

the nose grid

Link whispered at my side, "This so big sucks."

"This place doesn't suck," said Marty. "It's good."

"Maybe," said Calista, "if there were certain people who didn't go jumping on people's heads near the snack bar, if there weren't those people, then maybe we wouldn't all be standing here having a big shame banquet."

Marty was getting angry that everyone was like turding on his recommendation, and I just wanted them all to shut up somehow, I mean nicely, because suddenly I realized that we didn't really sound too smart. If someone overheard us, like that girl, they might think we were dumb.

I was playing with the magnets on my boots and trying not to look at her. I didn't want her to feel my eyes before I made my move. I was careful. Quendy and Loga went off to the bathroom because hairstyles had changed.

Marty drifted around and made slit-eyes at Link. Link and I were chatting about the girl, like I was going, *She is meg youch*, and he was going, *What the hell's she wearing?*, and I was going, *Wool. It's wool. Like from an animal*, and then Calista did her own chat to us, which was, *If you want to hear about an animal, what about two guys staring with their mouths wide open so they look completely Cro-Magnon?*

That shut us up, and we stared out the window. Wrappers were turning through space like birds.

Quendy came back from the bathroom and said, "Omigod! Like big thanks to everyone for not telling me that my lesion is like meg completely spreading."

"Hon," said Calista, "it's not spreading."

"Omigod! It is going to be like larger than my whole head! I am going to need a hat just to have all this lesion. It will like go onto the brim."

"Exercise the breath," said Link. "Nobody cares about a stupid lesion."

"How can you not?" said Quendy. "It's huge, and it's right on my forehead. It's like *bonnnng!*" She trembled her hands around the lesion like it was a kind of lesion gong.

Loga went, "No one will notice."

"If they don't know you," Marty said, "they're not going to know what you normally look like."

"Oh, so they think that usually my like forehead is like weeping?"

"Ask her," said Link. He pointed to the girl in gray.

He said, "Miss, I wonder if you would, could you look at this girl and tell me if you notice anything?"

The girl turned around and looked at Quendy. She said, "The lesion isn't bad."

Quendy's hands were out in a *please*. "You saw it! See? Like, how far is the air lock?"

"Hon," said Calista. "Listen to the girl."

The girl said, "I've been thinking, because of my neck."

The girl's lesion was beautiful. It was like a necklace. A red choker.

"The face," said the girl, "is a grid. The two big imaginary lines are one down the center of the face and one just across the top of the cheeks. This is my theory, anyway. The nose is where those lines intersect. The more a lesion interferes with those lines, the more noticeable it is. See, the hardest lesion to carry off is one on the nose itself. In your case, you have this lesion which is entirely on the edge of this one quadrant. That's not going to matter. It's not on a line." She unclipped herself and reached up with both her hands and touched her thumbs together, and made football goalposts around Quendy's face. "Framing. See?

Your lesion, it's on the *edge* of your face, so it *frames* your face. It draws attention to your face. The good grid. See, you have this great grid. I'm probably saying way too much."

We were all kind of stunned.

"Yeah," said Calista, sounding confused. "She's right. It just frames your face."

The girl in gray touched her own lesion with a napkin. She said, "I want mine to go all the way around. I want it to be like a necklace, but right now, it's just a torque."

We were all just kind of staring at her like she was an alien. She smiled. We kept staring at her.

"There are times you just want to sink through the floor," she said, "but then you realize there's no air out there."

"Hey," said Marty. "I got a lesion on my foot. You want to see it?"

She smiled sweetly. "No, not really," she said.

Link pointed at his face and was like, "Hey, what about my lesion? Look at this puppy. It bleeds sometimes. You like this?"

She smirked. "Oh, mmm-hm," she said. "You put the 'supper' back in 'suppuration.'"

Link thought that was hilarious. Of course, he didn't have any idea what the hell she was talking about either, but he started laughing while the rest of us were still looking up "suppuration" on the feed English-to-English wordbook.

She was now completely youch on all of our meters, except with the girls, who I could tell had started to chat each other like some ants after someone's buried a missionary alive in the middle of their bill. On the one hand, I thought she was the most amazing person I had ever seen in my life, even if she was weird as shit. On the other hand, I was pretty disappointed she was skeezing this sexy talk with Link Arwaker, who women for some reason always go for, in spite of the fact that he's a meg asshole to them, for example a slurpy question about, "Oh, what about *my* lesion? Let's talk more about *me* and *my* open sores."

Marty was trying to make up lost ground by saying, "Maybe you could change the bandages on my foot," but that was clearly just disgusting to everyone. We were all like, "Unit, no one wants to see your damn foot," and, "Jesus, Marty unit, stow the mess-hole."

Link was asking her, "Who are you? Where do you come from?"

And then she looked at me. Just at me, and I knew she was wondering what I thought about the guys and seductiveness and skeeze and all. She was waiting for me to say something, to see if I was going to skeeze like Marty and Link. I wondered whether she wanted me to skeeze. She seemed really smart from what she said, and she

was pretty, and I was still thinking about that globe of juice floating in front of her face. I was still thinking about the beauty of how that juice had been born delicately from her lips, how it had been born whole, and how her tongue stood there afterward to see the juice make its trembling progress into the world.

But I had nothing to say.

She and the girls spent the rest of the hour fixing Quendy's hair to like showcase the lesion. Usually, Quendy is just like a kind of broken, little economy model of Calista, and she knows that, and feels real bad about it. But when this girl helped her, it wasn't like that. Quendy was the center of everyone for a long time.

That was why I kept looking at the girl in gray, and started to want, more than anything else that night, to be with her.

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"Nature . . . vs. Nurture." A Primus prime-time feedcast event.

Image of a girl weeping on a courtroom floor. "I am not Girl Number Two! Please, Judge Spandex! I'm also Number One! I'm not a product, but a person!"

Image of a girl holding a blaster to a twin's temple. "Remember, bitch. You can't spell 'danger' without DNA."

Blam.

... the cola with the refreshing taste of citrus and butter . . .

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Calculon. New solutions for . . .

... It's dance. It's dance, dance, dance. That's fun. Fun's fun, and fun's what you can have. There's nothing to stop you from fun. Do you see the bodies? Can you smell the beat? Then you'll come and roar with us. Come and throw your boots at superstars. Come thrash in the cool until your head opens up, and you see the veins of the people you love bright as branches against the sky, and burnt in your brain will be the fun, all of the fun, and the lights, and the Doppler fade of screaming you heard at the Rumble Spot. The Rumble Spot.

The Rumble Spot: an ocean of chaos in the Sea of Tranquillity.

Images of Coke falling in rivulets down chiseled mountainsides; children being held toward the sun; blades slicing grass; a hand, a hand extended toward the lemonade like God's at Creation; boys in Gap tees shot from a rocket; more lining up

with tin helmets; Nike grav-gear plunging into Montana; a choir of Jamaican girls dressed in pinafores and strap-on solar cells; dry cleaners ironing the cheek prostheses of the rich; friends clutching at birds made of alloys; law partners jumping fences; snow; altitude; tears; hugs; night.

• • •

the moon
is in the
house of boring

She was on the moon all alone. Here it was, spring break, and she was on the moon, where there was all this meg action, and she was there without friends. She said she just walked through the crowds and watched, and she saw all these great things that way. She said she was there to observe.

There were crowds in the domes at night, spraying Gatorade from hoses, and all these college guys without shirts lifting their arms. There was a beetle that walked through the lanes and gave out prizes, which seemed really good, but she said that really, the prizes, they were kind of shitty when you looked at them close-up, because sometimes parts weren't included. She saw pools filled with foam.

Her name was Violet.

We asked her to come with us. We wanted to go to sleep by then, but we were on the moon,

even if it sucked, and it was spring break, you know, with the action, so there was no way we were admitting we wanted to go to sleep. We told her we were thinking about going to some club called the Rumble Spot that we'd heard about on the feed.

"I don't know," she said.

But I was like, "You got to go. You can go and, you know, observe."

Marty said, "It will be a, a, you know, fuckin', it will . . ." He kind of wiggled his hand.

"Since you put it that way," she said, kind of fresh. Calista laughed. Suddenly I knew Calista was either going to love her or hate her.

After we were walking for a few minutes, it was, on the scale, maybe closer to hate, because Marty and Link and I were all walking around Violet and asking her all these questions, and she was asking us stuff, and we were telling her, and I don't think the other girls really were too skip about walking behind us.

Link said he wanted to get cranked before we went, and he said was there any place where we could drink without IDs? Marty said he knew of this one place, which was called Sombrero Dot, and he went there before with his cousin. He said it wasn't too out-of-the-way.

We got there and it had been torn down. They had built a pretty nice stucco mall there, so Loga

and Quendy said we should go in and buy some cool stuff to go out in. That seemed good to us. I wanted to buy some things but I didn't know what they were. After we walked around for a while, everything seemed kind of sad and boring so we couldn't tell anymore what we wanted. Our feeds tried to help, and as we were walking around we were getting all the prices of things, but really the only thing that I wanted to get was a pair of infrared knee bands, and I could get better ones off the feed, and have them sent to my house, than in the stupid physical moon stores. Quendy bought some shoes, but the minute she walked out of the store she didn't like them anymore. Marty couldn't think of anything he wanted, so he ordered this really null shirt. He said it was so null it was like ordering nothing.

Now it was even later and we wanted to go to the club, but we hadn't got drunk yet, so Link said maybe we could take a cab to the hotel and break into the minibar.

As we were driving through the tube streets, there was all of this commotion because of the protests about the moon. There were all these kids, what my dad calls Eurotrash, and they were standing in the middle of the square and broadcasting to everyone all these slogans, and it was hard not to receive, because they were so angry, but the cab drove right by them, and they

didn't stop us. They were protesting all these things, some of them even were protesting the feed. They were like shouting, "Chip in my head? I'm better off dead! Chip in my head? I'm better off dead!" Loga rolled her eyes and was like, "Omigod."

We got back to the hotel. Kids were running down the halls with their fake birds. The fake birds were still in style. It was stupid, because the birds didn't even fly or sing or anything.

We went to the girls' bedroom and started to assault the minibar. I wanted to break it open quickly, because Violet was looking like she wasn't having fun. She was sitting all stiff on the bed.

"Just a sec," I said.

She nodded, but it was kind of polite.

Calista was whispering to Link, "What's her problem?"

We tried the minibar first with a comb, then with kicking. We threw it against the wall, which wasn't as hard to do with almost no gravity.

"You broke off a . . . a thing," said Marty. "You broke off a fuckin' thing."

"A caster," I said.

"Caster," said Link, pointing at my nose. "Good one."

You know your break sucks when the most

brag part of the night is you coming up with the word "caster."

Violet was just sitting on the bed, playing with her thumb. Her shoulders were droopy and her feet were turned in. In fact, all the girls looked kind of on suspend. Calista and Loga were staring into space, watching something on the feed.

"Fuck," said Link, kicking the minibar. "I want to get weasel-faced."

"There's no way you're getting weasel-faced," I said. "Let's just go."

Marty was like, "We could malfunction."

"Oh, god," said Loga and Quendy, rolling their eyes.

Violet looked real uncomfortable now. It was pretty obvious she really didn't want to be with us.

Link looked around at the girls' faces. "What's the problem?" he said.

"Drop it, Link," I said. "We're not going in mal."

"I heard about this great site called Lobe-reamer. Eighty-five bucks, one click, and we'll be completely raked for an hour and a half. We won't know which way's up. That's big, big scrambled, for cheap."

"Unit!" said Marty. "We're fuckin' there!"

Link said, "Okay. Let's . . ."

"Drop it, units," I said. "No one wants to be fuguing."

"Am I no one?" said Link.

Calista was like, "Are you asking in terms of sex appeal?"

"Ow!" Marty said.

Link said, "Shut up, Marty."

Calista chatted all of us guys, *Don't like push this. Especially because the girl is meg un-into it.*

Link was like, *Lobe-reamer. Lobe-reamer! Do those words mean nothing to you?*

Brake, Link. Brake and upgrade.

There was no way he was getting lobotomized or weasel-faced, so we just went over to the Rumble Spot unslammed. It was their Youth in Action night, so we could get in.

It was meg big big loud. There was everything there. There was about a million people it seemed, and lights, and the beat was rocking the moon. There was a band hung by their arms and their legs from the ceiling, and there was girders and floating units going up and down, and these meg youch latex ripplechicks dancing on the bar, and there were all these frat guys that were wearing these, unit, they were fuckin' brag, they were wearing these tachyon shorts so you couldn't barely look at them, which were \$789.99 according to the feed, and they were on sale for

like \$699 at the Zone, and could be shipped to the hotel for an additional \$78.95, and that was just one great thing that people were wearing. When I looked around, I wanted so much, that all of the prices were coming into my brain, and it was *bam bam bam*, like fugue-joy, and Loga and Quendy and Calista were already out on the dance floor, and my feed was like going fried, going things about the dance and pictures they were feedflinging across the dance floor of people on fire doing the moves.

Violet was screaming to me. I couldn't hear a thing. She was like, "Da da da? Da da!"

I was like, "What?"

She chatted me, *This is a scene.*

I was like, *Don't you dance?*

Not really. Are these all college kids?

I bet most of them. Look at the guy in the, you know, that thing? The neck bat?

Bow tie.

Bow tie.

He was maybe a hundred or so, dancing with the ripplechicks, a man in a dirty old tweed jacket, and he had this long white hair that looked kind of yellow, and his eyes were wide, like he was in mal, but I'm not sure he was in mal. He kept on sticking his thumbs up in the air.

And then they turned off the artificial gravity and we all went bounding accidentally, and it was

like people cruising past each other with their necks kinked, and Violet grabbed on to my arm, and now I was thinking that even though she looked really uncomfortable, and like she was watching some kind of bugs in an experiment, it wasn't so bad being a bug as long as she grabbed on to my arm, so I said, *Don't worry. We'll drift down.*

Sorry, she chatted.

No wrong, I said.

Really. I didn't mean to grab you.

No wrong.

I put my hand over her hand on my arm, and then she smiled and took her hand out from under my hand, and by that time we'd come down again, and were bending our knees.

The guy with the tweed jacket had on a jetbelt, and he was flying around near the ceiling.

You don't look like you're having fun, I chatted to her.

I will.

When?

I'm not used to this.

What do you do for fun?

When?

Normally.

I haven't been on the moon before.

I mean, anywhere. What do you do?

The man with the bow tie was standing near

us. He was trying to talk to Link by cranking Link's head around and shouting into his ear. Link was backing away.

Are you having a good time? she asked.

The moon really isn't working out, I said.

Next time, maybe you should try Mars.

Yeah, I've been to Mars, I said. It was dumb.

Suddenly, she laughed. *Are you serious?*

Yeah, I'm serious.

Omigod, she said. Mars is a whole planet.

And it's dumb!

She was like, *Dumb?*

She was starting to piss me off.

I said, *Yes, dumb.*

The whole world?

Dumb.

The whole world.

Dumb.

Oh, this is golden.

The Red Planet was a piece of shit.

*I don't believe you could—*but I couldn't receive any more of her chat because our feeds were spiking, and the music was getting louder, with the band singing "I'll Sex You In," and I saw her folding her arms like she didn't like me, and I didn't like her, and everyone was pulsing, even the old guy, and everyone was hopping, and they were scatterfeeding pictures across the floor: tribal dances, stuff with gourds, salsa, houses

under breaking dams, women grinning, women oiling men with their fingertips, women taking out their teeth, girls' stomachs, boys' calves, rockets from old "movies" flaring, bikini tops, fingers creeping into nostrils, silos, suns—and the old man was standing by our side, and trying to yell, but we couldn't hear him, so he leaned closer, and said to us, to Marty and Violet and now Link and me, he said, yelled, more like, he yelled: "We enter a time of calamity!"

We stared.

"We enter a time of calamity!"

We tried to back up, all of us except Violet, who was confused, and Link was saying, "This unit, he's like completely fuguing. He has this—"

"We enter a time of calamity! We enter a time of calamity!"

The old man reached out and, with a metal handle, touched me on the neck.

Suddenly, I could feel myself broadcasting. I was broadcasting across the scatterfeed, going, helplessly, *We enter a time of calamity! We enter a time of calamity!* I couldn't stop.

And he had touched Violet now, and Link, and Marty, and from all of them, it was coming, *We enter a time of calamity! We enter a time of calamity!*

And now I could feel that it was coming from other places, too, other people he had touched,

and Marty was trying to say that he'd never had this before, it was kind of cool, but he couldn't because his signal was jammed just with that, over and over again, all of us in a chorus, going, *We enter a time of calamity! We enter a time of calamity!* and people were turning toward us. People were looking. We were standing in a line and the old guy was standing in front of us. People were moving away. The police were coming. I could see them. I couldn't really move much.

I felt a kind of kicking in my face and I discovered it was my mouth, which was saying the time of calamity thing, but at the top of my lungs. We were shouting, we were broadcasting, and then over us all, as the cops came through the crowd, the guy started this crazy calling, both out loud and on the feed, this crazy calling over it all, over our chorus, and it went:

"We enter a time of calamity. Blood on the tarmac. Fingers in the juicer. Towers of air frozen in the lunar wastes. Models dead on the runways, with their legs facing backward. Children with smiles that can't be undone. Chicken shall rot in the aisles. See the pillars fall."

While we said, again and again, "*We enter a time of calamity. We enter a time of calamity,*" and

others in the room said it, too, and Violet looked as scared as me, and I tried to take her hand, and she tried to take mine, and the police were by our side, hitting the man over the head again and again with stunners and sticks, and he fell on one knee, and finally my fingers found her wrist, Violet's. It felt so soft, like something I had never felt before. It felt like the neck of a swan in the wind.

And then the police were at our sides, whispering to us, "We're going to have to shut you off now. We're going to have to shut you off."

And then they touched us, and bodies fell, and there was nothing else.

Part 2

eden

awake

The first thing I felt was no credit.

I tried to touch my credit, but there was nothing there.

It felt like I was in a little room.

My body—I was in a bed, on top of my arm, which was asleep, but I didn't know where. I couldn't find the Lunar GPS to tell me.

Someone had left a message in my head, which I found, and then kept finding everywhere I went, which said that there was no transmission signal, that I was currently disconnected from feednet. I tried to chat Link and then Marty, but nothing, there was no transmission signal, I was currently disconnected from feednet, of course, and I was starting to get scared, so I tried to chat my parents, I tried to chat them on Earth, but there was no transmission etc., I was currently etc.

So I opened my eyes.

college try

"Nothing," she said.

I had gotten up and was sitting on a chair beside her. We were in a hospital. We took up a ward.

Link was still asleep. Nurses went by.

I said, "I can't see anything. Through the feed."

"No," she said. "Or through my hospital gown. So stop trying."

I smiled. "You know, I thought maybe . . ."

"Sure you did. Want some apple juice?"

We'd been up for fifteen or twenty minutes. Everything in my head was quiet. It was fucked.

"What do we do?" she asked.

I didn't know.

boring

There was nothing there but the walls. We looked at them, and at each other. We looked really squelch. Our hair and stuff. We had remote relays attached to us to watch our blood and our brains.

There were five walls, because the room was irregular. One of them had a picture of a boat on it. The boat was on a pond or maybe lake. I couldn't find anything interesting about that picture at all. There was nothing that was about to happen or had just happened.

I couldn't figure out even the littlest reason to paint a picture like that.

still boring

Our parents had been notified while we were asleep. Only Loga hadn't been touched by the hacker. She hadn't let him touch her, because he looked really creepy to her, so she stood way far away. There were also others, people we'd never met, who had been touched, and they were in the wards, too. He had touched thirteen people in all.

There was a police officer there, waiting in a chair. He told us that we would be off-line for a while, until they could see what had been done, and check for viruses, and decrypt the feed history to get information to use against the guy in court. They said that they had identified him, and that he was a hacker and a naysayer of the worst kind.

We were frightened, and kept touching our heads. Suddenly, our heads felt real empty.

At least in the hospital they had better gravity than the hotel.

missing the feed

I missed the feed.

I don't know when they first had feeds. Like maybe, fifty or a hundred years ago. Before that, they had to use their hands and their eyes. Computers were all outside the body. They carried them around outside of them, in their hands, like if you carried your lungs in a briefcase and opened it to breathe.

People were really excited when they first came out with feeds. It was all *da da da, this big educational thing, da da da, your child will have the advantage, encyclopedias at their fingertips, closer than their fingertips, etc.* That's one of the great things about the feed—that you can be supersmart without ever working. Everyone is supersmart now. You can look things up automatic, like science and history, like if you want to know which battles of the Civil War George Washington fought in and shit.

It's more now, it's not so much about the educational stuff but more regarding the fact that everything that goes on, goes on on the feed. All of the feedcasts and the instant news, that's on there, so there's all the entertainment I was missing without a feed, like the girls were all missing their favorite feedcast, this show called *Oh? Wow! Thing!*, which has all these kids like us who do stuff but get all pouty, which is what the girls go crazy for, the poutiness.

But the braggest thing about the feed, the thing that made it really big, is that it knows everything you want and hope for, sometimes before you even know what those things are. It can tell you how to get them, and help you make buying decisions that are hard. Everything we think and feel is taken in by the corporations, mainly by data ones like Feedlink and OnFeed and American Feedware, and they make a special profile, one that's keyed just to you, and then they give it to their branch companies, or other companies buy them, and they can get to know what it is we need, so all you have to do is want something and there's a chance it will be yours.

Of course, everyone is like, *da da da, evil corporations, oh they're so bad*, we all say that, and we all know they control everything. I mean, it's not great, because who knows what evil shit they're up to. Everyone feels bad about that. But

they're the only way to get all this stuff, and it's no good getting pissy about it, because they're still going to control everything whether you like it or not. Plus, they keep like everyone in the world employed, so it's not like we could do without them. And it's really great to know everything about everything whenever we want, to have it just like, in our brain, just sitting there.

In fact, the thing that made me pissy was when they couldn't help me at all, so I was just lying there, and couldn't play any of the games on the feed, and couldn't chat anyone, and I couldn't do a fuckin' thing except look at that stupid boat painting, which was even worse, because now I saw that there was no one on the boat, which was even more stupid, and was kind of how I felt, that the sails were up, and the rudder was, well, whatever rudders are, but there was no one on board to look at the horizon.

cache & carry

I had a few pages cached, from right before the feed stopped. I flipped through them sadly. I went back and forth between them. One was a message from the crazy asshole, which said, *You have been hacked by the Coalition of Pity.* The other was a good sale at Weatherbee & Crotch, which, by this time, I had probably missed. It was too bad, because I would have liked to have been able to take the opportunity to check out these great bargains, for example they had a trim-shirt with side pockets that I thought I probably would have bought, except it only came in sand, persimmon, and vetch.

night. and boring

It was Saturday night. The main lights were out. It had been a day since any of us had heard from the feed. Our parents were probably already on the moon, and were coming to the hospital the next morning.

For most of the day since we woke up after the attack, we had stared at the walls. We'd been sitting in our beds, and we tapped our feet on the rails. None of us could get the tune of "I'll Sex You In" out of our heads. Someone kept starting it up, and then the others would swear and tell them to shut up. Then we couldn't help ourselves, and we'd start to tap it out on our trays with a spork.

Link had finally woken up, and he paced up and down the floor. Loga came by during the afternoon and she talked to all of us, and she kept saying, "Ohhhhh! Ohhhhh!" in this sorry tone of voice, which was nice, except that then

she would pause and we could tell she was m-chatting all the news back to our friends on Earth. Occasionally, she'd forget and she'd say out loud to no one, "Omigod! Yes! Right here!" or "Hello . . . ?" or whatever it was she was saying in her head. She would laugh at jokes we couldn't hear.

Once, she went to the bathroom, casual-like, and came back with her hair parted a different place. Calista and Quendy watched her.

Later, without saying anything, they went and did theirs different like that, too.

Marty was sometimes saying his usual kind of thing, which was like, "Fuck this shit. Fuck this." He wanted to be out playing basketball or something.

There was nothing to do. Violet stared at her hands in her lap. I looked over at her. I smiled, you know, supportive. She looked at me and then went back to staring at her hands.

Now it was night, and all the big lights were out. We were lying there. There were machines that were taking our pulse and shit. We were all supposed to be sleeping.

I heard Violet walk across the floor and head for the bathroom. A few minutes later, I heard her walking back.

"Hey," I said.

"Yeah. Hey," she said. She stopped.

"You can . . .," I said. I pulled myself up against the pillows. "Why don't you sit down for a sec?"

She sat down in the chair by my bed. I could see the curve of her nose against my pulse, which was green and bumpy.

We sat there for a little while. I was thinking, This is nice. We're just sitting here. We don't have to say anything.

I felt real contented. I lay my head back on my pillow.

I looked over at her face. I could see the light from my heartbeat on her tears.

I said, "You're . . . hey. You're crying."

"Yes," she said.

"You don't . . ." I didn't know how to say what I wanted. I tried, "You don't seem like a crier."

"No," she said.

We sat. Now the silence wasn't very good. Her head was low. I could see the curve of her cheek against my brain waves, which were red and loopy.

She said, "You go try to have fun like a normal person, a normal person with a real life—just for one night you want to live, and suddenly you're screwed."

"You're not screwed."

"I'm screwed."

We sat there. I wanted to say something to

cheer her up. I had a feeling that cheering her up might be a lot of work. I was thinking of how sometimes, trying to say the right thing to people, it's like some kind of brain surgery, and you have to tweak exactly the right part of the lobe. Except with talking, it's more like brain surgery with old, rusted skewers and things, maybe like those things you use to eat lobster, but brown. And you have to get exactly the right place, and you're touching around in the brain, but the patient, she keeps jumping and saying, "Ow." Thinking of it like this, I started to not want to say anything. I kept thinking of nice things I could say, like, "I'm glad you went out last night, because that's how I met you," or, "And I think you *are* a normal person," but they all seemed just smarm.

So we just sat there, together, and we didn't say anything. And it wasn't bad.

I hoped she could see my smile in the light of my brain.

father

When my father got there the next morning, he didn't stay long. He was being very powerful and businesslike. He was dressed up, and he looked like he was ready to give some orders and sort things out. He looked like everyone around us was stupid and he was going to roll up his sleeves and do some real clarity work.

He stood there staring at me for a few seconds, and I was like, "What? *What?*"

He seemed surprised, and then blinked. He said, "Oh. Shit. Yeah, I forgot. No m-chat. Just talking."

I was like, "Do you have to remind me? What's doing? How's Smell Factor?"

"Your brother has a name."

"How's Mom?"

"She's like, whoa, she's like so stressed out. This is . . . Dude," he said. "Dude, this is some way bad shit."

I could completely feel Violet watching us. She was listening. I didn't want to have her judging us, and thinking we were too boring or stupid or something.

My father asked me to tell him what happened. I told him, leaving out some parts, like trying to break in to the minibar. He just kept shaking his head and going, "Yeah," "Yeah," "Yeah," "Oh, yeah," "Yeah," "Shit," "Yeah."

Finally, he stood up. I could tell he was pissed. He held up his hands. He said, "They want to subpoena your memories. This is this thing which is . . . Okay, this is bullshit."

After a minute, he said to someone who wasn't there, "Okay. Okay." He turned to me and said, "I'm going down to the police."

"Dad?" I said. "When am I going home?"

Dad put his hand over his ear. "Okay," he said. His mouth twitched. He nodded to someone.

He hit me on the knee and left.

I was staring at the wall and the stupid boat picture.

I heard Quendy say to Violet, "When are your parents coming?"

She said in a flat voice, "They're busy."

"Busy?"

"Yeah. With jobs. I guess they can't come at all."

salad days.
w/ sneeze guard

The next morning, we hadn't heard anything. We decided we needed to be cheered up big-time.

So Marty invented this game where we blew hypodermic needle tips through tubing at a skinless anatomy man on the wall. We spat the needles and tried to pin his nads.

It was the beginning of a great day, one of the greatest days of my life. We all played the dart game, and we laughed and sang "I'll Sex You In." Everyone was smiling, and it was skip.

The surprise was, Violet was the best at the dart game. She always won. I sucked.

She tried to teach me. It was a complete turn-on. She took my hand and put the tube in my mouth.

She whispered, "Aspirate. With the tongue."

People were really impressed. Link and Marty were completely hitting on Violet for it,

but she didn't pay them any attention, and sometimes she would stand there with one hand on my shoulder. I could feel that she was putting pressure on it, and that she didn't need to stand with all her weight because I was there.

Then Loga came in to the hospital for a while, and we were all talking to her about stuff when she stopped for a second because the girls' favorite feedcast, *Oh? Wow! Thing!*, was on. They were all like, "Tell us what's happening, tell us what's happening," so we all gathered around her in our little gowns, and she sat there cross-legged on the bed and told us, "Okay, so like now Greg's walking in, and he's . . . omigod, he's completely malfunctioning—he's completely in mal, and Steph is crying on the sofa. Okay, so she goes . . ." And she told us the story of what was happening as it happened, and we all sat there, smiling. I never heard Loga tell a story this good before, and she even used her hands and stuff, and her eyes were vacant like she was seeing some other world, which I guess she was. "Jackie is sitting on the front of the boat? And he holds his hand up, and he's going . . . he's going . . . omigod, he goes, 'Organelle, I always loved you from when we first went sailing.'"

Quendy was like, "Oh, god! This is so romantic!"

"Oh, meg. Big meg. You can feel the breeze on

your skin. It's warm, like those nights, you know, when we're like—we're like, 'We're always going to be young.' The breeze is like that. I wish you could feel it." We all shivered. She said, "You can smell the salt. The moon's out. It's high above everything, and soft."

Quendy actually cried one tear.

Violet and I looked at each other. We didn't look away.

We still were like that, looking into each other's eyes and all, when the doctor came in and was like, *What the hell had happened in the examination room, what's with all the needles?* and he was upgrading to homicidal and going all, *Da da da professional care unit, da da da dangerous and costly da da infection da da da*, etc. Luckily, Link's mom heard him yelling at us, and she's a complete dragon, so she gave him a piece of her mind. She told him that we were all suffering from a very stressful experience and we weren't used to these kinds of stresses and he had to understand that we had to have our fun, too. I still felt kind of bad about it, because we made a big mess, and Violet was completely meg blushing, but at least we didn't get like shoved into orbit on cybergurneys or something.

I liked being just a few beds away from her. We could wave. We all talked about old music, like from when we were little, and all the stupid

bands they had back then, and the stupid fashions we liked in middle school, like the year when the big fashion from L.A. and shit was that everyone wanted to dress like they were in an elderly convalescent home, there was this weird nostalgic chic for that, so we all remembered having stretch pants and velour tops, and Calista had even bought one of those stupid accessory walkers at Weatherbee & Crotch. There were those stupid ads for having your pants pulled up like around your chest. Violet said she still had a cane at home.

When we were eating dinner, sitting on her bed side by side, she said to me, "This is fun."

"It weirdly is," I said.

"Maybe these are our salad days."

"Huh?"

"You know. Happy."

"What's happy about a salad?"

She shrugged. "Ranch," she said.

the garden

Violet was off someplace talking to the doctor. I say "someplace" because we were using the examination room to blow needles at the anatomical guy's basket.

Link and Calista were standing real close by the vibrating bath, and I realized that they had probably decided to hook up. It looked like Calista was getting over Link being so stupid, which was brag, because he's a nice guy. Quendy sat there on the table, glaring at them.

Violet came back from the doctor. She was all intense looking. I asked what was wrong. She said she'd found a place she wanted to show me. I said sure, and I went with her. We went out into the hall. The shouting from the examination room was more distant. We walked for a ways through some tubes and so on. People floated by automatically on gurneys.

She walked in front of me. Her slippers went *fitik, fitik, sliss, fitik* on the floors. They were soft sounds, like the sounds mouths make when they open and close. I watched her from behind. When we stopped to wait for an uptube, she lifted her ankle so her heel came out of the slipper, and with her toes she slid it back and forth on the tiles without thinking about it. She massaged the floor. When the uptube was free, she settled her foot back in, and walked, *fitik, fitik, sliss, fitik*, right on in.

She took me up to a huge window. We stood in front of it. Outside the window, there had been a garden, like, I guess you could call it a courtyard or terrarium? But a long time ago the glass ceiling over the terrarium had cracked, and so everything was dead, and there was moon dust all over everything out there. Everything was gray.

Also, something was leaking air and heat out in the garden, lots of waste air, and the air was rocketing off into space through the hole, so all of the dead vines in the garden were standing straight up, slapping back and forth, pulled toward the crack in the ceiling where we could see the stars.

"Whoa," I said.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's like . . .," I said. "It's like a squid in love with the sky."

She was only looking at me, which was nice. I hadn't felt anything like that for a long time.

She rubbed my head, and she went, "You're the only one of them that uses metaphor."

She was staring at me, and I was staring at her, and I moved toward her, and we kissed. The vines beat against each other out in the gray, dead garden, they were all writhing against the spine of the Milky Way on its edge, and for the first time, I felt her spine, too, each knuckle of it, with my fingers, while the air leaked and the plants whacked each other near the silent stars.

dead language

We were watching Marty invent a game called Struggle of the Dying Warrior. It involved him being tied with all of his limbs, like his arms and his legs, onto the frame of his bed with the rubber tubing. Then he tried to get up and walk. He was not getting very far.

Violet and I were sitting on a bunk, swinging our legs in rhythm. We were talking about our families. I told her that I had a little brother. She said I hadn't mentioned him. I said he was a lot younger and a real pain.

Violet asked me about my mom and dad. I told her that my dad did some kind of banking thing, and my mom was in design. I didn't understand what my dad did exactly. Whatever it was, he was off doing it on the moon until tomorrow, when they were going to tell us about our feeds.

When I asked her what her dad did, she

said, "He's a college professor. He teaches the dead languages."

"People study that?"

She shrugged. "I guess."

"Okay. So what are the dead languages?"

"They're languages that were once important but that nobody uses anymore. They haven't been used for a long time, except by historians."

"Like what languages?"

"You know, FORTRAN. BASIC."

"What does one sound like?"

She slid off the bunk, and went to get her bag. She opened it and pulled out something, which was a pen. She also had paper.

I looked at her funny. "You write?" I said. "With a pen?"

"Sure," she said, a little embarrassed. She wrote something down. She put the pad of paper on my lap.

She asked me, "Do you know how to read?"

I nodded. "I can read. A little. I kind of protested it in School™. On the grounds that the silent 'E' is stupid."

"This is the language called BASIC," she said.

On the paper, it said:

000110 Goto 013500

013500 Peek 10388, 030

013510 Poke 10389, 030

She read it to me. I could tell the numbers line.

"So what does that mean?" I asked.

"It's the first thing my dad teaches the students on the first day," she said. "It means, 'I came, I saw, I conquered.'"

I looked at her pen. "You write all the time," I said, completely in awe.

"I've done it since I was little."

"Do you write . . . stuff?"

"Not stories or anything. I just write down things I see sometimes."

"On paper."

"Yeah."

I looked at her. "You're one funny enchilada," I said.

She nodded real quiet.

"Doesn't your hand get all cramped up?" I asked. "Don't you end up like, hook-hand?" I made hook-hand. She made hook-hand. We pawed each other with hook-hand.

She shook her head and smiled.

I asked, "Why don't you use the feed? It's way faster."

"I'm pretentious," she said. "Really pretentious."

"Yeah, so the studio audience has noticed, but seriously."

"Seriously."

Suddenly, something occurred to me. I looked up at her.

Marty had fallen to his knees, and was being pulled back toward the bed by the tubing. His cheeks were puffed out. His hands were in fists. His fingers were getting blue. All of the ridges on his arms stood out. Calista and Link were whistling with their fingers in their mouths. The other people in the ward were yelling, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

I asked Violet, "Your father, he's a college professor, but he was too busy to come see you after you like completely collapsed from a hacker attack? Too *busy*?"

She looked me in the eye. "No," she said, "but that's what I told you."

release

The salad days couldn't last forever. We really wanted to get back to Earth. Everyone wanted to forget how sucky the moon had been.

Tuesday, just before lunch, a doctor and a policewoman and a technician came in. Our parents were all talking over in the corner. The rest of us were all sitting around, talking about spaceship disasters.

The technician called us all to attention and went through this whole thing, he was sorry for the delay, but they wanted to be absolutely sure there was no permanent hack, that our feeds were safe, etc. He was all like, *da da da, must have been a difficult time for all of us, da da da, we would find our normal service resumed without interruption, da da da da da, he was meg sorry we had to go through this, and he had complied with the police and handed over our data, da da da, like thank you all again for your patience.*

One by one, we went into the examination room.

In there, there were nurses and the doctor and the technician. The nurses were watching the relays, our blood pressure and all. They were like, "Don't worry about anything. You'll feel it all coming back in a few seconds." The doctor touched a bootstick to my head.

He said, "Okay. Could we like get a thingie, a reading on his limbic activity?"

The bootstick was cold on my neck. I could feel the little hairs standing up around it. There was some kind of static electricity.

They moved the bootstick a little. I heard it beep.

"You should feel it now," said one of the nurses.

I didn't feel anything. I looked around. They were watching me closely.

"No," I said. I shifted on the bed. I didn't feel anything. I said, "Nothing. I feel nothing."

"Hold your head still," said the doctor.

He shifted the bootstick and it beeped again.

I kicked my heels against the bed. "There's nothing. Nothing," I said.

"Why don't you—" said the nurse. *Pulse up. Rising.*

Limbic activity okay?

He's just nervous.

Don't worry. It'll hit him in like a second.

We have readings on engram formation.

Signal engaged.

Don't drop the exterior relays yet.

The Ford Laputa. Sky and Suburb Monthly says there's no other upcar like it. And we agree.

"There you go," said the nurse.

You'll be more than a little attracted to its powerful T44 fermion lift with vertical rise of fifty feet per second—and if you like comfort, quality, and class, the supple upholstery and ergonomically designed dash will—

They slapped me on the back. I laughed, and the doctor and I did these big grins. I went back out into the other room, and we were all starting to feel it now. We were all starting to feel it good—

. . . name is Terry Ponk, and I'd like to tell you about upper-body strength . . .

And the feed was pouring in on us now, all of it, all of the feednet, and we could feel all of our favorites, and there were our files, and our m-chatlines. It came down on us like water. It came down like frickin' spring rains, and we were dancing in it.

. . . Celebrate fun. Celebrate friends. You've just come through something difficult, and this is the time for a table full of love and friendship and the exciting entrees you can only find at . . .

We were dancing in it like rain, and we couldn't stop laughing, and we were running our hands across our bodies, feeling them again, and I saw Violet almost hysterical with laughter, rubbing her cheeks, and pulling her hands down across her breasts, her chin up in the air.

. . . big bro? Big bro, you there? Mom says

I should . . .

. . . until one crazy day when this cranky old woman and this sick little boy meet a coy-dog with a heart of gold—and they all learn an important lesson about love. The NYT called it . . .

. . . hits a grounder to the mound . . .

. . . In other news, protests continued today against the American annexation of the moon. Several South American countries including Brazil and Argentina have submitted requests to join the Global Alliance in response. President Trumbull spoke from the White House. "What we have today, with the things that are happening in today's society, is . . ."

She held my hand—we found each other's hands through the like, the waterfall, and—

. . . If you liked "I'll Sex You In," you'll love these other popular slump-rock epics by hot new storm 'n' chunder band Beefquake, full of riffs that . . .

. . . We handpicked our spring fashions . . . and holding hands, we danced.

... Hardgore, the best feed-sim battle game ever to rip up the horizon. Sixty levels of detonation and viscera just waiting to fly at your command, Captain Bastard. If you don't feel slogging waist-deep within fifteen seconds, we'll eat our fucking hats...

... In your absence, you may not have heard...
Hand in hand, we danced.

Part 3

u t o p i a

normal

Things were back to normal real quick. We went back to Earth, and we all rested up, and our moms brought us ginger ale in bed. We chatted all the time on the feeds and shared music and shit. We had this major debate going on because we watched the *Oh? Wow! Thing!* and there was this part where Organelle asked Jackie whether she had meg hips and he was like, "Since you ask, we both could work out more," and she was like, "You shithead, you should've lied," and so all the guys were saying, *no way, if she asked him this complete question he should answer it*, and the girls were like, *if you ever insult how I look then you're completely shallow*, and we were like, *but she asked*, and they were like, *omigod, you don't get it*, and Link said if they really didn't want to know how they looked, then how come they asked so much, and then I said this thing, and Calista said this

thing, and it was like, *da da da da da, da da da da da, da da da da da*, all day. It was kind of fun. I like debates where you argue about different points of view.

My family, they were coming and going. I saw them on the landings, or sometimes, when I went down to the kitchen, behind the counters. My dad didn't really talk to me except to walk up and check to see if I had a fever, which I didn't, because it was a software problem. My mother was always holding on to my brother, Smell Factor, like squeezing him like a doll. She was real busy with him and she went to peewee league games for him and even took him to work with her sometimes. When she wasn't around in the afternoons, he sat in his closet watching *Top Quark*, with it broadcasting all over the place, so I watched it, too, because there was nothing else to do really but watch *Top Quark* and eat Chipwiches.

Cap'n Top Quark, that whole planet is so sad that I think they'll need a whole lot of good thoughts and hugging!

That's why, lickety-split, and we're on our way. Charm Quark, prepare the Friend Cannon. Bosen, turn our biggest, orangest sails toward Cryos, on the planet Sadalia.

Aye, aye, sir! You've made me one happy particle, sir!

Smell Factor had one of those birds now, one

of the ones that didn't fly or sing, the metal ones, so I could tell they were meg yesterday. Stuff always starts with people who are cool and in college, and then works down, until when the six-year-olds get it, it's like, who cares? The birds must have been yesterday for a while, because I didn't see them in any ads, and even Smell Factor was leaving his around and not clutching it.

A few days later, I went out on errands, because really, there was no problem anymore. It felt good to get out and to see all of the upcars in tubes and in the parking lots, just normal stuff, like people walking and talking on their feeds, and kids hanging out and shit. There were all the suburbs stacked on top of each other, like Apple Crest and Fox Hollow, and I would just fly through the tubes in the suburbs in my parents' upcar, looking at all the houses and the lawns, each one in its own pod, and everything was all like neat. Then I'd go home and sit on my bed and watch the feed, and everything seemed normal.

It's times like this that I'm real glad I have friends. They say friends are worth your weight in gold.

We had a party at the end of the week over at Quendy's, because her parents were off choking somewhere. That was when everyone was having those choking parties. I mean, it was completely midlife crisis.

It was the first time I saw Violet since we were on the moon. It was brag because she didn't have a ride, and I could borrow my parents' upcar, so I got to fly over and pick her up. I met her at a mall near her house. The mall was right on the surface, and you could see the sky through the dome. She was waiting there and looking up at the sun hitting one of the department stores.

Violet lived in a suburb that was a few hundred miles away from my suburb, so while we drove we had a little time to talk before we got to the party.

It was great because we had music on our feeds, and it was the same music, so I knew she was hearing the same notes that I was hearing, and our heads were like moving together, and she put her hand near the lift lever, so when I got to the exit tube and went to lift us, her hand was there, and our fingers closed over the lift lever, and we lifted it together, and were flung up into the sky.

We were going along pretty fast, and going around towers and shit, and she asked me, "What'll a party be like?"

"Like a party."

"I haven't been to many."

"You . . ." I shrugged. "You do this . . . I don't know. It's fun. It's a party. What do you do instead of parties?"

"My friends and I are all home-schooled, so

we're a mixed bag. Bettina's mother has us come over and weave ponchos."

"You don't go to School™?"

"All's parents teach us how to breechload their antiaircraft gun."

"Whoa. Can you show me?"

"Here's the surprising thing: It's all in the wrists."

"Unit."

"Yeah. Unit. God, I'm so excited to be going to a real party."

"Oh yeah?"

"Will it be like it is on the feed?"

I patted her hand. "Yeah. I mean, dumber, but yeah."

"Why, this makes me feel like a special girl. The specialest girl in the world."

She raised up her hand, and we knocked knuckles together.

She leaned back in her seat. She pulled some seat belt out and then let it roll back in. We were both thoughtful for a minute. There were some weather blimps in front of us. They were all yellow in the sunset that was spreading over the Clouds™. We flew between them. We could barely see the silver of their blimp-hides through the color of syrup. They were like a herd.

She asked, "Do you think things are going to be different?"