

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 needletips 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:

002110 Goto 013500

013500 Peek 16388, 036

013510 Poke 16389, 036

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

"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 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.*

Handwritten notes on the left page, including the word "utopia" and other illegible scribbles.

... 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

utopia

Handwritten notes on a separate sheet of paper, including the word "normal" and other illegible scribbles.

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™?"

"Alf'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?"

"From what?"

"From the way things were before."

I looked at her. She looked serious, suddenly. I shrugged. I said, "It's good to have people again, like all these people, talking to you in your head."

"We've all been through this big thing together," she said. "It's got to change us somehow."

She rested her arm along the back of my seat. I leaned my head back. I could feel my hairs rub against her arm.

Even to my hairs, her arm felt soft.

## undervalued truffle

We got to the party and it was a pretty good party, but low-key.

When we got there, for a second we stood in the entryway, because Link and Marty were playing each other at this game, *The Cranky Tumble of Dark House*, one of the ones with zombies and mutants, and they were all spinning around and shooting their fingers like guns. They couldn't see anything, just the gamefeed, so when Violet walked in, Marty almost whacked her in the stomach with his fist. He and Link were swearing and hopping up and down on the marble tiles.

"Unit," said Link. "Just get out of the way."

Marty was like, "Out of the fuckin' way! We're—Oh, shit!—We're—oh . . . Unit!" He was all shouting at Link, who was like missing some shot at a spine-leech.



We went into the living room and over to the table where Quendy had all the drinks and beer. People were sitting around drinking, and some of them had music on their feeds and were sitting around talking to it, and some others had imported a feedcast of *Snowblind*, a comedy about a young man who nothing ever happens to, until one crazy day when he crosses the mob at a ski resort and finds out what's really buried in those moguls—and then all hell breaks loose! (NC-17)

Violet looked kind of timid, now that we were there. She took a deep breath and went over to say hi to Calista. I stood around and talked with Quendy for a few minutes. Quendy was at first really nice and normal, talking about how it was good to see that we were doing okay, and how she was okay, and everything was fine. Then she started this glaring at Calista, and she was chatting me like, *Do you think Calista and Link are doing it?*

I shrugged and was like, *Yeah. I bet.*

*He's such a pig. He did it with me like—Oh. Never mind.*

Quendy glared at Calista and popped a popcorn shrimp into her mouth from way down below, with her thumb.

She was like, *I'm tired of just being the friendly one who everyone like steps all over.*

*Yeah, I chatted. How do you do that, with the shrimp and your thumb?*

*Okay. I'll show you. Hey, are you going out with Violet?*

*Yeah.*

*That's great. I think she's meg nice.*

*Yeah.*

*Calista says she's kind of stuck-up? But I don't agree at all. Like, Calista's the one who's stuck-up.*

*Calista said that?*

*Yeah. You want to try the shrimp on your finger?*

She showed me how to pop the shrimp. As she did it, I looked across the room and saw Violet talking to Calista, and both of them were frowning. I was worried that something bad had happened, so I m-chatted her, like, *Hey, beautiful. What's doing?*

*Heyyyyy, handsome. Just talking with Calista. Having a nice little chat. I made the mistake of saying we were back to the picayune grind. Now she keeps going, "Picayune"?!? "Picayune"?!?" and pretending I'm French. I wish I hadn't said anything.*

I looked around me. Everyone was nodding their heads to music, or had their eyes just blank with the feedcast. It was just a party. Nothing but a party.

From one direction, I heard a kid say, "I think the truffle is like completely undervalued."



And from the other direction, a girl was saying, "But he never pukes when he chugalugs."

It was like nothing had happened. We were watching feedcasts as if our brains had never been invaded by the asshole. Loga was laughing with her front teeth showing, as if she'd never been different from the rest of us, the one left with the feed when the rest of us didn't have it. Some guy was pouring the beer. Link and Marty were doing like acrobatics in the entryway, fighting invisible demons.

And everything was completely normal.

The truffle was completely undervalued.

... which the President denied in an address early on Tuesday. "It is not the will of the American people, the people of this great nation, to believe the allegations that were made by these corporate 'watch' organizations, which are not the majority of the American people, I repeat not, and aren't its will. It is our duty as Americans, and as a nation dedicated to freedom and free commerce, to stand behind our fellow Americans and not cast . . . things at them. Stones, for example. The first stone. By this I mean that we shouldn't think that there are any truth to the rumors that the lesions are the result of any activity of American industry. Of course they are not the result of anything American industry has done. The people of the United States know, as I know, that that is just plain hooey. We need to remember . . . Okay, we need to remember that America is the nation of freedom, and that freedom, my friends, freedom does not lesions make." The President is expected to veto the congressional . . .

the others  
in mal

The party went on. I couldn't concentrate anymore. We watched *Snowblind*. The guy in it, he fell off a platform at a mob-owned ski lift and landed in powder next to a sexy assassin with a heart of gold. I was feeling strange sitting next to Violet, and she wasn't laughing, which was weirding me out. She was just sitting there. The feedcast went on and on, and they all went up the mountain on skis and shot at each other and finally they all learned an important lesson about love. Then it was over.

I went upstairs to take a whizz, and Marty and Link were dragging me into a bedroom.

"Unit," Link said. "Unit, you are about to walk through the mirror."

"It is time," Marty said, "for Bulb-tweaker."

"Oh, unit," I was like, "is this malfunction?"

"Hey hey hey hey hey, this is a great site. It's fuckin' smooth as glass."

"Bulb-tweaker?"

"It's just a mild scrambler," said Link.

"I can completely see straight," said Marty. He pointed. "That's right in front of me."

There were other guys in there, too, and one girl. They were whispering. Someone had gone completely fugue on the bed.

"Do a burst. Then crank it down to a slow burn."

"Okay," said Marty. "I'm going to go again."

"Unit," said Link, punching me on the arm. "Fly the friendly skies."

I was like, "Not tonight."

"Come on, unit."

"I don't think Violet's into the mal."

"Oh, come on, unit, she'll never know."

"What is this, shitheads?" I said. "Cut the *ABC Afterschool Special*."

"She'll never know!" said Link.

I said, "What did we just go through? Unit?" I whapped myself on the back of the head.

"Remember? Like, what did we just . . . ? Huh?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

"What?"

"I said never mind."

"Okay," said Link. "Your loss. Here I go. You with, Marty?"

"I'm with."

They spread out their arms and closed their eyes, and you could see when it hit them. They got the shudder first, and then their heads rocked, and they were big stumbling, and they went backward, and there were all these people back there on the bed and a chair and the floor, blinded, doing the quiver. Link's tongue came out. It was purple from candy.

I went out and to the bathroom. When I was done, I went back downstairs. Quendy and Violet were talking. Quendy was like, "Where is everyone?" but I didn't tell her they were up getting scrambled in the master bedroom.

Violet asked if I wanted to walk out in the yard for a minute, and I said sure, so we went out. We were standing on the porch and it was much cooler out there. The dome on the yard's pod was all blue, like it was night, which it was, I mean, up on the surface, but it was blue there at the house, too.

We stood, leaning on the railing. The night was perfect. We shut out the music from the feed. It was funny, then, to look back in and see people moving to nothing.

She said, "You're quiet."

I nodded.

"What's doing?" she asked.

"No real one thing."

We just stood there together.

I said, "You didn't like the feature."

She said, "It was okay."

"You didn't laugh."

"I liked the mountains. All the pine trees. I'd like to go to the mountains. Wouldn't it be nice? With a fire?"

I pictured the mountains and the fire and a snowball fight and let's-get-out-of-these-wet-clothes, and I said, "Yeah. Sure."

"I want to get out to the country," she said. She looked at me. "What's really doing?"

I couldn't tell her about the guys going in mal. I didn't want her looking at them while they were on the wall-to-wall carpeting and doing the quiver. I didn't want her to look at them as if she was sorry.

Finally, I said, "People have just gone so quick back to like before."

"Why?" she said. "What happened?"

I didn't tell her about them upstairs. I just told her about sitting in the living room, and hearing the guy who was like the truffle was undervalued, and the girl who was like he never pukes when he chugalugs. I told her about them and then I looked for the memory of them, which I still had, and I played it for her. She knew exactly what I was talking about.

She went, *Brittle*.

*I feel like we're the only two of us who like remember the, like, the thing.*

*People want to forget.*

*You can't blame them.*

She looked at me. She didn't say anything for a second, and then she said, "My feedware is damaged."

"What? In your—in your brain?"

She put her hand up next to her scalp. "It'll be fine. But I'm the only one who had damage. They're trying to fix it."

"What's wrong? Can you still get like, stuff and shit?"

She laughed. "Yeah. Both of them. I'm fine. But they say they have to find some way to make adjustments. Something happened when the guy hacked. Most people, the hack just jammed them for a while. Somehow it affected mine more. Something's still wrong."

"Holy shit."

"Do you remember one day when we were on the moon, the doctors took me out to talk to me alone? Then I came back and found you, and took you up to the air-loss garden? The doctors, they were talking to me about this. They said that it would probably stabilize. It hasn't yet."

"Holy shit."

"They say it will probably be fine."

"Holy shit."

She patted me on the chest. "Calm," she said. "The rose will bloom ere long."

"Yeah. What-fuckin'-ever." She watched me. I stared at her. I thought about Marty and Link going in mal.

She chatted, *What are you thinking about?*

*Nothing.*

*It can't be nothing.*

I thought about Link and Marty's eyes rolled back. And I lied, like, *I'm just wondering whether he meant truffles the mushroom or truffles the candy.*

She laughed and touched my face. I felt like I was protecting her from something and that felt good, like I was a man already. I hugged her like a man and we kissed. For a long time, we stared at each other. I liked the way the synthetic breeze was on her hair. We stood, looking out at the shrubs, and the motorboat up on a trailer, and I felt like I was in love, and our arms were around each other.

She leaned close to my head and took a handful of my hair in her hand and pulled my head down. She whispered, "Keep thinking. You can hear our brains rattling inside us, like the littler Russian dolls."



nudging

That night, the night after the party, I had something that I thought was a dream, with me at a great site where all the games were free and you could play anything. So I was thinking different even about pretty dumb games like *Turbo Checkers*, because if you can get anything for free, what the hell, so I started one of them, which was this fantasy game, and I was putting on some elf gloves, and stringing my bow, when I could feel that someone was nudging my feed. They were nudging it, like with their cheek or nose.

In my dream, I asked them who they were.

In my dream, they told me they were the police. They asked me if I was a victim of the hack at the Rumble Spot.

In my dream, I said yes.

In my dream, they told me okay, go back to sleep.

In my dream, I said who were they really? They said that they were going to be running some tests on me, and that I should think about something else.

I said that they weren't the police, so who were they really?

They said, here is the lizard you have always been wanting. We took the liberty of giving it a nice new collar.

I asked if all these games were mine.

All yours, they said. All yours. Good night, sweetie. They're all yours. Take them. All yours.

In my dream, I thought they were the hacker group, the Coalition of Pity.

But when I woke up, I didn't remember that for weeks. What I remembered was just the games, which, once I was awake, I couldn't find, and the elf gloves, and the bow, and the lizard that was all mine.

... AMURICA: A PORTRAIT IN GEEZERS ...

... I remember, as the last forests fell . . . at about that time, we would see hawks and eagles in the cities. People walked outside more, back then. The temperature usually didn't get above a hundred. There were streets in the cities, and eagles flew over them, wobbling without moving their wings.

I remember seeing the hawks perched on street lamps, during those last days of the American forests. They had come from the mountains, maybe, or pine woods that were now two or three levels of suburb, but the hawks sat in our cities like kings. They would not look down from their lampposts as thousands of downcars went by underneath. It was like they sat alone on Douglas firs.

I miss that time. The cities back then, just after the forests died, were full of wonders, and you'd stumble on them—these princes of the air on common rooftops—the rivers that burst through city streets so they ran like canals—the rabbits in parking garages—the deer foaling, nestled in Dumpsters like a Nativity.

o o o

## lose the chemise

It was maybe, okay, maybe it was like two days after the party with the "never pukes when he chugalugs" that Violet chatted me first thing in the morning and said she was working on a brand-new project. I asked her what was the old project, and she was like, did I want to see the new one? I said, *Okay, should I come over to su casa? I've never been there*, and she was like, *No, not yet. Let's meet at the mall.*

I was like, *Okay, sure, fine, whatever swings your string*, and she was all, *Babycakes, you swing my string*, which is a nice thing for someone to say to you, especially before you use mouthwash.

So I flew over to the mall near her house through the rain, which was coming down outside in this really hard way. Everyone had on all their lights until they got above the

clouds. Up there it was sunny, and people were flying very businesslike.

The mall was really busy, there were a lot of crowds there. They were buying all this stuff, like the inflatable houses for their kids, and the dog massagers, and the tooth extensions that people were wearing, the white ones which you slid over your real teeth and they made your mouth just like one big single tooth going all the way across.

Violet was standing near the fountain and she had a real low shirt on, to show off her lesion, because the stars of the *Oh? Wow! Thing!* had started to get lesions, so now people were thinking better about lesions, and lesions even looked kind of cool. Violet looked great in her low shirt, and besides that she was smiling, and really excited for her idea.

For a second we said hello and just laughed about all of the stupid things people were buying and then Violet, she pointed out that, regarding legs to stand on, I didn't have very much of one, because I was wheeling around a wheelbarrow full of a giant hot cross bun from Bun in a Barrow.

I said, "Yum, yum, yum."

She was like, "You ready?"

I asked her what the idea was.

She said, "Look around you." I did. It was the mall. She said, "Listen to me." I listened. She said, "I was sitting at the feed doctor's a few days

ago, and I started to think about things. Okay. All right. Everything we do gets thrown into a big calculation. Like they're watching us right now. They can tell where you're looking. They want to know what you want."

"It's a mall," I said.

"They're also waiting to make you want things. Everything we've grown up with—the stories on the feed, the games, all of that—it's all streamlining our personalities so we're easier to sell to. I mean, they do these demographic studies that divide everyone up into a few personality types, and then you get ads based on what you're supposedly like. They try to figure out who you are, and to make you conform to one of their types for easy marketing. It's like a spiral. They keep making everything more basic so it will appeal to everyone. And gradually, everyone gets used to everything being basic, so we get less and less varied as people, more simple. So the corps make everything even simpler. And it goes on and on."

This was the kind of thing people talked about a lot, like, parents were going on about how toys were stupid now, when they used to be good, and how everything on the feed had its price, and okay, it might be true, but it's also boring, so I was like, "Yeah. Okay. That's the feed. So what?"

"This is my project."



"Is . . . ?"

She smiled and put her finger inside the collar of my shirt. "Listen," she said. "What I'm doing, what I've been doing over the feed for the last two days, is trying to create a customer profile that's so screwed, no one can market to it. I'm not going to let them catalog me. I'm going to become invisible."

I stared at her for a minute. She ran her finger along the edge of my collar, so her nail touched the skin of my throat. I waited for an explanation. She didn't tell me any more, but she said to come with her, and she grabbed one of the nodules on my shirt—it was one of those nodule shirts—and she led me toward Bebrekker & Karl.

We went into the store, and immediately our feeds were all completely Bebrekker & Karl. We were bannered with all this crazy high-tech fun stuff they sold there. Then a guy walked up to us and said could he help us. I said I didn't know. But Violet was like, "Sure. Do you have those big searchlights? I mean, the really strong ones?"

"Yeah," he said. "We have . . . yeah. We have those." He went over to some rack, and he took these big searchlights off the rack. He showed us some different models. The feeds had specs. They showed us the specs while he talked.

When he went into the back to get another,

cheaper searchlight, I said to Violet, "What next?"

She whispered, "Complicating. Resisting."

Bebrekker & Karl were bannering us big. It was, *We've streamlined the Tesla coil for personal use—you can even wear it in your hair! With these new, da da da, and Relax, yawn, and slump! While our greased cybermassage beads travel up and down your back! Guaranteed to make you etc.*, like that.

I was like, "Okay, huh?" but the guy came back and he had another searchlight.

He told us, "You can see shit real good with this one? I have one of these on my upcar. It's sometimes like—whoa, really—whoa. There was this one time? And I was flying along at night and I shined the light down at the ground, to look at the tops of all the suburb pods? And all over the top of them, it looked like it was moving, like there was a black goo? So I turned up the brightness, and I went down, and I shined it more bright, and it turned out the black moving goo was all these hordes of cockroaches. There were miles of them, running all over the tops of the domes. They kept on trying to get out of the light, so wherever you shined it, there would be this—"

"I'd like to mount the light on my belly," Violet said. "Would that be possible?"



He looked at her funny. "With a swivel head?"

"Sure. Then I could swivel it."

"What's this for?"

"Something special," she said, in this low voice. She rubbed my arm up and down, sexily.

He was like, "Whoa. I can't even think." He gave me the thumbs-up.

She winked at me. It was kind of a turn-on.

She got him to send her all of the feedstats for the lamp, but then she didn't buy it. She didn't have it mounted. Instead, she thanked him a real lot, and then she took me out of the store, and I was starting to get the picture and think it was all pretty funny.

We kept going from place to place, asking for weird shit we didn't buy. She took me to a rug store, and a store with old chests and pieces of eight and shit, and we went to a toy store and she asked them to explain the world of Bleakazoid action figures, which is a dumbass name if I ever heard one, but they explained it all. It was mainly they were these muscular people from a parallel world, which is usually how it is. We didn't buy anything.

We ran through the big hallway with her tapping her head and saying, "Hear that? The music?" It was pop songs. "They have charts that show which chords are most thumbs-up. Music

is marketing. They have lists of key changes that get thirteen-year-old girls screaming. There's no difference between a song and an advertising jingle anymore. Songs are their own jingles. Step lively. Over here."

We went to a clothing store and she held up all these stupid dresses, and the girl there was like, *I'm helping a weird kid, so I'm going to be really fake, so she kept smiling fake, and nodding really serious at all the dresses Violet held up, and she was all, "That will look great," and Violet said, "I don't know. D'you think? He's pretty wide in the chest."*

The girl looked at me, and I was frozen. So I said, "Yeah. I work out."

Violet asked me, "What are you? What's your cup size?"

I shrugged and played along. "Like, nine and a half?" I guessed. "That's my shoe size."

Violet said, "I think he'd like something slinky, kind of silky."

I said, "As long as you can stop me from rubbing myself up against a wall the whole time."

"Okay," said Violet, holding up her hands like she was annoyed. "Okay, the chemise last week was a mistake."

I practically started to laugh snot into my hand. We went to some more clothing stores, and

we looked at all these dumb sweaters and pretended we liked them, and we looked at makeup that she wouldn't wear, and a gravel-tumbler, and we went to a DVS Pharmacy Superstore, and she comparison-shopped for home endoscopy kits.

We were looking at the endoscopy kits when she started whispering to me, "For the last two days, okay? I've been earmarking all this different stuff as if I want to buy it—you know, a pennywhistle, a barrel of institutional lard, some really cheesy boy-pop, a sarong, an industrial lawn mower, all of this info on male pattern baldness, business stationery, barrettes . . . And I've been looking up house painting for the Antarctic homeowner, and the way people get married in Tonga, and genealogy home pages in the Czech Republic . . . I don't know, it's all out there, waiting."

I picked up one box. "This one is the cheapest. You swallow the pills and they take pictures as they go down."

She said, "Once you start looking at all this stuff, all of these sites, you realize this obscure stuff isn't obscure at all. Each thing is like a whole world. I can't tell you."

"How's your like," I pointed at my head, "how's your feedware working out?"

"It's fine. You're not listening."

"I'm just wondering."  
She asked me, "What do you think?"  
"I liked the guy in Bebrekker & Karl. I wonder if it's true, about the cockroaches."  
"What do you think about resisting?" she asked me really hard. Her jaw muscles were sticking out.

I said, "It sounds great, as long as I get to wear the chemise." She laughed.

We went to dinner at a J. P. Barnigan's Family Extravaganza. We had mozzarella sticks and then I had a big steak. She got a Caesar salad. There were free refills on drinks. Afterward, we were sitting there in the booth, and I asked her whether she wanted a ride home. She said no. I said was she sure, and she said yes.

I said, "What's doing with your parents?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, with your house, and why you have me meet you here instead. And why didn't your dad come to the moon? When we were, you know."

She looked at me funny. She said, "Do you know how much it costs to fly someone to the moon?"

I guessed. "A lot?"

"Yeah. Yeah, a lot. He wanted to come, but it would have been, like, a month of his salary. He saved up for a year to send me. Then I went, and that stuff happened."

"He saved up for a year for you to go to the moon?"

"Yeah." She said, "Hey, here's what you can do. You can drop me at the feed technician's office. I have an appointment."

We made out for a minute in the car. Then I flew her a few miles away, to a technician. I left her there. Before I pulled out of the tube by his office, I looked back at her, standing by the door. She had her hands on her elbows. She was pinching the elbow skin and pulling it.

She waited there, pinching and pulling, and then went in.

sniffing

That night, I chatted her after I went to bed. I was like, *Violet. Violet?*

She was like, *Hey. Hey there.*

*It was great, going to the mall today. I had a good time. I enjoyed that whole thing.*

Finally, she was like, *I did, too.*

I could tell something was wrong. It was something about the way she was sending things on the feed.

I asked, *Are you crying?*

There was a long feed silence. I could hear programming.

She was like, *Yeah. Just for practice.*

*What's doing?*

*Never mind, she chatted. Never mind.*

*Didn't you have a real good time?*

*I wish you were here, she said.*

I thought about her lying in bed. Maybe in



some pajamas, so she was warm. I said, I wish I was there, too.

Look, she said, changing the whole subject. Look at everything I got from the feed. It's going crazy with everything we looked at today. It's trying to work for me.

This perky voice on her feed said, Hi! I'm Nina, your personal FeedTech shopping assistant! Tired of that gross-out smell in your mouth? Try FreshGorge Glottal Deodorant—your boyf will thank you big-time! Hey, Violet Durn, what a skip kinda day you had! You go shop, girl! Here's some more great info about all the brag stuff you asked about!

Violet started to forward me things. There were sites for the spotlights and the dresses and the endoscopy kits, and she sent them in flurries. Once they started coming, they started to call others to them, and I could feel them doing that call, and they were all around me. They came to us. It was like they were lots of friendly butterflies, and we were smeared with something, and they kept coming and coming, and more and more were winking beautifully, and more and more came. And they were landing on our fingers, and on our lips, and on our eyes, opening and closing? And we were going—Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!

It was crazy.

## a new place

Being with Violet was great.

She hadn't had much of the stuff you see on the feed when she was younger. A lot of it was too expensive, or her father just said no. But she had watched all the shows about how other people live normally, and she really wanted to live like the rest of us. So she and her other home-schooling friends had tried to copy us. For example, he said she couldn't have toy guns, because they were against his beliefs, so she had to pick up anything—pieces of wood or bent metal—and use them like a toy gun, and pretend it was just as good as a real one made of plastic.

I was afraid that she would be too smart for me, but she wasn't. I don't mean she wasn't smarter, because she was, but just that there was so much she hadn't done. She was like a little kid, all excited when I was just meeting her at



the mall for the day, and we walked from store to store or went on the air slides or shopped underwater. She had hardly ever done any of it before. She was always new.

We sat in the mall and made up stories about people who passed by. Shoppers walked around us on the concourses, their mouths moving, talking to people who weren't there. They were all muttering.

We made up stories about how they'd given birth to monsters in attics.

We went into stores, and we laughed and laughed.

It was like she took my hand, or I took her hand, and we ducked through doorways, and together we went to an old place, and it was a new place.

We went there holding hands.

## the dimples of delglacey

Okay, but sometimes, though, I did get worried that she was too smart for me.

I don't do too good in School™. We were back in School™, so I was reminded pretty often that I was stupid.

School™ is not so bad now, not like back when my grandparents were kids, when the schools were run by the government, which sounds completely like, Nazi, to have the government running the schools? Back then, it was big boring, and all the kids were meg null, because they didn't learn anything useful, it was all like, *da da da da, this happened in fourteen ninety-two, da da da da, when you mix like, chalk and water, it makes nitroglycerin, and that kind of shit?* And nothing was useful?

Now that School™ is run by the corporations, it's pretty brag, because it teaches us how the world can be used, like mainly how to use

our feeds. Also, it's good because that way we know that the big corps are made up of real human beings, and not just jerks out for money because taking care of children, they care about America's future. It's an investment in tomorrow. When no one was going to pay for the public schools anymore and they were all like filled with guns and drugs and English teachers who were really pimps and stuff, some of the big media congloms got together and gave all this money and bought the schools so that all of them could have computers and pizza for lunch and stuff, which they gave for free, and now we do stuff in classes about how to work technology and how to find bargains and what's the best way to get a job and how to decorate our bedroom.

It was still hard, there were some times when none of us did good, and I felt stupid, and we all felt stupid, and Loga and Calista were like, *Omigod! This is so dumb!*

*Could the teacher be any more, please, condescending?*

*Omigod, I know. Like, thanks for the heapin' helpings of yawn banquet.*

And I sat there with my palms pressed into my forehead, thinking about Violet, at home, being smart. I would think about some conversation we were having where I was dumb.

Like she was always reading things about how

everything was dying and there was less air and everything was getting toxic. She told me about how things were getting really bad with some things in South America, but she couldn't really tell exactly how bad, because the news had been asked to be a little more positive. She said that it made her frightened to read all this kind of thing, about how people hated us for what we did. So one time I said to her that she should stop reading it, because it was just depressing, so she was like, *But I want to know what's going on, so I was like, Then you should do something about it. It's a free country. You should do something.* She was like, *Nothing's ever going to happen in a two-party system.* She was like, *da da da, nothing's ever going to change, both parties are in the pocket of big business, da da da, all that?* So I was like, *You got to believe in the people, it's a democracy, we can change things.*

She was like, *It's not a democracy.*

I hated it when she got like this, because then she wasn't like herself, I mean, she wasn't like this playful person who drags me around the mall doing crazy shit, she was suddenly like those girls in School™ who sit underground and dress all in black with ribbing and get an iron fixture for their jaws and they're like, "Capitalist fool—propaganda tool," holding up both their hands, etc. When she said things like *It's not a democracy,*



suddenly I couldn't stand to be having this whole conversation. I was like, *Oh, yeah*, and she was like, *It's not*, and I was like, *Oh, okay*, and she said, *No, it's not a democracy*, and I was like, *Yes it is*, and she was like, *No it isn't*, and I got sarcastic, so I was like, *No, sure, it's all fascist, isn't it? We're all fascists?*

Then she was like, really gently, *No, please, I'm not trying to be an asshole. It's not a democracy.*

I was like, *Then what is it?*

*A republic. It's a republic.*

*Why?*

*Because we elect people to vote for us. That's my point.*

*So why is it like that?*

*Because if it was a democracy, everybody would have to decide about everything.*

*I thought about that. We could have everybody vote. From the feeds. Instantaneous. Then it would be a democracy.*

*Except, she said, only about seventy-three percent of Americans have feeds.*

*Oh, I said. Yeah. And so I felt stupid. There's that many who don't?*

*Then she told me, I didn't used to have a feed.*

I was like, *What do you mean?*

*She was quiet like she didn't want to chat. It was that kind of quiet. Then she went, We didn't*

*have enough money. When I was little. And my dad and mom didn't want me to have one.*

*Holy shit.*

*I got it when I was seven.*

*I'm sorry, I said.*

*For what?*

*For not knowing. You know, that so many people don't have them.*

*No one with feeds thinks about it, she said. When you have the feed all your life, you're brought up to not think about things. Like them never telling you that it's a republic and not a democracy. It's something that makes me angry, what people don't know about these days. Because of the feed, we're raising a nation of idiots. Ignorant, self-centered idiots.*

Suddenly, she realized what she had said, that she'd just called me a self-centered, ignorant idiot. She stopped. She started stumbling all over her words, and she was like, *I didn't mean . . . I, you know . . . it's not really important, but just, I believe . . .*, and so on. I just sat there and watched her. I could tell I was liking to watch her trip up over her words while I was doing this angry face, so I didn't move my mouth or chat her or anything. I just sat, and she felt bad, and then she even chatted me, *I'm sorry*, which was bad, because it showed that we both knew I was

stupid, and then I looked away. I looked away, and she put her hand on my arm, which was the worst, because it was the consolation prize.

That night, when I got home, I was looking out the window, being sorry, and my mother was like, "What's wrong?"

I didn't answer for a while. Finally, I said, "Do you think I'm stupid? I mean, am I dumb?"

"You're a nontraditional learner."

Smell Factor said, "No, he's not. He's dumb."

My mother asked, "Is this re: Violet?"

"No."

"Come on. Is it re: her? Because she shouldn't make you feel stupid. That's not good."

"Mom, it's un-re: her, okay?"

"She should be proud of you."

I didn't want to say anything. I didn't want my mom to think Violet was a snob. Violet wasn't a snob. I was just dumb.

My mom came over and said to me, "You're a wonderful boy. I know I'm your mom, but I can say that you're a wonderful boy. Isn't he, Steve?"

My dad was conked out at the table going over the news on the feed, but he pulled himself up, and she was like, "Isn't he a wonderful boy?," and my dad was like, "Sure, yeah, yeah," and my mom was like, "You're as handsome as a duck in butter."

"Where does she live, anyway?" my dad asked. "I don't know. Like, two hundred miles from here. I've never been there. Why?"

"Just asking."

"You're a catch," said my mother. "You're pewter."

That was no help at all, and the next day, I did really bad on a test, and I came home, and Violet chatted me to say she couldn't talk, she was, I don't know, learning ancient Swahili or building a replica of Carthage out of iron filings or finding the cure for entropy or some shit, and I was sitting around, staring at a corner of a room, where two of the walls and the floor came together, and my mom and dad caught me doing it, and my mom came up and hugged me.

I could tell it was all staged. They'd tried to find me. I patted Mom a little on the back, enough to say, *Okay, yeah, enough for affection. You can back off now, Ma.* She did, and I hoped they would leave, but they weren't done. So I had to sit there and listen to about me.

She said, "You're just the boy we wanted. You're good enough for any girl. You're just what we asked for."

My dad was meg uncomfortable and kept on moving from foot to foot.

My mom ran her fingers through my hair, and



rocked me back and forth, even though I was standing, and she said, like a poem, "You've got your father's eyes and my nose."

"And my mouth," said my dad.

"And my hands," said my mom.

"And the chin, dimples, and hairline of DelGlacey Murdoch."

"What?" I said.

"This big actor," explained my mom. "We thought he was like the most beautiful man we'd ever seen in our lives."

"Well," said my dad, "we *thought* he was going to be big."

"We saw a feedcast with him in it the night we . . . the night you were made." My mom winked.

"What?" I said. "What was his name? You never told me about the actor."

"He was . . . What did you say his name was again, Steve?"

"DelGlacey Murdoch."

"DelGlacey Murdoch," said my mom, kind of smoothing things over. "That's right. And we thought he was the most beautiful man we'd ever seen. So after the movie we went right to the conceptionarium and told them, 'We want the most beautiful boy you've ever made. We want him with my nose and his dad's eyes, and for the rest, we have this picture of DelGlacey Murdoch.'"

I said, "I've never even like heard of DelGlacey Murdoch."

My father played nervously with his pin-stripes. "He didn't . . . he didn't really take off the way like we expected. After that movie, he was mostly . . . I guess . . . small roles."

"He starred in some things," said my mom. "Steve, he starred in a lot of things."

"Straight to daytime," said my dad.

"Honey, he was the most beautiful actor ever. So we went into the conceptionarium, and told the geneticists what we wanted, and your father went in one room, and I went in the other, and . . ."

"Hey—hey—I don't want to hear!"

"You know what he was in?" said my dad. "Remember *Virtual Blast*? He played the fifth Navy Seal, with the croup. You know, coughing."

"He was in the feature with all the crazy utensils," said my mother. "A few years ago? That one? He was the doorman in the pillbox hat."

I had already pulled up a list of his feed-features and I was going over them. None of them got more than two stars. My parents were checking my feed, I could feel them like prodding it, and my mom was like, "It doesn't matter what he was in," and she m-chatted something to my dad, and so he was like, "No, no, that isn't the point."

"What we're talking about," said my mother,

"is how handsome you are, and how brave you are."

"We've decided that you've been through a lot," said my father.

"You've been very brave," my mother repeated.

"Yeah . . . ?" I said. "I just fell down. The guy touched me and I just like, fell down."

"You were brave," said my father.

"We've decided you need a little cheering up," said my mother.

I started to feel a little better. I could feel their feeds shifting toward a common point, some kind of banner they were pulling up.

"We've decided to get you your own upcar," said my mother.

"You can pick it," said my dad. "Within certain limits."

"Oh, god!" I said. "Oh, god! Oh, Mom—Dad—this is—oh, shit! Holy shit! Are you kidding! You are like the best mom and dad ever!"

"We're not kidding," said my dad. "Here's the banner."

And it unwrapped in my head, a banner for a dealer, and links to other dealers, and a big line of credit, and I was hugging them, and I was like holy shit, by tomorrow I would be driving to pick up Violet in my own goddamn upcar, and suddenly, suddenly, I didn't feel so stupid anymore.

... what the President meant in the intercepted chat. This was, uh, nothing but a routine translation problem. It has to be understood, that . . . It has to be understood that when the President referred to the Prime Minister of the Global Alliance as a 'big shithead,' what he was trying to convey was, uh—this is an American idiom used to praise people, by referring to the sheer fertilizing power of their thoughts. The President meant to say that the Prime Minister's head was fertile, just full of these nutrients where ideas can grow. It really was a compliment. We should say again that any attempt to withdraw the Alliance's diplomatic presence from American soil will be taken as a sign of ill will, and, uh, we are likely to respond with the most stringent . . ."

## lift

My father took me to test-drive upcars on Saturday. I had tried a lot of them in the feed-sim, but it's not the same as actually driving them, and you should always test-drive a vehicle before purchasing it, because you never know what unexpected factors will come into play. For example, I discovered that the Illia Cloud had a windshield that was kind of the wrong height for me, and I didn't like the dashboard arrangement of the Dodge Cormorant.

We picked Violet up at the mall and took her with us. Both she and me were really excited by the whole thing, and we were chatting really fast the whole time, about what color to get, and whether the red was too cheesy, or whether it was autumnal, which is what she said.

We took them out to test-drive, with my

father sitting next to me. He'd be chatting with someone somewhere else while I drove. He'd be looking out the window, and wincing whenever Violet or I talked out loud. He had trouble thinking and hearing at the same time. When he was done chatting, he'd ask me a question out loud, like, "How's she feel?"

Violet would tell me, "Resist the feed. Look into ox carts."

"Yeah, thanks, Violet," my father would say. "We're having serious decision flux here." He'd ask me, "What do you think?"

I'd tell him about the handling or the lift.

Violet would say, "How about a howdah?"

Dad asked, "What's a howdah?"

"A seat on elephant-back."

"Great. Great. Thanks."

Me and Violet walked up and down the rows of upcars. I was thinking about the Swarp and the Dodge Gryphon.

The Swarp didn't have as much room in the back. It was a little sportier.

The Dodge Gryphon had the larger back seat for your friends and shit, but it was a little lumbering.

So here was the decision: Dodge was bannering me with me driving, and all of these people in bikinis stuffed into the car with me, this big party, and with a beach ball, too, like I



could be the scene; and Nongen, who made the Swarp, was showing a romantic drive through the mountains with just me and Violet, who they got pretty much right, except they made her taller and with bigger boobs, and they made her cheeks kind of sparkly in a way that, if it were really happening, I would try to wipe off with a facecloth.

I didn't know which to choose, because if I got an upcar that was too small, then Link and Marty might be like, "We'll take my car instead. More of us can fit in," and then I would have spent these hundreds of thousands of dollars for nothing. But if I bought the Swarp, it was a little more sporty, and that might be brag, because the Dodge Gryphon was maybe too family.

"So you're getting this as a reward for being in the hospital?" Violet asked.

"I guess."

"A little present from Mommy and Daddy?"

"Yeah. They're buying it."

She thought about this for a minute. Then she shook her head. "You're lucky."

"Are you saying I'm spoiled?"

"No."

"It seems like that's what you mean."

"No, that's not it."

I thought for a second, and said, "So what is it?"

"Nothing."  
"Look, it's like a reward. I'm going to turn in evidence in court and everything. I mean, you are, too, but we're going to have to go to court against that guy. We should get something for that. We deserve it."

She looked at me strangely.

"What?" I said.

"No one's told you?"

I waited. Her eyebrow was arched. Finally, I gave in and said, "No. No one told me what?"

"We're not going to court."

"We got out of it? My dad was trying to get us out of it."

"He didn't need to. The guy was dead."

"What? How?"

"He died a day after we went into the hospital. Contusions. Broken skull."

"What are contusions?" I looked it up. "Oh."

"He was beaten to death at the club. We saw it. The police, remember? They beat him over the head."

She reached out and took my arm.

My father walked toward us across the pavement, waving. The plastic flags were flapping in the artificial wind while Muzak came out of heaven.

I bought the Dodge.



## a question of moral

That night we all had dinner together, my family and Violet. My dad was real proud of me, and was all, "He drove home behind me. Can you like believe this shit? Our own son with his own upcar?"

I couldn't stop smiling. "Yeah." I was like, "It's meg brag." My mom smiled at me.

Smell Factor wasn't listening to anything. He had some crappy kids' music show blasting in his feed so loud his aud nerves were probably shot. He had a bunny plate and was making something with his burrito.

"Are you going to take Violet out in it?" Mom asked.

"Tomorrow. She and me are driving out to like the country. She wants to go for a walk. I'm picking her up." I couldn't help grinning like a shithead again.

Violet smiled back at me.  
"There's a forest," said Violet. "It's called Jefferson Park. We're thinking about going either there, or out to beef country."  
My dad nodded. "It'll have to be beef country," he said. "The forest's gone."  
"Jefferson Park?"

He nodded, then squinted while he like clawed something off the roof of his mouth with his tongue. He told us, "Yeah. Jefferson Park? Yeah. That was knocked down to make an air factory."

"You're kidding!" said Violet.

"Yeah, that's what happened," said Dad, shrugging. "You got to have air!"

Violet pointed out, "Trees make air," which kind of worried me because I knew Dad would think it was snotty.

My father stared at her for a long time. Then he said, "Yeah. Sure. Do you know how inefficient trees are, next to an air factory?"

"But we need trees!"

"For what?" he said. "I mean, they're nice, and it's too bad, but like . . . Do you know how much real estate costs?"

"I can't believe they cut it down!"

Mom said to Smell Factor, "Hey. Hey! Stop playing with your food."

Smell Factor was head-banging with the feed music and turning his bunny plate around and around with his little pudgy fingers.

My father told him, "This is dinner together. That means family networking and defragging time."

"They cut down Jefferson Park? That is so like corporate—"

My father nodded and smiled at her with this meg condescending smile on his face, and was like, "Dude, I remember when I was like you. You should grow up to be a, you know. Clean-air worker or something. Don't lose that. But remember. It's about people. People need a lot of air."

For a minute, we all ate without saying anything. Violet looked either angry or embarrassed. I chatted her about being sorry for what Dad said, but she didn't chat me back. I thought Dad was being kind of a jerk to Violet. I wanted to say something, like, something that would be, you know, something about how she was more right than he was. I said, "Hey, Violet told me we're not going to court."

"About what?" my mother said.

"We were like assaulted?" I said. "Remember? The thing on the moon?"

"Yeah, sure," said my dad. "No, he's dead. There's no trial. We've all talked about suing.

We'll probably sue the nightclub, maybe the police."

I said, "No one told me he was dead."

My father chewed some.

Smell Factor was banging his head and singing along with the feed, "Intercrural or oral. Ain't a question of moral."

My father said to me, "There wasn't any reason for you to know."

"Yes, there was."

"No, there wasn't."

"It's my feed."

"You'd just get worried."

"I want to get worried. If there's like some meg thing wrong,"

"Intercrural or oral! Ain't a question of moral!"

My mom reached over and touched me on the wrist and said, "You're safe."

Dad said, "You have an upcar."

"The lunatic is dead," said my mother. "There's nothing to worry about."

Violet said, "It was frightening for all of us."

"Yeah, sure," said Dad, dismissing her kind of jerkily, "but that's no reason—"

"Intercrural or oral! Ain't a question of moral!"

"Smell Factor!"

"That's not his name," said my mother.

"Intercrural or oral! Ain't a question of moral!"

"What would you---"

"Intercrural or oral! Ain't a question of moral!"

"Hey!" yelled my mother. "Hey, you! We don't sing at the table!"

"You're acting out of line," said my father, pointing at me. "I'm really disappointed."

"Doing what?" I said. "I'm just asking."

"Dude, I just bought you an upcar, and you're being a brat."

You're not being a brat, Violet chatted.

"Stop chatting," said my dad. "What are you saying?"

"Let them alone, Steve," said Mom.

Suddenly, I saw Violet freeze, and her eyes stopped moving and her face got all white.

My dad was saying, "Look, we're going to sue the nightclub. Okay?"

"Sure," I said. "Whatev."

"Quits?"

"Quits."

"Now maybe you better take the girl home. In the new upcar. With the keys I just held out in my palm like a gift. Oh, because it was a gift."

My father got up all pissy and took the dishes into the kitchen. He rattled them against the rim of the junktube as he threw them away. They crashed down into the thing, the incinerator.

"You okay?" I said to Violet. "We should go."

"It's just, my foot's fallen asleep."

"Shake it," I said.

She looked down at the table. I mean my foot isn't working. Don't say anything. It's happened a couple of times since the hack. Something just won't work for an hour or two. My finger or something.

I was like, Holy shit. Are you okay?

I'm fine.

Do you want some water?

Titus, don't worry about it. It'll go away in a minute. It was just the stress.

Try to move the foot. Just try.

She just sat there, smiling kind of sick, not moving while right next to her Mom and Smell Factor crinkled up the disposable table together and threw it away. Violet was still in her chair, near where the table had been. She was alone in the middle of the rug.

Finally, she moved the foot. She moved it slowly in circles. She breathed out really deep. Her eyes were closed, like it was sex.

I held out my hand and pulled her to her feet. She came to my arms like we were doing some kind of flamenco rumpus. My mom smiled, and my dad, who was still pissed, said, "Yeah. Cute."

We left a few minutes later. I drove her most of the way to her house, and we met her father in a mall parking lot. It was a new mall, with lots of



spotlights swinging through the sky and rainbows going up a giant pyramid. We had to wait a few minutes for her dad to get there. We just sat together, holding hands. In my new Dodge Gryphon.

I asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. It goes away."

I leaned my head against the window. We were quiet.

She was looking at her knees. She asked me, "What are you thinking about?"

I looked behind us. I sighed, and I was drumming my fingers on the steering column and all. I said, "What if it really doesn't handle as good? You know, it's roomier, but what if it doesn't handle as good as the Swarp?"

She nodded. She said, "Are you at least okay with the color?"

"It's a good red," I said. "I guess."

"Autumnal," she said. "It's nice."

"You're sure it's not like cheap?"

"It's fall-like."

I smiled. "Thanks."

She said, "I'm a peach."

"Yeah. You're a peach."

Her father was landing. I couldn't see him through the glare of his windshield. She got out of the car. She kissed me. I said I would see her the next morning.

She kept turning and waving as she walked away across the pavement. The spotlights wobbled over the Clouds™. The pyramid glowed. I rose up into the sky and turned the feed on to songs about people allowed to get out of the same bed, and to eat breakfast together, two toasts on the very same plate.

*Handwritten notes in cursive script, including the word "Mama" and other illegible phrases.*

o o o

'Cause if love  
Can't help us from above,  
Can't help us like a dove,  
With wings so full of love,  
Then let me go.

And if hope  
Is nothing but a dope  
Who's holding on to rope  
Then I don't think I can cope,  
So let me go,  
Darling,  
Let me go.

But ...  
But, if faith  
Is more than just a wraith  
And is in real good faith  
Then let us both have faith  
And hold me tight.

'Cause "touching"  
Is not just that it's touching,  
But that we both are touching,  
Like with our mouths are touching,  
So hold me tight,

Darling,  
Hold me tight.  
Ho-oh-old me tight.  
Hold me tight.  
Hold me tight.

o o o

observe the  
remarkable  
verdure

The next day, I followed my feed's directions to her house. I drove about two hundred miles to get to the general area. It was a good day for a walk in the country, because there were these big occasional Clouds™, but mostly blue. The sun was reflecting in darts off all the upcars that passed me.

Her neighborhood was down a long droptube. I kept on going down and down through all these different suburbs, called Fox Glen and Caleby Farm Estates and Waterview Park, until I hit the bottom of the tube, where it was called Creville Heights.

Creville Heights was all one big area, instead of each yard having its own bubble with its own sun and seasons. They must've had just one sun for the whole place. All the houses were really old and flat. The streets were blue and cracked, and they were streets, I mean, like

for when things went on the ground. Their sun was up and you could see the sky was peeling.

I found her house, which was a little house with her parents' upcar parked outside it and some kind of a sculpture in the yard, with some hoops or loops and a floating, spiky ball.

I parked next to the house with the upcar still levitated, and I climbed down and went to the door. The doorbell played a piece of music, which I could hear through the door, which was wood.

She came to the door, and she was all smiling, and she was so glad to see me, and I was glad to see her. She invited me in to meet her dad, who was at home. I went in.

The place was a mess. Everything had words on it. There were papers with words on them, and books, and even posters on the wall had words. Her father looked like a crank. He was sitting in a lawn chair in the living room, hunched over like a hunchback, sorting puzzle pieces. His back honestly had a big hunch, which was from a really, really early feedscanner, from back when they wore them in a big backpack on their back, with special glasses that had foldout screens on either side of your eyes. He wore the glasses, too, and when we shook hands I could see pictures and words reflecting on his eyeballs, like when you stir water in the sun.

He held out his hand. He said, "It is a fine