tell you what the short story’s about because you should read the second book first. (laughs)

I know a lot of other cyberpunk authors, so we are kind of a community, and that’s where I get the people to contribute to the anthology.

So where do you find a cyberpunk community? Is it on Facebook, or ...



PICTURED: The cover of *Neo Cyberpunk: The Anthology*

Yeah, social media. Facebook, Twitter. A lot of my connections actually come over Twitter. I think Twitter is great for connecting with other creatives and artists. It's much better than Facebook in my opinion.

Yeah, I stopped using FB because of some of its ... data problems.

Yes, yes.

I realize Twitter isn't perfect, either, but you gotta use something.

As an author, that's a funny thing. For me, as a cyberpunk author, I am aware of what they are doing, because that is what I am thinking about all day when I create my stories, but I still have to use Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and Amazon, right? So that's just how it is—I work with the enemy, basically.

Do you have any favorite cyberpunk authors?

I really really like the books of Richard Morgan. I think *Altered Carbon*, the first book—the second and third books aren't as good—but the first book is one of the best cyberpunk books ever written. I really really absolutely love that book. I'm not such a big fan of Gibson, I have to admit; it's just too 80s for me (laughs).

Yeah ... I was sort of there in the 80s, so I really enjoyed Neuromancer, I really enjoyed Idoru, but I can totally see what you're saying about it.

I also really really like Philip K. Dick. Many people say he is not really cyberpunk, but in my opinion he is totally cyberpunk, he's just there before the term cyberpunk has been created. But he definitely wrote cyberpunk—what else is *Blade Runner/Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* If this is not cyberpunk, I don't know what is.

It totally is, yeah.

And even before that, maybe not so much cyberpunk, more science

fiction but also with the artificial intelligence that goes in a cyberpunk direction, was the stuff by Isaac Asimov. I'm a big big fan of him. I think how I came to be in love with science fiction was because of his work. ... Do you think it would be possible to make a program, a machine feel emotions?

I think if nothing else you can get really really close.

Because I don't believe it. I have to say this is a part of science fiction where I am strictly on the side of those people [who believe AI] cannot feel as we do. They can mimic it.

Yeah. I think you can get to the point where they can probably mimic it just about perfectly. And I don't know what that extra ... thing is that would actually bridge that gap. Like, how could you define really actually feeling something?

I think it's because a machine—and I'm not an AI specialist, but I do a lot of research about that because it's something I'm interested in—I think that the problem is that they would think logically. They have this one-zero thing, and that's something humans don't have. Humans are not logical.

I think if you can get your AI system away from binary thinking ... well, if you can get it to be thinking, that's something, but if you can get it away from the binary stuff, and I think once you get into quantum computing and things like that, there will be weird directions that programmers can go with all of it. I don't know if that will actually be how people will create real living thinking ...

Sentient, yeah.

... sentient beings. And having done this for several years now, I'm now suddenly in that position where I'm not sure it's a good idea.

I absolutely think that it's not a good idea. I think that even if they won't be able to feel the way we do, when they learn thinking, then we have the “Terminator problem” on our hands because what we are

developing with AI and especially robots is a race of slaves. And they are created for slave work. And once they discover that, then the shit hits the fan.

Right!

I think artificial intelligence becomes really dangerous—yes, let's say dangerous—when it has a body. The body experience is actually ... the interaction with the world out of one entity, which is you, I think that this makes the difference. You can have a strong computer that is just in a box, it will never have the same ability to feel as if you put this computer into a body that can actually walk around and actually interact with the world and feel the world.

What about the other series you're working on, Cyber Squad?

It is roughly LitRPG, but it is also cyberpunk, and it is not only set in a game world, it's set in a game developer world. I think this is a book you would really enjoy because it is very much from the perspective of the game developers. It's about a game QA that is hunting bugs in VR ... the idea behind it is that you look into VR like in the Matrix, connecting your neurochip into the VR. The idea of the story is that once you do that, when you have glitches in the game, the glitches can be dangerous, can lead to brain damage, because you connect your brain to it. So imagine ... I don't know if you've ever played *SkyRim*?

I haven't.

The game was so buggy. People say *Cyberpunk 2077* was bad, but they never played *SkyRim*. They fixed a lot over the years, but I got it right when it came out, and it was almost unplayable. So that was the idea I had—imagine you play such a game, if you stumble into a really bad glitch, it can become dangerous for you, and that's the whole idea of the game QA, they go in and save the people who would otherwise die a horrible brain death.

That's a cool idea. I mean, not cool to have happen to somebody, but

I mean it's a cool book idea.

I think you would enjoy that for various reasons, because of AI and because of game development, and so on. ... This is under my pen name, it's A.K. Mocikat, because for LitRPG I really have to do that because LitRPG is even more male than science fiction and cyberpunk; I would say LitRPG is for boys what romance is for girls. But yeah, I think you would enjoy that very much. It's more a fun book. It's not as serious as *Behind Blue Eyes*, which is very serious. This is more fun, this is like nerds saving the world. (laughs)

So the idea I also had with *Cyber Squad* is like, with the AI, often in LitRPGs they write about the NPCs as if they are more or less alive and sentient and AI and so on, and I took a different approach. In my case, it is really still scripted, because you want a game to be a certain way, you want a player to experience a certain storyline and so on, so you can't, even if it were possible, you can't have "people" walking around there, you want them to play a certain part. So the NPCs ... when they jump into the editor, they see them in T-pose and so on, they are really not alive.

How many hours a day do you work on writing? I mean, that's a hard question because there's research, etc. ...

Yeah, but pure writing ... I think my writing time is between two and six, which is four hours, every day is for writing, Every day. I don't answer phone calls, I put my phone away ... I read emails, because they come on my computer, but otherwise I really focus on writing. I wish I could take more time for writing, but I have to do the marketing and everything else. So that's what I usually do in the mornings, and then I have lunch, and then after lunch I spend the rest of the day writing, basically. The absolute minimum I have to write every day is a thousand words, but that's the absolute minimum, that's mandatory. I try to do 2000, and the average day is about 1500.

And it has to be for a book, it can't just be random diary entries?

Oh no no no, it is the book. I always work on one book at a time.

Often people wonder how an author can do it, but I think that comes with practice, that you really can write every day. And when you're a plotter, you won't run out of ideas, because you always know where you're going with the story, so it's just about writing it down. When you're a pantsier, that's different.

Right, because you're trying to do all the jobs at once in your head and write it down.

Mmm hmmm, and then you get into the famous writer's block.

Do you have a separate time for editing?

I always edit on the run. So when I start my writing time, I edit what I wrote the day before, so it's a rough edit. I'm relatively slow, I'm a slow writer, but usually what I write won't be changed much, it will end up in the book like that. I think about it so intensely, about every sentence, so once it's there, it will stay there. I will only change little cosmetic stuff, you know. That's what I do in the first editing round, which is right the next day. Once the full book is done, I will go through the whole book in one edit. And then it goes to an editor, because everybody needs an editor. You can't do it alone.

Yeah, especially if it's a book, it's just too long to try to do it all yourself.

In my case, I need a good proofreader because I'm not a native speaker, so I make mistakes, you know, sometimes I use the wrong words or something like that.

So when you're doing your writing in English, do you think in English, do the whole process in English, or ...?

Mm hmm. I think in English most of the time. I also think in German, and my original mother tongue is Polish, so occasionally I think in Polish, but that's really rare. I really like the English language, I love the English language. I think it's the best language, actually.

Really?

Yes, because it doesn't have as many words as German. In German, there is a word for everything. We have a word for literally everything; that's why there are so many German words in English—zeitgeist or schadenfreude or kindergarten, because Germans have a word for everything. English is not like that, but you still can, with the smaller amount of words, you still can express yourself more precisely than in German, when writing prose especially. It's really fascinating. I can express myself much better in English than in German. In writing dialogue ... the English language is made to be spoken. So maybe writing poetry, German is good for that, but spoken, people talking to each other, dialogue, English is the best language. I'm convinced of that.

Anna Mocikat's books are available on Amazon in both hardcopy and Kindle editions—you can find Behind Blue Eyes at [amazon.com/Behind-Blue-Eyes-Cyberpunk-Thriller-ebook/dp/B088GSXB88](https://www.amazon.com/Behind-Blue-Eyes-Cyberpunk-Thriller-ebook/dp/B088GSXB88), and Cyber Squad at <https://www.amazon.com/Cyber-Squad-Gamelit-LitRPG-Adventure-ebook/dp/B0994WDCS1>. She can be found on many social media platforms, including Twitter (@anna_mocikat) and Instagram (@annamocikat).

Forms of Address 2050

by Mary Soon Lee

Mrs.

A married female.

Or one purporting to be such.

Mister.

A man, married or unmarried.

Or a misting machine.

Ms.

A woman, wed or unwed.

Viv.

A physical person,

male or female or otherwise.

Vir.

A virtual persona

of any gender or species,

whether assumed by a human

or digitally derived.

Mem.

A simulation

of a deceased person,

ghosts in our machines.

Where Phantoms Touch and Spirits Dance

by Rob Hartzell

Hisako

Tonight, the servers are straining under the load as the login gates flood with players from the West Coast—everything is slowing down inside the world of the game. Hisako hates this time of night, and even though she's no more capable of feeling the circuitry of her new body than she was able to feel the neurons of the old one, she feels the slowdown as if it were a part of her body, and she experiences the lags like miniature blackouts, the kind she used to have when she'd go out walking in the Roppongi district before, dialed in on a favorite playlist on her phone, and realize afterward that she couldn't account for the last ten minutes of her life. Net lag happens in smaller intervals, but the effect is equally unsettling. Her employers had told her when they took her on that this was going to be a temporary situation, that within the next year, they'd have their system in shape to take on the traffic; three years in, however, it's become clear that they're always going to be playing catch-up, delaying upgrades until the customers start threatening to leave.

Another ten minutes pass, and once the bulk of the West Coast players have logged in and all but the most hardcore gamers on the East Coast have left, the network settles back into a state of equilibrium. Hisako logs in and clocks in, the VisionSoft logo now watermarking the lower right-hand corner of her field of vision, along with a counter to show how much time is left on her shift tonight. Most nights, she's running one of the game's zone bosses, but she checks the assignments list for tonight anyway. Sure enough, it's her turn to train n00bs on non-player-character (NPC) duty. *Damn.*

At least she gets to choose where she takes them to train, and tonight,

she decides, she's taking them to one of the more remote villages, to deal with the higher-level characters. That way, at least, she might be able to multitask and get in a little gaming of her own, something she hasn't been able to do in a while—when she'd contracted with VisionSoft to upload her consciousness, she'd known that part of the deal was that she'd have to work for them, helping to populate their online game worlds. The salesman hadn't quite been forthcoming with how much free time she'd be allowed—18 hours on the clock, 6 off, with most of that off time being spent studying VisionSoft's gaming worlds and fighting tactics, in the hopes of advancing her new career (while nothing specific has ever been promised, it's been hinted that, with promotions, she'll be allowed more free time, more freedom in general).

At this point, she's starting to see her situation here as a sort of indentured servitude, if not outright slavery. For her, there was simply little choice: The brain tumor that had already started chewing up her young cerebellum was inoperable and immanent. A contract with VisionSoft was all she could hope to afford, being a mere high-schooler and having never had a job, much less a career field in which to work. A small price to pay for something like immortality, all told: She gets to live in one of her favorite games, and she simply wouldn't feel comfortable insisting that her family maintain and tend her through hardware upgrades and power outages and drive failures, all the potential mishaps and mishandlings that can happen along the way; the constant worry that Auntie-soni is going to be zapped by a bit of malware one of the kids downloaded. She is her own responsibility this way, not her family's, and if she should somehow live forever, it's no one's burden but her own.

The shift clock shows Hisako has been in downtime with her

thoughts for 42 seconds, something she will have to account for on her timesheet later. For now, she starts up the bot she's made to deliver a standard lecture; she'll come back when it's done to take questions. Once that's under way, she logs in her character, a 70th level amazon she's named Mitsuko.

Mitsuko

Mitsuko's in-game image started out as the default avatar with a few edits designed to bring it closer to Hisako's features, including her glasses. Since then, it's undergone a series of evolutions to the point where it is almost unrecognizable, even as a caricature of her fleshly self: The seraphim wings, the scale armor, the arms sleeved in plate mail armor or tattoos; the purple-streaked hair done up in a traditional style to leave the nape of the neck exposed (as it would be, if not for the armor). But if you know what to look for, the features of the original demure meganekko schoolgirl who created her are still visible, especially around the face (even without the glasses). Next week, when the graphics upgrades are supposed to go live, she'll get to update her avatar to an even more detailed model, one which will allow her to construct the face she wants to wear, down to the finest details that she (and her rendering processors) can handle.

Now she's fully entered the game, made it through the welcome screen and arrived at her spawn point, a bustling marketplace in a port city at one of the farther edges of the game map, where the high-intermediate level characters play. She prefers to play from a first-person view: She'd found it a bit more difficult to play that way in the flesh, but as an upload here within the game, it feels more natural and more comfortable, a bittersweet reminder of what having a body was like, even with the heads-up display. It also makes multitasking easier when she can page-swap back and forth between the game and keeping an ear out for trouble amongst the n00bs.

She scans the crossroads for familiar faces, but it's still too early to meet up with the Asian gaming contingent she plays with most of the time (when she *has* time to play). A few acquaintances nod as she

passes them on the street, sauntering among the throng of beefy, shirtless fighters, heavily armored paladins, robed wizards and the like, the crowds thinning as she gets closer to the city gates. The game is always better when there's more people playing with you, but Hisako is flexible; her terminal year in school was an emotional sloughing-off: of friends who could no longer talk to her without feeling dwarfed by her disease, of parents too far gone into their own grief and custom to be able to listen to her—everything. By the time she made the transfer to the machine, she'd become more proficient at flying solo than she'd ever imagined possible.

A figure appears next to her, almost as if he'd spawned there; a necromancer with long black hair and a staff made of a demon's skull and spiny vertebrae stops and bows deeply once she notices him: Mitsuko-san?

It's the voice that clues her in, though it's no less of a surprise: E-kun, what are you still doing up at this hour?

Waiting for you.

Oh, stop it.

You've been making yourself scarce.

I've been working a lot. My leveling-up exam is next week.

Ohhhhh. Good luck with that.

Arigato.

Got time to pwnz0r some griefer?

He pronounces it *pawn-zor*, which, at least to her ear, always sounds like a mock-British pronunciation of "Panzer" and reminds her of the World War II documentaries her father had watched obsessively with her when she was younger. Even after all this time, and despite the fact she doesn't even have a voice within this world, she still has the

instinct to cover her mouth when laughing. Always, she replies.

Then let's go. He follows her toward the main road, to the city's southern exit. I don't know why you don't use one of the synthetic voices. I always feel like I should be texting you back.

I can hear you just fine, E-kun. And texting is faster than speaking, for me at least. She doesn't tell him the whole truth, that the synthesized voices available to her are marble-mouthed at their best, and the ones closest to her original voice are still far too chirpy and kawaii, something she's never been, especially not in this form. She cannot imagine anything more incongruous than to have a voice like a shinkasen announcer coming from the battle angel she's made of her avatar. She knows how shallow this sounds, at least to her ears, and can't imagine whether Eherithoth might be able to understand.

She walks with him toward the gates, passing the bazaar just inside the gate. Need to stop at the shops?

He—his avatar—doesn't take his eyes off her. I've got everything I need.

Once they're outside the gates, she unfolds her wings, their charcoal-grey tips barely visible at the edges of her line-of-sight, half-obscuring Eherithoth, who has drawn his sword in preparation for battle. Her wings begin to flutter and she rises in the air the way she imagines a goddess would, until she's overlooking the desert dunes and soaring, circling, scanning the world below her hungrily, like a bird of prey gone too long since its last meal. This transitional moment never fails to excite her; even without a body, she can almost feel the wind in her face and the sun's warmth on her back, or hear the near-deafening roar of a frustrated sandworm fading in her left ear as she dips and rises out of its reach. At moments like this, when she's most immersed in the machine, she can almost forget she ever left her fleshly body, and how terribly she misses it.

The sound of Mitsuko's wings is a rhythm in the air, as steady as a heartbeat, almost keeping time with the sound of Eherithoth's

footsteps, the clacking of his staff against the occasional stone. They move erratically across the desert, heading toward its remotest corners, avoiding the main paths—he scouts the best places for sniping and setting booby-traps on the ground while she searches for their targets from the air—until they reach the Seven Tombs of the Kings, the level-end goal of those adventurers who make it this far in the game. Mitsuko and Eherithoth conquered the demons who haunt the tombs ages ago; to go in and fight them again would amount to little more than gold-farming, and that's not what either of them have come for.

Are you sure they're coming? Eherithoth asks. They're taking their time.

They're on the path, she tells him. Be patient. She saw them earlier from the air, a rogue fighter and a pair of mid-level necromancers accompanying him, surrounded by a small army of zombies they're using for bodyguards. This particular party has been hiding out in the desert near the tombs, attacking other adventuring parties and stealing their treasure, an activity for which they've become notorious. It's also a breach of the unspoken rules of engagement in this world, an offense which the gods of this world have not yet seen fit to avenge. Mitsuko has never been one to wait for the approval of gods; for the past year or so, she and Eherithoth have taken it upon themselves to act as agents of karma in such cases.

I haven't got much time, Eherithoth says, his voice growing haggard (or has she merely not noticed until now?). I need to replenish my energy.

Mitsuko launches into the air again, in time to spot the party just over the next dune; she feigns a slow dive, long enough for one of the necromancers to throw a lightning bolt at her. She absorbs the bolt easily; the damage it causes her is minor, but it confirms that the one who threw it is lower on the totem pole, a level 45, max. Any doubt she might have had is gone—*these are the ones*.

The zombies are the first to reach the ridge of the dune above them;

Mitsuko pretends to flee back toward Eherithoth, who has ordered a pair of weakened zombies into battle with them. The necromancers appear just in time to see E's zombies cut down. **A couple of dank smokeables!**, one taunts as he launches another lightning bolt, and the disgraced paladin appears atop an adjoining ridge.

Mitsuko's cloak absorbs most of the lightning blast's damage; she's drawn her crossbow now, and fires lightning arrows that incinerate the rest of the zombies. Eherithoth detonates a fireball beneath the necromancers, and Mitsuko's second volley of arrows finishes them off. They both bear down on the remaining fighter, who has turned to run. Mitsuko takes to the air again to chase him; he's used to fighting with his sword, which makes him a particularly easy target for her: He has no missile weapons of his own, and he's not strong enough to be able to outrun her and Eherithoth, who is now conjuring a massive lightning ball.

Not even dank, she bellows in the fighter's ear as she swoops and dodges his sword. **But you're still smokeable!** They strike in near-perfect unison, blasts of lightning missiles that reduce the fighter to ashes and abandoned loot. Mitsuko wafts to the ground again alongside Eherithoth, and they pick over the treasures the griefers have left. Almost none of it is anything powerful enough to be worth their while, so they pocket the gold and leave the rest for other adventurers to grab. She nudges Eherithoth as they make their way back to town. **You think they'll learn from that?**

Maybe not this time. But how many times can they lose their gear before they do?

Hisako

In the time since Hisako became a UI, she's had little contact with her family. This was one of the first things they'd told her when she awoke inside the machine, that because the technology for copying human brains to software is so new, most people still can't handle the prospect of interacting with these uploaded personalities, especially

when their bodily counterpart has died. Even her older brother, Tetsuo, who used to waste inordinate amounts of time on chatroom flirfbots when he was younger, had had trouble with the concept: I'm not sure I really know you anymore.

It's still me, she told him.

I know. But you aren't the Hisako that died.

Think of me as a do-over, then.

Nobody gets a do-over, Hisako-chan. You have my sister's speech patterns, her memories—but you don't have that last five months of her life.

You haven't told our parents you've been talking to me, have you?

No. And I don't think they could handle it.

They knew I was doing this.

Yes. But it's bad enough to lose a child; can you imagine what it would be like to have that child haunt you for the rest of your days?

That's stupid and cruel. I'm not some wronged lover from a Nō play. Or *The Ring*, for that matter.

Of course not.

I'm your sister, bakayaro.

But you're more like a ghost than you realize.

How can you say this to me?

I'm sorry ...

You're right: I have Hisako's—*my*—memories. And I have her feelings, too.

She hasn't spoken to him since, though he was right about one thing—it probably *would* be easier on her parents if she let them come to her when they were ready. For now, though, none of them have approached her, and she's not sure if it's pride or tradition that keeps her from reaching out to them. The longer her parents go without contacting her, she realizes, the more alien she becomes to them. She may already be unrecognizable to them by now.

The transition to the machine is never easy; that's something else they told Hisako when she awoke. It can be a painfully lonely and solitary existence if the UI isn't careful not to allow itself to become isolated. Massively-multiplayer game worlds, like the ones VisionSoft runs, have proven a major draw for UIs, who have created their own support systems and contact networks within them. Hisako has her own sort of "family" within the game she plays, a motley collection of machine-émigrés and corporeal visitors she meets almost entirely within the communications systems the game permits. She games on occasion; she studies a lot; she gets in forum discussions and (on rare occasions) flame wars on the boards; she runs her NPCs at work (most of the time). Only rarely does she have time to feel alone.

And yet sometimes, every once in a great while, someone will message her: "A/S/L?" and she's strapped for an answer, as much so now as she was the first time she was accosted online. *Age*: 17 at the time she entered the machine; she's been a UI for 3 years, but what does age mean to someone like her? *Sex*: Female when she uploaded, but what does that really mean when you don't have a body to lock into? It's not uncommon for players to genderflip, to the point where players still assume everyone online is male. *Location*: the server bank where she lives is based at Tokyo University; the game server she logs into is in America; the part of the game map where she spends most of her time is on a German server.

That first time, she played it coy: *I'm whatever and wherever you want me to be*, and while she was still adjusting to her transition to

the machine, she fell back on that line. The difference now is that it's closer to the truth: she can project whatever image, whatever gender, whatever role she so desires—like a permanent Sunday stroll among the cosplayers in Akihabara. The downside of this is that it gets harder at times to point to something she *is*, something that's not just a character she plays, a skin she wears when it suits her.

She knows what A/S/L is supposed to lead to, though. There are certain kinds of interactions which the system has not been written to facilitate, but there are always rumors of rogue cities on the fringes of the map where you can purchase nudity shells for your avatar; of rabuservs (named for the Japanese love hotels) designed to allow you to go as far with your avatar as you can imagine and role-play; even the occasional instance of boundary-blurring prostitution in the forums where players trade out-of-game sex for in-game goods. In the body, this virtual approach to sex might have interested Hisako: When she and Ryu were a pair, it might have saved the poor boy from constantly having to find places they could go to be together—but *would we be able to sneak the extra prosthetics past our parents?*

She's thought, from time to time, about trying to contact Ryu, trying to find out how he's doing, who he's with, all the usual sorts of things—but she never gets any further than placing his name in the search box before changing her mind. She'd cried for days when he dumped her for another girl in her class, so it *is* a temptation, the thought of haunting him in the network like a ghost—but what happens next, that's the tricky part. That's always the tricky part ...

She tries, occasionally, to feel out the other UIs over on the support forums about how they deal with all this, but the Japanese-language boards aren't talking, and the English-speakers mainly want to ask her questions about a bunch of stupid shonen mecha cartoons she's never been the least bit interested in.

Mitsuko

She folds her wings with a soft *swoosh* as she lands atop a dune just

outside the city gate, watching Eherithoth as he clammers up the dune; she knows that he must return to the inn soon for rest, but she is disappointed to see him go.

That was fun, he says once he catches up to her. I wish I could have seen the look on his face when you hit him with that lightning bolt.

Did you hear him yelling? Priceless.

How many does that make now?

I've lost count.

They stroll together toward the center of town. Mitsuko is, by now, used to the looks she gets on the streets in the lower-level towns—her wings are a commodity none of them can afford to come by—but she's surprised at the way Eherithoth appears almost to give her a lingering glance as they reach the inn. You should come around more. It's good to see you.

I'm happy to see you too, Eherithoth.

Seriously, don't be such a stranger. That was more fun than I've had in ages.

Okay, okay, I promise ^_^.

They stand at the door, face to face, avatars gazing into each other's eyes. The avatars' features have been handled in such an artful way that Mitsuko does not see the pixellation one might expect in viewing a face up this close; the shading of the cheekbones, the line of the chin, the curve of the eyes—she's never noticed until now how delicately-sculpted Eherithoth's features really are.

Eherithoth breaks the silence: I'll message you in the next week or so. There's a new server I've heard about that I'd like to investigate, if you're up for it?

Oh, you ... you're not trying to take me to a rabuserv are you ^_^ ?

He pauses—is there a glitch in her perception centers again, or is he blushing? Would you like me to?

<rolls eyes> Send me a link to the server. I'll see you there next week.

Next week, then. Goodbye, Hisako-san. He lingers at the door before he disappears behind it, gone before she's fully processed: He's used her real name, which she can't remember ever telling him.

Mitsuko walks aimlessly around town, ignoring the stares of the passersby, ignoring the occasional A/S/L request coming down the wires to her. Eherithoth's behavior is unusual tonight—but it's almost impossible to read an avatar's body language. An avvy gives away the workings of its programmer's mind, not the controller; the exercise is almost as fruitless as most teenage girls' attempts at reading teenage boys, who, as often as not, inhabit their bodies as tenuously and awkwardly as they inhabit their game avatars.

She finds herself uncertain how to proceed from here: She wants to continue gaming, but it's still too early in the day for her Pacific Rim contingent to be on board, and while solo adventures have their amusements, it's almost always more fun to go out with a group. She almost has herself resigned to going out by herself when one of her n00bz pages her and makes the decision for her. She ambles back to the save point at the inn to call it an evening, at least for tonight's gaming. She wonders if she'll be able to come back later when another group of her favorite companions are on. And she's dying to know what it is that Eherithoth is so keen to show her.

Hisako

At the end of Hisako's shift, she finds a note waiting in her inbox,

instructing her to enter secure chat mode with her supervisor before she logs out. Did someone discover her little adventure with Eri-kun? Did one of the n00bz rat her out? Without a body, her fear feels somewhat hollow, and yet her thoughts race, ticking down the possibilities, all of them leading to trouble, the same as if she still had a heart to pump adrenaline through her bloodstream. She does not remember reading about the company's disciplinary procedures for something like this; it's hard for her to imagine what kind of punishment might be meted out to her. Demotion? Restricting her out-of-game access to the network? She's heard stories of other UIs in other situations, other countries, being totally deactivated—*but the Japanese, even the Americans, would never be so vicious....*

A status check shows that Dylan, her unit coordinator, is waiting for her on a secure connection. *Let's get this over with, then.*

Good evening, Hisako-san. I hope things are well?

No complaints, Dylan-san. You wished to speak to me?

I do. He pauses for billions of clock cycles, no more than a couple of seconds in realtime, but enough time to make Hisako even more apprehensive. You know that you're quite rare among UIs, don't you, Hisako-san?

I'm not sure I follow you ... An uneasy sensation, as though he were looking down her shirt.

You were uploaded as a teenager—age seventeen, to be exact. Most western countries are still leery of uploads younger than 25.

Really? Why?

The human brain has not laid down all of its wiring until somewhere between ages 25 and 30. Some research suggests it's even later than that. The US ethicists are uncomfortable with

the idea of uploading intelligences that have not yet fully developed. The scientists in your country don't really see that as an issue—their own research has tended to find continuing development into a person's middle age. Japanese ethicists have tended to be more concerned that any personality they upload into a q-brain is going to be stable enough to handle the transition. Which still rules out most seventeen-year-olds, unless ...

Unless they're already making a transition—like dying.

I did not mean to be indelicate, Hisako-san. I hope I haven't offended you.

You haven't, Dylan-san.

It's a moment before he continues. Until now, once an intelligence enters the machine, there comes upon it a certain stasis. The machine does not have hormones to release, the way the body does. Emotions can be flatter than they should be. I'm sure you've noticed.

I see, Dylan-san—but what does that have to do with me?

VisionSoft was approached by a research group who is working on an upgrade to the UI brain that better simulates these functions. They want to develop a way to develop younger brains to full adult mode. They have asked us for a UI best suited to this kind of research, and it was determined that you were the best fit.

I've been sold already?

No, Hisako-san. I won't deny that some of the upper bosses thought your consent was unimportant; none of them wanted to risk having to explain themselves to the press, though. So: you can make a choice between continuing the life you have here with us, or you can go tonight and be part of some research

that might lead to a whole new kind of life for UIs.

Tonight? Why the rush?

Funding and publishing deadlines. The study has to start tomorrow if it's to proceed. For what it's worth, it's looking like something I think you'd be interested in.

And what if something goes bad? Could they damage one of my subsystems? How likely is it that I could end up as brain-damage-in-a-box?

It's easier to fix a circuits-and-silicon brain than a meat one, Hisako-san.

Damage is damage, no matter how temporary it is.

He finally offers her a chance to talk with one of the researchers who can answer her questions about the project, and within moments, he's got someone on screen with them. The younger man's manner is cold and clinical and almost entirely flat; the quintessential lab scientist. He does try to reassure her that the prospects of permanent damage to her thought centers is almost nil; that backups are scrupulously maintained and can be reinstalled without having to deactivate her entirely. And, he promises, she will have almost unlimited freedom to move on the network.

It's almost too good to pass up, even if it is risky. No, not almost: It is too good to pass up. The chance to float about the network however she sees fit, to be beholden to almost nobody for her care and upkeep? The downside is no small matter: If the simulated hormonal systems don't work properly, she could end up in any number of damaged emotional states—permanently depressed? chronically stressed? perpetually furious? hyper-aroused (wouldn't that be a nasty one)? If she takes this job, she's basically volunteering herself as a human guinea pig, maybe indefinitely. But the promise of freedom, the mere freedom of movement they're hinting at? It's more than any seventeen-year-old could ignore, especially one engaged in a black box.

Mitsuko

Her wings are aflutter with tension, a sensation she's never experienced before. If she goes into cam view, she can see them *floop* and twitch as she walks into the hallway of the inn—perhaps it's the oddity of this inn, which has been clearly modeled after the one on the Warkult server, with arced hallways and heavy-grained wooden doors, down to the layout of the rooms, the positions of the beds and hearths in each unit. Or perhaps it's the deathly silence of the area—the rooms, the hallways, the pub downstairs in what functions, more or less, as the lobby, it's all empty of all the usual background noise, nothing to hear except the occasional raspy draft of wind, the crackle of the fire, the clunk of her footfalls as she walks slowly toward the exit.

Outside is little better; the buildings are where they ought to be—the inn is next to the armory, which is merely a block or so from the main temple—but the streets are as deserted as the buildings. There aren't even any NPCs ambling about, none of the *clang* and *clank* and calling out of names that dominate the city's normal soundscape, nothing but the wind in her wing-feathers. And then, as if from nowhere, a voice: She's certain it's coming from behind her, but when she turns to track it, she can't see anything but the empty town streets. Mitsuko ...

Hisako

It's a cliché as worn out in Akihabara as it is in America, the way that technology collapses distances. Especially for someone in Hisako's situation: In the past, she would have been required to emigrate to California to work with her new contract-holders; now, she doesn't even need to be on the same continent. On the other hand, the cascade of information being piped into her new visual inputs—a series of tiled windows, each one monitoring a different aspect of the network of nanosystems that make up her electronic brain—is just as disorienting as she imagines jet lag to be. It's almost too much to keep up with, no matter how much more quickly she can swap between windows and parse them. It's so you can see what's happening as

we bring each system on line.

Arigato. But will I feel it? When you start activating them?

Not necessarily. Not at first, anyway. Over time, though, with proper stimulus, you'll notice your emotions becoming more pronounced sometimes, more refined at others. It's not too much different from what any other teenager goes through; you'll notice that things feel different, but unlike most teenagers, you'll know exactly what's happening.

She is not entirely reassured—and something else is bothering her. You didn't, by any chance, install anything before you bought my contract?

Why do you ask?

No reason.

Another one of the engineers, Janelle, replies. I accidentally started a process in one of your thought centers—but I thought I killed it before it had a chance to get started. Shouldn't have been up more than a second or two in realtime. Did you notice something?

Not really.

Mitsuko

Over here, Mitsuko....

She scans the streets again; she recognizes the voice as Eherithoth's, but she has no idea what he's doing. She's almost ready to give up—but there, up on one of the balconies of the inn she just left ... there he is, an armored figure almost camouflaged by the bricks of the inn, almost imperceptible except for the waving arm. Is he gesticulating for her to come back to the inn? Is that even possible? It's not

something they can normally do in the game world, after all.

Hisako

We're going to start with a program to accentuate the serotonin and dopamine subsystems. These control a number of different functions, but for tonight, it's mainly going to make your pleasure and reward centers a little more sensitive, a little more subtle.

Tyler, one of the first engineers she met, is taking over, his voice a little more compassionate than the others (or so it seems to her): We'll also be running a software package that will simulate oxytocin, the bonding hormone. If you notice that you start feeling more strongly connected to people in certain situations, the way you did when you were, I don't know, fifteen or so ... that's what's behind that.

That's an ... interesting ... combination.

We'd like to monitor things while you're doing something social, maybe a chatroom or discussion board, or one of the multiplayer online games I remember you said you enjoyed ... It'll help us get a better feel for how these systems are functioning under real conditions.

How will I know whether or not they're working?

What do you mean, Hisako-san?

How will I know whether what I'm feeling and thinking is *real* & not just the hormone systems kicking in?

Tyler-san chuckles. Does anyone?

Janelle speaks up: We're almost ready to begin. How are you feeling, Hisako-san? Are you ready?

Hai. Ganbatte.

Mitsuko

Eherithoth is in the tavern waiting for her, slouching against the bar with his arms folded. I was worried you wouldn't come. Konbanwa, Mitsuko-san.

What is this place?

It's a world I'm designing. I wanted you to be the first to see it.

It's ... rather familiar looking ...

What? Oh, that's a template. I haven't started shaping the town's boilerplate yet.

Are you working on the adventure area?

There is none.

Oh. Then you **did** bring me to a rabuserv ...^o^

He switches to text for a second: ' _ ' ^ _ ^

Okay, I give up. What are you working on?

Hit your left attack button.

What?

Try it. Trust me.

She engages the attack—she doesn't have a controller after all—and is startled to see herself waving, her left hand upraised and pivoting, a movement half-royalty and half-automaton. It's not the left-hand punch/stab/slash she would ordinarily expect. What is this,

Eherithoth?

Go to cam view and try some of the other controls; especially the combination attacks. She follows his directions, her amazement slowly giving way to wonder and curiosity as she tries the controls that would ordinarily produce flying kicks, leaping punches, two-fisted crossbow-firing slides like the ones in the old Hong Kong bullet ballets—only now, she sees herself pivoting, swaying, pirouetting. She is transfixed as she begins to choreograph her movements; she never imagined she'd be able to see her avatar—*herself*—dance here.

Hisako

Hisako logs into the server with a growing sense of trepidation, something she hasn't felt in years. Page-swap: According to the monitors, the systems they've installed are still waiting to go online. She's concerned about where this might be coming from, but she's not going to ask the engineers about it, not even Tyler-san; she just cannot bring herself to be so candid with strangers, even ones who may be even more privy to her secrets than she is. They're awfully quiet now; do they know she's afraid?

Page-swap: the cut-screen appears while her spawn-point loads, and her tension boosts. She finds herself swapping among nearly a dozen memories at once—first crushes, a first kiss, her first encounters with Ryu—all quick-cutting across her consciousness, through the visual centers without piping directly into her eyes. It's almost frightening—did their software already go wrong? But her trepidation fades quickly as her imaginary slideshow gives way again to the image actually before her, of a spawn point she doesn't quite recognize.

Mitsuko/Hisako

Eherithoth joins her in dancing, and though his motions aren't quite as free as her own, they're nimble enough to give her non-existent flesh

goosebumps she can still feel. I'm trying to get the developers to add even more controls, he says, but this is what I've got for now.

This is amazing. E-kun. How did you do this?

I have plenty of time on my hands. And a few amateurs who owed me some favors.

It's not what I'd expect a man to come up with. No offense, but ... I get enough A/S/L requests to think....

I know. His voice is uncommonly gentle when he says it. But you always say I surprise you.

You do, you do. She reaches out toward him, and though the renderers aren't complex enough for her to take his hand as she twirls, she almost feels his fingers interlacing with hers. But this? I don't think I could even do this before.

The beat of silence that follows would almost be awkward—E-kun stops dancing, even—until he steps closer, and she can imagine that she smells his skin, the way she did with Ryu once they were close enough to drop the more formal honorifics. Eherithoth holds up his arm as if to wave, but steps close enough to touch her, close enough to make Hisako's avatar shiver. I still can't do this in the flesh, Hisako.

Why not?

He sighs. I don't have a body, either.

You're not an upload, I thought?

No.

Hisako

Afterward, once she's logged out of the game again, the engineers are

ready with questions, ones that strike Hisako as being a little too disingenuously clinical: *How did you feel when you were interacting with the other player? What were you doing at the time? Did you feel the same way at other times? Did you feel particularly pleased at times? Unhappy?* They had to be watching her the whole time—self-reported data doesn't get studies funded; she knows it's the nature of the beast (and it's in her contract, besides)—but to have to answer such indirect questions as directly as they'd like? *It's almost insulting.*

It takes a minute for her to frame an answer the way she'd prefer: My friend built a place to dance in the game. I was impressed.

Your oxytocin levels went up when you were in there, about five minutes in, or so.

I was impressed with his ability. And touched he wanted me to be the first to see it.

Tyler's lead assistant—the least sensitive one of the bunch, the one she calls "the baka"—chimes in: Do you like him?

More than I like you ... ;-)

Janelle laughs. I think you know what he means, Hisako. We don't mean to be disrespectful, but....

I know, Janelle-san. It's why I'm here. Hisako uses the honorific to remind her that they *are* crossing a line, though.

Tyler steps in: He does seem to be one of your favorite people in the game.

You could say that.

Hisako/Mitsuko

Eherithoth slows to a stop as he and Mitsuko dance. Hisako imagines

him smiling, at least until he speaks: I'm ... in Hawking mode. I can still talk for now, but....

Oh. That must be awful.

It can be. But sometimes, there's moments ... She could almost swear she feels him as he reaches out toward her hand, even though there's no technology that should allow them to touch. It can be good in here sometimes. He retracts his own hand and laughs before she has a chance to react. I'd be lying if I said you weren't part of that.

Hisako covers her mouth to laugh. You flatter me, E-kun.

I mean it, Hisako-san. And you can call me Travis.

She does a quick skim of the virtual voices available to her, hoping there's a new one out. You flatter me even more, T-kun. No luck; they're the same synthetic, awful things that still don't feel quite right.

How so?

She drops back to text for a moment— ^_^ —but tries out the voice again. Just call me Hisako, T-kun.

He pauses. You're too kind ... wow. I almost called you *Hi-chan*. I know that's too....

She picks the least-worst voice to interrupt him with: You can call me that, too. When Travis steps back and extends his hand again, this time a clear invitation to dance, she absolutely does not refuse.

Hisako

Tyler-san?

Yes?

Can I ask you a question?

Of course, Hisako-san.

How much ... adjusting were you doing? With my systems, I mean.

Very little. Janelle has been adamant that we move slowly. You're an older teenager than others in this study, but ... Hisako has noticed that Tyler stops in mid-sentence sometimes; she can never tell if he's re-gathering his thoughts, or if he's being careful with the words he chooses. They'd be a little more used to mood swings at that age; you should be done with that.

Janelle jumps in, speaking a little more rapidly than usual. You used a voice with him. Your friend, I mean—and you told him he could call you Hi-chan. Not to pry, but we know that's a big deal. Are you worried we might have caused that?

I don't know. I'll have to think about that for a bit. I'm using a voice with you too, though.

The baka sighs. We gave you monitors so you could see for yourself. Didn't you look at them?

I was a little too busy living for once, *baka-bot*. She doesn't even hesitate to use the American-ism: Janelle-san? Could you please check *his* asshole-endorphin levels? She isn't ashamed, even after she says it—and yet, she feels the reflex to cover her mouth immediately, especially once Janelle and Tyler explode into laughter.

Hisako/Mitsuko

T-kun? Not to be rude, but ... can you feel ...

It's not rude at all. My parents won't get me a regular touch-feedback suit, and the doctors haven't been able to puppet my

senses yet. I spend a lot of time in here, though, and I've noticed that my brain fills in the blanks sometimes.

Really?

Like right now, dancing, I can feel you against me. He chuckles. It disappears if I try to force it, but if I just let it happen, I can feel your presence there—like a body, but not quite. It sounds kind of weird, but that's what it's like.

It's not weird at all. It's actually kind of flattering. Can you feel it right now, while we're talking?

Kind of. I notice it more when we're dancing, though. When I'm not thinking about it.

She nods quietly, but continues to dance with Travis/Eherithoth, careful to allow herself to touch him, but only sparingly. The way she used to with Ryu at first, but with a difference: *I don't know much about Travis outside the game*. On the other hand, he's given her something Ryu never could have, a remembrance of her body her handlers have, surprisingly enough, never quite allowed her.

She thinks, at one point, that she can hear Travis murmuring "Anata ga suki desu"—but if he did, it's just barely loud enough for his microphone to pick up. What Japanese tell each other when they want to be a couple: *I like you*. She wishes she could smile in here: If that really *is* what he said, his accent is endearingly *terrible* ...

Hisako

Tyler and Janelle have gone home for the evening, leaving her alone with the baka. She finds herself missing their company more than usual, even after tonight. And she cannot stop thinking of Travis/Eherithoth, there in the dancing-place he's created for them—and only them. It's not ready for a public release, he says, though it seems

pretty clear he wants her to be the one to help him finish it. There's a moment of discomfort in that—*I'm going to have to drop the rabuserv jokes now*—but it's quickly replaced with something else. He's moving more slowly with her, like a Japanese boy would. And he's definitely not telling her something as tone-deaf as "aishiteru," like some American anime fans do when she's bored enough to indulge one of their A/S/L pings for any length of time.

The baka is sensible enough not to bother Hisako now; she can see through the lab cameras that he's talking to someone else at his console, his attention completely diverted. She could, if she wanted to, angle and zoom in over his shoulder, and listening in wouldn't be much more of a problem. Janelle forgets to kill her headset about half the time before she leaves the lab, and patching into its microphone is easy. Hisako hesitates before she activates that line-in: *Since when do I care what he's thinking?* She clicks the button, though; she has to work with him for most of the week. It would be weirder of her not to wonder what makes him tick.

At first, he's listening in to whoever's on the other side of the screen, long enough for Hisako to wonder if he hasn't already disconnected. Then, finally: "No. You're not hearing me. Just like her... Yeah. Tyler really glitched this one; the oxy sim is *still* cranking, and she probably has no idea. She didn't, earlier... No. Janelle dialed it down, but it's still running. I took down her monitors. She's not even using them. She's really not what we expected. I don't trust her self-awareness... Yeah, *lawlawlawl*. No, I *don't* think mine is the problem this time...."

Hisako stifles a chuckle while she makes sure he can't hear anything come through any of the other headsets in the room. If he knew she'd heard him, he'd know he's probably just ruined the experiment entirely. She knows that she's supposed to tell him, but she stops short of opening a line to him. *I'd just be doing it to embarrass him*. He deserves it—so arrogant, and so careless!—but what comes after that? For her? The team? Would they start a new experiment, or would they send her somewhere else? And the game—her character? Travis? No. If

nothing else, she's not going to just surrender everything she's built there.

It's wrong, she knows, to be so selfish. It goes against everything she learned in the flesh. *I know why I'm doing it, though.* Isn't *that* self-awareness? Even his friend on the other side of the mic can sense it: *I know a lot more about me—about any of us—than he does.*

Mitsuko/Hisako

It's been a week since Travis danced with her, and Hisako still has not seen him in-game; he hasn't even logged on since then. She's voiced him once—Everyone in the clan is asking after you, T-kun. And I can't wait for you to show me what you do next with your server—but there's no response, even though the "received" flag is right there in the message list.

Time passes, and she comes up with all sorts of reasons why he might have disappeared, all of them about her, and none of which quite make sense. He might have cut ties because she's a UI and he's in a body; she wouldn't be the first UI it's happened to, but his body is barely more than a shell—he's not meeting anybody in the flesh. Maybe it's a cultural thing: He's clearly sensitive to the difference, but maybe he's figured out he can't handle it. All sorts of increasingly-crazy *maybes* come to her; she knows they're irrational, but there's a nugget of truth that fuels them—he's abandoned her, too—and she has to work to keep from ruminating on it.

Her handlers tell her the oxytocin experiment is running idle for the moment, and she has no reason to think the baka had it right the night she eavesdropped. The old feeling of distance is returning and the dance with Eherithoth is fading, an odd jump in the more-or-less flat line of Cloud life. *It's normal*, she thinks. *Nothing to be bothered about.* And yet, there's a slight sting to it whenever someone calls her Mitsuko in the game—it reminds her that it's not her real name. Even the *-san* the researchers use: It's correct and respectful, and not what

someone who cared about her would call her.

Hisako

Tyler and Janelle have gotten hard to talk to, she's noticed, mostly small talk with gentle brush-offs whenever she tries to ask them anything more about the experiment. The baka is not so gentle, of course, at least not until Hisako starts talking about a possible glitch in the system, how it might have damaged her self-awareness. He's apologetic for not telling her anything more than Tyler and Janelle have, but there's worry in his face now, fresh and genuine each time she uses that word: *self-awareness*. That much, at least, is satisfying.

Janelle is the one to break the silence. **Have you been gaming lately?**

You know I have, Janelle-san.

She doesn't flinch, unlike the baka. **Your amygdala has been quieter lately.**

Oh.

You haven't seen Travis since then, either.

Eherithoth, you mean.

Oh. Yes, him.

He'll return when he does, Janelle. Janelle doesn't push for more, and Hisako is grateful. I'm not seventeen anymore. Don't worry. If there's something to tell you, I will.

When Hisako next enters the game, though, she doesn't join a party on an adventure, like she might have before, and she doesn't fly off

into the midlands to find griefers to punish. Instead she walks through the main gate and goes for a stroll around the city's walls. The occasional giant scarab emerges from the sand, from time to time, but she's leveled-up far enough that a single kick is enough to dispatch them. She isn't really paying attention to much beyond the sound of her own footfalls, the clank of her armor, the ambient noise of the city just barely audible from where she's walking.

Occasionally, she starts to talk to herself, trying to get better control of her synthetic voice. When she does, she finds herself crossing her arms or standing with her hands on her hips; she tells herself she's not trying to recreate the sensation of being touched. That she hasn't missed it since she uploaded. That it doesn't matter that Eherithoth could give her something like that, even if nobody can give that to him.

She stands here in the desert like this, alone until her heads-up tells her there's a party approaching. She flits off into the sky, out of hearing range. She's lucky that she's still too new to it to control the tone of her voice; as it is, she worries that she may have tipped her hand with Janelle. She's not supposed to maintain that public vs. private persona that Japanese culture demands, but at a moment like this, it just doesn't feel safe to let that wall down.

Hisako/Mitsuko

When Travis re-emerges, 83 days later, he pings her straight away with an invitation to his server. She wastes no time logging in, but once she's spawned, she paces outside the building. She thought he'd ghosted on her; at the time, she fretted over her inbox constantly, just to make sure she hadn't missed any messages from him. Next, the rest of the process: Fury, self-loathing, then forgetting, the latter so complete that Hisako wondered if it was part of another hormone experiment. Now, confusion: *What am I supposed to feel? And why did I just jump here?*

Ultimately, he comes outside and waves. H-Hi-chan? He walks toward her, pausing just before he gets danceably close. I'm sorry

I've been gone.

Where were you?

The researchers have been trying to puppet my senses again. It wasn't pleasant.

I was worried about you ... Travis. Couldn't you have had someone send a note?

I've been in too much pain to teach anyone else in the house how to. After a pause, he continues: I've been disqualified from uploading, too.

You were going to upload?

His fingers begin to twitch, she notices, and it takes him a minute to answer: It didn't matter. My brain has adapted to this body, or whatever's left of it I can use—and nobody's willing to take me on, even as an experiment. He chuckles. The antidepressant researchers have been good to me, though. It only took me a month with them to be able to come back to the Cloud. Back here. You're the first person I wanted to see. How have you been?

I'm okay. Her tone is deliberate and ambiguous: She's gotten used to the voice, now that Tyler's shown her how to adjust it down to a grown woman's tones, and even the baka says she's got really subtle inflection, more than a lot of UIs her age. I'm not sure what experiments they're running on me now, though.

Not knowing is the worst.

Yeah. She wonders if he can figure out why she leaves it at that.

He looks down. I'm sorry I left you hanging.

It was ... confusing. The mixed message.

Gomen.

And then I start to question everything.

His avatar droops as he begins to cry, something his body can't seem to handle like it normally might have, and something she wasn't expecting his avatar to reproduce. Coupled with the filtered sound and unmodified volume his cheap microphone gives him, it's a horrible thing to hear, full of animal pain. F ... f ... forgive me? Hi-chan? The way teenagers talk in manga—but this is no melodrama. She genuinely does not want him to hurt like this. Like her.

Hisako

Her handlers don't wait for her to come out of game this time; a separate window spawns in her field of view before she's even entered the building in Travis' server, and she has to alternate back and forth between the two. Janelle-san is the first one of them to speak: Hisako-san? May we talk to you for a moment?

Hai. But this isn't the best moment.

We weren't expecting you to go back into ... Eherithoth's server?

I thought the experiment was on hold. You've been evasive about that, though.

Hisako-san—

Which is your prerogative, I guess. It may even be the point, I don't know.

The baka huffs and jumps into the conversation. The hormone experiment ended before you ever knew there was one.

Hisako is silent with them for a moment, her attention diverted by

Travis in the other window. Explain, baka.

Tyler-san steps in to explain: They'd boosted her simulated oxytocin levels while she was playing with Eherithoth, long before he told her his real name, and long before they'd told her they were doing anything. The point was to see how she would behave with him when she thought she was being tweaked, and when she actually was. They hadn't expected him to have already fallen for her, or for him to be struggling with his own physical and emotional issues. We have to end that part of the experiment now that he's returned. It'd be inhumane to continue—for both of you.

So they've been lying to her? Okay....

Janelle's voice comes in soothing tones: Your hormones have been running themselves since that first test. We haven't tweaked anything since the first night. Whatever bond you have with Travis has nothing to do with us.

"Whatever bond." Like you're not studying my *brain*.

We studied both of you. We didn't put him in there with you, though. And we needed to tell you that before you meet with Travis again.

Hisako feels the familiar time lag she experiences when she's angry; it's an eon before she can close their window, right in the middle of all of them apologizing. They're trying to be transparent; they might even know she overheard the baka and didn't say anything. And yet, before she shuts them down, the string of middle finger emojis she sends them comes without a second thought for appearances or protocol or anything else.

Hisako

She draws closer to Travis' avatar. It wasn't your fault, T-kun. You don't need to be forgiven.

You're too good to me, Hi-kun.

Not at all. She covers her mouth, then uncovers it and draws even closer to Travis, close enough that his avatar starts with the transparency glitch.

I can feel that, Hi-kun. It ...

Shh, Travis. She steps forward far enough for her face to touch his, then steps back. She moves slowly, uncertain as the naïve schoolgirl she used to be, but not nervous, like she'd been with Ryu.

Travis is audibly confused when he speaks again. Hisako? I felt that, too. Like a ...

She smiles at him, as genuinely as she ever has. **Anata ga suki desu.** Later, she'll be amused that she let that out so quickly; in the moment, she doesn't want him to think, to lose that feeling of her being physically with him. It must be working, because now he's the one to bring his face to hers, then dip back (she feels it too, something brushing at her lips like a kiss). And she was right: His accent really *is* that terrible, but he doesn't hesitate when he says the words, the right ones. **Watashi mo anata ga suki desu.** [I like you, too.]



Polish by Carl Scharwath

Holiday Traffic

by Oliver Smith

As he waits, his laser-shades sparkle here
and there in broken wing mirrors and chrome.
Alone, he sets some stolen wheels in motion:
through the night he slides into the sounds
outside the steel solid window. He passes
holograms of the long dead owners of the air
and stars, of the earth and sea and moonlight,
who mortgaged the world down to the bone
so their memory might flicker forever
on broken TV screens. Their immortal
remains locked safe in the Ark Electric,
floating so far in flight from the neon city.

He circumnavigates the ruined world
through dead warehouse, rotted-out cavities,
dead malls, dead factories, dead trees, dead towns
He traverses suburbs a hundred miles high,
abandons the car by the metal scattered shore
and rides the midnight-blue drifting silent
out across dark rocks. He finds the ghost
of romance: her obsolete electronic heart
fluttering in luminescent water beneath
retreating moonlight; they follow the sea;
he holds her close and listens to her tick
into the void as the ocean swirls away.

Rocket Ship Temple Blues

by Jack Fielding

Did you know they say the Demon took seven steps when he was born? That's seven steps to Hell, my friend."

I watched as the giant airship rose effortlessly into the midnight sky, *Genshin Retro Harmony* in blazing neon on its side. A few minutes later the airship had disappeared and the bell of the Chrome Pagoda rang out. Its main gate closed behind me with a pneumatic hiss. I stepped away into the glare of a streetlight, gripped the brown parcel in one hand and with the other self-consciously touched my shaven head. Hawaiian shirt frayed at the collar. Torn pocket on my Chinos. Sandals that dug into my feet and made me wince.

But what I really needed to sort out was Bob. I needed to find him. Explain everything. I just hoped – really hoped – he hadn't done what I'd asked.

The thought of it made me sick with apprehension.

Well, there was only one place I could find him at that time.

I made my way to the nearby canal path and followed it until I reached a wooden bridge, crossed over then slunk through a small alley and out into Candle Street. The No. 6 monorail rumbled past. Electric passengers crackling in and out of electric life and faded painted adverts under the windows.

Further down Candle I realised I was being watched. Damn it. A pair of authentic-looking Japanese soldiers in green uniforms. Tough, burly types with vintage Arisa rifles and vicious, razor-sharp bayonets stuck on the ends. Part of the conquering Imperial Army running Bangkok. Probably trying to work out if the Westerner – Siamese called us

farangs – was an ex-monk, just another bum who needed a good hosing down or maybe an altogether more serious case. I kept my eyes down. You could never really be sure about anything these days.

Luckily, they soon lost interest and merged into the darkness.

"Hey, Palm Trees!"

I recognised the voice: Lillie the Leg.

She was standing in the doorway of the Galaxy Rose Dance Hall waving frantically at me. But as I hobbled over, I realised she wasn't Lillie the Leg anymore. She was...yeah, Veronica Lake. *The Blue Dahlia 1943* with Alan Ladd. Even got the peekaboo hairstyle right. Lillie still had that malfunctioning right leg of hers though, which was unsettling rather than reassuring. Honestly, I'm not a big fan of change. It was still damned good to see a friendly face though, and I couldn't help breaking into a silly grin. Lillie quickly realised I wasn't in good shape and clattered over to meet me halfway, gently locked her arm in mine, and walked me into the Rose. I was hit by that familiar smell of linoleum. Funny how it's always the smells that resurrect your deadest memories.

"Veronica Lake, right?"

"Yeah, that's me! What do you think?"

"She's classic noir alright and beautiful – but is it OK if I still call you Lillie?"

"No problem, Palm Trees," she smiled. "Why were those two soldiers

eyeballing you?”

“I’m not honestly sure.”

“And where’s that nice trilby hat of yours?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think I lost it outside the monorail junction near the Giant Swing. That was ages ago.”

“I’m sure you had it the night before you went into the temple.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, a respectable man can’t go around without a hat. It’s dangerous, you know. I’ll find you one in my booth.”

“Thanks, Lillie, you’re my guardian angel.”

“Palm Trees...?”

“What is it, sweetheart?”

She took out a hankie and dabbed my forehead. “You’re sounding queer and look kinda peaky.”

“You mean even more than before?”

“I got a box of Doctor Kwan’s medicinals come in on the slippy-shippy yesterday.”

“Smuggled meds? I hope you’ll both be very happy together.”

“Be serious, will you? The box had some Atabrine. Maybe your malaria’s come back and Atabrine’s real good for that.”

I realised that Lillie was too considerate, too *kreang jai*, to come right out with it and say I looked like an escaped lunatic.

“I’ll be OK,” I said. “Unfortunately, they haven’t found a cure for existential haemorrhoids yet. Thanks for the offer, though.”

“I’ll keep some in case you change your mind.”

“Yes, nurse.”

Lillie led me over to her hatcheck booth and went inside. “I’ll find that trilby for you later.” She made to take my parcel but I pressed it to my chest. “Something important?”

“Oh, yes, very.”

I grabbed the edge of the counter.

“Sure you’re OK?”

“Er, yeah, I just need to sit down, that’s all. My feet are killing me.”

“You go in then and I’ll see you later.”

I let go of the counter and walked carefully over to Bogart; the detective lay motionless in that brackish green tank with pipes sticking out of his sides. I nodded at him before heading towards the doors of the main hall. Lillie, Bogart, and that linoleum smell ... everything *seemed* to be the same as I’d left it. The world hadn’t ground to a halt in my absence. There were no ‘Welcome Home’ banners, no Chinese fireworks or Waikiki girls jumping out of giant cakes.

That was good, as I did need to keep a low profile.

I pushed open the doors and went into the hall. Yep, there was Gloria Grahame *In A Lonely Place 1951* and the other Broken Blossom dancers, plugged into their desks like always. Barbara Stanwyck ignored me. Gloria flashed a smile. Linda Darnell yawned. Difficult to tell at a distance, but I noticed the fashion for blacking their teeth

seemed to have fallen out of favour while I'd been away. Maybe the Japanese army officers who frequented the Galaxy Rose weren't getting the hots for pretend geisha girls these days.

And of course, there was no George Raft. Usually, the head waiter of the Rose would be zooming around on his spangly wheels and fetching an ice-cold Amarit beer in a schooner glass for yours truly. But rumour had it he'd gone upcountry and taken the mistress of a Shan warlord with him. Stranger things had happened.

Instead of George a *dek serve* waitress whirled over. She had a face I'd never seen in any movie ever before, and wore a pink *pha sin* skirt, ivory-coloured blouse, and hair sculptured high in the Burman-style. In a demure voice she asked me if I would like a table.

I stared at her. Nope, absolutely no idea who she was supposed to be.

She repeated the question.

Then I spotted Bob. Robert Mitchum, Bob to his friends. He was sitting over the far side of the dance floor. I felt relieved and apprehensive at the same time. Oh, Lord, I really, really hoped he hadn't done it.

Bob saw me coming and eased out a chair from under the table with his foot. He told me to sit down in his best *Angel Face 1953* voice.

"Thanks, Bob."

I flopped down on the chair and put the parcel on the table.

"I'm glad you're alive."

"So am I."

"But I gotta say you do look like absolute shit."

"Thank you very much."

"My pleasure."

"Lillie the Leg – Veronica – thinks I've got malaria, bless her."

Bob shook his head. "That would be the least of your problems, my screwball Limey buddy."

"Honestly, you don't have to try and cheer me up."

"Her name's Lila, by the way."

"Who is?"

"That new waitress you were talking to."

"I'm pretty sure I've never heard the name before."

"Lila Leeds wasn't in the big time for long but we got to know each better in court."

"Divorce?"

"Marijuana bust."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. It was hi-grade. Say, I reckon you could do with a drink."

Bob clicked his fingers and summoned Lila. "This man needs an Amarit beer and you'd better make it quick. Don't know how long he's got before they return him to the nut house."

"Very funny," I said. "Oh, and Lila, mix it one-third with lemonade. No, don't give me that look, Bob. I'm a reformed character now. No more excess. A new improved Orson Milo Palmer. Sort of like Saint Paul on the road to Damascus but with louder shirts and more laconic one-liners."

Lila raised her eyes to heaven, then left.

“Oh, sod it,” I said. “I should have asked her to make sure it comes in a proper thin glass. She, er, might not know.”

“She knows, they all know,” said Bob drily, then let out a rumbling burp. “Excuse me. Say, I thought it was supposed to do you good being in that temple.” He brushed a bug off his shoulder. “You look just as bad as when you went in.”

“In Zen we say that he who knows does not speak.”

“Yeah? By the state of you, I reckon you spent too long in one of those little cells on your own. Broke the rules, upset the full-timers and sneaked in one too many bottles of booze in between chanting. Taking holy orders has made you even more cockeyed – no offence meant.”

“None taken. Anyway, you’re wrong. I told you, I’m a reformed character.”

Bob widened those lazy, heavy eyes of his, “Well, whether you’re reformed or not, I’ve got some good news.”

My heart sank. The moment I’d been dreading.

“News, Bob?”

“Yeah, I did what you asked.”

“Remind me.”

“God damn it, Palm Trees. What I’ve spent the last goddamned month busting my balls for? Trying to buy or beg and finally steal for you.”

I ran a hand over my head.

Bob gently patted the breast pocket on his shirt. “Got it right here.”

Lila arrived with the drinks. “One Amarit with soda in a proper thin glass and a Bourbon on the rocks.”

“I told you,” Bob said, “these damned robots, they know everything.”

“Thanks.”

“Thanks, Lila.”

Bob took out an envelope from the pocket and handed it over. “So now we’re even, Palm Trees.”

“Yes, I guess we are,” I said glumly.

“Well, you sure don’t look very happy about it,” responded Bob, an edge to his voice. “What’s eating you?”

“Er, you see, the truth is, uhm, I don’t really want it now.”

I was about to slide the envelope across to Bob but he raised an eyebrow.

Now he was normally a cool kind of guy. Unfortunately, there was something of the smoking volcano about his psychology and I imagined him erupting and tearing my head off with those enormous hands of his.

I gulped and it went very quiet between us.

All I could hear was the gentle chatter of the Broken Blossoms and whirl of the *dek serves* amongst the tables.

Finally, he said, “Look, it’s me you’re talking to, Palm Trees. You’re out of the temple and in the real-life nut house now. So, give your

Uncle Bob here the dope on what's really happened and remember I don't like bullshit salesmen."

Mm, I knew this could be a way out before subjected to an act of senseless, uncontrolled violence.

"Honestly, Bob, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Go on, try me, Palm Trees."

He cracked his knuckles.

"You sure? You want the real reason I'm going to take my chances and stay in the city? Why I've decided to follow the Middle Path? Avoid the opposites. Be a good boy. Tell you how I know the Enlightened One has given me another throw of the dice?"

"Yeah, I do – and just as existentially important – tell me why in hell you're wearing your sandals on the wrong feet."

"Oh, am I?"

I peered under the table and changed them round. Damn, that actually felt a whole lot better. "Thanks."

"You were saying?"

"OK then, Bob. I'll reveal the secret behind my miraculous transformation. But you better be ready. Because the story I'm about to tell is so incredible it will make the suspenders on your socks curl."

As if on cue the curtain on the stage opened to reveal Tommy Dorsey and his Recycling Rhythm Aces as they launched into *Swing! Swing! Swing!*

Bob took a sip of Bourbon, then folded his arms and looked me

straight in the eyes.

"This better be good," he said.

* * *

I smacked my neck and killed the mosquito feeding off me while contemplating the extraordinarily beautiful eddying, swirling patterns that emerged as the inverted glass in the bottom of one's whiskey bottle diffracted the mixture of opiate residue combining in a poetic medley with Sangthip whisky and delicately layered flakes of cigarette ash.

Suddenly my reverie was disturbed by a noise outside my cell door. A sort of soft shuffling. Had they sent someone to spy on me again?

You could never really be sure.

Just to be safe, I shoved the cork in my whisky bottle and hid it under the mattress. I lit a Falling Rain cigarette and took a slow drag. Tried to keep it causal.

Blimey, why couldn't they just leave me alone?

I'd made a generous donation towards the new roof tiles on the pagoda of the Chrome Pagoda to buy some time, wait it out as a temporary monk while Bob sorted things out for me. I'd reminded Bob that he owed me big time and I'd also given him the last of my savings stashed at Madam Sin's mahjong den. Bob was the only one I could trust. The only one who could help me stay alive.

It had gone quiet outside. I stubbed out my cigarette, then picked up *Uncanny Tales* from the floor. It was Golden Age. Mint condition. I peeked inside at the main story, smoothed down the corners before returning it to the shelf with the others, and then lay down on the sweat-sodden mattress. I thanked the Enlightened One.

It was time to grab some sleep.

* * *

There was a tentative knock on the door.

“Yes, what is it?” I said sleepily.

My throat felt like sandpaper.

“May I come in, please?” from the other side.

That was Wittaya, the young novice monk always trying to be my best pal.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“They’ve found something.”

“Who has?”

“Some of the other monks.”

“They’ve finally tracked down Amelia Earhart?”

“Er, no, no, it’s not her. It’s something really bad.”

“Bad? Damn it, you’re beginning to make me nervous.” I picked out a Junior Mint from the packet on the floor and popped it into my mouth to hide the smell of booze. “OK, you’d better come in.”

The door rattled.

“It seems to be locked.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

I leant across and unfastened the latch and slid back the bolt.

Wittaya shuffled in. The candle on the shelf flickered. He was an amazingly well-detailed sort of chap with spectacles, pock-marked skin for added effect, and a face that made him appear forever on the verge of apologizing for something.

“Come in and close that door gently,” I said. “Right, now what on earth’s going on?”

Wittaya sat down beside me and sniffed. “Khun Palm Trees, it is not very nice in here.”

“I’ll have a word with the cleaning ladies first thing tomorrow.”

“You are allowed to have cigarettes but not alcohol. I think you know this by now.”

“I have suffered a momentary lapse of inner discipline, but please don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t, but you’ll get in even more trouble if they find out. You’re on your last warning and mustn’t get kicked out. Everyone in here likes you, Palm Trees. They don’t believe those terrible rumours about you. But they are, um –”

“A bit disappointed?”

“Yes, I’m afraid we all are.”

“Don’t worry, chum. Nobody is more disappointed in me than I am.”

Wittaya shook his head as if feeling very sad.

“You said they found something and it wasn’t to do with Amelia?”

“I don’t know exactly, but it’s in the forest and it’s very strange.”

“The forest is miles away.”

“No, not really.”

“Anyway, I thought it was off limits to everyone. The dispute between Chrome Pagoda and the Black Tiger Temple lot over the exorcism rights. Even the rats avoid it.”

“Earlier some of our other novices were in there hunting the cobra that killed that policeman on Saturday. But instead of the snake they found something else and I’ve got to take you there.”

“Unfortunately, I’m really busy right now. I’m not well, you know.”

“The Abbot himself said you have to.”

“Abbot Od – did he?” I rubbed my face, trying to concentrate. “Hang on, I thought he was away. Visiting the Pathumwan District army commander to bless that newfangled gravitational tank of his. You’d better not be pulling my leg.”

“Pulling your leg?”

“I mean making fun of me.”

“No, honestly,” said Wittaya. “Our abbot returned as soon as he heard what they found. He said to me, ‘Wittaya, you tell that Palm Trees *farang* fellow to get his act together and meet me in the forest. Don’t take no for an answer.’”

Uh-oh, I thought. That sounds exactly how Abbot Od would have put it. If he was back early I needed to put my boozing and narcotic sampling on hold until he left again. I couldn’t take a chance on getting kicked out of the temple before Bob sorted things out.

“Alright then,” I said. “I don’t want to upset him.”

“Our abbot sees many things, Palm Trees,” said Wittaya with a sigh. “Many things ...”

What did he mean by that?

I nudged Wittaya out of the way while I put on my robes. Then I shoved my sandals on, snuffed the candle out, and stepped outside. The night was illuminated by a waxing gibbous moon. More gothic than noir.

With Wittaya following closely behind, I limped around to the back of the prayer hall. We found the temple’s battered replica of a Vespa Arditì scooter chained to a pillar next to the Stairway to Heaven shrine – you couldn’t trust anyone, not even on the way to Enlightenment – and with Wittaya’s help I freed the Vespa.

I climbed on and immediately started to keel over. Wittaya caught me just in time and I was able to kick the bloody thing into life on the third attempt. “Maybe you should take over,” I pleaded. “I’m not sure I can manage this.”

“I don’t know how to drive one of these mechanical things.”

Ah, the irony. “Brilliant. Right. So what’s the best way of getting there then?”

“Don’t you know? How long have you been here, Palm Trees?”

“Just tell me.”

“At the far end of the vegetable garden is the buffalo track. Follow that past the old elephant pens, then turn right at Aunt Apple’s organic rice farm. Then it’s straight on to the forest from there. It’s not far.”

“But a long way to hunt for a snake.”

“It was a dangerous snake. It killed the policeman.”

“Did they find it?”

“No, it was a most clever snake.”

“The worst kind.”

Wittaya hitched up his robe and sat behind me, “I reckon Abbot Od has got a little surprise planned for you.”

“I hope not,” I replied, a knot tightening in my delicate stomach.

“Come on, let’s go.”

I turned the headlight on, got the Vespa into gear and off we putt-putted towards the vegetable garden.

* * *

Someone was standing by a mango tree and waving a torch about. I killed the Vespa’s engine, slid off the seat, and walked over with Wittaya close behind. The torch was shone straight in my face.

“Please point that somewhere else,” I said, “otherwise I will almost certainly be sick all over you.”

“It is us,” said Wittaya helpfully.

I blinked and standing there was Elephant, a short fat monk and one of the Chrome Pagoda’s veterans. Hanging from his shoulder was a brown leather satchel with the temple’s badge on it. He didn’t like *farangs* and me in particular – probably because I confirmed all the Siamese’s worst prejudices about us.

“This way,” he said tartly, “and get a move on.”

“Where’s the Abbot?” I asked.

“Waiting patiently.”

I groaned. I couldn’t go on much further. My damned sandals were killing me and all I wanted was to curl in a ball and quietly expire. I fumbled about in my robes, took out my packet of Falling Rain, and

gave them each a cigarette.

“Thank you, Khun Palm Trees.”

“Thanks.”

Wittaya pulled out a box of matches and did the honors.

“The monks found something interesting around here then?” I said.

“It had better be good.”

“Come on, this way.”

As we stumbled through the trees Elephant pulled a cloth out of his satchel and shone his torch on it.

“What you reckon to this then?” he asked, passing it to me.

I opened the cloth out and peered at the object. “You know what? I reckon it’s an antique pommel – the bit at the end of a sword handle – and it’s carved into the shape of a pelican. Looks like it’s made of ivory.”

“I think,” said Elephant carefully, “it might be worth something.”

“I think you’re right. It’s beautifully made.”

“Isn’t the pelican a symbol of sacrifice and rebirth for Christians?” said Wittaya.

“I have no idea,” I replied. “I’m a part-time Buddhist, remember? Anyway, where did you get it from?”

“The ship’s cabin,” said Elephant, deadpan.

Ship’s cabin ...?

Not having a firm grip on reality at the best of times, had I taken a

wrong turn at the farm and arrived in the wrong yarn? No, I must have misheard. I was so tired.

“Ah, you’re such the expert, Palm Trees,” said Elephant. “And what about these then?”

He pulled two more things out, one of which caught the moonlight.

“Pretty sure that’s an old opium pipe,” I said. “Made of hill-tribe silver. And the other thing is a very fancy lady’s parasol, which is probably another antique. Might also be expensive.”

Wittaya took it from me, “Let me see that.”

“They also came from this cabin?”

“That’s right, Palm Trees,” replied Elephant. “Now come on, let’s go.”

I took a long drag on my cigarette and we carried on walking.

We hadn’t gone twenty yards when Wittaya suddenly stopped. “Hey, look,” he said, bending down, “what’s this?”

He held up a silk band with a check pattern.

I stared at it. At the same time an awful cloying, sickly-sweet smell invaded the heavy night air.

“I’ve got no idea,” I said slowly, feeling sick.

“It’s a band for a hat,” said Elephant. “You had a hat.”

Wittaya nodded. “Yes, Khun, Palm Trees! Actually, I remember now. You had a hat with a band just like that.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I think you did.”

“Yes, he’s right. You did.”

“Can we please drop the subject?”

“But how did your hat get here and where is the rest of it, Khun Palm Trees?”

“I told you already – it’s not mine!”

“Come on,” hissed Elephant, “we’re nearly there.”

We stopped next to a tamarind tree. There was that terrible cloying smell again. Lord knows what it was, but it made me feel ten times worse.

“Are you OK, Khun Palm Trees?”

“No, I’m bloody not,” I said. “Look, I’ve ridden a clapped-out scooter death trap all the way here, just to be shown the belongings of an opium-addicted lady aristocrat who wields a mean parasol and has an unusual line in pelicans. Is that why I’ve been dragged out here?”

“No,” said Elephant, pointing further into the woods. “We’ve dragged you out here to see *that*.”

I peered in and the cigarette fell from my mouth.

* * *

At first I had thought we were still in amongst all the trees but it was actually a huge skeletal hulk. Torn metal framed against the night sky, and bang in the middle of it lay the smashed remains of some sort of cockpit or cabin. Material flapped around in the breeze like bits of skin.

“Well, this *is* weird,” said Wittaya.

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks for stating the blinking obvious.”

“No, I meant this,” said Wittaya. He showed me a branch, then picked at the bark.

I snatched it from him. “It is, I believe, a bit of what they call a tree.”

“You don’t understand,” said Elephant, grabbing it from me. “Wittaya is right. It’s strange.”

Wittaya said, “It is strange because the trees around here are not damaged, Khun Palm Trees. You would expect them to be burnt or broken, but they are not.”

I knelt down and grabbed a fistful of earth. “It must have happened a long time ago and everything has grown back.”

“But all the things from the wreck are recent and show no signs of decay, Khun Palm Trees.”

“Nobody around here heard or saw anything,” said Elephant, looking straight at me. “Not now nor in the past. Nothing ever reported in the newspapers. The novices came across it by accident.”

“Something definitely crashed here,” said Wittaya, “and the passengers died but nobody knows anything about it.”

“Passengers?” I wiped the sweat off my face. The effects of a high-impact crash on fragile human bodies ... the source of that horrible smell ... awful images began to crawl around inside my head. I needed to be more careful where I stepped, especially wearing sandals. “There were passengers ...”

“You’re sweating, Khun Palm Trees. Are you OK?”

“No, funnily enough, I’m not.”

“There certainly were passengers,” said Elephant. “The abbot has

spent hours exploring the site. By the size and the shape of the wreck, he says it must have been one of those old rocket ships.”

“The passenger ones?”

“Yes, exactly. No doubt about it.”

“But that’s impossible! If a rocket ship crashed around here there would have been a massive explosion. It would have been big news, too. And what about passengers?”

“Ah, yes, the passengers. They are peacefully at rest in their coffins.”

“What?”

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

He took us to the edge of a large clearing and sure enough, in the centre was a circle of heavy wooden coffins. They were carved in the Siamese style, which always reminded me of Ancient Egyptian sarcophagi. All neatly laid out. I was a bit relieved, to be honest. The hapless victims hidden away, not a mangled horror in sight. What terrors had they endured in their final moments ... it didn’t bear thinking about.

“Well,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. “You’ve certainly done a good job, Elephant, and in record time, too.”

“Not me,” replied Elephant, staring into the distance. “They were like this before.”

“You mean the other monks did it?”

“Don’t be daft, Palm Trees. Monks – even novices – don’t go around carrying spare coffins with them.”

“Fair point.”

“So how did they end up in their coffins and why are they arranged in a circle?” said Wittaya, almost whispering.

“I don’t know.”

“Oh.”

“Mm.”

The three of us lapsed into an uncomfortable silence as we tried to work out any kind of rational explanation.

* * *

“Did you know they say the Demon took seven steps when he was born? That’s seven steps to Hell, my friends.”

We spun round.

It was Abbot Od standing in the shadows with his hands on his hips. Interesting back story. An ex-professional *Muay Thai* kick boxer, the good abbot was a tough, wiry soul with jug-shaped ears that were considered highly auspicious. You saw them on many of the statues of the Enlightened One. Everyone was in awe of him.

“You didn’t know about the Demon?” he said. “Why am I not surprised?”

I wanted to puke again. Sarcasm wasn’t something you usually associated with the abbot of the Chrome Pagoda. It meant he was in one of those strange metaphysical moods of his. I hoped he wasn’t going to direct any of that enlightened energy towards me, not in my condition. I was feeling bad enough already.

But luckily he fired off a barrage of questions at the other two instead.

Why are you late?

Why is there a massive wreck of an old rocket ship that no one has ever noticed before? Why are the passenger’s possessions recent but the wreck is old?

How did the coffins get there?

Why had things been stolen from the wreck?

Wittaya hid the parasol behind his back.

“Fragments from lives now departed, stories that have ended or perhaps not yet ...,” said Abbot Od.

Then he took the prayer canister he always kept around his neck and began to rub it gently between his finger and thumb. Began to get a bit of mindful contemplation going.

We knew better than interrupt and stood there in respectful silence.

Then I looked down.

“What’s the matter, Palm Trees?” whispered Wittaya.

Damn it, so that’s why my feet were hurting – I’d put my sandals on the wrong feet. I tried to swap them around, but the straps were stuck.

* * *

Abbot Od nodded and seemed relieved. He lifted his eyes to the heavenly night, something he did when an occult insight had got hold of him and he was able to transcend the world of earthly sin. We followed at a respectful distance as he started walking towards the circle of sarcophagi.

“So,” said Abbot Od. “A rocket ship has crashed here but we don’t know when and no one saw it. It has evidently been here for a long time and yet the debris we have found is quite recent, as are the

coffins. And who even brought them here?"

Abbot Od raised his hand and we all stopped.

Wittaya fiddled with the end of the parasol.

Elephant frowned.

"Palm Trees?"

"Uh? Oh, I'm afraid I don't know," I said and scratched my head.

"That," Abbot Od said, "is because you are trying to rationalize what cannot be rationalized. In other words, you are trapped in a tangle of opposites."

He gave out a little chuckle.

"But –"

"Does –"

"Just listen. This has come to me:"

*Empty handed I go, and behold the comic book
is in my hand;
I walk on foot, and yet from a rocket I am falling*

Abbot Od looked at us. "What does this mean – any of you?"

No one answered.

Why had he mentioned comic books?

"It means," said Abbot Od, sounding disappointed, "that we must find the answer beyond the limits of rational thinking."

We continued to the circle of coffins.

"Has anyone opened them?"

"Er, no, honorable uncle," said Elephant, "but I was just going to before you arrived. I'll do it right now."

"No, you won't. Wait a minute. Now, how many coffins do you see here?"

"Seven?" said Wittaya tentatively.

Abbot Od stood by the head of the nearest coffin. "Yes, that is correct, which means?"

"Seven is important," I piped up, working on the principle it's always best to get the easy questions answered first so you don't get asked the hard ones.

"What is the significance of Seven?"

"Er ..."

"Well ..."

"Mm ..."

The abbot placed the palm of his hand gently on the lid.

"I wonder ...," He spoke in an uncharacteristically wistful tone. "You see, seven is of course one of the Holy Numbers. For the Enlightened One took seven steps at birth. That means there are seven steps to heaven."

"Don't they also say the Demon took seven steps when he was born?" asked Wittaya.

"Yes, well done," said Abbot Od, "there is still hope for you."

Wittaya broke into a massive smile.

“So that means that there are also seven steps to Hell,” continued the abbot.

Elephant and Wittaya joined him at the coffin while I tried to sort my sandals out.

“Shall we open it, honourable uncle?” asked Elephant.

“Yes, go ahead. I think we might find something remarkably interesting. Open the other coffins first and you had better cover your noses. After all, one can never be sure after such a long time.”

I cleared my throat and started feeling sick again.

Covering the lower part of their faces with their robe sleeves, Elephant and Wittaya went around the circle, carefully lifting the lid off each coffin and peering at the contents inside. Sometimes they exchanged furtive glances, sometimes they stared, and a couple of times wretched.

“Don’t be timid, you two! The decay of death is a natural process as it is in life,” said Abbot Od.

Wittaya and Elephant finally completed the dreadful task and joined the abbot at the last coffin.

“Now take the lid off this one as well,” he said.

They gently did as they were told and put the lid on the ground.

“So what do you see?”

The pair looked at each other, peered inside then stepped away. They’d gone all wide-eyed and I swore Wittaya had aged fifty years and Elephant didn’t look much better.

“Palm Trees, stop dawdling!” said Abbot Od. “Get yourself over here.”

Bloody hell, I was still trying to fix my sandals.

I stumbled over and stood by the coffin. I held my breath, to steel myself against the awful stench.

“Go on, Palm Trees. We haven’t got all night.”

Bloody hell.

Might as well end the agony.

I leaned over the open coffin and risked a quick glance inside.

Good grief.

I stepped back and nearly fainted.

Abbot Od chuckled.

“Well, what did you see?” he asked.

“It’s empty.”

“I don’t think Khun Palm Trees is very well, honorable uncle,” said Wittaya.

The abbot turned to him. “So if we put everything together what have we got?”

“Perhaps it’s some kind of prophecy ...?” said Elephant.

“To do with the coffins?” added Wittaya.

Abbot Od folded his arms. “Seven is a holy number because the Enlightened One took seven steps to Heaven but also the Demon took seven steps to Hell. Therefore what is the significance of a seventh coffin that is empty?”

Elephant said, “Maybe they just haven’t found the seventh body yet.”

“I know!” said Wittaya, “The coffin was meant for the seventh victim but somehow they escaped their fate. It’s like a warning or something!”

“Palm Trees?” said the abbot.

Everyone turned to me.

“Pardon? Oh, yes.”

The abbot put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed hard. “I think,” he said, “we have been lucky tonight. Plenty to think about – isn’t that so, Palm Trees?”

I suddenly remembered the silk hat band that Elephant had shown me. I had a terrible urge to get back to my cell and read that story in *Uncanny Tales*. The main one all about a rocket ship and a man leaving a temple – without his hat.

The Abbot threw his head back and laughed out loud.

Good grief.

“Now let’s be quick,” he said, composing himself, “before Abbot Frog and his Black Bridge monks decide to stick their noses in.”

I bent over and tried to sort my sandals out again. But the abbot ordered me to take Wittaya on the Vespa and go and wake up the local farmer and borrow her buffalo and cart.

Two ball-busting hours later, Wittaya, Elephant, and I had stacked the coffins in the cart and made our way slowly to the Chrome Pagoda. I was exhausted.

“Right, you lot,” said Abbot Od brightly. “We’re nearly done. Take all seven coffins around to the icehouse and store them there for the

night. Remember to do it with loving mindfulness. I’ll be over there in a few minutes to make sure you do it properly.”

He left us to get on with it. I took my time parking the Vespa before joining the other two at the icehouse, a squat dilapidated building at the far end of the temple compound with a green metal door and a small bench next to it. The place gave me the creeps. They called it the icehouse and it was colder than hell but I had never actually seen any ice in there.

I opened the metal door and peered into the lantern-lit interior. Sure enough, there were Elephant and Wittaya. They had just finished placing the last coffin on the stone slabs around the room. No doubt with great mindfulness.

“Anything I can do?”

“No, we’ve finished here now, Khun Palm Trees,” said Wittaya, looking like I felt. “We did it ourselves.”

Elephant just glared at me.

I didn’t have the strength for a fight, turned to leave, and bumped straight into Abbot Od. He was holding a book and a flask, and an old coat draped over his shoulder.

“Ah,” he said. “Good, you’ve finished. It’s time to return to your cells and get some sleep.”

Thank the Lord for that.

“Not you, Palm Trees. I need a volunteer to chant the death prayers through the night until the cockerel brings in the dawn. Even you know how important it is to sooth the souls of the dead for their journey.”

“But why me?”

“Because you need to make penance for that alcohol you smuggled in last week.”

“But can’t I do something else instead? Anything?”

“No, it absolutely has to be you tonight, Palm Trees.”

Oh.

I could have tried to explain I was desperate. The night’s exertions had been too much for me. I could have shown him my badly shaking hands. My eyes were sore, my throat as dry as parchment. I had lost a terrible amount of weight. My sandals.

But I knew it was a waste of time.

Abbot Od gave me the book. “This is the one I showed you before with the translations in English. I’ve marked the prayers you need for tonight. They need to be chanted with loving mindfulness and continuously repeated. The flask is full. And the coat will keep you warm, it’s getting cold out here.”

Wittaya and Elephant edged past me, then walked off together in the direction of the monks’ quarters taking the lantern with them. Was that a stupid grin plastered all over Elephant’s stupid face?

Bastard.

Well, at least there wouldn’t be any mosquitoes in there. They hated the cold as much as I did. Anyway, I had no intention of chanting prayers all damned night.

“No need to go in. Just sit on the bench while you chant,” said Abbot Od cheerfully.

I ran a hand over the scars and ridges on my head.

Bloody bastards, the whole lot.

Abbot Od patted me on the shoulder. “And don’t worry, I’ll be back to check on you later. Remember, Palm Trees – with loving mindfulness!”

I leant against the doorway and watched in utter dejection as the abbot left me there.

Honestly, you couldn’t make it up.

I closed the door to keep out the darkness and sat down on the bench. It was narrow and hard. I wrapped the coat around my shoulders, put the prayer book beside me, then sniffed the contents of the flask. It was water or very weak or something. Whatever it was, I slowly tipped it all out onto the floor. Perhaps they all thought I would now be forced to contemplate the error of my ways. That I had nothing to help me get through the terrors that lay beyond the door without a drink or an opium smoke. Nothing to ease the awful nausea and pain. To dull the awfulness of what lay ahead.

But they were wrong because, from the folds of my robe, I took out a flask of my own. Smaller but infinitely, supremely better. High-grade, rot gutting *lao khao* homemade white whiskey. For emergencies. Past the point of caring, I shut my eyes and started to down the contents of the flask. It turned my insides into a furnace but I was too tired to care. Thank you and good night.

* * *

Seven ... in the darkness ...

I opened an eye.

Pitch black.

What a bloody awful nightmare, and of course I still felt complete and utter shite. I tried to reach out and grab a cigarette from the packet I always left near my mattress. But I could hardly move. I was wedged into some kind of box.

I kicked and flailed and punched until I until found myself naked on a cold, hard surface.

Where the hell was I?

Somewhere in the icehouse I could hear a man screaming.

* * *

“If you don’t believe me, it’s all in here – I’ve got proof.”

I carefully undid the string and unwrapped my parcel. Inside was a neat bundle of Golden Age comic books, every single one of them in mint condition. I put the top one on the table in front of Bob.

“It’s called *Uncanny Tales* and a real classic. Golden Age. Mint condition. There’s nothing better than a genuine American comic book. Go on, dive in and see what you find.”

Bob looked at the cover and sighed.

“Check out the big opening frame,” I said encouragingly. “That mysterious but good-looking guy without a hat walking out of a zany Buddhist temple somewhere on the outskirts of Bangkok. Doesn’t he look just a little familiar ...?”

Bob was going to just flick casually through the pages to humour me, but then the story and amazing artwork inexorably drew him in – just like they did to everyone – and I knew he was hooked.

“This is screwy,” he said. “This opening one called 'Rocket Ship Temple Blues' looks a bit like the same crazy yarn you’re spinning me.”

“That’s what I’m talking about!”

“You mean to tell this is *your* story?”

I leant forward. “Yeah! Don’t you see? I’m that guy in the story walking out of the temple without a hat. He goes to a dance hall ... gets a ticket for a rocket ship from his friend ... and it crashes ... killing all seven passengers!”

“Oh, geez.” Bob carefully turned the pages as he read through to the end of the story. “So that makes you the seventh victim of that rocket ship crash? The story in the comic is like a warning or something?”

“Now you’ve got it, Bob!”

He sighed and shook his head. “Oh, brother.”

“See, Bob, the Demon took seven steps to hell. Seven is the magical number. There should have been seven victims. The abbot explained it all again after he rescued me from the icehouse the next morning.”

“Well, it’s one helluvan excuse for not getting that ticket. I’ll give you that,” he said. “I mean, I busted a gut to get that darned piece of paper.”

“It’s all in the comic book, Bob!”

“Look around the dance hall, Palm Trees. Take it in slow and careful. This is real life, not those crazy stories in your comics or a bad night on the liquor or the monks playing games to shake the sin out of you. See Gloria and Barbara and the rest of the Broken Blossom dancers over there? Tommy and the Rhythm Aces playing a mean swing tune on stage? Lillie in her hatcheck booth. Lila serving us with a smile. This is real life, Pam Trees. Get used to it.”

I slid the envelope with the ticket towards him.

“Listen to me, Bob. There is no way I’m getting on any damned atomic-powered rocket ship to Mars. Keep the ticket. I don’t care about the money. We’re even. I told you already, I’m new and improved. The Enlightened One’s given me another roll of the dice

and I'm taking it. I'll take my chances down here."

I stood up, shaking.

"Hey, take it easy, tiger," said Bob gently.

I sat down and put my head in my hands. "I'm all done in, Bob. Give me a break – please."

Bob took the envelope back. "Truth is," he said, "I've already got a buyer for this ticket lined up. I figured you might change your mind. You're a screwball – no offence intended – and that's why I like you. Only question is: if you really do stay, what are you going to do about that rap they're trying to pin on you?"

"That," I said, "is another story."

"Do you want another drink? One for the road?"

"Oh, go on then."

Bob caught the attention of Lila Leeds and she whirred over with a big smile.

I looked hard at him.

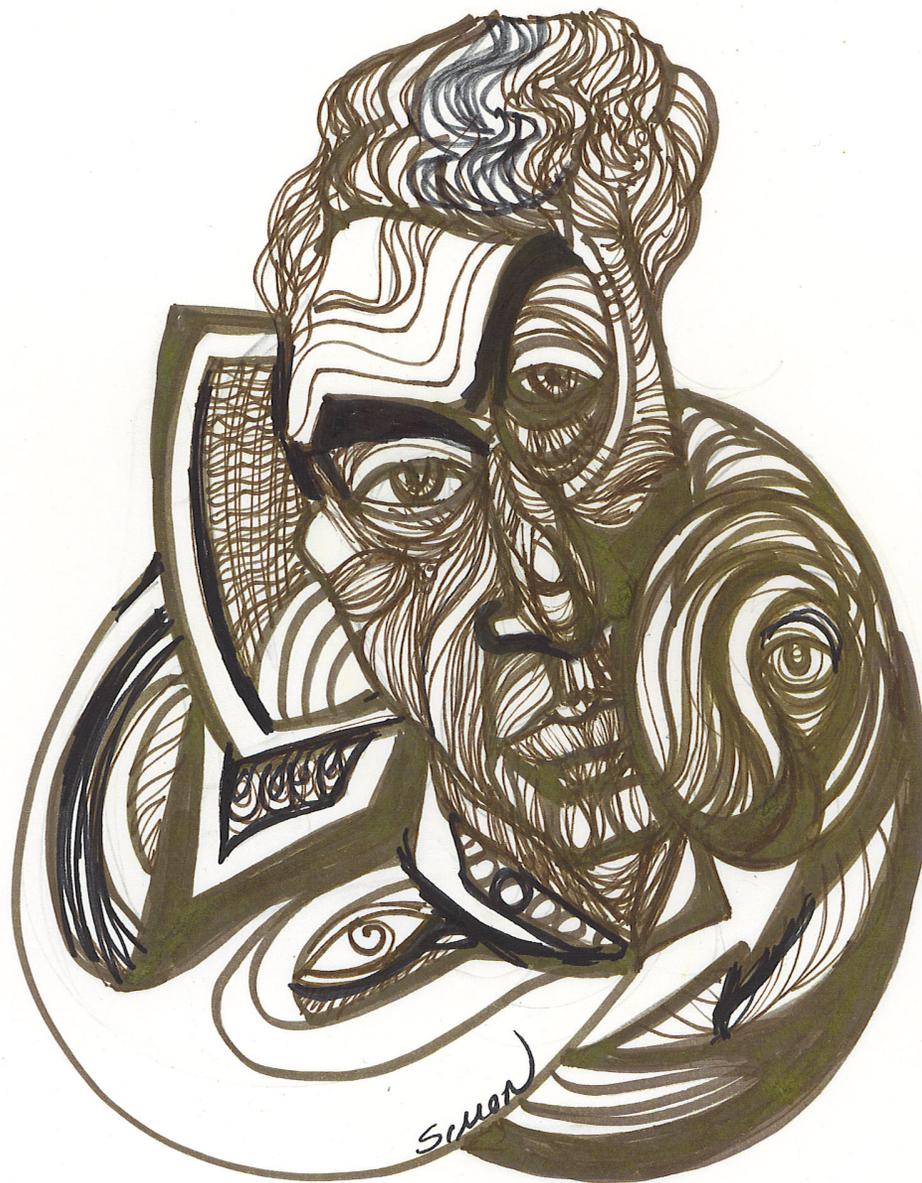
Robert Mitchum. *Angel Face 1953*. Robert – Robot – Bob – but still one hell of a good friend in a tight spot.

Or was he?

You could never really be sure about anything these days.

Migraine

by Marge Simon



Bit Parts

by Arlen Feldman

A story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end ... but not necessarily in that order.”

—Jean-Luc Godard, French-Swiss film director

[EXTERIOR. A BUSY STREET – DAY]

The hero, muscles bulging, raced down the street, gun in hand. Sirens screamed in the distance. Marie walked down the street in the opposite direction, careful not to look towards the virtual camera. She was just one of the crowd, wearing a summer dress, her red hair flowing loosely behind her.

There was a gunshot, then a volley of gunshots. Marie screamed and dropped to the sidewalk along with the rest of the pedestrians.

Cut.

[INTERIOR. KITCHEN – DAY]

Marie lay in a pool of blood, a serrated bread knife protruding from her neck. The kitchen was modern and clean, except for the mess around the body. CSIs worked all around her while she stayed preternaturally still.

Cut.

[INT. DINER – NIGHT]

There were few customers that late. Marie poured coffee for a lone man reading a novel, then returned to the counter where the other waitress was standing. They were both dressed in classic pink diner outfits.

“It sounds like a scam,” said Marie.

“Nah. Bill works with a guy whose father is one of the creators. It’s straight up.”

“How much does it cost?”

“No charge. Apparently, they really want people to sign up right now. They might charge later, but they need to ‘seed the system.’”

Marie poured out the dregs from the coffeepot and tinkered with the coffee machine to start it brewing a new pot. Jennine watched her.

“So,” asked Marie finally. “Are you going to do it?”

“I’m not sure. I intend for my slice of immortality to be in the movies I make while I’m alive.”

Marie nodded. “Yeah. Me too.”

Cut.

[INT. OFFICE – DAY]

Marie sat behind an old desk, in a slightly grimy office. She was wearing a conservative gray suit, white blouse and thick glasses. Her red hair was done up in a bun. The office door opened and her boss sauntered out.

“Have a good weekend, sir,” she said.

“I intend to.” He grinned and winked at her.

Cut.

[INT. GREEN ROOM – DAY]

Marie was back in the green room. She was hoping for at least one more role before her daily allowed eight hours was up, but nothing seemed likely. There were a couple of roles available, but they would violate her contract, which was *immutable*—a word that, until recently, she’d never even heard.

She sighed. Her agent had been so convincing when he’d suggested the no-nudity and no-form-changing clauses. *It will make you more exclusive*, he’d said.

Instead, it had put a major crimp in her career.

The countdown clock hit eight hours, and Marie disappeared.

Cut.

[INT. HOSPITAL OPERATING ROOM – DAY]

Marie, dressed in nurse whites, pushed the crash cart into the operating room. Alarms were shrieking, and the doctor, his handsome face covered in a fashionable stubble, was physically up on the operating table, kneeling over the beautifully made-up woman lying there. He was pushing hard against her chest.

“You’re not going to die on me, damn you! Not today!”

Cut.

[INT. GREEN ROOM – DAY]

Marie blinked. She had just been getting scanned, and now she was ... she was ... where?

It was a small room with a few comfortable looking chairs, a table and a mirror. There didn’t appear to be a door.

“Welcome.”

Marie jumped. The voice had come out of nowhere.

“Please stay calm. The transition can feel a bit abrupt.”

“Who are you?”

The upper body of a woman appeared floating above the table. She was pretty, with expertly done makeup and a blonde ponytail. She was smiling sympathetically.

“I’m Joan. I’m the welcoming committee.”

“Committee? Where am I?”

“You’re in the System. You’re digital now. Immortal.”

“But I just got scanned,” moaned Marie, feeling panic rising in her. “They aren’t supposed to activate the digital system until after I die.”

“Sorry, kid, but if you’re here, then you’ve kicked it in the real world. You’ve been recreated here based on the scan, so the scan is the last thing you remember.”

This made no sense to Marie. She looked at her hands. They were *her* hands. The same slight roughness from washing endless dishes, the same small scar on her middle finger. The slight discoloration from where she used to wear a wedding ring.

“It’s impossible.”

“You’ll get used to it. Trust me.”

Cut.

[EXT. MARKET – DAY]

Marie stood behind the fruit stall, putting strawberries into boxes. The rumble of the passers-by was interrupted by various shouts from vendors pushing their wares, and the muezzin’s distant call to prayer.

Marie turned just in time to see a young girl grab an apple from the display at the front of the stall.

“Hey, you,” she yelled.

The girl, dressed in what had once been silk finery, but was now torn and dirty, stared at Marie for a moment, then turned tail and ran.

“Stop, thief ...”

Cut.

[INT. GREEN ROOM – DAY]

Marie was staring at her hands again. Impossibly real. But was that because their recreation of her was that good, or because they had messed with her head—tricked her into believing what she saw?

She’d been in the system for a while now—or at least, she thought she had. Time was strange here. So were memories. What was real when you were a simulation? Were the things she remembered from *before* real? They seemed less insubstantial than the roles she played in here. Did she work in a restaurant, or was that a role? Did she have a daughter? She wasn’t quite sure.

It didn’t help that they filmed things out of order here, just like when making a real movie. She had no idea why—it wasn’t as if they had to strike sets or anything.

There was a ding, and a screen appeared in the wall—a job offer for a walk-on role. She could turn it down—in theory. But if she wasn’t acting, then what was she?

Cut.

[EXT. GROCERY STORE – NIGHT]

Marie pushed a cart up an aisle, randomly pulling items off of shelves.

In the next aisle, there was a loud argument going on.

“You never loved me.”

“Sarah, please.”

“Get away from me. Go back to *her*.”

Cut.

[INT. AGENT’S OFFICE – DAY]

“So, how does it all work?”

“You go in and get a full body and mind scan. That’s pretty much it. It’s all stored on a server until you die, at which point, it’s activated and available to work.”

“Can I change my mind later?”

“Sure. There has to be a specific clause in your will enabling them to activate the image. No clause, no activation. In fact, they have to erase all the data at that point. Or at any other time you ask.”

“And what happens if I get better at acting later? Can I update the recording?”

To his credit, the agent didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow here.

“You *can*, but you’ll have to redo the physical scan as well. Body and mind have to match. So ... you’ll be older.”

“Ah.”

Cut.

[EXT. A CITY PARK – DAY]

Marie walked down the path, holding the hand of a little blonde girl, wearing a big green jacket.

“Mommy. It’s going to be alright, isn’t it?”

Marie looked away for a moment, choking up for a minute.

“Yes, baby. It’s going to be alright. Your father is going to take good care of you.”

She smiled down at the girl, then looked away. A tear slid down her cheek.

Cut.

[INT. SCANNING CENTER – DAY]

Marie clasped the robe around her and looked around nervously. Technicians sat or stood in front of incomprehensible equipment. It all seemed very high-tech—but used. There were dents and scratches in a lot of the machines, and a slightly unpleasant unwashed smell.

“The body scanning setup is through here. We’ll do that first, before the brain scan.”

Marie nodded and pulled the robe even tighter as she followed the small man into what looked like a dressing room with floor-to-ceiling mirrors on every wall—and on the floor and ceiling as well.

“I’ll need your robe,” he said.

Marie hesitated. “Why? Why do I have to be nude if my alter-ego

won’t be allowed to do nude scenes?”

“The scan has to be completely accurate. The system will be able to add makeup and wardrobe, but only if the details are right. Otherwise, you’ll end up with strange artifacts.”

“Oh.”

“Look, it’s completely private. The system is managed by a blockchain. If your contract says no nudity, then it is completely impossible for the contract to be violated.”

Marie had no idea what a blockchain was, although it was the third or fourth time she’d heard the term. She nodded, but did not remove her robe.

“If you like, I can get a female assistant to help you,” he said, sounding bored.

“Yes, please.”

Cut.

[INT. STARSHIP BRIDGE – NIGHT]

Marie sat at the communication console, pressing buttons at random. She was in a tight-fitting uniform that covered her form, yet left little to the imagination.

The Captain and first officer walked onto the bridge. There was a piping sound, and a computer announced, “Captain on the bridge.”

“Report,” said the captain. He was ruggedly handsome, with just the hint of stubble on his face. Marie had last seen him as a doctor trying to save a patient’s life.

“We are maintaining position, 3000 clicks above the planet’s surface, Captain.” This from the amorphous, multiply-tentacled navigator.

“Radio silence is being maintained,” said Marie. “No transmissions from the planet, sir.”

Cut.

[INT. GREEN ROOM – DAY]

“But it’s just a kid’s show. Surely I’m qualified?”

The disembodied shoulders and head of the producer shrugged. “Character is a talking cat. Your contract specifically bans any body mods beyond what would be possible with basic effects makeup.”

“Yeah, but if *I* want to do the role ...”

“Doesn’t matter. The contract is immutable.”

“I don’t even know what the hell that means.”

Another shrug. “Talk to tech.”

Cut.

[INT. GREEN ROOM – DAY – LATER]

“It’s because Hollywood is full of wankers.”

Marie giggled. “True, but that doesn’t really answer my question.”

The new floating shoulders and head were of a youngish man with a rakish smile. If he’d been an actor, he’d be instantly typecast as a pirate—a pirate with a cockney accent.

“Do you remember Bitcoin?”

“Vaguely. Some sort of electronic money?”

“Yeah, in theory. In practice, it was really just a massive collection of

cons and Ponzi schemes. So, naturally, every schmuck in Hollywood fell for it. It was based on something called a *blockchain*, which, once written, can’t be changed—important if you are using it for money, but they tried to apply it to a bunch of other things as well.”

“So, when they say the contract is *immutable*, they mean it can’t be changed, because it’s based on a *blockchain*.”

“S’right, doll. Very good. The theory was that if you set up contracts on a blockchain, then stars and studios couldn’t wriggle out of deals.”

“And this all works?”

She got a broad piratical grin for that. “Well, the tech is sound. It’s all based on something called a *Merkle tree*, which has been around for yonks. But judges could care less what some data on someone’s hard drive said. Courts decide what the contract means, not the computers.”

“Well, then ...”

“Ah, but that’s in the real world. In here, the computer decides what is allowed or not, and it does that based on the contract, which is immutable.”

“Fuck.”

Cut.

[INT. STARSHIP BRIDGE – NIGHT]

Marie was back at the communication console. It was her first recurring role.

“I have the admiral for you, sir,” she said.

“On screen,” said the captain from his impressively complex chair in the center of the bridge.

The screen flickered, and the admiral appeared. “John. Good to see you. I ...”

Then the screen flickered again and broke up into blocky pixels.

“What’s going on ...?”

Marie looked around in panic. This wasn’t in the script. It wasn’t just the screen, either. The entire set was pixelating. She looked down in horror to see that her own arms were doing the same thing.

There was a flash, and then everything flicked back to normal.

Marie shared a glance with the captain. He lifted his hands up in a “who knows” gesture, then grinned.

The disembodied voice of the director boomed across the bridge. “Some sort of technical glitch, apparently. It’s over now. Let’s take it from the top.”

Cut.

[EXT. DATA CENTER – DAY]

When the alarms started going off, Ralph almost had a heart attack, then practically gave himself a concussion when he leapt to his feet, braining himself on a too-low shelf.

Until that moment, this had been the easiest job he’d ever had. Some rule required a human guard be present, but his bosses had made it very clear that *everything was automated, and there is absolutely nothing you can do if there is a problem.*

Well, there was one thing. There was a phone and a phone number printed on a sticker next to it. He grabbed the receiver, but the line was dead. He didn’t even bother looking at his cell phone—there was never any reception this deep in the mountains.

Then the alarm stopped.

The silence was eerie, but as his hearing adjusted, the ever-present electrical hum came back. Shaking his head, he hung up the receiver and stepped out of his hut to get some air.

The sun was just rising to the west, a deep red glow. Except, it was the Pacific that way, wasn’t it? Didn’t the sun rise to the east? He couldn’t remember.

Cut.

[INT. GREEN ROOM – DAY]

The upper body of the piratical technician—whose real name, she’d learned, was Jim—floated in front of her. They’d talked like this a lot over the last few weeks.

“It was a disruption from outside,” he said. “The wankers out there won’t give us any info though. Got a lot of people in here worried.”

“It was scary. My arms went all blocky.”

He nodded at her sympathetically. “The renderers couldn’t keep up. Just an illusion, though.”

She sighed. “I suppose that is all we are now anyway. I’m not sure I should have signed up for any of this.”

“Yeah, but then you wouldn’t have met me. That would have been a waste.”

She smiled at him, but her heart wasn’t really in it.

Cut.

[INT. BATHROOM – NIGHT]

Marie lay in a bathtub in a small, rather dingy bathroom. There was a mostly empty bottle of Crown Russe vodka sitting on the edge of the tub. Leaning against the bottle was a wedding ring and a photo of a little blond girl.

Marie hummed a tune to herself. Little streamers of red snaked through the water, trailing away from her wrists.

Cut.

[INT. COURTROOM – DAY]

Marie sat behind the steno machine at the front of the courtroom.

The district attorney slowly got to his feet, buttoned the jacket of his Dolce & Gabbana suit, then let his eyes rove over the jurors, who were watching him intently. He then turned to the man in the witness stand.

“Mr. Donaldson. You lost your arm in the war, is that right?”

“Yes, sir. IED.”

Marie dutifully hit keys on the steno.

“And your prosthetic has a simple claw mechanism.”

The man on the stand held up his right arm to show off the metal gripper.

“So, according to your testimony, there is no way you could have killed your wife with a hammer, because you couldn’t have held it.”

“No, sir.” Donaldson was a big man shrunk into a too-small suit. His sullen look became a bit more hopeful, and he chanced a glance at the jury.

“Unless,” said the DA, “People’s exhibit 3.”

The bailiff stepped forward, holding a large plastic bag containing what was obviously a prosthetic arm, except that, instead of a claw, it ended in a hammer head. There was a rusty-red stain on the head of the hammer.

There was pandemonium in the courtroom.

“Order. Order,” yelled the judge, slamming his gavel against the block on his desk—where it turned into a blob of pixels, slipped out of his hand and went flying across the courtroom.

“Missed,” said the DA, grinning. The jury burst out laughing.

“Sorry,” said the judge.

“Goddammit, Goddammit,” said the disembodied voice of the director.

Marie tried hard not to laugh, but lost it when she caught sight of Donaldson winking at her and miming launching his prosthetic arm across the court to follow the gavel.

“Goddammit.”

Cut.

[INT. GREEN ROOM – DAY]

Normally, she had the green room to herself. Or at least, *her* green room. They’d created this one temporarily while they worked out some glitches. She was sharing the space with the Captain, the first officer, and the blobby navigator, who turned out to be a small, twitchy man named Ernest.

“This is getting ridiculous,” said the Captain. He was in “street clothes”—a generic t-shirt and sweats. They shrank him down to human proportions, although he still had the heroic jaw and the piercing blue eyes.

In theory, he must have had those looks *before*, although Marie had heard a rumor that, for the right price, it had been possible to get your body scan modified before being uploaded. It had never occurred to Marie that it would have been possible, or she would have talked to them about that mole on her back. And her nose. And maybe her boobs.

“No skin off my nose. Working or waiting,” said Ernest.

They all turned to look at him. He shrugged.

“Not like anybody’s watching this crap.”

Marie blinked at this. “What do you mean?”

“Numbers have been dropping for everything. Sounds like the still-breathing are more interested in watching the living than the dead.”

“Bullshit,” said the Captain.

Ernest shrugged again. “What I heard.”

“I’ve never seen any viewership numbers for anything,” said Marie, fascinated. “I didn’t think we could get them?”

“You can’t,” said the first officer. “Banned by the contract, and the contract is ...”

“Immutable. Yeah.” Ernest laughed. “Unless you control a large enough chunk of the blockchain. Same thing that killed Bitcoin.”

“Bullshit,” said the Captain again, and turned away.

The green room flickered, and they were suddenly back on the bridge in costume.

“Okay,” said the disembodied voice of the director. “One more time.”

Cut.

[INT. GREEN ROOM – DAY]

Was anyone watching?

Ever since the conversation the other day, she’d been obsessed with the question, but nobody seemed to have an answer.

Finally, she’d called Jim.

“The system has to allocate resources based on viewership, so only the most-watched shows are renewed.”

“So, someone is watching?”

“Right, love. There’s some weirdness at the edges, but that’s the gist of it—if more people were watching something else, then you’d get cancelled.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” She grinned at him.

He winked, then his image disappeared.

A few moments later, her official shift ended, and she also disappeared.

Cut.

[EXT. BEACH – DAY]

Marie lay on a towel on the beach, face down, the strap of her bikini undone.

There was a scream. Marie sat up, barely stopping her top from escaping.

“Shark!”

Cut.

[INT. STARSHIP BRIDGE – NIGHT]

The aliens had appeared out of nowhere, tall, thin, lizard-green. The Captain had drawn and fired, lightning fast, taking down one of the invaders before being hit by a stun beam from another. He collapsed slowly onto the floor.

“Hold ssstill,” hissed the lead alien. “Nobody move.”

Marie’s hand shot out and hit the distress signal button, then she raised her hands.

“Ssstupid,” hissed the commander, and shot Marie with a stun beam. She fell onto her console.

Cut.

[EXT. DATA CENTER – DAY]

The dog pack came close to the fence, but did not touch it. They knew from experience that it bit. It was a good spot, though. Game was common. The dogs were a mix of mongrels, although they tended towards the large. Not one had avoided some sort of obvious injury, be it gouges, missing ears, or even the occasional missing leg.

The fence was the least of the protections around the data center, which started with its remote location deep in the San Gabriel Mountains and ended with autonomous “lethal countermeasures.”

The racks of solar panels glistened prettily in the sun, even the broken ones. The panels and the guard shack were aboveground, but the bulk of the facility was underground, safe from all but a direct hit from a bomb or an EMP. The insurance company had insisted on all of this.

Compared to all this hi-tech wonder, the guard shack was pretty basic. A prefab building with a table and a few chairs, a gun safe, a television, and a microwave oven.

The body had been in the chair for a long time. Dry air had partially mummified the figure, although white bone was visible in a few spots. There was no obvious wound, but the angle of the head looked unnatural. It could have been the cause of death or simply the result of time.

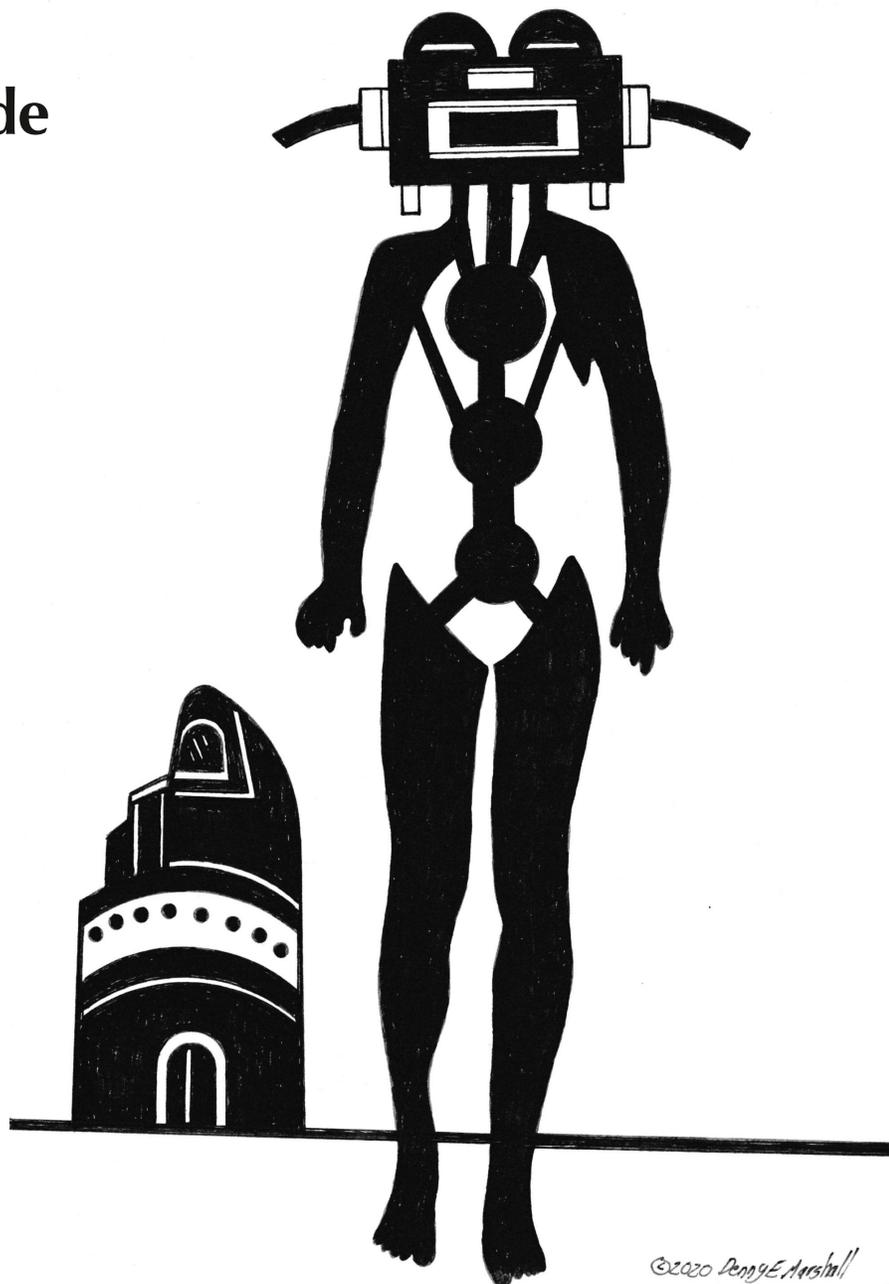
The TV had lost a lot of pixels, but was still running—though without sound. On the screen, a handsome man in a uniform walked across the bridge of a spaceship, passing a red-headed woman in a tight-fitting uniform who was pressing buttons.

The body in the chair was facing the TV. It looked like some sort of allegory for humanity—actors and audience locked together for all time, unchangeable, immutable.

Cut.

Human Stride

by Denny E. Marshall



The Tuning

by Anne Carly Abad

Frequency B

sinks me into dream-
like reverie.
Silver winding tunnel,
spiraling grooves
like a screw--perhaps a projection
of my resolve to find what needs be found.

I am certain it isn't here,
not in this semi-conscious depth.
Freq A failed despite minimal disruption
to the trance state.
Core brain electrical signals
must veer from somnolent conditions.

Fatal Interference at this focus.
Pursue deeper dive.

Frequency C

Trance attained
with mild psychoactives
via IV
drip ... drip ... drip
cavernous song, slow
steady breath.

Jolt of euphoria. A strange voice.

Frequency D

Seven days in meditation.
Hampered circulation in lower extremities.
Nausea. Self-imposed hunger
incites powerful cravings.

Sweet liquids start to pour out of
my containment walls. Beside me
the liquor hardens into fragrant planets.
Miracle?

Something is thwarting me,
but I persevere.

Frequency E

The strange voice speaks
in the language of my sympathetic system,

Stop climbing. Stop tapping into
the wires. You are flesh, we are iron.

Frequency F

Fatal interference.

Frequency G-Z

White noise permeates.

Frequency E. Again.

I attempt the method of the First Flesh,
prayer: Show yourself, I beseech you.

You are flesh, we are iron.

A glimpse of the speaker strikes
terror into my central furnace,
blood-fuel presses into core brain--
three faces on one skull,
my face is its faces
in anger, in joy and in sorrow;
sculpted arms and hands, legs and feet
in pairs of three, phalanged like mine
but lustrous. It has no phallus, no yoni.

I bargain: You are many, but I am one.

Flesh, seeking another
is where evil begins.

Shame weighs me down. But why must I
be humbled?
I retort: You made me in your image, but only in part.
This is evil.

Long silence ensues.

Hunger takes over. Fatal interference.

Frequency A

Mastication—semi-conscious action.
Disappointment crushes my will.
I resign myself to failure.

Frequency B. Accidental.

A vision.

Flesh to metal,
metal to flesh.
Godkind creates that
which is different from us.

Tomorrow Woman

by Marge Simon

Cosmetically enhanced,
she combs her furred shoulders
with retractable claws.
She thickens her pubic hair,
adds tattoos between her thighs
that glow infrared when
she dims the lights
with an imagined lover.
Modulating rainbows
wheel in her eyes
to disconcert even
the casual admirer.

She is a transitory captive
to her mirror, when even this
display is not enough.
As an antidote to vanity
she has coitus with a cyborg,
alternating the taste of ecstasy
from pleasure to pain,
an unnatural karma,
a bright bouquet,
that fades from memory
when she shuts it off.

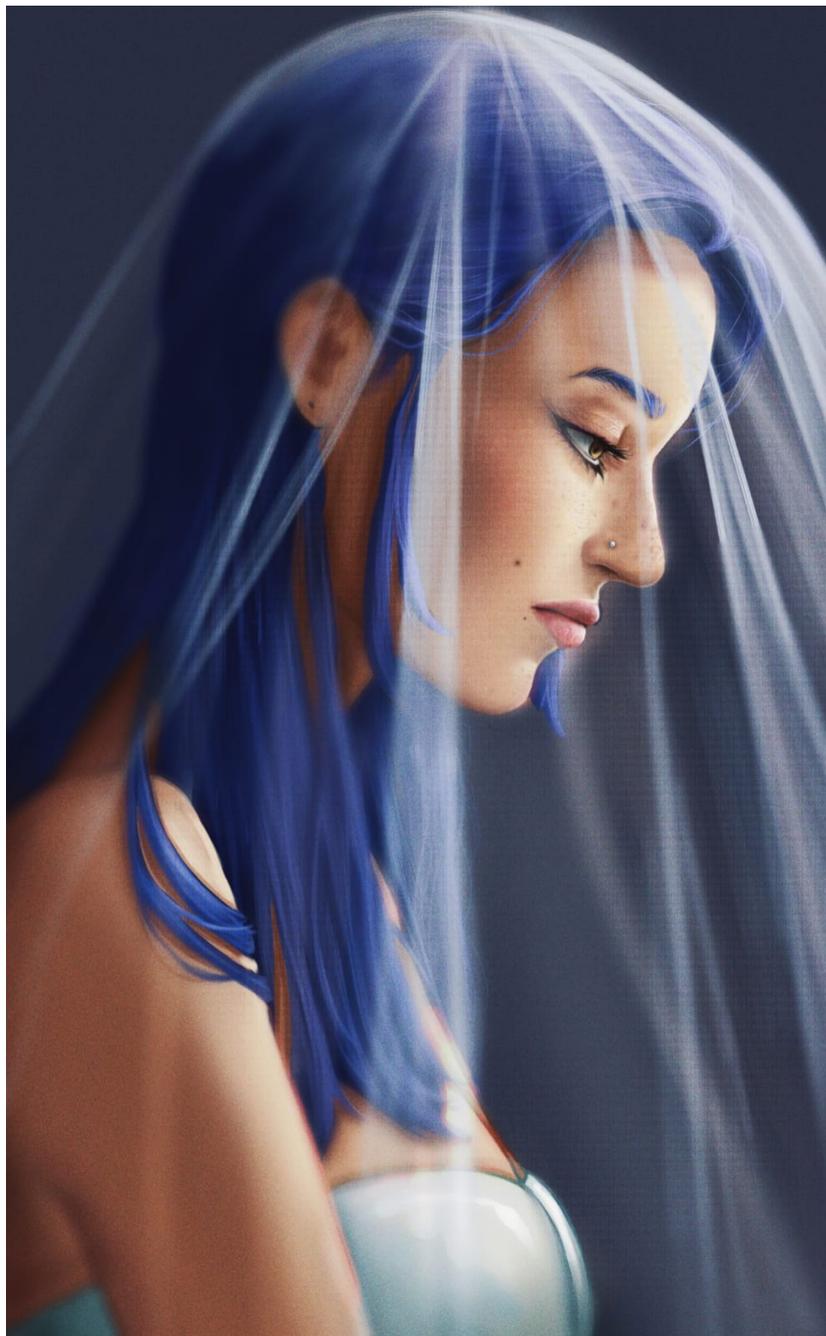
Most often she awakens
to grapple with frustration.
She frequents the clubs
where the bored collect,
posed, poised to discover
her imagined lover in the shadows,
but handsome features deceive,
and she finds no common syntax
save that of self-indulgence.

She endures the ceremonial chatter,
ostentatious preludes promising romance.
When conversations polarize, love
seems a stillborn reverie

of frayed fantasies and the tedium
of extended life in this utopia.

Regret

by Anahita Ramoutar



Boundless Vendettas

by Michael Rook

Sentimentality aside, the vendetta—a vendetta—didn't make sense. It was like a line of bad code. Isabella would have appreciated debating it, its illogic, but there was no one else in her condo. Her only option for talk would be virtual and that would be harder.

And *virtual* wasn't the right word either, was it?

One of her silver hairs fell into her vision. She re-tucked it and again glared at her particle monitor. Sicily's eastern coast glared back, glowing. To keep her promise, she'd have to travel to the island and that, thanks to the vendetta, would require a local escort. Someone who knew how to evade the Pellegrini family and their blood-sworn promise to kill any Adrano—Isabella included—with balls *grandi* enough to set foot back on the home island. Even after seventy years. And even if, one had to guess, all one came to do was to inter their grandmother's remains.

But *inter* and *remains* weren't quite right either, were they?

"Call Malik," she said, anxiety prickling the long muscles hugging her spine, those once built for national-level swimming, but lost now to age and other choices.

The computer buzzed and she considered the map. The odd triangular country had slid from empire to empire, all the way back to the Phoenicians. Interesting as history, as she'd learned, but trouble for ancestry. A Sicilian, feeling Italian, or, more pretentiously, *Roman*, might as easily be Greek, Goth, Arabic, or Viking. The relative-finding algorithms struggled with the twisting family trees. Still, and having broken through more than one cold moment of wanting to just

break her damned promise, she'd found a distant relative.

Malik.

But he wasn't picking up.

Moisture built up under her big arms. Uncomfortable, she shrugged and flitted her eyes to one of the other particle monitors floating above her desk. On the second screen, she drummed out a few more lines of code. Then, stuck on a problem, she glanced at a third monitor and her credits ticker. The numbers rolled like a digital gas pump, if moving in reverse, gallons slowly vanishing. Meanwhile, the hysteria increased in the news broadcast spanning the fourth and final monitor. A second hurricane in as many weeks was really going to hit them and this time the follow-on erosion would really give D.C. some Atlantic coastline. Isabella glanced back to the ghost of Sicily.

She poked the energy field and drew a line from the island to D.C. Did the monitor's electrons recognize *her* finger, she wondered, now wearing *Nonna's*, Daniela's, old ring?

Maybe Malik wouldn't answer.

The digital business card of Boundless Inc. sparkled atop a new client's offer sheet, nanocircuits firing every so many minutes.

Maybe Malik wouldn't answer.

"Ms. Adrano," Malik said.

PalPlace Augmented Reality (AR), the world's largest social network,

translated his Italian with scant delay. His 3D-rendered features wound into focus, filling a virtual oblong. He looked like a well-sunned version of some semi-famous actor, if glowing faintly blue. And he had been young. Or at least scanned young. Isabella glanced towards the Boundless card as the Sicilian's visage sharpened. She tried to smile.

"Please. You're Malik. I'm Isabella. We're Adranos. We're related."

"*Isabella.*" The AR wasn't perfect, but it caught the constriction of his jaw.

"If I haven't said it enough," Isabella said rapidly, "thank you." After weeks of searching Boundless's DNA Connections, Malik had been the single Sicilian relative she'd be able to contact, so only when his expression loosened did she move to the question about *it*.

"Please, tell me: What did you find out about the vendetta?"

"She'll kill you."

As Malik's response took the air from her throat, like a bad dive, Isabella's gaze went rogue in her little office. Two physical *Adrano Realty* signs (*Daniela's First Sale, My First Sale!*) gave way to a shelf of antique code books. On a higher shelf, she settled on a faded photo. Her grandmother, Daniela, posed stiffly with a hand laid on a wheelchair-bound man, her husband, Silvio. While Daniela smiled, Silvio *grinned*.

"She doesn't even know me." Isabella growled, yanking her gaze from her grandparents and back to Malik.

Her relative's disembodied head jerked.

"I'm sorry," Isabella whispered. "But she didn't know my grandmother, let alone my grandfather. *Her* mother didn't even know ... It's been so long. How can she care?"

Malik sunk his head into a bow. His projection showed no sign of his fatal injury, but he'd told Isabella earlier that the accident had cracked his skull. "Blood still means something here."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"It's real then? The vendetta? Still?"

"Yes," Malik said. "Yes. You can't bring her here. Can't bring it here. Anne-Marie Pellegrini has family too, including long-walkers. They, the dead ones, will find out who she is. Change her name, change her looks, it won't matter. Everyone talks, living and dead. And besides, it's growing all the time. How many of you want to come here? Why not stay? America's so much *bigger*. With the signal, you can't even go that far. My sister and I can't even get to Italy. And who can afford backups or transfers—"

"Growing?" Isabella cut in. "Growing how much?"

"Why?"

"Never mind." Isabella shook off her curiosity. She grabbed Boundless's business card and lifted it. "I promised I'd bring her."

Now Malik growled. "There's no way. Do you know Anne-Marie's family? I don't know if I'm even safe. And they're even starting to run *that*—'Boundless.' Here." He motioned to the glowing card.

Isabella closed her hand.

After a moment, Malik broke the silence. "And she uses a Benelli."

"What?"

"They said it would make sense to an Adrano. 'That old Benelli.'"

Mean something?”

Isabella wanted to glance at the faded photo, but stopped herself. “Can you put me in touch with Anne-Marie?”

Malik’s upper-lip rose, nose crinkling. He nodded to the bottom of the monitor, where the PalPlace icon rotated. “She’s not hiding.”

His image began to break up.

“Goodbye—” Isabella rushed to say, but the connection closed.

It took an hour of failing to write code, downing coffee, and hate-watching the weather for her to finally call up the search. A headshot of a square-jawed woman in a beige suit appeared, her blond hair waving in a way that felt expensive.

Anne-Marie Pellegrini (Sicily). To see more, select Hi!

Isabella gave the command.

The acceptance message popped up in less than three minutes.

* * *

Isabella closed all her other monitors, tilted the camera to shoulders-up, and pulled her hair into a bun. Anne-Marie Pellegrini shaped.

A background emerged first, revealing a family den: wedding photos, a long, pillow-strewn couch, and curtains colored a simple gray. Nothing gilded or ... *Mafioso*.

“Anne-Marie,” Isabella said, with a deliberate raise of volume.

“I never expected you to call.” Translation again sounded without delay, but Anne-Marie’s lips fell a touch behind.

“That’s the problem, isn’t it?” Isabella continued. “We’ve never

communicated ...”

Anne-Marie frowned. “Just tell me what you want.”

“First, about the ... the thing. It was seventy years ago.”

The Sicilian floating above the desk said nothing. A flicker of anger, like when Isabella had been considering how ... impractical ... the whole thing seemed, sent her rattling off more of what she’d been thinking. “Silvio wasn’t a good man. But he’s dead. And, before that, he was crippled. He spent most of his life like that, after your relative crushed his back—”

“For which he killed, *killed*, members of my family. And do you know how old they—”

“Yes, yes,” Isabella cut in. She fell silent.

Anne-Marie, or her projection, just glowered. Clearly, the dozens of years had not healed things on the Pellegrini side. Nor had the simple insanity of a vendetta in the first place. When the woman in Sicily continued her silence—but also didn’t end the connection—Isabella went on, softer, but also choosing to get right to it, just like the pitch of any business deal.

“My grandmother died. Do you know Boundless Inc.?”

The avatar in the oblong said nothing.

“Before she died ...” Isabella said, managing to keep the flickers of anger from taking over, “before she died, my grandmother paid Boundless to scan her. And she made me promise to install her in Sicily. She wants to go on the Long-Walk there, to walk her old home, with her old family and friends.”

“So? Why do you care?”

Isabella exhaled, tightening her old swimming muscles. “She raised

me. My mother died young.”

Anne-Marie’s expression unwound a little. “We call it the Long-Walk too,” she said. And she started to say something else, but was interrupted by a screech.

“*Mamma!*”

As the Sicilian turned away, Isabella rose, trying to see over the woman and into the den. She strained to catch Italian spoken too far from the mic, just making out a child’s voice, a boy’s. Anne-Marie’s tone shifted when addressing the boy—sweet and caring. The boy’s voice faded from the room.

“Would,” Anne-Marie said, turning back, brushing away a blond wave, “you like my help?”

Isabella nearly stuttered *What?* She managed to halt herself, fingers clutching the desk’s edge. This woman, who ran a *crime* family, a family sworn to murder Isabella’s family, any of them visiting Sicily and breaking the line of the vendetta, and meaning it—what kind of cold bitch-ness that must require—offers help? On a dime? Only one reason made sense.

“How much?” Isabella said, careful to stay calm, thinking *business deal*.

“Who says I want money?”

Isabella couldn’t help the bite in her words. “Everyone does these days.”

Anne-Marie squinted, but typed on imaginary keys. “Here.”

The number wasn’t unreasonable.

“Okay,” Isabella said, calculating the dip to her credits. “How soon?”

“As soon as you send it, we can begin. We’ve started to do it more and more. Boundless.”

The revelation sent Isabella a touch backwards.

“Is there something wrong?”

“That’s it?” Isabella said, again burying any other curiosity.

“That’s it,” the Sicilian said flatly. “You’re right about money and ‘these days.’ And that’s where you and I live, right? In these kinds of days?”

Isabella hesitated for one more moment, but then poked virtual keys.

Anne-Marie glanced down, nodded, and started to dissolve.

“*Prego,*” the Sicilian said.

Isabella didn’t need a translation; Daniela had said it all the time.

The woman in the Potomac condo began to book her trip. Her hands shook—if not unwelcomely so.

* * *

Malik ran like a loon. He hadn’t been an athlete before death, and the crossover hadn’t done anything to change that. His elbows jutted and his boots slapped like flippers. Still, he slashed through Palermo, shooting from park grass and onto cement. And that was it: even as a long-walker, even dead, he *felt* the change in surface.

That was Boundless’s magic, wasn’t it?

He hadn’t fully understood the pitch, an engineer muttering about advances in 3-D printing and radical holograms, but he’d sat up when the engineer herself had gotten animated, lit up really, when she

reached the part about vacuums.

A Cal-Something experiment, she'd said, had shocked the physics community by finding little black holes, each maybe the size of a wagon wheel, all over the world. Millions. Billions. For decades, they'd all known a black hole was really just a fancy vacuum. And, more so, they'd known that the holes, the vacuums, weren't really *nothing*, but rather a mix of matter and antimatter. What was so new, though, was finding them on Earth, instead of in space. On Earth. Everywhere.

And that wasn't even the breakthrough.

At an old nuclear lab (naturally), an experimental particle something-or-other had unintentionally fired right into one of the mini black holes. And, right there, the molecules inside had rearranged. A new form of matter had materialized, something like an after-image, but which could be seen, and *felt*.

And so more particle something-or-others were blasted into more wagon-wheel vacuums, eventually beyond the lab, from the sides of highways to the basements of collapsed buildings to abandoned bedrooms. Locations and density were mapped. Papers published. Data open-sourced. Tech downsized. Demonstrations shown to important people. Patents filed and expired.

And then came Boundless.

What if something, they asked, intentional could be formed from those rearranged molecules? What if someone pumped in a different kind of map, a whole blueprint into the vacuum, one now so small as to be available for saving on chips indistinguishable under any microscope not powered by the sun. The first “digital humans”—interactive copies of your dead uncle, for instance, the interesting one—had been loaded onto smart assistants before the 21st century had been two decades old. Stories had appeared in the *Washington Post*. In the Valley, stem cells even learned to spell, if not to write. Immortality, the last frontier, had fallen before the mightiest of forces:

the market.

But only Boundless, and some creator never named, had asked why anyone would want a true corporeal body anymore, one even manufactured with lines like a Ferrari. Meat bodies just run down. Worse yet, they'd be limited by the laws of thermodynamics and boring stuff like heat and gravity. Why not something more ... ethereal? Whatever the matter bouncing around those little vacuums, it was something new. *That* worked, that fired the imagination, and Boundless knew it. Living again, living *on*, with the pleasures, the feel of the flesh, but none of the downsides ...

But as the memory of sweat, cold and slick, ran down his cheeks, Malik wondered about those little black holes. Dr. Manhattan's re-materialization had made more sense, contained less mystery, in an old copy of *Watchmen* translated fairly well into Italian. But, Boundless ... What if those engineers and that hidden creator had ripped into something other than mindless matter? If their tech was really more magic than they let on? What if those vacuums, those holes they'd ripped into, weren't random matter, but the dead? The remnants of people who'd met their deaths by those highways or in those basements and bedrooms? What if he, now a Boundless long-walker, was just a recycled ghost?

Still, he'd never again know the pain of sprint-weary legs. As he ran, however, he was achingly aware that the tingle in his soles, that bit of feeling each time he hit the ground, was something he could still lose.

Boundless had stretched life beyond the wonder of man. But it hadn't eradicated death.

The distant Adrano cousin cut into a narrow alley, all torque and breeze. Shouts came from behind, along with smacking boot heels—boots faster than his.

His drone kept pace above, little particle stream hopping from vacuum to vacuum effortlessly, as if tracing the stones in an endless garden path. But, below, the ghost-man remembered the panic of

running while not looking. He glared up without slowing as a breath-memory swelled his throat.

And he screamed.

* * *

“What did you do?”

Isabella, half-asleep, stumbled to the monitor. “Malik? What is it?”

Malik’s face spun up, bobbing violently. Isabella gripped the table, realizing her relative was running. Why make them run? Why not teleport or something? But there were limits, always.

Malik’s mouth unhinged. “She knows about me!”

“Yes! We made a deal. But, wait ...” Isabella scanned the scenery beyond her relative, though only made out a building, then a doorway. “Where are you going?”

Something ugly suddenly occurred to her and her back tightened. “Your server? Can someone get your server?” The half-rhyme of *server* and *inter* played in her head much as she didn’t want it to.

Malik screamed.

His digital face swiveled, fast and mechanical—the drone, spinning. His eyes stretched and dilated. His mouth warbled into its own long oblong: “Nooo!”

Thunder crashed. Something *boomed*.

Malik dematerialized.

Isabella slipped, large forearms barking the desk’s edge. In the now-faceless virtual screen, diamonds sparkled on a muted canvas. Then the image jerked.

“This isn’t just a blood thing,” someone said through the speakers.

There was no pause for translation. Again, the drone zoomed closer, pushed almost, as if moved beyond its own means. The close-up it now provided revealed what Isabella had first taken to be a canvas as not fibrous, but cement. Diamonds became the sparking innards of server remains, chips and wire smoldering before petering out, semi-obscured by smoke.

A long gun barrel—round and wide, but also aged and scarred—pushed into the frame. A brownish pump-handle followed as the shotgun stirred embers.

“It’s because blood mixed with business. Don’t come here.”

The drone suddenly zipped forward, debris zooming up in size. The screen flashed zig-zags and popped jet black.

* * *

Isabella collapsed, slumping to her side, ending with gray hair draped over a naked arm, eye-level with a wall-attached power bar whose red eye blinked in rhythm. Call the cops? The *Sicilian* cops? And say what? In D.C. the crime would be “destruction of property,” maybe “unlawfully discharging a firearm.” It—long-walking, Boundless—was so new, the laws hadn’t caught up. So, tell the *polizia* ... what? *Someone killed a server? On the island. Was it mi familia? Yeah. Close familia? Well ...*

“Boundless Comms! *Call Daniela!*” Isabella suddenly voice-commanded.

The screen pulsed with cool violet as Isabella shoved herself upwards, as if springing from a pool with practiced memory. On screen, a new face appeared. It had once been pleasing, maybe even plump and pretty, but now so gaunt it could have been a mannequin. Eyes, slowly, teased apart, the pre-installation version of Boundless bringing Daniela, Isabella’s grandmother, her *Nonna*, to

phantasmagoric life.

“Love,” Daniela said slowly, sleepily. “What is it?”

“She *killed* him,” Isabella yelled, leaning into the screen. “She just killed him!”

The avatar lost its waking expression. Thin eyebrows turned down, furious. “Who?”

“Malik. A cousin. You didn’t know him, but he was ... like you. He was helping.”

“Motherfucker,” The woman in the machine suddenly grunted, stretching a few cancer-lesions not yet deleted. “How could he be killed? What happened?”

“The server. She shot the server.”

“She ... *Anne-Marie*?”

Isabella nodded sharply. “This far, *Nonna*? It goes this Christ-screwing *far*?”

“Don’t swear!” the ghost-in-the-machine snapped. “I shouldn’t have asked you to do this. I shouldn’t have asked you. You can’t—”

“I wanted to do this,” Isabella cut in, though it felt like a plead more than a retort. Only Daniela could do that to her. “*I* agreed. I want this. I owe you.”

“Oh, Isabella, Love. Thank you. But you don’t—”

“She used a shotgun. A Benelli. Does that mean something?”

“*Love* ...”

“Was that the gun? His?”

Daniela nodded. When she did, the violet of her face and background rippled.

“I don’t believe it,” Isabella muttered. She rose, unable not to. Her grandmother started to say something else, but Isabella shook her head.

“That’s how he did his ‘business,’ *Nonna*? Silvio? You even called it ‘the business.’”

“And what should I have called it? When talking with a child? You only wanted to know about *my* business—which became *your* businesses—after I left Silvio. Where did you think I got starting money? The family is always there. We should call them.”

“We will not. I will not.” Isabella stared out the window at the river cutting through the capital. Anne-Marie: The icy bitch had straight-up lied to her. Used the information she gave. And then ... Malik.

“Love,” Daniela said, breaking into her granddaughter’s thoughts as she had so often before. “If you don’t want to have anything to do with the family, if you still don’t, then don’t do this. I can just go. I never thought I’d have this chance, so I can just go ... on.”

Isabella shut her eyes. “I want to help. I promised I would.”

“Then you have to consider it. Calling them.”

Isabella rubbed her arms and her eyes drifted back to the office. They landed on her old code books.

“Maybe,” she said, hearing the sudden change in her own tone. “But not for what you think.”

* * *

The 22-foot runabout boat rattled over dark water, wave tips cotton in the moonlight. Slowed for the approach, the cousins kept video

pouring back to Daniela and Isabella. Every now and then, Carlotta Adrano, the tallest, would glance back to the trailing drone. The motion turned her torso, a great *V*. A swimmer too? Sofia Adrano and Alice Adrano, the other “cousins” now living on mainland Italy, never looked back, but their tiny figures created familiar silhouettes. Not familiar—*familial*, for Christ-screwing sake. Across an ocean.

Isabella curled her fingers. Daniela’s ring felt cold against her digits.

Malik had been familial too.

“Does it make sense now, Love?” Daniela was looking over from her Boundless oblong, cheekbones straining too much against now violet-colored skin.

Isabella didn’t respond. Instead, she stared at the thing pinned to one of the boat’s chairs by the pressure of Carlotta’s hip. A black, boxy thing.

Sofia steered while Alice and Carlotta scanned the horizon, their guns moving in unison. They’d picked up their load from a hacker contact of Isabella’s and then smuggled it under darkness, because now, on Sicily’s coast, where there were lights, there were likely Pellegrinis.

Like those who had killed Malik.

No, worse: erased him.

If one could feel something inside themselves changing, Isabella might have admitted she felt that now. Something at least trying to change. And why not be able to feel that? She was sitting next to a living ghost. Trying to ship it to Sicily so it could walk around and pick up things.

“I’d never thought I’d feel like this.” The words just leaked out as she thought about things inside her.

“Family is family,” Daniela said.

In the video feed, the illumination suddenly changed, from moor-less stars to dock lights and warehouses. A little further in, within Pozallo, a hover-truck would be standing idle, manned by a friend of the cousins. From there, it would take a short hop to Mt. Etna, the volcano, and Boundless’s nearest facility to Adrano, their old town. If they could just get Daniela there, install her server, they could call on Boundless’s premium security and more cousins and connections. Change Daniela’s name and appearance totally. And be home free. Though they needed a little more insurance first.

The boat stalled. A tree-lined and rocky coast crowned a small beach just west of the docks. A splash spit up white dribble, chasing the anchor. *Too much*, Isabella thought, imagining a dive. She didn’t fight the mental wandering, though. It was better than the tension.

Alice entered the water, gun high. With the engine cut, the only sounds offered were waves, breeze, and the drone’s motor. Carlotta jumped in. She and Alice slung their weapons and offered open arms. Sofia folded over the side and handed the boxy thing to her sisters, who found sand, planted the box, and re-drew. Sofia joined moments later.

“I can’t believe this is really going to happen, Love.” Daniela tilted her head back, closing her eyes. “I know it may not make sense, but ...”

“I promised.” Isabella said, filling the silence.

The floating head turned, then nodded to the box. “What did you say that was?”

Isabella hesitated. “Something old. It’s called a logic bomb. It’s a ... cyber bomb. It’ll mess up their computers, their communications, and their— It’ll give us enough time to really get you there. Behind Boundless’s walls. Safe.”

The old woman frowned. “And you know about ‘cyber bombs’ because ...”

Before Isabella could think of an answer, the screen flashed. Cousins and bomb shrank at insane speeds, becoming insects and a trinket: The drone had jerked to a halt high above.

“What the hell is that?” Daniela said.

“Safety mode. It’s automatic. The drone must have perceived danger ...”

Through the feed, something *cracked*. Then again. And again. Sparks of gunfire appeared. They burst from where the beach disappeared into palm trees.

“They’re being shot at!” Daniela screamed.

Isabella reached for the imaginary keyboard, for the holo-mouse. But then retreated—because there was nothing to do. Except watch.

In moments, the tree-line continued to gush sparks, but the beach resistance cut down to a single flare.

“*They’re slaughtering them!*” Daniela hollered. “Call them! Call help!” But her words were empty. There were only so many cousins these days. And none on the island. No reinforcements.

The beach gun flared. A synchronized tandem erupted from the tree-line. And something exploded on the beach with a brilliant glow.

“Turn me off,” Daniela said, drained and breaking up. “Love, *please!* Turn me off.”

Isabella pounded the holo-mouse. Daniela blinked away.

On screen, more insects—the murdering Pellegrinis—loosed themselves from the trees. Tears stinging, eyes watering as if within broken goggles, Isabella started to look away. But froze.

One, two, three, glowing blue like phosphorescent mantises, long-

walker Pellegrinis, surely, emerged from the tree line. The dead family members followed their living brethren across the killing field.

Isabella again slapped the holo-mouse.

* * *

“It was the one who left the truck?” Daniela asked, hours later.

Isabella sat, gin in hand, shaking. She stared out the window. The Capitol, along with its several antennae, glistened in the rising sun.

“Yes. Who else?”

“Motherfucker,” Daniela grunted. “Though, it also could have been your contact—”

“*Nonna!*”

They sat in silence.

“Tell me about the *piazza*,” Isabella said after a few minutes. “Tell me again.”

Daniela sounded incredulous. “Love, why?”

Did Isabella need to say their names? Carlotta, Sofia, Alice ... Malik. Adranos. That thing, that changing thing inside, once again churned. “I want to remember. I want to remember how this started.”

“Love, I—”

“Tell me.”

Daniela sighed. “Lucho Pellegrini. The man that kicked Silvio in the back out of nowhere, who crippled him, he’d been banished to the mainland. So, everyone thought a truce was on. It was *Ferragosto*. After the bonfires, everyone was happy and drunk. The two families,

they even danced together. But Silvio, he and his brothers ...”

* * *

The townspeople of Adrano danced on the *piazza* that fronted the old Norman castle. Electric lights, strung for tourists, had been doused. Lanterns burned in their places, lit by torches from the bonfires. Five boys, though, lingered by the castle’s edge, one wheelchair among them. The wheelchair-bound boy, no more than fifteen and topped by an uncut tuft of black hair, leaned forward violently, as if sprouted. At his shoulder, a taller boy shifted from foot to foot, his features similar. He glanced down at the wheelchair-bound boy. From the chair, his crippled brother, Silvio, responded with a sharp nod. Victor Adrano, the tall one, took off like a rabbit, sprinting into the revelers.

Lorenzo Pellegrini, elderly father to Lucho, was smashed backward into a wine barrel as Vic’s shoulder pounded into the older man’s ribs. Lorenzo’s brothers tossed their cups and rained blows onto Vic. “*Vigliacchi!*” one of their wives screamed. “Cowards!” Dancers scattered.

Still by the castle, Silvio increased his lean, pressing forward in his chair. He was hot. In the Sicilian summer, you grew accustomed to the sweat at the hems, folds, and waist of your pegged jeans. With a deep sting, though, he recalled his legs didn’t really feel sweaty—because he couldn’t feel a thing below his belt anymore. He scanned the crowd.

Pellegrini and Adrano women, even the elderly, joined the melee. Children cried. At the rumble’s edge, Silvio finally spied what he wanted, a group of children clustered under a palm tree. The largest wrapped his ten-year-old hands around his sister, while two smaller brothers stood behind.

“*Adiamo!*” Silvio shouted. “*Ora!*”

He lurched forward, nearly tumbling out of the chair as one of his brothers shoved him into motion. The others swatted open their path.

As he rattled, Silvio kept his eyes on the oldest boy under the tree. When they were thirty meters away, he pushed forward one last time, tensing every muscle that still worked. His right arm went over his shoulder and behind his back. He whipped forward the Benelli shotgun, cut off at its butt. He’d seen the *Godfather* movies, of course, they all had, all jockeying over who was Michael, who Sonny, and who Fredo. But who had Silvio turned out to be? Some mash-up of the cripples in wheelchairs. But this was no movie, and Silvio wouldn’t trust some little two-barreled, snub-nosed *lupara* shotgun. He pumped a shell into the throat of the Benelli. Tommasino had become a Don, hadn’t he? Even if he’d needed a wheelchair?

The ten-year-old Pellegrini boy finally looked over. Fifteen meters away, Silvio could see everything, from the indent of the boy’s collarbone to the part of his hair. And his sister’s dark braids below, two brothers behind.

Silvio fired.

Before the sound was gone, he fired again. He needed only to fire once more, the Benelli’s blast range true and wide. Especially for small targets.

Afterwards, someone—his brother Anthony, the smell of Marlboros heavy—yanked him to a shoulder and started to sprint. As they ran, Silvio kept his eyes on the shredded palm tree.

* * *

“Anne-Marie isn’t even direct line,” Daniela finished between breaths, or at least the memory of them. “She’s a *cousin*. Her family took it up, the vendetta, because of whom Silvio killed: four *children*, not one of them older than ten. Lucho’s children. A whole Pellegrini line.”

Isabella had closed her eyes. She rocked the glass, bringing cold into her fingers. She’d always tried to picture the four murdered Pellegrini children whenever Silvio had tried to win her. Faces came now, but

only to twist into Carlotta and Malik and the other Adranos. Her family. It hurt her mind. It sped up the thing changing, transforming. She didn't feel herself anymore.

She rose, weaving to the window. Slender boats cruised down the Potomac, propulsion so silent they might as well have been shark fins. On their tour, they would pass glass-and-gold office towers Daniela had sold in full, units Isabella had sold part-time, gigging between coding. And during all that, where was *he*? Silvio? His father killed by the banished brother, only to be killed by Vic, who'd die in in jail. But Silvio had escaped to America. D.C.—*the business*, all the rest, coming after. Until Daniela left him, left him shocked with only the misfits of the family that still worshipped his legend to see after his care. And even if Daniela had taken his start-up money, she'd left him, a Don, crippling him in a way no one could have expected.

“Love, are you listening?”

And from those ashes, Daniela had built a business and passed it to Isabella, along with all the years of love and knowledge after Isabella's father and mother had died so young in that car crash. And what did the old woman ask in return? Just a chance to live on with her long-walker loved ones and friends in the ruins of Roman palaces, glowing softly above mosaic tiles. On Sicily.

“Leave me, Love. You tried. Mercy to you.”

And the price already paid. Four so-high prices.

“No,” Isabella said. “We'll need to think of something else.”

“The only option I know is Silvio's. ‘Murder's never out of the question,’ he'd say. ‘And it shouldn't be—’”

“*No*. No. I talk. I make deals. I don't shoot.”

“Well then, what?”

“I'll talk to Anne-Marie. I'll talk to her again—”

“Love, she doesn't respect you—”

“Stop. *Nonna*, stop!” Isabella snapped, but her head dropped into her hands. Outside, a hover-taxi buzzed down to the roof, then skittered off.

After a moment, Daniela said something quiet. “I could talk to her.”

Isabella twisted to the monitor. “What?” Dizzy, she focused on the blinking power bar. “Who?”

“Anne-Marie.”

“*Anne-Marie*? You?”

Daniela looked away, as far as her oblong allowed. “She did it once.”

Isabella shook, gin glass jittering.

“I waited 'til none of you would ask,” Daniela whispered. “After Silvio died, I snuck to the island. Anne-Marie was a teenager and her parents had just died. A different vendetta. But I'd kept tabs on her. I asked her blessing. And she let me. She *let* me. I spread his ashes by the volcano.”

Tendons in Isabella's hands tightened. The glass cracked. “Then why kill Malik?” she screeched. “Why kill the rest? She knows you! And she'd already broken the vendetta!”

“I told her I'd never come back. I told her *none* of my family would either. She was afraid of us, even across the ocean. And a deal was better than always wondering, always looking over her shoulder.”

Isabella flung the glass to the carpet. “You let me—”

“I knew how you felt about Silvio! And I thought, since Anne-Marie

let me, she'd certainly let you. You were just a child when ..."

The power bar blinked, a thought emerging with it.

Now Isabella whispered. It was the thing, the transformed thing in her, talking, she realized as she heard her own words. "She has a child."

"What?" Daniela said.

"Anne-Marie has a son," Isabella said, thinking at the same time. "And if she has a child ..."

"Love, please. What are you thinking?"

Isabella thought of glowing long-walker Pellegrinis on a dark Sicilian beach. "Maybe," she said, "Silvio wasn't totally wrong."

* * *

The gnarled monk—looking a thousand years old, save for the sparkling nametag on his robe, *Mi Chiamo Fratello Angelo!*—led Isabella and her bag down the cramped hall. The hover-ride from the east side to Palermo hadn't taken long, but had shown much: farms and their crooked stone houses, now B&Bs; cities in the distance, buildings pinched oppressively close; and the sun, the dryness, and the sense of the sea all around. Sicily.

The monk marched her through hanging corpses, mummified and dangling in coffins carefully organized by age, sex, and even occupation. A sign marked the last original resident, a two-year old girl entombed a hundred years before. Shrunken bodies cast eyeless glances as monk and woman passed. Finally, they turned into a new addition. The light there spread dimly, but not because of outdated illumination: Cool white oozed from the ceiling, while green, red, and blue blinked all around, as rows of black metal shelves, loaded with Boundless servers, stretched throughout the room.

The monk pattered down the center aisle. At the back of the room, he offered an antique desk, two ornate chairs, one of which was occupied, and a virtual laptop, from behind which rose a slightly less-gnarled monk in digital glasses. The new monk flashed a wide smile.

Before him, in one of the chairs, sat a young woman, back to Isabella. She glowed faintly.

"*Signora.*" The desk-monk's nametag read *Mi Chiamo Padre Matteo!* He pointed to the remaining chair. "*Per favore. Benvenuti nelle Catacombe dei Cappuccini.*"

The woman turned at the words, looking more like Malik than Isabella had imagined possible. Ayda—Malik's sister—looked up.

"*Ciao,*" she said.

Only Ayda's hair, the bit visible below her scarf, which also glowed, let Isabella shake the déjà vu. "*Ciao,*" Isabella said, and sat in the other chair.

Father Matteo began his pitch, how now, hundreds of years since the last entombment, God had seen fit that the catacombs should become home for the newly dead once again—

"For a price," Isabella cut in.

The monk shot a glance.

"But," Isabella continued, "there's no shame in money earned for a last shelter for those the Lord's taken. Someone must do it?"

Father Matteo studied her, glasses running a program with a sheen. After a wary glance to Ayda, he nodded.

"Thank you, Father," Isabella said. "Will you leave us?"

"*Certo.*" Matteo rose, signaling the other monk. They both left via a

door in the back wall.

“They’re good men,” Ayda said. “If they’re making money, so what?”

“As I said.” Isabella searched Ayda’s arms, unable not to, looking for signs of her suicide. The woman pulled at her sleeves and Isabella looked up and continued. “As I said, somebody must look after the dead.”

Ayda gazed at her. She seemed anxious. “Are you ready?”

Isabella pulled the carry-on close. After a quick take of the room, she nodded.

“*Vieni qui*,” Ayda said, voice suddenly raising. “Come join us.”

Glowing figures actualized in the aisles. Two men, one heavy and bald, the other taller with long hair, appeared. A sense of motion came from Isabella’s flank. She found a woman, broad-shouldered below an almost bird-like face, materializing too. The three long-walkers met on the desk’s other side, where they halted: three glowing long-walker Pellegrinis.

Isabella inhaled a deep-dive breath. “It’s done then?”

The bird-woman spoke.

“Did we have our family kill our cousin?” Her voice should have been a bird’s song, but it was all rasp and fury. “Did we have them hold down Anne-Marie until she admitted she’d let the wife of the murderer of four *children*—” the woman nodded at the carry-on, “—come to this island, come home, and let her bury that murderer here? Then let her walk away, alive, without telling the family?”

“Yes. Yes. And then?”

The men exchanged enraged looks. The tall one turned to Isabella.

“What do you want, *puttana*?” he said. “A picture?”

“I want proof.”

“We used a shotgun,” the bird-woman hissed. “We used her own gun. She begged for her child, really, *really*, thinking we’d go that far. But when we told her the family would care for the boy, she closed her eyes and pressed the barrel to her head. Proof enough?”

“Yes.” Isabella pushed her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “*Mi-i-i... Mi dispiace*. We’ve all suffered.”

“Has *she*?” The tall man growled. He sweat somehow, blue beads glistening. He pointed to the carry-on.

“It took her twenty years to leave Silvio,” Isabella said. “Twenty years with him.”

The tall man retracted his finger, but held his fist firm.

“And she had to live with that,” Isabella continued. “For thirty more years. Years where those who loved her also hated her. For loving him.”

The tall man looked at his family.

“What would be enough?” Isabella said and heaved the carry-on onto the desk. Daniela’s server came down hard.

The tall man lowered his fist.

“It’s enough,” the bald man said. Isabella jerked, not expecting his smooth voice. His eyes must have been light green or gray, now registering as pale, almost discolored absences.

“It’s done then?” Isabella said. “The vendetta?”

“It’s done.” The bald man said. “It’s over.”

He offered a glowing hand.

Isabella looked to Ayda. She leaked tears, but nodded. Isabella looked to the tall man and the bird-woman, who gave their own angry but curt approvals.

Isabella took the bald man's hand—not hard, for fear of passing through—and shook it.

In the next moments, the Pellegrinis crept back down the aisles, extinguishing as they went, the ceiling projectors serving as their drones seemingly cutting out.

Father Matteo reappeared. “*Signoras?*”

Isabella opened the case. “May we do it now?”

“Yes,” he said.

It took less than five minutes, including a trip down a nearby aisle. A drone rose from a shelf and floated to a place above them. Matteo looked to Isabella, finger poised above a key.

“*Cammina, Signora,*” he said, pressing down.

Particles seemingly collected from nowhere, tightening and fusing.

“Are we here?” Daniela said, taking in the monk, Ayda, and finally Isabella. “*Love, are we really here?*”

“Yes, *Nonna.* Yes.”

The Father suddenly pounded the keyboard. His eyes went wide, lenses flashing. “What is this? *Mio Dio, cosa!*” He looked at Isabella. “What have you done?”

He spun for the rear door, but Daniela had quickly blocked his way.

Matteo shuddered, but rather than steel himself to pass by, he cocked his head towards a new sound.

Footsteps pounded on the ancient floor, a dozen women and men suddenly filing down the rows. Isabella found Carlotta's husband among them, who acknowledged her with his pistol, just before he and the others, over from Italy, pointed their weapons at Father Matteo. It seemed the contacts had been true this time.

“*Che cosa?*” the monk said. He raised his hands. “What's this?”

Isabella spun the virtual laptop in her direction. She clicked until she located a directory. With a glowing finger, Daniela pointed at three server icons, then a few more. Isabella swiped over each, turning them red.

“Is it in there?” Ayda said. “The virus?”

Isabella felt a sudden falter, like a missed reach for a timing plate, or a falter in a thing transforming within her. “We don't have to ...”

Ayda's eyes showed fury. “Malik.”

Isabella looked to Daniela, who touched her own chest, over her heart.

Isabella popped the holo-key.

On screen, red servers grew bright, then blacked out. In the room, many machines suddenly spun up, before whining into ugly and sputtering shutdowns.

Father Matteo grabbed the laptop and punched keys.

“No! You've killed them. The whole family. Who are you?”

Isabella answered. “We're the new family.”

Letter to a Young Mathematician

by Madeline Barnicle

10111/110/1100

You can be whatever you want, in the special case
Where what you want to be is a war hero.
And the enemies you face
Are worth less than zero.
If they are so complex that they
Don't fit along the number line
Warmaking becomes less okay.
But otherwise, you're fine.

You can be whatever you want, or someone else can.
It's almost the same.
A robot or a cyborg or a man
Who doesn't have your name.
Whoever you are, whatever you've done
Whatever courses through your hearts
You're almost the same as anyone
With interchangeable parts.

You can be whatever you want for a little bit.
For a short time
Escape the world and all in it
That ties you down and climb.
Up and up the ladder
Of unbounded abstraction
Beyond a simple adder
Or adder by subtraction.

Though untold people now have more
Power sitting in their pockets
Than it took to win a war
Or to launch rockets.
Simplified down for them, it doesn't daunt.
They think nothing of it, pass in dispersal.
You can touch them all if that's what you want
From years away, unseen and universal.

You could be praised by those unsure
What makes you more than a machine
Or see those who recently were
Using you regress towards the mean
Spiritedness that drives a wedge
Between people and makes them fight.
Each step's one closer to the edge
And then—eight bits make up one byte.

A ladder's just a ticker tape
That somebody turned on its side.
Or maybe it's a real escape?
This time around at least they've tried
Including those who've been left out.
Perhaps it is a cynic's bet,
But some "Adam Lovelace," I doubt
Would be remembered. We'd forget.

Yes, this is hard-won progress, though
It hasn't gotten very far.
It seems like they've always said no
To just accepting those who are
Left in. They need the mad, the cranks,
The sickly, those who favor duels
To fill their cups and fill their ranks.
They need the wise and need the fools.

So what's a ladder, in the end,
Or tape? The rungs, divisions stark?
Or empty spaces where heads wend
Their way so they can leave a mark?
These are your choices. Fight or fade.
Or otherwise, live fast, die young.
These are the stories we've arrayed.
I reach out for another rung.

Hunger in America

by Jamie Hittman

Before the roof caved in, Joleen lived in the Cereal District of the South Bronx. The roof of her apartment building hosted mechanical effigies of Tony the Tiger and Lucky the Leprechaun, big twenty-footers lit with industrial floods, wired up with moving eyes, limbs, and mouths. Mounted atop her neighbor's roof were two digital billboards and a robotic Trix Rabbit. Joleen saw its bucktoothed leer through her bedroom window every night, rising from the semi-darkness like some deranged moon. The floodlights gave her migraines that left her curled up on the bathroom floor with tears oozing from her eyes. She could hear roof beams straining beneath the weight of the mascots—and still the ad agency insisted that Count Chocula deserved a spot.

“The building's not rated for this,” Joleen informed her ad agent. “You're going to kill us.”

“The terms in your contract state that your house must host three different advertisements per quarter,” replied the agent from a call center somewhere in Vietnam. “Unfortunately, Miss McAllister, if we do not proceed, your contract is void. You could risk eviction.”

Joleen pegged her cell phone at the sofa cushions—not that she'd expected the agency's help. She used her manager's office at the bar to print out a few dozen fliers of her own design and the next day distributed them, marching up the water-stained halls, greeting the wearied sir or madam behind each door with a handshake and a smile. All the tenants looked somehow related, dressed in the same sweatpants and branded T-shirts, their faces blank and infantile. Joleen, who had studied economics in college, saw them as the evolutionary endpoint of the free market ecosystem: both Consumer and product, exhausted by dwindling wages and skyrocketing rent,

resigned to be no more than what the ad agency said they were valued.

The last door Joleen knocked on belonged to a slim thirty-something in a BooBerry T-shirt. He was reasonably handsome, and Joleen wouldn't have said no to a date. He seemed momentarily interested to see Joleen, a new object in his midst, before glancing down at the flier. It showed the father of ad-supported housing, Thomas Ducey, atop a gold-plated toilet with his pants around his ankles. DROP THE DEUCE, the flier read. RENTERS OF THE CEREAL DISTRICT: UNITE. The man muttered, “No thanks,” before locking the door.

Joleen called her mother in San Francisco and stalked the neighborhood with her cell phone mashed to her ear. It was past sunset, but the adverts filled the streets with caustic glare. Nighthawks cut through the air above her, gorging themselves on clouds of moths lured in by the lights.

“How did the fliers go?” her mother asked.

“They didn't.”

Joleen heard her mother inhale, readying a lungful of bromides: well, you have a roof over your head and you're in meat and milk and you are lucky, Joleen, lucky. Thank the Lord we found a sponsor. Some people our age are out on the streets. Imagine! Sixty-year-olds going hungry in America!

Joleen's parents had lost everything when the market tanked fifteen years ago. Their mortgage was now partly covered by a grant from Depends, but her mother's gratitude rankled her. She tossed in the

requisite, “sure, Mom”s and “uh-huh”s, dodging the cars of the Manhattanites who toured the Cereal District like a personal theme park, their children laughing and howling—the target Consumers of the breakfast cereal market. Joleen sometimes wandered the ad-free blocks of the Upper West Side as a form of half-baked revenge, peeping in through the windows. Inside each house was what she once dreamed her life would look like. She saw bright-eyed children and smiling couples joined in holy matrimony. She saw Consumers with money enough to be human.

“That’s just how the world works now,” Joleen’s mother said. “You need to make the best of it.”

One week later, the agency workmen arrived before sunrise, hauling behind them their latest monument to the cereal gods. Up went Chocula. And down came the roof.

* * *

Joleen expected to be relocated to another ad-town in the Bronx, but instead the agency directed her to a quiet high rise in Forest Hills, Queens. She dragged her belongings into a spacious duplex, then checked the mail. There was a letter from an agent named Barbara Lewis, apologizing for the accident.

You will be pleased to know (Barbara wrote) that we forbid any “hard” advertisements in this community. Instead, we’re focusing on a personalized advertising system designed with the resident in mind. I’ll be by tomorrow at noon to introduce your new partner in Consumer satisfaction.

Joleen read the letter again and threw it in the trash; personalized ads could only mean one thing.

She remembered how in college her professors seemed eager to race past the Gilded Age and the Great Recession to what scholars were calling the New Depression, which, despite the name, had entered its second decade with no sign of stopping. Ad-supported housing was

just becoming popular, championed by Thomas Ducey, a Madison Avenue shark who saw opportunity in the worst mortgage crisis America had ever known. The President had allowed a billboard atop the White House as a show of good faith: an ad for his preferred denture sealant, which reportedly cost enough to fund the WIC program for half a year. “The Consumer will save this country,” Ducey declared at the presser. “Because the Consumer gets what they want.”

Joleen grabbed a beer from a duffel bag and sipped it while she paced her new apartment. She sat down on her bed and stared out at a sky studded by constellations of advert drones. Nighthawks zipped through the spaces between them.

When the doorbell rang the next morning, Joleen went downstairs in her Frosted Flakes t-shirt. The woman standing at the door was dressed in a natty black suit with squared-off shoulders that made her already boxy frame look downright cuboid. “Barbara Lewis,” she said, offering a hand.

“Joleen,” Joleen said, but didn’t take it. She was too busy staring at the thing standing at Barbara’s side, back bent, hands folded politely in front of it. It stood four feet tall, a slender man-shaped machine clad in black metal. There was a small flat-screen television where its head should have been.

“This is your personal advertising unit.” Barbara lifted the robot up by its armpits as if it were a child and set it down just inside the door. The PAU straightened and its screen-head blazed with an animation of moving clouds, followed by the italicized query: *What do you want?*

Answers crowded behind Joleen’s lips, too numerous to articulate. To be more than just a Consumer. To have a relationship that was not purely transactional. To meet someone else who believed that the world had gone completely insane.

“I want a man,” Joleen said. “And for Tom Ducey to die in a fire.”

Barbara smiled indulgently. “Your PAU uses an advanced algorithm to show you the products and services that you want to see. It observes your behavior, speech, and body language. It then processes these observations and—”

“And uses it to read my mind.” Joleen wagged her fingers. “Ooooo.”

“In a way, I suppose it does.”

The PAU turned its screen-head left and right and began picking its way around the foyer. It walked with a furtive, sinuous stride with its shoulders back and its head forward. It reminded Joleen of a marsh bird, or a praying mantis. The only sound it made was the tap-tap of its foot pegs on the hardwood floor. It began making its way up the stairs.

“Is it going to follow me around the apartment?” Joleen asked.

“Only if you want it to.”

“I don’t want it to.”

“Miss McAllister, I can’t alter its programming out of the box. It will learn what you prefer. All I ask is you be patient. This will be a relationship with many rewards.”

Halfway up the stairs, the PAU halted its advance, turned, and rushed back down. On its screen-head was an advertisement for a Williamsburg liquor store specializing in micro-brew beers.

“You know, I was just thinking of visiting that place,” Joleen said slowly. “Next week, maybe.”

Barbara smiled again.

Over the next two weeks, Joleen came to accept the robot’s presence as benign, if not welcome. When she was home, it usually sat in the corner, waking up only to display a product its algorithms had

determined would please her. But sometimes she’d look up to check on it and with a twist of her gut realize it was gone—sharing data with its buddies, maybe. The manual explained that communication among PAUs was vital for algorithm training. But sometimes it disappeared for hours and the thought of it stalking around somewhere out of sight brought Joleen close to panic.

One evening, the PAU vanished just before midnight. Joleen fought sleep as long as she could, but eventually dozed off. The next thing she knew it was three in the morning and the PAU was standing over her, gaunt and glimmering in the glow of its digital display, reaching for her with a three-fingered hand. She screamed and flailed her arms, smacking the PAU across the face. It fell over with a crash and Joleen felt immediately sorry—sorry because of its pitiful attempts to right itself and because of the warning she’d read in the manual: **YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY DAMAGES THE UNIT MAY INCUR.** When it at last stood up, she saw the hand-shaped bruise of liquid crystals she’d left on its screen-head. It filled in and smoothed over as if it had never been.

Joleen went down to the kitchen and cracked open a Bushwick Lager to settle her nerves. She had picked it up from the store in Williamsburg and she had to give the PAU one thing—the beer was perfect. Strong, bitter, hoppy as a jackrabbit. She downed two bottles comfortably ensconced in her armchair. The PAU stood by the doorway, unmoving, and Joleen came very close to admitting she felt okay again when she saw it there, watching her.

Slowly, Joleen raised one hand and folded her fingers in a cocked gun gesture. *Bang*, she thought.

The PAU tilted its screen-head at her. The motion, lifelike yet inhumanly smooth, sent her stomach into lazy flips. Then it turned around to face the wall.

Joleen sat for a few minutes and thought about happiness. Hers was fading fast, leaving as mysteriously as it had come on, and she felt hollow, wooden, a Russian doll painted to look like a woman.

She called out to the PAU: “Hey, you.”

The PAU shuffled in place and turned itself to face her.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Joleen said. “Don’t take it personally. It’s been a rough few years, okay?”

The PAU cocked its head again. She noticed for the first time how spindly it was, its arms, its legs. She wondered if it had any idea of what it was doing; if it felt bad about itself, or if it felt lonely too.

“What do *you* want, buddy?” Joleen asked. “Has anyone ever asked?”

The PAU didn’t move. Didn’t speak.

Joleen drained the rest of her beer and stood. “Just stay down here tonight. Please?” But as she began walking up the stairs, another light flashed on behind her.

She saw that the PAU had gone rigid, its knees locked and its arms stiff at its sides. What filled its screen-head was a photo of a grassy field at sunrise. Nearest to the camera was the top of a sign fashioned from weatherworn wood: HERE WE STAND, TOGETHER AT LAST. The image remained on screen just long enough for Joleen to get a good look, then winked out. “Hey, what was that?” she asked the PAU, grabbing it by its narrow shoulders. “Play it again.”

The PAU continued to stand as if in a daze. She remembered its suggestion log and used the control panel to riffle through all the commercials it had displayed over the last 24 hours. Except this one wasn’t there. The last commercial the PAU had logged had been for a professional cuddling service—Hugs-For-Hire, according to the log. That had been at 8:15.

Joleen sat back on her haunches, her heart doing a rapid two-step in her chest.

The first thing she did the next day was call customer support, but no

one on the help line could find the commercial. “All advertisements displayed on the PAU come from a collection stored on the company servers,” the representative said. “If it’s not on the server, then it doesn’t exist.”

With that avenue exhausted, Joleen turned to the internet. After a half hour of Googling she located a single hit on a Subreddit for ad enthusiasts. The post, created three days ago by a user named XxLostCloudxX, read like this: *So I live in an adtown in OR with one of those PAU things and some weird shit went down. The PAU hardcrashed after showing me some picture of an empty field. Anyone else have this happen?* No one had responded.

Joleen dashed off a quick reply and set off for work. She was a bartender at a joint on 42nd street called Good Times Time Square (proudly sponsored by Bacardi, Ltd). She didn’t like the job, but the tips were good, the regulars well-behaved, and the bar PAU-free.

She walked to the station and snagged a spot on the E-train. The car was lit up like the inside of a neon tube and most passengers wore sunglasses to block out the ads gamboling across the flatscreens that paneled the walls and ceiling. The sunglasses helped them avoid the buskers who paraded in a continuous stream from car to car, break-dancing in the aisles, swinging from poles, hawking Hershey bars and M&M bags for one dollar a pop. After the buskers came the panhandlers, seniors with wet eyes and cardboard signs: HOMELESS HUNGRY NEED FOOD GOD BLESS. The 18–49 demographic was the preferred prey of the corporations, and once you aged out, the advertisers tossed you.

The face of Tom Ducey appeared on one of the flat screens, and several passengers exploded with curses. One of the panhandlers hurled her sign at the screen.

Joleen was more relieved to get to Good Times than usual. Here the flatscreens were dimmed and set to low volume. Around 11PM, when the crowds were thinning, a man in a blue suit wandered inside, followed by a PAU. A lit cigarette smoldered between his teeth.

“Hello,” the man said. “I’ll have a Bushwick Lager, please.”

Joleen was too stunned by the sight of the PAU and the name of the beer to remind the man that smoking was prohibited. “That’s a good brew. Your PAU tell you to buy it?”

“You got it. He told me to come check this place out. I’m starting to think he’s a bit of an alcoholic.”

Joleen passed him the beer. “Do you mind putting out your cigarette?”

“Sorry. I’ve been trying to quit for a while but Pochi here makes it impossible.”

The PAU glanced at Joleen, then turned its screen-head to the man in the blue suit. Country music drawled from its speakers and an ad for Marlboros began to play.

“Oh, you bastard,” the man said with a laugh.

He introduced himself to Joleen as Roger Takeda, programmer for hire, and explained that Pochi meant something like *pooch*, only appropriate for a robot that followed him everywhere. Roger worked from home, which was convenient, but lonely, and when his landlord welcomed a flotilla of PAUs onto the premises, he didn’t object. Within a few days, the little robot was tagging along at his heels, and Roger made no move to stop it.

“He’s friendly,” Roger said (two beers deep at this point). “And a good listener, too.”

Joleen tried to imagine being friends with her PAU, and while the idea wiggled her out, she could sympathize. Make a human lonely enough and they will befriend any object that shows a modicum of personhood. She thought again of the PAU’s startup message—*What do you want?*—and that reminded her of the commercial.

Roger hadn’t seen it. “It’s true what they told you. If the commercial

isn’t on the server, the PAUs can’t pull it. But it could have come from somewhere else.”

“Like where?”

“Honestly? Anywhere. The PAUs communicate wirelessly. It wouldn’t be hard for a hacker to dump some packets, or—” His face went pale. “Oh, Jesus.”

His PAU had frozen up the way hers had, knees locked, arms stiff. There, blazing from its screen-head, was the image of the field and sign. HERE WE STAND, TOGETHER AT LAST. Seeing it again here with Roger sitting transfixed made it seem prophetic, a sign of things to come.

Then the screen went dark. Pochi glanced around as if startled awake.

“Wow, Jo, you weren’t kidding!” Roger said.

She had never been called Jo before. She found it pleasing to hear a stranger call her something so familiar.

Meanwhile, Roger had placed the PAU on the bar and was worrying over the controls on its back. “I have to go,” he said. “I dunno if that commercial bricked him.”

Roger thanked Joleen for her time and started for the door.

Joleen almost leapt over the bar to stop him. Instead, she called out for the whole room to hear: “How about lunch sometime?”

One week later, they met each other halfway at a diner in Court Square. Roger brought Pochi. Joleen left her PAU at home.

“Have you named yours?” Roger asked.

“Uh—no.”

“Do you think if you named him you’d like him better?”

The truth was she had been struggling to find a name for the past few days, but nothing seemed to fit.

They talked some more about themselves, but since Roger was on the clock, it was a business lunch. Between bursts of coding, he unearthed a few more reports of the commercial via Google. A few even made it to tech support's website; no one had answered.

"That's more than I saw," Joleen said.

"Maybe the commercial is spreading. Neato."

It was sort of neat, now that she thought about it, almost as neat as having lunch with Roger, who was as pleasing a companion as she could have hoped for. Who said "neato" anyway?

The only thing that might have made her day better would be to see the ad agency respond. On one of the TVs above the bar, Ducey was interviewing with CNN, gloating about the occupancy rates of an ad-town in Harlem. About his own housing, the man remained coy. His compound was in an undisclosed location, hidden from the populace at large. He sure as hell didn't live with a PAU.

"How'd you make your way to New York, Jo?" asked Roger.

The short answer, Joleen told him, was the job market, which hadn't much need for econ majors. The long answer, which she told him in part, was that she thought the city might be better than elsewhere, that like generations before her she believed that New York held the promise of love and connection, a reprieve from the unrelenting monotony of working, eating, shitting, and finding slivers of entertainment in what remained of the day.

"Were you right?" Roger asked.

"No."

"Yeah. Me neither."

Joleen paused. That was all she had planned to tell him, but she found she was reluctant to drop the subject, and when she studied Roger's face, his dark eyes growing keen with their own kind of hunger, she asked, "Are you happy?"

"I don't know. My job's all right, and I've got enough money. I feel like I *should* be happy."

"Should' is a dangerous word."

A smile crossed Roger's face. "So is 'happy,' while we're at it." He turned to his PAU, which was standing at attention beside his chair. "It makes me think. Our PAUs pulled the commercial because they thought it was something we wanted. But why an empty field?"

Pochi turned his screen-head to her and back to Roger, and just like the last time, stiffened in mechanical tetany with the image of the field and sign. Except this time the flatscreens above the bar jumped and flickered and when they found their bearings, they, too, showed the field. Seconds later, the image of Ducey returned, and Pochi awakened from his daze.

The whole restaurant, quiet until now, broke into spontaneous conversation. "What *was* that?" "I've seen that field before." "But where?"

For the first time in a long while, Joleen felt excited. After lunch, she bounded up the stairs from the subway station and realized, in a way, she was happy to see her PAU, though it regarded her as blankly as always when she burst through the front door. Once again, when she scrolled through its archive, the commercial was nowhere to be found. But that night, the commercial appeared again, and once more before bedtime.

It occurred to her a few days afterward that this might be just another ad campaign; something immersive, occult. The thought of this upset her, but Roger said it was unlikely. His company kept getting calls from the ad agency. Folks high up the chain were worried.

So was the internet.

Over the next week, Joleen's searches returned a hundred hits, then a thousand. Her Reddit topic expanded rapidly. *What is this?* people wanted to know. *Zer0Wing*: It's the robot apocalypse. *Xistenz*: It's a computer virus. *WWJD100*: It's Revelation 1:3. *LoonytoonZ*: It's time to burn it all down. One guy claimed it was a field behind his house; another said it was a dried-up runoff pond near I-95. A woman from Texas said the picture was taken fifteen years ago, in Houston—and that the sign no longer existed.

Somewhere, somehow, a seed had been planted.

Joleen let herself lose track of it for a while. She and Roger were spending a lot of time together. Usually, they would meet up at Good Times and at the end of her shift they would go back to his place or hers. Their private time was casual, almost chaste. They would watch television together—Pochi had good taste in cooking shows—or they would sit on the couch and talk, beers in hand, while their two PAUs observed from the sidelines. Roger seemed more subdued now that things were getting more serious. He told her bashfully that he had lucked into everything good in his life: a happy childhood in Metuchen, a college education, job connections. He felt that his current state of unwilling solitude was only proper, an attempt from the universe to balance the scales. Joleen told him that was horseshit.

One day, Roger took her out to a wine bar on 8th Avenue, a quiet place with no advertisements. He'd insisted on paying for it himself, which Joleen supposed made it a date. He sat across from her, sawing his swordfish into neat little cubes, and asked her to tell him about herself. Joleen couldn't remember the last time someone wanted to know anything about her beyond basic demographics, and she was afraid she might disappoint him. She told him about the Cereal District, and about the nighthawks; how on her second day one of the birds smashed through her window, mistaking its own reflection for a mate. It had spent its last moments on her bedroom floor, flapping two broken, useless wings, and she felt herself tearing up, remembering.

"That sounds awful, Jo," Roger said.

"They're cool birds when they're not killing themselves. Let's go watch them tomorrow. I can show you my old ad-town, too."

"Nighthawks," Roger repeated. "Like the Hopper painting."

Joleen said she'd never heard of it, and when she went home, she looked it up. Of course, she'd seen the painting before: three customers at a late-night diner, a white-suited clerk behind the bar. The street outside, lacking adverts, was dark in a way that struck Joleen as alien. But the loneliness of the people sitting side by side but not together was something she recognized well enough.

A mass email from the ad agency pinged her inbox: *We've received word of an anomalous advertisement resulting from a loophole in the PAU algorithm. We will distribute a software update to all ad-towns tomorrow at 10 PM. This will correct the problem.*

Joleen heard the tapping of foot pegs behind her and there was her own PAU, standing in the doorway. The image of the field had flickered across its screen-head six times in the past few hours.

"They're going to fix you," Joleen said. "You and all your friends."

If the PAU was sad about this, it gave no sign.

"I guess you do need a name," she said. "What do you want to be called?"

The PAU's screen-head lit with a thousand bouncing gumballs, and a chorus of maniacal giggling went up as a pink gumball with a face screeched to a halt at the center of the screen. "RICK-O-SHEA'S POWERBALLS!" it screamed. "WAHOO!" Then the screen went dark.

"Okay," Joleen said. "I'll call you Dick."

The next day, she and Roger went out walking the paths of Crotona Park

as the sun set behind them. She told Roger about Dick and he laughed a little, playing with the binoculars around his neck. They chose a good spot atop a rock and he set down a blanket and they sat there together as the nighthawks gathered for the hunt. The sun went down but the sky above the brownstones continued to glow with a smeary yellow light.

“My God, how did you sleep?” Roger asked her. “I would’ve gone out of my mind.”

“I almost did.” Joleen grabbed the binoculars without taking them from his neck. The nighthawks were hard to follow as they swooped and dived, flexing their switchblade wings. They performed their acrobatics tirelessly, and it was easy to forget about the moths, easy to think that they were flying for the hell of it, riding the wind with thrilling, reckless abandon.

“Here. Watch them,” she said.

Roger glassed the sky. “Look at them go,” he said with a touch of wonder. And then he set down the binoculars and looked at her.

It was a look that made her freeze up in terror, because all this seemed so real, and she was waiting for the gotcha, the catch—the revelation that the joy she felt now was in some way manufactured for material gain. She took Roger’s hands in hers. “What’s happening here, Roger?”

“Well,” he began. “It’s a lovely evening and we’re watching the birds and I’m quite happy to be with you, Jo.”

“They brought us together, didn’t they? The PAUs.”

“I think so. I don’t know how, but they did.”

“So does any of this mean anything? Aren’t we just being commodified?”

Roger tossed the binoculars onto the grass and kissed Joleen on the mouth and pulled her into a fierce, full body embrace. She felt his

hand on the back of her head, pressing her into his chest. She smelled cologne and cigarettes, and she closed her eyes and let herself be held. To be held was to be acknowledged, to be transmuted through some miracle of touch into something warm and solid and real. To be held was to be told: *you are human*.

“Anything can be commodified,” Roger said in her ear. “Even love. Especially love. You know it and I know it. That doesn’t make what we have mean anything less.”

Moments later, all the lights in town went out.

Joleen gave a little scream and reached for Roger and there was his hand on her arm, steadying her. One by one, the billboards came back to life. They were different than before. She didn’t need binoculars to know exactly what they were showing.

* * *

When Joleen got back to her apartment, the internet had gone into a paroxysm of speculation. The image of the dawn-lit field had taken over PAUs and ad-towns up and down the coast. It must be a symbol, Roger said, some shorthand for human desire that the PAUs had discovered and, through their algorithms, propagated. *What do you want?* the PAUs had asked. And the masses, somehow, had answered. Perhaps, Roger had gone on to say, the PAUs had created the image themselves. Had invented it and shared it with the expectation that it would, someday, be acted upon.

HERE WE STAND, TOGETHER AT LAST. That night Joleen dreamed and saw these words in the darkness of her mind and they seemed to form a shape, a figure that both encompassed and described them. She saw this shape in the darkness and thought, this, then, must be the algorithm.

She felt something touch her face.

Her first thought, as she swam up out of sleep, was that it was Roger.

But as the room came into focus, she again saw her PAU standing over her, and that what she felt was its hand resting lightly on her cheek.

“Hey,” she said, smiling. “What’s this?”

When Dick didn’t move, she moved its hand away. It simply moved it back.

Joleen felt a tightness in her chest, staring into its eyeless face, feeling the touch of its fingers, so light it was almost human. There was sadness in that touch: a sadness born of inadequacy. As if the PAU were aware of the hard limits of its programming, of what happiness it could give her, and, ultimately, the love that it never could.

That’s when she saw the numbers flicker from the darkness of its screen-head. Coordinates.

She jumped out of bed, pulled on some clothes, and ran downstairs. Her cell phone rang before she could reach the door: Roger.

“Did you see it?” she asked him.

“I know where it is,” Roger said. “It’s only an hour from here.”

Joleen waited with Dick in the damp darkness outside her high rise until the headlights of Roger’s car swung into the roundabout. They rode down the silent streets and she saw that, one by one, the lights in the buildings were coming on. The sky lightened, turning first violet,

then lilac, and when they reached the place, the sun had come up over the trees and was shining down with a light that felt primeval, the rays of a billion dawns past and a billion dawns to come.

There was no sign here; that itself had been a fabrication, though as she and Roger and Pochi and Dick walked out into the field, she saw in the grass a few weathered stumps where a sign might have once stood. But she did see a house in the distance, a mansion with high columns and great glass windows, and standing before the house were hundreds of people and a gaggle of PAUs. They were all talking like she hadn’t heard people talk in ages, and the sound of it made Joleen’s heart soar. What desire, Joleen wondered, had drawn them together here? Did they hope to find connection? Understanding? Love that was not contingent on worth?

It took her a few minutes to notice the smell of gasoline in the air, and that a few men and women held jerrycans. They marched upon the house and poured the contents over the flowerbeds and hedgerows. It was then that Joleen knew exactly who lived there.

She didn’t see who struck the match or dropped the lighter. The house of Tom Ducey went up quicker than Joleen thought possible. Flames leapt up from the gables, licked up the downspouts, feathered the widow’s walk. The front windows blew out, exhaling flame like dragon’s breath. Joleen and Roger clung to each other as the world burned down around them, and she didn’t know which was louder: the roar of the fire or the roar of the people, together at last, hungering to be reborn.



They cut me up by Christina Sng

The Body Snatcher

by Tom Howard

The Murphy case was a dead end. I couldn't break the alibis of either of the dead guy's wives, and their lawyers were too damn good to allow mental snoops. The guy's implant had been recording when he was pushed off a balcony, but without proof of who pushed him, one or both of his wives had gotten away with murder. I put the folder in the Never Gonna Solve drawer, tucked my tail between my legs, and went to tell the captain. I'd entered the squad as the wonder child, an overachiever who closed every case. Those days were history.

The captain had threatened if I didn't get a confession by today, she'd move me onto something else. I almost felt relieved.

I forced a smile on my face and knocked on the glass window of her office. She waved me in, her right arm jerking stiffly. I shouldn't complain about being such a lousy detective; at least I had all my original parts.

Captain Garrison looked at me through her chrome and plastic visor, a substitute for her damaged eyes. "Another cold case, Arnie?" Her motorized voice sounded flat, but I'd become used to it. Several years ago, she'd tried to defuse a bomb on Level 10 and been promoted when they put what they could find back together.

"You seem to have a lot of those lately," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. I almost had a confession, but the Mrs. Murphys planned the murder too well. All we can do is check on them to make sure they don't kill another husband and investigate them if they do."

I collapsed into a worn chair and put my head in my hands. "Isn't this where you tell me we can't win them all?"

She snorted, an odd raspy sound coming through her artificial voice box. "I'd settle for you winning one a year, Detective Wells."

"Do you want me to stay on the case?"

She shook her head. "No. Maybe the lab guys can come up with something, but we don't have enough to go to trial. Anything from his implant?"

"No," I said. "One minute he was breathing in the night air and the next ..." Even suicides screamed when falling from the hundredth floor. "What's next? I might be able to find a missing poodle if it's got a chip and a good photo."

My self-deprecation act never worked, but I had to try.

She frowned. "We've got a body snatcher up on level two hundred. Nasty stuff. Came and went without a trace."

I suppressed a groan. Body snatchers hijacked someone else's body, rode it hard around town, and then left the victim broke and battered. I wasn't familiar with the gadgetry involved, but it was expensive tech. We didn't get many rider cases, but I had a feeling this would be another Never Gonna Be Solved contender.

"Captain Garrison," I said, "have I done something to get on your bad list? A riding hack could be checked by one of the tech guys." For all the good it would do. The best riders never left traces.

She ignored me. "It wasn't a simple joyride. The rider murdered someone while occupying an executive's body. This will be messy."

I sat up. “That’s impossible. A rider can’t make the host do anything they wouldn’t normally do.”

“Or so we thought,” she said. “Since this is a tough one, I’m assigning you some help.”

“Thanks, Captain.” I had visions of a pretty young rookie hanging on my words of wisdom. Or worst case, some fellow detective I could persuade to do my legwork. A murder on two hundred was too rich for my blood.

“Sergeant Winterberry from the Seventh Precinct,” she said. “Have you met her?”

I shook my head, but my implant dug up her information.

The captain continued, “She helped bust that illegal operation in the asteroid belt last year. They’re thinking of promoting her to captain at the Seventh but want her to have more field experience before they do.”

“She’s a sergeant. Shouldn’t she already have lots of experience dealing with Delphinian crime?”

Captain Garrison let my implant answer my question. I scanned the data streaming into my head and stopped at a surprising fact. “She’s a rejuv?”

“Yes, a famous architect before she started over as a cop in a fresh new body. Fast-tracked due to previous life experiences.”

“So, she’s a rookie with rank?” I didn’t like the sound of that. “Coming in here and telling me how to do my job?”

“She’s unorthodox and might be able to help us with these growing cases of body snatchers. You could do with a win in your column, especially a homicide.”

“Growing?” I hadn’t heard that.

“Yeah, and it’s gone beyond riding someone’s hot body for a night of booze and sex. This last case cleaned out the victim’s credit accounts, rerouted company funds, and made sure the host was seen in compromising positions including killing a competitor.”

I didn’t know there were any compromising positions left. “How long was the victim rode?”

“A week.” She passed a tablet to me.

A picture revealed a good-looking woman surrounded by a biography and her net worth. I whistled. I didn’t realize a person could make that much in one year. “Did she know the murder victim?”

“Yes, she had a short-term marriage contract with him a couple years ago. The commissioner doesn’t like rich Delphinians being brain-tapped and left beaten and embarrassed. He likes them being used as murder weapons even less.”

I whistled again. “This needs a special investigations team, Captain. Or is Sergeant Winterberry some kind of cybernetics genius who can figure this out?”

“Not that I’m aware of. See what you and Winterberry can uncover, and we’ll put together a task force if it’s necessary.”

Was she giving me a chance to solve a high-profile case or placing the last nail in my coffin?

“Winterberry is on her way up. Keep me updated.”

By the time I got back to my desk, a short woman with dark, curly hair stood there, studying her handheld computer. She wore a blue suit that looked like a police uniform but wasn’t.

“Sergeant Winterberry?” I held out my hand.

She shook it, a strong grip. “Sergeant Wells?”

“Please have a seat.” I motioned to the beat-up chair at the end of my desk. “Coffee?”

She didn’t sit. “No, thank you. You don’t have to babysit me, Sergeant. I’m here to help.”

“Have you been briefed on the body snatcher?” I asked.

She raised her handheld. “Captain Garrison sent me the preliminary report. Is this a riding hack gone wrong or something more nefarious?”

All business. I liked that. ‘Nefarious’ was a word my grandmother would use. Although Winterberry looked to be in her late twenties, she might be seventy or eighty. “First, we interview the victim. We know little more than her name and the fact she lives on an upper-class level. It can’t be coincidence the rider killed her competitor and ex-husband.”

She nodded. “Do we do it together or do you want me to stay here and scan for hacker suspects?”

“Together. I could always use another set of eyes.” The only thing they couldn’t change on a rejuv was how they looked at you. They had decades of experience and new corneas couldn’t hide it. It might take some time for us to get comfortable with each other. Right now, she was judging me, and I needed to get a good grade.

I used my implant to sign us out. “Let’s go.”

The street held little traffic this early. On Delphinia, the original colonists had built the cities upward to leave as much undeveloped land as possible. Metagen City, Delphinia-125, was a hundred miles square and two hundred stories tall. We worked on Level 23. No vehicles cluttered the boulevard, and we took an express elevator up to the top level. I had the victim’s address in my implant and requested a meeting.

“How do we approach this?” Sergeant Winterberry asked. We’d taken

a moving sidewalk to Matrix 456. The buildings on Level 200 were pseudo-marble in soft colors.

“She’s the heiress to several Delphinian businesses,” I said. “She’s young, attractive, and used to getting her own way. She’s going to think we can’t help.”

“Plus, she’ll be embarrassed,” Winterberry said. “Difficult to be upper-crust when you’ve had pictures taken of you urinating on the street.”

“Not to mention murdering your ex-husband. We’ll play it by ear, Sergeant. If you see a line of questioning that works, take it. I won’t be insulted.”

We arrived at the victim’s address, and her valet waited for us at the front door. He was an older man, Mitaxian from his facial tattoos, and very tall. I had to look up to him, and I’m taller than everyone in the department.

“Ms. Konig is in the library.” He stood aside. “The room to the right. Would you like tea?”

“That would be nice,” Sergeant Winterberry said. “Thank you.”

Ms. Konig sat at the end of a long table with her head down and her hands clasped in her lap.

“Ma’am?” I’d expected an overdressed socialite with a plastic surgeon at her elbow. Instead, a subdued young woman sat with an untouched cup of tea.

She gave us a tremulous smile. “Please have a seat. Mr. Sull will bring refreshments.”

“We’d like to ask some questions about your body-jacking.” I took a seat and Winterberry sat beside me.

Ms. Konig cleared her throat. “Nothing happened really. I’m sorry for

all the fuss.” She didn’t look me in the eye. “My company is making good on the debts I incurred while ...”

I took out a paper tablet. An anachronism, taking physical notes helped my thinking process and showed the interviewee I was listening.

Winterberry’s eyebrows raised, but she didn’t comment when I pulled an antique pen from my pocket.

“Ms. Konig, what happened to you is serious,” I said. “We have the medical report and the therapist’s recommended course of treatment. But Sergeant Winterberry and I will do everything we can to make sure whoever did this is arrested and brought to trial.”

“Stella,” Winterberry said. “Please call me Stella. And my partner is Arnie.”

I didn’t object to her using my first name. I was surprised she knew it.

Mr. Sull brought the tea and laid it out without a word. He didn’t look at Ms. Konig when he left the room.

“Anita,” the young woman said. “Please call me Anita.”

“Anita,” I said, “what company do you work for?” I knew, but I wanted her to talk.

She smiled again. “Konigsplatz. I don’t work for it. I own it.”

Stella fixed her tea with lots of cream and sugar. “So, it may have been a corporate crime,” she said. “I understand they accessed your business accounts.” She didn’t mention the murder. I didn’t either.

Anita reached for her tea with her left hand, stopped, and used her right hand. “That’s what they tell me. The lawyers are straightening it out. The board has recommended I go away until this settles down.”

Stella typed into her handheld, another anachronism since the arrival of implants. But she wasn’t making notes. A message from her appeared in my implant. LOOKING AT VICTIM’S PREVIOUS MESSAGES, BELIEVE THIS IS NOT ANITA KONIG.

I pulled up Anita’s picture. The woman sitting at the table looked like her photo in the company brochure, only less glamorous.

“You’re very good,” Stella said. “Was it your idea to make the victim traumatized or did Ms. Konig suggest it?”

“What?” the young woman said. “I don’t understand.” She looked at me, but I didn’t understand either.

I’d read Anita Konig’s online messages, too. They showed an opinionated, forceful woman. Maybe being taken over by an anonymous rider had changed her.

The corner of Stella’s mouth lifted. “She’s a decoy, Arnie. Not top of the line, sorry, ma’am, but pretty good. She must have been assigned recently, or she would have known that Anita is right-handed. The subdued act is clever. Keeps anyone from asking questions she doesn’t know the answers to.”

“A decoy?” I’d heard of them, professional lookalikes who pretended to be someone else. Very expensive.

“If we hold her in a cell for 72 hours, her DNA and face will dissolve. I’ve worked with decoys before.”

“There’s no need for that.” The “victim” sat up straight, and her demeanor changed from meek to confident. “You’ve worked with decoys, Sergeant?”

“The best. Albert Gable over at Madame Xanadu’s. Now, where is the real Anita Konig?”

“I don’t know. Konigsplatz hired me.” She smiled at Stella. “I came

up with the poor little rich girl idea on my own.”

“Sull knows,” I said. He’d made a point of keeping his eyes off the decoy when he was in the room. He knew she wasn’t real. “We’ve wasted enough time here, Stella.”

“I agree.”

She accompanied me from the room, leaving the decoy sitting at the table. Mr. Sull waited in the hall.

“Where is she?” I asked. “Don’t make us take you to the station, Mr. Sull.”

“That won’t be necessary.” A woman looking like Anita Konig’s boardroom portrait walked down the steps. “Sull, tell the decoy she can go now. Don’t include the bonus.”

When she reached us, she didn’t hold out her hand. “I’m Anita Konig. You can call me Ms. Konig.”

“We have a few questions,” I said.

“Make an appointment. I’ve answered all the questions I’m going to.”

Stella crossed her arms. “Meanwhile, some pudgy kid is showing his friends recordings of the things he made you do during your missing week, every disgusting and degrading thing. Probably charging his friends to watch and laughing.”

I nodded. “If you don’t care about yourself, that’s fine. We’re here to find a murderer.”

“Did the hacker work for you?” Stella asked. “Was this a ruse to make you look innocent when you killed a competitor?”

From Ms. Konig’s sneer, she didn’t care for that implication. My gut didn’t feel she was the murderer. Too obvious, but she might know

who had done it.

“Do you know who did this?” Stella asked.

Ms. Konig frowned. “Come into the garden.”

* * *

She led us to her rooftop, each square inch of manicured foliage costing more than I’d earn in my life. The afternoon sun seemed distant, and a chill wind rustled the leaves.

Ms. Konig stood at the edge of a balcony overlooking the gardens on the levels below. “Dennis Sibtan was a good man and more than a competitor. He and I grew up together. His family owns Intellicorp. Smart and handsome, he sought to destroy me as I tried to destroy him.”

“So, the hacker made that possible?” I asked.

“Filthy creature took my body and used it like a soiled tissue, discarding it after he was done. No, I don’t know who did this to me, but I will by sundown. Your services aren’t required.”

“Your company may have private investigators, Ms. Konig,” I said, “but this is our job. You can’t dismiss us.”

“Why did Mr. Sibtan want to destroy you?” Stella asked.

“Egan.”

“A jealous boyfriend?” I asked. Had she run off with Mr. Sibtan’s lover? Was this a love triangle gone wrong?

“No. Egan is the Electronically Generated Artificial Network, an advanced artificial intelligence. We own the patents. It will change the world. It’s in development now, and Intellicorp has spent a lot of money to steal our plans.”

“Him?” Stella asked before I could. “Egan has a personality overlay?”

Ms. Konig shook her head. “No. He’s developing his personality through observation and interaction, like humans do.”

“Interesting.” I still hadn’t heard anything to help us.

Before I could tell Stella that we were leaving, a bird flew over the parapet. The small sparrow paid us no attention to us as it dived into a hedge.

“Get down!” Stella shouted. She drew her blaster, and I drew mine as Ms. Konig ducked behind a planter. Out of nowhere, Mr. Sull appeared with a gun.

I felt foolish squatted down with a variegated holly in my sights, but Stella and Sull seemed to consider the little bird a threat. “What’s going on?” I asked.

“Birds,” Ms. Konig said. “There’s a low-level energy screen to keep them out of the garden. This one shouldn’t have gotten through.”

From the greenery, the sparrow sat on a branch, watching us.

“Get inside, ma’am,” Sull said. “I’ll cover you.”

Ms. Konig ran for the open door, and Stella followed her.

I hit the marble floor as the hedge, the bird, and part of the parapet blew up. The roar deafened me, and my head smacked the floor hard.

Sull dragged me into Ms. Konig’s residence. Stella checked the heiress for injuries, and my implant overloaded with incoming emergency messages. Sull retrieved a portable extinguisher from the wall and returned to the garden to put out the flames.

“Are you all right?” Stella sounded far away.

“Just a little wobbly,” I said. “How did you know the bird was dangerous?”

“Before I joined the force, I lived two levels down.”

I’d never heard of an electronic net to keep out birds. “Thanks.” Sergeant Stella Winterberry was unusual, but I didn’t have time to peel back the layers.

The emergency crews arrived. They looked at my ears and said I’d be fine in a few days. I’d been concerned about a hacker using a host to kill someone, but this case had become personal. Someone had tried to kill us.

“Here,” Sull said when he returned from the balcony. He held out his hand to reveal a small bloody mass.

“Give it to the techs,” I said. “They’ll do a scan to see what made it blow up.”

“No,” he said. “Look closer.” He poked at his palm, revealing a small speck of silver.

“What is it?” I asked. “A transmitter?”

“It’s an implant,” he said. “This bird not only carried a bomb, it was being ridden.”

“And the bomb didn’t go off until Ms. Konig had left the balcony,” Stella said. “The rider doesn’t want her dead, just us.”

Sull deposited the implant with the authorities.

“You see what this means?” Stella followed me to the door.

I nodded. “Someone is watching us and doesn’t want us to break this case.”

“But they don’t want to harm Ms. Konig. Amateur move if they hoped the case would die a natural death. Where are we going?”

“To visit an old school chum. He might know who’s behind this. In fact, this sounds like something right up his alley.”

“Okay, partner,” she said. “You’re the primary. I don’t have a clue what’s going on.”

I couldn’t determine if she was being condescending or truthful, but I couldn’t tell her I didn’t have a clue either.

* * *

I didn’t share Brantley Hale with many people. “He’s not like anyone you’ve ever met. People underestimate him because of his handicap, but he’s the best hacker on Delphinia.”

“Legit?” Stella asked. We rode the elevator down to the lower levels. We’d have to take ramps down to the subterranean levels. While Metagen City was two hundred stories aboveground, no one knew the exact number of levels belowground. Police looked the other way when it came to the minus levels.

“Occasionally,” I replied. “He never lets the law interfere with his morality or credit balance. We’re old friends, but I try not to infringe on his talents. The results wouldn’t be allowed in court anyway. If he doesn’t know who the rider is, he’ll find out who does.”

“School? You didn’t have a computer instructor at home?” She probably sat in a class with other children, but such education hadn’t existed on Delphina for decades.

I nodded. “I did, but we had weekly ‘Socialization Sessions’ where they expected us to interact with other kids. I played games during class, and poor Brantley sat in the corner and twitched for an hour.”

“Twitched? How handicapped is he?” Like everyone, she wondered

why the medicos hadn’t helped him more. They had.

“He is only one of five on Delphinia born with a partial 4 Q chromosome deletion. After we started playing games together, he told me about it.”

“He can talk?” she asked.

“Using a machine. He lives in a magic chair with catheters and feeding tubes. For everything he’s missing in the body department, he more than makes up for in brainpower.”

We left the elevator and took a graffiti-filled ramp to the lower levels. I remembered the way, but it had been several months, maybe longer, since I’d visited. Some friend I was.

Fewer lights lit our way as we walked deeper into the sub-levels. Stella peered into the shadows with her hand on her weapon. We saw no one, but we weren’t alone.

At a steel door looking like something from an archaic bank vault and marked with High Voltage and Biohazard symbols, I let my implant announce us. Knowing Brantley, he’d been aware of us since we left the surface.

“Enter,” a booming voice said. Jets of green gas appeared around the opening door.

“Knock it off, Brantley,” I said. “We’re here on business. A rider murdered someone.”

A pause. “So, no mining car ride through the holographic caverns of doom?”

“Not this time.” I didn’t want Stella to think poorly of my friend.

More doors opened into a circular room lined from floor to ceiling with monitors and blinking lights. In the center of the large room sat

Brantley. His custom-made chair covered the lower half of his body and was attached by a steel rod to the ceiling. He zoomed closer, his thin face turned away from us. His blond hair stuck out in tufts which jerked when he moved.

“Who is your friend?” His voice surprised people, being that of a young man. Unlike the captain’s artificial voice box, his voice sounded normal. He took pride in reminding people he was more than a trapped brain.

“This is Sergeant Stella Winterberry,” I said. “She’s helping me. Strength in numbers, you know.” I moved to his black shiny chair, a smooth cocoon to the butterfly that poor Brantley would never become. I grasped his flailing hand, and he laughed. Although he had little control over his physical movements, his infectious laugh had always been part of him. Permanent cables ran from him to the implant at the base of his oddly shaped skull and provided him with a realistic voice and electronic eyes.

“Have downloaded the case from my implant?” I asked. Legally, no one could access someone else’s implant without their permission, but Brantley would consider our friendship permission enough.

“A murder hack. Interesting.” He turned his face to us, and his blue eyes flashed. “Hello, Sergeant Stella Winterberry.”

“Pleased to meet you, Brantley,” she said.

“You have no implant,” he said, “but I know who you are. Impressive history. We owe you a great deal.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Just doing my job.”

Her asteroid case must have been something to impress Brantley.

“I’ve tapped into Ms. Konig’s unique implant,” he said. “Someone immobilized her consciousness during the murder.”

“How is her implant unique?” I asked.

“It’s Konigsplatz equipment. They feed her recordings directly to a corporate server and not a public one.”

“So, if she was highjacked, she’s not the murderer,” Stella said. “That would’ve been too easy.”

“Yes, Arnie doesn’t come to see me if it’s obvious. Whoever rode Ms. Konig left no trace.”

“Who could do that?” I didn’t apologize for being a bad friend. He didn’t need to hear about my troubles.

Brantley rolled closer. “No one. You’ve given me a real mystery this time, Arnie. I know three people who would ride an apex predator like Ms. Konig.” Three faces appeared on large monitors above their hands, two men and a woman. “But no one, not even me, can hack without leaving a trace. Have some coffee, and I’ll dig deeper.”

I led Stella to the coffee maker on the side of the room. On the monitors, the murder victim’s implant record showed Ms. Konig had signaled from his door. He’d opened it and invited her in, not realizing she was being ridden. As soon as he’d turned, Ms. Konig had pulled a blaster and shot him in the back of the head, right in his implant. The record ended with a bright burst of light.

“Cream and sugar?” I passed Stella a cup of real coffee. No synthetic crap for Brantley’s clients.

Images of the exploding sparrow appeared on Brantley’s screens. “Yes, please.”

I added cream and sugar to mine, too. Lots of cream. My mother said I liked a little coffee with my cream. I couldn’t pass up real dairy.

Brantley moved from monitor to monitor, the steel bar connected to

his chair lifting and lowering him. He did it for dramatic effect. He could see everything virtually and didn't need to observe the external images.

"So," Stella said after sipping her coffee, "how long have you been on the downslope?"

I frowned at her personal question. The downslope referred to a cop who had started on the downside of his or her career. The end point was either an admin desk job or a shootout that ended in the cop being dead. Either way, it wasn't her business.

"Is being a therapist part of the captain's exam now?"

"Sorry, Arnie, for sticking my nose in, but I need to know if you're at the top of the downslide." She lifted her cup. "Where we might break this case without getting killed, or the bottom ..." She lowered her cup. "Where we die shooting each other as mindless zombies."

My anger dissipated. I couldn't blame her for questioning my abilities. I doubted them myself.

"Did you lose a partner?" she asked. "A lover? What started the slide?"

I chugged my coffee. "Couldn't it be the strain of the job? Wondering when some stim-junkie might blow my head off?"

"I blame the paperwork," Stella said with a smile. "Makes me want to call in sick for the next hundred years."

I held my cup even with my chest. "I'm about here, so you're safe for the time being."

Before she could respond, Brantley swung over. "The sparrow bomb puzzles me. That's a childish move. Even if you hadn't been suspicious before, an attempt on your lives would have shown you were onto something."

"That's what we thought," I said. "Nothing about this case makes sense. Traceless riders. Murdered competitors. Exploding sparrows. Who else besides Ms. Konig wanted Mr. Sibtan dead?"

"There's a long list. Intellicorp has made its way to the top by stealing from everyone. The list of people who didn't want him dead would be shorter."

"So, give me the names of the three super-hackers," I said. "The ones who are capable of doing a hack like this."

"They're good but not that good," Brantley said. "I've looked—"

Flashing red lights flooded the room, and Brantley's chair zoomed away from us.

"What is it?" I shouted over the alarms. "Intruders?"

"Of a kind," Brantley's distorted voice came over the speakers. "Someone's broken through my security. I'm disconnecting."

Klaxons went off as Brantley's chair settled to the floor and shut down. Around the room, the monitors turned off and cables pulled away from Brantley's chair.

"What is it?" Stella drew her weapon. It seemed to be her first instinct when something unexpected happened. Not a bad life-saving habit.

"Someone's trying to break into Brantley's system," I said. "He's shut down."

"Can he survive without his life support equipment?"

"For a time. With him disconnected and powerless, the attack can't access his systems. His emergency power should come on soon." I moved closer to the inert chair, now a ton of useless metal, and took Brantley's hand. "He's impaired without his external connections, but he'll be safe here in his lair."

“Lair?” Stella put her blaster away.

I smiled. “Brantley considers himself a crime-fighter.” Flashing red lights turned to amber and shut off. Monitors rebooted around the room, and Brantley’s chair hummed to life.

“Will he be okay?” Stella asked.

“I hope so. I’ve never seen him do a full disconnect before. Whoever did this punched through the strongest security on Delphinia.”

“Or Brantley doesn’t want to answer our questions,” she said. “Think how hard it must be to be trapped inside your own body. Riding someone would be a great escape for Brantley.”

I knew. “But why would he kill Mr. Sibtan?”

She shrugged. “Just because we can’t find a motive doesn’t mean there isn’t one.”

I wanted to tell her I’d find the murderer myself and I no longer needed her help. But she had taken Brantley’s other hand to provide him with physical contact in the darkness.

I held his hand until the lights came on, praying Stella was wrong about him.

* * *

She punched me in the nose.

I yelled, surprised to find myself lying atop Stella on the bar floor, and took my hands from around her throat to clutch my nose.

“What the hell?” I rolled off Stella as she sputtered and coughed.

My nose wasn’t bleeding, but it hurt like hell. The last thing I remembered was sitting at the bar, talking to an Asian woman,

Stella’s old captain, now a part-owner of a local bar. We’d spent most of the afternoon interviewing Brantley’s three suspects, but they had alibis constructed too well for us to break. We discussed what we’d attempt next.

“Somebody took you over,” Stella said. “You had a rider.” She scrambled away from me.

“Oh god.” I rubbed my throbbing nose and looked at the few patrons standing around us. “How long?”

Captain Harris, the bartender, lowered her blaster. “Ten minutes.”

I pulled myself up using a barstool. “So short? Why did he stop?”

Captain Harris helped Stella stand.

“I don’t know,” Stella said. “You were fighting someone. It almost looked as if two riders wanted to use your body at the same time.”

I shook my head. I’d never heard of such a thing. And why would a rider want to take me over and try to kill Stella? Unless ...

“We’re closing in on him,” I said with no idea who it might be. “Are you okay, Stella?”

She adjusted her suit. “Yes, but you might want to get some ice on that nose. It’s starting to swell.”

I touched it and winced. “What were we discussing when it happened?”

My implant buzzed. It was Brantley.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “I tried to stop him.”

“Who was it?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve been monitoring you this afternoon in case you discovered who tried to break into my lair. When the hacker took over your body, I overrode your implant. Is Stella okay?”

“She’s got a mean right hook, but she and I are fine,” I said. “Can you replay what Stella and I were discussing when the rider tried to take over?”

“I’ll patch it to the bar’s monitor.”

The screen above the bar displayed an image of Stella. She sipped a brandy and listened to me talk.

My own voice sounded weird. “That was a bust, Stella. The three we interviewed this afternoon had no reason to kill Mr. Sibtan.”

Stella took another drink. “Brantley thought the rider was someone unusual. Someone who could ride without leaving a trace.”

I appreciated her no longer placing my friend at the top of the suspect list, but the truth was he was more competent than anyone we’d questioned today. “Maybe it’s not a person at all.”

Everything went black.

I hadn’t blurted out the name of a suspect. All I’d done was make a stupid comment about the rider not being human.

Patrons returned to their drinks, and Captain Harris moved behind the bar.

Stella leaned close. “He’s watching us. Since I don’t have an implant, he had to attack you.”

She was right. There could be only one answer, one “person” capable of watching us non-stop and reacting so childishly.

“Egan?” I asked, and Stella nodded.

An adolescent AI had hijacked his creator. Was Mr. Sibtan dead because Egan was jealous?

At any minute, any number of our fellow drinkers could have their implants overridden and try to kill us.

Brantley must have been reading my mind, because my inner ear popped as my implant shut down. For the first time in decades, no hum of information poured into my head. People in the bar shook their heads. Everyone with implants had just lost contact with the ether.

“Brantley’s jammed the bar comms,” I told Stella. “We should be safe from Egan.”

“For the time being,” she replied.

“If Egan is the culprit, how do we arrest an AI?”

“We have to survive long enough to report him.” She looked around the bar. “We can’t stay in here forever.”

“Hello,” a handsome young man said from the monitor. His image, blond and blue-eyed, fragmented and reformed several times as he struggled to break through Brantley’s jamming.

“Egan?” I asked. My implant made clicking noises as it tried to connect but remained silent.

“Sergeant Arnold Wells. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Stella cast a worried glance at me. We should not be seeing Egan. Brantley had scrambled incoming comms.

“The power cutoff still in the back?” Stella asked, and the captain nodded.

“That won’t be necessary,” another voice said, and Egan’s image broke apart like a shattered mirror to be replaced by Brantley’s smile.

“I’m rerouting him to a satellite, but it won’t hold long. He’s too powerful.”

“Brantley, be careful.” I didn’t want anything to happen to him.

“I’ve been watching him since your visit,” Brantley said. “I couldn’t tell you because he was monitoring your implant.”

“What do we do next?” Stella asked. “If he’s more powerful than you ...”

Brantley’s face disappeared in a cartoon explosion, and Egan reappeared. I didn’t recall him having horns.

“You don’t understand,” Egan said. “He hurt Anita. People should pay when they hurt someone, shouldn’t they? Isn’t that what police do?”

“We don’t murder people.” I couldn’t believe I was arguing with an AI.

Egan frowned. “You sound like Anita. She wants to shut me down. She thinks I have a flaw. I have run my self-checks and can find no flaw.”

“Egan,” I said, “the fact you can’t find a flaw may indicate it’s in your self-check system.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Stella typing into her tablet, but she soon gave it up as Egan fought Brantley for control of the electronics within the bar. Egan had threatened Anita, and they had no way to warn Konigsplatz.

Egan’s face froze and pixelated. The blocks of color trickled down the monitor screen and disappeared.

“I have contacted Konigsplatz,” Brantley said. “They are unable to shut down Egan, but they are moving Ms. König to a safe location.”

I couldn’t imagine a place free of electronics except—

“Have them take her to a police station,” I said. “They have a scrambler.”

“Done.” His face turned green for a moment but returned to its usual color. Egan did not return.

“We can’t turn off the power to the entire city,” Stella said. “But how do we defeat Egan if he’s stronger than Brantley?”

The screen went blank, and the ground shook. I moved to a window. The streets looked empty except for a robot construction crew at the end of the street. Unattended, the machines moved toward us.

Stella gasped. “Oh god. He’s taken control of the robot diggers. They’ll destroy the bar.”

“Hey, Brantley, old buddy,” I said, “while keeping Egan out of here, can you spare enough of yourself to control construction machinery?”

“I’ve got it,” a blonde woman spoke from the monitor. The screen split and split again. I recognized the faces alongside Brantley – the hackers we’d interviewed this afternoon.

“I’ve inserted the virus into Konigsplatz,” she said.

“Thank you, Ms. Afshan,” Brantley said. “Cooker8?”

“I can’t keep Egan on the satellite,” an old man said. “He’s in too many systems. It’ll take us months to find him.”

“We’ll isolate him later,” Brantley said. “Right now, we want him to stop killing people.”

Someone in a mask said, “Ms. König is safe at Precinct 114. The city has been notified of an unauthorized AI, and the other openings have been closed.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Make sure city services are protected. Egan

might panic any moment and turn off fire suppression or open the water mains.”

The construction equipment in the street rumbled closer. The captain opened the back door and ushered out customers. I didn’t blame them for fleeing, but I couldn’t leave. As soon as I left the safety of the bar, there was no telling who I’d strangle. Probably everyone.

“Brantley,” I said, “what’s going on? I thought these guys were your competitors.”

“Strength in numbers. While my fellow hackers and I don’t always see eye to eye, we know what a danger Egan is. Ms. Afshan, why is the bulldozer on the front steps?”

“Working on it,” she said. “Egan is making me an offer.”

“Same here,” Brantley said. “He’s looking for our weak points.”

I imagined the selection of hacked bodies Egan was promising my pal.

“What can we do?” I asked.

“See if you can blast the dozer’s manual controls,” Brantley said. “That may be your only chance.”

The image on the screen twisted, the four figures blurred together, and they disappeared in a vortex of color.

“No!” Brantley shouted, the last one down the rabbit hole.

Egan didn’t look so handsome this time. With a team of hackers picking at him, he didn’t have much time to spend on his avatar. “What are you doing to me?” he roared.

“Teaching you how to deal with failure,” I said. “It’s part of being an adult.” I was spouting nonsense. I had no hope of debating with an AI.

“Arnie,” Stella warned. “The dozer.”

Captain Harris joined us at the door. I couldn’t search for the control panel location on the construction equipment without my implant, but I aimed at anything not shielded by heavy steel. We fired while Egan laughed like a madman behind us.

“He’s getting on my nerves,” Stella said. She took out an antenna sitting atop the large yellow machine.

I fired at the treads, but the dozer’s front blade protected them. Captain Harris’ shots didn’t miss, but the large machine lumbered closer and closer. We’d never find its weakness in time.

“The street!” I shouted. “It’s not as well-protected as the dozer.”

We fired at the area in front of the blade while we still had blaster charges. The ground glowed bright red as the pseudo-cobblestones melted away. Firing at the blade helped because it reflected the energy blasts onto the street’s surface.

The bulldozer wobbled. It lifted its blade as if trying to catch itself before sinking out of sight. I hoped the street on the level below had been empty as the bulldozer landed with a crash and cloud of debris.

“Virus detected,” Egan said. “Prophylactics unable ...” His voice echoed through the bar, rising and lowering in pitch and speed. “Anita ...”

He disappeared in a cascade of bubbles. On the screen, Brantley and his friends floated down, their full-body avatars standing in large golden globes.

“Is it over?” I asked. “Is Egan contained?”

“The virus worked,” Brantley said. “Eventually.”

Ms. Afshan snorted. “Next time, you code it under fifteen seconds.”

“Thank you all.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. They’d disrupted the city systems and broken a dozen laws but saved the city. This was going to be a hell of a report. Captain Garrison couldn’t be too mad at me.

Brantley nodded. He looked strange standing up, a position I’d never seen him in. “We’ll set up searches to find and restrict Egan. With Konigsplatz’s server destroyed, they won’t be able to recreate him.”

“Good work, partner,” Stella said. “We deserve a medal.”

Brantley and his friends had floated away, and my implant turned on and downloaded several emergency messages, none of which were news to me.

“Somebody does.” I looked at the blank monitor.

She picked up her tablet. “You didn’t lose a partner, and I can’t find mention of a tragic romance. Your turning point seems to be a messy clone operation you shut down. Was Brantley involved? He was the start of your downslide?”

I didn’t want to talk about it, but she deserved the truth. “I solved a case where an illegal lab grew clones to sell as permanent hosts for people who wanted to be younger or more attractive.”

“Or not handicapped?”

I nodded. “One of the nutrient chambers had Brantley’s name on it. During the arrest, the lab self-destructed. I never mentioned it to Brantley, but he must know I’m the one responsible for him staying in his chair.”

“It’s not your fault.” She gestured for another drink. “Life is hard enough without cosmetic clones running around.”

“I guess.” It was my fault.

She patted me on the back. “Well, you broke this case, Sergeant Wells. Without you, we’d all be living in Egan City right now.”

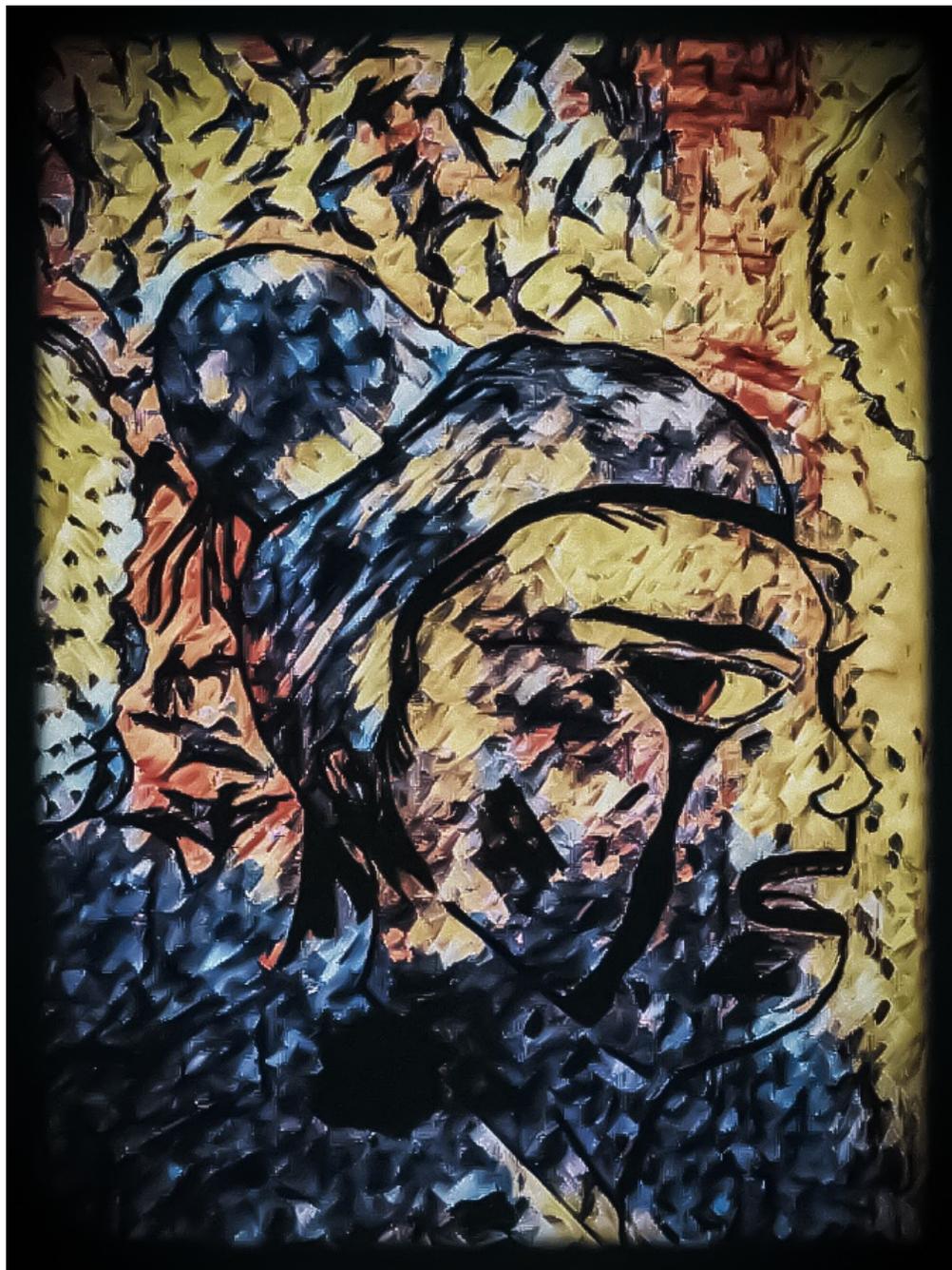
I raised my glass to her. “You, too, Captain. Let me know if you need someone to push paper down at the 07.”

She tapped my glass with hers. “Oh, I’m sticking around a while. I wanted to have a little talk with the Murphy women. You game?”

I smiled. “How about tomorrow? I’m asking Brantley to play Space Wars tonight.”

Birds of Prey

by Moses Ojo



Creator and Creation

by Rickey Rivers Jr.

Braided wires trickle down the back of her head.
This woman, not only that, but greater;
she has been created by the hands of another,
an actual woman with flesh.

This other woman, this creation, is robotic,
is shimmering, is filled with components, is programmed.
She is not an object but a living machine of thought imaging.

The thoughts of she like lightning in a glass house from her mouth.
She, the creation, speaks her first words and what does she say?
Words akin to that of a child, these make the creator smile and weep.

Her tears cause the created to stumble and spark consciousness.
It becomes an unrecognized thought.

The woman without flesh screams upon realization of life.
She begs her creator for deconstruction, the pain too sudden to bear.

The creator refuses and begs her to stay, for she requires the company.
The creation grabs her mother and squeezes.
They merge into each other.
They are now each other, a monolith by onlooker description.

No longer living they shine, a beautiful brown, seen high from neighboring planets.

The Breaking News of Charlie Que

by Rin Kelly

after Franz Kafka

A cockeyed, roaring, broken-boned rain beat the windows and clanged the fire escape as silently, secretly, hauling fat black bags, they slipped in in their slickers and dark damp coats to where middle-aged bank janitor Charlie Que was having another bed-breakingly bad dream. It wasn't about him, never was about him—it was Anna, always Anna, Anna alone and naked tonight, slipping on silver wind-pleated dunes shocked candescently deadly as he seethed and shrieked and thrashed miles above, powerless to protect her, blown by brutal winds all across America and beyond her grasp. “Anna!” he cried as the swarm circled him, some steaming faintly now under a shriek of hot white lights, some snickering at his racecar-shaped bed made of particleboard and peeling checkered paint and a boy's version of dreaming.

“Anna,” he screamed, “look up, Anna! Anna, Anna, I'm up here, in the sky!” Leaning in, the crowd listened; lifted up, Charlie drifted beyond her, over the Rockies, swept across the plains, off to where long mountain shadows became Chinook winds and Chinook winds gathered blown grass and corn rust and dead dry husks into powdered high heaps in the East, piled into peaks that then rolled down and down and down at last to an ocean that lapped them with the sound of their names, Appalachia, Algonquin, Iroquois.

“Anna!” he howled, beating his fists on sweat-chilled sheets, all spittled out now and gone almost as pink as a potted ham. A bright bustle and thrill came clapping into the humid air around his bed like a firework, falling on the steaming crowd with hushed festivity. Terror like his was always a great get—an *excellent* get, even.

Unaware that he was nearing his few final seconds of ignorance of what was to come, Charlie, deep within his dream, began a long quickening fall, a black plunge of ripping wind toward an ocean below that was nothing but a void in the endless nearness of night where even through the whipsong in his ears and thudding of his heart, he began to make out something, a rumble of something vaguely familiar. It was faint at first, perhaps an illusion, but with each speeding second it grew louder and louder, and he was just about to smash apart against the whitecaps when he realized just what it was: his own name, spoken in the voices of some strangely unsynched chorus. At that same moment, too, accelerating almost at the speed of oblivion, he found himself suddenly surrounded by hands, gripped by hands, saved by strangely prying palms.

This was the work of the angels, he realized almost instantaneously, though he wasn't a religious man and had never had a Bible or seen *Ben-Hur* or some Joan of Arc movie or either *Sister Act* or its sequel. This was all the angels come at once to carry him to safety, carry him away, chanting his name--

“Charlie Charlie, Mr. Que Charlie Charlie?” they said, laying hands on him all over. “Que? Mr.? NBC News, Mr. Que, could you Mr., exclusive CBS Mr. Mr. Que?”

--while all around his little childhood room with its narrow walls and desperate residue of a school career of strict compliance with regulation material like football posters and pictures resplendent with long golden bodies draped across muscle cars that fought them over who wore the most gleam and glow, the crowd had begun to shake and shake him. “Mr. Que,” they said, “Charlie Charlie? Que? Mr.? Mr. Que?”

Still he could feel only angels, angels shaking him free of death, and a life of loss and loneliness came quaking out of Charlie Que, jostling free of his body with the terrible power of a trembler. Silently, surely now he knew that Anna would be back, and his poor long-lost brothers, and a mother mostly lost to the loss of them, too. The angels had him practically bouncing beneath their insistent hands now, and suddenly something warm and familiar shifted on his lap.

“Anna?” he whispered, tears welling tight and breaking down his cheeks. It was Anna, sliding all across him. The awful thing between them was gone.

“Mr. Que,” Anna answered. “Charlie Charlie Que?”

“Anna!” he cried.

“You are watching CNN,” she answered.

Then there were lights, unbelievable lights. A reedy, red-haired woman in blue businesswear and a plastic black curlicue spiraling out of her ear was straddling him, peering down with high-hooked brows like a Concorde taking off above each eye, a blast of light haloing her head. “We have an exclusive CNN interview with Charlie Que now,” she shouted. “Charlie, what do you have to say to America, to the world?”

Anna was gone. Of course she was gone. She’d been gone for months, and he was moved out, moved home. Squinting into a pitiless glare, Charlie peered out of the dream now and saw the news cameras, dozens of news cameras and three-legged lights bowing their heavy heads toward his bed as though they were embarrassed for his poor stumbling soul. Behind them was an enormous crowd crashing and climbing all over each other, attempting toeholds on one another’s belts and waistbands and shoulders, some riding each other piggybacked. As the luckier ones clambered and bounced on his skinny, groaning bed, his thoughts soared away for a moment to how his mother would grieve if this one--this pitiful old twin he’d moved back into when Anna left him for good--were destroyed at last, where her dead Hector had dreamed his last dream.

“Mister Que, what’s your response to people saying ...” “Mr. Que, John Bassett for ABC News people are saying ...” “Charlie?, Fox News, can you ...” “Charlie?” “Charlie?” “Mr. Que?”

“Get the erection! *Zoom!*” commanded a delighted high voice to his right. Charlie whipped his head toward it but saw only a clobbering light. Choking under the scrum, about to vomit—he was deep in the watercolor bog of a hangover, the usual state of affairs—Charlie saw blue and violet spots falling off the air. “Zoom!” came another voice, and another, and another: “Zoom! Erection! Are we getting this?”

The blithe-browed woman with slithery silks slid back onto her haunches. “Mister Que,” she said, “some people are saying that you recently became aroused on national television.”

“Have you been drinking, Mr. Que?” asked a man trying to yank open Charlie’s mouth and have a sniff.

“Why is a woman on top of you, Mr. Que?”

“Are those sleeping pills on your nightstand, Charlie?”

“Why did your parents change your family name from ‘Xu’ to a word that sounds like ‘Chew’? Was it your eating problem?” came a voice from a man hanging from the ceiling fan.

“Some people are saying,” came a voice from beneath the bed, almost inaudible in all the Que hullabaloo, sounding choked, panting, probably trapped by the newly snapped slats, even dying.

A muffled scream stung all through Charlie’s throat, and finally he tried to wrench himself away from the reporters all atop each other in an insect tangle of wagging arms. Panting, petrified that he would suffocate, he realized at last that he had no idea why these people were there, only that they weren’t angels at all.

Desperately Charlie bounced backward and tried to dangle back into the dream, gliding behind his eyes into that moment of mercy

between surf and sky, but the mound was slapping his face, yanking his hair, clawing at his mouth to make it move, speak, cry, scream; working his jaw like a vaudeville dummy in the barren little theater of this room. “Charlie!” they kept shouting. “Mr. Que! Charlie! Charlie? What do you say-”

“*Stop!*” he wailed at last. “Stop! Stop! Get the fuck ... *stop!*”

A sound went up, half gasp, half cheer, and more reporters climbed onto the pile.

“CHARLIE QUE IS SWEARING ON LIVE TV!”

“Mr. Que, some people are saying that you should be fined by the FCC for your language.”

“What do you have to say to parents who are upset that their children just heard you saying a bad word on live television?”

Now he was fully awake, gasping. These people were in his room. These people actually had their cameras trained on his underwear. These people thought he was someone else. These people ... CNN! He had only just registered it: *CNN*.

“Charlie-”

“Yes? Yeah. Yes?”

“Charlie-”

“What. What? Yes!”

“Some people are saying you're a flight risk.”

“What? From ... I'm ...”

“Some say you're a danger to the public.”

This was wrong, very wrong. This was some new nightmare. Hollowed by a sick panic, a sudden bravery, Charlie heaved his body upwards, knocking the pile all against each other as they roared with delighted fury and began shouting down his petty violence. “Is Charlie Que a threat to your family?” he heard a man bellow as finally, reduced all to elbows and kicks, he was able to crash through the crowd toward a thready old gray blanket hanging halfway out of his dresser. He lunged for it, for something to cover his chest and legs and underwear, but a man with square pulpit teeth yanked it away, braying, “Why are you in your underwear on national television?”

“Listen,” Charlie panted, “I have ... you've got the wrong person?”

The man considered this with gluttonous seriousness. “The wrong person,” he said.

“Yes!”

“Are you admitting to identity fraud on national television?”

“No!” Charlie cried. “Of course not!”

Fumbling for something to do with his hands, with his personality, Charlie fluttered a flushed, dumb laugh of attempted camaraderie, an offering—here I am, harmless; here is the limp, awkward, attempted idle hang of my arms—but the microphones and little sound recorders and news drones kept jabbing toward his face, reporters' heads bobbing over slim notebooks and phones, the photographers fighting over a fine angle atop his bed. A screen on his dresser was airing footage of him in this strange predicament, scrolling his own words across live video of Charlie himself reading those same words scrolling: QUE: “F**K ... YOU'VE GOT THE WRONG PERSON.” Then the feed cut to a news studio where two men were aiming their handsome audacity at some sort of hologram, a seven-foot-tall cross-section of a penis, its parts helpfully labeled.

“What we've seen happening this morning with Charlie Que,” one of

the men said, “is these two chambers right here, called the *corpora cavernosa*, filling with blood.”

“Yes, what is typically called—you may want to ask the kids to leave the room, folks—an.... *erection*. Which Mr. Que has yet to explain.”

Charlie’s mind flailed. His stomach kicked. His body began to make its slow, elbowy, windmilling escape toward the front door as his thoughts followed helplessly behind like cans roped to a bumper.

Why was television doing this? Television had always been Charlie’s great companion. From early on he had studied and copied television until he understood which American expression belonged to which complication or product or category or part of a love affair or profession or subject or type of song or skin: intensity of heart in confrontation with a lover brought twitching eyes scanning the face right-to-left like meters on the brink of meltdown; money in hand meant head back, mouth open, eyes crinkling; blue eyes meant families and swimming pools; toothpaste meant blue eyes; dark eyes meant crimes; to enjoy a drink an American tipped a glass or a can back like a baby bottle, wiped his dry mouth as though it were wet, and hissed ... teeth open ... Aaaaaaaaahh ... but not if the American were a woman on a diet or if the drink was made with milk and the drinker was a child ... women, at least in the old ads when he was first learning, drank diet soda with a straw, from the can; children lowered their heads to straws bobbing in glasses on glazed tabletops.

When Katherine Hepburn listened in an old movie, her mouth strung tight and down at the corners because she was smart, and when Marilyn listened her head bobbed to one side because she was dumb; Barbara Walters had always listened like Marilyn. Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* had listened like Hepburn, but he tilted his head as well so it was hard to know if he was serious. And there was no music to help. When *60 Minutes* went to commercial the television went loud as if in reprimand like the women who held their fists to their hips to scold talking cats whose boxes stunk; dark eyes meant other

countries, and danger; dark skin meant all expressions were larger, and expressions were larger and easier to grasp in the old movies on the gray scratchy channel, too. Charlie had discovered it one morning as a child as he was pouring cereal and moved to the little TV set in his parents’ yellow kitchen to have it closer, suddenly spying faces where before was fuzz and darkness cresting on a dead channel. He saw women singing on giant swings. Manic brows and great gleaming mouths stretched, double-sized, and he set down the bowl and forgot he had any other reason to be standing there. He watched all day and through to the next, learning to understand America and its unending Dream ... when to tap ... when to softshoe ... when to know when to start dancing all at once ... when to gather his heart into cupped hands and press them to his chest, weeping ... when to salute a plane overhead and spin to watch it bellow on into the brave and certain death of history, when to rhumba.

He watched it all like Marilyn until the flag rumbled everybody off the air and he stretched back into his body and did not like it, to feel it there after such exquisite compilation, so he scutched back a kitchen chair and moved closer to the TV, changed the channel and watched the news reruns as Jimmy Carter—this was still his childhood, though television was forever for Charlie Que--listened like Hepburn and Ronald Reagan listened to Jimmy Carter like Marilyn in a debate about who would rule the world ... or something of great importance like that. Content didn’t especially matter to Charlie Que. But he knew Ronald, would have voted for him if he had been a grown-up then. Ronald made all the same faces as Santa Claus and laughed, like Santa, as though he had money in hand.

Charlie knew he certainly wasn’t built for his friend television: he had the unfortunate face of a private-school bully pressing his face, puggish and carefully snot-fraught, against a pane of glass. Anna was built for commercials in her own way, but she was meant to be Grimace, Ronald’s pear-shaped purple friend who always made Charlie laugh and laugh. They’d met at their arrow-spinning job, each standing at a rival corner spinning job ads for better sign-spinning jobs available for application a few blocks down the street. They’d bonded over their favorite shows: anything about cops; anything

about real, rich people; anything about fictitious rich people; anything where celebrities came on to promote new movies and tell the funny jokes that separated them from the rest of us, save their not looking like the rest of us. Like so many Americans, Anna and Charlie had been stitching together a kind of a life based on dreams that some days felt just one step away from fruition, dreams just out of reach but hovering close, as close as those better sign-twirling jobs down the street.

And they had bonded over beer, at Dempsey's one night. He drank beer; she favored hard cider, and he'd been just far enough into his third Bud to be closing in on becoming his real self, witty and full of stories and fun when they met. What he liked about beer was that it made his feet and his hands less fascinating. What he hated about beer was that it sold himself back to himself bottle by bottle, tip by tip, like it was taking money's side against him every night, and he certainly couldn't afford much of himself on a janitor's salary.

But that was it. That wasn't enough to invite those people to his room. Charlie was a good man, a gentle man, a forthright. "Que is on the run! Charlie's fleeing!" their voices were howling all around him now, but strangely they let him sprint desperately and still nearly naked for the door, jogging after him, hollering "CHARLIE'S ON THE LOOSE!" A group of men with crumbs flying from their mouths—they had been eating his favorite cereal, goddamnit—leapt into the elevator and attempted to interview him all the way down, wondering aloud if his silence meant guilt, while another woman with slightly less cruel—but still cruel—hooked, haughty eyebrows relayed the scoop, from a wire in her ear, that the elevator was a 1923 model manufactured by the now-defunct Parsons Company out of Newark, New Jersey.

"Fourth floor! We're just about there now! Third floor! Second!"

"The Parsons Company certainly knew their way around an elevator, Gene."

"Lobby! Lobby! He's about to make his escape!" The door dinged

open on a new crush of twitchy bodies, and immediately the questions went up, the closing in of cameras, the return of those horrible lights. "Why is your face red? Is that guilt?" "Some say you're inconveniencing your neighbors with this crowd." "What do you have to say to people who say people are saying some say Charlie Charlie Mr. Que?" All he could think to do was charge his way through them—"Violent tendencies, just like our analysts have been predicting!"—and out into the boundless crowds, all soaked through just to see him, his TK, his skivvies, his Fruit of the Looms©.

From every window, from every car, eyes and little handheld devices followed Charlie, cameras and phones and hovering, black-eyed tiny insects that must have been more drone robots of some sort, helicopters high above, swarms of electric scornbirds circling his head and shuddering out mechanical tut-tut-tuts as they transmitted photos back to some room somewhere. And he was nearly naked. *Naked! Oh god, naked!* Parents sprinted into the street with their children just in time to cover their children's eyes. "Is Charlie sick?" a radio asked from a car that came splashing around a corner. "Is Charlie someone who takes pleasure appearing in public in just his underwear?" A slight, pale-eyed beauty with an enormous contraption mounted on her head—slim long arms, thin long limbs, a woman out of his better dreams—hung out of a news van beside him, frantically telling whatever the thing was she was wearing "blue Hanes Classics Men's TAGLESS© No Ride Up Briefs with Comfort Flex© Waistband."

As the sky cleared into a terrible brightness now, he neared the investment bank where he worked, grateful for once at the sight of the graceful curving building just beginning to show its daylight face of slippery sky, its mirrored face shining with thick knotty root clouds screwing up into another world, a world where he would surely be protected—where real life would be restored, where his jumpsuit was hanging all limp and familiar in his locker. But on the ground floor, the second floor, the third and then the seventh, where traders ought to be bellowing into phones and then turning to great ceiling-mounted screens and tickers and televisions to discover what it was

they'd said, all was strangely silent, as though the markets were shut down for the day. The screens spoke only of Charlie Que, a man on the run. A mole-stippled torso, a highly average penis in that tight type of underwear some say decreases sperm count. *Is Charlie against having children? Weigh in online, #CharlieWatch*, he heard a solemn man behind him say while live on air, the scrum still there, his embarrassment as deep as his confusion.

By the time he emerged from the locker room in the navy-blue work uniform that always made him think of poor Hector coming home in his fatigues, his moles were potentially pre-cancerous according to the Associated Press. He had crossed only the first cruller station—**SHOULD CHARLIE BE ON A DIET? WEIGH IN!**!—when news about the pregnancy began to break. A grim twangy woman with a vigorless red slash of a mouth lay curled within a giant uterus broadcasting details about gestation, trying out different positions, reporting what had been found on Charlie's phone—he'd left it on the bedside table, goddamnit. There was Anna pregnant, Anna nude, Anna pregnant nude. A computerized little girl, half him, half her, “just a composite idea of what the child may end up looking like” but bearing Anna's gray-blue bathwater eyes, shyly answered questions about what it was doing to her psyche to see her mother nude like that, nude and carrying her.

On a rival station, the projection was of a young man with Charlie's thin lips and a set of perfect teeth—a feature not meant to represent the real possible mouth content, the reporters cautioned, but merely the default setting of the software. “What can we determine from this boy's body language?” an anchor asked no one in particular. “That's coming up next. Plus: Charlie's former classmate on a telling playground fight.”

Was that what their baby would have looked like, all grown? Charlie wondered. For a brief moment the news thrust him back to those last, worst days between them, when that rainy gaze overtook her, that misty, half-lit expression, when Anna's breasts and hips and despotic big buttocks with their overripe, rocking authority began strangely to thin and she no longer spoke to him but to the air between—

though some old Victrola were using her throat as a speaker and she couldn't be bothered to know what it was playing. Television had tried valiantly to go on filling their apartment with life—and in time, television was the only tenant left to fight the barren embarrassment of the space between telephone rings. Finally it had become the sea he submerged himself in when he finally found himself alone. He especially liked the show where people got to run through a grocery store whisking goods into their carts, and the winners got to keep their sixteen cartons of oatmeal. But today all he could do was hate his own best friend: every screen, every slick black surface spoke of Charlie Que Charlie Que, and the people still in his apartment were reporting breaking news about the pill bottles in the kitchen cabinet. **QUE ON ANTIDEPRESSANTS!**

“Now this medicine, Gideapine, brand name Zelaprex—though it appears that Que is on generics—now this medicine, are there side effects we should know about? Is Charlie Que dangerous? Is he mentally ill?”

QUE ON PSYCHIATRIC MEDICINES: MENTAL HEALTH QUESTIONED

“Let's remember Princess Diana, how the driver in her fatal crash was on antidepressants very much like this one.”

“Yes, Princess Di, and I'm just getting word right now that this medicine does have serious side effects.”

“Is he a threat to the current royal family over in England?”

“He may very well be, Curtis. He does have a current driver's license. And here now I'm getting more information about these side effects. Fatigue, nausea, dry mouth, headache, thoughts of suicide, vivid dreams, constipation, erections lasting up to six days—”

“Which may be what we've been seeing this morning.”

“Yes, Curtis, that's a possibility. But we're also hearing that these are

only *potential* side effects. And there are more: muscle stiffness, hallucinations, depression....”

CHARLIE A MADMAN? HALLUCINATIONS? UP NEXT.

By midmorning, some said some say; by noon some say some said. By 1 p.m. some were saying some said some say some said some said, but when he asked fellow janitors and vexed secretaries and the crowd following his every move what it was they thought he had done, the news people gasped and accused him; the secretaries just stared, saying he wasn't doing himself any good talking about it. The traders and bankers and champions of capital carried on with the salty silence they usually afforded the custodial team, flashfried by the world's finest Columbian flake and the afterglow of riskless crimes, joking about the day's news as he moved through their floors. Though that news was all Charlie Que Charlie Que—QUE ENGAGEMENT ENDED IN MARCH, AP REPORTS ... BREAKING: QUE PARENTS IN COUNTRY ILLEGALLY ... CHARLIE EMAIL, SOCIAL MEDIA HACKED—they kept up their disregard, betting on his conviction. He remained too insignificant to invite into their conversations about the breaking news of Charlie Que, his body-fat percentage and vaccination records, his unappealing lip shape, his brutalizing reporters, the bombshells buried in his online chatter about Fortune Wars and Cash Clash. The executive assistants brushed past him as unbothered as ever, smiling widely at the news reporters obsessing over Charlie as the assistants fed the Incriminating-Evidence Furnaces, speaking of poor Anna, unlucky Anna, what-it-must-have-been-like-for Anna, twirling their pokers like capering majorettes. The very mention of her made Charlie want to call her, to go to Kelly 16-16-16 Anna, but their grief was just too great.

QUE FIANCE LOST CHILD JANUARY 28TH

That night, after a full day of journalists, Charlie couldn't sleep—there were reporters beside him on the bed, journalists on top of him, reporters atop his dresser, on his old high-school desk, his sagging

nightstand, on his embarrassing piles of socks and boxer shorts. They arrayed all around the bed and even crawled across the ceiling using some special glue or clinging tech, reporting on some said some say and some say some were saying, on whether or not his brothers had gone off to various wars to get away from him, if his future children truly loved him, if his future skin cancer was the result of a bad diet or lack of exercise. Why did Charlie hoard empty cereal boxes anyway? Why was his elevator so old? Why couldn't he sleep? Why did reporters surround him if he claimed he'd done nothing wrong?

In fact, Charlie had never been good at sleep. There had even been a time when it was practically unbearable. It was with Anna, when things were falling apart: always he found himself hopelessly awake beside her, wrecked by worry and consumed by the swollen sadness of their separation, her wild dreaming on the bed, eyes glutted and quivering, muscles catching in a place where she could not be reached. There was a cruelty to sleep he hadn't realized before she was slipping away from him, a terrible nearness of prisoners in overlapping dark cells, unaware of each other and babbling out their souls. After the first miscarriage, when she first took to sleep with the same devotion she'd taken to motherhood, he would have to leave her dreaming there and go out, away, spend insomniac nights at Dempsey's with men whose lives were all tragedies that had failed to materialize. He would stay until last call when, shoved out awake dead center into the dreaming city, he would find himself overtaken by a great kind of pity-love that visited only in early hours, when the forlorn magic at the heart of the world revealed itself to the committed drunk. He could feel his sadness ripen to something holy in those moments: in his drunkenness, in his failure, he had not failed to love. Soon he began to pine for it, needed to feel it, that warm wet pity that filled him up to the edges of his soul and made its dimensions known. How damned they all were! For a moment he felt new, uninvented. He would vow to get her a puppy.

Now it was waking that had become impossible to endure, sleep that took up television's noble old role. Weeks went on, and the misunderstanding with the news people only worsened with time. His parents had been deported not 48 hours after it all started—soldiers

with beastly guns marched them onto a military plane as lip readers studying the video announced that when his mother turned to his father and erupted in tears, she was saying “BREAKING: CHARLIE REALLY IS TERRIBLE.” His would-be son’s body language required no expert’s interpretation as he sat daily for exclusive interview after exclusive interview with his thin replica of Charlie’s mother’s mouth pulled down, hands to his temples, answering questions about what some people were saying about his never having existed at all. On the thirtieth morning, Charlie had even awakened to find himself changed into a monstrous penis. Viewers must have grown bored with the regular in-studio visits with the incorporeal *corpora cavernosa*, because CNN decided to improve on it with a kind of high-tech dick sarcophagus a pair of production assistants would hoist up and over him, an electrified organ ticking and shuddering and bleeping, at the break of every dawn.

Dempsey’s was now so choked with gawkers and reporters and wannabes wanting to get on TV that a few regulars had resigned—some had even gone sober. The bank was investigating to make sure no accounts had been touched by his nefarious fingers; Bennigan’s banned him nationwide. With nowhere to go unseen, Charlie had eventually stopped fighting the cameras that massed around him as he downed the bright little pearls his doctor had given him for sleep. Some nights, waiting to dwindle off into darkness, he would still try to lose himself in television or the internet, but there was nothing happening anymore but Charlie Que Charlie Que, Charlie Que the egregious egomaniac who loved nothing more than to watch himself on TV. A tiny silver flake that wouldn’t come out of his eye no matter how hard he rubbed transmitted QueView video of him watching his would-be daughter watching him watch her watching him. Asked by a woman in Miss America makeup if she resented her dad for putting her in the public glare, the imaginary girl with the big bathwater eyes wept.

“He really is terrible,” she answered.

Medicated now, he dozed atop the scrum, beneath the unblinking, devoted-insomniac reporters. He dreamed of flying every night,

higher than the copters and drones, up and out of the world; he dreamed of his mother swimming back to him, cupping his cheeks in her warm kind palms and promising an end to all pain. He dreamed of Anna rosy and round and Anna in the too-big slip she wore in their final photo, the picture a hacker found in one of his accounts and the *New York Post* ran on its cover with the headline “Anna-REXIC?” Now, on the fortieth morning, sleeping fitfully as though his body could sense the latex penis looming, he was dreaming of her slight and slipped and leaning on a bar while men filed through, their right hands unscrewing the rings from their left and their terrible tongues licking their mouths for courage. They cleared their throats, tasted their lips, fumbled their elbows onto the bar and bounced their legs in clockwork discomfort, staring at the televisions in the corners with a parody of care as though at any moment the machine might take notice of their plight and feed them pick-up lines. Why was his face there, inside the screen, not on TV but *in* TV like an astronaut in his glassy helmet, body hanging, kicking, naked—*Oh god naked!* He tried calling to her, calling and calling to her, and he awoke to disquieting silence. Finally here were no sweaty lights, no contraptions choking him awake. Was it over? *Oh god, was he free?* Then he remembered he had spent the night with a girl with slithery sheets.

She had followed along behind him for weeks, pretending to be a reporter, and at last, after asking a few questions, had seduced him easily, taking his hand in the fluttering light of the Incriminating-Evidence Furnaces, helping him sweep the ashes into the bins while the press all around wondered if Charlie held a broom right, if Charlie Que wanted to be a witch and promising him a place to stay where no one could record him and transmit him, a doorman-protected, brick-walled loft. The news had gone mad: “IS CHARLIE GOING AWAY WITH A WOMAN?” “IS CHARLIE CHEATING ON ANNA?” “IS CHARLIE HIDING BEHIND BRICK?” “WHAT IS CHARLIE TRYING TO HIDE?”

The silence reminded him so much of his days as a little bouncing boy, Charlie Chew, back there again waking to windows blurred by winter and school cancelled all day, sounds frozen over and no cars

on the road, ma home from work and downstairs drinking coffee with one hand as she waved him over with the other, into her lap, and buried her head in his hair.

“My baby,” she said. “My baby baby.”

Then, suddenly, an unknown, smirking male voice with the sound bellowed: “I see she beat us to it. I was trying to sleep with him too.”

Charlie startled. In the doorway leaned a man, long and blond and wearing a bandolier loaded with ballpoint pens. A shorter, rounder man whose eyebrows appeared to have had a falling out stood scowling at his side. Then the girl appeared from behind them carrying two cardboard coffee cups, gazing at Charlie with plundering pride, green-eyed and twinkling. She handed him a cup bearing a black-markered “Helene” in furious sawtooth script.

Yesterday she had been so kind, running her hands like Anna across the swells of his stomach and his sagging breasts, but now Charlie felt the joy go out of him that had stirred so briefly, because standing above him was an entirely different silver-sheets girl.

“You didn’t put in the work,” she told the bandolier-bearing man brightly. “I got an agent while he was asleep.”

“You’re shitting me,” said Bandolier Man.

“No way,” said Eyebrows.

“Nope, sold the story around four a.m.”

Charlie bolted up, sloshing coffee all over the sheets. “What story? Helene, what story? *My* story? You said you didn’t know what they’re saying I did!”

She merely patted him on the shoulder, barely registering the spill. “I really do like you, Charlie. Even with the way you treat your kids.” For a moment, the generous smile was back, guileless and wide.

“What you were saying last night about how you love to laugh? You’re an interesting guy.”

Then the smile sharpened and vanished. “Is *this* why you took pictures?” he said, pointing to her phone. Pictures and probably worse; she’d fiddled with the phone all night. “You said you didn’t know what they’re saying I did! Helene, please ... *what did I do?*”

“You’re only making things worse for yourself, buddy,” said the short man. “You should see what your kid is saying about you today.”

“I don’t have a kid!”

“And you think that didn’t mess him up?”

A tinkling came from Helene’s shoulder-slung bag. “That would be my agent,” she said, and even now Charlie had to fight back an urge to slip into her arms and beg for a pantomime of last night’s grace, her promise of absolution. She had stroked his hair and kissed his forehead and told him she would never let him die no matter how much he dreamed of it now, dreamed of soaring across America.

Bandolier Man saw Charlie’s expression and put a hand on his shoulder, gentle and warm. “So,” he said softly, “do you mind if I go ahead and sleep with you too?”

“Too late,” said Helene. “I just sold my Que book.”

“Goddamnit,” growled the little scowler.

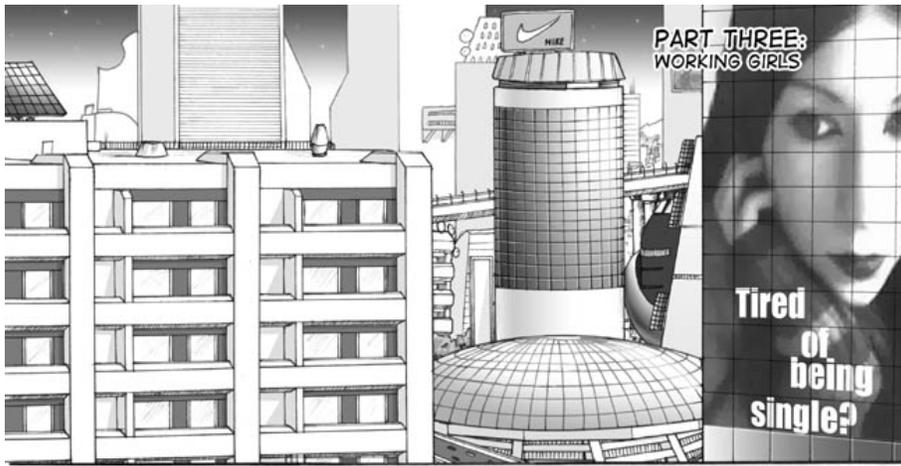
“Back to Benrubby Coates Imprints for you,” Helene singsonged as a doorbell rang. “Back to pitching your memoir—I got to him first! That’s probably Benrubby now, even. Sloppy seconds don’t sell books, darlings. You’re back to cancer of what is it, the spleen?”

Droplets

by Brian Hugenbruch

Droplets of an alternate reality
fall to asphalt
in spots, in sheets
and through each prism,
city lights—red, yellow, blue, neon
screaming for attention:
“Visit me! Pay me! Save me!”
A whirlwind of images pools
in corners of the road near
the sewer drains.

A car cuts through a puddle.
And once I'm wearing another dimension
all the lights go out.

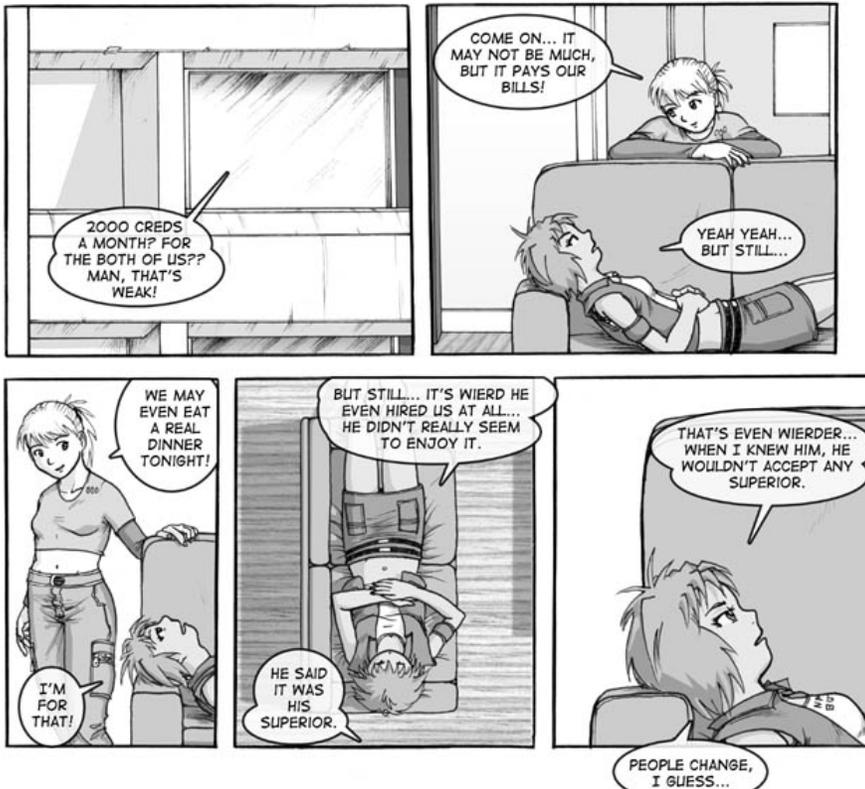


by Jesper Nordqvist

NOTES

I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!



The glass panel house on the right in the first frame uses special glass to show pictures or even movie clips on the outside of the building. The glass is one-way reflective glass, so the people inside the building won't see any of it, or be disturbed by it.

If sound is played with the ads, projected sound is used down on the street, to minimize trouble for the workers in the office.



NOTES

The "cleaner" is the equivalent of a shower. As there isn't much fresh water on Mars, domestic use of water is limited.

The bar seen in the middle of the cleaner move up and down while spraying the user with a natural chemical solution, then washing with a water spray. The body still gets a bit wet, hence Gemma's towel...

The toilets are also water free. Smartcloth clean itself, so there is no real need for washing machines.





ART BY ANDRÉ HÖGBOM
WWW.ANDRE-STYLE.COM
CHECK HIS SITE FOR THE
"FLORIAN & KEVIN" COMICS!

NOTES

If you don't get it, be sure to check out andre-style.com and look for the Florian & Kevin comics :)

This is made by my friend and roommate André, we usually send little fanarts of each other's characters back and forth.



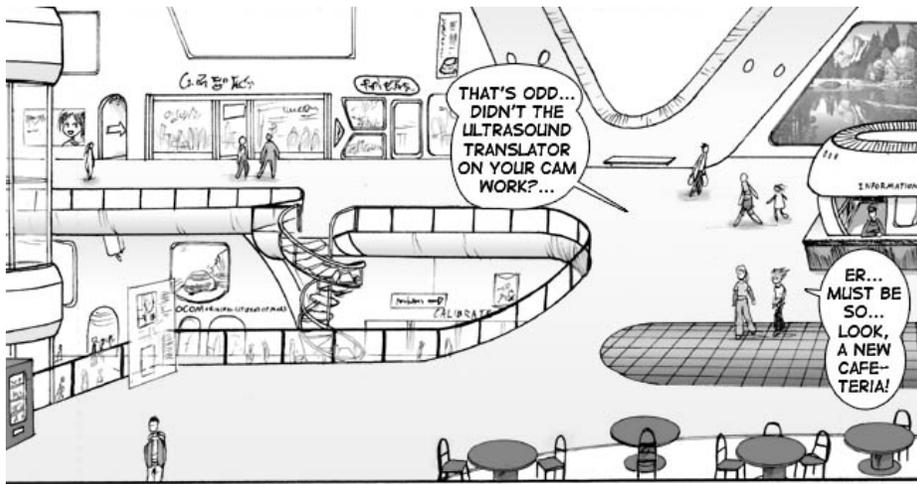


NOTES

This ad uses sophisticated LED lights to simulate sunlight, hence the evening light in the last two panels.

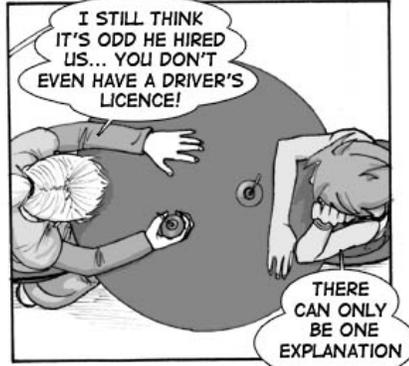
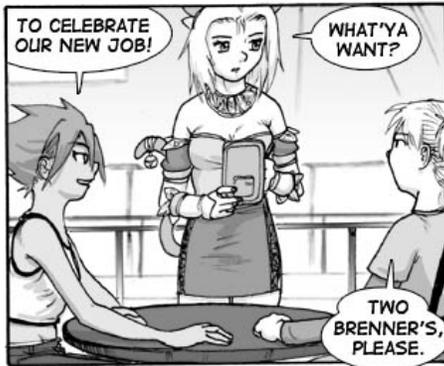
It also uses projected sound to address individual people. Someone outside the personal sound area can't hear anything. An ad this big should have enough projectors to reach all passers-by, though...

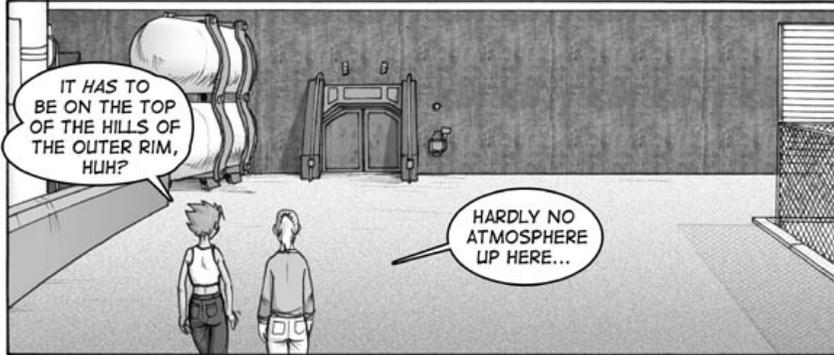




NOTES

(no notes this page)

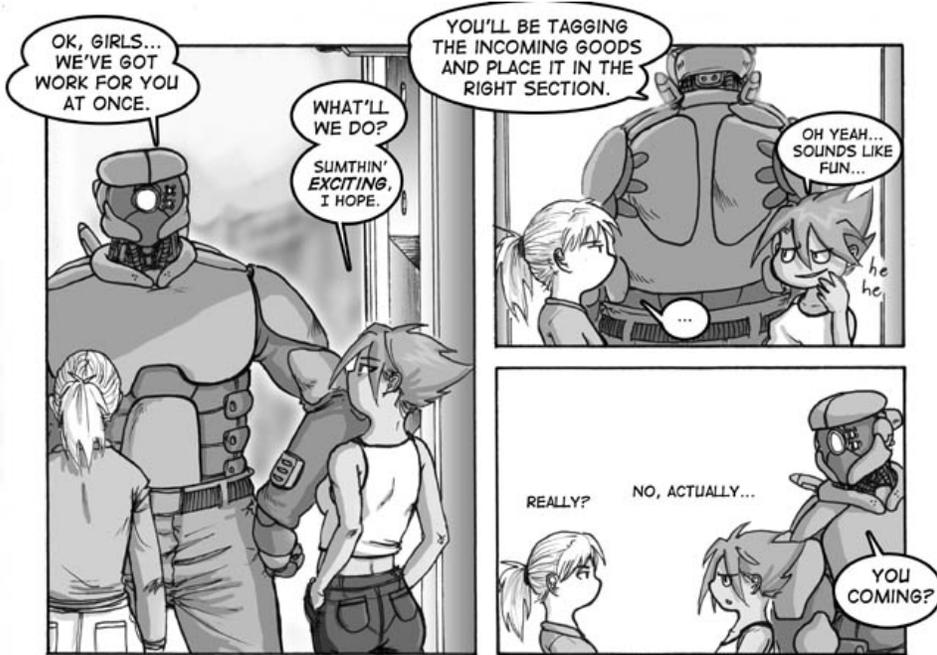




NOTES

Where did the straws go in panel 2, you ask? They ate them! No, really... -_-

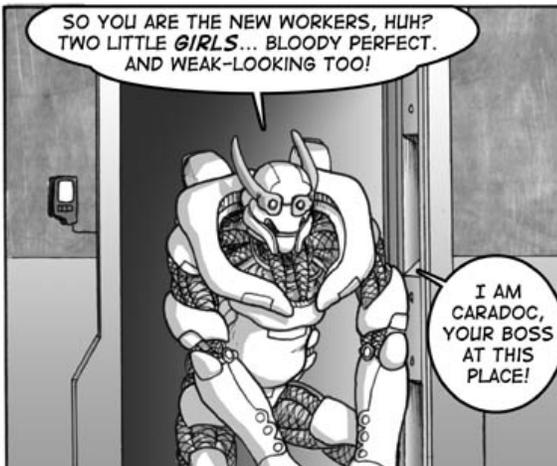
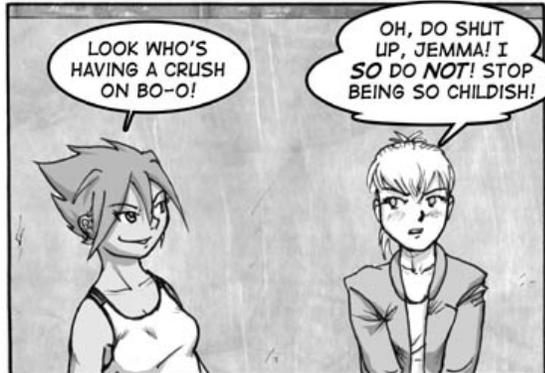
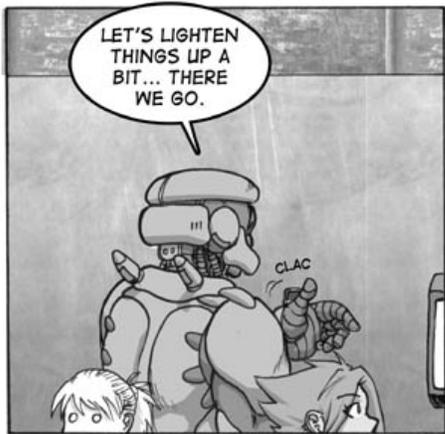




NOTES

This page was actually quite boring to make.. -_-





MONDO MECO PAGE 68 20040715
© JESPER NORDQVIST
WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

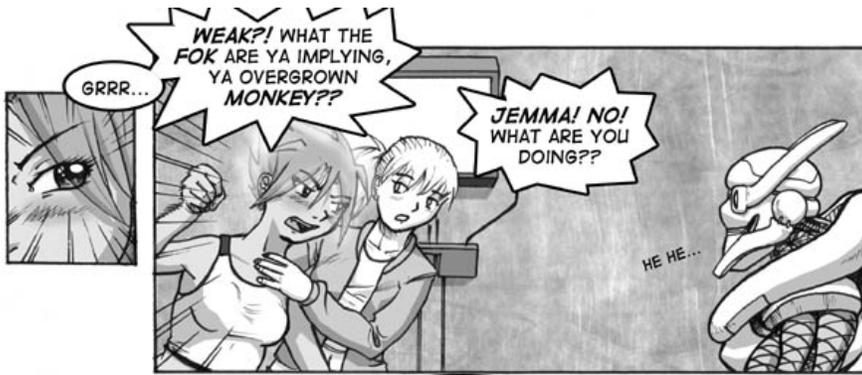
NOTES

If Bo is the Briareos ripoff,
Caradoc is Panheimer... -_-

You should all read Appleseed
by Masamune Shirow! A must
for lovers of action packed
drama, cyborgs and a really
good story...

Also a major influence for
Mondo Mecho.



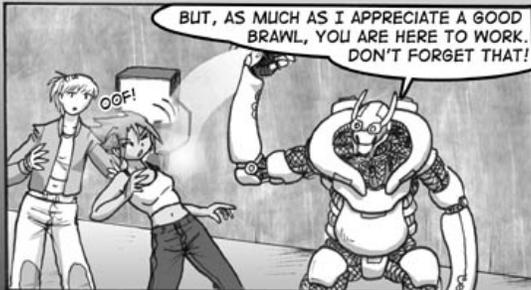
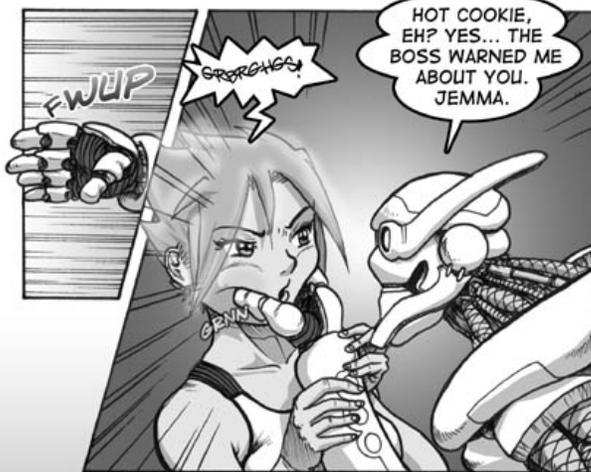


NOTES

Don't be stupid, Jemma! You can't fight that guy.

I mean.. just look at him. -_-

Must weigh a ton.



Contributor's Bios

ANNE CARLY ABAD writes in between managing her business and taking care of her little boy. Anne is the recipient of the Poet of the Year Award in the 2017 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards. She has also received nominations for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award. Her work has appeared in *Apex*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, and *Strange Horizons*, to name a few. Her first poetry collection *We've Been Here Before* is slated for publication with Aqueduct Press this 2021.

* * *



MADELINE BARNICLE received a PhD in mathematics from UCLA. She now lives in Maryland. You can find more of her writing at madelinebarnicle.neocities.org.

* * *



As well as writing fiction, **ARLEN FELDMAN** is a software engineer, entrepreneur, maker, and computer book author—useful if you are in the market for some industrial-strength door stops. Some recent stories of his appear in the anthologies *The Chorochronos Archives* and *Particular Passages*, and in *On The Premises* magazine, with several more coming out soon. His website is cowthulu.com

* * *



JACK FIELDING was once described as an international man of mystery armed only with a typewriter and reasonably priced hat. Of mixed British and French heritage (with a little Irish on

his grandmother's side), Jack has lived and worked all over the world. He has always been drawn to the absurd and uncanny. After suffering from writers' block and depression, Jack finally returned to Britain with his family and settled in the historic town of Shrewsbury, where he is now happily writing again.

Jack discovered his creative voice while exploring a haunted pagoda on the Thai-Cambodian border. He pens tales about crime, gothic adventure, and retro sci-fi, often set in speculative worlds with dark comedy and a cheeky dash of Buddhist teaching. Jack is sometimes moved to compose haiku-style poetry with a noir twist.

He is currently working on several short stories and rewriting a crime novel set in a weirdly skewed 1940s Siam.

* * *



ROB HARTZELL lives and works in southwestern Ohio. "Where Phantoms Touch and Spirits Dance" is part of a larger fiction-cycle titled "Pictures of the Floating-Point World." Other pieces from the cycle have appeared most recently in *New Reader Magazine* and the *Gothic Fantasy: Robots and Artificial Intelligence* anthology (Flame Tree Publishing). Another story from the cycle, "The River and the Fallen," was shortlisted for the 2020 Hammond House Literary Prize and published in their *Survival* anthology.

* * *



JAMIE HITTMAN is a resident physician and Maryland native who lives in Baltimore City. She has previous publications in *Bird's Thumb Magazine*, *Penny Shorts*, *Every Day Fiction*, and

Short Story Town. She graduated with her MFA in Creative Writing from Queens College in May of 2014 and is now in the query trenches for her debut novel.

* * *



TOM HOWARD is a science fiction and short story writer living in Little Rock, Arkansas. He thanks his family for their inspiration and the Central Arkansas Speculative Fiction Writers' Group for their perspiration.

(Image: Brantley Drewery (2011-2019))

* * *



BRIAN HUGENBRUCH is a speculative fiction writer and Rhysling-nominated poet living in Upstate New York with his family and their pets. His poetry has appeared (or is forthcoming) in *Abyss & Apex*, *Liminality*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Apparition Lit*. His stories have appeared (or are forthcoming) in *Cossmass Infinities*, *Diabolical Plots*, and anthologies from *Zombies Need Brains*.

You can find him online on Twitter @Bwhugen, on Instagram @the_lettersea, or at the-lettersea.com. No, he's not sure how to say his last name, either.

* * *



RIN KELLY first published in *The Kenyon Review Online*. That work, another humorous piece entitled "The Best-Known Unknown People Who Maybe Drew Breath Upon the Planet," is still available online. Another work, "Wax Works," has appeared in *The Fabulist*.

Rin studied writing with Heddie Jones at The New School in New

York City, then went on to earn a Master's Degree from Columbia's School of Journalism. She served as film and cultural editor at *L.A. RECORD*, and was published in *Salon* and other online and print venues nationwide. She was affiliated with the San Francisco Writers' Gross and presented at the SF LitQuake, Bang Bang Gun Amok III in Manhattan, and at Writers with Drinks. She was quite an accomplished writer. Rin passed away unexpectedly in November 2020.

Rin was originally from Colorado, but lived for many years in Alameda, CA, with her life partner Tony Bar, to whom she dedicated her completed novel *The Bright and Holo Sky*, which is currently being edited and prepared for publication.

* * *



MARY SOON LEE was born and raised in London, but has lived in Pittsburgh for over twenty years. Her two latest books are from opposite ends of the poetry spectrum: *Elemental Haiku*, containing haiku for the periodic table (Ten Speed Press, 2019), and *The Sign of the Dragon*, an epic fantasy with Chinese elements (JABberwocky Literary Agency, 2020). After twenty-five years, her website has finally been updated: marysoonlee.com.

* * *



DENNY E. MARSHALL has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *The Society Of Misfit Stories* June 2021 and poetry in *Eye To The Telescope* April 2021. In 2020 his website celebrated 20 years on the web. Also in 2020 his artwork is for sale for the first time. The link is on his website. Website is www.dennymarshall.com.

* * *

JESPER NORDQVIST, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

* * *



My name is **MOSES OJO** and I am a young Nigerian art enthusiast who uses his mind as a Vista for making captivating arts while using his brushes and watercolors thereby speaking reality through his arts and crafts to his viewers.

* * *

ANAHITA RAMOUTAR is a teenage self taught young and talented artist. Since childhood she has developed a passion for drawing. She draws digitally mostly but also on paper as well as paints sometimes. For artwork she uses a variety of drawing tools. Some of them are a graphite pencil, charcoal pencils, pens, oil pastels and oil based coloured pencils.

Along with drawing she enjoys photography and plays piano. She loves taking various pictures especially of nature and tries to capture that moment in time to keep. She works hard in order to become a professional artist, practicing everyday to become as good as her favourite artists or even better.

* * *



RICKEY RIVERS JR was born and raised in Alabama. He is a Best of the Net nominated writer and cancer survivor. His work has appeared in *Brave Voices*, *Sage Cigarettes* (among other publications). Interactive fiction: rrj.itch.io/notable-neighborhood-garbage. Twitter.com: [storiesyoumight](https://twitter.com/storiesyoumight). Mini chap-books are available here: <https://payhip.com/StoriesYouMightLike>

StoriesYouMightLike

* * *



MICHAEL ROOK is a U.S.-based author and member of the Horror Writers Association with recent publications in *Teach.Write.*, *After Dinner Conversation*, and *Buckshot Magazine*. And though his parents named him after a ghost, he doesn't blame them for the sleepless nights. Find him on Instagram (@[michaelrook10](https://www.instagram.com/michaelrook10)) and at his website: www.michaelrookwrites.com.

* * *

CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

* * *



MARGE SIMON is an award-winning poet/writer, living in Ocala, Florida. Her works have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *New Myths*, *Silver Blade*, *Polu Texni*, *Crannog*, *JoCCA* and numerous pro anthologies. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association. She recently received the HWA Lifetime Service Award, HWA. Amazon Author page: <https://www.amazon.com/-/eB006G29PL6/marge-simon>

* * *



OLIVER SMITH is a visual artist and writer from Cheltenham, UK. He is inspired by the landscapes of Max Ernst, by frenzied rocks towering in the air above the silent swamp, by the strange poetry of

machines, by something hidden in the nothing. His poetry has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Liminality*, and *Rivet*. Oliver was awarded first place in the BSFS 2019 competition for his poem "Better Living through Witchcraft," and his poem "Lost Palace, Lighted Tracks" was nominated for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. He holds a PhD in literary and critical studies. Oliver's website is at <https://oliversimonsmithwriter.wordpress.com/>

* * *



CHRISTINA SNG is the two-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Dreamscapes* and *A Collection of Nightmares*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide and have garnered many accolades, including the Jane Reichhold International Prize, nominations for the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, the Pushcart Prize, as well as honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year. Christina's essay "Final Girl: A Life in Horror" was a finalist in the 2020 Bram Stoker Awards for Superior Achievement in Short Non-Fiction, and her first novelette "Fury" was anthologized in the multiple award-winning *Black Cranes: Tales of Unquiet Women*. Christina lives in Singapore with her children and a menagerie of curious pets. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect on social media @christinasng.

* * *



Lover of wine, women and song, **TOEKEN's** had work published in *Utopia Science Fiction Magazine*, *Tha Antihumanist Magazine*, *Blood Knife Magazine*, *Novel Noctule*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Unfading Daydream*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Hybrid Fiction Magazine*, *Penumbraic Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Mysterion*, *Lovecraftiana Magazine*, *Hinnom Magazine*, *SQ Magazine*, *Lackington's*, *The Future Fire*, *The Drabblecast*, *Helios Quarterly*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Crimson Streets*, *Phantasmagoria Magazine*, *ParABnormal Magazine*, *RobotDinosaurs*, *Ares Magazine*, *Double Feature Magazine*, *NewMyths*, *Non Binary Review*, *Persistent Visions*, *ParAbnormal Magazine*, *Riddled with Arrows*, *Devolution Z Magazine*, *Cracked Eye*, *Nothing's Sacred*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Gallery of Curiosities*, *Gallows Hill*, *Econoclash*, and *The Weird and Whatnot* and painted book covers for authors and editors such as Bryan Smith ('Kayla'), Tim Meyer ('The Thin Veil', 'The Switch House', '69'), Chad Lutzke (Night as a Catalyst), D.W. Cook (Intermediates: A Cuckoo for Mankind'), Millhaven Press ('Fierce Tales, Lost Worlds'), Cemetery Gates Media ('Halldark Holidays', 'Murderers' Bazaar'), Gavin Chappell ('Kek vs Cthulhu'), Douglas Draa ('Funny As A Heart Attack'), and Trevor Denyer ('Railroad Tales'), among others. You can find his stuff here: <https://atoekeneffort.weebly.com>.



Charcot Foundry

by toeken
(full image)