

## The Last Man's First Year on Earth

by David W. Goldman

One of the dancers jumps onto a table beside the stage, catapulting an unfinished drink high over the small, crowded dance floor. Bright purple wavelets splash from the tumbling glass onto the dancers—who, oblivious, continue whirling to the insistent throb that fills the long, dimly lit room.

From where he stands by the bar at the room's other end, Molloy can't make out the gender of the dancer on the table. As he watches, the dancer kicks forward—and a trayful of pills skitter out across the tiled floor. Molloy imagines little crunching noises as the pills rendezvous with dancers' feet. But all he can actually hear are the band's primitively pounding chords and screeching ululations.

One reason Molloy can't better discern the dancer is that—Molloy flips a mental coin for the pronoun—her table is right in the middle of a cascade of multihued gems pouring down from the ceiling, a meter-thick coruscant curtain that surrounds the small stage and engulfs the nearest tables. Molloy assumes this light show is controlled by one of the two band members who stand immersed from head to groin in interface gel; the mushroom-shaped mound of gel fills half the stage.

The third musician blows a soprano sax.

Or maybe there's no light show at all. Ten minutes ago the bartender gave Molloy an amp of Synesth, and now he's having trouble keeping his senses apart. Three stools down, a girl orders a gin and tonic; to Molloy her voice smells like frying onions. When the bartender sets the drink before her, the click of the glass against the hard plastic counter washes over Molloy as a chilly pulse of red.

The boy on Molloy's other side is tapping both hands against the bar in time to the music. But he's a fraction of a second off. The delay slowly increases, and Molloy realizes that the boy must be on a time-sense modifier. Molloy has heard of these drugs, but this is his first chance to see one in action. Fascinated, he watches as the tapping of the boy's left hand begins to fall further and further behind the right. Apparently this is one of those drugs that enter directly through the olfactory nerves, rather than through the bloodstream—the boy must have sniffed more of it up to one side of his brain than the other.

The boy looks about twelve years old.

The girl with the gin and tonic could be ten.

On another night their ages might have bothered Molloy. But tonight he's riding a big dose of Serene. Lately, in fact, he's been riding a *lot* of big doses of Serene. He wonders just how much of the drug he's been using, and whether that might be bad for him.

He doesn't really worry about it, though.

\* \* \*

Molloy woke from a dream of Max. They were cuddling naked in their bunk, and she was about to tell him something very important.

He reached for the receding dream, trying to pull himself back inside. Then he gave up and just lay there, eyes still closed,

savoring the firm mattress and the crisp, newly laundered sheets. The edge of a summer breeze blew across his face.

He frowned, opened his eyes.

He was not aboard the ship. He was curled on his side in a comfortable bed, in the middle of a small room with cheerful yellow walls. An open window showed blue sky and trees, and admitted the caw of a distant crow.

He was naked, beneath a sheet but no other covers. He rolled onto his back and straightened his legs. The bed was too short for him.

A flimsy-looking wooden door faced the foot of his bed. It opened now and two children entered, a girl and a boy. The boy wore tan shorts and a dull red smock with several pockets. The girl was in a knee-length blue gingham dress. From the sound of their footsteps, both were barefoot.

He guessed their ages at nine or ten.

The girl smiled at him. "Woke right on time, I see. Good for you!"

The boy pulled a couple of palm-sized cards from a pocket. He glanced at one of them, then handed it to the girl. She studied the card's surface, nodding.

"You're looking just fine," she said, continuing to examine the card, "just fine." She passed the card back to the boy and smiled again at Molloy. "Before we start, have you any questions for us?"

Molloy was taken aback by her poise and manner of speech. He opened his mouth to respond, but his throat was very dry. The girl pointed to a small table beside the bed, where a glass of water rested. With a little effort Molloy pushed himself up onto his elbows, and then to sitting. He reached for the glass, took a few sips. He returned the glass to the table and turned again to the girl and boy.

And, to his mild surprise, realized that he had no immediate questions. He shrugged, sheepishly.

The girl nodded, and turned to the boy. He touched the edge of the card with his fingertip, then looked at Molloy. "Can you tell us your name?"

Bemused by these children playing at being adults, but content to cooperate, Molloy answered. "Kerry Molloy."

The boy touched his card again. He glanced at it, then asked, "Place of birth?"

"Plymouth, Massachusetts."

"Date of birth?"

"February 16, 2072."

"Profession?"

"Zoologist. Or xenobiologist, on a good day."

The boy nodded. He offered the card to the girl, but she ignored it. She beamed at Molloy. "Very good, Kerry. Very good indeed." He might have been her prize student. "Now tell us, what is the last thing you remember, before waking here?"

Max, he thought. No, that was the dream.

He answered slowly. "The *da Gama*. We were a month out from Shastri's Star, heading home. Everyone was already coldsleeping except me and Max—Dr. Seurat. I was in my bunker, waiting for her to activate it. She leaned over toward me, and..." He frowned, closed his eyes in concentration. "She leaned over..." After a few seconds he looked up at them, vaguely troubled.

"Retrograde amnesia," said the boy. "Your memories of the last few minutes before hibernation never reached long-term storage. Well-reported in the literature. Nothing to worry about."

Molloy nodded. He didn't feel worried. He did wonder, though, whether perceiving his doctors as children meant that he'd suffered some kind of stroke.

The girl was still smiling. "You've come through very nicely, Kerry. Now get some sleep. We'll stop by again tomorrow."

But as the boy pulled the door open, Molloy said, "Wait."

They turned back. The girl's eyebrows were raised in surprise.

Molloy wished he hadn't said anything. His question really didn't seem all that important.

"Yes?" asked the girl.

"Well," said Molloy. "I was just wondering. About...Dr. Seurat. Is she here, too?"

The girl's eyes went wide for an instant, and then her smile faded. "Kerry," she said, "do you remember what happened to Dr. Vogler, when you arrived at Shastri's?"

He frowned at the memory. "His bunker—it had failed during the trip out. He was dead."

She nodded. She spoke carefully, her eyes locked onto his. "Well, I'm afraid that on the trip back, all of the bunkers—except yours—failed."

"But—no, not Max!" For an instant he felt a tearing pain in his abdomen, as if something had been ripped out of him. But then the pain eased. "Max...is dead? And everyone else, too?"

The girl nodded again. She waited. After a moment she looked at the boy, and the two of them quietly left the room.

Molloy settled back into the bed. He turned again to face the window.

Poor Max, he thought.

In the distance, a crow cawed.

Molloy fell asleep.

As the girl had promised, they came again the next morning. The boy helped Molloy sit up and don a hospital gown as the girl placed a breakfast tray onto the bedside table: two slices of toast, a glass of red, pulpy juice, a small bowl of some kind of pudding.

At the girl's suggestion, he perched on the edge of the bed and began to eat.

“Today we’ll start filling you in,” she said. This morning she wore pink shorts and a matching blouse with lace around the collar. The boy’s tan shorts and reddish smock were unchanged. “I’m sure you have a hundred questions—though I imagine that none of them seems very important just now. Am I right?”

He considered for a moment, then shrugged. He reached for the juice.

“That’s the first thing we need to explain. You’re on a medication to help you through the shock of losing your friends, and the stress of adapting to a new world. The medication doesn’t interfere with your ability to process information. But it blocks some of the normal emotional response—at the dose you’re currently on, nearly *all* of the emotional response. So your intellect is unimpaired, but you’ll find that nothing really seems to matter.”

He nodded. “Sounds about right.”

“Unfortunately, that also means that you don’t have much initiative right now. So we need to anticipate your questions. Jonathan—” she indicated the boy, who was leaning against the wall near the door—“and I have had to educate ourselves not only about your mission, but also all about late 21st-century culture and society. You’ve been quite the project for us!”

He raised his pudding-laden spoon toward her in salute.

She paused, then returned to what was apparently her prepared speech. “We’ll keep you at your present dose of Serene for a few weeks, then gradually wean you off. Later you’ll still work through all the usual stages of grief and adjustment—but only after your intellectual acceptance is complete. You won’t suffer any post-traumatic stress.”

She seemed to be waiting for a response. “Okay,” he said.

She looked toward the boy. “Jonathan?”

He stepped forward from the wall and faced Molloy. “The *Vasco*

*da Gama* returned to Earth orbit precisely on schedule, in 2234. But the automated reactivation sequence failed. For reasons that you'll learn soon, nobody was able to get up to retrieve the crew until quite some time later. When we finally arrived, we discovered that only two of the coldsleep bunkers were even barely functioning—yours and Shawn Foster's."

Molloy was hit with a memory of Shawn flying him down to Shastri IV, the little pilot grinning evilly as their shuttle performed a sudden, unannounced barrel-roll. A typical Shawn moment! But then the image lost its immediacy—it could have been a vid he'd watched once, years ago.

The boy continued. "Ms. Foster's bunker was at the edge of failure, so we tried to revive her first. We were not successful. But what we learned in the attempt helped us with you."

The girl took over. "Jonathan mentioned that you were in orbit awhile before we brought you down. It was longer than you might assume. That's partly why the bunkers failed." She paused. "Today is July 15, 2309. More than two hundred years since you left Earth."

"Wow," said Molloy.

"Yes," the girl nodded. "Wow."

The boy reached into a pocket and pulled out a handful of his little cards. He fanned them and removed one. He returned the rest to his pocket, then stepped to the bed and handed the chosen card to Molloy.

It was plastic, six or seven centimeters across and two-thirds as tall. Surprisingly heavy. Molloy looked at the face of the card.

The room disappeared. Molloy was immersed in a featureless expanse of deep blue. White letters appeared before him: *Press to begin*. A short arrow extended rightward from the words.

He blinked and lowered the card. The letters and their

background immediately vanished.

He looked again at the card. The blue field returned, with its short instruction. He turned the card away and the room came back.

“Direct laser painting onto your retinas,” said the boy. “It’s activated by your attention, shuts off when you look away. You control it via pressure sensors around the rim. Understand?”

Molloy nodded.

The girl said, “We’ve programmed it with pretty much everything that’s happened since you left. It’s all cross-linked; you can just browse wherever you like. Though I’d suggest you start with the chronologic overview.”

Molloy looked again into the card’s blueness. He slid his thumb up along the card’s edge; bright against the blue background, a yellow dot moved simultaneously upward toward the end of the arrow. He pressed, and the previous words were replaced by a short list of choices: *Chronology / Events / Science & Technology / Culture*. He lowered the card. “Okay,” he said.

The girl smiled at him. “You study today. We’ll talk again tomorrow.”

They left.

Molloy looked at the card and considered his choices.

When they returned the next morning, the boy lifted the card from Molloy’s bedside table. He glanced at it, then turned to the girl and gave a little shake of his head.

She sighed. “You didn’t read *anything?*” she asked Molloy.

“I was going to get to it later.” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

Another sigh. “Not your fault.” She turned to the boy. “Better lower his dose. You seem to have been right about the metabolic differences.”

As he ate his breakfast, the girl asked, “Kerry, how old do you

think I am?"

Molloy finished chewing his toast. "Ten, maybe?"

"And Jonathan?"

He glanced at the boy. "About the same, I guess. Or maybe a year more."

She nodded. "Actually, I'm a bit older than Jonathan. He's not quite seventy."

Molloy assumed he had misheard her.

"My birthday is next week," the girl continued. "I'll be a hundred and twenty-four."

Molloy put down his toast. He looked from one child to the other. "Yeah," he said. "Right."

She shrugged, pointed to his card. "You can read all about it," she said. "The breakthrough came just a few years after your ship left Earth; several lines of longevity research all suddenly converged. Within a decade it was firmly established that with the right treatments and maintenance, humans can live for a *very* long time." She paused. "Though there is one catch."

"Let me guess." Molloy picked up his toast. "It only works on children?"

Her eyebrows lifted. "Yes. Once the hormonal changes of puberty kick in, a number of irreversible processes start—in joints and arteries, of course, but throughout the nervous system as well. An adult's lifespan can be extended to a hundred twenty, maybe a hundred and thirty years, but eventually cancer or senility will beat all of our treatments. A prepubescent body and brain, though, we think can be kept not only alive, but completely vigorous, for at least six hundred years."

"Six hundred years," repeated Molloy. "Wow."

"People don't usually say 'wow' anymore," she told him.

"Ah. So what do people say?"

“Biff.”

“Biff. Six hundred years, huh? Very biff.”

She picked up the card, placed it onto his tray beside the juice.

“You’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

Late that afternoon he felt a twinge of curiosity. He picked up the card.

The card’s lasers continued to work even after his window, and the room, grew dark. They were still working when the window began to brighten again in the morning.

He started by looking up the biochemistry and physiology of the longevity treatments. Which quickly led to a digression into modern pharmacology. The medicine floating through his blood, he learned, was not simply a biologically active molecule, but rather a tightly coordinated flotilla of micro-machines. There were hundreds of other such “drugs”—most of them, to his surprise, targeted at psychological rather than physical processes. The drugs even had standard signaling protocols for communicating with each other: adverse medication interactions were a thing of the past.

A cross-reference led him from pharmacology to the *Culture* section. There, another returned him to *Science & Technology*. He spent a confused hour flipping back and forth until he finally realized that no one distinguished anymore between medicinal and recreational drugs.

A lot of the information in *Culture* baffled him. Eventually he turned back to *Chronology* and *Events* to try to make sense of his new world.

By the early 23rd century, he learned, the longevity treatments had remade the industrialized world. The youngest third of the populace were biologically children. Pregnancy was almost unknown; *in vitro* gestation had become a reliable, though decreasingly employed, substitute.

Elsewhere, though, poverty or religious belief kept all but the privileged few from offering their children the new therapies. The children of those few went on to maintain their privilege as had their parents and grandparents before them: as toll-taking shepherds to the natural resources stampeding from their nations.

It was not the longevity treatments that had divided the world into haves and have-nots. But for the billions of miners and pieceworkers watching their undernourished babies age and die while the children of affluent countries prospered, the longevity treatments were the final affront.

The war took surprisingly long to really get rolling.

Then a quarter of humanity died within two months.

After that, things got messy. Widespread communication and power failures. Plagues—only a few of them laboratory-raised. Famine. Desperate tides of refugees. Hand-to-hand battles in cities everywhere.

Finally, after a dozen years of horror, the children ended it. The highly communicable virus they released caused incapacitating fever and pain for two to three hours; then coma. Then death.

But only, of course, for adults.

By the time the virus had run its course, Earth's surviving population was just a fifth of its former number. It took the survivors decades to clean everything up.

Molloy, that night, never did get back to the *Culture* section.

When his door opened in the morning, the boy and girl looked different to him. Not like children. Elves, maybe. Dangerous elves.

The girl's smile faded as she saw Molloy's expression. She glanced at the card he still held, then back to his face. She waited.

"The thing I'm wondering," he said to her, "is exactly how long you've been a doctor."

"A doctor?" She shook her head. "Biochemist."

He shrugged. "How long?"

"Since my twenties."

He nodded. He held up the card, keeping his eyes on her. "You didn't happen to work on designing any viruses, did you? Back when you were getting started?"

Her return gaze did not waver. "Of course I did. Why do you think I'm here?" She glanced down at her dress, brushed away a stray thread, looked up again. "There aren't many of us with working experience of adult physiology."

His eyes were tired, and he let them close for a few seconds. An image of Max came to him; she was pointing to a chart projected in the air beside her. It took him a moment to recall the scene: she'd been lecturing the crew about a reptile Molloy had discovered. About its physiology.

The girl, perhaps mistaking the meaning of his barely audible sigh, said, "Don't worry. The virus hasn't been detected anywhere on Earth for twenty-five years. And we've immunized you, besides, just to be totally safe."

Eyes still closed, he nodded, not feeling very safe at all.

Though that didn't really bother him.

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The saxophone is quieter now, crying out short seductive pleas. Unmoved, the room-filling organ-like chords continue their relentless pounding, their insistent vibrations more felt than heard. Around the stage spinning gems, all lucent diamonds now, continue to fall. The dancer on the table begins a slow, pulsatile striptease.

The bar before Molloy glows and throbs in time to the music, while its surface—a non-repeating tiling of black and blood-red rhomboids—emits undulant apricot pennants that flap away in all directions. He glances at the bartender, whose head glows and

throbs, too. Molloy is pretty sure it's all just the Synesth. Idly, he picks up a stainless steel coaster from the bar, flips it between his fingers. The cool, smooth surface feels like skunk-scent.

The boy beside Molloy has slowed way, way down. The bartender catches the eye of one of the bouncers and nods his head toward the boy. The bouncer is more heavily muscled than Molloy. She must be mainlining testosterone, Molloy thinks; in the long run that's supposed to cut decades off your life. Perfectly legal, though, like everything else in this world. We're all grown-ups here.

The bouncer hauls the boy from his stool, carefully carries him through the crowd, deposits him gently at a table near the wall. The boy is not going to be ordering anything for a while.

The vacated stool is the only open spot at the bar. But for a long moment no one emerges from the crowd to claim it. Molloy doesn't need to turn; he's watched this show too many times before: A roving eye detecting the vacancy. The small smile of discovery, the confident step forward. A glance to either side—noticing Molloy standing there. Confused surprise. The next step hesitant. Recognition, then. A frown. A pause. Finally another step, off to one side this time. Away from the bar.

But now a thin, twitchy girl climbs onto the stool. She's dressed entirely in silver, from her long-sleeved pullover blouse to her tight pants and elegant boots. Though it's not really much of a silver—Molloy wonders if clothing catalogs this month are featuring “pewter.”

The girl orders. As she waits she glances at Molloy, flashes him a quick, nervous smile. The bartender returns with her pills, and she gives them her full attention.

Her hair is short, jet-black, with bangs falling almost to her heavily made-up eyes, shaded to appear Asian. The exotic effect is partly spoiled by the small, round ears poking out through her

elegant coiffure. She looks remarkably like an anorexic version of a girl from Molloy's fourth-grade class, Leslie Wong.

Molloy peers again toward the other end of the room. The table dancer is completely nude now—arms, stretched high overhead, beating sinuously against the music.

Molloy still can't tell whether it's a boy or a girl.

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He had been promised all the usual stages of grief.

After a week off the *Serene*, though, he felt cheated. They all were gone: twenty-eight friends. Colleagues. Fellow adventurers. The people with whom he'd spent his last ten waking years.

Max.

He owed them lakes of tears, months of black despair. But the best he could summon was a deep, resigned sadness. He felt as if years had passed since he'd learned of their deaths; as if he, like the disturbingly altered world around him, had long ago moved on.

Not that his week had passed with no tears at all. But most of those, he had to admit, were really for his own loneliness.

A small team had been assembled to review and organize the findings from the *da Gama*. They welcomed Molloy eagerly, barely completing their introductions before starting to pump him with questions about the specimens his ship had brought back.

One of the boys, a lanky redhead named Thomas, shyly approached Molloy on his second day in the warehouse-like building that served as their primary lab.

"Got a minimus?" asked Thomas.

Molloy looked up from the scaly five-legged body he was thawing. "Huh?"

Thomas winced. "Minute," he corrected himself, "Got a *minute*." He grinned sheepishly. "Would you believe I've been practicing that

all week?”

Molloy glanced down at the specimen box, flipped off its heater. “So,” he asked the boy, “we don’t say ‘Got a minute?’”

“Nope. ‘Forgive this intrusion?’ is good. Or ‘Encroachable?’ Though that’s more for someone you know well.”

“Yes,” said Molloy.

It was Thomas’s turn for confusion.

“Yes,” Molloy repeated. “I do have a minute. You may encroach at will.”

Thomas grinned again. He leaned against the workbench. “I’m not really much of a biologist, to be honest. Or geologist, or astrophysicist. But I had to get on this project. I’ve been waiting all my life for the *da Gama* to be revived.”

Molloy considered this pronouncement. Thomas looked no older than any of the other children. His unkempt red hair fell to his neck in back and on one side, was trimmed short in front and over his other ear; his round cheeks were heavily freckled on either side of his button nose. Molloy still couldn’t reconcile his co-workers’ juvenile appearance with their obvious knowledge and experience; during conversations he had to close his eyes to force himself to listen seriously to their comments.

He wondered for just how many years—decades?—Thomas had been waiting.

The boy was staring up at him, expectantly. So Molloy asked, “Why? What’s the *da Gama* to you?”

Thomas shook his head, grinning with secret knowledge. “Not the ship. You. You’re my uncle.”

Molloy stared.

“Grand-uncle, actually. Your sister Evelyn was my grandmother.”

“Biff,” said Molloy.

That evening he joined Thomas for dinner. They stayed up all

night exchanging stories, first about Evelyn and later about their own lives.

As dawn lit the comfortable, if somewhat haphazard, furnishings of Thomas's apartment, Molloy yawned widely. "Think I'll skip the lab this morning," he said.

"One minimus," mumbled Thomas. He rose unsteadily from a sprawl of mismatched floor cushions, stepped into the kitchen. After a few seconds he returned and handed one of two very large, bright-green pills down to Molloy.

Molloy eyed it dubiously. "I'm supposed to swallow this thing?"

Thomas laughed. "*That* would be interesting! No—here, I'll show you."

Holding it a few centimeters below his nose, Thomas gave one end of his own pill a sharp twist. Molloy could just make out a slight mist at the other end as Thomas vigorously sniffed.

Thomas grinned, his face flushed. "Ah!" He pointed to the pill in Molloy's hand. "Go ahead."

Molloy studied the green cylinder. One end tapered to a blunt tip, the other was a textured barrel. He held the pill as Thomas had done. With his thumb and forefinger he spun the barrel. Droplets of moisture tickled his nostrils.

"Quick! Breathe it in!"

Molloy sniffed hard. His nose burned. No, he decided: it was actually more of a sharp tingle. Kind of nice, in fact.

Then his face, his hands, his legs, his whole body, *throbbed*. His vision went red with the pulse. "Whoa!" he shouted. There was another powerful surge, followed by a short train of after-shocks.

Molloy's heart raced as if he had been doing calisthenics. The room around him seemed suddenly vibrant, each piece of furniture outlined sharply in the now-vivid daylight. He sprang to his feet, too full of restless energy to remain supine.

“Still want to skip the lab?” asked Thomas.

Molloy shook his head. Slightly out of breath, he held the green pill before his eyes in dumb amazement.

Over the following weeks, Thomas served as Molloy's intermittent tour guide—to the city, to popular culture, and to basic pharmacology.

Gradually Molloy came to know some of his other co-workers. There was Lydia the soil scientist, absent one week to attend an Osaka installation of her shaped-light sculptures. And Lawrence, a geneticist, who after two part-time decades had recently completed his English translation of the thirteenth-century Icelandic *Saemundar Edda*—an accomplishment so far not as well received as his previous Sanskrit rendering of *Tom Sawyer*. Working at the other end of the lab, gregarious Roberto was an expert in supra-ecological cladistics—Molloy still wasn't clear about that—who seemed to have an opinion on every topic and, as far as Molloy could determine, no hobbies whatsoever.

Lately, though, the person with whom Molloy worked most was a fellow zoologist named Mei-Ling. She was shorter than most of the children—the top of her head barely reached Molloy's chest—and plumper. But her energy seemed inexhaustible; she always spoke loud and fast, her words accompanied by spirited gestures of her hands and head. At first Molloy had assumed she must be a devotee of the big green pills.

But Thomas told him that you couldn't use those for more than a couple of days in a row. “After you've popped four or five amps,” he explained regretfully, “your metabolism is so skarked that you spend half your time eating. And after a few more, the hallucinations start to become a real problem.”

Later, when Molloy told Mei-Ling of his original assumption, she guffawed. “Me? Riding an amp of Boost?” She shook her head,

flinging her hands palm-out before her. “Believe me, that’s a conflag you do *not* want happening closeby!”

Mei-Ling was thirty-eight—just a year younger than Molloy, biologically. Which made her slightly less alien than the rest of their colleagues. On the other hand, it also meant that she was the product solely of a culture more than two hundred years distant from his own. Half the time he couldn’t understand her at all.

“What about dachsugs?” she asked one afternoon.

“Dachshunds,” he corrected.

She was always asking him about dogs. A badly tailored bacterium, released early in the war, had long ago exterminated all of Earth’s dogs and wolves.

“They were about this long,” he told her, holding out his hands. “But only this tall. Short little legs. Usually hyper.”

“Good pets? Health probs?”

“Couldn’t say. I never knew anybody who owned one.”

She considered, then shook her head. “Anything that low-slung would have skarky spinal issues. You’d have to borg it with titanium vertebrae.”

That morning it had been terriers. Yesterday beagles. Her dream, she had confided to Molloy, was to engineer herself a small, apartment-suitable, dog. Not an entire breed—just the one animal, for her apartment. She didn’t seem to feel that the biotechnology involved would be especially challenging; what held her back was trying to decide what sort of dog to make.

This afternoon he and Mei-Ling were reviewing the phylogenetic chart that the *da Gama* team had devised for the species of Shastri IV. Stabbing one of her stubby fingers toward the display, she insisted that an entire branch of rodent-like amphibians be moved to a different spot.

“A seven year-old coming sideways off a week of Frazee would see

what I'm talking about!" she exclaimed. "What about this dentition?"

"Dentition." Molloy snorted. "If you would just *look* at the genes coding this third hip joint, like I've been saying for the past hour..."

It was a long afternoon.

Finally, Molloy reached out and deactivated the display. He rubbed his eyes. "Pick it up from here tomorrow?"

She nodded as she climbed down from her stool. She stretched backwards, hands pressed against the small of her back.

He said, "I'm starving."

She hesitated for an uncharacteristic instant before straightening and then looking up at him, an odd little smile tentatively visiting her circular face. "I know a place," she said.

She took him to a small, noisy establishment several blocks from the lab. He had been to similar places with Thomas: crowded combinations of dance club, restaurant, neighborhood bar and pharmacy. This one was scruffier than the others, though, with rusty table legs and recorded music. The patrons were scruffier, too; as he pushed aside a child-sized chair and lowered himself to the floor beside the short table, Molloy felt like he was being sized up by a prepubescent biker gang. There weren't any lingering stares, though, which was a marked improvement over most of the public Molloy encountered.

The food was very good. So was the beer.

Molloy set his rumpled napkin onto his empty plate. He frowned. "Nobody has ever refused the treatments? Or gotten lost while hiking through the wilderness, at just the wrong time? Everything always goes perfectly?"

In the center of their table sat a large bowl of assorted pills. Mei-Ling absently stirred them with her hand. "Give us some credit. We've been doing this for a couple hundred years now."

Molloy thought she was about to say something else, but she stopped herself.

“What?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Just rumors. There are always rumors.”

His eyes narrowed. “Go on.”

“I don’t believe them for a femto.” She picked up a dull orange tablet, studied it. “You shouldn’t either.”

Molloy drummed his fingers on the table, staring at her.

She sighed. “Like you said. A child refuses the treatments. Or some skarky crèche-keeper locks one of his brats in a closet, hides her existence from the system. Or, yes, some kid gets lost on a field trip, and by the time he’s rescued his voice has started to change.”

Molloy leaned eagerly forward. “So I’m *not* the only adult on the planet?”

Mei-Ling shook her head. “Rumors. Distant sightings. Synth-mesh conspiracy scenarios.” She dropped the orange tab back into the bowl, fished out a light red amp with tiny green spots. “Synch, Kerry. You’re it. The only one.”

He slumped back into his chair.

“You want hope? Here.” And she placed the spotted red amp onto his plate, beside his napkin.

He picked up the pill. It wasn’t one Thomas had yet introduced him to.

He asked, “What is it?”

She just raised her eyebrows, daring him.

Okay, fine, he thought. He held the amp beneath his nose and spun the barreled end. He sniffed and waited.

Nothing happened. He felt no different. He looked around the room—it was still the same dive as before.

If she could be wrong about the amp, he suddenly realized, then maybe she was wrong about those “rumors,” too. He was going to

have to start paying attention, ask a few quiet questions. There was probably an entire underground network of adults!

"It's called Rose," she said. "How do you feel?"

"No different."

She nodded. "So, tell me—how do you think our work is coming?"

He grinned. "I think that tomorrow morning I'm going to convince you to put those rodents right back where they belong. Dentition or no dentition."

"And the rest of the chart?"

"Oh, we should be able to get it all finished by lunchtime, don't you think? In fact, look at the overall project timeline. Eighteen months! That's ridiculous! We'll be done thawing and scanning all the specimens by the end of the week."

"All seven thousand?"

That did seem a bit optimistic, he had to admit. So far they had been processing only two or three specimens a day. Still, he thought, the team could be a *lot* more efficient.

She reached across the table and patted his hand. "Later on you'll figure out why it's called Rose."

But he was distracted by the bowl of pills. He plunged his hand in, pulled out a sky-blue tab. He had a good feeling about this one. He swallowed it with a little beer, not bothering to ask Mei-Ling for an introduction.

He counted, as Thomas had taught him. Five seconds for the coating to dissolve in his stomach. Fifteen more for the pill's contents to enter his bloodstream, another fifteen to achieve an appropriate concentration in his brain...

Mei-Ling stood up. No, he realized, she was still seated; she had simply grown a meter taller. He blinked, and her suddenly elongated head rippled colorfully, like an oily puddle crossed by breeze-blown waves.

She leaned forward, an expression of concern stretched unevenly across her face. “You may not be ready for that one,” she said, her voice dopplering upward as it approached him. “Maybe I can at least balance it out for you...”

The chair beside him had wrapped itself around his arms, so he couldn't help her as she reached toward his face with a yellow-striped amp. She twisted it beneath his nose.

He sniffed in the mist, his nose growing longer and wider to help. At least, he thought, he could still breathe for himself. He giggled.

“What?” she asked.

He giggled again, then gasped back a laugh. “I just hate to have other people doing my—” he struggled to continue—“*breathing!*” He burst into loud laughter. A few patrons glanced his way, then nodded knowingly and turned back to their own tables.

Mei-Ling smiled indulgently. Then she reached into the bowl for another of the yellow-striped amps, popped it for herself.

The empty amp sat in her chubby fingers, Molloy thought, like a spent fuel cell. A new laugh began deep in his belly and burst out uncontrollably through a toothless mouth that had opened above his navel. He couldn't catch his breath to explain to her; he just pointed at the empty amp.

She glanced curiously at the pill, then giggled once, and again. Then she looked at him and broke into cackles. Which sent him into a new paroxysm.

She waved the amp back and forth. “It's simply—” She worked to stifle her convulsions, failed. Then succeeded just long enough to blurt, “—simply so...*vacant!*”

They both fell back in their chairs, shaking with laughter. He—  
—he was standing beside her, by the door to the street. His arm was draped over her shoulders, hers lifted to his waist, holding each other up against their continuing hysteria.

“What just happened?” he asked, looking from side to side.

She seemed to find his question tremendously amusing. “You don’t remember?”

“We were sitting at the table...”

She grinned. “Congratulations! You’ve achieved stutter!”

“What’s—”

—they were staggering down the street. He recognized a grocery store, though not the bejeweled elephant parked in front. They were heading toward his apartment.

It took him a second to remember who he was with.

“You were telling me about stutter,” he said. His voice’s bafflement made him chuckle.

She laughed, long and loud. “It’s a side-effect of the drugs’ anti-interaction signaling. Sometimes a combination of drugs, if their concentrations are all just right, fall into a cyclic feedback loop. Your consciousness—”

—he was opening his apartment door. Someone helped him in. They sat beside each other on his small couch. She—

—they leaned against each other, giggling.

“I have to admit to a trace, I guess, of lickophilia,” someone said. It was a woman, or maybe an elf. Her face flowed confusingly, but he thought he should recognize her.

Whoever she was, he laughed at her term. He leaned over and gave her smooth forehead a lick.

His action seemed to startle her. Then she burst into a long train of high-pitched guffaws. He joined her, and then she—

—he was lying on the floor, watching a shimmering bronze octagon pulse across the ceiling. The carpet prickled against his lower back as someone began pulling off his pants. He closed his eyes—

—Max was straddling his hips, rocking against him.

“Oh...oh!” he moaned, his quick breaths in time with her movements.

He reached out and grabbed her thighs. They felt—

—he opened his eyes. She was completely naked, her face contorted with pleasure as she moved over him. But it wasn't Max. It was Leslie Wong, from fourth grade, her body undeveloped and pudgy.

“Leslie!” he exclaimed.

She panted. “Wait.” Her little tummy jiggled as she rubbed herself back and forth against his erection.

He took a deep gasping breath to try to clear his mind. This wasn't right.

“No, we shouldn't...”

She kept moving, faster now, oblivious.

He shook his head. Pushing his hand against her flat chest, he rolled out from under her, sat up.

She grabbed his shoulders, tried to—

—he was sitting on the floor across from her. They stared at each other.

Neither of them spoke.

She sighed. Her eyes—

—he was standing, fastening his pants. Mei-Ling sat on the couch, pulling on her shoes. Staring at the floor.

“It's okay,” he said. “We were both...”

She nodded without looking his way. “Still, I shouldn't have...”

“Forget it.”

Her head tilted up to him. “You won't—”

—they were standing by his door. She asked, “Promise?”

He frowned. “This stutter—how long will it last?”

She smiled gently, stretched up a hand to give his cheek a sympathetic pat. “Go to bed. You'll be fine in the morning.”

He opened the door for her.

She didn't move. "Promise that you won't tell anyone."

He nodded. "Our secret. If *I* even remember by tomorrow."

She seemed to relax. She gave his hand a quick squeeze, and then, without looking him in the eye, turned and left.

He closed the door behind her.

Its face blurry and faint, the door leered at him. Then it slowly winked, man-to-man.

"Shut up," he said.

He turned—

\* \* \*

Molloy orders a Scotch. When it arrives he holds it to the light, gives it a sniff. The Synesth must be wearing off—his drink looks and smells like a Scotch is supposed to look and smell, and in that order. He takes a sip. Apart from a barely audible, gong-like peal, it tastes like a Scotch, too.

He looks down the room to the stage. The curtain of falling gems is gone. But he still doesn't know how much of that was Synesth—the band has finished its set. Two of the musicians are busy vacuuming the interface gel back into its tank; the third runs around the stage with a broom, chasing loose blobs as they calve off the central mound.

Most of the dancers have dispersed to nearby tables. A few still stand, in swaying embraces of two or three or four; others have simply collapsed onto the floor. The table dancer crouches curled on her table, rocking fetally to some internal, slightly syncopated, beat.

"What are you drinking?"

He turns to the pewter girl. Her head flicks nervously away from his gaze, then back. Dark bangs swing above dark eyebrows.

“Scotch.”

Her head shakes uncomprehendingly.

“Not many bars stock it. Taste?” He holds out the short, heavy glass.

She looks away. “No, I don’t—” Then she turns back and takes the glass from him. “Sure.” She peers for a second into the amber liquid, then lifts the glass and takes a big gulp. Her eyes widen, and her free hand begins to move toward her mouth. But to her credit she gets through her surprise and completes the swallow without any coughing or spitting.

Molloy figures her for no more than fifty. Most of the children have a dismissive attitude toward alcohol, but only the youngest haven’t experimented at least a few times with drunkenness.

He retrieves his drink and sips. He pays close attention, first to the taste and smell—his mother’s butterscotch brownies—and then to the warmth that flows smoothly downward to his core. He nods, satisfied, and sets the glass carefully onto the bar.

She says, “I’m Laura.”

Molloy smiles at her, holds out his hand. It’s unnecessary, of course, but before she can take his hand he says, “I’m Kerry.”

“Yes, I—” She catches herself, then reaches out and shakes, her small hand grasping three of his fingers. Her grip is fleeting, but stronger than Molloy had expected. Her palm is moist.

She glances toward the now-empty stage, then back to him. “I’ve never plinged this band before. Pretty frail, weren’t they?”

Molloy doesn’t know whether “frail” is supposed to be good or bad. Not that even those terms mean much, right now, to him and his Serene.

He shrugs.

She nods, seriously, as if his shrug holds deep wisdom.

She gives him a wobbly little smile. He smiles back.

After several seconds, she bites her lower lip and then turns to her pills. She's a little slow inhaling as she pops an amp; Molloy catches an errant whiff of bananas.

Molloy picks up his drink and takes another slow sip.

\* \* \*

In the following weeks, he and Mei-Ling never spoke of their evening together. In fact, after the first few days he rarely even thought about what had happened; his memories were so fragmentary and distorted that it all seemed a barely recalled fever-dream.

Still, after that he was more careful in accepting social invitations. And in experimenting with new drugs outside of his or Thomas's apartment.

One night a couple of months later, Molloy was the last to leave the lab. As he stepped outside he pulled on his mittens against the stinging cold. It had snowed that morning; now, after a day's tramping by pedestrians and personal transporters, the walk was covered by a ragged, unevenly packed slab of snow. It squeaked beneath each of his footfalls.

He frowned when he neared his apartment. The front light was out—something that had never happened before—and the building's entrance was hidden in deep shadow. He stopped, looked up and down the deserted street. Without his own foot-squeaks, the night was silent except for muffled traffic sounds and the harsh whisper of wind over dry snow.

Shaking his head at his anachronistic paranoia, he stepped to the door and unlocked it. As he pulled it open, a hunched figure burst from the building's shadow and pushed past him in through the doorway. Tightly clutching the dark blanket that draped it from head to foot, it stopped just inside and whirled back to face him.

Blue eyes peered through a narrow opening in the cloth.

“Come on!”

It was a woman's voice.

An adult woman's voice.

“Quick! Before someone—” She spun, still bent over, and quickly surveyed the lobby. She ran to the elevator, pressed the button.

His paralysis was broken by the sound of an approaching vehicle crunching through snow. He glanced up the street, then stumbled through the doorway and yanked the door shut behind him.

Across the lobby, the elevator chimed and opened. The cloaked woman hurried inside, gesturing urgently for him to follow.

She touched his floor number as he joined her. Her dark finger was long and slender. Something—a ring?—glittered as she pulled her hand back under the blanket. The doors closed.

“Who—” he began.

She shook her covered head, her blue eyes fixed on his face.

The elevator opened to his floor. He stepped into the hallway—empty in both directions—crossed to his door, unlocked it and pushed it open. She moved quickly past him; he followed her inside. She waited for him to lock the door behind them.

For the first time, she straightened up—she stood slightly taller than Molloy. Her blanket, he now saw, was woven from two shades of brown in a delicate herringbone design. Elegant, unseasonable sandal-like shoes dripped melting snow onto his carpet.

She tossed her head and the blanket slipped to her shoulders.

Her hair was a short, frizzy corona outlining a narrow, sharply sculpted, umber face. Her cheek-bones were high, her neck gracefully slender.

Her eyes were luminous.

She coughed, and clutched the blanket tighter about herself. She was shivering—as she had been, he belatedly realized, since she

had first appeared.

She asked, "Could I have something to drink? Something hot?"

Dumbly, he nodded. He headed toward the kitchen, still wearing his coat and mittens. Then, flustered, he turned. "Please—" he said, and he urged her to the living room. She sank gratefully into a deeply cushioned chair. He stared, fascinated, as she kicked off her shoes and pulled her feet up under herself.

Still shivering, she tilted her head up toward him. "That drink...?"

In the kitchen, he had to remove his mittens to get a mug from the cabinet.

He brought her tea. She drank in hurried sips at first, and then in gulps he feared would burn her tongue.

She held out the mug. "More?"

She took her time with the second cup, holding it in both hands and inhaling the steam. She wore three rings—a small red gem and a larger green one on the middle and ring fingers of one hand, a wide, intricately worked silver band on the forefinger of the other.

He took off his coat, hung it in the closet. He told the room to increase the temperature. He pulled up a smaller chair for himself.

She set her empty mug onto the floor, then sighed and relaxed into the chair, letting the blanket fall open around her. She wore a slim, long-sleeved, wine-red dress that reached to her calves, still tucked beneath her. Her body's slenderness matched that of her neck and face; Molloy tried not to stare at the contrastingly generous curves of her breasts and hips.

"Who *are* you?" he pleaded. "They told me I was the only—"

She nodded, but held up a hand. "Can I stay? You'll hide me?"

Her fearful gaze was incandescent, unbearable.

"Yes!" He leaned toward her, his hands tightly grasping the edge of his chair. "Yes, of course!"

Her slow smile was brighter than her eyes. She sat up in the cushions, reached forward and placed her hand onto one of his. Her touch sent an electric thrill up his arm.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you.”

They sat staring at each other for several seconds. He wanted to say something else, something that would make her smile deepen even more.

She let out a slow breath, then eased back into her chair, her hand—the one with two rings—pulling away from his. Her gaze drifted to a point over his shoulder.

“I heard about you on the news,” she said. “Months ago, right after they woke you. Suddenly, I realized that I wasn’t...I’d never had a reason to escape, you understand? Where could I go, how would I survive? I followed the stories about you. He didn’t know that I could access the news. And then you moved *here*, almost my own neighborhood! I waited. It was hard—you were out here, so close! I didn’t say a thing. I wasn’t supposed to know or care about modern events; when he came home it was supposed to be the past. The old times.”

Molloy was baffled by her cascading words. But she wasn’t smiling anymore; he reached out and touched the back of her hand.

At his touch she paused and her gaze returned to him.

“Last night when I made his drink, I added some pills to it. I had researched. He didn’t know I could do that. He said it tasted different than usual. He fell asleep so deeply that I was afraid I had gotten it wrong. I waited beside him, terrified, for hours. But it was all right—he was just sleeping. I took his keyset. There was nobody on the streets. I ran, trying to stay in the darkest places. Then the sun started to rise, and I found a place to hide. Then the snow...it got so cold! It’s not always so cold outside, is it? Finally night came, and after a long time I reached your building. I smashed the light

out front. It was late, and I was sure I'd have to hide until morning. But you came! You—”

She rolled her hand palm-up and clutched his, tightly. She stared into his eyes.

And then they were both on the edge of their chairs, leaning together and embracing tightly, her body buffeted by violent shudders. He held her, trying to soothe her. And tried to make sense of what she had told him.

She calmed after a few minutes. Gently, she pulled away.

“We should call somebody, shouldn't we?” he asked. “The police? Or—”

He stopped at her alarmed reaction.

“But you were being held against your will,” he persisted. “You—”

She placed a finger on his lips, shook her head. “I don't exist,” she said. She took him by both shoulders, stared intently. “Do you understand?”

“No! I don't understand any of this!”

She smiled slightly, sympathetically. “You can't tell anyone about me.”

He pulled out of her grasp, stood. “Look, just explain to me—”

She held up her hand. “Please. I'm so tired...”

But another thought struck him. “What about *him*? The one you... Won't he guess where you've gone, follow you here?”

She shook her head. “He won't do anything. He can't. That would just bring attention.”

Molloy tilted his head in query, but she did not explain further. In frustrated incomprehension he paced across the room, then back.

As he started to ask another question she reached out and took his hand.

“Please,” she said.

He sighed. After a moment he said, "At least you can tell me your name."

She smiled softly. "Judith."

He made up the couch as a bed. He had intended to sleep there himself, but she adamantly refused to take his bedroom from him.

He found her an oversized pullover shirt to wear for the night, showed her where the room controls were.

"Is there anything else you need?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Thank you. Again."

In the bedroom, Molloy lay on his side in the dark, unable to sleep. After perhaps an hour, the bedroom door opened. She stood there, silhouetted, watching him.

He didn't say anything.

She climbed into the bed behind him, then slid over until her body was pressed against his. Her hand rested on his shoulder. Her breath was warm against the back of his neck.

He waited, his heart racing.

Her breathing slowed. After a few minutes she was snoring softly.

Molloy didn't move. He let his breathing fall into rhythm with hers, with the press and ease of her breasts, through her shirt's thick fabric, against his back.

Eventually he fell asleep, too.

It was still dark when he woke. They had each turned in their sleep; now he was behind her, his arm draped over her side. Sleepily, he thought back on the previous evening and marveled at her presence.

Slowly, gently, he ran his hand down her cloth-covered side, to the start of her hip's curve.

She stirred, let out a soft, contented sigh.

He brought his hand back up along her flank.

She took his hand in her own, and moved his palm to her breast.

He rolled her over and they embraced, their mouths pressed tight together, their hands moving over each other's body.

She rolled on top of him, then raised her arms above her head. He lifted off her shirt, holding it for a second in a trembling grip before dropping it onto the floor. He clasped her slim waist with both hands and stared at her in the dim light. She reached down to press her palm against his chest—where his heart pounded furiously.

“Oh!” She sounded surprised.

He tried to pull her back down, but she resisted.

“Where are your drugs?” she whispered.

“What?”

“Really, it will be better.”

“I don't—”

But she was already stretching across him, reaching toward the bedside stand. She pulled open the top drawer, felt inside. “Ah!” She removed a small plastic case—a standard pill assortment Thomas had given him.

She kissed his forehead, then took one of his hands from her waist and placed it over his eyes. “Just a second...” she whispered. She leaned forward and turned on the headboard light. She rattled through the pills for a few seconds, then clicked the case shut and set it aside. She switched off the light, lifted his hand from his eyes.

“Here,” she urged. “This will steady you down.”

He took the amp from her, hesitated.

Her fingertips glided down his chest and moved slowly across his stomach. To his lower abdomen—but then they veered sideways, tracing a lazy circle over his belly.

He groaned.

“Go ahead,” she whispered seductively.

He popped the amp and sniffed. No tingling in his nose with this

one—just a pleasant banana scent.

He felt his heart rate ease. But, he was relieved to observe, there was no decrease in his desire—nor his arousal. If anything, he felt stronger, more confident.

“There,” she said, her fingers resuming their previous journey, “Isn’t that better?”

For a minute he lay very still, not wanting to interrupt or distract her.

Then, with a desperate moan, he pulled her to him.

Molloy didn’t go to the lab that day. When they weren’t making love, or dozing afterward, he showed her around the apartment. Judith proved extremely creative at meal preparation; he was amazed by what she was able to assemble from his limited pantry.

Sexually, though, her creativity caught him off guard. She would touch, or lick, or bite him in ways he didn’t expect; some of these actions inflamed him, but others just left him wondering at her previous experiences. And sometimes he seemed to surprise her, often with what he thought were perfectly mundane caresses or juxtapositions.

He slept very soundly that night.

When he woke in the morning, he wanted to spend another day at home with her. But she told him to go to work.

“Don’t make anybody curious, or suspicious,” she said. “Go to your lab the same as always. Do your work.” She kissed his cheek. “I’ll be here when you come home.”

So he went to the lab; he did his work. He apologized for missing the previous day, saying something about needing a little time alone—after that, his co-workers’ curious queries were replaced by deferential solicitude.

And he came home and she was there, waiting.

She brought him new universes to explore. She introduced him

to drugs Thomas had never discussed; he learned new modes of sensation—and she stimulated them all.

Judith never used any drugs herself, though. She wouldn't tell him why not, just as she refused to say anything about her past. After a few days he stopped asking. She said she was happy, and he believed her.

A couple of weeks later, Thomas came to him in the lab.

“Encroachable?” he asked.

Setting aside the laser card he was studying, Molloy smiled. “What's up?”

Thomas pulled over a stool and climbed on. “That's what I've been wanting to ask *you*. At least, I think it is...” He looked at Molloy a little dubiously. “Just what exactly does ‘*what's up?*’ mean?”

Molloy pivoted on his own, shorter, stool to face his grandnephew. “It means, what's new? What's on your mind? What can I do for you?”

Thomas nodded. “Yes, then. Exactly.” He looked up at Molloy, waiting.

Molloy blinked. “Oh.” He glanced down at the workbench, then back to Thomas. “Well, nothing, really. Mei-Ling and I are nearly done on the phylogenetic chart. Lawrence thinks he's discovered another new transfer-RNA. And Roberto seems very excited about some five-way predator-prey relationship among root symbiotes.”

“I didn't mean work,” said Thomas.

Molloy did his best to look puzzled.

“You've been...different lately,” continued Thomas. “You turn down all my invitations—” as Molloy began to protest, Thomas held up his own hand “—which is fine, just fine! I can understand you don't always want to spend your time plinging the city with me. And, I've got to say, you look great these days. Like someone who's

really found his kefir.”

“Found his *what?*”

“His—hmm. You know, actually I have absolutely no idea why people say that. Apparently it’s a very good thing to find.”

Molloy laughed. “Are you hungry? How about lunch?”

They headed out, Thomas telling Molloy about the improved dataflows he had implemented for his team’s genomic cluster analyses.

As they finished eating, Molloy sipped a cup of tea while Thomas flipped his pill case between his fingers.

Thomas squinted up at Molloy and said, “Really. There’s something different, isn’t there? Something good.”

Molloy shrugged, hiding his face behind his tilted teacup. But Thomas’s pitiful expression of frustrated curiosity was more than Molloy could bear. A laugh burst from him, and he choked for a few seconds, coughing tea.

As he wiped up, Molloy said, “I shouldn’t tell you. I promised.”

Thomas leaned forward eagerly. “You *have* to tell me! That’s what I’m here for, right? You and me, we share all of our secrets.” He tipped his head to the side. “Well, all of *yours*, anyway.”

Molloy laughed again. “Okay, okay. But really, you have to promise to keep this secret.”

Thomas snorted. “Like *you* promised?”

Molloy winced. Maybe, he thought, this was a bad idea.

“Sorry,” said Thomas, holding up a hand. “Your telling *me* doesn’t count. Nothing will go any further than this table. I swear.” With his forefinger he traced an X across his forehead.

“You’re supposed to do that over your heart.”

Thomas glanced down at his chest. He frowned. “Why?”

“Do you have to get back to the lab anytime soon?” Molloy asked.

“Not really. Don’t try to change the subject.”

Molloy stood. "Come on."

As Molloy led him down one street and then another, Thomas couldn't get another word out of him. But he soon realized where they were headed.

"Ah-ha! You finally got yourself a synth-mesh, didn't you?"

Molloy just said, "Wait and see."

As the elevator door closed behind them, Thomas said, "I've got some great mesh-scenarios for you to try."

Molloy unlocked his apartment, and they walked in.

"Hi," he announced.

Thomas looked up at him in surprise.

There was a rustling from the bedroom. "You're early..." Judith came to the bedroom door, yawning. All she wore was one of his shirts, blue corduroy, its front unfastened.

She froze when she saw he was not alone. Then her head jerked toward Molloy. "*Why—?*" She spun back into the bedroom, slamming the door shut.

Molloy, suddenly wishing he had never said anything to Thomas, looked down at his companion. Thomas stared toward the bedroom in blank astonishment. Then, to Molloy's bewildered dismay, Thomas turned on him with a face contorted in fury.

*"What were you thinking?"*

Thomas strode across the apartment and threw open the bedroom door. Molloy rushed after him. Gazing over Thomas's head, Molloy saw Judith huddled in the room's far corner, face pressed against her drawn-up knees, arms wrapped tightly around her bare legs.

"Stand up!" shouted Thomas.

Molloy grabbed his shoulder, but Thomas ignored him.

"Stand up!" Thomas repeated. "Command absolute, damn it!"

Molloy yelled, "Stop that! You can't—"

Judith stood.

She kept her head bowed, not looking at them; she continued to hug herself. Molloy saw that she was trembling.

“Cancel simulation! Command absolute!” Thomas spat the words with a cold ferocity that stunned Molloy.

Judith dropped her arms to her side. Her trembling ceased. She lifted her head; her expression was...blank.

Thomas was breathing hard. But Molloy barely noticed him now. He stared with horror across the room.

“She tried to tell me...” he mumbled. “She’d been mistreated, imprisoned. But I never imagined—” He realized that he still gripped Thomas’s shoulder. He spun him around, demanded, “She can be cured, can’t she?”

Thomas just stared at him.

“What is it? Hypnosis of some kind? Of course—drugs! No wonder she would never touch them! She must have thought—” He gazed at her, standing so terrifyingly still and helpless.

Thomas’s eyes widened. “You—” He shook his head in incredulity. “You honestly don’t—” His anger returned. “You...child! You ignorant, irresponsible, primitive child! You *adult!*” He forced Molloy’s hand from his shoulder and whirled to face Judith.

Her eyes followed his movement. Otherwise she was a statue.

Thomas shouted at her: “Primary servicing procedure!”

Judith placed her hands over her ears. Molloy was about to tell Thomas to stop yelling at her, when he heard a series of soft, sharp pops from Judith’s direction. Then Judith pushed upward with both hands and lifted her head into the air several centimeters above her neck.

A few drops of blood spilled from her neck’s sudden edge. One fell onto the collar of her shirt, soaking immediately into the corduroy fabric. The others slid down the front of her neck, and then

continued, slowly and with tiny hesitations, down her chest.

For several seconds, Molloy gaped. Then he doubled over and vomited.

Thomas spoke more quietly now, but with no less fury. "It's a machine, Kerry! A *toy!* A sick, perverted, bioengineered *toy.* And you, all this time, you've actually been..."

Molloy fell to his knees, his emptied stomach cramped in a knot. He stared at the carpet before him. He had never before noticed the filigree of amber threads that ran through the deep brown pile. Delicate yellow diamonds of two different sizes repeated themselves across the surface.

Thomas said, "I can't figure where you could have gotten this...thing. *And I don't want to know!* If even a hint gets out, do you have any idea—no, of course you don't. You've lived here for almost a year, but you haven't bothered to learn *anything* about the world!"

There must be a pattern to the diamonds, Molloy thought dully. They joined to form circles and swirls, but he could discern no larger, predictable design.

"Just try to imagine, will you, what word of this could do to you. To your position at the lab, to the way people on the street look at you..."

Molloy wanted to get back to his feet, away from the sour smell of vomit. But if he did that, he might glance toward—He kept his gaze on the yellow diamonds.

Thomas sighed. After a moment, he reached down and took Molloy's arm. He eased him partway to his feet, turning him toward the door. Then he guided him out to the living room, and into a chair.

Molloy let his eyes close. He heard Thomas return to the bedroom and close the door. He could hear Thomas's voice, muffled, in a terse, one-sided conversation with someone. A while later the front

door chimed. Thomas emerged from the bedroom to let someone into the apartment; they disappeared into the bedroom. Shortly afterward Molloy heard the bedroom door open again, and the sound of something heavy being rolled through the apartment. An unfamiliar voice muttered, “Skarky lickos,” and Thomas hissed, “Shut up.” The front door opened, closed. A few minutes later it reopened. Footsteps approached him.

“Kerry.” Thomas’s voice was soft. He took one of Molloy’s limp hands, closed its fingers around a few small, hard objects. “I want you to take these, okay? They’ll help.” He waited, but Molloy didn’t respond. Thomas sighed. “I’ll check on you tomorrow, okay?” He patted Molloy’s hand, and then left, the door clicking quietly shut behind him.

Molloy sat there for a long time. Finally he had to get up—the pills in his hand falling unnoticed to the floor—to use the bathroom. When he emerged he looked around absently, turned off the lights. He walked into his bedroom.

Not bothering with a light, he undressed, hung up his clothes, got into bed.

One of his arms lay on top of the covers. As he shifted position in the bed, that arm brushed against soft, rumpled cloth. Puzzled, he reached out—and felt corduroy. His eyes snapped open, in the darkness, and for a second his breath caught in his throat.

Slowly, he picked up the shirt and held it in the air above him, his hand trembling. Then he swung his arm to the side and let the shirt drop to the floor.

He lay still, eyes wide; the only sound his own irregular breathing.

\* \* \*

The next band is setting up. One musician, dressed in a flowing

caftan embroidered with flashing red and gold threads, is arranging projectors in a ring around the edge of the stage. Another—bright blue hot pants, a dark brown vest and white knee socks—switches on the projectors, one by one, making small adjustments as fuzzy shapes coalesce in the air above the stage.

Molloy sets his empty glass onto the bar. An amber drop glides down the glass's side; he wipes it away with a fingertip, then sucks his finger clean.

“Blit?” says the pewter girl. Laura. But she's not talking to Molloy; she's just trying to get the bartender's attention.

The two musicians are standing now within a jumbled cage of multicolored light beams. Wherever a pair of beams intersect, some sort of plastic-appearing projected artifact throbs or rotates. There are spheres and assorted geometric solids, contracting and expanding as if with breath. At other intersections bulges pass up and down through fluid, organic forms. Molloy can also make out what appears to be a disembodied guitar neck, and toward the back of the stage a short piano keyboard.

“I've seen these before, somewhere,” says Laura. This time she is talking to him. She, too, is studying the stage. She points. “That tall, thin, greenish-yellow swirl? And over there, the orange dodecahedron?” She tilts back her head in thought, her short hair falling away from her face.

The bartender removes her tray, replaces it with a fresh supply of pills. Then he holds a bottle over Molloy's glass, inquiring. Molloy shrugs; the bartender pours him another Scotch.

A third musician has joined the others. Apparently they're tuning the projections. The new musician squeezes a blue sphere between her hands: a soft electronic buzz squeals forth, then drops swiftly in pitch. The caftan-wearer strokes a ruddy gourd and an invisible violin sounds. The third member of the band, with the vest and

knee socks, presses piano keys—surprising Molloy with blatting tuba tones.

“Japan,” Laura announces. “Two years ago, maybe three.” She pauses until Molloy faces her. She is grinning—the dark make-up around her eyes patterned with tiny cracks—proud of her recall. “Some skarky sculpture installation.” She frowns. “Do you think these frails even licensed those forms?”

Molloy shrugs. He reaches for his drink.

She lifts an amp from her tray, sniffs loudly as she pops it. After a few seconds she waves an arm toward the variety of mismatched objects floating above the stage, and giggles.

“Looks like my apartment,” she says. “After a party.” She giggles again, like a child watching a silly cartoon. “Do you ever go to parties, Kerry?”

\* \* \*

He didn't return to the lab for almost a week. He finally took some of Thomas's pills, and found his numb gloom replaced, mostly, by an equally numb apathy.

His co-workers welcomed him back without any questions. Molloy never asked Thomas what story he'd told them.

During the following weeks Molloy spent more and more time at the lab, staying until midnight, arriving before dawn. Sometimes sleeping over, curled across a cleared lab bench with a spray of packing foam for a blanket.

Thomas pushed him to get a new apartment, insisting the change would do him good. Molloy let Thomas organize the move, replacing all his furniture while he was at it. Molloy didn't think of this so much as a change in his life—more as just a further dropping away of his history.

Before long, though, he was leaving the lab only a couple of

hours after everyone else. In the new apartment he prepared meals with pans that no one had ever used, sat in chairs where no one had ever leaned toward him. He didn't think of it as *his* apartment. But it was an environment within his control.

The floors were all solid-colored plastic. No carpet, he had told Thomas. No patterns.

Eventually he again started accepting Thomas's invitations to sample the city and explore the contemporary pharmacopoeia. He even went out now and then with Mei-Ling or other co-workers—each of whom taught him, in passing, about their own preferred drugs. Over time he learned to recognize dozens of pills, to know their effects both singly and in combination. He settled into his own routines: Three pills got him started each morning; another helped him focus on his work during the day. In the evenings he popped two amps to wind down, and later a final quartet of tablets provided precisely nine hours of uninterrupted, dreamless sleep.

One spring evening, following a walk from the lab through streets lined with blossoming trees and multicolored flowers—and with one clutch of children who pointedly crossed to the far side of the street when they saw him approaching—he showed up a bit early at Thomas's apartment. In an hour they were to meet Roberto for dinner and an outdoor dance recital.

The door chime brought no response. He assumed Thomas was out on an errand. The two of them had long ago exchanged key-settings; Molloy identified himself to the door, unlocked it and entered.

The room was even more of a shambles than usual. Cushions were strewn across the floor, and a small, snack-laden end table had toppled onto an intricately patterned Turkish carpet.

Molloy shook his head at his grandnephew's habits. He stepped forward, picked up the end table and set it upright beside the

carpet. The table's legs clacked sharply against the wooden floor—at the sound, a muffled rustling came from across the room. A pair of cushions lifted from one of the larger piles, then fell away as a yawning Thomas sat up beneath them, rubbing his eyes. His hair was a mess.

Apart from random cushions he didn't seem to be wearing anything.

“Kerry! Biff—what time is it?”

Molloy snorted in amusement. “Quite a party you—”

Another cushion rose and slid aside as a sleepy, long-haired girl sat up beside Thomas, equally naked. Molloy didn't recognize her. She leaned against Thomas and wrapped her arms around him.

Thomas shrugged out of her grasp. “Time to go, honey.”

Molloy looked away. “I'm sorry! I didn't...Sorry, maybe I should just—”

Thomas waved away his concerns as he turned to the girl. “Really.”

“Come on, Tommy,” she cooed. “Just one more time?”

“No.” Some irritation had crept into Thomas's voice. He stood, pulling her to her feet beside him.

Reflexively, Molloy braced against embarrassment or titillation.

But they were just a couple of naked little children.

Thomas gave her skinny bottom a slap. “Get dressed and get going.” She ran a finger down the side of his face. Thomas pulled away. “I mean it! Command certain.”

Molloy's heart paused.

The girl started rooting sulkily through the cushions, making a show of reluctantly donning pieces of clothing as she found them.

Impatient, Thomas said, “Knock it off! Command absolute!”

The girl's pout disappeared. She stood upright for a second, in a pale blue t-shirt and one frilly white sock. Then she turned back to

the cushions, began lifting and stacking them methodically.

Molloy stared at Thomas, who was now retrieving his own clothes. Molloy felt his heart pound strong and slow. He was suddenly drenched in chilly sweat.

The girl finished dressing. She walked to the door and, without a word, left.

Thomas kicked over a cushion. “Ah-ha!” he exclaimed, scooping up his pants. As he added them to the bundle he held against his chest, he said, “Sorry about all that. Just give me a couple of minutes and—” He looked up at Molloy. His expression shifted to puzzlement. “What?”

“What?” echoed Molloy, disbelieving. “*What?* That’s all you can say to me?” A pulse hammered in his temple. His vision, which had tunneled into a circular frame centered on Thomas, now exploded outward to encompass the entire chaotic room. He grabbed up a cushion and heaved it at Thomas. “You bastard!” He hoisted the end table. “You fucking *hypocrite!*” He hurled the table, catching Thomas in the leg.

“Ow!” Thomas fell to the floor, clutching his knee.

Molloy strode across the room, kicking cushions and knick-knacks out of his way. “You fucking—!”

Thomas, rocking back and forth in pain, stared up at him in terrified bewilderment. “What are you—” Then his eyes widened. He glanced toward the door, then back to Molloy. “You don’t—Oh, god, Kerry!” He shook his head, and his expression changed to something between annoyance and disgust. “When are you going to start paying attention?”

Confused, Molloy—who had been leaning over to grab Thomas—faltered, straightened up. Without warning, Thomas kicked him hard in the thigh. Molloy swayed backward—then the back of his shin banged against something and he fell over. His

shoulder struck the wooden floor with a burst of barely registered pain. He ended up twisted uncomfortably, lying half on the floor, half across uneven cushions, his leg propped over the fallen end table.

Thomas stood, unsteadily, and looked down at Molloy. A thin, helpless-looking, naked child, rubbing a sore knee.

The same child who had murdered Judith.

Molloy meant to shout, but his voice came out rough and quiet. “A *sick, perverted toy*. Did I get that right? For *you*, though, that’s okay. Just not for me.”

“A toy?” Thomas was breathing hard. He pointed toward the door. “Of *course* it’s a toy! Everybody uses them sometimes. Why not? But you don’t see me running around with some hairy, swollen, bootleg *mother-borg*, flaunting my skanky lickophilic fantasies for the world to see, do you? *Do you?*”

Thomas’s angry revulsion baffled Molloy, just as it had that afternoon he’d brought Thomas to his apartment. “What are you talking about? What—” That word, though: hadn’t he heard that word before, somewhere? “—*what* kind of fantasies?”

Thomas looked away. “You heard me.”

“No, I don’t...lickophilic?”

Thomas bent over to pick up his clothes yet again. “God, Kerry. People just don’t...*speak* about some things, you know?”

Molloy pushed himself up to sitting—his shoulder flaring in momentary complaint. “Thomas,” he said. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Still looking away, Thomas sighed. Then he turned to face Molloy. He dropped onto a stack of cushions, his recovered clothing heaped on his lap.

“Some people, they...” Thomas took a slow breath, let it out. “I mean, I can *understand*, I suppose, in *your* case. But *still*...”

Molloy waited, nervous. He had never before seen anything embarrass Thomas.

Thomas sighed again, then took a breath and gathered himself. “*Enilikos*. It’s Greek, okay? So, *enilikophilia*. And then, before long, just...lickophilia.”

“But what—?”

“Adult.” Thomas glared at him. “It means *adult*.” His gaze fell to his pile of clothes, then returned, glowering, to Molloy. “All right? Do you understand *now*?”

Molloy just sat there, staring back. But not at Thomas.

A dozen puzzling moments from the past year rose before him. They each pivoted slightly around the axis of Thomas’s words—and clicked, at last, into their places in the world’s pattern.

Quietly, Thomas said, “So.” He stood. He shook himself, like someone stepping from an ocean. “All right. We won’t talk about...that...again.” His gaze drifted sideways, aimless, until it encountered a clock display on the wall. “Blit!” he exclaimed. “The recital!” He glanced at the clothes balled up in his hands, tossed them aside. He looked at Molloy. “If we hurry, maybe we can still catch Roberto. Give me just a minute to clean up and get dressed.” And he rushed from the room.

Thomas’s words washed over Molloy, meaningless. His attention was caught up in the pattern of event and motivation spread all around him, its obviousness suddenly inescapable. The pattern of people and relationships that he could now see swirling through the past year and into his future—a pattern never precisely repeating itself, yet still, he knew, rigidly defining the limits of every moment of the rest of his life.

For the first time since his reawakening on Earth, Molloy understood his place in the world.

\* \* \*

The new band's music doesn't pound. As one of the musicians rolls a deep blue helix between her hands, first one way and then the other, a subsonic room-filling rumble grows slowly in volume and frequency, then suddenly surges into a deafening roar of white noise—before falling reluctantly back to its original growl. Each cycle takes a minute or more.

Soaring above, the other two musicians chase each other in jittery bursts of melody. As their lines alternate in call and response, dare and counter-dare, the two of them dash gymnastically around their light-beam cage, squeezing, slapping or stroking one projected instrument after another.

Molloy can't hear any reliable beat in all this, but the dance floor is full again. Bodies sway and hop, moving in localized eddies of rhythm.

The dancer on the table remains curled, on her side now—asleep, maybe.

Laura taps Molloy on the shoulder. He turns to her, and sees her say something to him just as the music crests and crashes.

He leans toward her, shouts, "What?"

"I said," she yells back, "it's too bad you didn't find any *aliens* on your trip."

Surprised, he pulls back a little. "Oh?"

She nods. She waves dismissively toward the band. "*Then* maybe we could have heard something *new* around here!"

She says it so seriously that Molloy can't help but laugh. Which makes Laura smile.

"Still," she says wistfully, "I can't imagine doing what you did."

Oh, thinks Molloy. *This* conversation.

He tips his head to the side. "What do you mean?"

“Surviving,” she says. “On a strange and hostile world, so far from home.” She shudders.

“It’s not such a big deal.” He reaches into his pocket, feels the hard edge of his pill case. “You just do what you have to.” Without looking, he takes out the case, flips it open one-handed. “Besides, we had all the modern conveniences.”

She grimaces—maybe at his expedition’s idea of “modern.”

By feel, he picks out a Serene. He returns the case to his pocket.

She says something else, but the music is rising again and all he hears is “...souvenirs?”

He shakes his head, points to his ear. She nods, and turns to toy with her pills until the sound ebbs.

He lifts the Serene to his lips, swallows it with some Scotch.

When the music eases, she says, “I was asking if you brought back any souvenirs from your trip...?”

He nods, wearily. “Sure,” he says. “Lots.” He pauses for a second, hoping the Serene will kick in soon. “Maybe you’d like to see them sometime?”

She glances away. “Yes,” she says. She looks up at his face. “Yes, I’d like that.”

There’s an awkward moment of silence.

She lifts a pill from her tray, sets it back down. Then she turns to watch the dancers.

Molloy picks up his Scotch and takes a sip.

After the music has cycled through two more of its slow waves, she turns back to him.

“Really,” she says, “it’s too bad you didn’t find any aliens.” This time he hears in her quiet wish a sincere yearning, a desire for wonders.

Molloy gives her a gentle smile. Suddenly she looks so open and vulnerable. So much—despite her makeup and sophisticated

clothes—like a lost child.

He closes his eyes.

Too bad he hadn't found any aliens.

“But of course I did,” he says.

“What—?”

He opens his eyes. Her confused expression tugs at him through the thickening baffles of Serene.

He leans toward her. In the bar's shadow, he places his hand on her little thigh.

“Never mind,” says Molloy. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

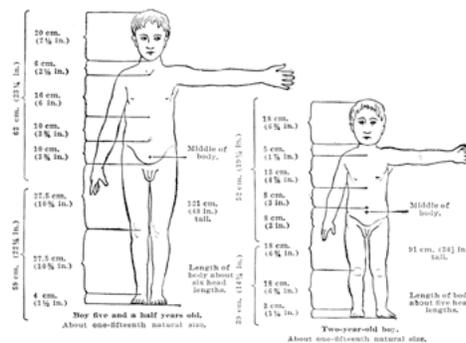
The music begins to swell once more.

For a few seconds he studies her smooth, round face. Her tiny nose and unblemished cheeks. Her big, hopeful eyes.

And then he dips his forefinger into his Scotch. He holds up the finger before her, raises his eyebrows in invitation.

Her eyes flick from side to side, checking who's watching. Then, with the sly expression of a child sneaking a forbidden treat, she leans forward. Her gaze locked with Molloy's, she sticks out her tongue.

And licks.



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