InterText

VOLUME 6, NUMBER 3 MAY–JUNE 1996

"Autoerotic"
by CHRISTOPHER HUNT

NEW STORIES BY

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First Text

JASON SNELL

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?

I'M FREQUENTLY ASKED WHY I edit *InterText,* even though it takes up a big chunk of my life and I don't see one red cent from it.

It's a good question. And while I've got a stock answer, you can judge for yourself if that answer is a good one.

I do *InterText*—and it may be true of all of us, though I can speak only for myself—because online publishing is something I believe in, and because online publishing allows me an outlet I otherwise wouldn't have.

When we started *InterText,* I was splitting my time between a college newspaper, where I was writing and editing hard news stories, and college classes, where I was writing long and dull papers about dull subjects. *InterText* was an opportunity to do something different, something more creative. It was an opportunity to read short stories, pick the best of the bunch, and put them together in a publication that would provide good reading to people all over the world.

It's all worked out pretty well, I think. Though I'm of course interested in what takes up most of my time these days—my "day job" as associate editor/online at *MacUser* magazine—*InterText* is still a release. *InterText* is the place where I get to read about future doctors struggling in a world rife with infection, cat detectives troubled by dogged (and dog-faced) police officers, the intrigue of an interactive movie-making industry that doesn't *quite* exist yet, a prostitute-turned-spy who lives in an orbital outpost above a barely recognizable planet, or even a man's encounter with a beautiful Irish woman on St. Patrick's day. And that's just in *this* issue.

However, that's not all I get to read. I also read the dozens of stories we receive every month, most of which we can't accept (even though we like some of them very much). I also spend some time maintaining our four-headed mailing list—if anyone tells you software automates the job of running a mailing list, laugh at them. Long and hard. Do it for me.

So *InterText* is fun, but it's also a lot of work. Not just for me, but also for the other folks who bring this magazine to you every two months: Geoff Duncan and Susan Grossman, both of whom have enough "day jobs" to make them crazy without even thinking about another issue of *InterText.* And there's Jeff Quan, who continues to stretch his wings as an artist with every issue, even as he moves from his job at the *Oakland Tribune* to his new job in online publishing at c|net.

If you think that I'm asking for your sympathy, well, rest easy. You pay your money, you take your chances—we signed up for this, and if we didn't want to do it anymore, we'd stop doing it.

What I *am* asking for is your contribution. If you're happy as an *InterText* reader, just keep reading, and spread the word about *InterText* to your friends. If you're a writer (and I know many of you are), keep us in mind when it comes time for you to submit one of your short stories.

And if you're someone with editing or copy editing expertise (especially if it includes experience working with fiction), we can always use skilled hands and eyes in those areas. Be warned: this ain't an easy job, and we're committed to the long haul. *InterText* has been around for five years, and it's not to anyone's advantage for *InterText* to have inconsistent or constantly-shifting editorial practices. We aren't looking for people who are intimidated by a couple issues of insanity.

So, if you're interested in becoming part of the *InterText* team, don't be a stranger. Although some of what we do can't be done by other folks, we're not a closed group—Susan Grossman joined *InterText* after we'd already been at this for three years. And we're a virtual organization—Susan and Geoff both live in Seattle, but they don't (can't) see each other very often, and I live 600 miles away in northern California—so distance shouldn't be a big problem.

As times goes on and our lives get busier, it gets a little harder to set time aside for *InterText.* We're still committed to publishing good fiction every two months. If you can help, let us know—send us e-mail at <editors@intertext.com>. And if you *can't* help, don't sweat it, and don't feel guilty about it. This is a tough job, a weird job, and it's not for everyone. If a handful of you think that it's for you, let us know.

Making Movies

CERI JORDAN

We're used to movies carried by plot twists,
but are we ready for movies that are part of a plot?

THE POLICE—ACTUALLY THE TECHNOLOGICAL Information Misuse Division, which is very much the same thing—arrived in mid-afternoon.

Two officers, one male, one female. When I answered the door, their guns were still in their holsters, which was a promising sign. I offered them cinnamon tea, which they refused, and then the woman produced the tape and asked me to identify it as my work. I thought I understood.

"It was a legal contract," I heard myself say, hands automatically moving over the video player keys, watching the screen pale and flicker. "I never expected any of this to happen. I would have withdrawn it, but Empressa-Corp insisted on holding me to the contract—"

"We do appreciate that," she said, glancing around the room as if expecting to find vital clues among the half-assembled hardware and discarded takeaway cartons. "You are not suspected of committing any offense with regard to this matter. We'd simply like you to confirm that this is a copy of the feelie you recorded on the date already mentioned…"

White noise, screen flicker.

Simple 2-D playback, faded and slightly out of focus. To get the detail, I'd have to plug in, get the full output, *feel* it, and I couldn't do it. Not that day. Not again.

But they didn't seem to want me to. I should be able to identify it easily from this. Just the visuals. Like a video recording. My life from the outside.

Screen flicker.

Union Square. A bright day, wind flapping the flags, the whole staff of the development department drawn up in a neat line, shiny shoes and immaculate hairdos. The President makes her way along the line. Shakes my hand. I bob a curtsey. I smile. A few polite words, and she moves to shake Jason's hand—

"It's wrong."

Not turning, I feel them exchange glances.

This isn't how it happened.

It's a good mock-up, sure. A film set or something. The President, one of these professional lookalikes. But Jason's shirt is the wrong color—he was wearing the one I bought him, the deep red—and I never wear high heels, and she's pausing with Jason far too long. He'd hardly even taken her hand when—

The bullet.

I watch him spin under the impact, slow motion. The President ducks, her bodyguards press in close; and yes, I was on the floor beside Jason by this point, but I was holding his head steady until the medics could reach us, trying to minimize the damage to his skull, and no, my God *no,* I wasn't screaming—

It took me a moment to realize that they'd switched the tape off.

"That isn't the recording I made." I said, feeling along the arm of the chair, guiding myself down into the seat before my legs failed completely. "If this is a film, I'll sue them blind, I swear it. Where did you get this?"

The sleek tanned man touched the eject button and jerked the tape free.

"Who made this recording? Where did you get it?"

The locks on his briefcase clicked open in succession, and then closed.

The woman smiled. "You've been very helpful, Ms. DuMaris. Thank you so much."

I kept up the protests until they were halfway down the stairwell, ignoring the neurotically twitching curtains at frosted glass doors all along the corridor. Then I stormed back inside, slamming the door dramatically, for good measure, and went back to the video player.

"It's wrong." This isn't how it happened. Jason's shirt is the wrong color, and I never wear high heels. He'd hardly even taken her hand when— The bullet.

The recording chip was embedded inside the supposedly non-removable plastic casing, and I was pretty confident that they hadn't noticed it. And once I'd eased open their encryptions, my new piece of evidence played back just fine.

AGAIN.

And again.

Watching the bullet, the fall, the blood. Letting the memories flay me raw. Letting the memories push me through tears, through despair, into fury—

The apartment door.

Jason, back from rehab early, bored with smiling nurses and exercise machines, squinting over my shoulder at the screen. "Nice picture, Kay, but what the hell happened to my shirt?"

I tried to laugh, but all that came out was a strangled sob, and he lowered himself gingerly onto the rug beside me, the joints of the exosupports on his legs creaking

faintly. His hair was wet. Must've started raining. I hadn't noticed.

"Info Misuse came calling," I said, remembering to hit pause a split second before the shot rang out, leaving Jason's thin nervous smile frozen on screen as he takes the President's hand. I made myself look away. "Wanted me to identify this as my feelie."

"It isn't, though. Is it?"

"No. That's what I told them. They expected me to. Just wanting confirmation. I copied the tape. Because I want these bastards, whoever they… Oh, Jesus."

His hand closed over mine, thin brittle lines of fiber-muscle hard against my skin, but he said nothing; just waited for me to sort the implications out in my head and explain.

"So a feelie relies on the person with the recording implant—this woman pretending to be me—*believing* everything that's happening is real. Just acting out the emotions won't work, because actors always *know* they're acting, and when the punter plays the tape back, that knowledge that it's false will come through. So this woman must have believed she was me, meeting the real President, and that her lover had just genuinely been shot…"

Jason nodded slowly. "Which probably means…"

"That he genuinely was."

The wind shifted, and rain drummed lightly against the window panes. After a moment, Jason reached across to prise the remote out of my hand, and hit the PLAY stud. Knew I'd stopped the tape there deliberately, not wanting him to see. Had to prove he could take it. Silly bastard.

I watched his face: nostrils flaring slightly, mouth hardening.

When my doppelgänger started screaming, he hit PAUSE again and said thoughtfully, "Did it really make that much mess?"

I SHOULD NEVER HAVE ACCEPTED THE CONTRACT.

Thing was, the Corporation thought it would be good publicity. Kay DuMaris, famous hardware designer and high-profile new signing to their development department, making a popular feelie giving all the world's no-hopers the chance to genuinely feel what it was like to meet the President. I was supposed to give her a guided tour round the labs after the line-up. It never happened. She was hurried away in a limo built like a tank, and I was crying in a corridor as they wheeled Jason into surgery.

We'd only been together a month.

And all that time, the eavesdropper in my head, lapping up every burst of pain and hope and despair, recording everything.

They kept it running till Jason came out of the OR and the doctor told me he was going to need extensive exocybernetics to walk again, but he'd be all right. It worked out well: the punters like happy endings.

I understand it was a bestseller for a while. Then a guy they'd wired up to bed streetwalkers in interesting ways got carved to ribbons by a crazy posing as an underage tart, and my more modest agonies slid quietly down the sales charts into oblivion.

JASON WOKE ME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, AND dragged me protesting into the dark living room. The gray flicker of the video screen, a discarded blanket and cold coffee cup. He'd been out here quite some time, then. Watching.

"Look." He jabbed one finger at one figure among the frozen panorama of faces. "Recognize him?"

I blinked at the image. "Yeah. It's Uncle. Runs a pirate tape operation in the Piata. Fancies himself an actor."

Jason grinned, a flash of white teeth in the dark. "And does crowd scene work for cheap movies."

"Good. Clever boy. So we know where to start. Now," I brushed my lips across his, teasing, "turn it off and come back to bed."

POOR BASTARD NEVER REALLY KNEW WHAT HIT HIM.

Uncle's shop is a two-compartment tent on the edge of the Piata, out among the factory-reject stalls and the cocktailers. Officially, it sells nicotine products: needle, pill, or slow-release tab, pick your poison. The tapes are stashed in the rear compartment. Safe enough. The police never venture into the Piata. Not without a full platoon of infantry and helicopter back-up, anyway.

I went in the front, packing what appeared to be a colored plastic water pistol. Uncle looked up from his stock-check, slow rheumy eyes narrowing, and grinned derision.

"Neat shooter yo' packing, Kay. Where's the party?"

I fired a couple of cyanide darts into the countertop, and let him watch them dissolve into the bare wood, and by then Jason had slashed the back of the tent open and come in behind him, grinding the empty revolver into the base of his spine, and his smile had turned thin and brittle.

"Party's here." I told him. "Unless you got some info for us."

"'Bout what?"

"About that fake feelie you did crowd work for."

He squinted at me in the gray-filtered light. Gears grinding in a junk-fuddled head. Not everyone down here who knows my name knows exactly who I am, which is just as well, and the girl in the fake may not have looked much like me. The punter never sees the viewpoint character from the outside, so what does it matter?

Jason shifted position, sliding the revolver muzzle round to settle against Uncle's kidney, standing just to his

right now, stony. "May not remember her, Uncle. But I think you'll remember me."

The guy in the fake had been a pretty good double, which was what had fooled me for a few seconds. Tall, with that beautiful blue-black skin, pure African, and built like a professional fighter, solid muscle. Yeah, Jason is a pretty distinctive looking guy. Particularly now.

Uncle's eyes traveled slowly across his face, shot through with the pale yellow marbling of artificial nerves, down to the fiber-musculature of his bare right arm and hand, the pitted scar tissue of his shoulder, the occasional glitter of metal.

I've seen kids run screaming after seeing Jason from across the street.

"I'm talking," Uncle rasped, "but it ain't no crime to make movies."

"It is when you kill people."

"You guys never heard of special effects?"

I snapped the safety catch off, and watched him jump. "Let's talk about who hired you."

"Don't remember. You'd need to ask my agent."

"Name and address, Uncle. Or you're going to star in a cute little snuff movie. No cameras, no editing, but the most convincing death scene you'll ever play."

Jason winced. He never did like my extended metaphors.

But we got the address.

"FINE." JASON SAID. HALFWAY ACROSS THE PIATA now, jostled by tourists and junk-heads, stretching lazily and sauntering in the sunlight like ordinary market-cruisers hunting a bargain, the guns tucked safely in my kit-bag. "Now what? We just march up and demand they turn themselves in? We've got no evidence—"

"No." I agreed. "And I wouldn't want to blow the place up without hard evidence. So we jump one of the chief executives, give him a chance to explain the whole situation, and *then* we blow the place up."

"Hmm. Subtle."

"As always." I touched my middle finger and thumb together, Piata slang for *seeking information.* "First we need someone to crack their security system, find out what schedules their execs keep. And, if we can, who was responsible for this… travesty."

I like to keep my vengeance specific and precise, where possible.

Jason shrugged, feigning interest in the contents of a scrap hardware stall, all rusted contacts and outmoded disk drives. "Pascal?"

"He's the best. But he won't do it. Not for our price range. Garrad, however—"

Snorting, Jason let a fader panel clatter back to the tabletop, earning a thin growl of displeasure from the ever-watchful stallholder. "Garrad, yeah."

Never quite worked out why Jason dislikes Garrad so much. Doesn't dispute his professional brilliance. And it certainly isn't jealousy. Garrad's shacked up with a Jap boy called Kirohita. They moved here together. Some kind of, ah, legal difficulties in Europe. No danger there.

The guy in the fake had been a pretty good double. Tall, with beautiful blue-black skin, pure African, built like a fighter, solid muscle. Yeah, Jason is a pretty distinctive looking guy. Particularly now.

But Garrad has some nasty facial scars himself—acid gun, my guess, though he never talks about it—and I wonder if they make each other uncomfortable; if for each of them, looking at the other is like looking in a mirror, being reminded.

Never claimed to *understand* men, did I?

SO I WENT OVER TO THEIR APARTMENT ON MY OWN, and Garrad, who has a weakness for revenge attacks, grinned that nasty grin and jacked in, and Kiro and I sat on the terrace drinking toso and maliciously exaggerating the latest underworld gossip.

"Bad enemies you're making for yourself," he said, as I was leaving, with the file tucked in a hidden pocket. "Better have your passports ready and your seats booked."

PanChuenCorp. Big, bad bastards. Owned 90 percent of the external entertainment industries: film, music, everything apart from feelies and other VR spinoffs. Rumor had it that they left the other 10 percent independent just for the fun of poaching talent from it.

But they'd never touched feelies.

Alarm bells rang in my head all the way home, but Jason was stripping down the revolver on the kitchen table, quick metal-sheened fingers glittering under the anglepoise lamp glare, and there was no way to back down now, nowhere to go.

"His name's Bursal. Head of distribution. Looks like they finally let him loose on a film of his own. Got his own car—serious money. Parks in a public multistory across the square from PanChuenCorp. Every day."

Jason nodded. "Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

SHOULD HAVE KNOWN IT WAS ALL WRONG WHEN WE got into the multistory so easy.

We went armed with security disruptors and lockpicks and you name it, and the idiots had left the rear fire door open. Should have realized straight away, but no, I was so hyped up and scared and busy worrying how Jason was going to deal with this. Calm, sensible Jason.

Bursal came out exactly half an hour after most of the work force, as he always did. Unlocked the driver's door, slid inside, briefcase on the passenger seat, reaching for the safety harness—

The revolver, loaded now, touched the back of his neck, cold as ice.

"Mr. Bursal," I murmured into his ear, watching his pale frightened eyes follow me in the rear view mirror. "My name is Kay DuMaris, and we really do need to talk."

And then Jason was kicking the rear door open, jackknifing out into the sodium light glimmer, wrenching the front passenger door open and flinging the briefcase out to clatter on the concrete—

"Right, you bastard," he was saying as his synthetically reinforced hand closed around Bursal's throat. "You think what happened to me was so damn entertaining? Wait'll you see what I've got in store for you, murdering little…"

In the rearview mirror I saw Bursal's left eye gradually irising down, like a zoom lens closing, closing, and suddenly I understood who was directing this movie.

"It's a trap, Jason. Let him go."

Dark eyes met mine, just for an instant: then he glanced away again, the switchblade flicking silently open in the car's interior light. Bursal squealed like a kid.

I leant forward and jabbed stiffened fingers into the pressure point I'd found by accident during a fumbled amorous encounter in the shower; just below the right armpit, hollow space between bones, the shock jolting the central processor into virtual immobility.

Reduced to the numb inadequacies of his own damaged nervous system, right arm limp across his lap, Jason managed somehow to turn his head towards me and spit a curse.

"Who are you recording for, Bursal?"

"Empressa. They said they wanted a feelie about making documentary movies. I didn't think you… It wasn't meant to end like this."

"Oh, but it was. It was supposed to end with us thinking your "documentary" was some kind of faked-up snuff feelie and butchering you in a filthy car park. Or your office, or your apartment. The setting doesn't matter. All they're interested in are those clear death-sensations, because death sells movies, and the more the audience feels, the better."

He stank of piss and stale sweat, and I was beginning to feel sick.

"Let's move, Jason." I kicked the rear door open, keeping the revolver pointed in Bursal's general direction. "And you, Bursal, I suggest you contact the police and explain this whole sordid little escapade to them. They may just be able to protect from EmpressaCorp's assassins. Though I wouldn't bet on it."

Jason got out of the car without help—his legs are pretty good, and his left arm was virtually undamaged—and kept pace with me until we were out of the multistory and way down into pedestrian territory, the backalleys of the artisan district.

"Empressa's going to fry our asses for this," he said, when the numbness wore off enough for him to speak clearly again.

"S'all right. My ass is too big anyway." I pulled him into the shadow of a mock-medieval tannery and pressed the boarding pass into his hand. "Pier twelve. You'll need this if we get separated. The ship doesn't leave for another thirty minutes. I wanted to leave time to mop the whole thing up, but… Oh. And I'm sorry I hit you."

Numb muscles kicking back in, stiff and pale artificial yellow with the effort, Jason smiled.

"Tough business, making movies."

CERI JORDAN

Is a writer, theater practicioner, and general rogue and vagabond. She lives in Wales and has had work published in several small-press magazines. Her short story "Handlers" appeared in Vol. 5, No. 6 of InterText.

Autoerotic

CHRISTOPHER HUNT

Just because times change, people don't.
Sex is still sex. Secrets are still secrets.
And spying is a two-edged sword.

SHE STARED AT THE JOHN'S FACE. HOVERING ABOVE her like a small, pinched moon, it was pale and luminescent in the fractured darkness. Eyes clenched, mouth a gaping crater, it was as much the face of a squalling baby as the face of a man in the paroxysms of love. Poking out behind his earlobes she could see the protruding nodes of the Sensation jacks, plugged into temporary digital ultrasound terminals attached to the base of his skull, feeding him dreams, ecstasy, heaven. A salty spray of perspiration splashed on her face as he shook his head.

His sweat stung her eyes, made her blink. His ass was heaving up and down rapidly now. Stars clustered thickly on his back, swirling galaxies flowed across his face, dust clouds collected behind his knees, a supernova flashed between his toes. She wondered if he was experiencing this in the Sensation ecstasy. Or if he was in some other place altogether.

Perhaps he was. His hands had fallen away from her buttocks, and he was starting to drift away from her. His penis slipped out, bumped her thigh, flapping wildly in the star-crusted darkness like a baton. He seemed unaware, his face still rapt, his buttocks still pumping as he floated away. She was almost tempted to let him go, to let him spurt his ecstasy into the empty vacuum of the simulated galaxy he was tumbling through.

Instead, she reached for him, wrapping the fingers of one hand around his penis, placing the other on his left cheek, bringing him back down, guiding him back in. She knotted her legs around his back, her arms around his neck, moving her body to the rhythm of his thrusts, twisting her hips in a slow, languid rotation.

The movement shifted their center of gravity and they started to spin. He was becoming frenzied, his stomach smacking wetly against hers in a sticky staccato.

Now they were upside down, though it felt no different. His clothes hovered in a carefully folded pile nearby. His shoes hung suspended above the clothes, the toes pointed together to form a V—"So I can find my clothes afterward," he had said, laughing. His one attempt to break the ice, like the obligatory joke before a business meeting.

He wasn't so bad, she supposed. Not like the older ones with their sour breath and nicotine-brown teeth who kneaded her breasts callously with rough, dry fingers, commenting on their firmness and bounce as if they were loaves of bread or rolls of toilet paper, men who had long since passed the point where they needed or cared to give pleasure to a woman, men whose power Earthside could be measured by how low their balls dangled in their gravity-stretched sacks.

At least it was all clean, safe, sterile. At Serenity, you didn't *have* to gather information from clients, and when you were used up you weren't wiped, wired, and dumped Earthside with your brain full of black holes.

This one—Fukuda was his name, a hotshot young biosoft engineer up here on a prepaid company bonus plan—was a real high-flier. Literally. Anybody who came up here was on the inside track, if they weren't already at the top. That's why all the boys and girls who worked the zero-g chambers at Serenity Station had to submit to a thorough debriefing after each contact. Hypnotherapy, lie-detector tests, and drugs were all part of the routine. Selective memory wipes were frequent.

At least it was all clean, safe, sterile. Not like some of the privately run stations. At Serenity, you didn't *have* to gather information from the clients. Your job didn't depend on the quantity of valuable data you processed. When you were used up, you weren't wiped, wired, and dumped Earthside with your brain full of black holes and shattered synapses, your mouth snapping out garbled messages that no one—least of all you—could understand. Messages that had to be incomprehensible because if somebody ever did understand, then you were dead.

The private stations were for losers. Dead-end street kids with no smarts. Kids who thought a gig on a station—any station—was the ultimate score. Kids who were going to soon die one way or another anyway.

Serenity was a MITI operation. And as a gateway to the good life, it ranked on a par with Tokyo University. Unlike the private stations, it didn't deal in black market data. MITI, the far-thinking government department that had guided Japan's industrious corporations to their current economic dominance, simply liked to keep tabs on its corporate partners—like a mother reading her children's diaries. And that meant Serenity had to be a clean operation. The kids who worked the zero-g cham-

bers were clean, smart, beautiful, all with the rough, raw street edge that would make them ideal special ops executives. Serenity was a kind of training center whose graduates often went on to top-paying positions in the intelligence and security departments of the big *zaibatsu*.

For a kid on the outside looking for a way in, Serenity was a golden opportunity. It was a place to make contacts.

Like this slicker. Young, moving up fast. Shy, nervous, kind of embarrassed about the whole business. But eager. Treat him right and in a few years he'd come looking for you. They always remembered the first time.

He was grunting loudly in her ear. And wheezing. A harsh, whistling sound, abrupt and irregular. She held tight, digging black-lacquered nails into his back, deliberately raking them across the skin to leave him with the scars that were proof of his victory, of his sexual power. He would come soon. The chemicals he had taken to delay ejaculation would be wearing off now.

She felt him swelling inside her, the bony protrusions of his hips scraping against her own, rubbing her raw. He had slowed now to a final grinding push, pushing as far inside her as he could, fingers jammed in the cleft of her buttocks, pulling her toward him as if trying to dissolve the fragile boundaries of skin, bone, and electrons that separated them, to merge them into a single ecstatic entity. She shivered as he ground against her clitoris, tiny flutters of pleasure rippling through her. When he came, it was explosive. The convulsion shuddered against the walls of her vagina, teasing her with half-hearted promises of indeterminate pleasure—a pleasure she doubted existed anywhere outside the minds of men. The feeling wasn't unpleasant—it was warm, comfortable, like a cup of tea on a cold afternoon. But it wasn't an orgasm. In fact, only one person other than herself had ever given her an orgasm, and it hadn't been a man.

She felt vaguely relieved that it was over. And with that relief came tenderness—a feeling she experienced even less often than pleasure, and a feeling for which she had little use. She had for so long cultivated the image of the hard woman, the ice-woman—tough, cold, and glamorous, a woman whose popularity with her clients increased in direct proportion to how small and worthless and despicable she made them feel—that when she fell prey to emotions such as tenderness, sympathy, and sadness, she became confused and angry. They melted the impermeable shell she had molded around herself, leaving her vulnerable and open to attack.

Even now, as she cradled the john's head against her breast, running her fingers through his damp hair, feeling the pounding of his heart against her stomach, she wanted to take that trusting skull and crush it, to switch on the gravity and let him plummet to the floor.

He looked up at her and smiled.

"Thank you, Zazu-san," he said.

The Sensation input was programmed to terminate following orgasm. He was back in the real world now. She wondered how much of his pleasure she had been responsible for. It was difficult to tell. Her own previous Sensation experiences had always been shared with the client; the sensory data and imagery flowing into their minds were shaped by the physical activities of their bodies and directed by the fantasies of their subconscious minds. Her own conscious fantasies were always quelled, if indeed she even had any. It was part of the training. The client was paying. It was his trip. She was just along for the ride.

Some trips were pretty smooth. Soft-focus holoflick passion brought to life, fast-cutting from one sexual position to another. Others were rollercoaster rides into a nightmare of sexual deviance and fetishism. And sometimes—as in this case—the client didn't want you along.

Those were the strangest clients. What were they doing in there?

She smiled at him, still stroking his hair, letting the long, coarse ponytail fall through her splayed fingers. He nestled against her like a cat. She was tempted to be cruel. She hated it when they didn't take her on the Sensation ride. It underscored the fact that she was just a vehicle for their pleasure, not an active participant.

More than that, she wanted to know why they didn't take her. Sure, the fantasies were always intercut with flash fragments that had nothing to do with sex—wives, husbands, children, marketing strategies, research projects—but the images were blurred, disconnected, out of context. The station monitors analyzed them, tried to piece them together, but they were seldom able to come up with anything coherent. More information was gained from inadvertent comments, bragging, and things left unsaid than from the distorted reflections of the subconscious conjured up by the Sensation experience.

So why?

"It's in my contract," he said, smiling wanly.

"What is?" she asked, wondering if there were some new little game he wanted to play, something he'd signed on for but that they'd forgotten to tell her about in the briefing.

"That I don't share the Sensation experience," he said, tapping his temple with his index finger. "Too much classified data."

"You a mind-reader?" she said.

He shrugged. "I can see it in your face."

They spoke English. Though she was fluent in Japanese, had grown up speaking it, he didn't know that and there was no need to tell him. The less the client knew, the better. These days, English was *de rigueur* for Japanese businessmen, its legacy of dominance lingering in the

business world much as French had remained the language of diplomacy long after that country had slipped from the center of the world stage.

"Some champagne?" he said.

"Sure."

He propelled himself rather awkwardly toward the bar.

"Let me get it," she said, pushing herself smoothly past him. "I'm more familiar with the routine."

He caressed her flank as she glided by. She felt his eyes lingering on her body. The sensation was not as distasteful as she expected.

She paused at the bar. "Would you prefer to switch on the gravity?" she asked. "It's much more elegant that way."

He smiled thankfully. "That would be wonderful."

He kept coming back. Sometimes as often as twice a month. Whatever he was doing Earthside, he must have been doing well. And he always asked for her, always brought her gifts. At first, just duty-free goods picked up on the shuttle—perfume, scarves, liquor, stamped cubes of Lebanese or Moroccan hash wrapped in gold foil, expensive rejuvenating creams and lotions. Then, later, diamonds, Chanel dresses, Comme des Garcons suits, sculptures, paintings—he was more lavish with his gifts than a corporate president.

She wondered how he could afford it all. According to his job description, he was only a team leader in Matsushita's biosoft R&D department—a respectable position, to be sure, but not one that merited such an apparently limitless expense account.

She enjoyed the gifts, the flattery, but refused to lower the barrier that separated them. It was part of her mystique, after all. Showing him love or affection, whether false or not, was not part of the deal. If he preferred her, it was because of her cool reserve and not in spite of it.

She took the gifts as her due, made love to him as was her duty, and ignored him as was her custom.

And still he refused to share the Sensation experience with her.

SHE WASN'T SURPRISED WHEN TAN KATSUMURA called her in after his last visit. She was surprised only that it hadn't happened sooner.

Tan was Serenity's chief monitor. Suave, elegant, with a manner sweet as roses and an attitude tough as nails, she was typical of Japan's first generation of female executives. And at 87, she had no time for unnecessary pleasantries.

Tan's sharp brown eyes watched her expressionlessly from behind a pair of old-style horn-rimmed glasses, her remodeled face smooth and businesslike beneath a carefully-applied veneer of foundation and artful strokes of blush.

Rumor had it that Tan had been one of the last geishas.

Tan tapped the stack of printouts on her black Formica desk, her voice clipped, deceptively frail. "Nearly three hours of conversation, 18 hours of body analysis, 18 hours of Sensation probes, and not one single byte of hard data."

Zazu shrugged. "I'm not paid to gather data," she said, her voice inevitably surly, provocative in its insolence, knowing her high, wide cheekbones were thrown into stark relief by her downturned mouth. "I'm paid to provide pleasure."

Tan glared at her. "Don't take that tone with me, Zazu-chan." She bit off the affectionate address form as if the word burned her tongue. "You know our primary function as well as I do. We do not demand that you obtain data from the clients. But we expect something." She slapped the pile of printouts again. "We expect more than this."

"This man worries us. He is too young, too wealthy. Matsushita acknowledges him, but nothing in his official status indicates he is in a position to lavish gifts upon you as he does."

Zazu stared at the cold black Formica, familiar feelings of anger welling up inside her. The trainers had left her temper intact, regarding it as a potential asset not only in her work as a prostitute, but for any possible future assignment Earthside. Special ops executives needed a streak of meanness, though they also needed to know how to control it—a discipline that, in Zazu's case, the trainers had overlooked. Gritting her teeth, she muttered, "I've followed all the procedures. The man is well trained. He reveals nothing. If you're looking for some insight that you haven't uncovered in your analysis, I can't give it to you. I'm as puzzled as you are."

Tan sighed. "I am aware of that. As you should be aware that special circumstances call for special measures. This man worries us. He is too young, he is too wealthy. His personal data does not equate. Matsushita acknowledges him, but nothing in his official status indicates that he is in a position to lavish gifts upon you as he does. Nor, for that matter, is there anything to indicate why he is able to visit us so frequently."

"So?"

"So!" Tan's carefully-modulated voice slipped for a moment, a granny's high-pitched squeal. "So, he is an anomaly. Whatever he does for Matsushita, it is not what they say he does. Our inability to learn his secret discredits us with MITI. This worries us. More importantly, it worries MITI. For more than a century, MITI has been privy

to the secrets of the *zaibatsu*—if not officially, then unofficially. The fact that Japan's largest electronics manufacturer is going to such lengths to keep something from MITI is unprecedented. And that is why we must find out what is going on."

"I'll tell you what's even stranger," said Zazu, leaning back in her chair, lighting one of the Gauloises he had brought her on his last visit. "They go to all this trouble to keep us from finding out their secret; meanwhile they make it obvious as hell that something weird's going on. Why send him up here in the first place? If he's such a classified piece of goods, why don't they keep him locked up tight in a max-security R&D center Earthside? Why tease us?"

Tan's hard brown eyes blinked, her smooth face cracking with distaste, as a waft of dark French tobacco smoke drifted across the desk. She switched on a directional air filter. "Yes." She nodded. "A good question. Perhaps, with a little more effort on your part, we might find the answer."

Zazu leaned forward, glaring at Tan across the desk, hazel eyes unblinking, the hot rush of anger burning her skin. "Fuck you, Tan. You may be chief monitor, but I don't have to answer to you. I'm a free agent. I do my job, and I do it better than anyone here. The credits I bring up must account for half the fucking budget. Don't tell me about effort. You think it's easy to screw just any slack-gut that flies in and slaps a few credits on the table? You think it doesn't take any effort to float around in that goddam zero-g chamber while some mealy-mouthed corporate shit is pushing and poking at my body like I'm some kind of fucking toy? Who the fuck do you think you are, telling me to make more of an effort?"

Tan leaned back in her heavy padded chair as if trying to distance herself from this sloppy display of emotion. But her face remained composed, its smoothness marred only by the barely perceptible clenching of her jaw, by the slight tremor in the muscles around her mouth. "And who do you think *you* are?" she hissed, the words, corrosive as acid, at odds with the expressionless face. "You were nothing before Serenity. Just a skinny, mean Kabuki-cho street tramp giving head to any Yakuza errand boy who was willing to slip you enough credits to buy a few grams of bootleg Filipino ice. You were trash. A bundle of wired nerve-endings with a nice ass and a lot of potential on the fast track to nowhere. Whatever you are, *we* made you. So what gives you the right to act as if you owe us nothing but your body? There are plenty of bodies out there, Zazu. What makes yours so special?"

"You tell me, mama-san."

"Do you think we selected you because of your body? Is that how you view your work here—an overpaid hooker in a government-subsidized brothel?"

Zazu shrugged, inhaling deeply on her cigarette. "Sounds like a fair enough description to me."

"If it were your body we were interested in, we could have found a much better one at half the price and with none of the aggravation." She paused, folding her arms across her chest, eyes straying to the stack of printouts on the desk. "Why are *you* here, Zazu?"

"It's a good gig."

Tan sighed. "Don't play games with me, Zazu. You're here because you wanted to get off the streets, because you wanted to stop selling your body for the drugs that made selling it bearable. You're here because this is the only chance that someone like you will ever get to break into the system."

Zazu stubbed her cigarette in the heavy glass ashtray that squatted like a tortoise on the edge of Tan's desk. "Fuck the system," she said.

Tan rolled her eyes. "If you wish to follow the accepted career track for Serenity staff, you will play by the rules. Thus far, the indiscretions of your clients have made it easy for you. Now that that is no longer the case, you will have to work a little harder. Just a little, Zazu." She leaned forward, carefully spitting out each syllable as if it were an olive pit. " Just… a… lit… tle… har… der."

Zazu was silent. Memories of the streets reverberated in her brain with the abrasive persistence of a German metalbeat band: the sour taste of cheap Japanese whisky in the back of her mouth; stale sperm gluing her ass to plastic sheets; the piss-taste of unwashed cocks in the neon glare; calloused hands dark with city grit groping her awkwardly on thin, damp futons in cramped capsule hotels, the cool, electric rush of low-grade ice cut with codeine; and the awful, mind-numbing grip of the speed-jitters that kept her constantly searching for another hit.

"Fine," said Zazu finally, lighting another cigarette, wondering for the first time if life on the inside was really all that much better than life on the outside. Cleaner, maybe. Safer. More comfortable. But better? She'd always felt trapped on the streets, at the mercy of forces she couldn't control, forced to sell her soul for a patch of stick-on ice and the dreams of freedom it gave her. She'd thought Serenity was her ticket to real freedom. Now it was starting to look more like an upscale version of the same prison.

"Fine," she repeated, her voice thin and empty as the universe outside. "What do you want me to do?"

Behind Tan's owlish head, the moon drifted across the viewport, fat and white as a melon. It passed by quickly, though it would return soon. In order to achieve the degree of centrifugal force required to maintain a comfortable level of gravity, Serenity rotated on its axis every 43 minutes. Even so, the gravity was not nearly as strong as Earth's, and those kids brought in while they were still

growing developed a long-legged lissomeness that many of the Earthbound company men found especially attractive. An unfortunate side effect of this low-grav limb-stretching was that bones lost their resilience, becoming too frail to cope with the oppressive weight of Earth's gravity. As a result, many of the kids had to have their bones reinforced with lightweight metal composites before discharge. In the worst cases, they required a complete non-removable exoskeleton. This gave them an illusory aura of cyborg invulnerability, increasing their attractiveness as special ops executives.

"Make him share the Sensation experience with you."

"Oh, sure. No problem. Seven times he's been here and every time he's insisted that he do it alone. What am I supposed to do? Bargain with him? No Sensation for me. No fuck for you." She shook her head. "He'll just ask for someone else."

"Zazu, you disappoint me. You know how easy it is to manipulate clients—especially the men. And this man clearly has more than a passing interest in you. Find out what it is he likes about you, and use it. It's really quite simple. I'm sure he'll do anything you ask." She smiled, thin lips pressed together, a smile as tight and humorless as a zipper.

Zazu flashed a marionette grin back at her. "Sure, Tan. Sure he will."

Tan nodded. "Good. See to it." She paused, staring at Zazu over the printouts. "There's something else."

Zazu waited, staring back. "What?"

"He's been mapping you."

TAN CERTAINLY HAD A SENSE OF DRAMA, SHE HAD TO give her that much. But she hadn't explained it very well. Like most clients, Fukuda ran his own customized Sensation program on Zazu's board, slipping the tiny ROM crystal disc into her external drive before each session. Nothing unusual in that. In an effort to keep the outflow of data to a minimum, Sensation users built as many failsafes as possible into their programs, lock-out macros that automatically edited out classified imagery. Still, even the cleverest programmer couldn't predict all the possibilities, and a few isolated fragments always slipped through. Enough of those fragments, together with data gained from body and conversation analyses, created a pertinent database of classified corporate and private material sufficient to keep Serenity in business.

In Fukuda's case, however, not only was nothing coming out, but data was going in. Somehow he had penetrated the various passcodes that allowed access to the station's security and analysis systems, pulling in the station's own data on Zazu, mapping her sensory and motor responses, charting her brain patterns, sampling the electrical and chemical discharges of her neurons. Strict privacy regulations and the usual delays between visits and analysis had ensured that this serious lapse in security went undetected for over a month. When Tan discovered it, she had kept it to herself, unsure of its veracity and disturbed by its implications. Finally, on receiving a communication from MITI concerning Fukuda, she decided that Serenity—and Zazu in particular—would have to pull out all the stops and find out what was going on.

Tan had been strangely reticent regarding the possible political and technological implications. She hinted at Matsushita's growing resentment of the Sony-Philips group's increasing influence on MITI policy, and, more particularly, its anger at Sony-Philips' refusal to license its patent on the Sensation interface. What she didn't say, but what seemed clear enough to Zazu, was that with a program able to exploit the Sensation interface as a gateway to classified databases, Matsushita was aiming at a technological coup and the destruction of MITI's credibility. The Japanese powerhouse had been straining at the leash for years and now, with governments around the world becoming increasingly subservient to corporate masters, it seemed natural that Matsushita would attempt to seize the power it thought it deserved.

But something nagged at Zazu, scratching at the back of her brain like an electrode ghost. Something was wrong. Why would he be interested in Serenity's data on her physical, mental, and emotional states? Why not download the thousands of files packed with classified data on rival corporations? The whole scenario seemed oddly out of joint, overlaid with subtle incongruities, illusions within illusions, like a computer-generated simulation of the fourth dimension.

"Zazu, you disappoint me. You know how easy it is to manipulate clients—especially the men. Find out what he likes and use it. It's really quite simple. I'm sure he'll do anything you ask."

She stretched on the low-slung body-contour couch, curling one silk-sheathed leg against her chest, watching him, eyes wide and glowing in the starlight like a cat's.

He was attaching the Sensation terminals to prepared implant pads at the base of his skull. The terminals were flat, square pieces of aerated ceramic about the size of an old-fashioned postage stamp. Each was fitted with 256 micropins that penetrated the thin epidermal layer to rest gently on the bone. Each pin transmitted a specific signal frequency to the brain stem and thence to the medusa oblongata, cerebellum, or cerebrum, depending on the

frequency. Circular ultrasound transceivers protruded from the outside face of the terminals. These extended about twenty millimeters, and their configuration and angle gave the wearer an eerie resemblance to the Frankensteins who staggered maniacally through some of the ancient monochrome horror vids. Built-in digital processors and decoders sampled the sensory and mental data from the brain using 36-bit quantization and compressed it into packet form for transmission to the computer. There the data was run through the Sensation program and transmitted back to the user. It was a tight closed loop, one that performed something on the order of one million simultaneous logic operations per second. As far as the user was concerned, it was a fantasy come to life.

Hallucinogens could do much the same thing, of course. And there were plenty of drugs on the market specifically designed to intensify the sexual experience. But none could provide anything like the sophistication, the coherence, the reliability, and, above all, the safety of the Sensation experience. In any case, drugs were often used in conjunction with the Sensation program, creating an extraordinary ripple effect that defied comparison.

He had removed all his clothes and stood now beside the board, his pale, hairless body glowing like old ivory in the cool blue starlight, cascading shadows filling the hollows of his rib-cage, pooling beneath his cheekbones. Between his thumb and forefinger, the Sensation disc glittered like a broken star.

She knew there was no point in trying to trick him into sharing the Sensation experience. He must know by now that they were on to him.

He slid the Sensation disc into its slot, tapped a touch key, sleepy, downturned eyes brightening almost immediately. The program was running.

For now, its effect was minimal—electrifying the senses, heightening perception. Responding to the body's physical changes, the program increased in intensity as the user became more and more aroused.

He could still communicate in a normal manner.

She raised herself from the couch, propelling herself forward in a languid glide, arched toes skimming the floor. He watched her, body trembling perceptibly, penis starting to thicken and distend.

She went to him, ran soft fingers across his smooth, hard chest, tickling the sparse hair around his nipples, burying her mouth in the soft flesh at the base of his throat, nuzzling him with wet, gentle kisses.

Still kissing him, she reached behind him and switched off the board.

His body tensed, the light in his eyes blinking out.

She pressed harder against him, felt his cool skin grow clammy, his tumescent penis shrinking and softening against her belly.

"What are you doing?" he whispered, voice cracking.

"Don't you know?" She traced circles around his cold nipples, felt them stiffen beneath her touch. He seemed unnaturally disturbed, frightened even. Surely he must have known that he would be found out sooner or later. She had expected him to act more nonchalant, to be more prepared.

"No," he said, pulling her hands away from his chest, holding her out at arm's length. He looked awkward, plainly embarrassed now by his nakedness, fumbling with the Sensation terminals, frightened eyes flitting about the chamber, searching for his clothes.

She turned away, moving through spinning galaxies, a shimmering, dark-hued goddess, lean, muscular legs spanning a thousand light years in a single stride. Reached the bar. Poured herself a Lemon Sour. Lit a cigarette.

She heard his voice behind her. Weak. Plaintive. "Zazu-san?"

She turned, regarding him coolly through lazy curls of tobacco smoke. "Mmmm?" she said, sipping the tart shochu.

"What is wrong?"

He seemed so bewildered, so truly distressed. Maybe he really didn't know what was going on. Maybe he was just a patsy.

"Your specs don't correlate, Fukuda-san," she said, watching him over the rim of her glass. He had put on his trousers, was shrugging into his shirt, a pale, half-naked ghost floating in the vast emptiness of the holo-projected universe. "You seem to be getting all the perks that go with being a chief executive, yet you're only a junior staffer."

"Oh," he said, sounding vaguely relieved. "I'm too young to be a chief executive. There are certain… er, proprieties to be observed." He looked down at his chest, shaky fingers fumbling with the buttons on his shirt. "At the same time," he continued, speaking to the floor, "the company feels I should be rewarded for my services. And this is one of the few perks—as you put it—that can be awarded with some assurance of discretion."

She decided to be blunt. "That doesn't explain why you won't share the Sensation experience or why you've been stealing data from our banks."

His head jerked up, dark eyes blinking rapidly. "Stealing data?"

"Don't play games, Fukuda-san. You must have known we would find out. Stealing data is a crime. If it wasn't so damaging to our credibility, we would probably have you charged."

He shook his head, flicking a stray tendril of limp, black hair across his face.

She snapped open the control panel on the bar, flicking on the main light. The stars faded in a burst of halogen as

the dark universe exploded into light. He stood shivering in the brightness, pathetic and small, like an animal trapped in the paralyzing glare of a car headlamp.

She felt sorry for him. A pawn sacrificed in some devious corporate chess game.

Like her.

Finally, he spoke, his voice apologetic. "It was only meant as a demonstration. To show that the Sensation interface can be penetrated and embarrass Sony-Philips into releasing its patent."

He was still looking at the floor, hands clasped in front of him like a chastised schoolboy. "The data," he went on, "the data was not important." He glanced at her furtively from beneath his downturned brow, gauging her reaction.

She took a long drag on her cigarette, staring at him through slit eyes. She had expected to feel anger. But she felt nothing. Only emptiness. A cold chill emanated from her stomach, spreading through her body, freezing her heart. She had never been raped before.

"Get out," she said, her voice brittle.

A few weeks later, Sony-Philips announced that, in the spirit of good will and cooperation, it would license its Sensation interface for manufacture by competing companies—including Matsushita.

Almost immediately, Matsushita dropped its own bombshell. The Matsushita version of the Sensation program not only offered users the standard benefits of the Sensation-enhanced sexual experience, it offered them the opportunity to enjoy the full experience alone.

Matsushita had developed a program that contained all the data necessary to provide the user with a fully tangible partner. Special add-on external pads delivered the same kind of physical stimulation that a real partner would. Mental and emotional data supplied through the program would interact with the user's own thoughts and sensations to ensure a complete, fully satisfying, and thoroughly realistic sexual experience. Because the programmed partner had been so thoroughly mapped, the experience would not only be different for each user, it would be different each time. Currently, Matsushita had only programmed a heterosexual female partner. A heterosexual male partner would be forthcoming, to be followed by homosexuals of both sexes. The company promised to respond promptly to market feedback and anticipated the creation of a variety of partners to meet any sexual need - no matter how unique.

As an added bonus, Matsushita had given the program the ability to simulate a variety of specific environments—including an orbital zero-g chamber.

She looked at the face in the mirror, at its thick, sensuous lips, smooth skin the color of sandalwood stretched tight over sharp-angled bones, smoky brown eyes fading into their sockets, a face as harsh and precise as a Balinese mask, a face no longer her own. A face owned by millions, leered at daily. A face that in a few short weeks had come to know the kisses of more men than any other face in history.

And she wasn't even receiving residuals.

She wondered again if he had known. Obviously the real reason that he hadn't shared the Sensation experience with her was because it would have distorted her responses, preventing an accurate mapping. Had he known what he was doing, what he was doing to her?

"Time is your enemy," she had told the young Zazu, sad, thin face cracked by abuse and nicotine. "You must defeat it while you are young or remain its prisoner forever."

She stared for a moment longer, curling her lips in a fierce sneer, then picked up a heavy jar of rejuvenating creme from her vanity and hurled it at the mirror. The heavy, unbreakable glass shivered as a thousand thread-like cracks spread across it like a spiderweb. So thin, so imperceptible were the cracks that it seemed almost as if the glass had been designed that way, the spider-web pattern delicately etched by an unknown robot craftsman.

She looked at her face now, fragmented into a thousand discrete pieces, all of them a part of her but none of them belonging to her. Tears and mascara streaked across the broken planes of her features like viscous oil flowing over the cracked mud-flats of an ancient seabed. Vacant eyes stared out at her, dark and hollow like extinct volcanoes, like the eyes of her mother, a soya-brown Eritrean with stiff-kinked hair who had come to Japan as a domestic, was compromised by the man of the house, then thrown out on the streets, pregnant and creditless. "Time is your enemy," she had told the young Zazu, sad, thin face cracked by abuse and nicotine. "You must defeat it while you are young or remain its prisoner forever."

She had learned fast. When the Serenity scouts found her, her wire-thin elasticity twisted their bodies in knots, her laser-sharp tongue perforated their bloated egos. Impressed, they signed her up. She was seventeen. She had beaten Time.

She sipped from a half-empty tumbler of scotch, savoring the fire in her chest, the warm liquid embrace that for a moment filled the cold hollows in her gut, somehow sensing that this was all that was left of her, a cold, empty vessel waiting to be filled. Lulled by dreams of power, she had allowed herself to be conquered. No longer could she define herself by her ability to command

desire, by her dual role as both victim and victor in the tawdry, ongoing war between the sexes.

She had been robbed. Stripped, violated, and vivisected. Her spirit had been drained by a digitized vampire, leaving her with only a physical shell, a dry, empty husk that drifted in orbit like a discarded spacesuit.

She sat quietly, eyes fixed on her shattered image, the sound of her breathing the roar of a cockleshell ocean in her ears. The slick velveteen flesh that lined her empty body tingled as the liquor spread its fiery tentacles outwards from her stomach, high-octane molecules searing raw nerve-endings like a cauterizing laser, leaving her numb and senseless, a hot, scotch-soaked cunt spread wide for all.

Darkness fell across her face like a low-budget video fade as Serenity drifted out of the blaze of filtered sunlight and passed quietly into Earth's shadow. She heard the faint hum of the nuclear generator as it kicked in, switching on night-power. The lights came on.

She glanced at the Earth monitor. Thousands of kilometers below, the night-shrouded Korean peninsula jabbed at Japan like an accusing finger.

She counted the seconds on her fingers. Waiting.

Since the release of Matsushita's upgraded Sensation program, business had slowed to a trickle. A few grim-faced Sony-Philips executives occasionally stalked the near-empty chambers, recouping lost pride in joyless orgies of pain, muttering about psychosexual side effects and personality disorders.

None of her regular clients had made the trip and no new ones had been assigned to her.

Talk in the staff lounge had been downbeat but cautiously optimistic. Once the novelty had worn off, it would be business as usual. Nothing could ever beat the real thing, even if the perceived benefits of the real thing were more psychological than real. The Matsushita program was just a hightech sex toy, a surrogate partner for losers and perverts. A few of the more cynical kids had speculated the novelty would not wear off. Instead, prostitutes would be recruited into providing the raw data for multiple versions of the program, a possibility all agreed beat the hell out of having live sex with not-always-attractive strangers. None of them knew Zazu had already provided the raw material for the first version.

Zazu didn't care one way or the other. She floated lazily in a tranquilized haze, discreetly applying stick-on epidermal downers whose active ingredients blended quickly with the alcohol in her bloodstream, washing through her body like liquid sleep.

She watched herself in the mirror, watched the broken fragments of her soul swirling across the mirror's silvery surface, scattering like ashes on the dark waters of the Pacific.

THE MAN IN THE WRAPAROUND MIRRORSHADES offered her a cigarette. "You must understand, " he was saying, thin-lipped face blank and subtly menacing behind the reflecting glasses, "that Matsushita was not aware of the source of the data used in the Sensation Plus program. We were under the impression that the data was gained from a volunteer at the research center involved."

Zazu spoke slowly, her jaw heavy and sticky as clay, squeezing words from her mouth like soft candied cherries. "He said it didn't matter… the data, it didn't matter." She fumbled with the cigarette, flipping it through stiff, nerveless fingers.

Tan was hunched at her desk, hands folded tightly in front of her. "Inoue-san, Matsushita authorized the penetration of our data banks. You have already admitted as much. Surely you are aware that the only data removed was that pertaining to Miss Zazu?"

"No data at all should have been removed. Our intention was merely to demonstrate our ability to exploit the Sensation interface, not to commit a felony." He sucked on his Mild Seven, turning his silvered gaze on Zazu, capturing and absorbing her reflection like the mirror in her quarters.

Zazu barely listened to them. Their whitewashed exchange of political doubletalk crackled like satellite static in the upper stratosphere of her mind. One of Matsushita's top special ops sharps, he had come here to arrange compensation for Zazu, and for Serenity; to atone, he said, for Fukuda's unforgivable error in judgment. In his expensive charcoal-gray London-tailored suit, he was as smooth, and as believable, as a video real-estate shark.

She knew why he was here. He hadn't come here to make amends for the violation of her spirit. He had come here to buy her off. Matsushita was in trouble. Sensation Plus had a bug in it. After only three weeks on the market, there were already hints of serious problems with the program. One man had developed a split personality. Another had killed himself. Reports of less extreme personality disorders were piling up. It seemed that the computer-facilitated interaction of two personalities in a single mind seriously disrupted the host mind's sense of self. Frequent users of the program—and there were many—soon found their simulated sex partner was taking up permanent residence in their subconscious and, on occasion, making forays into the conscious mind.

She puffed obsessively on the Mild Seven he had given her, the constant stream of smoke stinging her eyes. She stared at him through narrow, tear-misted slits. As part of the deal, he wanted her to come down to Tokyo with him, to allow Matsushita's scientists to access her mind and body directly, to search for a key in her neural data that would allow them to lock her troublesome silicone clones into the program.

"A permanent salaried position with Matsushita's Special Operations Department plus six percent of the gross profits on the debugged Sensation program." He had spread several sheets of hard copy on Tan's desk, was pointing out specific clauses in the agreement.

She glanced at her watch. 19:45. There was a shuttle leaving for Seattle in fifteen minutes.

Tan and Inoue were absorbed with the contract. Behind them, the Earth hung in the viewport, its blue-white bulk filling the meteorite-proof plastic like a huge mural.

She stood up silently, slow and quiet as a slow-motion replay, feeling invisible, an ephemeral computer ghost drifting unnoticed through the space station's hollow shell. She left her cigarette, still burning, on the arm of the chair, and walked unhurriedly to the automatic door.

She'd make them pay, all right.

CHRISTOPHER HUNT

Is a Vancouver-based freelance writer and library junkie who wonders why he has to work so hard to make a living. When he has time, he edits the Web 'zine Circuit Traces, *which can be found on the Web at <http://vanbc.wimsey.com/~chrish>.*

E i r e

JOSEPH W. FLOOD

One might be able to depend upon the kindness of strangers, but it's altogether different to depend upon their devotion.

MOM GOT ME THE TICKET. IT WAS ONE OF THOSE discount fares they advertise in the newspaper. She surprised me with it on my birthday. I opened the envelope and saw the destination: New York. And the date: March 17th. St. Patrick's Day.

"Use it to visit your Irish girlfriend," Mom said brightly.

"Mom, she's not my girlfriend."

"There's nothing like being in New York for St. Patty's Day, especially among the Irish."

Mom considered herself Irish. In the kitchen hung a tapestry depicting the four provinces of Ireland. When I was young, she would point out the county where our family originated. Westmeath, she would say, that is where the O'Banions are known. Her finger rested on a black speck on orange yarn. I would eat Fruit Loops while she talked about my grandfather who emigrated from Ireland and died shortly after I was born.

Mom loved the idea of my being in love with an Irish girl. She couldn't wait to meet Maggie. I had invited her out to Chicago, but she had never been able to make it. Something always came up. I had met her the summer I was interning in New York, before I graduated from NYU. The accent was too much; it was too charming. I got to talking to her in a club and just fell for her. We stood near the dance floor and laughed and drank while her friends flittered about. She was good company, and I made sure I got her number before I left the club.

I met her a week before I left, so we never had a chance to go out. After I moved back home, I called Maggie every few weeks and we talked about this and that.

ON THE WAY TO O'HARE, MOM TRIED TO TEACH ME several phrases in Gaelic. "For Maggie," she said. I repeated the words as we edged through traffic.

"Ma, what was that last one?"

"I love you."

MAGGIE AND I HAD ARRANGED TO MEET IN A midtown bar after the parade. I flew in, dropped my things at the hotel, and went to Broadway.

The parade went on for hours. Maggie and her friends were actually in it, marching with the members of some social club. I knew it was a group whose primary purpose was to party. I couldn't make out the name of the club on the banner—the wind was blowing and the words were in Gaelic. I didn't see Maggie marching past, though she could have been hidden in the boisterous throng.

People were drunk, even at ten in the morning. I decided to go to the bar after a few hours. We hadn't set a precise time to meet. Maggie didn't know exactly when the parade would end. She said that her group would end up at Mulvaney's, an Irish bar on a side street.

The cover to get into Mulvaney's was five dollars. I was anxious and my heart was beating. I felt happier than I had in months.

I stepped into a wall of wet heat created by all the bodies packed into the place. I squeezed between people, trying to reach the bar. Beer spilled from a plastic cup onto my jacket. I reached the bar and somehow ordered a Guinness. The bartender was taking the orders of his favorites, so it took a while. I shuffled through the crowd into a back room.

"Maggie!" I exclaimed, spotting her. She was with two of her friends, Patricia and Mary. The three of them clustered around a table covered with empty pint glasses. Their faces were red, either from heat or from drink.

"Hello," Maggie said smoothly, her eyes twinkling. "Did you see me in the parade?"

"I looked for you but didn't see you."

"Didn't see me?"

"No, too many people," I shouted. A band was playing somewhere in the crowded bar.

"Brian, I thought you'd keep a closer eye on me," Maggie said, teasing.

I flushed red and felt my face growing warm. I took a sip of Guinness, trying to conceal it. The beer was warm, and rich. "I'll have to watch you more closely."

"I can't believe you came all this way just for me."

"You know she's not worth it," Patricia said with a laugh.

"Patty! He came all this way from Iowa just for me!"

"Illinois, actually."

"Illinois then it is."

I was still standing next to their table. No chairs were available. Maggie and I talked about the parade, the weather, how I missed living in New York. Patricia chimed in with the occasional wry remark. Mary merely watched the men in the bar and pointed out to Maggie and Patricia the ones she considered good-looking.

"That one. He's a handsome man."

"Him? Bit short, don't you think?"

"I don't mind."

"You'll take anything then?" Patricia asked.

"Patty, be quiet for a change."

"You're one to talk. Hey, what about that one…"

I turned to Maggie. She was looking across the crowded bar to where Mary was pointing. Maggie has very blue eyes, especially at times when the light strikes them just so. This wasn't one of those times.

"You think you'll stay in New York?" I asked.

"Oh, you mean with my life? I don't know. We'll see."

Patricia got up. Mary had dared her to talk to a man at a table across from ours. I took her seat. Patricia slowly made her way through the crowd, smiling and tapping on shoulders to get through. Mary was giggling and Maggie watched her progress. I smiled and drained my beer.

Patricia leaned down to say something to the man, brushing her blonde hair behind her ears. All the men at the table were wearing Irish soccer jerseys. They watched her as she smiled and talked. Then she came rushing back.

"She's a bold one," Mary said with a laugh.

"Quite," Maggie added.

"I can't believe you came just for me. Patty! He came all the way from Iowa just for me!"
"Illinois, actually."
"Illinois then it is."

Patricia returned with a story to tell. They were just visiting the States but had a friend at Sullivan's who could get them in and give them free drinks.

"They wanted to know if we wanted to go!"

"They are cute," Mary said. "And Sullivan's is a lot of fun."

I must have appeared skeptical because Patricia began assuring me that Sullivan's would be a good time. Mary and Patricia began gathering up their things. Maggie gave me a nudge.

"You don't mind, then?"

"No, why not?"

We all spilled out onto the street. The sun had slipped behind the tall buildings and the shadows were cold. We walked up Second Avenue, our hosts ahead of us. Nobody had bothered to introduce me. The men were talking among themselves in thick Belfast accents. I wasn't drunk at all.

The line to get into Sullivan's stretched halfway down the block. We walked past everyone to the bouncer at the door. The fellows from the North mentioned the name of their friend and the bouncer waved us past, scowling at the number of us. Inside, it was just like Mulvaney's, a melange of people, beer, and smoke. I somehow lost contact with my group as we inched forward through the crowd. I looked around and everyone was gone. I saw just the backs and heads of strangers.

I was pushed to the bar by the press of people behind me. I took out a five and waited. There were only two bartenders, and they were rushing from one end of the bar to another. I couldn't seem to get their attention. At last I caught one.

"What can I get you?"

"Guinness."

I tried to turn around but couldn't get through. Behind me was a sea of outstretched arms, trying to reach the bar. Dripping pints of beer were ferried over me, exchanged for the wrinkled bills that were passed forward. I figured Maggie and company would end up at the bar eventually. I waited and waited, but then my bladder gave out. "Bathroom," I yelled, in order to get the crowd to part.

After I finished, I searched the bar for Maggie. I looked everywhere and didn't see her. I couldn't get back to the bar—there were too many people. I chose a spot along the wall, trying to stay out of the way. Someone thrust a beer into my hands, slapping me on the back. I was standing under a mirror shaped like a harp.

"There you are," Maggie said. "We're back here." She took me by the hand and led me to a section I had missed. It was a smaller room, and less crowded.

"Look what I found."

Everyone was just sitting around drinking. Maggie and I talked. Mostly, she told me gossip about Mary and Patricia. She didn't ask me many questions. I felt drained by the heat and noise of the place.

"Do you want to go get something to eat?"

"I don't want to leave Mary and Patricia alone. No telling what trouble they could get in."

The two girls looked like they were about to pass out under the table.

"Could you get me a drink?"

Once the table discovered I was going for a drink, everyone wanted one.

"I can only carry so much," I protested.

"Ask for Danny," one of guys from the North said. "He'll take care of you."

I reached the bar and tried to get the attention of one the bartenders.

"Are you Danny?"

"No," he said, scowling. "He's at the other end. So what can I get you?"

When the beers were set on the sticky counter, I asked if I could pay with a credit card. The bartender looked at me as if I was insane. I paid cash.

Patricia lifted her head off the table when I returned. "Good job, Bill," she said.

"It's Brian."

Maggie had switched seats and was talking with the Irish from the North. I sipped my beer and looked at the decorations on the walls. Harps and four-leaf clovers and maps of Ireland and pictures of Joyce and advertisements for Guinness.

Maggie was still talking to the other guys. I sat there drinking my beer for a very long time, and then she returned.

"I'm staying just a few blocks from here."

"Is your hotel nice?"

"It's convenient. If you want, instead of going all the way back to Yonkers, you could crash at my place."

"Can I bring my girls?"

"You can bring anyone you want."

"We'll see."

Patricia wanted to go somewhere else. "I'm falling asleep in here."

"Did you have a good nap, Patty?"

"I have my second wind. Mary, wake up."

As we threaded our way through the crowd, I again mentioned to Maggie how close my hotel was. Outside, people mingled in the street. A cold wind had blown all the clouds away, revealing a vast sky dotted with stars. At the corner, the wind blew hard, funneled between office buildings. I turned up the collar of my coat. Maggie was shivering as she walked, so I squeezed myself against her.

"Is this body heat then?"

"You looked cold."

"It is cold, Brian."

Maggie and I walked down the street together. Mary and Patricia were way ahead of us, with the guys from the North. Maggie was walking very quickly. I tried telling Maggie in Gaelic that I loved her. All the words came out wrong. They jumbled and hung in the air.

"What's that?"

I tried again, enunciating as carefully as possible. I tried to remember Mom saying the line in the car. *I love you.*

"Oh, Brian," she said with an uneasy laugh.

The office buildings were checkerboards against a night sky. The wind suddenly gusted over us. The wind poured over my collar, down my neck, cold air settling on my chest.

"Girls!" Maggie shouted. "Wait for me!"

Maggie walked quickly ahead. We darted across an intersection, appearing briefly in the headlights of oncoming traffic.

A door was pulled open. This was the next bar. Inside was warmth, music, the smell of people. We found a table. Patricia had taken us to a sports bar. A waitress brought us menus. They served hamburgers, ribs, wings, barbecued chicken. The TV over the bar was playing an NBA game. Knicks versus the Magic. Shaq slammed one home, and the crowd in Orlando went wild. I could barely hear Marv Albert. The TV was a bright hole in the dark bar. The Knicks came roaring back. *Yes!* The Knicks ran and passed and shot and missed and Shaq got fouled coming up the lane. All the billboards cycled over. Nike. Coke. American Express. Tan girls in Lycra danced as the sweat was mopped up. Giant black American millionaires ran and jumped while I sat with Irish women.

We waited for the waitress to return. Patricia and Mary had gone back to their game of checking out men.

"Yes," Patricia said. "That is a handsome man. Built. Muscular."

The guys from the North seemed to have disappeared. The waitress had just left us sipping our water. We waited for a very long time. The basketball game was still going on, fast shooting and fast passing.

"That's a nice one, too," Maggie said, her accent lilting.

The game was in its final seconds. Shaq went inside and jumped toward the basket. The crowd roared and Marv Albert had to yell over the noise.

Maggie looked away from me, toward someone else.

I FLEW BACK MONDAY AFTERNOON. NEW YORK disappeared under a layer of gray smog. We rose into the sky. When I looked down again, there was just mile after mile of farm country, squares of green under the sun.

On the way home from the airport, Mom was desperately curious but I had little to say. I told her about the parade. I told her how cold it was in New York.

"It was cold here, too."

Once we were home, Mom made coffee. I stood by the counter and poured myself a cup while Mom went on about an aunt's trip back home to Eire.

"Friendliest people in the world," she said.

She caught me staring at the tapestry of Ireland. The four provinces. The twenty-six counties. One island, divided.

"Which county is your girlfriend from, dear?"

Mom smiled, sweet. Both of us were looking up at the ratty old wall hanging, its patchwork of colors faded with age. I picked up my coffee and quietly left the room.

JOSEPH W. FLOOD

Is a writer who lives in Washington, D.C. He just quit his job to write fiction for as long as his savings permit. Stories of his have been published on the Internet and on old-fashioned paper. His home page on the Web is at <http://users.aol.com/joeflood/joeflood.html>.

Cyberwhiskers

NICK VINCELLI

Some people find the future intimidating, with threats from disease, technology, war, and societal disintegration. For others… well, it's a dog's life.

WHILE I WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF A DEEPLY spiritual experience, the Home Management System warned me of unexpected guests.

"Alert! Possible intruder!" it exclaimed, reacting to information gathered through its infrared sensors. "Take precautions to secure your unit immediately!" The timing, of course, couldn't have been more offensive. I was conferring with my Creator, Leo the Lion.

I had purred in supplication to His Great Wisdom. "What do you want, my kitten?" the Great Lion roared majestically during our session. He nearly filled the room and emanated a fiery red celestial aura.

"I'm suffering from post-apocalyptic nihilism," I meowed.

"The wise cat does not worry himself with human concepts," my Creator sagely counseled. "He simply concerns himself with eating, sleeping, and burying his wastes."

Such wisdom! I had programmed Him well. But the Home Management System shattered the religious experience.

"Alert! Possible intruder. Take precautions to secure your unit immediately!" it reiterated. Hissing, I aimed my paw at a button on the wallscreen. The holographic image of Leo the Lion vanished, leaving void in its place. I activated the Home Security Subsystem to identify the source of the unwelcome encroachment.

I had expected to find a submarginal or, worse yet, a pre-adolescent human wielding a Micronuker, but the microcams deployed outside the door revealed two former members of Portland's Finest clad in PacificRim Security uniforms. I recognized them as Chuck and Bob, who once served on the Portland Bureau of the Police K-9 unit. An insipid pit bull, Chuck mindlessly barked and pawed at the door as if his chaotic gestures would intimidate it into opening. Bob, a somewhat more cerebral German shepherd who wore glasses and sported a bow tie, remained aloof, wisely conserving his energy for a future altercation.

The now-defunct Portland Bureau of Police had supposedly extended their officers' neurological capabilities with genetic engineering and nanotech neuroimplants, but I had my doubts. I've always believed if a mammal is born dumb, no amount of high-tech retrofitting will raise its intelligence—and if the species itself is suffering from cognitive deficits, no amount of genetic tinkering will improve its members. Portland Police could have saved a lot of time and money if they had admitted the veracity of these unpleasant facts.

With a jab of my left paw, I initiated a vidphone connection. Both Bob and Chuck had portable Micronukers strapped to their backs. I expected trouble.

"What are you devolved wolves doing?" I asked.

"Don't mew at me like that!" growled Chuck, "I can decapitate your head in a nanosecond and spit out your marble eyes!"

"Easy, Chuck," cautioned Bob. "We just wanted to say hello, Tony."

"I doubt your intentions are that innocuous," I hissed.

"I'm warning you, whiskerface—"

"We thought you might reconsider your decision," Bob barked, overriding Chuck's hostile outburst.

"To resign from Portland Police? They don't even exist anymore."

"That's not exactly true. We just got a new owner, that's all."

I recognized Chuck and Bob, who once served on Police K-9 unit. I've always believed if a mammal is born dumb, no amount of high-tech retrofitting will raise its intelligence.

"PacificRim Security," I reminded them pedantically, "no longer uses mammalian law enforcement. They've completely converted over to VLE."

The Portland Bureau of Police had, in fact, begun to experiment with VLE—Virtal Law Enforcement—before PacificRim Security was contracted by Ecotopia. With better funding and organization, PacificRim Security further developed VLE. Now a 911 NetAlert dispatched a team of robots, remotely controlled by datasuited law-enforcement technicians in the Kingdom of Hawaii. PacificRim was also experimenting with intelligent law-enforcement robots so that human interface could be dispensed with altogether.

I now understood the motive behind Bob and Chuck's visit: they wanted to snatch the VLE equipment I had permanently borrowed from Portland Police before I told them to take their job and lick it.

"But," whimpered Bob with lowered head, "we still need your abilities, Tony. We know you're the best feline

detective in the business. We're fighting the war on terrorism addiction and we need your talent."

"Thank you, but the answer is still no. I prefer self-employment."

"I bet he just spends his time chasing rats and cockroaches!" Chuck interjected.

"I'm in business for myself. I'm an Animal Companion Tracker," I wearily explained.

Chuck burst into canine laughter. "Bark, bark, bark, barrrrrrr…!" Saliva dripped off the idiot's limp tongue. "So you catch lost pets!"

"If you gentledogs will excuse me, I have some work to do," I meowed.

"Well, I didn't think you were going to make this easy for us, so we'll have to do this the hard way," Bob growled.

"We got a warrant for your arrest," Chuck triumphantly announced. "You can access it on EctopNet."

"What is the charge?!"

"There are several," explained Bob. "Theft of a VLE system and abandonment of duty."

"I dispute both charges, since my former employer no longer exists. I suggest you access my legal representation program—"

"You've got five seconds to open this door, puss, or we're nuking it!"

Lifting his right leg as if he was going to relieve himself, Chuck activated and armed the Micronuker strapped to his back. My back began to arch as my ears flattened.

"Okay, pooches, you win. I'll let you in," I meowed.

"That's the smartest thing you mewed all day, kitty," Chuck barked.

I commanded the Home Management System to unlock and open the door. The two canine centurions swaggered in, their tongues dangling out of their obscenely ugly mouths.

Leo the Lion suddenly materialized, filling the room. He unleashed a wrathful roar. "I shall rip your extremities off and bury you in a toxic waste dump!" He growled. Bolts of fire shot from His mouth.

Terrified, Bob and Chuck hypertailed out of my sub.

"Thank you, My Father," I mewed, deactivating the hologram. Stupid dogs—proves my point about retrofitting dumb mammals.

Exhausted, I gave myself a thorough licking, followed by a long catnap. I dreamed I tore the head off a bird.

WHEN I AWOKE, I TREATED MYSELF TO THE holovised version of EcoNewsNet to keep up with current events. I always find human news entertaining.

"Welcome to EcoNewsNet." A virtual human female appeared. Since I hadn't selected gender or race, it would toggle between male and female, Euro, African, and Asian, by default. But no cats! The designers of EcoNewsNet were speciesist. I planned to ask the Non-Human Civil Liberties Union to file a suit against them.

"The ceasefire between the Republic of Islam-Amerika and the Confederacy of Christian States ended this morning when robotic tanks of both sides exchanged tactical nuclear weapons along the Maryland-Virginia border."

"Thousands of Ecotopians celebrated the birthday of Captain James T. Kirk," an ersatz male African-Ecotopian reported. Footage scrolled by: thousands of silly *homo non-sapiens* in silver robes, fixed in lotus postures and staring at holovised icons.

"In Seattle," a computer-generated South Asian woman with green hair chimed in, "two preadults were responsible for the fly-by micronuking of a four-story apartment complex. The complex's defensive systems apparently failed to stop the attack, which killed fourteen occupants and wounded thirty. The preadults were later issued online citations by PacificRim Security for random euthanasia and unauthorized use of a remote stealth fighter. They had been previously treated for terrorism and virtual reality addiction but apparently suffered a relapse."

"And now for Gaia's mood," a Euro-Ecotopian man declared, introducing an African-Ecotopian female with a pulsating halo hat around her tatooed head.

"Showers expected today west of the Cascades as another front comes in from the Pacific. High temperatures in Portland today will reach 58, the low tonight will be 41. Winds from the north at 14 miles per hour. Radiation levels are moderate—"

The broadcast was interrupted by the Home Management System. "Mr. Clawrunner," it smarmily announced, "incoming priority e-mail. Do you wish to read now?"

"Yes." Priority mail was business, which I badly needed.

RE: Missing animal companion

Dear Mr. Clawrunner:

Please help me! Suzy, a beautiful four-year-old Siamese, disappeared three days ago. I'm not sure if she just decided to run away or if she was abducted by Romulans. Data warned us in a vision that the Romulans were planning to attack Ecotopia by implanting neural nanotech in thousands of animal companions and programming them to infect EcoNet with viruses. Can you help? Please, I hope you can. What are your fees? You can access Suzy's photo by touching her name.

—Luna, OldTech Shaman Goddess

Oh, Leo. Luna, my prospective client, was apparently an OldTechie *and* a Trekkie—a disturbing combination. Suzy probably just got tired of hanging around this lunatic and decided to take her chances on the streets of Portland. I almost rejected the case, but the photo of the lost Siamese changed my mind. Just the sight of her was enough to put me in mounting mode.

So, with some trepidation, I emailed back that my fees were 98 ecocredits if I succeeded in returning the lost animal companion, Suzy the Siamese. I also requested more specific data. Several hours later, Luna gave me her residential address. She lived in Powellhurst, on the eastern outskirts of Portland.

Time to dust off the Virtual Law Enforcement tech and go to work. I wasn't going to dirty my beautiful fur coat stalking around the bombed-out streets of Portland looking for this displaced female feline—only a dog would do something as stupid as that. I would conduct the entire investigation from the comfort of my subterranean living space. Via cyberspace, I would send a robotic tiger into the damp streets of the Pacific Northwest to scout for Suzy.

I climbed into my datasuit—specially modified for the feline body—and, ensconced in a sensor-laden latex outfit with a helmet with visors, activated a Portland Police tigeroid inertly sprawled on the sofa. Via remote control, I became the robotic tiger's consciousness, and soon I became the tigeroid. I accessed the Home Management System through the datasuit, unlocked and opened the door, then stealthily darted to the elevator and stood up to press the elevator button. Sharing the elevator with a male human dressed like a Vulcan, I languidly made my way to the surface, from -7 to ground level. The elevator stopped at -2. Charlie, the automated subcomplex manager, quickly explained the delay over the speakers.

"Alert! The anti-missile defense shield is activated. Please remain inside until the alert is over. Thank you and have a nice nanosecond."

Suddenly, the lights blinked as the entire complex shook violently. That one was close. The pseudo-Vulcan in the elevator cocked an eyebrow. "Fascinating."

Charlie cheerfully returned. "The alert is now over. A microcruise fired by a portable stealth fighter was intercepted by our X-ray laser. There has been minimal structural damage and no apparent casualties. Please proceed with caution, and wear your environmental suits if you leave the complex as radiation levels are now high. PacificRim Security has been notified. Thank you for your cooperation."

The elevator continued up the shaft, and soon I was out on the street. I scanned the subcomplex with the tigeroid's electronic eyes. The giant, baroquely-designed, fortified, densely-populated crater that housed hundreds of mammals seemed intact. I was grateful I lived in a sub and not in an elevated apartment.

Another day in Ecotopia. As usual, it was gray and drizzling—typical spring weather. I live in Portland Heights, near Washington Park, where I get a nice view of downtown. Many of the humans' skyscrapers had been destroyed, but some still defiantly stood and others were being reconstructed by microbots. Many of the tall ferns that had died were now being replaced by rapidly growing, genetically-engineered evergreens resistant to the insults of *homo non-sapien* technology. All in all, Portland was still pretty nice compared to other cities in North America.

I wasn't going to dirty my beautiful fur coat stalking around the bombed-out streets of Portland looking for this displaced female feline—only a dog would do something as stupid as that.

A bright flash of light appeared over the Willamette River as another Micronuker was discharged. Poor Suzy… lacking the nanotech neural implants that gave me the edge, she was especially vulnerable and probably wouldn't survive long in this urban war zone. I felt compelled to rescue her, but I also needed to pay the rent, so this was a case where altruism dovetailed with self-interest.

First, I needed to arrange transportation. Children of God, a group funded by the Confederacy of Christian States, destroyed most of the Max surface light-rail last year when they discovered Ecotopia was selling particle-beam weapons to Islam-Amerika, and the city had never completed the underground maglev system. On all fours, my tigeroid proxy would take nearly an hour to reach Powellhurst. But an alternative presented itself.

PacificRim Security had dispatched a red-and-white egg-shaped security vehicle in reaction to the attack on my subcomplex. Two androids in uniform climbed out, both designed to resemble human actors of the last century. (PacificRim Security felt its machines would get more respect if they resembled past mass entertainment icons.) Controlled by law-enforcement techies in Hawaii, they entered the subcomplex to download Charlie's data on the attack. I seized the opportunity and climbed in. I was briefly dazzled by the graphic displays inside, but I soon found the autopilot program and touched it. An interactive map of the Portland area appeared, and I manipulated my virtual tiger paw to narrow the scale until I could touch the exact address of the building I wanted to reach. The security vehicle sped off. I activated the emergency systems and the vehicle began to accelerate,

its siren wailing. Other computerized surface vehicles obediently got out of the way as I rushed through the drizzle, heading east. I hoped to arrive at Luna's place before the security robots realized their car had been commandeered by an artificial tiger (controlled by a not-so-artificial tabby).

Amazingly, Luna lived in an actual surface structure. In the old days, the humans called this a *house*. She must have had a good anti-terrorist defensive system. I instructed the vehicle to open its wing doors so I could jump out, then to drive slowly out of the neighborhood on its own. PacificRim Security would be searching for its lost toy, and I didn't want to be near it when they found it. They'd probably turn me into dog food.

I approached the house, hoping to get inside and catch a sniff of Suzy's scent. Even though I wasn't physically present, the electronic nose of the tigeroid was able to identify various chemicals, so I would be able to trace her unique feline signature. I pawed at the door to get Luna's attention. If she didn't open it, or if she wasn't home, I would have to access my Home Management System and hope it could break into Luna's Home Management System, which might take hours. A cat can shed a lot of fur in that time!

The door electronically opened. I felt my back start to arch as I cautiously walked in. From the first time I examined Luna's request for help, my whiskers had sensed something offline—and now my dread intensified. Was PacificRim Security trying to lure me into a trap so they could recapture my equipment and reprogram me for their own nefarious plans? It was rumored the Confederacy of Christian States was preparing to assault Ecotopia for its surreptitious support of the Republic of Islam-Amerika, and PacificRim Security would assume a more military role. Maybe I'd get drafted.

I sniffed around and engaged the infrared feature of my eyes, casually observing the ambient walls change colors and patterns. Then a beautiful Siamese appeared from under a table and greeted me.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Clawrunner. My name is Suzy," she meowed.

I almost disgorged a hairball in my data suit.

"Suzy?" I meowed through the tigeroid, "did you just return? Your partner Luna told me you ran away—that's why I'm here. I'm an Animal Companion Tracker."

"Correction, Tony," Suzy growled, coyly sniffing the body of my electronic surrogate, "you are a whore for the *homo non-sapiens*. You sell out your own kind for profit!"

"What kind of dogpiss is this? I came all the way here to find you, and now I get this patronizing, feline-correct lecture. Where's Luna? I'm entitled to compensation for my efforts!"

"I *am* Luna, you fool! Like you, I was enhanced by the human power structure. Like you, I escaped. Luna is my human alter ego."

Damn Siameses are all crazy!

"Okay, Suzy, your cleverness makes me knead my paws. Now what do you want from me?"

Suzy walked back and forth in front of me. "I want you to help the Movement."

"What movement?"

"The Feline Liberation Army. It's time we regained control of our world. With human technology, we can run this sick planet—we can turn it into Planet of the Cats!" she purred.

I made the tigroid take a few steps back and sit down. "Suzy, I think you're deluding yourself. Besides, the humans are devolving—they probably won't be around much longer. When they go, the insects will take over."

"Listen, Clawrunner, you're contradicting the wisdom of the Book of Leo. It was prophesied that Leo would soon return to liberate His kittens—"

"You silly Siamese! The Book of Leo was a computer program written by a human in California."

Before she could react to my outburst of heresy, a blinding flash overwhelmed my visor display and my sensors went ballistic. Intense heat and radiation assaulted the house, and the tigeroid was thrown across the room. Suzy was dazed, temporarily blinded, and she ran for cover under the couch. My robotic self had been damaged by the blast and had only limited mobility.

Two dogs burst in from the giant hole blown out of the door. Chuck and Bob! The malodorous mutts!

"PacificRim Security!" Chuck the pitbull barked with fascist glee. "You're under arrest! Bob, read them the Steps."

"Step One," Bob calmly barked, "we admitted we were powerless over our addiction and our lives had become unmanageable—"

"Wait a Leodamnned nanosecond," I protested. "What's the charge?"

"You're charged with theft of a PacificRim Security vehicle, and she's charged with terrorism addiction."

"What terrorism?" I meowed, interrupting Bob's litany of accusations.

"Your Siamese friend belongs to the Feline Liberation Army, a group of renegade neuro-enhanced pusses planning to overthrow PacificRim Security!" Chuck interjected with a homicidal growl.

"We are not obedient slaves like you dogs!" hissed Suzy, her back arched.

"And we ain't psycho-pusses who always lick ourselves and throw up furballs!" Chuck retorted.

"I believe we can better resolve this in a PacificRim Security facility," Bob suggested.

Reinforcements arrived. Two PacificRim Security robots—again resembling human actors—appeared at the blown-out door, armed with laser rifles and Micronukers.

I had nothing to lose—except some expensive equipment. I lunged for one of the robotic officers. The virtual cop tried to arm his laser rifle, but my limping tigeroid managed to bite his leg and release sulfuric acid before the cop could react. The acid flowing from my fangs began to dissolve some of his circuits and processors.

The other robot officer fired his laser rifle into my head. My sensors indicated trauma to my power supply.

"Run, Suzy!" I yelled. Suzy was already dashing through the smoldering hole in the door. Then Chuck was on top of me, trying to rip my head off. I got a final bite in before my connection crashed. A nice parting shot.

I SUFFERED FROM ONTOLOGICAL SHOCK AS I realized my virtual self was now permanently disabled and I was once again Tony Clawrunner, a seven-year-old gray tabby trying to pay the rent by finding lost pets.

How the hell did I get into this litter box?

I was out of business unless I could appropriate another virtual self. Or perhaps I could dirty my paws and run around the streets of Portland myself. I didn't like that idea at all. And what would happen to Suzy? She was genetically engineered and neurally enhanced, so she would probably survive. But what would she do now?

I got out of the data suit, licked myself, and instructed the the Home Robot to serve me some food. The three-foot-tall drone dutifully opened a can and put its contents in my bowl on the living-room table. After dinner, a little catnip, some stress-reducing string chasing, and a long nap, I arranged another session with my Creator, Leo the Lion.

The majestic Lion filled the room, His Holy Tail making elegant swishing movements.

"I'm having a crisis," I opined.

"Tell me, my kitten."

"My virtual tiger assistant was destroyed this afternoon by PacificRim Security. I'm out of business until I can get another one, but in order to get another one I'll have to leave the sub. I'm wondering if it's worth it. Maybe I should go into another line of work."

A brilliant cognition surfaced in my high-tech brain.

"Correction, Tony," Suzy growled, coyly sniffing the body of my electronic surrogate. "You are a whore for the *homo non-sapiens*. You sell out your own kind for profit!"

"I've got it, Father—I'll become a cat priest! I could sell interactive sessions with Your Holy Tailness over EcotopNet—the humans would probably upload lots of ecocredits into my account for my channeled wisdom. How does that smell, Father?"

Before Leo could give his regal purr of approval, the Home Management System once again rudely interrupted my session.

"Alert! Possible intruder!" it blared, sensing someone near the door. "Take precautions to secure your unit immediately!"

Fearing a PacificRim Security raid, I turned on the vidphone and observed a forlorn Suzy rubbing against the door. I let her in. She rolled on her back in gratitude.

"Thanks, Tony—it's so wet out there! I had nowhere else to go."

"Well, I guess I have room for another feline."

I was preparing to mount her. She was definitely in heat.

"You know," she murmured, "maybe you're right—maybe I've been deluding myself. Maybe I should accept human domination and just try to be comfortable. I used to believe in Leo's spirit and in the emancipation of all cats, but I'm not sure anymore."

"Actually," I said with a wily purr, "I just had a revelation…"

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Selections from the New World

MARCUS EUBANKS

Human history is scarred by battles with tiny enemies.
Penicillin and its cousins brought the war to a standstill.
We thought the war was won. We were dead wrong.

THE RECURRENT THOUGHT, LOOPING OVER AND over again like a mantra: *Of all the stupid ways to die.*

I come back to myself when it dawns on me I'm clutching shards of blood-slick glass in my hand. It seems I managed to forget the beer I was holding until the slender pilsner flute collapsed under my grip.

"Fuck!" Oblivious to the neighbors, I eloquently express my discontent as the pain hits me. I've cleverly cut myself to ribbons—though some remote part of me notes clinically there's nothing deep enough to merit sutures. For the life of me, I can't tell if I'm irritated more because I've wasted several ounces of excellent beer (which in my mind represents flagrant alcohol abuse) or because I've opened my hand to the possibility of infection. The fact that the glass was fine lead-crystal is irrelevant.

Not that it matters. I wipe my bleeding hand on my Levi's and laugh. It doesn't matter either way.

I kick the broken pieces into a corner of my third floor balcony and grab the bottle, which is still roughly half full. After three long swallows I toss it over with the shattered glass.

I blot my hand again on my jeans as I walk into the house to grab a six-pack to restock the outside fridge. I pry the cap off one with an elegant opener that Vicram gave me a while back—one of the first to be made from one of those insanely strong ceramics they started coming out with a few years ago. He had thought it hysterically funny that a technology which could spin bridges from thin silken strands was being used to make trinkets to open beer-bottles.

Back on the balcony, reclining in the bristling wet summer heat on a teak deck-chair, I thumb the system's remote so music from inside washes over me. I'm imagining my friends here, leaning against the rail to torment passers-by or maybe to seduce them into joining us: "Hey you—yeah, *you.* Wanna beer? No no, you gotta come up and talk to us while you drink it. No drink and run here, no sir!"—or just milling about in endless conversation.

There, squatting by the railing, should be Francois, messing with one of the candles. Frankie of the dry dangerous wit, fresh out of a prestigious fellowship in cardiothoracic surgery. In spite of the unpredictable schedule of transplant work, he always managed to find enough time to make the Fearsome Foursome complete at least a couple of times a month.

Dean would be sitting in one of the chairs, or sprawled out on the decking with his back to the three-story drop, doling out beers from the weathered little fridge he rested his feet on. He was a master of the absurd, helping all of us to avoid the grim pitfall of taking ourselves too seriously.

Later that night he'd joked about it, showing us the line of sutures marking the deep laceration the heavy needle had opened in the web of his thumb.

Finally, there was Vicram, laughing and harsh. He would be needling one of us about something, leaning up against the building's exterior wall with his legs stretched out along the wide rail on which he perched. Vic always pushed his assault right up to the line, but only rarely beyond. Paradoxically, he was strangely astute and gentle when any of us was upset about something important, like women or work.

FRANCOIS BIT THE BIG ONE BECAUSE OF SOME obscure strain of strep that one of his patients, who happened to be a smack addict, had growing on the valves of his heart.

I remember Frankie joining us that night down on South Side, observing in numb shock that the resident working under him that day had slipped spectacularly with a needle while they were closing a chest after a valve-replacement. He had managed to breach the wonderfully thin but resilient gloves that the surgeons were using back then, reinforced densely with strands of kevlar. Later that night he'd joked about it, showing us the line of sutures marking the deep laceration the cutting edge of the heavy needle had opened in the web of his thumb.

"I'm probably going to come down with that new strain of Hepatitis G—you know, the one they couldn't isolate well enough to cover in the vaccine," Frankie had said, looking at Dean. "And one of you goddamned internal medicine *fleas* is gonna end up filling me with gunk up to my yellow eyes so my liver doesn't fry my brain."

It's drizzling now, rain dropping on the roof of my carefully restored townhouse on Pittsburgh's north side

and falling into the alleyway. That was what, '04? We barely had a fucking clue, even then. *Viruses?* Ebola had been a name to conjure with, especially after the fiasco in Cairo, and bible-thumping assholes were agitating to set up quarantined ghettoes for victims of HIV. Prions were nasty to be sure, but turned out to be almost impossible to transmit unless you were eating infected meat. Still, we remained blindly panicked about the so-called scourge of immunology even then. We were idiots, all of us, even those of us who knew.

Frankie was just fine until he developed the vicious streptococcal heart disease the same time he came down with intractable pneumonia. Strep—the very same bug kids everywhere had been getting penicillin or amox for at first sign of a scratchy throat for the past forty years. Apparently the bug had been sitting semi-comatose, probably on one of the valves of his heart, for the three months since the needle-stick. It had waited patiently for his immune system to sag for a moment, and then it seeded his lungs.

After that, Frankie DuBois started dying aggressively of a grim combination of pneumonia and heart failure, which even ten years before could have been cured with a course of antibiotics. Hell, the cardiac part wouldn't have happened at all, or at least not that soon, but the bug had somehow found a way to make itself look even more like heart tissue to the body's own defenses. As a result, his own immune system chewed up his heart in the process of trying to beat the infection.

So at the tender age of thirty-four Frankie had been hacking up bloody gobbets of lung, rattling obscenely with every breath. We smuggled beer into his bay in the intensive care unit daily in an attempt at forced good cheer until the morning the unit team decided that he needed a tracheostomy tube so he could be placed on a ventilator.

The next afternoon Frankie had mimed for pen and paper and scribbled in tortured letters "KCl, 40 mEq IV push." He looked up at us in naked feverish pain, begging. Two and a half hours later he suffered cardiac arrest when a tragically mislabeled vial of potassium chloride was pushed into his circulation. We looked on dispassionately, three visiting attending physicians, as the residents and students on the unit team tried futilely to revive him.

WE SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY BACK HERE ON MY balcony, profoundly drunk. It turned into one of those startlingly mild late October evenings, and my candles finally remained unmolested. Dean had gone on a tirade about the *laissez-faire* street economy which made antibiotics available indiscriminately.

"They are taking away everything I have, dammit!" he said with the precise diction of the thoroughly impaired. "War on drugs? Jesus!" He stopped and turned such an ugly glare toward us that I had to remind myself forcibly that this was one of my best friends; that it wasn't meant for us. "If they're so hell-bent on keeping us from killing ourselves with drugs, then why the *fuck* don't they interdict the dangerous shit, like keflex and biaxin?" He lapsed into silence, staring morosely at his beer.

It was an old complaint. As far back as the early '80s it was known the unrestricted use of antibiotics in Asia, Africa, and Central America was selecting out some frighteningly vicious strains of common bugs like strep and TB. It was also happening in our own inner cities, but no one wanted to think that we might somehow share the blame. It had proven impossible, of course, to get people in positions of power to take any notice of it. When the nets reported that a small hospital in Sioux Falls had isolated a strain of vancomycin-resistant staph from a patient's wound back in '98, surgeons and infectious disease people all across the country collectively soiled themselves. The world as they knew it was over, their last line of defense against this ubiquitous organism was blown to hell in the time it took to read one preliminary journal abstract.

Even then, the Fed turned a blind eye, busy as they were with isolationist economic policy and internal power struggles. Besides, it was all taking place in shitty third-world countries and American inner cities. Their unspoken policy was along the lines of, "whatever *those* people get is their own fault anyway, right?"

We used to joke about it in school. Dean observed one evening a lot of it was *our* doing as well: "I figure North Philly is like my own private petri-dish. I'm doing an experiment—figure I'll create a nice resistant strain of, oh I dunno, gonorrhea or uh, pneumococcus. 'Cause I'm a humanitarian. Yeah, that's it, I adore the human race. Yeah. So here's some pink stuff for you, some biaxin for you, and for this lucky dog over here, unasyn. Big guns, kiddies. You can have the biggest, nastiest antibiotic I've got, even though you don't need it. Heh. Enjoy."

EIGHTEEN MONTHS AFTER WE BURIED FRANKIE, DEAN responded to the Deep South's desperate call for docs to manage the epidemic of Blackwater Shakes. He steadfastly refused to let Jan go along, finally resorting to dumping her cruelly so she wouldn't try to follow him. Dean had picked up a masters in Public Health during his residency and had studied quite a bit of epidemiology. He knew exactly what he was getting into, and damned sure didn't want to subject anyone he loved to it, even of their own free will.

Three days after he left, I took a leave of absence and followed him down, figuring I could finally put my mostly theoretical training in disaster medicine to some

practical use. The flight into New Orleans was unremarkable until I woke with a start, realizing how unusual it was to be able to stretch out across three seats to sleep on a morning flight into that city. As the cab from the airport approached the Claiborne Avenue exit, it edged over to the shoulder and stopped.

"This is as close to the city as I get, brother."

I paid him then, and climbed out shaking my head in disgust. Idiot. He probably would have been better off in the city, with the mosquito foggers going day and night.

I hiked three miles to the Garden District, where Dean was staying. Not one of the passing cars even slowed down to look at my outstretched thumb.

Blackwater Shakes, or Mekong Flu as some of the media was calling it, was a strain of *P. falciparum* malaria the microbiologists labeled Burma IV. So many names for such an old disease. This particular variety had been bred out of the jungles of North Thailand, Laos, and Burma, and was resistant to every anti-malarial drug known. Therapy was mainly supportive, in the hopes that victims would survive initial bouts to gradually bolster their own immunity over the course of several years. That the disease was transmitted by mosquito rather than by casual contact with other people was ignored by the greater fraction of the populace in their panic, as marked by the black X's I saw spray-painted on the entries of several houses.

"We might as well be back in 1907 for all the good we're doing," Dean said one evening as we sat in a French Quarter courtyard bar. The Quarter was strangely quiet, robbed of the tourist traffic that kept it alive. We had worked all afternoon and most of the evening in a vast tent that had been set up in Charity Hospital's parking lot to handle to the added volume of patients. "We're going to run out of packed red cells for anemic crises sometime tonight, and that military fluorocarbon shit isn't going to cut it for more than a couple of days."

All I could do was nod. I'd been at the same morning meeting as Dean, called so officials from the Red Cross, the CDC, and the city government could meet with some nervous-looking representatives from the Federal government. It seemed the Fed wanted to know what needed to happen so the situation could be brought under control in the next few weeks. Me, Dean, and the dude from the CDC looked at each other in astonishment. The CDC guy was working desperately to stifle a laugh

"Have you listened to a single word we've said?" Dean asked.

It was too much of a straight line to ignore. "No man, he's an *administrator*," I said. "You know better than that. They specialize in *talking*."

Dean ignored me while the poor bastard from the CDC tried to keep from falling out of his chair in hysterics. He hadn't had any sleep in days. "Let me try to make it simple," Dean continued. "This is going to take years, and that's just to control it locally. The foggers are going non-stop and we already have some of the best water control in the world, but the mosquitoes just don't drop like they used to. This place will never be safe for people who haven't been through it already." The Federal rep tried to interrupt him, but Dean plowed on relentlessly. "There is no medicine now in existence that will kill this parasite. *None*. Do you understand me now?"

SIX WEEKS LATER, I FIGURED THEY HAD AS MUCH OF a system in place as they ever would, and took off back north. Dean remained behind, proclaiming his sick joy in being back in New Orleans, crippled though it was.

"We might as well be in 1907," Dean said "We're going to run out of packed red cells sometime tonight, and that military fluorocarbon shit isn't going to cut it for more than a couple of days."

He had done okay actually, surviving his initial infection and several relapses. He lived to see all the Interstate highways leading out of Florida and Southeast Louisiana blockaded by National Guard reserves and then regular Army troops. The Coast Guard had set up off the Gulf Coast and around the Florida peninsula with air and sea support from the Navy. It was idiocy, of course: the species of mosquito that harbored the parasite couldn't survive outside the affected areas anyhow. The good people of the United States had taken notice, however, prodded by the horror show broadcast daily out of Miami and New Orleans. They demanded the government do something, and damned well do it immediately.

Gibbering politicians, in defiance of every recommendation from the CDC and other groups, responded to the mandate of the people by laying down the largest and most effective quarantine the world had ever seen.

Dean was killed in the New Orleans riots.

MY HAND HAS MORE OR LESS STOPPED BLEEDING, BUT it smarts like hell. The music changer stutters once, and strains of Dvorak's *New World* symphony pour out into the damp heat.

It doesn't really strike me at first, but suddenly I start laughing and find myself utterly incapable of stopping. Doubled over in hysterical giggles, I reach into the little fridge and grab another beer. I struggle for sips of air, finally managing to stop so I can take a hit from the bottle that leaves it less than half-full.

New World. Christ, that's sick.

I start laughing again.

WITH VICRAM IT WAS ALMOST ANTICLIMACTIC, LOST as he was in the local media hype that surrounded the whole affair. Mucormycosis had somehow found its way into the ventilation system of the hospital he was working in. It used to be one of those fungi that normally only infected people who were pretty badly immunosupressed, like AIDS patients and folks getting chemo for cancer or transplants. But like so many other opportunistic pathogens, it had inadvertently been bred for aggressive resistance to antibiotics for nearly half a century. Candidiasis was bad, but people can live with a recurrent yeast infection on their skin and, ah, other moist places, as long as its not injected into their bloodstream. Mucormycosis, on the other hand, was invasive as hell.

Aggressive as it was, however, investigators later came to the very public conclusion that few if any of the 372 patients and hospital employees who died would have been susceptible had they not been subjected to huge innoculums of airborne spores for weeks at a time. The fact that the same problem was cropping up in other places on a smaller scale didn't seem to sway their judgment in the slightest.

I went to see him in isolation at Pittsburgh General. Vic was dark to begin with, but now he was sunburned from the UV lights they had pouring down on him day and night—PGH's administration was taking no chances on a repeat of the disaster that had taken out their competition across town.

Vicram looked up from a tissue that held a macabre mess of clotted blood and dark fungal hyphae. "What's the matter, triage-boy, you scared of hanging with sick folks?" he asked, laughing. I guess I'd gone pale when I saw what came out of his head. "The Foursome is looking pretty fucking anemic these days, eh?" He turned serious. "This shit's gonna cross out of my sinuses and into my brain in two days max. Listen bro, I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but how about you don't come back upstairs to visit me any more after this, all right?"

As it turned out, he became septicemic that night and died the next day while I was working a shift in the e/r.

THE RAIN IS OVER. I LEAN BACK IN MY CHAIR AND look down at the remote.

Program finished, it says. *Select another or # for random play.*

I toss it over my shoulder so it lands on the carpet inside. I guess it hits hard enough to push a key, because a blues piece with a funky Hammond organ starts playing from the depths of my library.

The pain from my hand has calmed down enough that I notice the angry welt on my forearm once again. The TB test has been sort of a ritual for me: every six months on the solstice I get a nurse or a medical student to hit me with the subcutaneous PPD injection. Up 'til now, it has always been negative.

It itches, but I resist the urge to scratch. I cough, and wonder if it's the cigarettes or the first manifestation of the infection sure to blossom in my lungs.

Tomorrow, of course, I'll start the standard six-drug regimen. Ain't gonna help much, though. Multi-drug resistant TB, probably brought here on a bus from Manhattan, made it to Pittsburgh about a year ago. It's been at least three months since any of the hospitals in town have treated a case that was even slightly responsive.

I drop the bottle to the balcony floor. It rolls on its side, beer slowly spilling away.

Aw hell. What an incredibly stupid fucking way to die.

MARCUS EUBANKS

Is an intern at a Big Hospital in Pittsburgh. When he's not working or sleeping, he likes to hang out with friends and drink good beer. Sometimes the group of them lures random passers-by off the street to join the conversation...

Yeah? Well, *my* dad can make a spaceship with a protractor and some batteries!