

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

pleasure to meet you and make your acquaintance." He had a very slight smile, which didn't change when he moved his mouth. He spoke with this buzzing, flat kind of voice. He said, "I am filled with astonishment at the regularity of your features and the handsome generosity you have shown my daughter. The two of you are close, which gladdens the heart, as close as twin wings torn off the same butterfly."

Violet said, "You can see why I don't take him out in public much."

"The sarcasm of my daughter notwithstanding, it is nonetheless an occasion of great moment to meet one of her erotic attachments. In the line of things, she has not brought them home, but has chosen instead to conduct her trysts at remote locales, perhaps beach huts or oxygen-rich confabularies."

"The surprising thing is," said Violet, "when he flunked out of charm school, it was because he couldn't learn the minuet."

"She meets them at the drama, I presume, or speakeasies."

"Why don't we leave," Violet suggested, "while my last shred of dignity is still at least as big as a thong?"

I was like, "It was . . . It was real good to meet you." I said, "We're going out into the country

for the day. I'll take real good care of her." I was trying to be like a man to another man, like responsible.

He nodded. He flattened his hand, and lifted off with it like it was a Dodge Gryphon, and he was making an engine noise, and then he flew his hand toward some books and landed it. He made these chirpy noises like the windows rolling down. He said in a high-pitched voice, like a teensy-weensy kind of voice, "Ooooooh! Observe the remarkable verdure! Little friend, I am master of all I survey."

I nodded. Violet had the door opened. We went out and climbed into the Gryphon. We pulled on our seat belts.

"Wow," I said.

"Yeah."

I lifted us off and we floated down the street.

"He's something."

"So far as my social life goes, what strikes me as a good idea is leaving him in the basement wrapped in a cocoon of pink insulation."

"I didn't understand a single thing he said."

"He says the language is dying. He thinks words are being debased. So he tries to speak entirely in weird words and irony, so no one can simplify anything he says."

We turned a corner.

"Where's your mom?" I asked.
"Probably South America," Violet said. "She likes it warm."
"Are they divorced?"
"They never married."
"Your life . . . It must be kind of strange?"
"Meaning what?"
"Just . . . it's not . . . the things that most of us . . . do?"
"No," she said, like she wanted to change the topic.
I hit the droptube, and we fell up.

a day in the country

We flew for an hour or so out into farm country.

While we flew, she told me the story of her family, which was that her mom and dad met when they were in grad school, and decided to live together as an experiment in lifestyle, and had her. Then everything was fine for a few years, but when she was about six or seven her parents started like fighting all the time, and yelling all the time and stuff, and her mother ran away. I asked her if that was when her father started to get like he was, I mean, hard to understand, and she said he was always hard to understand, but after her mother left was when he started to get completely like he was.

She played me some saved memories of him lecturing. He was pacing up and down through the lecture hall and he was saying, "In the nineties, the older programming languages,

with their emphasis on neoclassical, even Aristotelian logical structures, gave way to object-oriented interactive structures." His shoes scraped along the tiled floor. He looked all his students in the eye, like he was challenging them to a fight. He leaned toward them and said, "In object-oriented programming, discrete software objects interfaced more freely, in a system of corporate service provision that mirrored the emergent structures of late capitalism." Who the hell knows what he meant, but suddenly, he seemed kind of powerful, like someone who shouldn't necessarily be wound up in a cocoon of pink insulation and hidden in a basement somewhere. He was like a different guy.

She said the only time he actually talked like a normal human being was sometimes when he was big tired and they were eating dinner before he went to bed.

She and he took turns making dinner.

They had just got a Kitchnet food synthesizer.

She asked for my family's story, but it wasn't as interesting. Just *da da da*, my parents met through some friend, *da da da*, they went out, they started to live together, *da da da*, they went to Venus, *da da da*, you know, they're sitting in this restaurant on Venus, back when Venus was called *The Love Planet*, with *Love* pronounced *Lerv*, back before the moulting-quakes and the

uprisings, so they're sitting there, and my dad holds up his hand, and it has this big lump on one of the fingers, like some kind of cyst? And my mom's like, *Steve, what's that, is it malignant?* and he goes, *Honey, I hope it's benign*, and he pulls a little pull-tab and the skin unpeels and under it is an engagement ring for her, already on his finger! So he takes it off and slips it on her finger and it constricts and clamps on and she's like, *Omigod! Omigod!* and everyone in the restaurant starts clapping. And she's like, *No, I don't have any like circulation to my finger*, and so they had to go to a jeweler really quick and get it adjusted, which is why whenever they have a fight and make up, my mom always has this joke? She goes, *Yup, married, and with the scars to prove it.*

It felt good to hear Violet's story, and to tell mine, even though hers was kind of more interesting than mine. I said it must be hard for her dad to bring her up and home-school her himself. She said it was, that he worked real hard at it, and also worked real hard teaching. She was proud of him, even though he was—from what I could see? like, in my opinion?—an insane psychopath.

Our feeds caught a banner from a farm that invited visitors, where you could walk around and see everything grow, so we swerved for there and landed. There weren't many other people

there that day, so we were almost alone while we walked around.

It was real peaceful. We walked along holding hands, and our elbows rubbed, too. Violet wasn't wearing sleeves, so I could see the little frowns made by her elbows.

It smelled like the country. It was a filet mignon farm, all of it, and the tissue spread for miles around the paths where we were walking. It was like these huge hedges of red all around us, with these beautiful marble patterns running through them. They had these tubes, they were bringing the tissue blood, and we could see the blood running around, up and down. It was really interesting. I like to see how things are made, and to understand where they come from.

It was a perfect afternoon. They had made part of it into a steak maze, for tourists, and we split up in the steak maze and tried to see who could get to the center first. We were like running around corners and peeking and diving, and there were these mirrors set up to confuse you, so you'd see all these nonexistent beef hallways. We were big laughing and we'd run into each other and growl and back away. There were other tourists in the steak maze, too, and they thought we were cute.

Then we sat and had some cider doughnuts that we bought at the farm stand. We got some

that were plain and some cinnamon. I liked the cinnamon better. Violet said that it was important to start with the plain, so that the cinnamon seemed more like a change. She said she had a theory that everything was better if you delayed it. She had this whole thing about self-control, okay, and the importance of self-control. For example, she said, when she bought something, she wouldn't let herself order it for a long time. Then she would just go to the purchase site and show it to herself. Then she'd let herself get fed the sense-sim, you know, she'd let herself know how it would feel, or what it would smell like. Then she would go away and wouldn't look for a week. Then she would go back finally and order it, but only if it was on back order and wouldn't be shipped immediately. Then finally when it was ready to ship, she'd like be, oh, hey, I don't want it shipped hour rate, I want it slow, slow rate. So it would take like three days to get to her, and then she'd leave it in the box. Finally, she'd open the box just enough to see like the hem of the skirt or whatever. She would touch it, just knowing it was hers. She'd run her fingers along it kind of delicate. Just along the edge of it, not even really letting herself touch it completely, just gently, with her fingertips, or maybe the back of her hand. She would wait for days until she couldn't stand it anymore to take it out and try it on.

At this point, I was completely turned on, I wanted to get more doughnuts, but it was this debate between getting more doughnuts, which were really good doughnuts, but not being able to stand up because I had complete prong.

So we sat for a while just where we were and I flattened out the doughnut bag with my hand on the tabletop. You could tell how good the doughnuts were because they left a clear ring on the paper.

Later, we went and climbed up an observation tower over the farm. It was getting to be sunset, so it was meg pretty.

We were sitting side by side, with our legs swinging on the wall of the tower, and the Clouds™ were all turning pink in front of us. We could see all these miles of filet mignon from where we were sitting, and some places where the genetic coding had gone wrong and there, in the middle of the beef, the tissue had formed a horn or an eye or a heart blinking up at the sunset, which was this brag red, and which hit on all those miles of muscle and made it flex and quiver, with all these shudders running across the top of it, and birds were flying over, crying kind of sad, maybe seagulls looking for garbage, and the whole thing, with the beef, and the birds, and the sky, it all glowed like there was a light inside it, which it was time to show us now.

Later, when we were flying back in the dark, lit up by the dashboard, she asked me, "If you could die any way you wanted, how would you like to?"

I said, "Why you asking?"

She said, "I've just been thinking about it a lot."

I thought for a while. Then I said, "I'd like to have this like, this intense pleasure in every one of my senses, all of them so full up that they just burst me open, and the feed like going a mile a second, so that it's like every channel is just jammed with excitement, and it's going faster and faster and better and better, until just—BAM! That's it, I guess. I'd like to die from some kind of sense overload."

She nodded.

I said, "I'm going to do that when I get real old and boring."

She said, "Yeah. You know, I think death is shallower now. It used to be a hole you fell into and kept falling. Now it's just a blank."

We flew over a lake. The bottom had been covered with a huge blue ad that was lit up and magnified by the water, which had a picture of a smiling brain and broadcasted "Dynacom Inc." when you looked at it.

I was like, "What are you asking for?"

She said, "It makes good times even better

when you know they're going to end. Like grilled vegetables are better because some of them are partly soot."

I wanted to point out that that was probably because her dad made them, but that if someone good makes them, they're probably not partly soot, but I didn't think that was her point, about vegetables, so I just kept flying, and I said, "This was a good time?" and she said, "One of the best," and I said, "So when it's time for them to do a pleasure overload on me, are you going to be around to give the order to cut the juice?"

She looked at me, surprised. For a second, she was like completely confused. It was like I'd said something else.

Then she saw what I meant, and she laughed like I'd given her a present. She said, "If you'll let me, sure. Sure I'll be there." She leaned over, really sudden, and kissed me on the cheek. Then she whispered, "I'll be the first one, dumpling, to pull your plug."

The way she said it, pull your plug, it sounded kind of sexy.

Right then, everything seemed perfect.

I dropped her off, and we planned other things, and did a secret handshake. I drove back toward home listening to some brag new triumph screams by British storm 'n' chunder bands. When I got home, the lights were out, but they

came on for me. I walked through the empty house, and got ready for bed, and lay there thinking about how perfect everything was.

I could feel my family all around me. I could trace their feeds faintly, because they weren't shielding them. Smell Factor was dreaming while a fun-site with talking giraffes sang him songs and showed him wonderful things in different shapes. My parents were upstairs going in mal, which they wouldn't want me to know, but which I could tell, because they chose a really flashy, expensive malfunction site that was easy to trace. They were winding down together, I guess. Like, you can only go on being completely fugue-stressed for so long without winding down.

I could feel all of my family asleep in their own way around me, in the empty house, in our bubble, where we could turn on and off the sun and the stars, and the feed spoke to me real quiet about new trends, about pants that should be shorter or longer, and bands I should know, and games with new levels and stalactites and fields of diamonds, and friends of many colors were all drinking Coke, and beer was washing through mountain passes, and the stars of the *Oh? Wow! Thing!* had got lesions, so lesions were hip now, real hip, and mine looked like a million dollars. The sun was rising over foreign countries, and underwear was cheap, and there were new

techniques to reconfigure pecs, abs, and nipples, and the President of the United States was certain of the future, and at Weatherbee & Crotch there was a sale banner and nice rugby shirts and there were pictures of freckled prep-school boys and girls in chinos playing on the beach and dry humping in the eel grass, and as I fell asleep, the feed murmured to me again and again: *All shall be well . . . and all shall be well . . . and all manner of things shall be well.*

... First, in the deserts and veldts arose oral culture, the culture of the spoken word. Then in the cities with their temples and bazaars came the pictographs, and later, symbols that produced sounds as if by magic, and what followed was written culture. Then, in the universities and under the steeples of young nations, print culture. These—oral culture, written culture, the culture of print—these have always been considered the great epochs of man.

But we have entered a new age. We are a new people. It is now the age of oneiric culture, the culture of dreams.

And we are the nation of dreams. We are seers. We are wizards. We speak in visions. Our letters are like flocks of doves, released from under our hats. We have only to stretch out our hand and desire, and what we wish for settles like a kerchief in our palm. We are a race of sorcerers, enchanters. We are Atlantis. We are the wizard-isle of Mu.

What we wish for, is ours.

*It is the age of oneiric culture. And we, America,
we are the nation of dreams.*

• • •

nudging
again

Later that night, I had nightmares.

Someone was poking my head with a broom handle. They tried to put it like in my ear. They said, "Whispering makes a narrow place narrower."

Then came all these pictures, and I was seeing all over the world, and there were explanations, but I was still asleep, and I couldn't figure them out. I saw khakis that were really cheap, only \$150, but I didn't like the stitching, and then I saw them torn and there was blood on them. It was a riot on a street, and people were screaming in some other language, they were in khakis or jeans and T-shirts, and they were throwing stones and bottles, and the police were moving forward on horses, and a man in the crowd waved a gun, and then the firing started. They were in front of factories,

and clouds of gas drifted through them and the American flags they were burning started to spark big, and the gas got darker and darker, and the people sped up, like a joke, grabbing at their necks and waving and sitting and slapping the ground. They fell down. I saw a sign with a picture of a head with a little devil sitting in the brain, inside the skull, with these like energy bolts coming out of his mouth.

I saw fields and fields of black, it was this disgusting black shit, spread for miles. I saw walls of concrete fall from the sky and crush little wood houses. I saw a furry animal trying to stand up on its legs but the back ones were broken or not working, and it dragged itself with the front ones, whimpering, through someplace with gray dust, and needles coming out of the sand. Its jaws were open. I saw long cables going through the sea. I saw girls sewing things, little girls in big halls. I saw people praying over missiles. I smelled the summer in this rocky place, and the summer smelled like electrical burns. I saw a kid looking at me, he was a kid from another culture, where they wear dresses, and there were all of these shadows all over his face, these amazing shadows, and I thought it was a really cool picture, to get all of those weird shadows somehow, but with nothing making them, and finally, I realized that they weren't shadows, they

were bruises, and then the end of a gun, it's called the butt, it came down and hit him in the face and then all the pictures were over.

Hey, Violet said. Hey. Was that you?

I was like, What? What's the thing? With . . . the . . . ?

Did I wake you up?

Okay, could . . . is she . . . ?

Hey—look lively. Someone was just nosing around my feed, checking out my specs and sending me all these images.

It was probably a corp. Don't . . . Oh, unit, I can't believe you completely jolted me. I was having this weird-ass dreaming.

I don't think it was a corp. They didn't have a tag.

Don't you have a shield?

They got right wham through the shield.

Oh, unit. Oh, unit. I'm . . . Do you know how asleep I was?

I called FeedTech Customer Assistance. I'm going to report this. Something's happening.

Oh, okay. Shit. Okay. So can I go like back to sleep?

You sure it wasn't you?

Unette—it wasn't me. I was so asleep, it was like . . . It was like ten asleep factor.

They can trace who it was, I bet.

Yeah. Maybe.

You didn't see any of this? The images?

What of?

There's someone else here. Can you feel it?

Who?

Someone else. They just tapped in, just a second ago.

A voice said, Hi, this is Nina from FeedTech Customer Assistance.

Thank god.

Are you tired of the same old shoulders? Why not try extensions?

Violet was like, Someone just approached my feed. They were checking the specs and stats.

And what can I do to help you this morning?

You need to follow them and see, somehow, see who it was. Quickly . . . Quickly!

Violet, I'd love to respond personally to each and every request for assistance, but unfortunately I'm unable to, due to increased customer demand, so I've sent this automated intelligence Nina to talk to you instead.

No, you don't understand.

Looking at your recent purchase history, I notice that you've expressed interest in a lot of products you haven't bought. Are you having trouble making up your mind with so much cool stuff to choose from?

Can you please connect me with a live operator?

Violet, I think I can help you come up with

products that really say, "You." They'll shout, "You! You! You!" as if it was always Saturday! Oh, I know! You're almost a woman, and you want things that are totally big Violet! That's where I can help!

All right, chatted Violet. No thanks. Thanks. I'm done.

Sometimes choices are hard to make.

Fuck off.

This automated intelligence Nina can help you throw away the bad—and find the good! I can help you find the great products that are uniquely the woman known as "Ms. Violet Durn"!

Fuck off!

Okay, it doesn't seem like you want to talk right now. So I'm going back to my little hole. There, I'll be sorting and sifting, and trying to make life as easy and interesting as possible for you and your friend and all of our excellent customers at FeedTech—making your dreams into hard fact™.

Okay. Thanks. Thanks a big lot.

And thank you, Violet Durn of 1421 Applebaum Avenue. I'll look forward to helping you again, whenever you—

Can I go back to sleep? I asked. I had these really weird dreams.

Violet seemed kind of without any energy. She was like, Go ahead. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

We said good night. She was slow. I turned over and curled up, and the pictures playing in

my head now were better, not so violent or sucky. They were more of women in turtlenecks petting my hair. I heard some music. I fell asleep. It was a deep sleep, and I didn't wake up until morning.

◦ ◦ ◦
It is an upcar tearing along over the desert. It cuts
brag swerves through passes and over
gulches.

*Someone once said it was easier for a camel to pass
through the eye of a needle than for a rich guy
to get into heaven.*

There is a city. A marketplace. Camels. Arabs.
The upcar shoots overhead, and they duck.

*Yeah, sure. Now we know that the "eye of the
needle" is just another name for a gate in
Jerusalem—and with the Swarp XE-11's
mega-lepton lift and electrokinetic gyrostasis,
you can flip ninety degrees to the ground and
back again in one-point-two seconds—so
getting through the gate just won't be a
problem anymore.*

The Swarp XE-11: You can take it with you.

◦ ◦ ◦

the real thing

One Saturday, a few days after we saw the riot from the news in our dreams, there was this promotion, where if you talked about the great taste of Coca-Cola to your friends like a thousand times, you got a free six-pack of it, so we decided to take them for some meg ride by all getting together and being like, *Coke, Coke, Coke, Coke* for about three hours so we'd get a year's supply. It was a chance to rip off the corporations, which we all thought was a funny idea.

I picked up Violet at her house and we drove to Marty's, where everyone was meeting.

When we got there, Calista and Loga were getting out of Calista's car, and it was like, *Whoa*, because they were wearing all torn-up clothes. They were walking normal, but they looked like they'd been burned up and hit with stuff.

I ran over to them. I was going, "Holy shit!

Are you okay? What happened?" and Violet, too, she was going, "Hey—are you okay?" They stood there and looked at us, then looked at each other like, *Omigod! Someone is poopiehead!*

"Yuh," said Loga. "It's Riot Gear. It's retro. It's beat up to look like one of the big twentieth-century riots. It's been big since earlier this week."

I was like, "Oh."

Violet was like, "Sorry."

"No wrong," said Calista, flipping her hair.

When we went inside, Marty and Quendy were also wearing Riot Gear. Everyone was going, *Hi! Hey! Hey! Hi! Unit! What's doing?*

"Hey!" said Loga to Quendy, pointing. "Kent State collection, right? Great skirt!"

Quendy bowed her legs out. "It's not a skirt—it's culottes!"

"Ohhh, cute!"

Calista said, "That looks great on you!"

Quendy didn't say anything to Calista, because Calista had just put her arm around Link and they were smelling each other's faces, and Quendy was jealous.

"Units!" said Marty. "Into the—in here—fuck yeah, man—into the living room. Kay kay kay kay. Right in here."

We grabbed some seats.

"Okay," said Marty. "O-fuckin'-kay!" He nodded. "Coca-Cola!"

We waited to start.

We were like waiting.

We all sat there for a minute, looking like we were smiling, but in reality, not. Each of us looked at everyone else's face. Violet chatted me, *This is like when I was twelve, and we had this slumber party and agreed to show each other our boobs. I think we finally just gave up and watched America's Unlikeliest Allergy Attacks.*

"So . . .," said Marty, kind of sneaky. "Anyone up for the great taste of . . . Coke?"

Loga said, "I like its refreshing flavor."

"It's really good on a really hot day," said Link. "There's nothing like an ice-cold Coke."

"I like regular Coke," said Quendy, "but also the fantastic taste of Diet Coke."

Link pinched Calista. She kind of sighed, "Me, too."

Marty said, "Coke, its great taste, it's so good that I would beat up a guy if he had one and I really wanted it."

"Anyone?" said Link. "You and Coke?"

Loga said, "Coke, it's really good, almost as good as Pepsi."

"Unette!" said Marty. "'Almost'? You just lost us one! The fuckin' count just went down."

I said quickly, "I like Coke because of the energy."

Link pinched Calista. She kind of sighed, "Me, too."

Violet said, "I love the great feeling of Coke's carbonation going down my throat, all the pain, like . . ." She waved her hands in the air and looked at the ceiling, trying to think of something. She said, "It's like sweet gravel. It's like a bunch of itsy-bitsy commuters running for a shuttle in my windpipe." Everyone was looking at her. I could feel them chatting each other, saying that was stupid. I sat nearer to her. I put my hand on her back.

She was saying, "Sometimes I try to think back to the first time I ever had Coke. Because it must have hurt, but I can't remember. How could we ever have started to enjoy it? If something's an acquired taste, like, how do you start to acquire it? For that matter, who gave me Coke the first time? My father? I don't think so. Who would hand a kid a Coke and think, 'Her first one. I'm so proud.' How do we even start?"

There was a long, silent part.

Then Marty said, "Yeah. That may have cost us a few. Hey, how about the great foaming capabilities of Coke?"

And then we were onto this whole thing,

about Coke fights, and Coke floats, and Coke promotions, and we went on and on and on, but Violet didn't say anything else, just sat there silently. The guys kept going. I was laughing extra loud at everything, because I didn't want people to notice that Violet was all clammy. So I was yelling all these carbonation things and trying to bring her back in, and the other guys were going spastic and throwing pillows at each other. We were like rum and Coke, stadium Coke, flat Coke, bottled Coke, Coke and nachos, Coke and hot dogs, hot Coke, Cherry Coke, Coke on tap, comparative suckiness of, until finally there was another quiet part, and Link said, "Hey, Marty-unit, do you actually have any Coke?"

Marty was like, "No. But, fuck, aren't you getting like meg thirsty? With all of this talking about the great taste of Coke?"

We looked at our feet for a minute. I moved my butt around on the, it's called an ottoman.

"Let's go out and get some," said Link.

"Yeah. Let's go to the store."

"Which store?"

"There's a Halt 'n' Buy up on like, near the Sports Giant."

We were all standing up. Marty was like announcing, "Okay, we'll go out and get some of the great beverage of Coke, with its refreshing

flavor," but no one was really rattling that way now.

Loga and Calista were whispering to each other, with Violet walking behind them. They saw she was near them, and they changed the subject.

"Oh, and omigod!" said Calista. "Are those the Stonewall Clogs? They're so brag."

"Yeah," said Loga.

"Omigod. They look wholly comfy. Are they comfy?"

"They're pretty comfy." Loga picked up her foot and played with her flowery clog, and she was like, "I got a size seven, but it feels more like a man's size seven."

"This top is the Watts Riot top."

Violet said, "I can never keep any of the riots straight. Which one was the Watts riot?"

Calista and Loga stopped and looked at her. I could feel them flashing chat.

"Like, a riot," said Calista. "I don't know, Violet. Like, when people start breaking windows and beating each other up, and they have to call in the cops. A riot. You know. Riot?"

"Oh, I just thought you might . . . know . . . Maybe . . . I wondered what incited it." Violet was playing quickly with her own hands.

"Yeah," said Calista.

"I was just asking," said Violet.

"Okay."

"I was just . . ."

"Yeah. 'Incited.'"

"What? It's not like I was saying something mean or stupid."

"No. Okay. Loga, are we going?"

They kept on walking.

Loga said, "Put *that* in your metizabism."

Calista said, "What's a metizabism?"

"Oh, sorry. I thought it was good to use stupid, long words that no one can understand."

Calista laughed and looked backward, going, "Shhh. She'll hear you and have an alpoduffin . . . fleatcher."

In my head, I was like, *Oh shit.*

Violet was chatting me. *Did you hear that? I can't stand this anymore.*

I was like, *What do you mean?*

They were just these meg bitches. Will you take me home?

I was like, *Just let it blow. Let it blow. No wrong.*

They hate me.

No one hates you.

Your friends hate me. They think I'm stupid.

No one—fuck!—no one thinks you're stupid.

Yeah, I don't mean dumb stupid.

We can't leave them now. It would be like a total rash on their ass if we went.

They just insulted me.

Unit, they didn't.

They thought what I said during the game was stupid. They think everything I say is weird and stupid. What is your problem? Take me home.

Link was like, "You coming with?"

Violet was like, *Take me home.*

Fuck! Why? Fuck.

I want to leave.

"No," I said to Link. "Violet, uh, she has to go home."

"Unit," said Link. "The party's just begun. We haven't even filled the bathtub with anything from the kitchen yet."

"I've really got to go," said Violet, smiling like she was shaking hands with the members of the frickin' PTA.

Everyone was going out to get in their upcars and go get some stuff at the store. Calista was showing off her WTO riot Windbreaker. Violet and me said good-bye. We got in my upcar. We took off.

Then we started to fight.

fight
and
flight

I flew down the main tube in Marty's community. It was a gated community, and I waited to get out through the neighborhood's security sphincter. It pulled open, and I flew out into the droptube, going like a million miles an hour so that Violet would jerk back in her seat. Then when I was going up, I had this idea that instead of like throwing her around by going too fast, I would be like quiet angry like my father got, and I'd just do everything exactly right, everything up to the centigram.

So I flew really good when I got up above the surface, going over the shantytowns that had been built up around the cooling steeples. I flew perfect. I could see the others come out of the droptube behind me, and they were heading off to the strip.

We went for a while. It was raining. There was all of the lights from the factory towers

below us, those really hard lights, those bright white ones. They were shining through all the gases, above the tubing and the tanks and ladders. There were cargo ships anchored in the sky. I flew around them, politely, like a gentleman.

We were too angry to speak out loud. Our jaws were like *grrrrrrvvvvv*.

So we started to chat.

She was like, *What?*

Nothing.

What nothing?

What nothing what?

She was like, *What are you angry about?*

I breathed, loud and kind of angry. *Why are we going away?*

Because they were making fun of me.

I didn't say anything. I was like, to myself, *This is dumb.* The whole thing was dumb. It was stupid, and it pissed me off.

Violet was pushing me, like, *Well?*

So I, like a shithead, said, *Well, maybe you shouldn't, you know, show off like that.*

Show off? Like what?

Like the way you do sometimes. Using weird words.

I don't use weird words.

Okay. Saying weird shit.

"Oh, screw you!" she yelled out loud. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. It's, like . . . It's something I like about you, but you have to . . . like . . ."

"You like it about me. What is it you like?"

"I like . . . you know, you're so funny, and beautiful, and you . . ."

"Everyone's beautiful. Everyone's pretty as a pansy in a blister pack. That's not what you're talking about."

"You can be a little . . . You can . . . It's kind of scary for people sometimes. It feels . . . It sometimes feels like you're watching us, instead of being us."

"Well, I'm not used to the things you're used to."

"I'm just telling you how it sometimes . . . it feels."

"Thanks for telling me how it feels."

"I'm just telling you."

"Thanks."

We drove on. On *Sky Offenders*, they were having a live thing about drug smugglers getting caught on parasails. There was a lot of static from her chat breaking through. She was pushing it hard.

I dropped my feedwall and let her chat me again.

You think I'm a bitch, don't you?

This is stupid. This is dumb.

She stared out the window.
There's something else wrong, isn't there? I asked her. Isn't there?

Nothing. No answer.

For a long time, nothing.

Then I was like, *Is there something else wrong?*

She looked at me, I could tell she was trying not to cry. She said, "Yes."

I was like, *What is it?*

She whispered, "Talk to me. In the air."

I was like biting my lip. I hate these kinds of conversations. I was feeling completely squeam. I went, "Okay. What's, uh, what's wrong?"

For a long time, we went through columns of smoke. They were coming up from below. They were like the rows of trees up the sides of Link's driveway. If we had been happier, I would have done them slalom. They were as gray as, I don't know. They were just gray, okay? The rain hit them.

She said, "My feed is really malfunctioning."

"Right now?"

"I can't feel it right now. But yes."

"Go to a technician."

"I have. I've gone to a bunch. I don't think you . . . Okay, my feed is really, really malfunctioning."

"I don't understand. You told me this already."

"Shut up. I've been going to technicians. The

feedware is starting to produce major errors." She looked scared. She wasn't looking at me. I could feel how much she wasn't looking at me but was looking other places.

"I got my feed later . . . than some kids." She said evenly, "I got my feed really late."

"You told me. So?"

"But the problem is, if you get the feed after you're fully formed, it doesn't fit as snugly. I mean, the feedware. It's more susceptible to malfunction."

"Susceptible?"

"It can break down more easily."

"What does this mean?"

"Nobody knows. The feed is tied in to everything. Your body control, your emotions, your memory. Everything. Sometimes feed errors are fatal. I don't know. I could lose . . . I don't know. They thought it would stabilize. But it didn't. It's getting worse. Meg worse. They told me yesterday it's deteriorating."

"Like rusting?"

"I mean, not the hardware, but the software/wetware interface. They said they didn't . . . I'm not going to cry. I am not going to cry."

I didn't know what I should do. I guessed that I should put my arm around her. I went to move my arm that way. She didn't look very huggable. She was all slouched. She was saying, "They don't

know. I could lose my ability to move; I could lose my ability to think. Anything. It's tied in everywhere. They said the limbic system, the motor cortex . . . the hippocampus. They listed all this stuff. If the feed fails too severely, it could interfere with basic processes. My heart could just . . ."

We were sitting there, going through the air. My hands felt really useless. I said, "This sucks. They can't just turn it off? They turned it off before."

"No, they didn't. They disconnected us. They shut down most of the functions. The feed was still on. It's part of the brain."

I looked over at her. She was looking right at me. We were going down the aisle of smoke through the sky. Somewhere over Nebraska, the drug parasailers were being shot out of the air.

She said, "Just drop. Drop and then catch us."

I was staring at the steering column, wondering what the hell she was talking about.

She said, "I want to feel something. Let's feel vertigo together."

That sounded okay to me.

I dropped us.

When we stopped, suddenly both of us had sweat. It was just mainly across our foreheads and fingertips.

She smiled at me. We both felt meg nauseous.

"My fingertips," I said. "They're sweaty."
She nodded.

We flew for a bit. She chatted me like, *Let's go back now. I'm okay.*

No. You don't want to go back, I said. They were being jerky.

They weren't being jerky. I was being pretentious.

You weren't—

"I'm fine now."

I said, "We can't just go back. I am like completely—I am—I'm this thing. It's this whole meg thing. I can't go back. *Let's go to your house.*"

"My dad will be there."

"Let's go to my house, then."

"Okay."

With one hand, I changed the course. I held out the other hand. She took it. We flew over gray piles and gray piles and gray piles toward home.

so much to do

When we got to my house, we went inside and I shut the garage door behind us. We went up the steps and into the family room. We were going to watch something on the feed. We sat there. We weren't really interested in the feed. It was daytime shit, anyway. Soap operas with all these people with the big hair going on crying jags. And lots of puppets. Puppets telling you about every goddamn thing.

"I wish there was someplace we could go," Violet said. "I want to . . . I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"Just, there's a whole universe out there."

"Yeah."

"I've never been underwater for a really long time."

"I been down on a couple of vacations into the really deep part. It's pretty good. There's a lot of stuff to do."

"I'm just using that as an example," she said, stroking my face.
"You have to have reservations. Otherwise, if you go by yourself, you get the bends."

She was stroking my face and was like, "I probably don't have much time. There's just so much I want to do," which was a difficult thing for her to say, because when she was stroking my face, it looked like it might mean one thing, but on the other hand, it probably meant something else, and it would be embarrassing if it didn't mean what I thought it meant, and if I said something, and then if it turned out that by "so much she wanted to do," she really meant riding trikes across the Sahara.

That would suck.

I said, "Do you mean . . ." I stopped, and tried, "That could be taken to mean that . . . you know . . . we . . ."

My feed was like, *Tongue-tied? Wowed and gaga? For a fistful of pickups tailored extra-specially for this nightmarish scenario, try Cyranofeed, available at rates as low as—*

She was like, "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you at Marty's."

"Would you stop?"

After a minute, I said, "You kept quiet about this for a long time."

She nodded. "A few weeks. I've known."
"You could've told me."

"I could've," she said.
"You didn't need to be thinking about it all alone."

She had her hands in her lap now. She said, "I want to go out and see the world. There's so much. There's . . . just so much."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah. I don't know. Yeah. This sucks. It meg sucks." I didn't know what to say. We sat there, side by side. We were sitting there, and it seemed like nothing was right. We were done talking.

I held on to her, and she held on to me. We held like that. We were staring at the wall.

She blew out all her breath.

It was a strange moment, like when you get sad after sex, and it feels like it's too late in the afternoon, even if it's morning, or night, and you turn away from the other person, and they turn away from you, and you lie there, and when you turn back toward them, you can both see each other's moles. Usually there seem to be shadows from venetian blinds all across your legs.

She said, "You toss something up in the air, and you expect it to come back down again."

Which made absolutely no sense to me.

We sat and we looked at the fireplace. There

were the fake logs and the fake iron parts. All the bricks were perfect. The walls were all a weird color of white.

Then there was the sound of the front door banging open. Mom was home with Smell Factor. We both were like, *Whoa*.

We pulled apart, and were sitting there. Smell Factor ran into the family room and took off his sneakers one at a time and threw them at the wall. Then he fell down on the rug and phased out and started watching *Top Quark*. Mom was like yelling for him to go pick up his room. He just lay there. She was clapping and calling his name. He just kept up with *Top Quark*. He didn't have it shielded, so we were picking up the whole thing.

Aw, Top Quark, I'll never get the prize at the fair.

Listen up, Down Quark—don't get so down!

Remember all your friends are right behind you.

Yeah, Down Quark!

Yeah, we'll sing a song for you! It's a happy, zappy song, full of chuckles and chortles.

Violet ate dinner with us. My father wasn't there, so it went better than the last time. She said some stuff that made my mother laugh. Mom was chatting me about how she was a great girl.

We flew back late at night.

I finally asked her, *Do they know how long?*

No. Earlier, they were saying it could take years.

Now they're not sure. They're saying it will be much faster.

It still could be years.

It's not going to be years. It could happen anytime.

I dropped her off at her house. We didn't make any plans. There weren't any plans.

I spent the rest of the night doing homework. It seemed like that was the only thing left to do.

... from *Bow-Wow and Plucky*, on the Christian
Cyberkidz Network:

“... Dad? I keep thinking she’ll come back, but I
know now that she’s going to stay away.”

“Yeah. It’s like, it’s been so long, I don’t know what
she would look like if she came back, how
long her hair would be.”

“She was the best dog. If she came back, it would
make everything right.”

“Billy: Nothing will make everything right. That
dog was a good dog, but she wasn’t like a
superdog, with powers. And I think you’ll see
a little voice inside you that will tell you the
same.”

“I still put the suet out by the mailbox, and I still
sing her my—”

seashore

We went to the sea, because there wasn’t time
after School™ to go under it. She and I went to
stand beside it. We watched it move around. It
was dead, but colorful.

It was blue when the sun hit it one way, and
purple when the sun hit it another way, and
sometimes yellow or green. We had on suits so
we wouldn’t smell it.

We sat in the sand. I made an angel with my
arms and legs. She piled sand on my stomach.
The suits were orange, which was stupid. I hate
it when a suit is a really ugly color so you look
completely dumb. After she was done piling
sand and I was done with my angel, we stared
up at the sky.

I was like, *I don’t think you have to worry.*
Science is like, they’re always discovering things.
Yeah. Have you looked at the sea?

*You've been reading more of that depressing shit.
Everything's dead. Everything's dying.*

*Some upcars floated over in the Clouds™.
Some cargo ships. Some transit needles, heading
off to Norway or Japan or something.*

I sat up. I was pissed off with things.

*I went, You know the part that's the really ironic
thing? The guy? The hacker? You almost agree with
him. He completely fucked you over, and you almost
agree with him.*

*Yeah, she said. That's certainly the really ironic
thing.*

What? What are you being sarcastic about?

I'm screwed.

See? Like, that's so big negative.

*What do you mean? What's positive? My body is
completely falling apart. I mean, you saw it with
my foot—but it's happening more often. One of my
fingers or a part of my face will just freeze up. It's
getting more frequent. Like once every other day, for
ten or fifteen minutes. Sometimes for a few hours.*

Oh shit. Don't tell me this. Oh shit.

*And I'm not getting all the images that are
supposed to come through on the feed. I'm getting a
lot of error messages.*

— They can fix that.

I don't know. I don't know. I just don't know.

*I kicked at the sand. I looked at her. She
looked good, through the mask, her big sun-*

*glasses brown and purple in the light. I was like,
You know, I . . .*

What?

I really like you.

*She hit me on the back of the head. That'll do,
she said.*

... to Crackdown Alley ... only on Fox ...

"Have you given it to her?"

"You can kiss my ass."

"Have you given it to her?"

"What do you think I am?"

"Want me to tell you what I think?"

"Don't breathe in my face. Go breathe in someone else's face."

"I'll breathe in whatever face I want to breathe in."

"I didn't give it to her."

"What do you think I am?"

"She doesn't have it."

"You can kiss my ass."

"Don't breathe in my face."

"Have you given it to her?"

"Want me to tell you what I think?"

"What do you think I—"

...

limbo and prayer

On Monday, I went into School™ and I was sitting in homeroom when I saw that Calista had her hair up in this new way, and on the back of her neck was this total insane macro-lesion that I never even saw before. I guess I was looking at it kind of *Holy shit!*, because Quendy sat down next to me and chatted, *Impressed? Ain't even real.*

Quendy still hated Calista, because Quendy wanted to be going out with Link herself.

I asked her, *What do you mean?*

Calista got it done yesterday. Quendy made this face. Now that lesions are "brag." Now that they're the spit.

It's huge. It's fuckin' huge.

It's not even real. I mean, it's an incision, but it's artificial. It's not even really weeping. Those are beads of latex.

Whoa. I'm surprised her head doesn't, you know, topple off. Like: *badump.*

It's so stupid. God. I can't believe how stupid it is. Link came in and was kissing Calista on the forehead, with his hand behind her skull, and then he tickled her lesion.

Oh! Unit! I grabbed Quendy's wrist. Oh, unit, this is like—*whoa*—total error message. Major system error!

It's so stupid. I can't believe he's falling for that. It's so dumb.

Whoa! I got to tell Violet about this. She'll go crazy.

Yeah.

She's always looking for like evidence of the decline of civilization.

Yeah.

I looked at Quendy. What do you mean by that?

Nothing. Just that Violet is always, like you said. She's always looking for stuff about the decline of civilization, and everything's a mess, *da da da*.

Is that a problem?

I don't have a problem with it. I think she's nice.

I'm going to chat her about this.

Yeah. Do. She'll think it's funny.

I found a hitch-up to Violet. You sitting down?

I said. Calista got an artificial lesion.

So much for my Frosted Flakes.

Link is tickling her lesion.

Let me just push the bowl toward the wall. You heard it here first.

Link is . . . He's a great guy, but do you mind if I say he's not the quickest bunny in the centrifuge?

I laughed. No. Not our Link.

Did I tell you I thought he was youch the first time I saw him?

Link? Our Link?!? He's butt-ugly. Have you met him?

That's why I thought he was youch. You all were so beautiful. He was hideous. There was some, I don't know, some texture there.

Are you kidding?

Until he opens his mouth.

Right now, he and Marty are skipping rope with some coaxial cable. Ah, he's tripping. He's falling into a desk.

I liked talking to her like this, first thing in the morning. It had a kind of bedroom feel to it. It was kind of flirty, kind of drowsy.

She was like, Can I ask you a question about Link?

Yeah?

The name. Link. As in "Missing . . ."?

No, I said.

So?

I don't think you want to know. It won't help much with your worry, you know, about civilization ending and stuff.

Huh? . . . Oh my god. Oh my god. . . . It's a penis thing, isn't it?

No.

Yes, it is. It's some gross boy/locker-room sausage joke, isn't it? Sausage link? Oh. You are so . . . Oh.

No, it's not.

Is so.

Is not. He's the product of this government experiment.

What?

His family's like really old and meg rich? So they got this . . . you know . . .

What?

He was cloned from the bloodstains found on Lucy Todd Lincoln's opera cloak.

There was a long silence.

Then Violet was like, Mary.

Yeah. Mary, then. Mary Todd Lincoln.

There was another silence. I sat there, waiting.

She was like, So he's the genetic clone of Abraham Lincoln.

Yeah.

Abraham Lincoln.

That's what I said.

Tell me what he's doing now.

Eh . . . the limbo. With the coaxial cable.

I thought so.

Except, he's bending forward instead of backward, so it isn't as hard.

This is extremely grim.
How about over there at your house?

Let me recover.

What's doing at Violet's place?

Dad's off at work. Mom's just a mom-shaped hole in the front door. I'm eating cereal, putting on my stockings, and reading ancient Mayan spells.

You know Mayan?

They're not in Mayan. They're in Spanish. The feeds translating them into English. I'm reading a spell to preserve dying cultures.

Uh-huh.

Written sometime before their empire fell, I guess. "Spirit of the sky, spirit of the earth, grant us descendants for as long as the sun moves, for as long as there is dawn. Grant us green roads; grant us many green paths. May the people be peaceful, very peaceful, and let them not fall; let them not be wounded. Let there be no disgrace, no captivity. O thou Shrouded Glory, Lightning Lord, Lord Jaguar, Mount of Fire, Womb of Heaven, Womb of Earth. Let our people always have days, always have dawns." Then it goes, "O King One-Leg, Giver of Green."

King One-Leg.

Amen, brother.

Link and Marty are doing a lasso with the coaxial cable.

Yeah?

Calista is combing her hair. And she keeps jolting each time she scrapes the edge of the lesion.
Thank goodness for home-schooling.

There's a party on Friday night. You want to come?

Do they hate me?

They don't hate you. Quendy just told me she thought you were nice.

You were talking with her about me.

Don't worry.

I won't. They hate me, don't they?

They think you're like meg cuddly.

Okay. I want to live a little.

Exactly.

I'll come.

Brag.

Will you get me?

Sure.

What time is it right now? Do you have to go?

Yeah. It's time for announcements.

I make my own announcements. Into the garbage can, so it echoes.

Lonely.

I tell myself to come to the office.

Yeah.

Then I pace in circles, waiting for me to show up. I wait and I wait, you know. I wait and I wait in the office, she said, but me never comes.

... this month's 20 Hot Sex Tips for Girls.

Hey! You wanna leave your boyf with his head spinning? Then check out what Lucia, our Lady o' Love, has to say about these chicks and their sich in the sack!

Natalie from New Jersey messages us, "My guy sez, 'No nookie at parties!' But I feel that in order to do our duty to the party, we gotta—"

... which is why I ask it. Consider: The United States has been instrumental in the overthrow of truly genocidal dictatorships. We dole out billions of dollars each year in foreign aid. We support failing economies. We give harbor to many who seek our shores. We are trying to do what is right. We are trying to do what is—"

flat hope

On Friday, I went and picked up Violet at her house for the party. I hoped that the party would cheer her up.

I was used to the route, now, and I liked seeing all the stuff I passed, the antennas and chutes and vents, and my feed told me their names as I looked at them—*Charming Lawn Observation Tower; Riverdale Exhaust Hood; Institute for the Study of Psychoeconomy; Bridgeton Playland and Compulsion Center*—and after a while, I knew them by sight, and with each one, I could feel like I was getting closer to Violet, which was like a present which I didn't know what was inside of.

While we flew to the party, she told me about weird things she'd read on the feed, while she was resisting it or whatev. She told me about the scales on butterflies, and the way animals lived in ducts, sometimes whole herds.

People would hear the stampeding through their walls. There were new kinds of fungus, she said, that were making jungles where the cables ran. There were slugs so big a toddler could ride them sidesaddle. "The natural world is so adaptable," she said. "So adaptable you wonder what's natural."

When we got there, people were drinking already and it looked pretty fun. Someone was being a DJ and broadcasting tracks on the feed, so we tuned in, because otherwise you just hear the shuffling while people are moving around with no music on the floor. I have a pretty good auditory-nerve hookup with my feed, so the sound is real spink, and it's good to move to. So we got some drinks and drank them, and said hi to people, and then the feed was going, it was doing this song, *I got some feet, and those feet, they're gonna walk. Walk, feet, you walk, the ten toes, I walk with the feet*, that one, and so we danced to it. It's a kind of low-hips dance, with the draggy elbows, and we did it, it's good for that.

It was all going pretty good until Quendy arrived. When she got there, it was like—*silence . . . wwwwwwwwww (wind) . . . wwwwwwww . . . ping (pin dropping)*—because her whole skin was cut up with these artificial lesions. We were all just looking at her. They were all over her.

She raised her arms. The cuts were like eyes. They got bigger and redder when she moved. "Do you like them?" she said, laughing. "I got it yesterday."

"You're," said Marty, "you're covered with cuts."

"They're not 'cuts,'" she said, smiling like he was an idiot. "First of all, it's the big spit. And second, for your info, it's called 'birching,' and they're lenticels."

Marty and Link were chatting me and each other.

Unit.

Unit.

Whoa, unit.

Violet had her face in her hands.

People were starting to dance again.

I could tell Calista and Loga were chatting up a storm. People were dancing, and the feed was going, *I walk these itty-bitty steps. Away from you. Just itty-bitty steps. I walk away.* Quendy went over to the table with the drinks and poured herself some vodka and Tang. Some other girls were over talking to her.

Violet was standing next to me, like, *I can't believe she did it.*

I went, *It's all for Link. I guess she wanted to outdo Calista.*

Can you even think how much that cost?

*I don't know.
Each one of those incisions has to be capped off in plastic.*

*Yeah. It was probably pretty pricey.
It's the end. It's the end of the civilization. We're going down.*

*No, it's sure not too attractive. Lenticels.
I just hope my kids don't live to see the last days.
The things burning and people living in cellars.
Violet.*

The only thing worse than the thought it may all come tumbling down is the thought that we may go on like this forever.

I looked at her. She wasn't joking. Her face was full of lines.

Violet, I said. I took her hands. I had an idea, and I was like, *Let me show you something.*

She didn't say or chat anything. We went away from all the people, up the stairs. The bedroom doors were closed. I took her up past the bedrooms, to the attic. I pulled down the attic, like, the pull, and this ladder folded out. I went up, and willed the light, but there wasn't any feedlink to the light. The light was worked by a string. You pulled it sometimes, and the light went on.

There was all kinds of old shit up there. She came up behind me. When we walked, our footsteps, they were clunky. The boards felt old.

We used to come up here, I said. We played sardines in the closet. You got to hide, and then everyone looks for you, and when they find you, they hide with you. This was this meg good place, because only Link's best friends, we were the only ones that knew about it. We would be up here, all together, and people who weren't his good friends, they'd be walking around downstairs, and we could hear them, and we'd be laughing our asses off.

I used to, when I was hiding here, I kept thinking of when I was littler, you know, younger, before I was good friends with Link. I kept thinking of the time when you're all racing around, and you pass people in the halls, like in cartoons where people go in one door and come out another one. And you're like passing them all and looking in all the laundry places and shit, and it's a big game, and people keep giggling, and then you don't see them again.

Then you're walking around alone. You know, there's this weird moment where you realize that you're alone, and no one else has been walking for a while. You realize that the moment, the exact moment, when you became alone is already over. You've been that way for a while. So you're walking around this empty house, and all the towels are folded up, and the soap is still wet on the soap dish. That's the creepy thing.

She sat down on an old thing.

I kept going. I was like, You're walking, and everything's empty, but the weirdest thing is that it's not empty at all. The weirdest thing is that you know that you're more alone than anyone, but that more people are thinking about you than ever before. They're all just there, holding their breath, following you, like your every move through the house, listening to your footsteps and the doors opening and closing. So you're more alone, but more watched. It can just go on and on for hours, you walking around, walking on the carpeting, picking up stuff and looking at it, alone, but thought about, until Link gets tired of it, and says the game is over.

That's exactly it, she chatted.

I didn't know what she meant, but I nodded.

She rubbed her eyes with her palms. I watched her. She stood up and brushed off the butt of her skirt.

She looked around, lifting things up. What is this junk?

Old shit, I said. All this old shit.

I walked over to one wall. There are some old pictures. I lifted them away from the inside of the roof. Paintings.

She came to my side. Whoa.

We looked at them. Ships at sea. Old-time faces, painted without smiles or anything, dressed in black, holding pieces of paper or big

books. Link's dead relatives from long ago. They had old-time names, ones from the past: Abrahah, Jubilee. Noah. Ezekial. Hope.

Jubilee was frowning. Ezekial was covered with pockmarks.

Hope was this fat old woman with a little dog.

Hope was looking off to the side, as if someone she missed was calling her name.

our duty to the party

On the way down, we passed the bedrooms again. The party had picked up. The doors were open now, and on some beds, there were people making out, and on some others, people were in mal, their legs and arms all twitching and their heads rocking back and forth, and someone was puking in a roll-top desk and trying to roll the top down to hide it. Someone's arm was coming out from under a bed, moving like they were conducting a symphony orchestra. Violet walked closer to me, and I put my arm around her, but her shoulders weren't soft, like she didn't want to be touched, and we got to the landing, and heard some kind of smacking down below, and people cheering.

When we went downstairs, they were all playing spin-the-bottle like little kids, stretched out on the floor, swinging their legs. Violet's back was kind of sagging as she walked down

the stairs in front of me. I was feeling kind of strange, like, I can't really explain it, like as if hypodermics were in the air again, but thrown all ways and still traveling.

Link said, "Hey, take yourselves a seat and play. It's fun."

"It's for kids," said Loga, "but it's kind of sexy?"

Calista was like, "Omigod, it's so uncomfortable sitting on the floor with my lesion. This is so wholly stupid."

Quendy said, "I've only spun once, but I think I did kind of good." She shifted on the floor. Marty's eyes were like meg riveted on her ass, and also on her shoulder blades, where you could see all the red fibers through the splits in the skin. They were shifting as she and this meathead named Ches Something kissed for a turn.

Violet and I sat down. I didn't need to chat her to tell she didn't want to play. We weren't next, which was good, but I really didn't want her to get spun to, because I thought she might get really pissed by the stupidity of the whole game. I was sitting cross-legged, and I put my fist in my cheek and just sat there, telling the bottle with my eyes to keep on going while it spun.

Quendy spun, and got Link, and I was like, *Oh, shit, bad news*. She was really glad. She went over to him, while everyone did this big whoop,

and he started to kiss her on the cheek, really just friendly, but she put her palm against his cheek and turned his head so she was kissing him on the mouth, and then put her arms around him. Everyone was completely silent, like *Omigod*, and they kept on kissing, with Link kind of trying to pull back, but being afraid to push too hard, with her cuts everywhere, and Calista staring at them both with this big-hair hatred in her eyes.

Link like tripped and stumbled backward and sat back down next to Calista. Everyone was really uncomfortable, except Marty.

Hey, chatted Marty to the guys, *don't you think Quendy looks good?*

Link was like, *Just shut up and play.*

I was like, *I think it looks stupid.*

It's a good look, Marty chatted, *and kind of fun.*

I was disgusted, like, *Huh? You can see her like muscles and tendons and ligaments and stuff through the lesions.*

Yeah, said Marty, *which makes you kind of think about what's inside, huh? Which is sexy.*

"You must be chatting about how Quendy looks really sexy," said Calista. It was like she was going to start something mean.

"Yeah," said Marty. "We were . . . just saying that the lesions look good."

"Oh," said Quendy. "You like the lesions?"

Link said, "Can we just play?"

"Well, I think they're a lot of fun," Calista said, as if she didn't mean it but meant the opposite.

Link spun again, and while he kissed this other girl, really hardly at all, Calista was still talking to Quendy, saying, in this really mean voice, "And don't let anyone tell you you look stupid."

"Nothing's stupid," said Marty.

"That's right, Quendy," said Calista, "because seeing what's inside of you, all your guts, is just so sexy."

"Calista," said Quendy, trying to stop her, "we're just having fun."

"That's good," said Calista.

The guy Ches Something spun and got Loga. He walked over to her and said, "Time to play."

"Quendy, you know what's fun about your lesions?"

Loga and the Ches guy started kissing, hard. They were playing up their kiss, maybe to like take attention away from the meanness Calista was having. Loga's hands were in Ches's hair, smearing through the hair, her fingers wet with gel.

Calista said, "About your lesions? What's fun is watching a girl who's so desperate for someone's boyfriend that she does something to herself which is really stupid."

There was a quiet part. Then Marty said, "Okay—just—let's—okay—let's—fuckin'—fuckin'—just let's play."

He spun the bottle, and it turned, with the neck flashing, and suddenly I could hear Quendy crying, and then I saw the bottle land on Violet. Marty got up and straightened his pants and walked over.

"Hey, there, sexy," he said. "Let's make this good."

He reached out his hand toward her. She flinched backward. He put his hand on the top of her head.

I said, "This isn't much fun."

"We'll show you fun," said Marty, winking.

"Stop it," said Violet, standing up. "Stop it all."

"What's wrong?" said Marty. He held out his hand toward her wrist. He took her wrist in his hand.

Violet was completely white. She was shaking. Her head, I mean, it was bobbing. She suddenly was yelling, "Can I tell you what I see? Can I tell you? We are hovering in the air while people are starving. This is obvious! Obvious! We're playing games, and our skin is falling off. We're losing it, and we're making out. And you're talking—you're starting to talk in a *fucking sestina!* Okay? *A sestina!* Okay? *Stop it!* Fuck you! We've got to all stop it!" She was screaming.

People were staring and chatting, and they weren't chatting with me, except Link, who gave me a single, *What's doing with this? Fix it, before cutting me off.*

Violet was screaming, "*Look at us! You don't have the feed! You are feed! You're feed! You're being eaten! You're raised for food! Look at what you've made yourselves!*" She pointed at Quendy, and went, "*She's a monster! A monster! Covered with cuts! She's a creature!*"

And now I was going, "Violet—Don't. Violet! She's not a—she's not a goddamn monster. She's—" but Violet screeched, "*You too! Fuck you too!*"—and she tried to slap me—I grabbed her by the arm—and she tried to scratch at my face, but her hand wasn't working.

She had broken somehow, and she was broken, and, oh fuck, she was sagging and I grabbed her to help her, and she was shaking, and her eyes were all white and rolling around, and she couldn't talk anymore—

—she was choking—

I grabbed her and tried to wrap my arms around her. There was a long line of spit coming out of her mouth. Her legs were pumping up and down. She was broken. She was completely broken.

I was crying and saying to call an ambulance, and people were like, *Fuck no, is she in mal? If*

she's in mal, no way, we'll get in trouble, and I was like, Call a fucking ambulance, and I tried to do it on my feed, but things were too screwed up, and I could feel the signals going out, and she was breathing again, but she'd gone limp, and I lowered her to the ground, and I put her there, and Quendy was still yelling, "Fuck you!" at her body. "Fuck you!" And Violet was breathing now in heavy, big gasps, but her eyes were closed, and I was leaning next to her asleep body, and squeezing, and squeezing, and squeezing.

I don't know what the others did. There were noises, and women came.

I went with them. And the feed whispered to me about sales, and made all these suggestions about medical lawyers and malpractice, and something happened, and I was sitting beside her in an ambulance, and suddenly I realized, *The party is over.*

The fucking party is over.

Part 8

slumberland

52.9%

The waiting room was white. There were these orbs moving back and forth filled with fluids. They went up and down the halls.

"There will be some delays," said one of the nurses.

She touched her face with her hand. Her pinkie was sticking out. She pressed on her cheek, like she had a toothache.

She said, "Expect a delay."

"Let me tell you a little story," said a woman on a chair next to me.

"He's distressed," said the nurse. She fixed her hair, which was this hair held together with two magic wands. "Breathe deep," the nurse told me. "She's pretty functional."

"What?" I said. "What do you mean?"

"The doctor will talk to you."

"There was this one time," said the woman on the chair.

"When is the doctor coming?" I asked.

"He's here."

"Where?"

"In the room with her."

"But when's he like coming out?"

She sighed. "You might want to rest your eyes."

I paced on the floor. The feed was handing me things. I listened to it, and I paced around, following the pattern of the tiles on the floor.

. . . the poor sales of the Ford Laputa in the Latin American market can't be explained by . . .

. . . craziest prime-time comedy yet. What happens when two normal guys and two normal girls meet in their favorite health-food restaurant? Lots of ABnormal laughs, served with sprouts on the side, is what!

I paced there. I went around all the chairs. I did them slalom. Men locked into giant wheels with their arms and legs spread out were being wheeled past down the hall. People in smocks hit them on the rim to keep them rolling. The wheels rolled by. The people in smocks were whistling. The men in the wheels stared out, their mouths open, their eyes looking at everything flashing by, but the men were not moving at all. Just looking at the world helpless, in circles, the world going by.

Violet's father got there half an hour after I did. I saw him running past me. I didn't wave or anything, because I didn't want to get in the way or be a pain in the butt. People, sometimes, they need to be alone. He went past me and didn't see who I was. That was okay with me. They took him into the room. I waited.

I clapped my hands together softly a bunch of times. I swung my arms at my sides and then clapped. I realized that they were swinging really wide. People were looking up at me. I stopped. I couldn't help a small clap, one last one.

He came out. He was walking real slow. He sat down.

I didn't know whether to talk to him. He was smoothing out the knees of his tribe-suit.

I went over. I said hello, and introduced myself again.

He said, "Oh, yes. Hello. Thank you for . . ."

He was just like, nodding.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. 'Okay.' Yes, she's 'okay.'"

He didn't seem much like before.

I was like, "What's happening?"

"They're fixing the malfunction. For the time being. The doctor's coming out." His eyes were orange with the light from his feed glasses.

The orbs went past. We waited. Two nurses were talking about the weekend. There was nothing I wanted to watch on the feed. It made me feel tired.

"Can you stop?" said her father to me.

I realized I'd like been clapping again.

"I hate rhythms," he said.

I put my hands down. I stood still, in front of him.

He said, "You can monitor her feed function."

He sent me an address. "Go there," he said. "If things neural were going swimmingly with Vi, the number you detect would be about ninety-eight percent."

I went there. It was some kind of medical site. It said *Violet Durn, Feed Efficiency: 87.3%*. He stared at me. I stared at him. We were like, just, there. The efficiency went up to 87.4%. He turned his head. Someone was whistling two notes in the hallway.

Violet was not a bitch. She didn't mean those things. It was because of the damage. It was making her not herself. I told myself that again and again.

But it didn't matter if she was right or wrong about what she said. It was the fact she said it, especially to Quendy, calling her a monster, screaming like one of those girls in black at school, the ones who sat on the floor in the basement and talked about the earth, the ones who got rivets through their eyes just to make people think they were hard. I wanted Violet to be uninsane again, just a person who would touch my face.

"She's awake," said a nurse. "Please come in."

She wanted him. Not me. I just stood there. He turned around and went in.

After a while, he came out and sat down again.

The nurse said, "Now you."

I followed her in.

Violet was sitting in a floating chair with lots of cables. Some of them went to her head.

When I came in, she looked away from me.

"I'm sorry," she said.

We stood that way for a little while. She was dressed in just a gown again. Like when we were getting to know each other, back on the moon.

She said, "I said I'm sorry."

I didn't want to piss her off, so I figured what she wanted me to say, and I said, "I'm just . . . I'm worrying about you."

She shrugged. I watched her. I didn't know how close she was to the person who had gone completely fugee at the party.

I asked, "How did they say you are?"

"Fine," she said. "For a little while." She held on to her kneecap. She moved it back and forth.

"How long?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

I said, "You don't have to say."

"Not long."

She looked up at me. She was almost crying.

She was like, *I can't even say everything I need to say.*

Don't be—don't—it's all going to be good.

She rubbed her eye. *Why are you standing so far away?*

I was like, *You're covered with cables.*

She was like, *Oh. Yeah. Yeah.*

We were just like standing there for a minute. Well, she was sitting, but I was standing. I looked up at her. She was moving her kneecap again. I patted myself on my hips. It was like, *Tip-tip-a-tip-tip. Tip tap.*

She went, *It's funny that you can move your kneecap all around with your fingers, but you couldn't move it with your muscles if you tried.*

One of the orbs came in and started to circle around her.

I said I had to go.

She said she'd see me later.

I said my upcar was back at Link's. I'd forgot.

She said I should go and get it.

I said I hoped she was okay.

She said she was pretty okay. She'd chat me later. Was that okay? Could she chat me?

I was like, *Oh, sure. Sure.*

No. Really?

Sure. Yeah. On the chat.

I nodded. Finally I waved, kind of pathetic, and I went out. The orb was in front of her face. I couldn't see what she looked like. I went out into the hall.

Later, my mom came and picked me up, and we went and got my upcar. The others weren't there at Link's house anymore. Link was in the back, by his pool. He waved, and yelled over to me, "She okay?" I chatted him yes, and he chatted me that that was good, and I got in my upcar and flew home behind my mom.

We had bean cubes and fish sticks for dinner. I had a couple of helpings. There was still time to do my homework, but I watched the feed instead. Some cops found a bunch of rods in a warehouse and were trying to figure out what they were. Durgin, the star of the show, said they belonged

to a pimp. His assistant had a run in her stockings. She bent down to fix it. Later I went to bed. I couldn't get to sleep. My parents had turned off the sun hours before. The light outside the blinds was just gray.

Finally, I guess I must have fell sleep. At least, I dreamed, and there were beads of water going along some string, and Violet said, "How many do you need before you're done?" and I said, "These are yours, first," and she said, "How many do you need?" and I said, "You know. You completely know," and she said, "That's why I want to hear it from your mouth."

The next day, I was at her house. It was all weird. We didn't talk. I don't know why. We didn't open our mouths. We just sat there, silent, chatting.

It's not you, I argued. It's the feed thing. You're not like that.

Maybe I am like that. Maybe that's what's wrong.

She rubbed her hands together. I'm sorry. Please. Tell Quendy I'm sorry.

Her father was walking down the stairs near us. We could hear him through the wall.

She chatted, I lost a year of my memories.

I didn't understand, first. What?

I lost a year. During the seizure. I can't remember anything from the year before I got the feed. When I was six. The information is just gone. There's nothing there.

She was pressing her palms into her thighs as hard as she could. She watched herself real careful like it was a crafts project. She went, *Nothing. No smells. No talking. No pictures. For a whole year. All gone.*

I just looked at her face. There were lines on it I hadn't seen before. She looked sick, like her mouth would taste like the hospital. She saw me looking at her.

She was like, *Don't worry, Titus. We're still together. No matter what, we'll still be together.*

Oh, I went. *Yeah.*

She reached out and rubbed my hand. *I'll remember you. I'll hold on to you.*

Oh, I chatted. *Okay.*

She went, *God, there's so much I need to do. Oh my god. You can't even know. I want to go out right now and start. I want to dance. You know? That's this dumbass thing, because it's so cliché, but that's what I see myself doing. I want to dance with like a whole lacrosse team, maybe with them holding me up on a Formica tabletop. I can't even tell you. I want to do the things that show you're alive. I want to eat huge meals with wine. I want to go to the zoo with you.*

Zoos suck, I said. All the animals just sit there and play with their toes.

I want to go on rides. The flume, the teacups, the Tilt-a-Whirl? You know, a big bunch of us on the

teacups, with you and me crushed together from the centrifugal force.

I wasn't really wanting to think about us crushed together right then, or about us in a big group, where she might go insane again, so I just looked like, *Yeah. The teacups!*

And she was still saying, *I want to see things grazing through field glasses. I want to go someplace now. I want to get the hell out of here and visit some Mayan temples. I want you to take my picture next to the sacrificial stone. You know? I want to run down to the beach, I mean, a beach where you can go in the water. I want to have a splashing fight.*

I just sat there. Her father was working on something in the basement. It sounded like he had some power tools. Maybe he was drilling, or like, cutting or boring.

She went, *They're all sitcom openers.*

What?

Everything I think of when I think of really living, living to the full---all my ideas are just the opening credits of sitcoms. See what I mean? My idea of life, it's what happens when they're rolling the credits. *My god. What am I, without the feed? It's all from the feed credits. My idea of real life.* You know? Oh, you and I share a snow cone at the park. Oh, funny, it's dribbling down your chin. I wipe it off with my elbow. "Also starring Lurna Ginty as Violet." Oh, happy day! Now we go jump in the

fountain! We come out of the tunnel of love! We run through the merry-go-round. You're checking the park with a metal detector! I'm checking the park with a Geiger counter! We wave to the camera!

Except the Mayan ruin.

What about it?

There aren't, I like pointed out, there aren't the sacrificial stones. In sitcoms.

No, she said. That's right. Chalk one up for the home team.

We sat. She fixed her hair with her hand.

I asked her, What did it feel like? At the party?

She waited. Then, she admitted, It felt good. Really good, just to scream finally. I felt like I was singing a hit single. But in Hell.

87.1%

Later, before I left, I watched Violet and her father petition FeedTech for free repairs. Violet's dad couldn't pay for all the tests and shit himself. None of it was covered by medical, because the feed wasn't medical.

They sent a message to FeedTech explaining what happened. I sat there while they spoke it together. It was all about how she had lost her memory, and how sometimes she couldn't move parts of her, and about how she had gone completely fugue-state. They asked FeedTech to take on payments for research and repairs. They said that FeedTech had to, because it was about the life of a girl.

Her feed's warranty had expired years ago.

"We will present this petition to several corporate sponsors," said Violet's dad. "If you do not acquiesce, others will. We will find

someone who will support this repair. We will take our business elsewhere."

"Please," said Violet. "We need your financial assistance."

"If you want us as customers," said her father.

They sent the message. After that, we didn't say much.

86.5%

Quendy and I talked the next day. We were sitting on big cubes, they were made of concrete. We sat side by side.

I was like, "She's really sorry."

Quendy nodded. She still had the lesions all over her. When she moved her head, I could see a lesion on her neck open and close like a fish mouth singing a country song.

Quendy said, "I was like . . . I can't go out in public anymore. At first, I was so living eternally in a tool shed. But Loga was like really, really good? She was sitting with me that night. We went back and sat around at my house. She was like, *Da da da, she was completely in mal, don't listen to her, da da da, she's a complete fuguing bitch.*"

"She's—but she's not—"

"I know. That was just what I like needed to hear then."

"She feels real bad."

"I know. It wasn't her."

I didn't say anything. I just nodded. Quendy brushed her hair back out of her face. I rubbed the corner of the concrete with my thumb.

Quendy asked, "She okay?"

I shook my head. "She's scared. They say that it's . . . The feed isn't working well with her brain anymore."

"Omigod." She looked at me. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. The whole brain is tied in to the feed. The whole brain, like the memory and the part that makes you move and the part for your emotions."

"The limbic system."

"I don't know."

"I just looked it up."

"Okay."

"There's a diagram." She sent me the site.

"Okay." I sat there.

"Maybe you should check it out," she said, a little angry. "It'll help you understand what's happening to her."

I pulled up my leg and untied and tied my shoe.

"Don't you want to know?"

I said, "I guess not."

"You know," said Quendy, "this isn't re: the

world serving you some meg three-course dump banquet. It isn't re: the world serving me some dump banquet. She's the one who this is happening to. I don't know what you're saying to her? But I hope you aren't sulking weirdly."

She looked over at me. I just sat there.

She added, "Making her feel low-grade."

She put her hand on my leg.

"Hey," she said. "Hey."

Through the holes in her hand, the blood in her veins was blue.