

# Broken Mirror

short stories from around the corner



Daniel LaFavers

# *Broken Mirror*

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## BLAKES BROKEN MIRROR

"Tell me about blue steel."

"Nasty stuff," her soft whisper answered tensely.

"Where?"

"A lot of ears, cowboy."

Blake shifted visual from the video feed to an image of the connection net, colorful fibers between spherical nodes.

"Hold on," he answered as he floated into her Internet endpoint, seeing the catacombs of the Boeing University Computing Network. He found her process, swimming among the other green interactive and yellow and red background tasks on the Orion Node which was routing her packets from a wireless access point.

He dropped a bounce back routine onto her process and watched as it began intercepting low level packet routing information and sending chatter back through the port. He saw the detour and noted its router IP then dropped in an encrypted redirect hack, bypassing the ears until they could crack the line again. Such things had become second nature to him now.

"Blake?" What a sweet voice she had.

"Tracers are out for a few seconds, Luci."

He opened up a video window while he kept her terminal connection in the background.

"Blue steel is their name for it. The kids call it sublime, but that's just the street beta stuff. Bastards are letting the kids high up on it so they can watch what breaks."

"Any details?" he answered when he saw new auto agent processes gathering in a flock, working to hack his new link.

"It's not your average brain fuck, this one. It messes with the neurotransmitters somehow and it's supposed to enable the cells to relay faster or some shit like that."

"What else?"

"Look, Blake, you gotta leave me alone with this. I've been teaching clean for almost a year now."

"What else?"

"I don't know. You do it, you're never the same. It crusts up the nerve cells, changes what they're made of somehow. You get just a

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little, and half your brain can't talk to the other half until your saturated. That's all."

"Good girl."

"Listen, I can't talk to Craven any more. He thinks I want to try it, and he's pushing me. I've been clean for a year now, and I can't let the kids down, so no more."

"Okay. No more. Thanks, sweetheart."

She disconnected, and Blake watched her process at Boeing timeout and disappear before he jumped out of that node.

He settled back to his home environment with its floor of breaking waves inside a circular wall of data. Maybe it was time to talk to Craven himself, but he was a blank, off the net, not even a voice phone number. That made it tough to get to him from inside the net.

A plain text message arrived. Blake's daemon process sprung to life, traced the message through four telnet hops before he lost sight of it. In a few seconds the agent process returned and reported that the system of origin was a public terminal in a Singapore Library. He suspected that the message had been rekeyed through a human slug. Whoever it was had contacts in Singapore. That didn't help much. Ever since Amsterdam flooded the net with ultra high encryption it was very easy to do such careful business, and in the tech slums of Singapore even a savvy third grader could make a good salary running these types of errands.

Blake opened the message.

What's the name? Who has it? Talk to me or  
I talk to the Admins. You know the address.  
I'm not bluffing. I know what caused the  
Denver Rally. I know what you did to Sally  
Baker.

-Broken Mirror

The last sentence caused Blake to hesitate. His blood would have chilled, if he had any. His pulse would have quickened, if he had not been transformed into an immortal on the net. Sally Baker.

She was one of the friends of his older sister so many years ago. Her girl scout friends had sleepovers a lot. They treated Blake as if he were the house cat, walking around half naked as if he were too young to notice. He was in love with Sally Baker because she was the first to get breasts and because she insulted and ordered him around less than the others. Years of subtle guilt followed him as he

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waited for someone to find out that one night, at 2:26 in the morning, he went down to the family room and felt up those blossoming breasts. He was careful, quiet, and she didn't wake up. No one did. No one knew.

But Broken Mirror did.

He quickly wrapped a reply in two layers of encryption and sent it to [remailer.16673@pepsi.anon.net](mailto:remailer.16673@pepsi.anon.net).

It's called blue steel in Appalachia. Very hot. I'm trying to contact a blank named Craven. I want to help. No need to discuss Denver.

---

The earthquakes had turned New York City into an archipelago of skyscraper stems, still inhabited by floaters and throwbacks. They cast their long shadows across the water twenty thousand feet beneath the space plane returning from Lagrange-II.

The pilot announced they would be landing in Denver in less than twenty minutes.

"Wake up, Luci baby."

"Are we there?"

"Just about."

Blake held the small briefcase in his lap and gripped its handle with a loose urgency. Inside was a printout on high quality bamboo paper, the acceptance of Spain to the terms of the Boeing Free Trade Agreement that would enable the accelerated development of the Hawking anti-gravity drive.

The port terminal was filled, as usual, with throwbacks pushing homespun cloth and hand-carved stone elephants. The air was filled with the scent of stir-fry and the burning of corn whisky stills. Blake moved past them, pulling his fiancée behind him to the cab line outside.

While on his way to deliver the papers, Blake called his contact and sent the following message: "Bert, I'm in town for a few days. If you still want to get in a round of golf give me a call." If Spain had declined, Blake would have had to inform Bert that he was going to be too busy for golf.

His coded message was sent verbally through a friend of a friend of a friend.

By the time he and Luci reached Boeing Headquarters in Denver, the rally had already begun. By the time the formal release had been

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made, every Spanish company or a company with holdings in Spain had increased from one hundred to seven hundred percent in market value. By the time Boeing purchased the unnamed key technological companies, they were all grossly inflated.

Several anonymous investors lead the rally and made a killing. Three Spanish government officials were executed. It's all in who you know. On his honeymoon, Blake paid a clear third of his stock market windfall to arrange to be lucky enough to hit it big on a dollar slot machine. Some guys get all the luck.

---

Rain fell on the stinking rot of Blake's alley, giving an oil slick patina to the ancient cobbles reflecting the restless night. He stood under the draining sky and let the rain patter on his face and soak through his long dirty hair, making his thick clothes soggy and heavy. It was good to feel.

"Git your fool self back outta that crap," hollered Stupid Tom, another throwback and Blake's best friend in the world. Tom slapped his big feet through the greasy puddles and tugged at Blake's arm.

"Outta the rain, fool."

Blake let himself be dragged away. The rain seemed to bring him back, give him a few moments of increasingly rare lucidity. If he didn't get help soon, the brain lock would get him all gone.

Tom pulled his friend into the relative protection of a makeshift lean-to which Blake and Tom called home until the next Admin sweep would come through and snake them out.

"Look here, Blake. I got food."

"That ain't food, Stupid, that's garbage, what that is."

"Eat it or don't."

Tom pulled the key off the expired can of Spam, twisted it opened and ate the meat brick with three big bites.

"It don't go bad, Blake. They just throw it out cause they always makin' more. It don't go bad. Here, I got a whole bag of 'em."

He wiped the slick meat jelly on his pants and opened another can.

"Well, give me some, Tom. You're a goddamn provider is what you are, buddy."

"I know all the good places."

"Look, friend, we can't stay here."

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"How come? I know all the good spots. I know where I can get us some cake. Real cake."

"I don't mean this pathetic hovel, you moron. I gotta go East. I gotta get my goddamn brain fuck medicine or I'm gonna go all gone."

"East? Where? Why?"

"Georgia. I gotta go find that sonofabitch, Craven. I shoulda known he'd be the one."

---

"For god's sake Luci, you don't need that crap now. It's ten in the morning."

She lifted her head from the mirror and sniffed the green powder up into her nose.

"Fuck you, Blake. What do you know what I need?"

Their marriage started with a bang. The Vegas money meant that they could start out on the fast track. Luci ran head first into the late night clubs, cracker gangs, and custom highs. "Craven's an artist. You just don't get it," she told him over and again. His ability to mix hallucinogens with speedsters or tranqs could take the enthusiastic trip rider well past the inner world of the mushroomers and into whatever heaven or hell you wanted to pay for.

It wasn't the life he had expected to buy with his prank. For three years he had watched her descend into a glass-eyed caricature of herself. He turned from the vacant skin that was once the woman he loved and went out to his car.

He unfolded the paper and read the notice again.

Thank you for selecting Kline Somatico Laboratories. Your genetic composition forecast is explained in detail below. This forecast describes only the range of possible futures and will vary based on the lifestyle and medical options you pursue. Choice Counselors are available to help you select the proper treatments and medications to mitigate your genetic predispositions.

His eyes scanned down farther to the result lines showing the computed probabilities. Colon cancer: 12-15%. Nothing unusual there. It was even a bit low. Arthritis: 42%. Stroke: 56%. Early Alzheimer's 94%.



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His doctor told him that the effects of the condition were already visible on the holoscan.

He wanted to give Luci the chance to support him, to share the tragedy and help him live through it, but when he went to her and found her immersed in Craven's brain fuck de jour, he decided to take a transference.

To live forever, or as long as you wanted, free of disease, free even from the constraints of the brain, is what it offered. He pulled the car out to the road and called the Admins, starting the process that would take him inside forever.

He checked into their hotel, worked with the lawyers to prepare the Transference Will And Testament, and selected the disposition of his body. He decided to let Luci keep everything, to start fresh, and sold his body for genetic research by Somatico to give him the startup funds for his new life in the net.

He didn't need to look back. He saw no reason to stretch out the grotesque drama his physical life had become. Having a body was a mere gestation, a building of a mind ready to live as an immortal. When all the details were covered and all the bills paid, he lay quietly on the scanner bed in the low orange glow of the room. A priest sat by his side, uttering the prayer that would officially transfer his soul from the shell of his body into his new identity in the net. The needle went into his right temple and the army of nano-scanners began replicating themselves and examining the structure of every axon and dendrite, relaying the complete connectivity and state of each cell. Once the software copy was made he woke up. The computer gave him a complete environment, supplying his new virtual brain with the stimulation replicating the real world. He felt himself breathing. He could see the ceiling of the scanning room.

His body lay empty and still on the narrow bed. He watched the feed as a young tech came in, pulled the sheet over the body's head, and wheeled it out.

A video screen opened and his lawyer's face appeared long enough for him to verify final payment. He stayed and watched the empty room for hours, never tiring, never hungry. He watched the same tiled walls, white equipment, the same sink and sea scape picture all night long and into the next day until the tech returned and adjusted the permission of the data feed. Everything went black.

Over the next year, he slowly trained his new brain to wear the net itself as his body. He joined the community of the immortals. Humans became mere thralls to feed the machines. Government and

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law took on a completely different meaning without the constraints of the physical world. It was heaven.

From inside he was still able to interact with the old world, if it suited him. He learned how to project himself into the communication net. From inside he got Luci away from Craven, helped her through school, and pulled a few strings to get her a position at the Boeing Elementary School in Georgia. All was great until he got the first message from Broken Mirror.

---

Blake knew he looked like shit. He knew that it was a long shot. He stood at the bottom of the stairs looking up at his old home, the home in which he had watched his poor wife lower herself into the trip rider sky. He went up the steps and rang the bell.

She opened the door. He knew that all she saw was a filthy bum in a dirty flannel shirt and sweat pants, carrying a bedroll, covered with grimy facial hair. He pushed the door back and pushed his way in, ignoring her shrieks and pitiful threats. When he turned and looked straight into her eyes she stopped and stifled a scream.

"You're going to help me, Luci." He meant to stay calm, but when he saw the recognition in her eyes he felt the old anger rise again. The brain lock made it seem like an old forgotten dream, but he forced it back and spat the words out angrily.

"You put me here, you goddamn junkie, and now you're going to help me."

"Blake?"

"I didn't want to ever see your wasted face again, but it's Craven and you're going to help me."

She had backed against the wall. Her hands covered her mouth. Her eyes were wide and she was breathing with short gasps. How dare she feel the victim after what she made him do? He pinned her against the wall and thrust his dirty face close to hers, forcing her to smell the stench of having to live outside the system, a walking dead man without a soul, a zombie with a deteriorating mind.

"Is this what you wanted?" he screamed in her face. "You see what you made me? You filthy trip whore!"

"Please stop! Blake, I'll help you. Just don't hurt me, please."

He slapped her sharply across the face. "Don't hurt you? Is that what you said?" He hit her again and she crumpled down into a quivering, screaming thing balled up at his feet. "Like you hurt me? Like how you let them take my soul?"

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He spun around, kicked the glass top table over, and then sat down heavily onto the sofa, staining its clean, light fabric with his dirtiness. This isn't how he wanted it to go. He needed information. He stood back up to get what he came for, but she wasn't there. He felt something hard and cold hit him in the back of the head, and as he fell forward, he heard her calling out for help.

---

Luci's call distracted Blake from a conversation with a contact in Singapore, as he was trying to track down the slug who sent the last message.

The video window opened up, and the first thing he noticed was that a table had been knocked over. In the next second he saw a large man in a flannel shirt stumbling forward as she hit him with the glass candy dish they had bought in Mexico.

"Luci?"

The man got to his knees then reached around and knocked her down.

"Blake! Help!"

He called the Admins. Police would arrive in about four minutes.

"Blake?" the man called out. "Blake?" He stood and faced the telescreen.

Blake saw in the mirror across the room the reflection of his own video projection. He looked young, healthy. Next to that he saw the same face, older, ravaged by living as a throwback behind the scenes, without even so much as a valid personal id.

The man immediately forgot Luci, who ran out the front door.

"What are you doing there?"

Anger rose in the face of that beaten man. His words rose through a gravelly throat choked with rage, "You're not real. I'm Blake. I'm still here!"

"You're not supposed to be. You're not Blake anymore."

"What did you think they were going to do to me? Do you know what they did? Do you know what they're allowed to do when you're not a person anymore? They hurt me. But I'm Blake. I'm the real one. You're just a fake, a cheap fucking copy!"

He fell forward to his knees, sobbing. "Give me my id back. You're not even real. I need money. It's my id. My money."

"I can't do that."

"Help me! Won't you even help me? It's me?"

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"You're the one? You're looking for blue steel to help the Alzheimer's."

"My brain's going all gone. It can help me." His voice rose into a shriek, "You have to help me."

He looked into the desperation on his face, the same face that had looked back from inside the mirror his entire carnal life.

The face was twisted with grief. He was crying. "I didn't want to have to see you. I knew you could help me. I know things about you, because it's me. I know what I did to Sally Baker, and what you even wanted to do but were too nice to try. I'll tell them everything."

"I'll help you. The police are coming. Get out and try to contact me. I'll do whatever I can for you. I'll try to get blue steel for you."

It seemed to calm him down a little bit.

"That's what you came for. I'll help you. Maybe even Luci will help you."

His tear-stained face lifted up to the video monitor, and they held each other's gaze for a moment.

"I'll help you," Blake repeated.

The police beat him to it. Four men rushed in and pushed Blake to the floor, pinned him and cuffed him and ran his fingerprints.

"This one's a zombie. Reported transferred and destroyed."

"What's he doing alive?"

"Escaped Somatico labs in Nevada. Killed three doctors and a guard. Call in the clearance for the sentencing."

A hush fell over the room for an eternal forty five seconds.

"Got it."

One of the officers placed a long metal pole at the base of Blake's neck. He called out, "Clear", the others stepped away, and the officer delivered a fatal electric shock. Blake stiffened and managed to draw his eyes onto the vidscreen. Then he went limp.

The boy who used to daydream about being a singer, of having six children and a parrot named Friday, and who always held a secret longing to one day be just a little bit famous, lie dead on the carpet.

Blake remembered the words of the policeman, how he had escaped from the labs. He imagined the hard life, unable to complete a legal transaction for even so much as a candy bar. Somehow he did it, he survived, and he almost made it. He felt proud. Ok, Blake. I will be famous, but just a little bit, just for you, buddy, because we always wanted it.

## CUSTODY OF LOVE

Moonlight fell through the bay window, shining on the soft purring cat that came to join Melissa Galloway. She was missing 90210, but it didn't seem to matter right now. With the TV off and the lights out, the large house seemed like a deserted church.

Last week Melissa found out that she was adopted, and she was only beginning to understand the choir of emotions humming inside her with sour dissonance. It meant that she was abandoned, but that she was rescued. She had family, but no roots. Impotent anger drew her back and forth between condemning her parents for not explaining this to her sooner and knowing that they did it out of compassion and love. Was it disappointment then? All that needed to be said had already been said. Any tears that were to be shed had already fallen.

At least Emily didn't care, thought Melissa, as long as she had a lap to purr upon.

Carl came up from the basement. He was babysitting her and her younger brother Stephen tonight.

"Do you want to come down and play Scrabble with us or some chess?"

"I don't think so."

He came over to the large window bench and sat slowly and quietly across from her, his face hidden between gray and black.

"Would it help to talk? About anything?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh, little-dove, I wish I could tell you something that would make it better."

"Carl, I'm almost a teenager. Why do you still call me that?"

"Tu et toujours ma petite colombe."

"I just need to snap out of it. I will soon. I mean, I know that it's no value judgement on me, on who I am today. It's not like mom or dad deciding that they don't like the way I dress, so they throw me out. Whoever did this didn't even know me. It's just as well, I guess."

A moment of sweet quiet settled between them, framed by brittle moon shadows on one side and Carl's quiet friendship on the

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other. In between them, Melissa sat as if drifting apart from the flow of time, watching herself watch the wind-blown maple leaves.

"Did you know?" she asked, just above a whisper.

"I did."

"I remember something. They told me once when I was real young that they were going to take me to my father, which I didn't understand. I thought I was going to have to go live at the building where daddy works. I haven't thought of that in years. I still don't know what it means, really."

"Come on downstairs."

"I think I want to sit up here a little longer."

"I understand." He reached over and gently pushed a stray lock of hair away from her face, brushed it down behind her ear and then left her.

For the past week, Melissa felt like a stranger in her own room, and sometimes in her own skin. She imagined that her mind, the one nurtured and grown by Jack and Mia Galloway, had taken over this body, displacing whatever mind should have been there by another name.

She went over the reasons a mother would give up her baby, and none of them eased her mind: alcohol abuse, junkie, shiftless, one night stand. She began to notice things about herself, the wide cut of her jaw, the small upturn of her nose.

Why didn't they tell me?

---

"Why did you tell her?" Carl asked the next morning, standing in the doorway to Jack Galloway's office.

Jack looked up from his drafting table and said, "I know it's tough on her, Carl, but she'll be all right."

Carl came in and sat at the small chair next to the window, watching a couple birds that were perched in the tree outside.

Jack took a sip of his morning coffee, watched Carl for a moment, then turned back to his work and said, "How's the Petterson House coming? I hear the board's demanding a historically accurate restoration."

Carl didn't say anything. He continued to stare out the window.

"David told me that he's very pleased with your work. I told him he would be. You've done very well here. I'm glad you let me talk you into going on to college."

"What else have you told her?"

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"I haven't told her about that. Not yet."

"I don't think you should. There's no reason she needs to know. It's already confusing enough for her."

"We'll see."

"Jack. I'm serious."

"Well," he answered curtly, "It's not your decision, is it?"

"No. I suppose not." He looked square at Jack and told him, "I'm just trying to protect you. What happens if she finds out you weren't granted legal custody? What would she think about that?"

"I'm not the one you're trying to protect, Carl. Let it alone for now. I'll tell her when I think the time is right."

---

"So what's this big news?" said Melissa's friend Amy, once they were settled at the lunch table. Instead of answering, or being silly like she usually did when she had some secret to impart, Melissa stared at her lunch tray until she was able to say without emotion, "You can't tell anyone. This isn't some pinky swear thing. I mean, swear on your holy life."

"I swear. I really do. What's wrong?"

"I just found out last Tuesday. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't."

"What?"

Melissa beckoned Amy to lean in closer, cupped her hand over her friend's ear and whispered the two terrible words, "I'm adopted."

Amy sat back and asked, "No shit? I mean, really? You're serious? My god, Melissa."

"Shh."

One of the boys called out from the other end of the table. "What's the big secret?"

"None of your business, Derek."

Amy added, "Butt out."

Another boy butted in. "It's a girl secret. She's probably in love or she's going to get a training bra."

"She doesn't have anything to put in a bra," Derek said. "She must be in love. How sweet."

Melissa normally would have ignored the ignorant prattle of the lesser half of the species, but maybe that wasn't the right thing for her to do. Maybe the real Melissa, if that was even her real name, would have done more than sit there feeling embarrassed and afraid

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of the boys. She stood up, curled her fingers tightly into her palm and walked down to Derek's end of the table.

"Stop talking about me."

"You're so cute when you're angry. No, not even then. Do you want to borrow some kleenex for you baby bra?"

"Shut up, puke. I'm dead serious."

Her last comment got the attention of one of the teachers on lunch patrol.

Derek turned to the boy next to him and said, "Look out, it's the PMS monster. Oh, I'm afraid."

When he turned back around, Melissa lifted his tray of chili, french fries, apple spice cake and a Coke into his lap. She pulled the tray up and swung it hard into his face, dragging him up out of the chair by his hair. Her nervous frustration found a sudden outlet, and she slapped and kicked until he grabbed her shirt and punched her cheek. Then she really started into him, clawing eyes, biting, punching.

When they were finally pulled apart, Derek looked at her and laughed, until his friend said, "Oh man, you got your ass kicked by a girl." Only then did he seem to notice his bloody lip.

Melissa stood in the grasp of Mister Landry, her English teacher, feeling the rush of adrenaline as it settled under a new understanding of the freedom that she had found. If she didn't have to be Melissa Galloway, she could be anyone, say anything.

---

That evening in her room, surrounded by her things, the posters and decorations she had selected, being someone else didn't hold as much appeal. It was hard enough for kids to figure out who they were when they knew who they were. Melissa began to feel doubly lost. If Melissa Galloway was a fiction, how could she ever know who she was really supposed to be? If she stayed who she was, how could she know if she was being true to her real self?

At a quarter past seven, there was a quiet knock on her door, and she heard the footsteps of her father come into the room.

"Fighting, Melissa? That's not like you."

She remained on the bed, lying with her back to him.

"How do you know it's not like me?"

She didn't move until he sat on the bed behind her and put his hand on her shoulder. When she turned over and displayed the



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bruise below her left eye, he melted into a mushy puddle of sympathy.

"Oh, Melissa, baby. What happened? Did someone make fun of you because they found out you were adopted?"

"No!"

She scooted up and sat with her back against the wall.

"It was just this guy, Derek. He's always cracking jokes and making fun. I decided that I'd had enough so I pushed his tray full of chili into his face."

"I'm glad, I suppose, that you stood up for yourself, but you know what your mother and I have told you..."

"Don't lecture me now! Jesus, why didn't you tell me?"

Her father looked away. That was the question she had been afraid to ask for the past week. He spoke softly, looking away from her, as if he were confessing a great secret to her white teddy bear that sat on a table next to her bed.

"I don't know how much you remember. When they came to take you away, when they decided we couldn't keep you. Do you know how much that was like a cold knife in my stomach? The way you screamed when the sheriff took you out of my arms. You were my girl, my beautiful baby girl, and I couldn't stand to think of you as anything other than that."

He looked over to her, but only briefly. He examined the blanket balled at the end of the bed and said, "Why didn't I tell you? I don't know. I was afraid for so long that you'd find out on your own and stop loving me, or run away or something. I was stupid, I suppose, and selfish, but I was afraid that if you found out about the whole thing, you wouldn't want me anymore."

Again, Melissa found her voice, where before she would have been afraid to say these sorts of things. She hesitated just a moment, then said, "You still should have told me."

"Your mother wanted to, at first, but I convinced her that it wasn't time yet. Eventually, we stopped wondering when would be the right time. You were ours, and we loved you, and that's all that seemed to matter."

Finally he turned to her, slowly moving his eyes up to face her.

"But it's different now, and I'm not afraid that you'll hate me for what I did, because it turned out to be the right thing. You're going to go to high school next year. I just decided that it was time."

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"I don't want to be mad at you, daddy. I'm not. It's just hard, you know, wondering who I'm supposed to be. You have no idea what it's like to have your world fall out from under you."

"You're wrong. I know it's different, but when I saw you being taken to the sheriff's car, and thinking that was the last time I would ever see you, the world fell out from under me."

Her father stood up suddenly and said, "Get ready for supper. Carl's here. I'm going to help him prepare for the historical review board tonight."

He left her, with so much still wanting to be said between them. She needed the answers that he had started to give, but she couldn't bring herself to run after him and demand more. She fixed up her hair a bit and went down to the supper table.

---

Carl saw her bruise and said, "You're right, Jack. That's quite a shiner. How are you, slugger? I heard about the excitement at school today."

"I don't want to talk about it."

She didn't talk about anything throughout supper. She fed herself the steamed broccoli and corn, leaving most of the chicken and potatoes while the men discussed the silly details of their work, which apparently was more important to them than she was. As she and her mother cleared the table, her father addressed her suddenly.

"Melissa," he began.

She looked up at him.

"There's something more I need to tell you."

Carl looked over to him and said, "Jack, are you sure?"

Jack looked at Carl for a prolonged moment and nodded.

He stood and led Melissa into the living room. The others stayed at the table, watching them through the narrow archway. Her father went into his study and brought out an envelope with a piece of yellowed news paper that was saved in a plastic sheet protector.

Today the third circuit court ordered baby M to be removed from the residence of her adoptive parents and returned to her natural father. In two weeks, the two-year-old baby girl, who has known only her adoptive parents, will be taken by child services and returned to her birth father who only learned about his daughter after her mother was killed in a highway accident.

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Lawyers for the father, an unemployed semi truck driver, praised the decision as a victory for parental rights. "If they hadn't dragged their feet so much, there would've been no issue here. It should have been settled well over a year and a half ago," said lead attorney Baxter Cheetum.

"This is simply not right," complained Jack Galloway, the adoptive father. "This little girl doesn't understand. Why won't they think of what's best for this child? This is monstrous."

The decision ends a fourteen month legal custody battle, eight of which were spent locating the adoptive family.

"I don't understand." Melissa said, looking up to her father. "Why didn't he want me?"

Then he handed her an envelope. In it was a hand written letter.

*Dear Mr. Galloway.*

*I don't know how to begin, let me just say that I decided to take up your offer. Melissa can go on ahead and stay with you.*

*For a whole year now my head was all filled with lawyers telling me that it was my natural right and there's plenty of mistakes and loop holes. All that time I imagined my daughter with me. I thought long and hard about settling down and trying to make a go of it and I knew that once I had her I would of grown up and started to take care of business.*

*But I still didnt' feel ready. Long ago I wondered if it was the right thing to do, I had paid so much money, and made such a fuss, that I didn't know what else to do. I love that little girl. In the year that this has all been going on my love kept catching up and passing my doubts and I knew that I wanted her more than I ever wanted anything.*

*Cathy never wanted anything to do with kids. But I did. That's why we never did get married. She should of just gave her to me then. But that's not what happened.*

## CUSTODY OF LOVE

Mabey your right. She needs a mama and a daddy. Mabey its me who's being self-fish. It's because I love her that I want you to go on and take care of her. I dont' know if the lawers can undo what we did, but I will tell them to. It's not for the money. I need the money now, and eighty thousand is going to give me the chance I never had. But that's not all the story. It was your kindness and the way you offered friendship, and not hateful words that I was thinking you felt. I do want to watch her, and help her grow up. But she'll grow up better with you than with me, I think. I love her to much not to let her have that chance.

I'm sorry for making it hard. I thought of this before, but if they took her from me, I couldn't stand that. Now that she's mine, I can let her go with you. Do you understand that, that it's not the money I wanted, but the best for her? You promised you'd let me come and see her once in a while. You take good care of her because I love her so much. that's why I don't want the money. Put it in the bank for her.

I don't know how to do it, but we'll talk and settle it later. I'm going to give this to my friend to give to you before I burn it clean up.

Sinslerly,

Carl Doogan

Melissa turned around and saw Carl sitting hunched forward with an elbow resting on his knee and his hand covering his mouth under red, worried eyes and a wrinkled brow. When their eyes met, tears fell out of his. They met each other in the living room. Carl picked up Melissa and carried her back to the sofa where he sat holding her, an eternal embrace, saying quietly over and over, "I never did leave you. I love you so much, you know that?"

From the doorway her father told her, "Carl finally let me use that money to help send him to college, as a loan, he insisted. You don't have to wonder, Melissa, about who you are, or what happened to your natural father. He's been your close friend all your life, a real part of our family. Love is one of those funny things where the more of it you give away, the more you have. I want you to love him, Melissa, as much as you can. I want to give back to him what he gave to me, and to you."

## CUSTODY OF LOVE

He then left the two of them alone.

"It says my mother died in a car crash."

"Yes."

"Can you tell me anything about her?"

"I can tell you everything. We'll have to figure out what it all means. Some kids end up with two dads because of divorce, a thing of hate and anger. This happened the other way around. We took something that divided a whole city and somehow turned it into friendship. I waited, and watched, and loved you just as much. Things were really hard for me back then. It was better this way."

"So you're really my father? My real father, I mean?"

"Something like that."

It was odd. Part of her didn't like having been lied to all these years. Another part was flopping back and forth, seeing Carl as both her friend and the shadowy, invisible father she had been wondering about the past week. Most of her, however, knew how happy she had been growing up in this house, having all the things a child could have, never lacking love, discipline, nice clothes. What would it have been like, she wondered, without a mother, without her little brother?

"Thank you, Carl," she said.

"You're welcome, my little dove."

## CODY AND THE SLAVE

It's not that Cody was such a close friend, really. I just ended up hanging out with him because he kept asking me, and I usually didn't have much else to do on campus. Besides, everyone seemed to think he was cool, which gave me some kind of status by proxy, I suppose. When I got in his car, he held up his cash card.

"Cashed out a couple of my mutual funds."

"How much?"

"Forty grand."

"Are you sure about this?"

He tossed the brochure to me. I saw the picture of the girl he had circled. Gloria Pell. Nineteen years old, convicted of selling unregistered drugs, hooking without a license, and e-cash counterfeiting: sentenced to two years to the highest bidder. Guaranteed to be drug free, but then you can't always believe the trader hype.

"I'm gonna have her every damn night, my friend!"

"What about Kayla?"

"I'm through with Kayla and her rules and her baby ass and all that damn whining."

"You guys broke up?"

"I got tired of her shit."

"I liked her. I thought she was nice."

He put a cigarette in his mouth, pulled a plastic lighter out of his shirt pocket and flicked it's weak spark five times until he was able to get just enough flame. He threw the used up lighter out the car window and said, "She's too nice. No sense of adventure."

I looked back down to the picture of the young con for sale. "You're not even gonna get her. She'll go for at least a hundred thousand, easy."

"No way, her ass is mine. I'll even lend it to you now and then, if you kiss mine."

"No thanks."

They sold off the lifers first. They always went to the big companies who could afford their high price and had the facilities to keep them in check. Owning a lifer was better in some ways than a

## CODY AND THE SLAVE

short timer because you didn't have to worry about keeping up their health — you could outright kill a lifer, no problem — but you also had to deal with keeping some filthy child-killer or such trash in your home.

The first lifer was about fifty years old. You could see in his eyes he wasn't right. He wore an orange cloak that was tied around his chest and waist, pinning his arms to his side. The leg shackles chinked in a slow, steady rhythm, echoing in the small courthouse room as he stepped up onto the flimsy wooden podium.

He had set off a bomb in a store, injuring twenty people and killing a teacher and a young boy. No one bid enough to even pay for the debt of his room and board through the trial. This was his third offering, so he was simply ordered destroyed.

The next lifer was a woman who had fought with her younger sister a little too savagely, causing her to fall off a third story balcony. I remembered hearing about her in the local news the previous week. She was bought by an agent of Paramount Apparel, no doubt to work twelve hour days for the rest of her life in front of a sewing machine.

The first short-timer was a fellow about our age, convicted of selling stolen net-time in the dregs.

"Three years you can get for this one, ladies and gentlemen, and I'll bet you'll get equity. He'll get you good resale after he's broken in."

He had the hunched over, pale look of a coffin-jacker, and I figured he had an implant somewhere under his unkempt, greasy hair. His hands were shackled in front of his yellow button down shirt. He stood still, with his eyes closed.

The auctioneer started his patter. The bidding was slow.

"Oh, come on folks," the announcer said, interrupting the bidding. "Surely someone has a dog they need walked. He may not look like much, but he's smart. He's docile. He'll keep your house clean and your computers in top shape, that's for sure."

He finally went for seven thousand to an older fellow, who gave him to his daughter and her husband as a wedding present.

Gloria Pell was brought out next. She was beautiful. Long dark hair fell softly over her shoulders, partially hiding a haggard look of forced dignity. The auctioneer started immediately, calling all around the room until the bidding got up to the twenty thousand range and began to slow down.

## CODY AND THE SLAVE

Cody was jumping an extra hundred on every bid he heard. There was a pause while Cody held the last bid at thirty two thousand. A man called out from the other side, "Let me see her."

A few bidders went to the front. Gloria's shirt was pulled over her head and down along her arms to cover her shackled hands. Her pants were pushed down to the floor, and the questioner looked at her legs, arms, and stomach. She lowered her head, letting her hair obscure a clenched jaw until the announcer pulled her head one way and another and encouraged Cody and the others to examine her neck, teeth, breasts.

"Thirty three", said the other man.

"Thirty four."

"Forty."

Cody paused, then said, "Forty five."

"Fifty."

He agonized for a moment, not wanting to let her fall through his fingers, not wanting to give in to the older man. Finally, he made some internal decision and said, "Sixty five."

The other man grinned, and said, "Sixty seven."

Cody caught my eye, perhaps expecting me to want to throw in some money to help him out. I turned away and heard him say, "Sixty eight."

"Seventy."

"The bid is seventy thousand dollars, ladies and gentlemen. Is there another bid?"

From the crowd came a bid from someone who had been waiting for the other man to eliminate Cody.

"Eighty-five."

"Ninety."

The two kept leap frogging each other, while Cody came back to me and sulked. As the bidding went higher and higher, Gloria sprouted a little smile, mixed with her shame. She finally went for one hundred forty five thousand to the man who had asked to have her undressed.

The next and last one was a forty year old grandmother, arrested for involuntary manslaughter of two men after she fell asleep at the wheel and crossed over the median on an old manual highway. She was sentenced to ten years. Cody bought her for forty eight thousand, right in front of her sobbing husband, who, of course, wasn't allowed to bid.



## CODY AND THE SLAVE

I heard someone call my name.

Kayla came up and walked with me, carrying her oversized valise that was filled with her art supplies and drawings.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Sure. He hasn't called for awhile. I just shouldn't have let it go on so long. I guess it's as much my fault as it is his."

"No, Kayla. I don't believe that."

"Is it true what I heard?"

"Yeah. He's an owner."

"I don't know what he told you about why we broke up, but ..."

"It's okay. I think you did the right thing."

"Oh, shit. Look."

Cody saw the two of us and walked over. His slave hurried behind, carrying his backpack, staring at the ground.

"Are you two happy together?" Kayla asked, with exaggerated sarcasm.

"We are now, after slave relations came over. Seems she didn't quite know the rules. They beat her pretty good for me. So, yeah, things are fine now."

"Are you proud of that?"

"Hey, it wasn't my choice. I just said I was having trouble with her, and they knew what to do."

"Do you make her do ... those things?"

He leaned in close to her and said, "Whenever I want. You better just stay on the good side of the law, little Miss Muffet, or it'll be your turn."

"Back off, Cody," I said, pushing him away from Kayla with my forearm."

He stepped back, looked back and forth at the two of us and nodded slowly. "I see. Okay. Fine."

"Look, Cody, I don't think we need to hang out together anymore. Okay?"

"I thought you wanted a piece of her ass too. Just say the word and ..."

"The word is no."

"Why not? Are you getting in Kayla's pants now?" He turned to her and said, "Do you cry when he tries to touch you, too?"

"Whatever I do, or who I do it with, is none of your damn business, Cody. Leave me alone."

"Where have I heard that before? Oh yeah, in your frigid bed."

## CODY AND THE SLAVE

I stepped in front of Kayla and said, "You don't have to say stuff like that. Just let it go."

"Whoa, man, put your feathers down. Besides, I was talking to that little bitch behind you."

I turned and took Kayla by the hand and walked her back the other way. I was afraid he would come after us, but I didn't want to turn around. I felt his eyes, his smirk, following me as I ran away from him. We went around the corner of the library and through the archway that ran under the molecular engineering school.

"It's okay," she said. "He's not behind us."

"Ever since he became an owner - I don't know. I guess having power like that changes you."

"No, it just helped his real self come out. God, I'm glad I'm getting out of here at the end of this semester. How did you ever get mixed up with him?"

"He was my roommate my freshman year. I suppose that means we're bound together for life or something."

"I hope not."

We stopped, and she leaned in close to me and kissed my cheek. "Thank you."

We kept walking. We didn't say anything about it, but we just kept holding hands.

---

Glasses clinked all around the table, toasting the end of the semester and the future possibilities. Kayla's friend said, "And here's to Kayla's new fella, the first guy to pull her head out of the clouds, open her eyes, and steal her heart."

The others toasted, as I kissed the sweetest girl ever.

"I never expected her to go for someone like you - you know - nice."

"Never mind, Carol." To me, she said playfully. "She's just jealous that I got the best man on campus."

Another friend from her sculpting class said, "I guess the whole Cody Thing gave her quite a shock."

Kayla looked down with a twinge of discomfort.

"Hey guys," I said. "We don't need to bring any of that up."

Cody didn't leave her alone. Having power over his slave made him think that he could do anything with anyone. He still wanted her, mostly because he couldn't have her. The harder he pushed, the closer Kayla and I became. I learned of the things he had wanted to

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do with her, and the awful things he did do. What little was left of our friendship had been long used up. He would threaten me, follow her, call her, send sexually explicit e-mail to her and violently explicit e-mail to me.

It got him kicked out of the university. He even got in trouble with slave relations when someone reported that his slave was sick and needed medical attention. You can't do that with a short-timer. You've got to give them back to society in as good condition as you got them. He did what he had to, but just barely. I would sometimes see his slave running errands for him. She looked to have aged five years in the past two months.

"Here's to moving on," I said.

We drank and were silent for a moment. Then Carol said, "Oh, Jesus Heavenly Christ. I don't believe this."

I turned and saw Cody, cleaned up, dressed in dark slacks with a jacket and tie. His hair was cut short, and he was carrying a bundle of roses wrapped in green paper.

He approached, and very casually said, through the thickness of silence that had dropped over all of us, "Hello, Kayla."

She never looked at him or spoke. He laid the flowers by her dinner plate.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know I've done some bad things, but I've been thinking lately."

She gave him no response. I reached over and put my hand over hers.

"I want you to know that I've never felt this way about anyone, and I didn't know what to do. Maybe I went too fast, or did the wrong thing, but I just didn't know how... what to do. It's just... Well. I want you to know that I'll always love you."

Kayla sat still for several seconds. Then she picked up the flowers and dropped them on the floor. Without looking away from her half-eaten plate of vegetable lasagna, she said, "I don't love you. I don't like you. I never will. Leave me alone. I don't ever want to see you."

"I won't hurt you. I can't hurt you. I love you."

He bent down, picked up the flowers and set them on her lap.

I stood up.

"This isn't about you," he said, pointing his finger in my face.

Kayla pushed her chair back, got up, and again threw the flowers to the ground.

"Enough," she said. "I don't love you. I love him."

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Cody seemed unable to sense the strangeness with which his scene was filling the entire room, capturing everyone's attention. My heart beat heavily. I felt everyone's eyes.

"Enough," I repeated.

He stepped forward and put his arms around Kayla, holding her in a rigid embrace.

She screamed and pushed at his face.

I pulled him back by his hair.

She pushed him away.

He suddenly turned and punched me in the jaw. I had never really been hit in the face like that. It felt kind of numb at first, then there was a throbbing ache.

"This is all your fault."

In the background, I heard people moving out of the way.

His hand darted quickly and his fingers dug into my throat, grabbing me around the voice box. I tried to push him away, but he grabbed my hand and twisted it painfully. Then he turned me around and moved me forward toward the front of the restaurant.

It happened too quickly. He pushed past a group entering the wide wooden doors and threw me down the shallow brick stairs to the sidewalk. I banged my knee and twisted my ankle, but I was able to roll down and stand up.

I saw him walking down toward me, and my eyes twisted the scene into a vision of lethal rage, as if I were watching a video of what was happening rather than experiencing it. I rushed forward and grabbed hold of him, drawing us both onto the brick steps.

At first, it just felt like a really hard punch to my left side, but then, for the first time in my life, I knew profound pain. Still locked in the primal, twisted vision, I managed to get above him and started hitting his arms and chest with wild, uncontrolled fists.

I felt that awful pain again, this time in my leg, and only then did I see his knife. I tried to stand up, but a deep, snapping pain buckled my knee and I went down hard, bashing my left wrist against the sharp edge of the brick step.

I looked up at him and saw the knife clearly. He held it point down, with his thumb twitching over the bottom of the hilt. When his arm raised, he convulsed and his eyes opened wide as he was hit by a nerve stinger gun. The next instant, heavy booted feet ran by my head as three city cops swarmed above him.

Finally, the panic vision left me and I found myself lying on my side on a little metal bed. My leg and gut had been wrapped and I

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was being lifted into the back of a big, red paramedic van. The sweet softness that wiped away some of the fear and confusion turned out to be Kayla's hands brushing my forehead and cheek.

---

"So you stole his lover, flaunted your conquest in front of him, and more than once verbally insulted and threatened him."

"It wasn't like that. I.."

"Just answer the question."

"That wasn't a question. It was a statement."

"Okay. Did you verbally insult and threaten him?"

"He was sending me..."

"I didn't ask you what he sent you. Did you threaten him? Yes or no."

"Yes or no? I can't answer that way."

"Your honor, will you remind this witness that he is required to answer all questions put to him."

"Answer the question."

"I will, but I won't say only yes or no. I gave my oath that I would tell the entire truth, not just the part of the truth that serves his purposes. If I must answer these questions, I have to answer them as truthfully as I can, and I can't do that with yes or no."

"He asked you a simple question. Answer it with a single word."

"I wont."

"You will, or you will be held in contempt."

"If you force me to answer that way, then I'll have nothing but contempt for this court."

"Answer the question."

"And what of your contempt for me?"

The judge turned to the defense attorney and said, "Repeat the question."

"Did you ever threaten your friend Cody?"

"Whatever I said was defensive, in response to more serious threats both verbal and written that he made to me. I told him to stop. I met him threat for threat, in response to his harassment."

"So, that's a yes."

"You heard what I said."

"How serious is your relationship with Kayla Demming?"

"I... We..."

"Come now, that's not even a yes or no question? Do you have a problem with this, too?"

## CODY AND THE SLAVE

"Objection, your honor. Argumentative."

"Sustained."

"How would you describe your relationship with Kayla Demming?"

"I'm in love with her."

"Is she in love with you?"

"I believe so."

"Do you have a sexual relationship?"

"Objection. Where is he going with this?"

"Overruled, but get to the point."

"Have you had sexual relations with Kayla Demming?"

"We haven't made love, no."

"Weren't you a little bit jealous of the intimacy of her relationship with the defendant? Didn't you feel in competition with him?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Didn't you want what he had?"

"No. I want what I have: her respect and her love. He never had those."

"You didn't want to have sex with her?"

"I thought you were going to get to the point, but since you're going to make me answer that, no. I didn't and don't want sex with her, not until she's better able to cope with having been repeatedly raped by your client."

"No more questions."

---

The prosecution went for attempted murder and got it because they found that Cody had purchased the knife after he had purchased the flowers. He was sentenced to twenty-five years.

We needed the closure, I guess. We came in and sat in the back as the lifers were being sold off. Cody was the first short-timer. The bidding went pretty strongly between a small building contractor and an older fellow who seemed familiar to me. When the man went up to pay for his new slave, I recognized him as the husband of Cody's slave.

Kayla took my hand and we walked to the tall doors in the back. I could sense that he was watching us. I felt his powerful eyes following each of our steps, staring longingly at the back of Kayla's head. This time I turned around to face him. He wasn't even looking

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our way. His new owner had turned him around to examine the tangle of years-old whipping marks on his back.

"He was a juvenile offender," the guard explained. "I hope he learns his lesson this time."

"Oh, he will," said his new owner with icy stillness. "Right, boy?"

I turned back around and said, "Let's get the hell out of here."

# THE HEAD HOTEL

"Can I have real sex with a beautiful woman?"

"Of course you can," said the balding man sitting upright behind the grotesquely antique wooden desk. His practiced smile was pasted across an otherwise bored face.

"Because I've never - well - not really, with a beautiful one."

"I hear you. Who has, right?"

His laugh was a little too loud. It echoed against the painted concrete wall and pierced into Brian's sensitive ears, making him want scrunch his eyes and turn away. He took a sharp breath and fell into another coughing spasm.

"Your last day of carnality, after all, has to last you an eternity."

Brian smiled, and after a brief moment remembered to reply with an upward movement of his head, visual feedback. Body language, the Normals called it. He hated having to beg like that about something so private, especially to a sub-human who wouldn't or couldn't jack and had to live in only half a world.

"We'll get you a girl. Ten, if you want, but once your a Head, you'll be bored with input that's a hundred times better than anything your tired old flesh can deal up. I understand that Head sex isn't like those trashy jack fucks you get on the red-web.

The salesman looked down and opened Brian's folder. Real paper forms with real ink were stacked inside. It seemed to Brian about as useless and old-fashioned as having to drag his flesh around just to take care of business.

Brian shifted restlessly in his chair, feeling constricted having to wear clothes.

"So, Mister Babbage, you've pretty much been a Jacker all your life?"

"Since I was fifteen."

The salesman hummed, scratched the side of his face, and examined the papers one at a time. Finally, he looked up and sat back in his chair, examining Brian with the disinterested boredom of another random, rote bureaucrat.

"It says here that you're Carlson/Kramer positive."

"Yes."



## THE HEAD HOTEL

"And what is that, exactly?"

"Where have you been? It's everywhere. Can't you Normals even read anymore?"

The narrow little man closed the folder and answered, "I read very well. Books. Have you ever seen a book, Mister Babbage, or held a real journal in your hands?"

"Whatever. C/K is the latest wetware virus. It causes soft tissue cells to degenerate during mitosis. Stuff turns to jelly inside."

"And is that why you want to become a Head?"

"It's terminal. What the hell do you think?"

"I think you Jackers should all be rounded up with your neuro bugs, your Jack holes, and the rest of your godforsaken excuse for humanity, and burned. That's what I think."

"Just do your job, Normal. Nobody asked you to think."

"Here," he said, closing and scooting the folder across the desk. "Take this to room 17C and make an appointment with the cutting team."

Brian rose and farted before he caught himself.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Get the hell out of here, you filthy Jack-animal."

The cutter's office was accessible only through a maddeningly inefficient series of corridors, intersections, elevators, and wrong turns, made worse by the sore bruise that was now covering his entire right foot. He wanted to be home and off his feet.

The receptionist took his folder and said, "I have an opening tomorrow or in three weeks. Which would you prefer?"

"Tomorrow, please."

"Be here with your consent and beneficiary forms at 4:30."

"Is that 4:30, or 16:30?"

"Afternoon. We don't work in the middle of the night."

Brian left and found a public jack booth, pulled the chord from the wall, and inserted the plug into the jack behind his ear. He checked text mail from his sister.

"Dear Brian," it began. "The lawyer has Mother's estate settled, finally. The trace on the inheritance was cleared this morning. How's your foot? K."

An audio message was from his boss: "Brian, you need to devolve the time tracker lineage. Hacker 17 was able to slip a pseudo mirror into the line and modify the activity log. Talk to Sheena. She grew a program sort of like this last year."

## THE HEAD HOTEL

As he was listening to the message from work, an interactive message appeared from Gina's House of Heavenly Whores. The message wanted to know his preference for girl size, color, shape, weight, and the intimate details of what he wanted to do with them. Some of the items on the activity list were unfamiliar to him, so he selected the Light Fun Straight Sex Package Number Three with a petite red head.

While he waited for the agent to book an appointment for him, Brian flew to his work node, pulled out the latest release, gathered the programs he had been working on for the past two days, and marked them for extinction. He dropped a sniffer to gather statistics from the hacker pool, then hopped out to his bank to check on the inheritance deposit.

If his work was good enough to fool the company's lawyers, it would certainly be good enough for the folks at Head Hotel.

His mother was infected with the famous Carlson/Kramer virus last year through some bad tripper soda at a neo-rave party, thrown by her boss to celebrate the ten millionth download of his art piece, "Ocean Fred," a tribute to the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Fred Flintstone cartoons. It's was a still rendering of Fred on a deep sea fishing boat, catching Charlie the Tuna, finally, at the end of someone's hook.

She didn't tell Brian or her daughter Kellie until it was far too late. She volunteered to test a vaccine at the Center for Disease Control in Anchorage, but it was only partially successful. Brian contracted the virus when she insisted her children visit her in person one last time. Kellie missed it, luckily, but when the familiar rings began to appear on his legs, Brian had himself tested.

"You have three basic options," the clinic nurse had told him. "You can ignore it and let it eat you up in about three years. Two, you can try to medicate it, but that means little or no time online and may not be successful. Or, if you have enough e-notes, you can go the Head route."

"How much?"

"Fifty thousand or more."

So he sought out a friend of a friend who was supposed to know how to hack unsecured e-note transactions. He had a trick of intercepting paymail, adding a bogus hop fee, and forwarding it. When Brian contacted him, he learned that he had to incorporate himself as a non-profit church, give the man a legitimate business account id, and allow anonymous donations. He also learned that he

## THE HEAD HOTEL

took all the risk and got only fifteen per cent of the take. Brian then laundered it through the street market by purchasing block bandwidth slices for his company, and then, rather than donating them, as his church license indicated, he sold the time to jack-hustlers for fiat dollars, to break the electronic chain. This money went into the nightly deposits of another friend of a friend that owned an orange juice store, who then paid a salary to Brian's mother as a marketing consultant. After he convinced his mother to let him help her settle her financial accounts, he invested her salary in high growth commodity funds and then let the machinery spin.

In the next ten months, as the disease began to show external manifestations, he raised enough to supplement her own savings and investments so that, once her estate was settled between Brian and his sister, he had almost enough. He was short only fifteen hundred notes.

He received a static message from Gina, confirming an appointment for that evening for two hours with Peggy starting at 19:45, courtesy of the Head Hotel.

It was time to call Kellie.

He opened a voice connection and waited for her to answer.

"Hello," he heard her say.

"Kellie, it's Brian. How was the ceremony?"

"Nice. Not many people were there. Jeremy said to tell you that he misses his uncle. We thought you'd be there."

"Maybe I should have."

"No. I understand. Are you feeling better?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Do you think you're going to have to have your foot amputated?"

"Something like that."

There was an uncomfortable pause. Brian added, "I need a little extra money."

"What for?"

Her tone suggested she had already guessed what he was about to say next.

"I'm going to the Head Hotel?"

"Oh, Brian. That disgusting infomercial thing? It's not that bad."

"Yes..."

"You can fight this."

"Yes it is. I don't think I want to try that."

## THE HEAD HOTEL

"There's another nano-spore that's supposed to arrest it. The doctor was telling us about it just last week."

"Kellie, it's into my lungs. I can't wait for that."

There was another long pause that grew uncomfortable until she said, "How much?"

"Seventeen hundred."

"Okay, but I want to see you first. One last time."

"It's not like I'm going away. I can still send messages, or synth my voice. I'll still be here."

She began to cry. "Not you too, Brian. I can't lose both of you."

"I'll still be here. I just won't have to live in this infected meat anymore."

"When?"

"Tomorrow. I need you, Kel. Please."

"I want to see you."

"I'm still in Nevada. There's not time. It's better this way. I'll call as soon as I'm settled in."

"Turn on video, Brian. I want to see you."

He sent a command to the booth's vid-cam to activate it and looked up at it.

"I'll miss your blue eyes."

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The little red head stood in front of the sofa with a short, black skirt and a green V-neck sweater and asked, "Ever been here before, sport?"

Brian shook his head no.

"Do you like it any particular way, or just take it as it comes?"

"I don't know, really."

"What do you want me to do, honey? Do you want me to lead?"

"Okay."

She pulled the sweater over her head, past her short hair, revealing her bare stomach and breasts to Brian's staring eyes.

"Can I..."

"Can you what, sweetie?"

"Can I hold you on my lap, for a little while?"

"Honey, you can hold me any way you like."

The first hour was awkward, and if not for Peggy's reassuring encouragement's, Brian would have felt like running away. She was a real professional, a healer, a whore, in the best sense of the word. She never once asked about or even seemed to notice the thick

## THE HEAD HOTEL

bandage that covered Brian's right foot. By the second hour, he was feeling comfortable, able to get into the spirit of the role playing and other games of Light Fun Straight Sex Package Number Three.

There was no need for him to go home. He spent the night at a real hotel, expecting to find it luxurious. It was nice having such large, private space, but the bed was uncomfortable, and he wished he could sleep floating in the salt water of his jack crib.

The next day, he paid for an hour at the city park, and he spent the whole time sitting by a splashing fountain, looking at pretty girls, families, birds. He noticed the occasional squinty, slouching gait of a jacker out of his hole. The Normals were also easy to spot with their vacuous giddiness. It was a mild source of embarrassment at work that his own sister had decided to live on the outside, a weird pathology they liked to call "going natural." To Brian it seemed as ignorant as a child declaring that he never wanted to learn to read because he preferred being stupid all his life.

By the time of his appointment, Brian's foot was a pounding ball of sharp pain, and his coughing hurt his throat and chest. Some of the phlegm he coughed up was turning red, not that it mattered much any more.

By 16:30, he was well ready to be rid of his body.

He was ushered into the cutting room, told to strip naked and lie down on a plastic table. The cutter and her staff came in and told Brian to jack in. He plugged in the cable that would be part of him from now on and closed his eyes. He accessed the camera from above and was able to watch the whole thing.

She lifted his head, swabbed the back of his neck with a numbing solution, then injected a nerve inhibitor to paralyze and numb the area completely. Then, she stuck a needle into the jugular veins on either side of his neck and began routing his blood through a filtering machine.

He felt dizzy and nauseous as the blood feeding his brain was replaced with an artificial, oxygen-rich plasma. She cut open the back of his neck, letting his body drain its blood onto the plastic slab. Then she sliced quickly across his spinal chord and his body went completely numb. The team stopped his heart and carefully cut through his neck. After they took his body away, and his head was propped on a tripod stand, he tried opening his eyes. He saw the bright glare of the lights above. He tried to cry out but had no voice.

## THE HEAD HOTEL

The cutter put her hand over his eyes, turned to the camera and said, "It's best not to do that. Let me know if you have any questions."

He accessed the voice synther and said through the room's speakers, "I'm okay."

"Good. We're almost there."

His face was swabbed all over with more of the numbing solution, and the staff gave him several shots of the nerve killer.

"You might not want to watch this part. We have plenty of activities while you wait. Follow the yellow arrows if you want."

Brian decided to stay and watch.

Once the medicine took effect, they cut the skin away from the scalp, peeling it away from the skull. The optic nerve was severed and the rest of the skin was removed. It took only another ten minutes to cut away the jaw and the top of the skull.

It was time to wait for the nano-surgeon. Brian dropped a trigger event on the room door and followed the yellow arrows into a full media room. He tried out a jack adventure, and suddenly he had a body again. This time it was the body of the leading actor. He felt his legs move as Dirk Kerrigan, Master Detective, walked into his vintage 1995 office, complete with a flat screen computer running X-windows terminal sessions. He felt breaths moving his chest up and down as he saw the headlines of the paper: "Hacker Sue, still missing."

He started to read the article when Dirk's secretary, wearing her always-appealing, yellow summer dress, came into the room.

Brian felt himself ask, "Yes Darla?", hearing Dick's voice in his own head.

He watched as the actor swept his eyes across Darla's high hem line.

"There's a woman to see you, Mister Kerrigan."

Just then, Brian's door event triggered, and he backed out of the drama and returned to the vid-cam in the operating room.

The nano-surgeon set up his telepresence set, covering most of the head. Brian saw that he was allowed to fork the doctor's visual stream, so he watched as micro veins were grafted into his brain, replacing the crude intravenous feed that the cutter team had installed.

In a half hour's time, he had a complete set of grafts that would feed him artificial plasma loaded with the appropriate balance of oxygen, hormones, and synthetic antibodies. It was then a simple

## THE HEAD HOTEL

matter to lift the brain from the skull and place it into a saline solution.

“All done, Mister Babbage,” the nano-surgeon told him, speaking to the camera. “The cutter crew will transport you to your new home.”

The cutter nurse removed the end of his jack wire from the wall and plugged it into a low-res wireless node. Once his plasma feed was transferred to a mobile unit, Brian was able to watch his brain being wheeled down the hall and into the vault as a series of jerky, grainy, faded images. Even so, the vault was amazing. There were rows and rows and still more rows of tall cabinets. Each one was a wall of small cubby holes, cubes two feet on a side.

His brain pan was installed into the hole that had his name etched onto the door. His plasma feed was connected to the artificial body that would provide food and energy for him for the rest of his long life. When his jack wire was plugged in, the low resolution images were replaced with full, high-definition, and he was able to see himself over the shoulder of one of the cutter staff: a brain floating silently in a pan, in a box. The door was closed and locked.

Brian felt nervous. He expected to feel his heart beating fast inside his body, but he only felt numb. He felt like he needed to yawn, but found that he couldn't even feel his face, or click his teeth together. He felt as if he had to scratch his left arm, which was strange because he couldn't even feel his arms. It felt funny not breathing.

He accessed the video of the storage room one last time, saw the unending rows of head cabinets, and resolved never to access that feed again. He turned his attention back to his home account. Tomorrow he would arrange to terminate the lease of his old jack booth. He nervously accessed a few of the familiar sites: his work account, Cyberia, The Arcade, Capacitor Cafe, the History Channel. It all worked. He could see. He could hear. He could even smell the tangy, sweet aroma of his background processes operating smoothly.

He opened a connection to call Kellie. He heard one ring and then the line went dead. He dropped a fault query agent onto the line, but suddenly, his vision was filled with the video feed of the office of the snotty salesman. Sitting in the seat across the desk was a man wearing the unmistakable brown plaid jacket of a Network Administrator.

The admin turned his faced toward the camera and said, as if by rote, “Mister Babbage, due to unauthorized usage of network

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resources, including fraud, illegal interception and tampering with packet traffic, and failure to report bandwidth resale, your account is being terminated. After your outage is complete, you will report to a probation officer who will assign work to you so that you can repay your debt to society. After the period of one year, you will be allowed eighty characters of text output per day and two thousand characters of text input per week. Your outage shall be for the period of six years.”

Brian was suddenly surrounded by blackness. He no longer heard the background hum of processes and events. He was numb, dumb, blind, deaf, and alone. It was the darkest dark and the quietest quiet. Words formed in his mind, almost as if he were hearing them, demanding, pleading, raging, whimpering. His brain wanted his body to run, to be afraid, to fight, but even the outlet of physical terror was denied him as his brain floated alone in a box, screaming and crying inside itself.



# THE PEOPLE'S ARENA

The arena was filled with screaming, bloodthirsty fans. The condemned were held aloft in a cage that was craned around above the hoots and taunts of the audience. Close-ups showed the fear, the twisted despair on the penned law breakers. Some held their position with quiet dignity. Some cried. The crowd loved it when they lost it and screamed and clawed at their cage.

All over the country, splitters and repeaters came on-line to duplicate the live data stream as millions of Americans accessed the live net site.

Music. Fanfare.

Announcer: Live from Denver Penitentiary Area 5, it's The People's Arena. Tonight we witness the disposal of Father John Baker (camera shows a small man with gray hair and a look of sick shame) Craig Horton (punk, flips the bird to the camera) and Mrs. Henrietta Jones (a young woman crying frantically). Their crimes were selected from among the worst of the worst. Tonight we'll celebrate their executions as we (drum roll) Send 'Em To hell.

Good Evening, I'm Doug Kellerman. Welcome to tonight's balancing of society. You may remember the story of Mrs. Henrietta Jones. She held her two children, Sarah, 8, and Thomas, 11, at gun point for over three hours, demanding her husband grant her a divorce. In the end, she killed her own children, her husband and a Dade County Sheriff. Tonight, she will be executed by guillotine at the hand of her husband's father, Karl Jones II.

Craig Horton, whose only defense was, human flesh simply tastes better, was found to have murdered over ten young women, and at least six men, eaten them, and stored their remains in his basement refrigerator. Folks, that's just not done! That's why he'll be drawn and quartered by the four People's Arena Monster Trucks!

But first, we have Father John Baker, who confessed to the sexual molestation of dozens of children of his Sunday School over the past twenty years. Tonight, his execution is dedicated to the memory of little Amanda Sampson, who died at the age of twelve during complications of an unsupervised home delivery of Father Baker's bastard child.

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We'll wait just a moment for the lovely ladies to finish shackling him to the shooting pole. Father Baker, what were you thinking?

...walk through the valley of the shadow of death the lord is my shepherd ...

Excuse me, Father, do you have anything you would like to say to the world, or to the children whose lives you tried to ruin?

... I have sinned against you, my Lord...

That's all well and good, but vengeance is ours, isn't that right? Over here we have some of the children who had to endure Father Baker's evil actions. Your name is...

Timmy.

That's a nice antique you've got there.

It's my daddy's deer rifle. I'm gonna shoot him in the gut. I've been practicing.

Good, very good. Let's move along. What's your name?

Heather.

Well, Heather, you're looking very pretty for this occasion. Is that a new dress?

Don't touch me.

Oh, I'm sorry. What's that you've got?

This is a laser-sighted sub machine gun with smart tracking bullets. I'm gonna shoot his hands...

In the control room, the director, Polk, turned to the executive producer and said, Look at those ratings. I told you we weren't going too far with the whole kid angle.

I still wish you had cleared this with me. We've been getting more and more mail complaining about the program.

Trust me.

Doug Kellerman presented the fake news footage of Father Baker being taken into custody somewhere, as they always said, in a small midwestern town. Timmy and Heather were interviewed, as were some other actors playing the part of infuriated parents, the last of which said, I hope the whole world gets to see that sick son of a bitch put down.

The scene froze on the man's face and then dissolved back to Doug.

All right then, let's get ready to Send 'Em Down.

Lights lowered, and father Baker and the kids were flooded by spotlights.

The engineer prepared the blood packets as the kid playing Timmy took aim. He pulled the trigger, firing the blank and sending

## THE PEOPLE'S ARENA

a signal to the control room to activate the small explosion of the fake blood. The actor portraying the evil Father Baker jerked back and then forward with a convincing outcry of agony.

Heather's shot popped a blood pack just at his sleeve, covering his hand with dripping red stage goo. The slow motion replay, which had been computer generated and enhanced yesterday during pre-production, was shown to both the live and the net audience.

Timmy's next shot scored in the gut, and Father Baker slumped forward. Flashing signs around the arena prompted the audience to begin the standard long howl. Doug Kellerman ran around the center of the floor waving his fist in the air, urging the crowd to a roar. Then he stopped, and as he knelt down and punched his fist forward, the audience, in synchronized fervor, chanted, Got 'im!

At just that moment, the guillotine was wheeled in by women wearing big hoop dresses, representing Marie Antoinette, each wearing a red scarf around her neck.

From the control room, the crew began the preparations for the standard beheading illusion which, hidden by a flash of light, enabled them to drop off a fake head into the basket and make the actor's body appear to have only a stump of a neck.

Karl Jones II was driven out from the end of the arena on a white carriage pulled by six horses whose coats had been bleached to be pure white. He climbed down from the carriage and up the steps onto the platform where he was met by Doug.

So, Mrs. Jones is your daughter-in-law.

Well, not for long.

That was an awful day. Let's share that again with the audience.

The monitors in the auditorium, and the video stream on the net feed, switched to the footage of the video drama, prepared and sent to the media last week to be broadcast along with the other real news stories, setting up tonight's event.

Terrible. Just terrible, Doug said at the end. Let's see if we can heal that a little bit.

Henrietta Jones was dragged, screaming and clawing. Her cries and writhing brought the crowd to a high volume.

Once her head was pulled through the little gate and locked in, Doug brought over the microphone.

So, Mrs. Jones, what do you think of your little stunt now?

She merely screamed louder in a wild, disconnected hysteria.

Oh come on, you were little miss self-control when you were holding a gun to your daughter's head. Say something.

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More useless screams were now coming in a spasm of gasps and choked wails.

Stop, screaming! Doug commanded. Her wide-eyed mask of horror only pitched the audience into waves of laughter and howls, especially when Doug put his own face close to her and began yelling, Shut up! Shut up, Shut the hell up! Then he began his own show of feigned anguish, screaming back in her face.

He suddenly stood back and asked the crowd, Have you had enough? Do you want her to shut the hell up? Are you ready? All right!

Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

Karl Jones II pulled the large lever. The blade slid down, there was a quick flash of light, and it was over. As Doug ran around with his fist in the air, the slow motion again displayed a sequence from the pre-production effects staff. Again he knelt, threw his fist forward, and the crowd cried, Got 'im.

The carriage and guillotine were pulled away, and from each of the four sides of the Arena, the monster trucks roared in and began circling Doug Kellerman whose amplified voice rose above the trucks.

And now, our main event.

The trucks stopped circling and backed into position, each approaching Doug who stood at the middle of the floor.

Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, it is our pleasure to bring to you the end of a life of such foul and disgusting evils that it pains me to have to confess that such a man can still live in this world...

Inside the control room, heads turned to the sound of gunfire in the hall. Polk hurried out of his seat, and when he pulled open the door, he was greeted by a group of men and women wearing camouflage pants and tee shirts with the initials P.E.E.

They stormed in and pulled the engineers and directors out of their seats at gun point. Polk was held in a choke hold by a large, burly woman and felt the cold steel of her knife brushing his neck.

In walked a man with glasses, a flat top hair cut, a fanny pack, and a old western holster with a six shooter.

Patch me in, he ordered. Another man focused a camera on him as another plugged into a video port and sat down at the mixing board. In seconds, the setup story went blank and the arena's video screens and the net feed held only the image of this man's firm, angular face.

## THE PEOPLE'S ARENA

I am Jacob Peterson, leader of People for Ethical Execution. We have taken over this travesty in the name of the decent people of the world. No more will killing be done for sport. Criminals must be punished, but they must first be given the chance to repent and to change their ways. And if they must be let out of the world, then only by humane means. Tonight, we will demonstrate this by executing the director of this show, Mister Humphry Polk. Take him downstairs.

P.E.E. had flooded through the entire arena, taking control of each camera and lighting position. Polk was taken down to the arena floor, and Jacob Peterson took the place of Doug Kellerman as the master of ceremony.

Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, you will see an execution for crimes against the decency of humanity. Not only has this man attempted to reduce us to the level of the animal, he has descended to the lowest of the low by corrupting the souls of little children to do his filthy work of nasty public revenge. Tonight will be the last broadcast of The People's Arena, and we will finish by the humane execution of Humphry Polk.

The monster trucks were pulled away, and Polk was put in leg chains. Jacob Peterson unzipped his belt pack, pulled out a syringe and took off the plastic needle cover.

Witness the only decent way to kill!

Polk screamed out, Help! Help me. Don't let the justice end!

The crowd, which had been held by confusion and disbelief, were suddenly pulled out of their stupor. They began pouring over the gates and out onto the arena floor. Jacob Peterson and his minions of P.E.E. were dragged down and swarmed over by the audience turned posse.

Polk hopped away through the crowd, and as soon as he reached the edge, was helped up into the stands by a couple of the security guards.

Get them away from the cameras and get me back to the control room.

He hopped up piggy back onto one of the guards and bounced up the stairs as he was carried away from the increasing clamor of the lynching going on below him on the arena floor.

The guard set him down at the door of the control room. He picked up the chain binding his legs and hopped over a couple of the intruders who were lying in a pool of blood on the floor. The net feed showed the roof of the arena from camera four. He scanned the

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vista of images, punched in camera nine that held a still image of the arena in a wide shot, showing the terrible melee below.

Who's with me, he called out as he put a set of headphones on. He heard a response from Pete on camera six.

Anyone else? Damn! Okay, Pete, give be a slow zoom into the center. Find some action. I need an announcer! Pete, pan around. I'm switching to live audio.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you saw earlier, our program was invaded by a band of radical kooks who don't approve of our manner of justice. Well, fuck 'em. Take a look.

He sat back and watched the images flowing in from camera nine. Anyone with a P.E.E. shirt was getting pummeled and beaten. The other fights were breaking out, and the arena floor was packed with a wild, frenzied, uncontrollable mob of visceral hatred that quickly erupted in a conflagration of brutality that quickly spread from the intruders and onto itself.

Polk cut the microphone and called over his shoulder to the security guard, Lock all the doors. I don't what this spilling out into the streets.

He turned back around and said, Pull back Pete. Then he glanced at the clock on the wall and switched the audio on again.

The primal urge of catharsis denied, the human drama of revenge breaking through the impotent anger of society. We will not be denied. We're mad as hell, and we're not gonna take it any more.

He watched the second hand begin to sweep out its final minute.

The images showed men and women, clawing, fighting for their lives in the pit of chaos. Some were seeking refuge around the top row of seats, but there was hardly a soul in the arena not engaged in some form of fist fight, foot race, or grotesque display of grief at the death or injury of a friend or loved one. It was like a human demolition derby, accompanied not by the crunch of metal, but by the echoes of flesh against flesh, bones snapping, mothers crying, and the primal screams of people trampled under the feet of the fight.

At thirty seconds to close, Polk punched the credits and the recorded voice that cheerfully thanked the sponsors and previewed next week's show, all while the bloody pit of howling hell panned across in the background.

Finally, he punched off the live net feed and turned around.

The executive producer came at him and grabbed him around the throat.

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Is this what you wanted? Is this where you hoped to take us? Do you even see what you've done?

He pulled back and ordered the two men from the National Guard, Take him down to the arena and let him feel what his brand of catharsis feels like.

Polk, despite his pleas that quickly broke into hysterical screaming, was dragged down the hall and the back stairs. When he was thrown through the door, he felt the sting of tear gas and the hands of a mob pulling him down, beating his face, tearing at his skin, and his screams were added to the final performance of his great work.

# GETTING HIGH

## Eddie

---

Tinny's bar was nearly empty except for the dusky fog of humid air that hung thick with old grease, barbecue, and spilled drinks. The faded florescent light cast a yellow tinge to everything that made those not used to it feel confined and sticky just walking in. At the back corner sat another desperate user, trading thirty five bucks he stole from a woman at the bus stop for today's ration of medicine. Eddie took out one of his packs of cocaine, carefully measured and burnt into a solid little rock, and made another trade while his buddies stood outside watching the street for admins.

Behind them, the TV showed the latest news release of President Zach Webber. His gray temples highlighted his charismatic, chiseled face which beamed with its usual plastic smile, as if he were some gigantic PEZ dispenser delivering yet another candy-coated media morsel out of his neck.

Tinny stood, his old skinny frame leaning along the counter under the ancient black and white tube TV. He waited for the junkie to leave, then called out, "Yo, Eddie. D'you hear this fuk'n bullshit?"

"... and so it is with great sadness and regret that I must declare that we have lost the war on drugs. This is not a battle that can be won with deeper and deeper pockets. That has been demonstrated. This is not a battle that can be won by simply interrupting the supply. We've been trying that for the last fifty years. The only way to win this battle is to take the money away from the pushers and kingpins, to dry up their capitol by decriminalizing all drugs, making them cheaply available, and to take all the money that once went into the near useless and increasingly intrusive police system and divert it to free clinics and hospitals to treat this national epidemic the only way that it can be treated, as the medical problem that it is. Effective immediately, I am granting a pardon to all non-violent drug offenders to make room in our prisons for habitual felons. I am immediately removing the military forces from participating in intervention efforts. I am issuing an executive order



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eliminating all federal drug screening tests. I am issuing orders to immediately dismiss any federal employee who, under the influence, causes a disruption of work of any kind. I have asked that Congress form a joint commission to quickly pass legislation decriminalizing the consensual use of any substance, abolishing the Food and Drug Administration, and repealing the War On Drugs bill passed by the previous administration."

"You hear dat, Tinny? We in business now. We in business now!"

Eddie went to the phone and called Li Chan's pager number. A few moments later, Tinny's old phone rang.

"Eddie here."

"Yeah, whatcha need, brotha?"

"You hear da news, Li? Money gonna be flowin' like water. Bring it on, my man. Bring it fuck'n on."

"You call me when you need more, not when you got some stupid hard on for trouble."

"You hear da news?"

"I heard it. We knew it was coming."

"Then it's cool? We gonna push it fast."

"You're pathetic, man."

## Li Chan

---

Four young men, wearing their colors and signs, stepped through the heavy steel and glass door of the Kwik Mart on North Baxter, tinkling its little bell. They moved past the display of Twinkies, candy, and coffee that huddled in the corner next to the newspaper stand above a floor that was tacky from old unmopped stains. Li Chan stood in line behind the mother who ignored her crying baby to fill in another lottery ticket.

The old, heavy set Italian behind the counter eyed the boys who stood nearby.

When the lady finished giving her tickets to the cashier, Li Chan stepped up close and said, "Hear you're sellin' weed, hash now, shit like that."

The old Italian stood still and didn't say anything.

"Come on, let me see some of it. Is it good?"

He turned and took down a small orange box with black lettering and decorations, one of the new brands, Canniblast.

"You got rock? Crack?"

"You don't get that here."

## GETTING HIGH

"You know that's right. You know what else is right? You ain't never gonna get it here, amigo, cause we see it here, you don't got a store no more. You tell that to your boss and his boss and his boss. Word from Tony."

He looked down at the little box then tossed it back behind the counter as he and his buddies moved on out.

That night they all paid a little visit to the Kava Kavern down the road. They took a booth and waited for the tight-shirted college girl with a freckled face, nose ring, and braces to come over.

Li Chan spoke for the group, "Yeah, we want to try some o' that new coke you s'posed to be sellin' here."

"Uh, okay, like, if you wanna get high, you know, that's upstairs, okay? I can bring you up something else if you want, though? You can also get food up there."

"No, that's cool."

The four men went up the stairs to a large room that used to be a Pully's Pinball. It was dark, filled with tables pushed close together. One table had a group of yuppie punks doing lines for their first time. Three tables were taken up by one person each, all smoking crack. A few others just had some folks smoking pot and drinking. When they sat down, a man came over.

"Good evening gentlemen. Have you been here before? No? You can get coke, crack, and hash, but no needles and no LSD. There's a twenty five dollar cab payment you pay up front. You get that back if you hang around at least an hour after your last hit. Or you can just get our cab rider's card for forty dollars that you can hold onto until you need a ride. What can I get you?"

"Is it good stuff?"

"Oh, you bet. Clean."

"So, what do you got?"

He listed their various offerings, everything from a small rock to an all night party powder pack. All his prices were no more than ten percent of the same quantity on the street.

"Well, you know what?" Chan said, "I don't think we got the cash for that cab thing. What do you guys think, wanna go see a movie or some shit? You know, that's cool. I think we're gonna just go see a movie. We'll catch you another time."

They all stood and went back down the stairs, past the coffee drinkers and cheesecake eaters, out into the street where Li Chan picked up a pay phone and called Tony.

"Yeah?"

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"Yeah, man. It's Chan."

"Done?"

"Just a minute."

He looked back over his shoulder and waited. Fifteen seconds went by. Tony said, "Well?"

"Hold on, man."

After another twenty seconds the pipe bombs they planted went off, shattering the upstairs windows and sending a boom out into the street.

"Got it?"

"Good."

### Tony

---

Tony sat in his grandmother's basement behind a table covered with cocaine, cash, and the books. It was getting harder and harder to move the product with fifty dollar bags going for \$4.99 at any hash house. Their threats had been growing more and more empty after six of his boys had been arrested for interfering with the legal sale of narcotics.

It's not like they could go into business themselves. Nobody with a record could get a tripper license, and no one was buying wholesale either. They all had their own suppliers. Somebody was making out like a bandit.

The door at the top of the basement stairs opened, and he heard his old grandmother calling down to him, stretching out his name like they did in the old country, "Tooooni! Tony you come up d' stairs now."

"Shut up, nanna. I'm busy."

"Ah, hell with you Tooni, you get your ass up here now."

"I'll box your ears, old woman!"

"If you could have a real job - respectable - you wouldn't talk to me like that. Nobody want your stuff - my problem? I just say to you..."

"Button it, bitch!"

"You going to hell for that little bastard..."

"Fuck you, grandma!"

"Oh yes, and fuck you back!"

Footsteps descended behind his grandmother. The old stairs groaned and complained as the weight of three heavy men started

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down. The first one was tall and massive, six eight, two seventy, dressed sharp as a surgeon's scalpel.

Victor stopped and said to grandma, "It's okay, Mrs. Garbonzo. I'll speak with your grandson down here if you don't mind."

"No, s'okay." She cast a squinty, side-eyed glance at her grandson and went back up the stairs past Victor's two men.

Victor stepped down slowly, one step at a time. He unbuttoned his jacket and came over to Tony. In a flash, his big ham fist landed on Tony's cheek, just under his left eye.

"I ever hear you talk like that to an old lady — your grandmother for God's Own Sake — I will personally beat you to such a filthy pulp they'll need dental records and blood type to figure out who the fuck you were."

"I'm sorry."

"You sure as hell are. Sit down, Tony, we're gonna talk. We're friends, aren't we, Tony?"

"Sure, Victor. Sure."

"And I've saved your sorry ass more than what - three four times?"

"Oh, at least."

"And where would you be if not for me?"

"I wouldn't be worth much. Not much at all. What do you need? Just name it."

"You run a pretty good neighborhood, here. That's why I leave you alone even though, mostly, you're an asshole. But you ain't been running it very good lately — no, that's okay. I understand. It's just that, bottom line, you haven't moved hardly any of the new stuff we sent you. Still, you can be helpful to me in may other ways. Do you understand me?"

"I don't know. Look, I'm not set up to push that other stuff yet. Who the fuck even does opium?"

"Just remember all the things you owe me. Remember that you don't know me, and you don't know where you get your supply. And remember that I have friends in places where you would least expect them. You do know that, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Just sit tight, Tony."

Tony watched as Victor and his men went back up the stairs. Then he watched out the narrow basement window to make sure they got in their car and left. As soon as the car was out of the driveway, Tony heard the sirens from down the street. He ran up the

## GETTING HIGH

stairs and through the kitchen, but by the time he was in the back yard, the police were already out of their cars and running around the house. He made it halfway down the alley.

He was only seven years old when the neighbor's dog got loose and chased him down. Now, that horrid vision and that awful panic came back to him as a very aggressive, well-trained German Shepherd chased after him, not barking, not wagging his tail. Just running, with those evil, piercing eyes and glinting sharp teeth. The dog jumped in front of him and clamped his jaw around Tony's wrist.

Through a fog of panic as he lay on the ground, prey to the awful monster, Tony cried, "Ow, Ow, Ow! He's hurting me. Oh-Ow. Stop him!"

"Down Gustov. Good Booooooy."

He felt a heavy knee in his back, then the city cop peeled Tony's hands away from his face and wrapped them in cold steel.

## Victor

---

"...And earlier, on the city's Southwest side, a major victory for the police as another illegal drug dealer was taken out of business. Senator Carpenter spoke of the incident at a fund raising dinner earlier this evening."

"While it's clear that President Webber's plan seems to be having a positive effect on the use of some drugs, the understandable reluctance of responsible businesses to carry hard drugs like heroin, like opium, like blue steel, enables the underground to continue. And they have the added incentive to provide additional, far more dangerous mixtures than anything that a licensed distributor would carry. The substances found just this afternoon, for example, demonstrate that we still need a reasonable degree of control, rather than this insane free-for-all, this irresponsible nationwide Meta-Rave that the President seems to enjoy so much. But considering his college days, I guess we all should have expected as much..."

Victor turned away from the television and walked over to the window that looked into the small warehouse. Already, large sacks were being loaded onto the truck to be taken to the Fast Times Drug Refinery, thanks to another amendment that was silently moved through Congress with the help of Senator Carpenter. The amendment simply provided for the Child Safety and Security Bill to

## GETTING HIGH

name KoKo, Inc. as an official wholesaler for controlled substances. Tony's bust was enough of a payoff to open the door just a little bit. Of course now FTDR would have to be paid in favors and soft money to open that door even further.

"What a sight," he said to the tiny, empty office. He shook his head with a small laugh. Imagine shipping cocaine around in broad daylight in a semi truck. After the truck was loaded and on its way, the first of many he hoped, Victor drove down for a business meeting at the Holiday Inn by the lake. This was more like it.

He knocked.

The door opened and, without comment or ceremony, he was let in. On the bed was a pile of five suitcases, each filled with part of the evidence from Tony's bust, heroin, opium, and a large bundle of the latest blend of blue steel. He looked it over, then handed out payment to both of the men inside, four hundred fifty-dollar bills each. They helped him carry the bags out to his car, and he left.

Victor took out his phone and punched quick dial number three, which used to connect him with Tony's cell phone until he had reprogrammed it.

"Yeah."

"Too bad about Tony."

"Who the fuck is this?"

"You don't know me, Mister Li. Let me just say that there's now a position that needs to be filled and that Tony spoke very highly of you. You will be contacted."

He cleared the number, then pressed quick dial number seven.

Drake's man answered.

"Pelican printing."

"It's Victor."

After a moment, Victor heard the line click over and Drake's cell phone ringing.

"Hey, my boy! Well done. Your papa would be proud. Very proud."

## Drake

---

Soft Celtic music played in the background as the waves rolled in under a deeply blue sky. Drake Mandrake sat comfortably in his fifteen-thousand-dollar, imported leather sofa across from Judge Ellsworth Tanner.

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"We need three things," Tanner explained. "New legislation, public opinion, and judicial review. Carpenter's got the first two underway. Now we need the law to be tested in a friendly environment."

"Your court?"

"If it comes to that, yes. But I was thinking of Maine. They're sick at the very thought of Webber's plan. We may not even have to do anything."

"We don't want to go too far," Drake said. "I had to go through hell to pay our way into this coke gravy train. I need at least four, five months to get our operation ramped up in Europe. Damn it's tough, and I'm just a small fish. Shit, it's not enough that Carpasian's was first to get into the legal US market. Now he's already up to his dick in Russia, and he's got a goddamn good head start breaking into Shenyang and Singapore. Shit, I'll probably get going in Germany, then Amster-fucking-dam will try to go full open on us too."

"You've got Europe, and I've got to find a way to get Webber to sign the new bill."

"He'll sign it. If he still wants to keep funding the rebels in Kyrgyzstan off the books, he'll need back his cash flow that he's drying up with his new policy. Besides, you don't just turn off a quarter of a trillion dollar economy and not piss a few people off. He'll go along with us, especially if we can get some friendlies on the oversight committee."

"God, Drake. If you pull this off, you'll have Carpasian and every other family in the Western Hemisphere ready to kiss your ass."

"Don't kid yourself. Carpenter's not smart enough to come up with this political issue on his own. We've just got a piece of him. Shit, half the congress by now is in somebody's pocket, one way or the other, and the other half hates Webber anyway."

## Ellsworth

---

Ruling on the hearing for appeal of case number 7938 of the Lower Springfield District-25

"... therefore, considering the greater public good, the local community standards, and the ability for those of this country to pursue life and liberty, this court finds that Mister Antonio Garbonzo's unlicensed drug business poses a clear and present

## GETTING HIGH

danger to his community and this state. Therefore the motion to retry the case at the state level is denied...”

Outside the courthouse, perky young Connie Calloway stood in her neatly-pressed, navy blue blazer and waited for the entourage of feds, media, and the prisoner to emerge. She pressed her hand against the earpiece through which she listened to Anchorman Bob back at the station.

“And what does this ruling mean for the few remaining drug dealers who refuse to obtain the legal license?”

“Well, Bob, the focus of the decision was more related to the particular substances, not the license. It seems the court system just isn’t ready to sanction these more serious drugs...”

Judge Ellsworth Tanner watched the reports from his chamber for a few minutes before he hung up his robe and opened his briefcase to check once again that his plane tickets were with him. Then he went down to the staff garage and drove out to the airport.

He met Senator Carpenter at the Sycamore, overlooking the Potomac River behind M street near Georgetown University. As he cut up his tender swordfish steak, Tanner said to his old college friend, “As I understand it, various friends of your campaign are quite eager to give you whatever support you need.”

“That’s very kind of them, but I want them to understand that this is a matter of principle to me. Webber is wrong.”

“Of course, of course. We just want you to understand that your goals and our goals, let’s say, intersect. What’s the status of the Recriminalization Bill?”

“The majority leader is holding it up.”

“Can someone in the House introduce it?”

“It needs Webber’s support. He’s got a pretty tight lock.”

“What do you know about operation Desert Rat?”

“Rumors. CIA stuff.”

“Ask Webber how it’s funded. Ask him what invisible force keeps the details off the web casts. I think you’ll find that if you can open the door a little bit, you will find sudden and fierce support.”

Carpenter smiled, “One of these days, El, I’m going to ask you how you know that, but right now, I don’t want to know.”

“No. Not yet.”



### Senator Roy Carpenter

---

The political tug and pull always seemed to extend into even the most banal rituals, like making a member of the opposing party wait an extra forty-five minutes after the scheduled appointment. Finally, the door opened and Senator Carpenter was shown into the Oval office.

The President stood behind his desk and waited for the senator to come over to him. He extended his hand warmly and said, "Good morning, Roy. Come, have a seat."

They sat down facing each other on the sofas in the middle of the room.

"What's on your mind?"

"I'm here to request your support for the introduction of a new bill. The majority leader..."

"The Recriminalization Bill?"

"Yes."

"Why should I? I specifically asked Mister Sams to keep that nonsense away."

Roy Carpenter started to speak. He was prepared to speak in the normal mode of veiled intents and shades of meaning and slowly make his point clear. He had rehearsed in his mind the slow trickle of clues and suggestions that would make the President increasingly somber and attentive.

All that evaporated, and he found himself speaking plainly and directly.

"You have an illegal operation underway to assassinate three heads of state. It's funded off the books by members of various South American drug families who are hoping to take their business into the area. If you cut off the drug money, you cut off your operation and give them a very good reason to spam the accounts of your operation on web casts from Peoria to Portugal."

"Not assassination. I never said assassination."

"What do you think 'Take care of' means to men like Agravar and Limon?"

At the mention of those two names, the President became immediately sober and still.

Carpenter continued. "The public is glad to have coke and crack out of their hair, but they're not as comfortable with some of the new genetic drugs like blue steel and cold ice. You can't possibly have intended that sort of smack be sold the same way you can pick up a

## GETTING HIGH

fifth of vodka or a bag of hash. Help the bill through and sign it. If you don't, your foreign policy will be in the shit-house, you'll have no more invisible money, and you will see such a public campaign against you that everyone is going to know about your bastard child with Carla Smithsonian, the one you paid to have aborted during your last year of college."

There was more, but already Carpenter was feeling sick and filthy for playing it this way. He stopped and let his words fade and sink into the plush grandeur of the room until all that was left was the sound of air blowing through the register on the ceiling and a faint ringing in his ears.

Webber looked all of his sixty-three years at that moment. He sat forward with his head down and elbows resting on his knees, his hands thrust out in front of him, clasped together with interlocking, white knuckles.

"Get out," he said feebly to the carpet.

### President Zach Webber

---

President Webber stepped up to the microphone in the Rose Garden to announce the signing of the Recriminalization Bill.

"Good morning. We have taken another critical step forward this morning in our national struggle against excessive drug use and the ruination of young lives that it brings. The free access to drugs has cut drug-related crime to a tenth of what it was before. Access to new medical and community outreach programs has helped thousands of Americans begin to turn their lives around and away from drugs. More people are living their lives cleaner, safer, and happier than before. Neighborhoods are quiet and friendly once again. However, since the repeal of the drug laws, I have been made aware of medical evidence, particularly concerning newer genetic drugs which instantly and irrevocably alter a person's nervous system and brain. Under such influence, a person becomes instantly ruined, beyond rehabilitation, and an immediate threat to his or her community. These and other, more addictive and serious drugs, must not be allowed to infect our everyday lives. I might as well declare that it is legal to practice rifle marksmanship on playgrounds, schools, and highways, for surely the only purpose of these types of drugs is the same sort of killing for sport..."

In Tinny's bar, the phone rang.  
Eddie picked up.

## GETTING HIGH

“Eddie here.”

“Yeah, whatcha need?”

“Everybody tryin’ cold ice now. Got big cash for you. Need some more, boss. Bring it on, my man. Bring it fuck’n on.”

# THE GREAT GAME OF GOLF

The three of us were riding along in Greg's new Saturn SL2, its trunk and back seat filled with our clubs. "If you quit your job, Rick, you'll be able to join us like this all the time," said Quinn from the passenger seat.

"I'm not ready to stop sucking the corporate tit just yet. Maybe when I get my swimming pool paid off, I'll let you talk me into consulting."

"It's not as risky as you might think. I have at least three solid customers I could send you to this very afternoon. Greg has some prospects practically on the hook he can hand off to you. We could really use you up there." He held up his phone. "Here. Call Stanley and tell him you're not coming back on Monday."

"I thought you'd at least let me get on the first tee before turning the screws."

"I can have an office for you, Rick. I'll even hire you a secretary. Brunette. Petite."

"I just can't now."

"You know, it's getting hard to always be polite and not ask, so I'll ask. Why? Why can't you come work with us?"

"I don't know if I should get into it now. We're almost to Arnold's house?"

"What does he have to do with it?"

"It's just not a good time. Don't say anything to him, but I've kind of been covering for him at work. Something's wrong, and he won't talk about it. I'm afraid that if I bail, he won't be able to keep up. I just can't right now. Maybe you should ask him."

Quinn was silent for a moment. I knew what he was thinking. Arnold wasn't reliable anymore. He was unsteady, and I couldn't tell if he was being lazy, distracted, or just losing his edge. It was getting worse, and the past year, especially, was tough. Even his golf game went to hell. Quinn finally answered, "Maybe, but he just doesn't have your coverage or experience."

"Well, then there it is, I guess."

We pulled into his driveway, and I ran up to ring the bell. I had expected him to be waiting on the porch like he always did on golf

## THE GREAT GAME OF GOLF

days, but this time, not only was he not here, he didn't even answer the door.

"Is he home?" Quinn called out from the car.

I shrugged and turned and rang the bell again. A flash of yellow caught my eye. Taped to the door was a note, written on yellow legal paper. I opened the screen door and pulled gently on the tape. I unfolded it and read:

*Rick, I'm sorry. You've been so good to me, but I can't stand this lie anymore. It's all over for me. You must go on without me. I know this makes me a weak bastard, but I just don't care anymore. Tell Quinn that he can have my Big Bertha driver if he still wants it.*

My hand began to shake and I suddenly went cold and numb. Somewhere through the fog that veiled this reality from the one just seconds before I heard the car door open. I handed the paper to Quinn and ran around to the back of the house.

"Arnold!" I called.

He wasn't in the back. I didn't see any signs of anything drastic. I ran on around the other side and saw Greg and Quinn looking in the windows. I dropped to the ground and started looking into the basement window. He was sitting at the old worn recliner in the corner of his workshop, a half bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and his putter in the other.

I ran around to the front door. It was locked.

"He's in the basement. He's still here," I told them.

I kicked at the door but it held fast. I kept at it, watching it rebound as hard as I pushed. We needed to get in, and I knew that I had to wear down that damn dead bolt before it wore me down. The tinkle of broken glass disrupted my banging and I ran over to the others. Greg gouged his car key into the window screen and managed to rip enough of a hole that he could pull the screen out of its track. He reached around and slid the window open, climbed carefully onto the counter and over the sink. He rushed to the back door and let us in.

I sprinted to the basement door and thundered down the stairs. I stopped when he looked up at me, a broken man, exhausted, desperate. The others stood behind me. We were frozen. How could he consider something as awful and wrong as this?

He raised up his pitiful, heavy head, and as if begging with his last thread of forced dignity, he said, "I can't."

## THE GREAT GAME OF GOLF

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"Don't make me?" he pleaded. "I can't. Not anymore. Get a sub."

"There is no sub, you drunken idiot. It's Saturday, not league night. We've got a ten-thirty tee time, and we either show up as a foursome, or we don't show up."

"Then don't show up."

"You selfish baby! You're going to just check out and leave us like this, playing with strangers the rest of the season?"

"Rick, take it easy," Greg said as he pushed me gently aside and stepped around in front of me.

"Look, my friend. It can't be that bad. Whatever is bothering you, pressing you down, it can't be worse than just being on the course. Do you want to just caddie? We'll talk about it while we play."

Quinn stepped up and said, "Hey, buddy. We've all been there. We've had the hard times. You get through them."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "No. No. I've tried so hard. It won't go away. I can't. I just can't. Leave me alone." He took another drink.

Upstairs, I heard his wife come in, gasp as she saw the window, and then scream as she read the note.

She came running down the stairs, still carrying her keys and a plastic grocery bag.

She looked around the room at us with a fierce, rabid gaze. "What did you do to him?"

"Us?" I asked perplexed.

She held up the paper, crumpled it and threw it at me. She ran over to him, took the whiskey away, and yanked the putter from his hand, throwing it violently against the wall. She hopped onto his lap and pulled him to her.

"Don't, honey. Oh God! Don't even think of that."

"Get away from me," he begged with a weak, shaky voice.

She turned around suddenly and screamed at all of us. "Look what you've done to him. Get out. Just get out." She turned back around and cried into his shoulder, "No. No! I won't let you die. I won't let you."

"Die?" I said confused.

"Die?" echoed Greg and Quinn behind me.

"Angie, he's not going to die, for crying out loud."

## THE GREAT GAME OF GOLF

Quinn bowed his head and said, just above a whisper, "It's worse than that." He turned to Greg, who put a hand on his shoulder, giving him a little bit of his own weary strength.

Arnold's voice was low and scraped against the horrible scene, as if from the mouth of the devil himself. "I'm giving up golf."

I leapt forward and yelled, "Don't say that! Take it back, damn it."

Angie turned her tear-streaked face to me, then back to her husband. "What?"

"Don't say it," I warned him. Angie turned and shot me with one of those looks of such deadly force that only an angry woman can summon. I backed up a bit under its serious, unspoken intent. Then she turned that look, that awful, powerful look at her husband. He cast his eyes down and pouted while she said again, "What was that?"

"I'm not going to play golf anymore."

His words struck me like a cold ice pick in my stomach.

"That's all?"

The torture in his voice ripped into the three of us. We felt his agony, not the least of which was the pain that comes from even considering such an empty, useless life. "Isn't that enough?" he cried out, on the verge of tears.

Angie climbed off of her husband's lap, looked at all of us and said, "Oh, for God's sake!" She slapped him on the arm and said, "You really scared me."

"You don't understand," he pleaded. "I just can't face another penalty stroke on seven. Those damned cat tails. I can't."

"Oh, for God's sake," she repeated. Then she said, "Somebody's paying for that window."

"I'll take care of the window," I said quietly.

"You sure as hell will. Look what you've done to him, all of you. You and that damned game. I'm glad he's quitting. It's for the better, I think."

"He's not quitting," I said.

She gave me that look again. Then she reached her hand down to her husband, pulled him up from the chair, and said, "I think you should all leave now."

They were walking past us. It was all happening too fast. Luckily, one of us was able to pull something through the sickness that had flooded into the basement. Greg said, "Why don't we all just go out to lunch? We don't have to play. It really is a nice day."

## THE GREAT GAME OF GOLF

They stopped. My heart began pounding. Why couldn't I find any words? Angie looked around to each of us, testing us with her measuring eye.

"Where?" she asked as her eye stopped in my direction.

"Burger King."

She held us at bay for a moment, with her piercing eyes, then turned to her husband and said, "Do you want to have lunch, or should I make them go away?"

He looked at the floor, shuffled his feet, and said, "Lunch, I s'pose."

"I'll make us some sandwiches," Angie said.

"NO!" came our three-way echo.

"Burger King," I said again.

"Yeah, that's all."

"Right."

"Whatever," she said. She picked up her groceries and went up the stairs. Halfway up, she turned to her husband and said, "Tonight, we need to have a talk about golf."

We waited for her to clear the top of the stairs and circled around Arnold.

"Get him out to the car, quick."

As they rushed him up the stairs, I ran over and picked up his putter, then grabbed his bag and followed them out. They practically carried him out the front door and across the front lawn as they ran him toward the car. I started to follow them, but Angie saw me with his clubs. I faked left, ran right, and almost knocked her down. She chased me out to the car, saying over and over, "Oh no you don't! Oh no you don't!"

Greg pulled away, and I ran alongside the car until Quinn reached back and pushed open the door so I could jump in. I looked back and saw Angela in the middle of the street. I heard her cry with exaggerated exasperation, "Oh, for God's sake!"

---

I sat with Arnold's and my clubs between my legs, while he sat trying not to go into a fit of hysterics.

"I'm not playing!" he insisted.

"Oh, shut up," I told him. "You're playing."

"I wanna go to Burger King." he cried.



## THE GREAT GAME OF GOLF

Greg turned around and asked him, "Good God, man. Why didn't you say something? We could have taken you to the range, given you some pointers."

"I've been to the range."

"Did you try changing your grip like I showed you?" asked Quinn.

"Forget all that," I told them. "This is beyond the grip. He's lost the soul of the game." I looked down and saw the calluses and blisters on his hands, the extra dirt and grass stains on his clubs, the dozens of old score cards and short pencils in his open pouch.

"That's where you've been these past months, dodging work, hitting the courses and the range?"

He nodded slowly.

"And all this time, you've been getting worse and worse, instead of better?"

He closed his eyes, turned his head away, and nodded again.

"Arnold," I said gently, "You can't get better by doing all the wrong things harder, not while you're running away, slave to the shaft. You don't play golf with your hands, you play it with your head, with your soul. And Arnold, you've been playing soulless golf, and it's been hell. You don't even like to play, do you?"

He turned his head back to me and breathed a sigh that lifted years of bottled up fear and deception from his shoulders. "Oh God, I hate it. I've always hated it, but I can't let you down. You love it so much. If I try harder, maybe I'll see what you see."

I reached out my hand and placed it on his shoulder. "Arnold, you have sinned. You have played dishonestly, and for that you have paid your penance. If you cannot or will not be her master, Golf will make of you her slave, teasing you, taunting and haunting your days and your nights, mocking your pitiful trials."

"Stop. Please."

"It's not too late."

---

Arnold stood in front of the Pro Shop cash register, holding the new \$400 bag and his Visa card. He was beginning to sober up, so I knew I had to keep him from changing his mind.

"Why do I have to do this? Angie will kill me."

"You have to make a sacrifice to Almighty Golf, to let her know that your heart is pure and your intentions are genuine. But you can't buy yourself a good game. She'll see right through that."

## THE GREAT GAME OF GOLF

Then we took him out to the 9th hole water hazard and had him wash off all his clubs with the pond water.

"You see, your clubs are filled with negative energy. When you hit the ball, it picks that energy up from your club and is drawn to the water as the course tries to dispel the evil. When your clubs are cleansed in the Holy Hazard, your drives will fly right over it."

"Now you're just being silly."

"Perhaps, but perhaps not."

We cleaned up his clubs, put them in his new bag, and left his old bag outside the pro shop.

"Aren't we going to get a cart?" he asked.

"Oh no!" Quinn said, "Have you been using a cart all this time?"

"Yeah, why?"

He bowed his head and walked away.

"What?"

"A cart is okay once in a while," I explained. "But it separates you from the course. It lets you bring in all the noise of the world, and that disturbs the Gods of Golf."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"We'll be on the first tee. If you want to understand the joy of golf, you can join us there."

We waited for a while. There was another foursome waiting for us to tee off, so we swapped with them and waited for Arnold to join us. He sat on a bench by the putting green for a while, looking at his new bag, looking down at his hands. Finally, he stood, adjusted his hat, spit on the grass, and picked up his new bag and his clean clubs and approached us with the look of a man approaching the gallows.

"I'm ready," he said.

"Ready for what?" I asked.

"I'm gonna try hard. I'm gonna do really good."

I shook my head, smiled and told him, "No you're not. You're probably going to play really shitty. Between the three of us, we've got a total of twenty two balls, and you're welcome to lose every one of those. Here's what you're gonna do. Hit the ball. Then, if you don't like where it landed, pick it up and drop it anywhere you like, or just hit another one. No score, no rules, just you, your clubs, the ball, and the grass."

"And us," Greg reminded me.

He wanted to tee off first. He duffed it way off to the right. It sizzled the grass and stopped about thirty feet away.

## THE GREAT GAME OF GOLF

"Boy, that really sucked," I told him. "Greg, go out a ways. Try your four iron. Now, just use a little bit of wrist and try to pop it out for Greg to catch. Not a full swing, just a little pop."

He took the club head back about fifteen inches and popped the ball straight and high, right over Greg's head. He looked at me, laughed, then looked down at his four iron and laughed even harder.

"What?" I asked him as we all became infected by his silly giggling.

"I forgot to put the damn holy water on my driver."

After we teed off, he picked up his two balls and dropped one of them next to mine. His second shot was not too bad and after a third, he was within chipping range. His chip was clean and straight but went clear over the green by quite a piece. He took out another ball and threw it underhand onto the green, almost putting it in the cup. By the fourth hole, the short par three, we were all engaged in such antics as taking full swings with putters from the fairway, putting left handed, taking two or three attempts for our putts, and sometimes skipping the tee shot altogether, only to drop onto the perfect fairway lie. On the back nine, we settled down. Arnold started hitting more of his own shots instead of moving them, and his shots were getting better. Quinn even began soliciting us again to quit our jobs and come work for him.

It was remarkable to see the difference in Arnold. Every Wednesday evening for the whole summer, he would fume and curse under his breath, hacking his way from a nineteen handicap up to the high twenties. That afternoon he played his first real game of golf all season.

When we walked into the club house, giddy from the silliness and the beautiful day, we saw Angie sitting at one of the snack bar tables. Arnold walked over to her, ignoring the stern, firm features of her frozen face and kissed her like a frustrated prom stud.

"Oh, Arnold," she whispered heavily. "Are you actually smiling? After golf?"

He took her hands, pulled her up and hugged her close. After another long, soft kiss, he looked into her eyes and said, "I quit my job. So did Rick. Isn't that great? We called Stanley on the fourteenth green."

"You what?! Oh, for God's sake."

"No, Angie. For my sake. I did it for me. From now on, I'm going to drop the ball where I want it."

## THE GREAT GAME OF GOLF

He picked up his bag, took his confused wife by the hand, and led her back to her car.

"Well that was close," said Quinn, "Do you want to play another round and let me tell you about your new job."

"Tell you what. Let's go choke down some double Whoppers and go play that new course on the North side."

"You know that one costs a hundred eighty-five dollars a round, don't you?"

"What's your point?"

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Watson, Congratulations! Your prenatal tests indicate that your daughter is carrying the Somatico gene lines four and seven. Your daughter carries our patented contra-senility and immuno-enhancer gene lines that were introduced into your family by Mr. Watson's maternal great grandmother in 2034. You can relax knowing that your baby daughter will grow old without being ravaged by the incapacitating effects of Alzheimer's, AIDS-4, (early tests indicate resistance to Carlson/Kramer syndrome), and that she will be especially resilient against breast and pancreatic cancers. The patent license of one hundred fifty six thousand dollars will be due upon your daughter's twentieth birthday (pro-rated in case of premature demise). Our financing department looks forward to helping you establish lines of credit and other payment plans..."

Jean pushed herself away from the kitchen table and stood up, holding her hand across the tiny bulge in her belly.

Her friend said, "You know my sister's cousin, Deelia? She had her a little boy, and he got the second line. Their whole family had myopic RK done, but his vision was always clear as an eagle's. Jean, aren't you excited?"

"No, I wish this hadn't happened."

"Oh, don't worry about the money. Insurance covers most of the license. That's what Carla says anyway. Besides, the commercial's right, you can't put a price on good health. Jeanie, this is a good thing. Remember what's important. I know you want this baby to bring the two of you back together. Don't let money get in the way. I don't know why you're getting so upset. You've got a healthy baby girl."

Jean closed her eyes. Her friend didn't know. She hadn't seen.

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

"It's disgusting."

"Oh, Jeanie..."

"You don't understand."

"Now, you don't mean any of that. You're just hormonally out of balance. It's understandable. Besides, you have twenty years. Well, twenty years and, what, another six months?"

"Twenty six weeks."

"Well, you think on it. I know you'll do the right thing. Listen, I have to go pick up Sammy and Bitsy at the playground and hope that my ex hasn't let them break or sprain anything critical."

Jean walked with her friend through the front room and said, "Don't mention this to anyone. I don't want Will to hear about it except from me."

"Of course, dear. Love ya, bye. We'll talk."

When she was gone, the house seemed too quiet, filled with little echoes and the sound of her footsteps pacing across the laminate wood floor. Quiet and solitude were what she needed to allow herself a moment of anguish. She put her hand to her mouth to suppress an awkward sob that was the only physical manifestation of her deep, furious well of despair and anger. She put her hand over her abdomen again and felt that she had somehow fallen into the wrong universe. Babies, not mutated, inhuman monsters were supposed to grow inside a woman's body. The words that hammered her like an endlessly looping LeviRail platform announcement were, "He lied to me. He lied to me. He lied to me." She sat down and clenched her fists against the sickness she felt in her stomach.

The images from her other world flashed back into her mind, images from her career studies when she was seventeen and working in the rehabilitation labs, the hospice centers where the genetic companies hid their mistakes.

It was always children. They never lasted long enough to grow up, yet they suffered with such brave, hopeful faces, crying and straining to do the rehabilitation exercises, as if they could shrug off the wrongness that had been written into their very being. When the face of little Amanda flashed back to her, Jean covered her eyes and tried to make the memory go away, but it refused.

Amanda's skin was spotted like that of a leopard. The attempt to reverse a hereditary tendency for melanoma introduced into her mother's genetic line caused her skin to become a patchwork of porcelain white and dark cocoa brown, a reaction from a

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combination with her mother's modified genes and her father's Asian lineage. The condition also affected her stomach and intestines, which were severely ulcerated and bled easily. She was in pain all the time, pain that would floor a grown man, pain that no human should ever have to endure in nature, made worse by the dozens of operations and harsh treatments that did more to gather data than to ease the hurt which pressed down every day upon her little calico brow, squashing her smile into a tiny curl of her lips.

"When I get better, I'm going to be a moon pilot."

She was always hopeful, because she knew that she was supposed to be, because her daddy and all the doctors and geneticists kept telling her that they would make her better. Her frail body, stripped of its natural rhythm and ravaged by treatments and pills and lasers, died two days before her eighth birthday. The vision of hope in the tired eyes of that little girl who had never known anything but pain, and had no idea that others were free from the torture she felt, were seared into Jean's heart, along with all the other images of children struggling with twisted limbs, peeling skin, silver-blind eyes. Each one was a story of desperate, useless hope. When Amanda died, and Jean realized that death was the closest to being natural that her body had ever been, she knew that it was pointless, selfish, and unnecessary, one of the worst wrongs ever devised by humanity.

And now, growing inside her, was such an abomination against nature. Most mutants were otherwise normal and healthy, with nothing to show of the tampering but the appearance of some enzyme or chemical, but the shortcuts could fail when the pieces of the patch were broken down into gametes and recombined with another.

The pain of her memories slowly ebbed as feelings of betrayal and anger forced her into a calm of conviction. By the time Will got home, she had reached the kind of stillness that comes from a completed, unquestionable decision.

He came in from the garage. "I thought we were having black bean chili," he called out from the kitchen. "Jean?"

She stood and with great effort, as if she were walking through thick, muddy water, made her way to the arched doorway between the front room and the kitchen.

"Cook!" He demanded, using the exaggerated voice of the flabby king from the old Bugs Bunny cartoon, "Where's my hasenpfeffer — What's wrong?"

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Jean pointed to the letter that was still lying on the small breakfast table.

He picked it up, read it quickly once, and then again slowly. "This is a mistake," he said.

"You lied to me."

"Jean, I..."

"You knew how I feel. The things that I had to see. I asked you. Specifically." Her voice rose to an angry crescendo and broke.

"It's not true. Jean, it can't be."

Her earlier calm returned, and she said, as if speaking not to Will, or even herself, but just saying the words mechanically, "I will not have this thing inside of me."

Her husband approached with a look of confused panic twisting his face.

"Don't you!" she beat her fist down in front of her as she blasted, "Dare! Touch me." You goddamned mutant, were the words she just barely managed to hold inside her mouth.

"I am leaving. Tomorrow I'm going to register for a transference, and I'm divorcing you."

She turned while she still had the strength of her anger and walked past him to the garage. As she passed, he reached out and grabbed her arm.

"I didn't know. I don't understand. We can get through this. Together."

"This is my body. I do not have to let it be used as the host for some mutant parasite against my will."

"A parasite? Is that all our daughter is to you? A leech, a tapeworm? It's our daughter."

His plea fell dead into the space between them. There was a moment, somewhere in the lingering silence that filled the house, that she could have considered changing her mind. There was a brief moment that Jean wanted very much to be able to pretend that what had happened had not happened. The moment passed.

"Get out of my way."

---

Kera and her new school friend Demi waited at the LeviRail station, sitting on the concrete bench, swinging their legs back and forth while they and a handful of others waited for the next train.

"I think Billy Mason likes you," Demi said.

"Ugh, I hope not."



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"Why? He's nice."

"What are you supposed to do when a boy likes you?"

"I don't know. If you like him, I guess you have to kiss him."

"Well I don't," Kera fibbed.

Demi asked, moving to a safer topic, "Do you think your father will let you go to Cathy's sleep over Saturday?"

"I think so, but it's not my dad. He's my grandpa, but he likes to be called Nick."

"Do you always stay with your grandpa?"

"That's where I live. My parents were killed when I was two. There was an explosion of some kind on Space Station Liberty Two. I don't remember them at all."

Kera didn't mind saying that. It was the simple truth, but everyone always seemed to think they were supposed to be sad about it. She couldn't figure out why she had to be sad about people she never really knew except from old video. It wasn't very practical.

"My brother Will was like half dad, half brother." After a pause, she added, "He's really cool," filling a canyon of love and admiration into that simple phrase.

The LeviRail train arrived with a scent of electrified ozone and a whisper whoosh of air. The doors opened, and they took a seat together in the back.

"Is he much older than you?"

"Who, Will? He was thirteen years old when I was born. Nick and Molly are nice, but they work a lot, and Will stayed with me before he got married last year. He missed school, and dropped off the track team to take care of me. He's going to have another baby soon. He's a great dad."

Demi's stop was first. Kera waved her goodbye and waited past the next three stops, remembering how he had fed her sugar water and peppermint candies when she was sick and taught her how to chop wood and catch a fish and how he wrote stories to read to her at bedtime. She got off at her stop and hurried down the stairs to get her bike from the rack. When she rode around the corner of her street, a smile spread across her face, and she stood up to pump the pedals hard because she saw Will's green car in front of her house.

She expected to find him where he usually was, in the living room having a cigar with Nick. But this time when she went in, the house was dark, and there were muffled voices coming from the library. The house held the hushed stillness that immediately told

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Kera something wasn't right. She dropped her backpack onto the sofa and stepped carefully next to the doorway.

Molly said, "Give her some time. Jean's just upset. I know it will be okay. It has to be. I wish you'd let me call her."

"It's too late, grandma. Don't make me keep saying it. I know her. I know why." There was a long pause, strained by no one having any idea of what to say. Then Will said quietly. "I'll find someone."

Nick told him, "You know that money is no object. We'll sell the house, if we need, so don't worry about money."

Kera peeked around the corner and saw them all sitting quietly, looking beaten and afraid. When Will saw her, he stood up. She ran to him and let him pick her up into a tight embrace.

"What's wrong, Willy?"

Nick answered instead.

"Jean doesn't want the baby."

Will sat down holding Kera on his lap, holding his arms tightly around her as if needing a physical reminder of their unspoken bond of devotion.

"Why not?"

Nick took a large breath and gathered himself as if preparing for some important announcement or confession. "My mother, your great-grandmother had her genetics altered when she was young. Back then, and when I was young, it was almost fashionable, a source of pride like cosmetic surgery or a getting a net jack implant. Later, there were more and more people that didn't agree with that, and your mother didn't want you to have to know for yourselves the things she went through. People called her terrible names, and she got into a lot of fights. That's why she didn't want either of you to know. I suppose that was wrong."

"What about the baby?"

"She has your mother's genetics. So do you. So does Will."

"Is that why she doesn't want it?"

"That's right."

Will said quietly, the breath of his voice tickling her hair, "She doesn't want the baby. She doesn't even want it to be inside of her anymore."

Kera sensed the depth of what that meant. The horror of it washed over her and away, and she accepted it with quiet resolve. "She's going to kill it."

"They used to do that," Nick explained. "It was called an abortion, and there was a great deal of fighting over that issue."

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Presidents were elected or not based on what they believed about that issue. You see, an abortion meant killing the child, an unborn human life, which is clearly wrong. But the women of that day also knew that it was wrong for anyone to tell them that they had to donate their body unwillingly to support a life which fed off of it. They were both right, and so they were never able to reach an agreement."

"Until transference," Molly said. "Now that they can transplant the placenta and the baby into another woman's body, no woman has to endure an unwanted pregnancy. The surrogate mother takes over the pregnancy instead."

Nick continued, "She has to wait at least fifteen days for a surrogate to be found. That way if someone wants to acknowledge the sanctity of life, and do it with more conviction than the hateful slogans and protests of the old days, she can step forward and grant the baby a chance."

"Who's going to carry your baby now, Will?" Kera asked innocently. It seemed a simple matter to her, but her question caused Nicolas and Molly to turn their eyes away.

Will said to her, "I don't know yet. I've still got two days. I'm working with an agency, and they promise to meet the deadline."

"Why can't Molly do it?"

"I'm too old, sweetie."

Will went on, "There were a couple candidates, but they're asking for more money than we have. But don't worry. We'll find something."

Kera turned and slid down from her brother's lap. This was not something she wanted to say while cradled in his arms like a child.

"Will," she said softly. "I can carry your baby for you."

"No," Nick insisted.

Will fixed his eyes on her. "Can you...? I mean, have you...?"

"I started last April." She knew her body was capable of carrying a baby now. She had been taught by her school, by society, and by Will before any of them, that her body belonged to her and what that meant.

The days when young adults were forced through a limbo where they were physically capable, but not legally allowed, to make such decisions for themselves, led to an epidemic of irresponsible behavior, as if creating a life was some kind of prank to get away with behind the backs of the grown ups. It was not until they all stopped blaming the parents, the schools, the politicians, and the

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social programs, and placed the responsibility and the blame directly on the backs of the young adults that the situation began to reverse itself.

“No,” Nick repeated. “You’re too young. I won’t allow it.”

She raised her head to him slowly and told him what she knew as deeply as she knew her own name. Her voice held a hint of confusion that he would consider saying such a thing.

“I get to decide.” Then she turned to her brother and added, “If he picks me.”

She didn’t need to hear in words what she read in his face.

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It was fun at first, having a baby inside her, feeling it move and then kick. Will had lost his house and a lot of his money in the divorce, so he moved back home to take care of her once again. He was there to rub her back, and take her to birthing classes, and help her with her homework. He was with her on her fourteenth birthday, when the baby came, causing her to leave guests, cake, and all her unopened presents. He held her shoulders in the delivery room while she pushed, and screamed, and cried that she didn’t know it was going to hurt that much.

Three days later, they came home to a house filled with friends, reunited to finish her birthday party.

Demi was holding the baby so Kera could open her gifts. She said, “You know, Kera, I think you’re supposed to kiss the boys first, and then have the baby, or did I miss something?”

Her cheeks blushed a tiny bit as she looked over to Billy Mason who was hiding behind a cup of punch. She opened the present, and everyone went “Awww” again over a little pair of baby bunny socks.

She picked up a small gift box.

“That one’s from Billy,” Demi announced. The crowd offered a prolonged, suggestive, “Oooo,” to prepare the moment. She took off the ribbon carefully and opened the wrapping paper. It was a small friendship necklace and two tickets to the Corella Blue concert for the next weekend.

“Oh, thank you,” she squealed. “Look Demi, two tickets. Do you want to go with me?” She paused just a moment while poor Billy Mason slowly died of embarrassment. Then she jumped up and ran around to him and said, “Thanks, Billy. I’d love to go with you. Can I, Will?”

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"Can she, Will?" Demi repeated, followed by Susan, Mikayla, and then the rest in a chant until he said, "Ask Nick."

"Nick!!" she screamed. He came into the room munching on a piece of birthday cake.

"Ask Will," he said with a grin.

"Go, silly," Will told her. "You know you don't need my permission."

She let Billy Mason put the necklace around her neck, gave him a quick, nervous peck on the cheek and rushed back to her seat amid hoots and whistles from her friends.

Will watched Kera smiling and laughing and being silly with her friends. On the outside she was still a little girl in his eyes, like a new bud, opening to the warmth of the sun. During the five and a half months of her pregnancy, he had seen a young woman, proud, competent and sure.

When the party was over, and orange sunbeams slanted into the quiet house that still held the scent of ice cream punch and sugar icing over the scattered remnants of wrapping paper, Will brought his crying, hungry daughter over to Kera. She smiled and undid the top buttons on her blouse. He sat down in the soft recliner chair, held his sister on his lap as she held her niece to her breast, and he rocked them slowly in time with the pendulum clock that ticked softly from the next room.

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Hello? == Is this Richard Temple? == yes == okay ... um ... my name is Susan ... you may think this is kind of silly, but I picked your name at random from the phone book == okay == there's this thing I like to do ... I make videos of myself and I send them to guys == videos? == yeah == and you send them to strangers you pick in the phone book? == yeah == what kind of videos? == (giggling) dirty videos, silly == ... == Richard? ... are you still there? == uh yeah == don't hang up ... I've already called, oh let's see, fourteen guys ... a lot of them just hang up on me, or they get rude ... you don't seem rude Richard == I try not to be == good ... can I send you a video? == I'm not sure ... how old are you? == twenty four == what do you mean dirty videos? I don't think I get what this is all about == there's nothing to get ... it's just me ... I sit in a chair, turn on my video camera and, you know, do things == okay == okay? == yeah ... I'd like to see you do things, I suppose == good ... I think you'll like it.

It happened so fast that Richard had trouble believing both that it had happened and that he had said yes. The email arrived the next day with a video attachment. There was no sender address.

All last night and at the office that day, the strangeness of the phone call had bothered him. He had seen those late night commercials where you could talk dirty to naked women. A couple nights, he had dialed all but the last digit, afraid to cross over that boundary. There were many times he had walked past the large yellow sign with simple black letters: Adult Books. So many times, he had shuffled his feet at the last second, fighting the curiosity, the need to know, to see. What kept him away was the fear that someone would think that he was too young and would try to throw him out. He was twenty three, but his wide cheeks and curly red hair made him look more like a jolly high school kid.

He began to shake a little as his heart began beating excitedly. He saved the video to his desktop. After dating Mary Catherine for five whole months his senior year in High School, the most he ever saw was her left nipple. And she refused to french kiss him. His three frustrated attempts at relationships in college left him with

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three just-friends, in their words. Now here in his hands was not just some voice on the phone or some picture in a magazine, but a video, secrets revealed. A strange gift of fate.

As he clicked on the video icon, he tried to convince himself that he had been duped, that someone from the office was yanking his chain. He swung between hope that it was actually real, to a dull acceptance that it was really just a gag. The screen flickered. He sat slouched back in his chair and only then noticed that he was breathing fast.

A chair. The camera seemed to be fixed on a tripod pointing at a recliner chair. The picture fluttered as the focus adjusted itself. In a moment a woman wearing a tee shirt, jeans, and sandals walked into frame and sat down in the chair. The scene cropped her just at the shoulders. With no introduction, no ceremony, she unzipped the pants, pushed them down to her thighs, and put her hand inside her blue cotton Hanes Her Way. Her voice hummed and cooed. Soon the pants came off, the knickers came down, the tee shirt was pulled off, and the headless woman proceeded to do what normally is done only in the privacy of one's own room. For the next forty minutes, Richard received a detailed education on the capabilities of the woman's body and the extent of her imagination, which found unconventional uses for various household items. After a long episode of repeated demonstrations, compelling both audibly and visually, she stood up and walked out of the camera frame.

It was terribly personal, disturbing. It was more shocking and foul and explicit than anything he could have imagined. He clicked it and watched it again.

Hello? == hello, Richard == hello ... uh ... Susan == did you see me on the video? == yeah == did you like it? == it was pretty nasty == (laughing hard) well yeah, I guess so == it was okay == Richard? Did you join me? == what do you mean? == was I able to help you give yourself pleasure? == I don't do that == liar == it's a sin == well, I'll bet I made it damn hard not to == you made it damn hard, that's for sure == (giggling) oh, Richie, you're precious - hey, listen == what? == this is just a thought. Sometimes, if I like the guy - well, there's another game we can play == a game? == have you ever seen a pretty girl walking alone in the mall?

Later that night, he sat on a wooden bench outside Sears. Showered, freshly shaved, and self-consciously wearing some Old Spice that he bought at the drug store, he sat, trying to keep from shivering from the nervous tension. He almost hoped he wouldn't

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see her. He felt that the eyes of the world were upon him and that they all knew what he intended to do.

He saw her. It had to be her. She walked down the middle of the mall. As she had said, she had curly blond hair and was wearing a thigh-length skirt, sheer white blouse, heels and large dark sunglasses. She carried a shopping bag from Harper's. He watched her. She had told him not to look away, but to let himself gaze at her the way he had always wanted to be able to look at girls, without having to glance away if they turned their heads. As she got closer, he could see the lace of her bra through the flimsy fabric of her top. She walked past him, paused just a moment for him to give the proper sign.

He held out a folded piece of paper on which was written the phrase, "I'm looking for a handout."

She took it, smiled and dropped it to the floor. He followed her into the store. She led him around as she shopped. He continued to watch her closely, following the outline of her body, imagining the shapes unrevealed. In housewares, she stopped to look at towels. It was late, and they were alone in the section. She bent over at the waist and adjusted her shoe. That was his cue.

For a moment he paused. He had begged her three times to assure him that it was okay to do what she was suggesting. As she stood up straight, he was drawn forward by desire that gave not a damn for fear, reason, or religion. He stepped up and put his arm around in front of her, pressed his sweat-dampened palm flat, and slid it up across the curves of her shirt. With his other hand, he reached around and caressed her neck.

Suddenly she pulled at his hand, gasped and moved away from him. His hand caught in her necklace, and she pulled him out from behind the towel display until he could free himself. She ran off, leaving him embarrassed and stunned.

He watched her run to the escalator without looking back. With a cloud of confusion and filthy shame, he turned and walked the other way, saw the hallway to the elevator and took it to the ground floor by the catalog department.

He forced himself to drive slowly and carefully and spent most of the way along back roads with his eyes pasted to the rearview mirror. As soon as he got home, he deleted the video and wiped the free space.

He stayed up until 1:30, waiting for someone to knock on his door and arrest him. Finally, he fell asleep in his chair, watching an



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infomercial for Nordic Track and silently praying to banish the awful lust from him.

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"Are you okay, Richard?"

"Oh, sure. I'm fine. A little tired, maybe."

"Did you get Diane's email? She brought in some donuts. At the counter. When you settle in, come up to my office. I want you to show me the account tracking demo before the executive meeting."

It didn't happen. He didn't molest a strange woman at the mall. There was no email. No video. He stepped out of his cubicle and around to the coffee counter. He selected a chocolate-covered chocolate donut and poured himself another cup of jitters.

"Hi, Richard."

"Morning, Diane."

She was wearing her long skirt again, the one that made her look like a pretty school teacher from the twenties. He imagined what it would feel like to stand behind her, to reach around and put his hands on...

"What?"

"I said, do you mind if I come see your demo?"

"Oh, sure. I mean no. I mean, come on by."

"It sounds pretty neat. Also, I need to go over the network init handshake data. I think I'm going to need the size of the description buffer passed as a short int instead of char."

"Okay. We'll be in Ken's office in about five minutes."

"Good. Let me get my notes."

He watched her walk away, took a bite of his donut, and heard himself say, "Diane."

She turned around.

"I like that skirt. It looks nice."

As soon as he said it, he knew it was wrong. You weren't supposed to notice that women were pretty in the office.

"Thank you, Richard."

But she didn't seem to mind much. She was actually smiling.

In a few minutes he was settled in front of Ken's computer. He brought up his new application, waited for it to wind its way through the WinSock layer and the database protocols. Finally, the interface was presented.

"You can get the list of stolen card numbers here. The customer service agent can update the database with this option. Once a

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number's in the system, it polls the validation master record and reports the store address, time of day, and amount."

Ken asked, "So you didn't have to add anything to the system?"

"No. What I did was add this client layer over the other separate systems. The database group has been proposing for the past six months that the system be rewritten and better integrated. But that's not necessary. This lets us add value to the legacy systems without disrupting them or forcing anyone to mess with the old system."

"Can they also set the no-approve flag?"

"If they want. But this lets us track the stolen card to catch them, rather than encouraging them to steal another card number. It can turn off any accepts of the number that don't use the physical plate, like web purchases."

"What's that one?" Diane asked as she pointed at one of the icons on the screen, letting her auburn hair fall for a moment against Richard's cheek. He wanted to freeze the moment, to nuzzle into the softness of her sweet-smelling curls. Instead he answered, "That prints a report of the activity and lets us email it to our security division or directly to the FBI."

By the end of the day, Richard was able spend almost an entire minute without worrying about last night. There was even a moment at lunch when he forgot about it entirely.

When he got home and found another email from Susan, the day behind him vanished into a distant, artificial dream world. He pretended for a moment that he would just delete it. He held on to this little fantasy as he downloaded it and opened the player. The fantasy that he could walk away from it granted him a lapse of an entire seven seconds before he hit the play button.

This one was black and white, a store security camera from Sears. Richard watched himself leering and following the blond woman who looked as if she were interested only in picking up a few housewares. He watched the splice of cameras showing them as they walked through various departments. Even in the grainy black and white, he could see the lecherous gaze with which he followed her. When she bent over and disappeared behind a shelf, he pounced. From this angle, he could see the shock and fear that came to her face. He watched himself grope her and grab her neck while she tried to find her voice to call for help. When she ran away, it looked as if he tried to pull her back. The tape went to black. Ten minutes later, the phone rang.

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Hello? == did you see it? == who is this? == it's Susan ... who else? == why? == shut up and listen. == you bitch! == /click/

After two horrible minutes of helpless fury, the phone rang again.

Hello? == don't piss me off, pervert ... unless you want to watch your little show on the news ... they've already offered me twenty five hundred for the Sears Stalker tapes == what do you want? == now you're getting smart ... I understand you can track credit card numbers, find out who spends what and where == how do you know that? == /click/

He looked at the caller ID - blocked. He paced back and forth like a caged dog.

Hello? == I don't like questions except my own ... remember that ... soon you will get another email with a card number ... I want you to go to work tomorrow, track that number, and send one of your reports to sally at surfcabin dot net ... if you try to find out who that account belongs to, I'll sell the tape ... if you don't do this little favor for me, I'll sell the tape ... if you do anything to piss me off, I'll sell the tape, send a copy to your boss, one to your mother, and one to your minister ... and one more thing. .. when you go to feel up a woman, have the decency to wipe the sweat off your flabby hand /click/

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The next morning, he pulled the source of the database application from the source code control archive and built a new executable that would let his username set the tracking flags but not write an audit record. To install it, he used a hack that was still left over from the testing days. He sent a HUP signal messages to the process, which instructed it to flush and restart itself, this time starting the doctored version of the program through a symbolic link to his local directory.

When he launched his tracking program, he set it to track the number throughout the day. He then switched to a raw telnet session and ran a query to verify that the audit record of his activity had not been written. Still, he would have to make sure to reset the system before the batch audit programs found the discrepancy that night.

He reviewed the recent charges on that account. There were two charges for gas, an expensive meal at some restaurant, and four charges for rental cars.

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During the day, his tracking system showed him another charge for The Rise And Shine Bed And Breakfast, \$1,600, a charge for flowers, \$97.69, and one for office supplies, \$57.13. The name on the account was Don Skully. At 4:30, Richard deleted the tracking record, switched back to the proper version of the program, and sent an encrypted email with the collected data from his personal account.

He hurried home that night to wait for the phone call that would tell him it was all over. While he waited, he went to his computer and went to the national telephone directory. He found three Don Skullys. Two were in California, and one was from his own state. He did another search.

The first page on the hit list was titled "Credits and Acknowledgments." He noticed the domain of the page: surfcabin.net, the same as Susan's email address. The page thanked several people for their hard work and contributions. Don Skully was being thanked for his exceptional work above and beyond his position as executive secretary of the Governor. There was a link to the main page, which turned out to be a promotion for the re-election of Governor Nathan Nickleson. The second hit was Don Skully's home page, again at the surfcabin site. When he went to Don's Links section, Richard began to laugh quietly. One of the links was to his boss Ken's page.

Of course Ken couldn't have run the tracking program himself. It was compiled on Richard's hard drive. He couldn't have switched the program because he wasn't there when Richard came up with the re-run hack for testing. He didn't know where in the database system he would need to look to pull together all the information, and it's not the kind of thing he could ask for without raising suspicions.

But what was the point of going through this elaborate setup to read a database record that Ken could look up with a simple query to the backend?

"To frame me."

Suddenly the thought of being questioned about the incident in Sears felt like nothing compared to the thought of being arrested for his attempt to blackmail the Governor. If Susan and Don Skully were working together, the calls could have come from the Governor's office.

They set him up as the fall-guy to get the information for them. He opened the web browser and looked up the information for surfcabin dot net. There in the whois entry was his own name,

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address, and phone number, and it was almost certainly set up with a credit card in his name.

He looked up The Rise And Shine Bed And Breakfast, then picked up the phone.

Good evening ... rise and shine B and B == hello, I need the room for this Saturday, tomorrow == Your name? == Don Skully == Yes, sir. Thank you. What time will he be coming? == is 8:00 okay, pm? == we'll have the room ready for you ... that will be sixteen hundred dollars == very good == There will be someone new to check in and get the room ready. == Anything else, sir? == Just have the usual ready. == I see ... just a moment ... You'll be in room number 12 with two attendants in the presidential suite for this Saturday == Thank you.

Next he went to the state website and looked up the name of the attorney general. He called her home number, left a message, and waited. She called back in three minutes.

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Richard followed the bell boy into the room, tipped him five dollars and sat on the bed. It was a very nice room overlooking a lake. It had taken him three hours to drive here, an entire month's salary at the check-in desk, but like the compulsion that moved him forward in the Sears store, he felt unable to control his need to resolve this. He watched himself behaving so differently than he had ever expected himself to behave. He was almost amazed at how simple it all was. So many things for so long had been within his grasp, but he had always chosen to pull himself short.

He started Saturday morning by buying a new suit and found that he looked more confident and grown up with the air of dignity that he felt it gave him. He went to the bank and signed a check for two thousand dollars cash. He watched the teller count out an entire third of his checking account. Before driving out of town, he stopped at the adult book store, walked in, looked around at the magazines, examined their covers showing skin, boobs, buttocks, and full frontal females. He walked past the aisle of videos and marital aids, laughed quietly to himself and left. For lunch he stopped at the most expensive steak restaurant he could find, spent sixty dollars on porterhouse and wine.

Now, sitting in the room, having laid one thousand, six hundred dollars cash on the check-in counter and watching the clerk pick it

## RED LIGHT RICHIE

up without batting an eye, he felt a new kind of freedom and calm. He dialed the phone.

Yeah? == I'm in room 12 == We'll be right there.

As he hung up, there was a knock on the door. He was greeted by the two attendants who were there to spend the night.

"Come in, girls. Why don't you go get the bath ready."

They smiled and entered. Richard found himself enjoying the sense of power that had been waiting in him to be discovered. "Lose the robes," he commanded.

Without hesitation, they both dropped their terry-cloth robes to the floor. They were wearing silk teddies, one black, the other red.

"Very nice, girls. Run along."

They went to the bathroom, and Richard heard the water start to run. Then the one in the red came out and helped him off with his jacket, massaging his shoulders. Richard let himself sit back and enjoy it, amazed that he wasn't nervous with the close touch of the beautiful woman.

Soon the mood was broken by another knock on the door.

"Run and hide, sweetheart."

As she climbed off the bed, Richard patted her on the behind and smiled at how comfortable his new found assertiveness felt.

He let in the state trooper.

"Mister Temple?"

"Yes."

"Are the girls here?"

"They're in the bathroom."

He went to the bathroom. Richard sat in the chair by the window and listened to him arrest them, amid cooing, whining, and eventually a shrill chorus of creative cussing, until he led them out in handcuffs.

"You bastard! You're supposed to leave us alone."

"Call the front desk," black teddy cried.

"He said he'd protect us," wailed red teddy. "Call the front desk, damn it."

They finally quieted down, and in a few minutes, Governor Nickleson let himself in. He was wearing the same comfortable smile and charm that had allowed him to endure the past three administrations despite so many difficulties.

"Good evening Crystal, Shawna."

"Nathan, make him take these things off."

He ignored the girls and turned his attention to Richard.

## RED LIGHT RICHIE

"I'm sure you understand, Richard, how important it is that we were able to head this little difficulty off at the pass. I'm glad you were able to get in touch with me as soon as you did. Mister Skully will no longer be any trouble, and we'll deal with Ken and this Susan. You did the right thing by calling us. Blackmail is such a dirty thing, don't you think?"

Richard smiled at the Governor's veiled reference to their own arrangement. His assistance, after all, was not without its own price.

"I just don't want anyone to see that video."

"We all do things, from time to time, that would be somewhat of an embarrassment to us. I understand that. We're kind of alike in that regard, aren't we? You know something about me, and I know about your video."

The governor stood up and said, "Tonight's on me. They're good girls, once you get to know them."

He tossed an envelope filled with Richard's money from the front desk, plus an extra ten thousand dollars cash.

"Thank you, but the girls can go. All I wanted was to get this taken care of."

"It's taken care of."

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"Richard, have you seen Ken?"

"No, Diane, is he late?"

"Someone said he got arrested."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. It's kind of creepy. There's no email. No announcement. He's just gone."

"Well, this sort of thing doesn't happen without a reason. He must have done something."

"I guess. Hey, um, Richard. My church is having a spring dance. You know how it is. Everybody expects us to bring somebody. It's not like a date, or anything. I'd just rather go there with someone I know. It's this Saturday, if you're free."

"I don't know, Diane. A just-friends thing?"

"Oh, of course. I mean, I just thought..."

"I don't know if that's going to work for me. I'd rather take you on a real date. We'll dress up nice. I'll bring you flowers. I'll get you punch. We'll dance, and then I'll take you home and maybe kiss you good night on your porch. Then, if you want, we'll go out again

## RED LIGHT RICHIE

sometime. You're smart, you're really pretty, and I... I love how your hair smells when you're close to me. So, is it a date?"

She blushed a little bit, looked around, brushed her hand on his shoulder, smiled sweet and said "Cool! It's a date."



## BOB THE VAMPIRE

"You have no idea what I am, do you"? he asked with words muffled as he sucked playfully on her left nipple.

"You're like an investor or something?"

He shifted his weight and settled his ear against the soft, young flesh above her breast bone as she rubbed her fingers lightly along his chin.

"You know," he said, in with a voice that was drowsy from wine and the late hour. "I could kill you as easily as love you, you know."

"Hmm?"

"No. I do not think I shall kill you tonight. Killing is a nasty, tiresome pastime, and it was never that much fun anyway."

"I know you won't kill me," she said playfully.

"And why is that, my sweet child?"

"Because I don't think you're through with me yet." She giggled and smiled coquettishly.

He sighed.

"You really don't believe me. That's all right. I'm usually too nice a guy to kill people without some kind of reason anyway. Kiss me," he commanded.

She lowered her head and placed her open mouth over his.

The moment drew on as they felt the rise and fall of the small boat upon the lonesome ocean waves.

He rolled away from her and took her hand.

"Come," he commanded. "Let us watch the stars."

She rose and followed him through the tiny closet of a stairway to the deck. The warm night air was blown cool by a whispering breeze beneath stars and a midnight sky which lit them with a faded blue.

"Stand by the rail. I want to look at you."

She stood, a pale statue under the gibbous moon, a shadowy ghost against the pitch black of lapping water. Long dark hair fell over her shoulders to her round hips, framing her breasts. Her legs wore the smooth satin of youth.

"How old are you, Velana?"

"Twenty four."

## BOB THE VAMPIRE

"You're beautiful. I never tire of beautiful women."

"What's wrong? You look sad."

He turned his face up and watched the stars, the same stars of his youth, unchanging, unlike the rest of the world that raged with white water fury.

"They always tire of me."

"So, who was the last person you killed?" she asked with a sudden, brash voice.

"His name was Cory Corman. He stole from me and decided that I wasn't worth arguing with. I broke his neck. It was a long time ago."

Valena's eyes darted suddenly. "I ... I was just joking. I didn't think you were serious. You don't seem like that."

"At ease, child. It was long, long ago. I am neither proud nor ashamed."

"How long?"

He stood and walked to the railing next to her, peering out to the hidden horizon.

"What year is it now?"

The girl didn't answer.

"Twenty three twenty five, right? That would make it - oh what, around ninety, ninety-five years ago."

Another breeze blew across them, rousing her hair. She hugged her arms together and turned around to face its approach across the undulating blackness.

"I think we should head back. It's getting late," she said.

He put his arm around her shoulder, pressed his warm flesh to her chilled softness.

"What's wrong? Don't I look that old? Haven't you ever met a vampire before?"

He put his mouth on her and began sucking to make a love bruise on her neck.

She recoiled away and stumbled into the bench at the other side of the boat with a look that confessed genuine concern.

"No, sweet thing," he said through a light chuckle. "There's no such thing as a vampire."

Suddenly he didn't feel like laughing anymore.

"But if there were such a foul thing, I would be it."

She sat looking at him, as if ready to laugh or cry or jump over the edge.

## BOB THE VAMPIRE

"I'm a mutant," he said simply. "I was born in twenty eighty-seven. There's a chain of a few critical proteins that my body never forgets to make. My body doesn't know how to grow old."

She stared at him, still wary.

He walked to her with careful, deliberate footsteps and stood for a moment looking down on her. He lowered himself to sit next to her with easy familiarity and said, "You don't want to believe me? Good. I get tired of explaining it to people."

He took her hand and said, "I'm sorry for telling you this way. I get maudlin and too talkative at times. I'm sorry. If you want to go back now, I'll understand."

Velana drew her feet up onto the bench and hugged her arms around her knees. When Robert put a cotton blanket over her shoulders she asked, "Why do you talk of killing like that?"

"It's a silly thing. People don't believe me, as you did not. But there flows in me such a bitter stream of cynicism and frustration. Everyone I have ever loved or cared about is dead. It angered me in the past terribly, and I did kill, fiercely and often, but never unjustly. I convinced myself that those I took were better to have died sooner than later anyway. An early death seemed a trivial thing to me, knowing that I would far outlive the memory of them. But I haven't."

He stopped, looked at his companion's dark eyes and said, "Do you have any idea what it means to me to be able to tell you these things, and not pretend, not keep it hidden in me like a shameful secret?"

"No."

He smiled. "But I knew I would tell you. I knew the instant you gave me that flower and told me it was too fine a night for, what did you call it, faraway sadness. Such kindness to a stranger. I fell in love with you in that moment, I believe. Does it frighten you that I speak of this so simply? It's ironic, really. Those of you who have such little time spend so much of it worrying and not doing what you know you want to do, while I have learned the pettiness of all that, but don't need the time it saves me. But I forget, you don't believe me, do you?"

She tilted her head, showing him a furrowed, pensive brow.

"No, don't answer."

Another breeze crossed between them, rumbling softly in their ears.

## BOB THE VAMPIRE

"I'm trying to seduce you tonight, you understand. I've been alone, drifting for the past forty years, too tired to learn another new trade, afraid to fall in love, weary of moving and lying rather than have others watch me fail to grow old with them. I need you, Velana, whether for a month or for the next seventy years. I see something in you — I saw it that first night — that I have not seen in a woman since I was this old for the very first time. I don't know what that is, or if it's more in me than in you, a fulfillment of a hopeless wish, or the spark of recognition of what I had given up hope to ever see again. I have only my time and my useless money."

"So just how rich are you?"

"The perfect question. Direct and sublimely relevant. My love, I am so goddamn filthy rich that I don't even know why I bother trying to manage it anymore. Do you have any idea how a portfolio of a mere million dollars compounds over a century? I've had nearly two and a half, and I started with quite a bit more than that after my first lifetime where I did such a silly thing as work hard, invent, and save."

"How much?"

"A bit over four and a half trillion I think, which doesn't buy nearly as much as it would have two hundred years ago, but still will buy me pretty much any damn thing I want."

"And what do you want?"

"Can you guess?"

"Something fun to do?"

"Nothing's fun anymore, and I've done a little of everything."

"Love?"

"Love is for teenagers and new mothers."

She chuckled and said, "My, but you are cynical. What then?"

"Do you know what drives humans? They all know that if there's something they're going to do, they need to get to it, because they will die soon. They go to school, get jobs, plan their retirements and their children's college funds. It has such a simple, beautiful rhythm to it which they don't even see. They don't need to see it, because it's written into every piece of everything they do. Life is a finite and dull story, with moments of brief energy and clarity. Yet because they will die, even the simplest of things—a cheek kissed, a poem written, a meal eaten, even a dump in the toilet—has meaning because there will come a time when there will be no more cheeks, or songs, or meals, only dust and eternal nothing. What meaning is there for me? What do I care about some goddamn chicken

## BOB THE VAMPIRE

sandwich when I'll be eating still at the end of the world? Why do good? Why not kill? Why bother putting my sterile seed into yet another woman, another wife who will wrinkle and wither? What glory is there in yet another sunrise? I don't expect you to understand this, but I want to tell it to you, because you have a kindness within you and, just perhaps, you can help me forget for a while that my life is a meaningless drone."

"You must be weary," she said.

"Yes."

"Investing so much time and energy in such extreme crap. I'm cold, Robert," said Velana. "You talk too much and I'm tired. Why don't you come downstairs and make love to me while we fall asleep? If I promise to kill you in the morning, will you find meaning in my arms?"

---

The orange morning sun speckled the water with dancing diamond flashes as Velana sipped from the bottle of warm white wine, and Robert snored softly from below. She stood and stretched and relished the warm air on her naked body.

Her earrings and necklace were in her purse. She threaded the stems through her earlobes and put the necklace over her head then touched the pendant and said, "Call Mark."

The low orbit satellites routed her call to the office of *Generations* and fed the voice of her partner to her earring receivers.

"Where are you?"

"On his boat."

"What did you get?"

"Sperm, blood, hair. Good samples."

"Where are they?"

"In my makeup kit. Listen, I may be a little late coming back."

"Are you okay?"

"I don't want to just rush off. It would be suspicious. Besides, this man is the best lay a girl could ever dream of, and I don't think he was even trying."

"For God's sake, Velana, tell me you're kidding."

"This man could make even your toes curl, Mark."

"Just get back as soon as you can so we can start the mapping. Every minute is costing us a fortune while your bloody Chinese team sits around the pool drinking Yoohoos and Red Bull."

## BOB THE VAMPIRE

"Keep them happy, Mark Darling. You know that price is not an issue."

The snoring downstairs stopped and she heard her host clear his throat.

"Just sit tight. We're almost there. I gotta go."

She tapped her pendant again and then took off her jewelry and went down the stairs.

"Good morning, sleepy."

He smiled as she lowered herself onto the bed and snuggled next to him. "How about we jump overboard and you show me how to do it while treading water."

"The dolphin quickie? I was just pulling your leg, sweet pea."

"I wonder about that. I think you're just too tired to satisfy me right now. What do you want for breakfast? We have wine, some stale bread, or salt water."

"I want you to marry me, Velana. I want to watch you grow old."

The first words that appeared in Velana's mind were: over four trillion. She had expected to gain his trust, but this was unexpected. She tried to appear cool and sincere.

"Will you give me three seconds to think about it?"

"Will it take you that long to decide?"

"No. Well then, how about a quick consummation of the engagement?"

"How about flash-waving a couple of scrambled egg burritos?"

---

With the boat autopiloting itself back to the Hawaiian shore, Robert Shale and Velana Parks recorded their marriage with the Swiss Registry, making them legally married worldwide, as well as on all of the stations and off world colonies. When the mountains of the Free Hawaiian Nation appeared as tiny buds on the horizon ahead, Velana turned to her husband and said, "I don't think it's death that you envy. It's not the specter of the end that gives meaning to our lives, but what we leave behind us. You can leave legacies all around the world if you want. Meaning? What meaning do any of us have? Why should anyone else care what I leave to the world? It's for me to do, and it's for me that I do it. It's not happiness, you see, but power. The power to change the world. Promise that you'll help me change the world."

"Into what?"

## BOB THE VAMPIRE

"That doesn't matter. The meaning is not in the destination, but in the journey. That's all any of us have."

"You may yet breathe life into my stagnant soul."

"Don't be so mawkish."

"Do you love me, Velana, my wife?"

"Not the way you love me, but yes. More than I would have thought possible. Not because of anything you said or confessed to me last night, but because of the way I think and feel when I'm with you."

"And what is that?"

Rich, she thought.

"I feel happy. What are you smiling at? You think of me as just a child."

"You are. By the way, you should know that I purchased your genetic engineering company last night. If you do discover the secret of my preternatural youth, I will own it. Not you. You're wasting time on that Chinaman. The Yoohoo gave it away. That would have to be Chan Tsu Lao. He's three quarters fraud, one quarter drunk with, a couple points left over as a geneticist. What you should do is request an unpublished paper from the archives of JAMA from the last century titled An Analysis of Ablative Mitosis, written by Dakota Simpson and myself. That was the closest I've seen anyone come to understanding how my maternal grandmother's genetic therapy for hypertension made me what I am. I understand you're a pretty good chromographer yourself."

She said nothing.

"You're beautiful when you pout."

"Why did you play along?"

"I wanted the marriage registry. That way even if you manage to buy back your company, I'll still have a chance at a legal claim. And I'd like to buy you pretty things. I do love you, you know, and you are remarkably beautiful and wonderful. Brilliant, and we think alike. We'll make a good team."

"The money?"

"Yes, I am that rich. More than that actually. Oh, I will change the world. I already have in ways that I can't wait to tell you about. I did lie about one thing. Death is not what gives us meaning. But that's a lie I tell to myself as often as to others. And it's not power, or a legacy. Do you want to know what it is? It's very simple. Nothing. Nothing gives life meaning unless we invent it, and then it can be whatever you want: power, sex, money, love, war."

## BOB THE VAMPIRE

“And what is it for you?”

“Right now, I’m an artist, and this planet is my canvas. I figure that since everyone else is on borrowed time, it belongs to me. That’s why if you find the secret — and I hope you do — it will die with you, and live in me. No, I don’t want to share the world with anyone. Not until I’m done with it.”

“Not even with me?”

“Come on, Velana. I wasn’t born yesterday.”