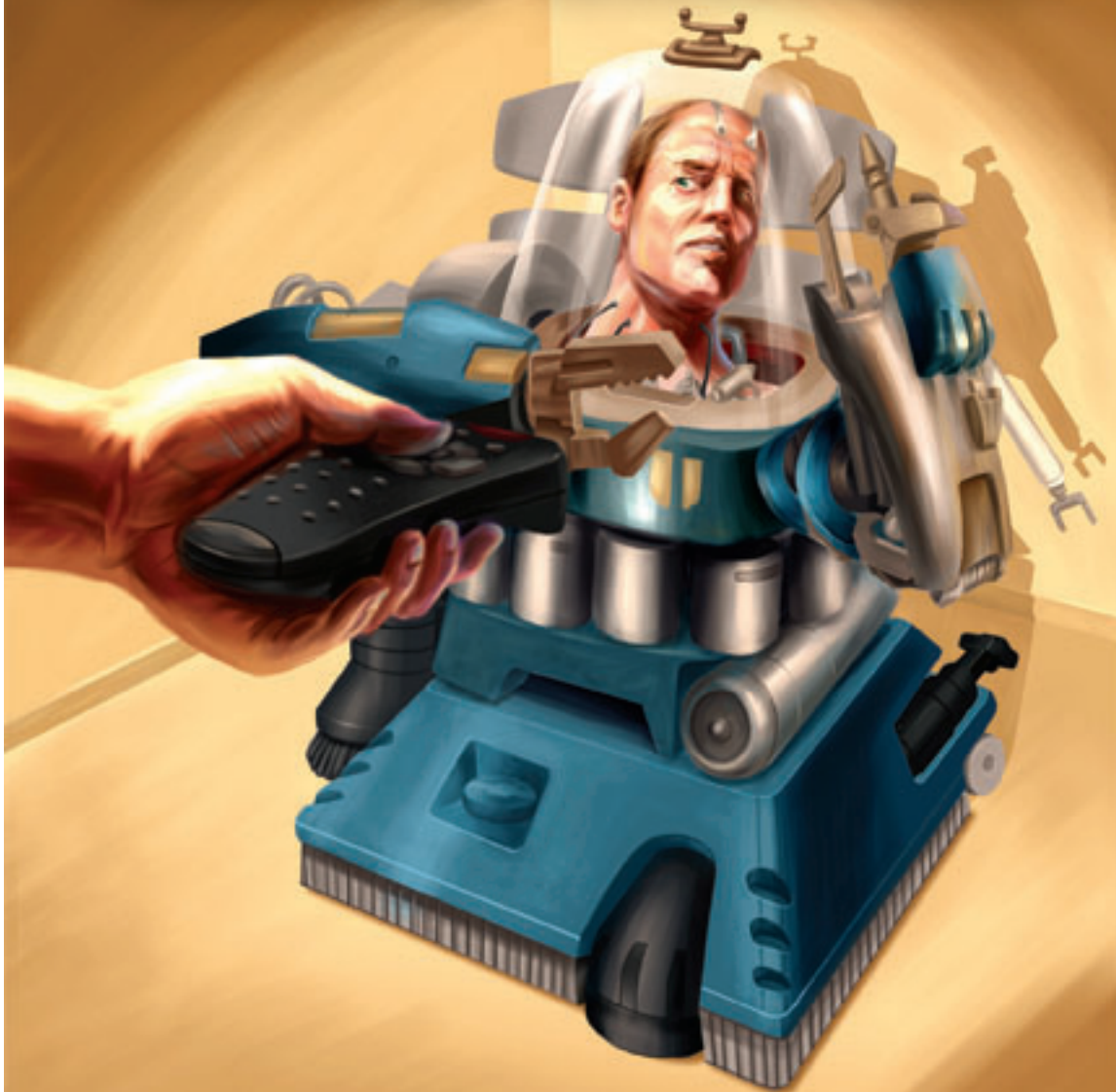


REBORN

CLIVE WARNER



REBODY

Clive Warner

CITIRIA PUBLISHING

Cover art by David Rabbitte
Glyphs and Layout by Mike War

"It is a curious paradox that almost all science fiction, however far removed in time and space, is really about the present day."
- J.G. Ballard, "Vermillion Sands", 1971.

REBODY

Copyright © Clive Warner 2007

ISBN 978-0-9790386-1-7

Published simultaneously in the USA and UK

All characters, places, events etc. described within are entirely the products of the author's imagination and in no way are intended to represent any actual character, place, event, etc., and any ap-

parent resemblance is either accidental or coincidental in nature.

Sir Isaac Newton is supposed to have remarked that his scientific achievements were due to the fact that he stood on the shoulders of giants. In science fiction we stand also on the shoulders of giants.

With thanks to Prof. Hugh Fox.

1

Not in vain have I dressed
In robes of yellow feathers,
as if through me, the sun has risen.

— Unknown pre-Columbian poet.

I've been sitting for ten minutes staring at the term paper of Yolanda Lopez Navarro, one of my English students here at Lady Guinevere College, San Antonio. What grade should I give? E? E minus? As a teacher I have failed, for she seems incapable of writing proper English. Every sentence is riddled with Spanish words.

Across the bottom Yolanda has written:

"I sorry, Professor Hugh. I study hard but writing the Inglés, it difícil." And, alarmingly, she has imprinted a kiss in peach lipstick.

I tuck the term paper out of sight under the others, and look about nervously. How will I deal with this? Truly, my results are awful. My class on Joyce and Dunleavy seems impenetrable to this student generation.

Yolanda is about five eight, I guess, looks French, and makes a pair of jeans and a baggy sweat-shirt look Paris-chic. She's from a little town south of Monterrey, Mexico, that was conquered by the French at some time in history. That's as much as I know. Except: she scares the hell out of me.

There's no getting around the grade problem. If I flunk her my pass rate will drop below acceptable, and I'll be up in front of the Dean. Then, bang goes my tenure! I'll have to give her an oral exam. Oh, I can't even write that without the immediate double-meaning. Let's see; a verbal exam. That's better.

Can't use my office. Cram myself into a cubbyhole with Yolanda? I'm getting hot just thinking about it. Whoa.

Where? Where can I take Yolanda to administer an, umm, verbal exam, which will be quiet and private enough and yet have other people there? Maybe a coffee shop or something. There's the Moon poetry group, that meets every full moon at the Latte Day Coffee bar, on the Riverwalk.

I dig around in my desk drawer and pull out a 'What's On' flyer I picked up at Barnes & Noble just yesterday.

Here it is. A guy called Bob Miker runs it. They meet tomorrow. I'll send Yolanda an email.

* * *

Later:

From: Yolanda

To: Professor Hugh

Subject: Verbal Exam

Dear Prof,

Gracias por la second chance!

See you at the coffee bar!

Adios, Yolanda.

* * *

Two fifteen, Friday afternoon. I sit here in my tiny cubbyhole at the back of the library, entering my student grades into a geriatric PC running a version of the operating system from the previous decade. It's so obsolete that I have to carry a list of the keyboard controls to move around the data

screens.

Yolanda's exam grade is empty. It's the last piece of data I have to put in. Finally it's come down to this: Me, the grade computer, and Yolanda's exam.

I put in a C.

Then I erase it and enter a D. But I think of explaining to the Dean why my pass rate is still on the way down, and delete the D and put a B minus. Then I upgrade all the other students one point, just to make sure.

What the hell difference does it make at the end of the day? School is bullshit anyway. The whole damn system is designed by the corporate rich. All they want is a steady flow of recently qualified grads, who will happily work for peanuts until they are tossed on the scrapheap when the new batch arrives. And here I am part of the system. How did this happen?

I escape from the grade program leaving Yolanda's B minus in place, pick up my tote bag, lock the office door, and make my way through the almost-deserted halls to the parking lot at the rear of the main building.

My pride and joy stands by itself on the back row of the lot. My two-year-old black Mitsubishi. I bought it at one of those Federal auctions, where they sell off all the gear they've confiscated from criminals. Otherwise I'd be running around in a three-year-old Ford Escort with no cruise control, like most of the other profs.

The Mitsu has black one-way windows, carpet that comes up to my ankles; a stereo system like a stage set, and massage seats. When I bought it, I found a tiny silver spoon dangling from the mirror. I think it belonged to some narco before the Feds. Sometimes I wonder if, one day, some wiry *moreno* with wrap-round mirror shades isn't going to accost me in a parking lot and demand his car back.

It's a blistering hot July afternoon. The moment I catch sight of the Mitsu, I point the clicker at it. Even though it only takes me twenty seconds to reach the car, that's twenty seconds the air conditioner has to reduce the temperature from 'third degree burns on contact' to 'ouch'.

I take 181 up to 410 and then along 410 for a while, until I reach Phantom Larches, where I live with Doobie, my Dalmatian bitch. Even before I park the Mitsu I can see an envelope jammed through my front door handle.

I think my blood pressure's rising. Yes. As I expected. The neighbor committee has fined me fifty dollars to go into the communal security fund, for having had three warnings about the leaves on my front lawn not being removed 'in a timely manner'. Jeez. I wish my students could write that well.

Doobie starts barking even before I get the front door open. It's not the 'who the hell is that' bark, it's the 'hi there, it's me, doing my job' bark. That's better than coming home to an empty house. All traces of my very temporary wife disappeared almost as rapidly as she arrived in my life. I wasn't exciting enough for her. I won't write her name here. It's part of a pact I made with myself a while ago. The pact, roughly translated, goes: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die!"

* * *

I park the Mitsu in the Marriott parking lot, go down the steps to the river, and arrive at the Latte Day just after eight o'clock. It's next to the Lighthouse café-bar.

The place is a low, rectangular building with a lot of windows.

I push the door open. A bell jangles as I enter. There's nobody in sight, I must be way too early. Oh well. I'll have a couple of drinks next door, and come back later.

* * *

The bell jangles again as I open the door to the Latte Day. This time I hear the murmur of conversation. Potted plants and rococo vases of flowers fill the room. Tiny round tables cower between the foliage. There are three chairs per table, made from the light alloy that was popular before people got 'large', as they say nowadays. I'm not sure I'd want to sit on one of those things.

On my right is a high counter of transparent plastic. It has many compartments, each filled with coffee beans. A mid-twenties guy stands behind the counter. He's wearing a pale cream sweater. A scent of perfume drifts from him. I guess it just might be aftershave.

He begins checking five large thermos flasks that occupy most of the counter. Each bears a label, 'House Decaf', 'House Special', and so on.

I order a Columbian. Seems a good idea. I need the caffeine. It was so boring in the bar across the road, I drank more than I should have.

"Anything else? Something to eat?"

"No, thanks."

The door bell rings. I turn around to look. Two guys come in, then a young woman, about twenty-three, in dark eye makeup. One of the men carries a battered Samsonite briefcase, the hard-shell type.

"Hi. I'm Bob." The fellow with the briefcase sticks out his hand, so I shake it. He's about five-ten, has intense blue-green eyes, black hair and a neatly-trimmed beard.

"Uh, nice to meet you."

"Are you here for the open mike?"

"I guess so. I'm meeting one of my students here."

"I publish the Lunar Poetic Magazine."

"Really?" I have the horrible suspicion this might be one of my ex-students. He looks kind of familiar.

Bob consults his watch. "You're early. It's only half past eight."

"Well, that's what it said in the *What's On*. I picked up a copy in Barnes and Noble."

"I put that to get people to come on time. Trouble is, they all know that. Nobody arrives before nine."

"Oh. How long have you been running this?"

"The poetry nights? Ever since I moved here from Austin, a couple years now. I'm doing an MFA in poetry. Have you seen the magazine?"

"No." His enthusiasm and energy threaten to light the fires I can still recall from my freshman days. The fires that smolder under the fire-blanket of university bureaucracy.

Bob opens the briefcase and pulls out a slim magazine. "Have you written any poetry?" He passes me the magazine. On the cover is a cartoon of a frog smoking a bubble pipe. It reminds me of Alice in Wonderland.

"Not really."

"Not really?" He looks set to continue grilling me, but just now the front door opens and Yolanda floats in on a cloud of expensive perfume and female pheromones.

"Oh, hi, Hugh!" Yolanda grabs my arm and plants a determined kiss on my cheek.

I imagine myself branded with an apricot lip-smacker now. Must get discreetly away to the rest room, and remove the evidence. But there is no time, Yolanda links arms with me and tows me to a nearby table.

A flood of slightly odd-looking people swarm through the door. A braless girl in a string top with blonde string hair; a very tall thin pimply guy with a toilet-brush haircut and several rings dangling from his nostrils; a guy off an old Bob Dylan vinyl album cover, complete with guitar case and black French-style beret.

The beret guy is arm-in-arm with a pretty redhead who's wearing a T-shirt printed with a picture of a taco. She turns to say hello to the string girl, and I see that the back of her T-shirt bears a large printed slogan. It reads:

'If God had not meant man to eat pussy, he would not have made it look so much like a taco.'

A middle-aged man sits at the next table. He wears an Afghan coat like a refugee from Sergeant Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band and sports a black eye patch. He breathes with a hoarse raspy sound, like he forgot his oxygen tank.

When everyone's settled down a bit, Bob gets up, walks over to a reading stand, and raps on it a couple of times with a tiny wooden hammer.

"It's nice to see so many friends here tonight. And some new faces, too." He glances sideways at me. "Everyone's welcome to participate. In fact we demand it!"

"Isn't he great?" Yolanda leans over and whispers, then wiggles her tongue in my ear.

"You know him?" goose bumps have risen on my arms.

"Yes." She giggles. "Want a Coke? Diet or regular?"

“Er, yeah. Okay. Diet.” I feel dehydrated from the drinks earlier.

While I wait for her to come back, I try to read the price tags on the plants. Wow. I don’t know who can afford this stuff.

More people arrive. The room’s filling up. Ah. Here’s Yolanda with two tall glasses of ice and cola. She sets them down on the table. It takes me about ten seconds to finish mine. I like the bitter taste.

A huge spray of foliage, ferns and such, overhangs our table. At first this seemed cozy but now I see its drawbacks as a large bug drops gently off the flora and lands on Yolanda’s bare shoulder. It’s a beetle, of such a blackness that it shines deep green, a vibrating olive color.

This is what I notice but have no more time to remark when, her mouth in the same ‘O’ as that Munch painting, ‘The Scream’, Yolanda turns her head, spies the beetle, tickling its way across her cream-tan skin, raises her hand to swat it, and lets go a scream fit to shatter windows.

The beetle, probably stunned, sprouts a pair of wings and buzzes loudly away in a series of Immelman turns.

I wish I could too.

While my thoughts still churn like a washing machine, Yolanda flicks her fingers across her shoulder as if dismissing the beetle. “Ugh! You see the color of that, Hugh?”

“Did you see ...” I begin to correct her, automatically, the English professor part of my brain taking command in the lack of a more appropriate captain.

“I’ve brought some poetry. You think they’ll like?” She shivers for a moment, and her breasts jiggle enticingly. She has these pert breasts, my personal addiction, these being so high they seem to start at her collar bones. It’s been very hot today, which explains her low-cut batik silk blouse. It’s rather translucent. I don’t think she’s wearing anything underneath.

“Ah ... Er ...” Her term paper’s egregious grammar swims in my mind’s eye. More pocho than English in some places. “Not sure.” Shit, what can I say? Then, momentarily the spin cycle stops and I think: yeah. I’ll justify my grade with her poetry. It’s English, more or less.

“Tell you what. I’ll grade you on your poetry. It is in English, isn’t it?”

“Oh, si! Of course!” without warning she leans toward me and plants a kiss on my lips.

Something stirs down below. Damn. I nonchalantly cross my legs and think of beetles, plants, and ... Yolanda’s shoulder. This isn’t working but at least my condition hasn’t, um, increased.

The screech of an amplifier in feedback splits the air for a moment, then Bob’s voice echoes around the room. “Hi everybody! Glad you could come. Next week, try to remember we start at eight thirty, right? Let’s see. Who’s got the list?” he looks around.

A lanky student-type gets up and walks over to Bob, and hands over a piece of paper. Bob studies it for a moment. “Who?”

The student points across the room to a man in his late forties, mainly bald, with glasses.

“Clyde?” he says into the microphone.

The forty-something guy walks over to the microphone. He is clutching a sheaf of letter-sized paper. “Near enough,” he says. “Nobody in America can spell my name right, but it doesn’t matter. Is it one poem?”

“Yeah, one poem each,” Bob says.

I hear a buzzing of wings nearby. The beetle emerges from one of the flower sprays and circles at high speed under one of the ceiling lamps.

The middle-aged guy taps the microphone, clears his throat, and picks up his sheaf of papers.

“This is a poem called ‘She’.”

Oh shit, this is going to be some maudlin gump about his significant other, I expect. And of all things he speaks with a Brit accent. Weird.

He clears his throat again then bursts out with:

“When I first saw you on the floodlit catwalk, I felt passion stir and had to be in your warm leather embrace.

“While I was so in love, I could not see your faults. Proclaiming only virtues I allowed photographs, videos even, to be taken, which show a grinning fool: I, with you, then.”

Hmm, I think, this may not be quite as I expected.

“The money I spent: your black vinyl bra, body waxing, silicone enhancements, rubber gear — o God all that stuff.” He pauses for breath.

Finally he finishes, and rushes away from the mike as if embarrassed to have read the poem, and hides behind a huge potted fern.

Bob walks up to the mike again. He smiles happily at Yolanda, rolls his somewhat bloodshot brown eyes, and says, “And next, a new member —”

Yolanda grabs hold of my arm and digs her nails in like a cat my mom once had. I’m afraid to move.

“— Yolanda will read her poem, “Him.”

Yolanda releases my arm. She gives me a sweet peck on the cheek, then advances to the microphone. The overhead spotlight — I guess it’s there to help read — finds her batik blouse little impediment. Oh Buddha, she’s magnificent.

From behind the giant fern the ‘She’ guy says quietly, “by George!”

Yolanda caresses the microphone, pulls it from its stand, and, in her Latina, breathy, husky, sexy voice, says:

“Him. So smart. So shy.

“Him. Not to know. But now ...”

I hope no-one is recording this for posterity. I will have a hard time justifying a B plus for this. Meanwhile Yolanda has turned to face me rather than the audience, and continues,

“to want him body...” but now the words are coming and going in waves. And I don’t want to hear the fragments I can make out. It’s all too embarrassing.

“Until he is mine, mine, mine.” Yolanda blows me a kiss and folds the paper.

A few people clap in a desultory way. The guys around the room glance at Yolanda’s silhouette in disbelief, then at me, with envy.

Yolanda comes back and sits down. After a moment she rests her hand casually on my thigh.

“I’m going for a coffee. Would you like some?” I croak.

She shakes her head, smiles, and digs her fingertips in for a moment. I feel a bit drunk, but not so drunk that she doesn’t cause an immediate reaction.

I get to my feet and stroll into the espresso bar for a strong one. Maybe caffeine will revive me. I better get a cab back to my apartment. Don’t want a DWI on my license.

The pale-cream sweater guy is face to face with a Latino man about twenty-five years old. I catch the last words of what he’s saying:

“ — Light, man.”

“Well, that’s Medellin for ya. Adios, man.” The Latino guy turns and walks to the door. He seems to be missing an ear.

“Can I get you something?” sweater guy asks.

“Espresso?”

“Sure.”

“You all right? You look a bit red. Too hot?”

“I’m fine,” I grunt, trying futilely to banish Yolanda from my imagination. I feel dizzy.

The door swings open. Yolanda walks through, takes me by the arm, and says, “Come on, Hugh. No time for coffee. I think you need some air.”

Our fear of death is the fear that our identity will be obliterated. If we did but realize and experience that that identity is an immortal being which cannot die or be obliterated, our fear of death would vanish.

— Benjamin Creme.

I pause for a moment and survey my students. There are twenty-three of them in my second year, and this time I've tried to introduce a new topic: comedy in literature.

"... and so, how does Dunleavy give the story so much humor? What method does he use? Evidently it's not slapstick. We can't point to any one sentence or paragraph, and say 'this is funny'."

We're studying "A Fairy Tale Of New York" by J.P. Dunleavy.

In the very front row, dead center, Yolanda leans forward, gazing at me with her dark eyes. She's dressed in a Mexican-style blouse and scarlet hot pants.

It's been two weeks since our first date, if I can call it that.

I look away, feeling my cheeks blushing slightly, and scan the rest. Three students in the second row are deep in a whispered conversation. One at the back seems to have passed out. A guy on the far right, third row, stares back at me with bloodshot eyes, grinning like a loon. Must be on something. The others wait for me to continue, fidgeting and coughing.

I haven't had a chance to talk to Yolanda. I arrived early and waited anxiously. When the rest of the students had all arrived, I had to take the podium.

Yolanda came in five minutes after I started. It was hardly a problem for her to find a place in the front row. That's the last place students want to sit.

* * *

It's break time. She seems to have disappeared. Maybe she's hiding in the rest room. I bet that's where she is. Well, I've got an advantage. My next class is a free period.

I position myself a discreet distance from the female restroom and keep a watchful eye on it, while pretending to read the San Antonio Express News.

Eleven thirty-five, the door opens, and there she is.

"I need to talk to you."

"Hugh!" Yolanda gives me a huge smile as if she hasn't been avoiding me all this time. "I'll be late for class." She quickens her steps. I walk alongside, a moth-eaten teddy beside a Christmas Faery Queen.

"When?"

"After the last class. I'll be waiting." She blows me a kiss and hurries away, all long legs and platform shoes.

* * *

Several students give me curious glances as they pass by. It's a little awkward, pretending to be doing nothing in this narrow corridor.

Ah. There she is.

Ruining my pose, Yolanda grabs my arm and tows me down the corridor. With her other hand she tows one of those carry-on hand luggage carts. I guess her college books and notebook PC are inside. "Let's go to Dave and Busters," she says. "Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

Like a gentleman I open the car door for her.

Yolanda flings her cart into the back, making me wince.

Traffic is heavy on 410.

The Mitsu hunts between gears as we loiter along.

I move into the third lane but a Chevy Camino blocks me. The lane seems clear ahead of him, why doesn't he accelerate?

I guess he's talking into his cell phone, but no; he sticks his hand out the window and gives the

finger to some guy next to him on the right, in a Ford Expedition SUV.

I blow the horn.

The Camino guy looks back and gives me the finger, too. Fuck him!

“Hey, cool it, Hugh!” Yolanda puts her hand on my thigh and massages it. Saturn begins to rise.

I glance at her.

She grins at me, then flips down the sun visor on her side and rummages in her handbag.

“Okay, but I wish — ”

A loud backfire interrupts me. I return my gaze to the road — best not run into the asshole in front — just in time to catch a flash of fire, as the guy in the Camino looses off a shot at the guy on the right. Fuck!

“Hey! We better get outa here — ” but no sooner are the words out of my mouth when I see a long barrel poke out of the Expedition.

Bam! A tongue of flame rips through the air.

The Camino fishtails, then slides sideways and caroms off the crash barrier. It loses speed. I hit the brakes and just manage to avoid it.

“Hugh! Look what you’ve done!”

“Huh?” I’m still looking for gaps in the flow, gotta get out of the crossfire —

“You’ve ruined my makeup!”

“Uh, sorry — ” I shoehorn the Mitsu into the second lane, between a semi trailer and a mobile home.

“Hugh, Dave and Busters is the next exit.” Yolanda doesn’t seem to have noticed the exchange of gunfire. She dabs at her face with a tissue, removing a lipstick smear.

I guess that happened when I hit the brakes.

“Next exit, Hugh!”

“Uh? Yeah.” I spot a gap in the first lane, squeeze in. The cops’ll be here any minute, for sure. Here comes the off-ramp.

* * *

Dave and Busters isn’t too crowded, but we’re early. I guess the kids have been dragged home to dinner and the dating crowd hasn’t arrived yet. It’ll be pretty crammed by nine. I like the games, but first I need to have a serious chat with Yolanda.

I lead the way over to an empty table near the bar and pull a chair out for her.

“Hugh, you’re a real gentleman. That’s one of the things I like about you.”

I seat myself. She takes my right hand and places it on her left thigh. I try to think about Nancy Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, all wizened and wrinkled.

“Look,” I start, “A relationship between professor and student. It’s not proper.”

“Why? I’m a big girl now. I can choose who I want. Can’t I?”

“People will talk.”

“People?”

“You know. The dean. He’s one of those ... ” I search for the words.

“Born agains?”

“Yeah. One of those born agains. I don’t think he approves of relationships outside of marriage. At least, not this kind of relationship. I could get into real trouble.”

Unexpectedly, Yolanda laughs, a delightful trill that sends shivers through me. She moves my hand a few inches and then traps it between her thighs.

“Papa’s the — ”

“What?”

“Nothing.” she smiles at me and squeezes my trapped hand with her thighs.

At this moment one of the bar staff comes over. “Sir, would you like chimpanzee service?”

“Eh?”

He leans over and says in a low voice, “It’s a silly idea if you ask me. Some animal training center on the edge of town. They serve drinks. Pretty good too. Never spill a drop.” He laughs. “You’ll

need a banana though. Dollar each.”

“Hugh, why not?” Yolanda releases my hand.

“Okay. Yeah, why not? I’ll have a separator.”

“Cooler for me,” Yolanda says.

“Right. Here’s the banana.” The barman pulls out a roll of tickets, tears one off and hands it to me. It has a little yellow banana printed on it. Off he goes, back to the bar.

A little time later a chimp walks up to the table carrying a tray.

I guess it’s a she, because she’s wearing a frilly dress in the style of a Victorian maid.

The chimp, holding the tray steady as you like, takes the drinks and sets them on our table, and waits expectantly.

“Hugh, the banana!” says Yolanda.

“Oh! Yeah.” I offer the banana token to the chimp. I see she has a name pinned to her dress. It says “Daisy”.

Daisy does a passable curtsy and scampers back to the bar, disappearing behind the counter. I see the barman pull a banana from a bunch hanging there.

“Cute!” Yolanda seizes my hand. “Hugh, let’s go back to my place after. Don’t drink too much. I don’t like it when you do that.”

I order a Salty Jack lobster lunch.

Yolanda has a Pierre Crouton crispy salad. She picks at the lettuce and nibbles on Croutons while I shovel French fries into my mouth.

“Hugh, con cuidado! Take care! Lot of calorías in those! And I saw you eating puffy tacos yesterday!”

Puffy tacos. San Antonio’s answer to the deep fried Big Mac. I do make a hole in the crust and pour the fat out before eating them.

“Well. What I wanted to say, was — ”

Yolanda leans forward, listening, giving me a view of the twin peaks, and I forget what I was about to tell her. Got to be here somewhere — ah. Yes.

“I think we should wait, er, a bit, the vacation may be a better — ”

“Don’t you like me, Hugh? I thought you liked me. I played the video to myself every night, hoping you’d call.”

“I don’t have — video? What? — your phone number. What video?”

“The video of our night together. You know, Hugh, in the old days, I read that people would keep a lock of hair. But now, we have video! I bought the camera at Bust Buy.”

Oh shit. Suddenly my lobster tastes crummy. I look for Daisy, and spy her sitting inside a small roped-off area near the bar. She’s just finishing her banana. I need another drink, and fast.

* * *

“Hey, look!”

“Looka wha? Er, what?” Wosh she mean? Where?

“Over there!” Yola pulls my arm. I nearly lose hold of the bar.

“Eh?” Peering around. All noise, lights. Where Daisy? Need another banana.

“Come on!” Yola, Yolanda, drags me away from the bar.

Cling on to her, totter along to somewhere, until we stop. Where’s the nearest thing to hang onto? Ah, a wooden post. Gottit.

“Look, another chimp!”

Looks bigger than Daisy. Ah, it’s a boy chimp. Wearing blue jeans and cowboy boots. Check shirt and a big white Cattleman hat. Looks like the guy on the tobacco adverts.

There’s a big wheel behind him. It’s turning slowly. Lights flash on and off. A sign overhead reads ‘Wheel of Life and Death’. It looks like one of those old-fashioned Faro wheels.

Two Yolandas offer tokens to the chimps.

I close one eye. Thass better.

Yolanda reaches out and pulls on a big chrome rail that circles the wheel. The wheel speeds up a little.

The cigarette poster chimp pushes a button. The wheel goes ‘pok pok pok pok .. pok ... pok’, a red light jumps from one slot to the next, I hang on to the post, Yolanda does a little dance, a bell goes ding!

On my right, one of those moving message displays lights up. It says ... YOU WIN ... no I can’t read that fast, wait, here it comes again: YOU WIN 5,000 AIR MILES.

Hey. Not bad! Okay, here I come!

“It’s ten tokens, Hugh.”

“Uh?” Bananas? I had enough bananas already.

“Let me find them.”

Oh! Yolanda sticks her hand in my pocket and roots around, does something down there. Ooh. But the bananas have taken charge. She grabs something and pulls her hand out.

“Hey! You’ve not spent any!” she brandishes a roll of tokens. Reaches out, grabs my arm, and pulls me away from the post. Reelin’ an’ a rockin’.

Here’s the wheel. Grab it. Oof. I lost it again. Grab the rail. Oof! Nearly fall, there. Yolanda stops me.

The wheel whizzes around. The chimp furrows his brow. He presses the button. The wheel goes ‘pokpokpokpokpokitypok . pok .. pok ... the light blurs through the slots, slower, slower, the screen flickers, messages flash, free health cover — try again — \$5000 travel cover — 1 car payment — spin again — lose — spin again — free spin —

And stops. The screen says ‘cryo freeze’.

“Whass that?” I ask, feeling silly about asking a chimp.

The chimp shrugs and gives me a ticket. The ticket has the image of the Christian cross on the front, but with a big red ‘X’ over it.

I’m about to ask what I won, but the chimp points over to the booth where the games controller sits.

I push the ticket through the tiny slot in the booth’s glass window. A hard-faced woman takes it and laughs.

“You just got your head insured, bud. It’s a pretty head, too!” she laughs again, and pulls a piece of paper from underneath the counter. “Here’s your policy with NecroNo. ‘Course, if you’re a born-again, you’ll want to tear that up.”

* * *

Yolanda’s driving. Good job, too. Seems I used her bananas as well as mine. I-85 is a blur. Road lighting, headlamps, signs.

She handles the car well. Off at junction fourteen. Her country condo. Nice. Daddy must be rich. Speed bumps, oof, a bit fast, scraping sounds below.

We stop.

The motor dies.

My door opens. I’m leaning on it, fall out, her arm stops me.

“Vamonos, Hugh. I got something to wake you.”

Nice carpet in here. Looks comfy. Just lie down on the sofa for a minute. Just lie down here. Ah, soft. Good. She’s gone. No, she’s pulling my shoe off. Now the other.

“Uh — ”

“Here. Take this. Toma-la. Down ... ”

I swallow. “Woss tha?”

“Via-tamins. Here, let me help.”

Socks coming off. She’s having trouble with my belt. Everything taking a long time. A strong tug on my pants. Down they come.

She pulls me across the room. Opens a door. Her perfumed bedroom.

Tie’s choking me. Argh. Got to get it off. Knot’s jammed, can’t breathe. Help. Ah. That’s better. Now the shirt.

Ooh. Big surge from down there. How. Oh. That pill. I hear a giggle.

Her fingers hook into the waistband of my Hanes.

Yolanda unbuttons her blouse. She's wearing one of those half-cup bras.

I kiss her exposed nipples and they swell, wet and shiny.

She reaches down, undoes fasteners, says 'momentito' and giggles, pushes her tight jeans down, and kicks them off.

"Now," she says, reaching down, grabbing me firmly.

I don't care any more. This may be wrong, but it's a memory I'll still enjoy when I'm sitting in an old folk's home, enjoying the last rays of the sun.

Yolanda leads me over to the bed.

We fall onto the sheets.

The pillows are embroidered with the name 'Chris'. Strange.

She pulls off her bra and pants and drops them over the edge of the bed, giggling.

I tremble and cup her breasts in my hands, ecstatic. So soft. I press my lips to her stomach, kiss the hollow of her navel.

Her breasts glow in the light from the bedside lamps. I nuzzle them, sadness welling up from within me, for no apparent reason.

She kisses my hard length, hot butterfly kisses, and as she reaches the tip, her tongue teasingly flicks it, and I am drowning in pleasure, I am adrift in seas of delight. And right now, I don't care what the born agains or anyone else might think. On, in, out, and in.

* * *

A dull pounding echoes through my head. For a moment I wonder where I am. Then the bedside lamp comes on — on Yolanda's side — and spills across the pillows.

She sits up, throwing the sheet off, and the sight rivets my gaze. Before I can move, though, the pounding starts again, louder than the pounding in my head.

It's someone at the door. What the hell? Jealous boyfriend maybe! I hope not, I especially hope it's not some football jock or martial arts instructor.

Yolanda pulls her jeans on, not bothering with panties, then her blouse, leaving her bra lying on the floor, and runs lightly to the bedroom door. She opens it, runs through, and pulls it closed behind her, except it doesn't quite close.

A sliver of light comes from the gap. She must have turned on the lights.

The thudding has a feral sound to it, as if a hole in the wall gang is making an entry. I'd better see what I can do. Whatever, this doesn't sound good.

Where are my pants? Damn, next room. Shirt? There it is on the floor.

I twist round and lunge across the bed, put one hand on the floor, then grab the shirt with the other.

A huge crash comes from the next room. Splintering sounds. Another crash, followed by a smaller bang.

"No!" Yolanda's voice. Shit. I forget about doing up my shirt buttons. Where the hell are my Hanes?

"Que haces aqui?" a man's voice bellows from the next room.

I translate, still looking for the Hanes, 'what are you doing here?' and suddenly that question, and 'Chris' embroidered on the pillows, makes me realize: this is not Yolanda's pad!

The sound of a slap comes from the next room, and I hear her cry out. That does it. Clothes or no clothes, I am going to deal with this bastard.

Immediately, I hear another slap, then she shouts, "Papa! No!"

The door bursts open.

"You mess with my daughter?" Yolanda's dad, looking like a balrog, marches into the room. He carries a sledgehammer and he looks like he knows how to use it. "A tu madre, puñatero!"

I leap to one side, but my feet are tangled in the sheets. Oof! I crash to the floor, winded.

Her dad raises the hammer. He holds it poised for a moment, then swings it down at my face.

Desperately I roll sideways.

The hammer crunches into the floor.

I hear wood splintering.

Oof! I catch a boot in the ribs. Can't breathe.

I roll the other way, onto my stomach.

Start getting to my feet.

Pain blazes through me.

Dimly I realize: I have been smashed to the floor. I catch a close-up of his boot. It's ostrich skin.
Smearred with blood.

Get yourself a new body in 24 hours, for free.
 - Internet spam, Feb. 2003

The sound track is back. No video, though. None of the sounds make sense. Just roaring, whines, and whistles.

O Buddha. I can move the muscles of my face, but I can't feel my lungs working. I open and close my mouth, smack my lips together, wiggle my tongue, rub my teeth with it. But I'm not breathing! No air. No breath. Am I dead?

Descartes said 'I think, therefore I am'. But he's dead.

The Bardo Thodol says I should have seen lights of different colors, representing wombs waiting for my identity, soul, or whatever, to enter and be reborn. I know that I should have tried for the pure white light. Was the Buddha wrong? I've seen no white light, or lights of any other color.

I feel my face muscles move, but I don't breathe. Do ghosts feel? Do they think? Am I in purgatory? Where are all the other souls, then? And there is one more thing: something that must be saliva is trickling down my chin.

I itch. I itch all over, but my hands won't, somehow, reach the itches. It's driving me crazy.

Time and again I bring my hands up to my face, hoping somehow to sense their presence, though I see nothing except random flashes and blobs of color. And somehow, I can't clap my hands. My legs feel real enough, though I have no real sense of bed underneath. Are my toes wiggling down there?

Maybe I'm in a sensory deprivation tank. I've heard of such things. I wonder if I can detect slight differences in temperature. No. Seems they've got that covered. Whoever *they* are.

Straining my ears, I can just make out a dull thumping sound. Is it my heart pumping, or some machine thudding in the basement?

My screams build up inside until it feels like my brain will explode.

* * *

I concentrate on the background roar:

Mumble, roar, squee ... Hugh. brrr, mmmg. lllllo... Hugh. Hello, Hugh. Hugh. squakkk, brrrlj, mmm.

Me. That's me! Hugh! I mouth words back at them. Hello you bastards. Where am I? Read my lips: get me outa here! Help. Help me! Please please please, no, don't panic. No. Please, please, O God, O Buddha, O Krishna, O Allah.

O, anyone!

A fogginess comes over me.

* * *

Demons with green glistening faces push me into a huge fungus, and I am digested, except for my head, which pops out of the base and rolls across a carpet of tiny purple mushrooms.

Ants nest in my ears, nipping and scratching my eardrums.

Is hell madness? Is madness hell? I must concentrate on my identity. If this is part of the re-birth process — but — I must concentrate, om mani padme hum, my name is Hugh Toffle, I teach English at Lady Guinevere College, I go out with Yolanda, her father —no. Don't think about that.

Calm. Calm. OK. I think, therefore I can use logic.

I can't see anything. OK either I am in complete darkness or my eyes are gone.

O shit probably I am blind. Ohblindnonono.

But what about the rest of it. The sound track. Maybe it's Alheimers. No, I wasn't that old. Not Alheimers.

Maybe it's an accident. Maybe I am lying in bed on life support. A vegetable.

People looking down and 'no better, doctor?'

'Sorry, completely vegetative...'

HEY! CAN YOU HEAR ME? Feels like my mouth moves but there's no sound.

Seems like I am drooling out of my mouth again.

I remember an ostrich-skin cowboy boot smeared in blood.

I must be dead, but I still slobber.

* * *

Mummy mummy please mummy come o please

mummy no mummy please

stoppit stoppit STOP!

mm

stop

ommm...

* * *

Rrrr ... squee ... lo. Hay ... lo. Hooo ... Hay-low.

Hell-o Hoo. Hello, Hoogh. Hoogh.

Sounds like my name! I try to say hello. Nothing happens. Of course. I am dead. How can anything happen?

Hell-o Hee-u ... squeeeee, roar. Sssss ... el-come t-t-t-ooo Re ... sssssh ... rumble ... body, roar ...

The fog steals into my thoughts, and I fade away.

Good.

* * *

Bad ears. That's what I've got. At least, that's what I figure from the words I can make out. I blacked out there for a while.

I don't have any idea why I can't see, move, or feel much of anything, except the drool on my chin, and someone wipes that every so often. It would be great if I could stop drooling.

The fog is coming again.

* * *

I've got inner-ear damage, canals like Venice; silted up. Now, though, I can make out a lot more words. The more I concentrate, the more I can understand.

Hugh? I think it's a male voice, it sounds lower in pitch than a woman's.

Ah. Somehow they know I am awake.

"Hugh, speak."

Speak? That's impossible. I tried a thousand times to make so much as a squeak, even a whisper.

"Hugh, open mouth. Work voice."

Ah, what's the use. But I open my mouth anyway.

Whoops! My tongue flutters in my mouth, and I hear a horrid rasping sound. I close my mouth again, but my cheeks are full of air, I can feel the pressure. My lips make a tiny high-pitched farting noise and then my cheeks deflate.

"Work voice."

I open my lips again and immediately a rush of air starts from my mouth. “Hurr ... Whooorr ... whaaa ...” I close my lips and the rush of air stops, but my cheeks remain distended until I let a little air escape from the corner of my mouth.

“Good. Try again.”

“Whaarr ... wee ... ”

“Good. Good. More.”

I try and I try until my tongue aches and will no longer obey me, but lies curled in my mouth like an old rug.

“Rest. Rest, now. Understand?”

“Urrr.”

The kind fog returns and I slip away.

* * *

“What time is? Year?” is what I say, except it comes out more like, “Wha tize? Yarr?”

“Fifty-two.”

“Fifty thoo?”

“Ah. In your years, that would be two k three three.”

It takes a moment before I can translate it. 2303! Oh, crap.

If I have been reborn, then I managed to preserve my identity, maybe I am a baby. No. Babies must know they have arms and legs and stuff, even with eyes glued shut. Or no eyes.

“Eyes next,” the voice says. “Now, rest.”

* * *

“Hugh? We’re going to turn on the video now.”

“Uh? Aw ri.” I can speak better now. Got more control over my tongue. Hey! I can see something! Brightness above, a pink blob in the middle, darkness below. “See anything?”

“Pink blob.” The blob moves. “It move!”

“That’s me. The blob. You need practice. Like the ears, the mouth. Resolution eighty by twenty.”

“Huh?”

“Just taking notes. Your eyes, Hugh. They were removed. No good. Crystalline. Now you’ve got cameras. But the interface into your brain, that’s the problem. Let’s try a hundred by forty.”

The pink blob moves a bit, and I hear a faint click. The blob takes on more of an edge. I try to focus on it. There’s a darker area on top. Hair, maybe. If I try really hard I can just make out two darker smudges. Eyes?

“Better?”

A bit. It gives me a headache.

“Expected. Now rest.”

The fog returns and I feel myself slipping away. Seems they can turn me on and off like a light bulb. Whoever ‘they’ are. Must ask, nex —

* * *

I wake up to bright light. The blob is back, but it’s not a blob anymore, it’s a face. I can make out eyes; nose, just about; and mouth. The mouth opens and closes and I hear: “Better vision?”

“Yeah. Wha happen?”

“We changed the interface. Added an adaptive matrix.”

“Whass tha?”

“Hard to describe in your terms. Like a silicon chip welded to bacteria.”

“Back-eria?!”

“Don’t be alarmed, they work for you. You feed them.”

“Uh!” I remember, last time, my last thought was: who are ‘they’? “Who are you?”

“Your speech is improving, Hugh. We’ll add an air modulator next. Let’s get on with the video tuning. And my name is Eight Dwayne Stevens. I work for ReBody Incorporated. Re with a capital, Body with a capital, but one word, see?”

I work on the video tuning for what seems like hours. Stevens shows me one pattern after another. Each time, he leans over me and does something. My brain hurts like hell.

Eventually my vision reaches the point where I have a color matrix of about 300 x 200. It still has some holes in it though. Faces are not my strong point any more. Stevens says it will improve with time. It’s a brain problem, not the cameras or interface. Then we spend a lot more time working on my hearing and speech. It goes a lot better than the video. Finally I get the hang of controlling the air flow with the new modulator valve, and I can say proper ‘t’ sounds again.

“What! What! What!”

“Good, Hugh. Very good. Next session we’ll talk about things. Now rest.”

* * *

“How much resolution have you? Let’s see. Which is the lowest square you see stripes?” A column of black and white squares materializes in the air above Stevens’ desk.

“The third row down.” I don’t want to be messing about with this. I want to know what the hell happened, but I think I know. I remember a cowboy boot in close-up, a smear of blood on it.

“Good. About half of what the human eye can manage. The adaptive matrix is better than a human eye. Your brain is the problem.”

“Oh. Thanks very much. Listen, I —“

“And your speech. Also better. Near acceptable.”

“Thanks. Listen, tell me what happened. To me, I mean.”

“After you died?”

“Ah. I guess so.”

Stevens riffles through a bunch of thin pink slips, they look like plastic, and feeds one into a small device about the size of an electric razor.

“Yes. Post-death history. Enrico Rogelio Valdez Musko, AKA El Chueco fled the United States of America to Mexico in 2303, charged with homicide — yours — and various other warrants. There are no further records.”

So Yolanda’s father, that scumbag, fled to Mexico after staving in my spine with the sledgehammer. The bastard got away with it. It doesn’t make me feel any better to know he must have died years ago. Worms have long since eaten him.

“Where is my body?”

“Body? No body was preserved. A new body can be grown, of course, but machinery is so much more”— Stevens pauses for a moment — “efficient. Your cart provides everything you need. Mobility, nutrition, oxygen, waste disposal, and — in good time — extensors.”

“My ... cart?” A wave of giddiness comes and goes.

“I will project a holo for you.”

The column of light disappears. The air above the desk flickers, then a strikingly real, solid-looking image takes its place. My face, about half size, stares back at me as if from a three-dimensional mirror. I blink. It blinks. My skin is a mass of pink and brown blotches. It sags. It has no hair. And below the chin, my neck is plugged into a thing like a large round biscuit tin on caterpillar treads.

“No! No! That’s not me!” Colors fade; the room becomes shades of gray.

“Oh yes, I am afraid it is, Hugh.”

“Oh God!”

“Hugh, there is no God. If there was, you would have met him, wouldn’t you? After all, you were dead. Do you remember being anywhere? Like heaven? Ha ha!”

“Then let me die, damn you.”

“But you did die, Hugh. And now you have a second chance at life.”

I try to reply, but only choking sounds come from my mouth. I’ve lost control of the air valve. Here I am, thanks to Yolanda’s dad: a damn disconnected head with crummy ears and crummier eyes, riding around on a trolley, with a bunch of machinery instead of natural functions. Like a char-

acter in a Philip K. Dick novel. What did Dick call artificial organs? Artiforgs!

I open my mouth to scream. Stevens lifts his arm and points at me. My air supply dies, and I go 'gleep'.

"I think that's enough for now", he says.

* * *

"We had to turn you off. And we adjusted your interface."

I can see and hear Stevens much better now. But there is some kind of glass or plastic in the way. "How long?"

"A week, in your time."

"My time?"

"Never mind. Hugh. Your time with ReBody is nearly finished."

"I am finished. With you. With all this shit. Just turn me off. What I am nauseates me. Why me? Why me, for whomever, whatever am sake?" A strong taste of aniseed burns my mouth. A pump or motor or whatever whines inside my biscuit tin.

"Oh no. And waste our investment?"

"Investment?" I look around. Hey, that's new. I can rotate my neck maybe thirty degrees either way. Up and down, too. They've changed my cart. It's bigger. It's got a big round can with snap fasteners stuck on the side. And all around my head is a glass or plastic shield.

"I wonder whether you will choose the logical path, or perhaps slide back to the organic." Stevens reaches out and raps my casing down there. It makes a sound like tapping a large biscuit tin.

A door-shaped opening materializes in the wall and a guy walks through. He looks like Stevens' twin.

"This is your account manager, Seventeen Albert Roce."

"Account?" I don't like the sound of this.

"Remember? No? Signed contract with NecroNo, Inc., 2003, clause included:

I, Hugh Toffle, do hereby grant and allocate rights to revive my head at any time in the future, should this be deemed safe, and likely to result in continued existence as defined in the ProLife Act of 2002. I hereby agree to indemnify such future organizations, whether connected fiscally or ... Hugh, the problem is payment. Look — your account."

A holographic white screen appears in the air. Multicolored words and figures appear on it:

Transport from NecroNo, Inc., in cryo. 343 ND.

"En Dee?"

"New Dollars. I'll just use dollars from now on. So that's three hundred forty-three dollars."

Checking of status and initial biosupport. \$1,729.

More figures appear and scroll down.

"Revivification. Opening your brain pan, cleaning the slush out, connecting you to the biotrolley, flushing all blood vessels, veinclens, clot eating bacteria, flesh-metal interfaces ... well, it's a long, long, list. Guaranteed six months. Parts only. Subject to provisions of the Republic of Bot."

"Bot?"

"History not included. The war."

"The war?"

"You should know all about that, Hugh. You come from a time when what you called 'America' was at war, yes? Never mind. And implants, re-ed, train, support since reviv ... total, \$97,643.35"

"What?"

"One New Dollar is ten old ones. Now, what bank accounts? Property?"

Fuck. If I heard this right, I owe ReBody something like a million bucks, in old dollars. I run through my accounts:

"Try Bank of America. Branch on four-ten and Olmos."

Roce fiddles around, then says, "your account exceeded two hundred thousand dollars — old dollars — by 2100, year the Patriotic Laundercash bill passed. All accounts over 200 K interrogated. Owner couldn't account, confiscated."

We go through my four bank accounts and they all nix out. One was that Bank of America

account. Another one I had, in Boerne, had been annexed to pay reparations to Iraq. Seems that in 2113 some crazies from Boerne had taken a suitcase full of nerve gas to Baghdad and exploded it in the city center. Boerne was the nerve center of the Republic of Texas at that time.

My other two accounts both petered out from excessive bank charges.

“You are, effectively, bankrupt, Hugh,” Roca says. “Oh, and I notice you forgot to mention the savings account. We already emptied it. After inflation there was very little. So now, we have no recourse except your services.”

“My services?”

“Yes. And your degree is three hundred years out of date. Hard to find anything. Very hard. By the way, what was an ‘English Professor’? A tiny sound like ‘erk’ escapes from his lips, and his face wobbles slightly as if it were about to come loose. “Never mind. We have found a place for you!”

He not busy being born, is busy dying.
- Bob Dylan

Light! I'm awake. I remember now. Yes. ReBody, Inc. and that bastard Stevens. He turned me off with his little remote gizmo, like a television. Got to do something about that.

Where am I? Someone's apartment, by the look of things. Let's take a look around. I have rudimentary control of my tracks now, and I have two metal extensor arms with crude grapples.

Stevens did say I'll get much better at using them, but it'll take time for my brain to form new pathways.

I must be okay for battery power; I've already experienced what happens when I get low on juice. Pain. That's what happens.

My tracks make a dull whirring sound as I circle the room.

The floor is some kind of light blue plastic material, by the look of it. My tracks don't slip.

There's a wardrobe-style mirror on the far wall.

I make my way over there, avoiding a large table and four chairs in the center of the room.

Ugh. But the blotches on my skin have faded. Hmm. Have I been modified again? There seem to be some extra mechanical bits and pieces in a tool holder on my front surface. Wonder what they —

“Hey! Hugh dombot! You awake?”

Uh? I reverse the potential to one track and feed power to both, rotating in place.

A pair of rather large boots, of dull-gray metallic material, comes into my field of view. Two legs, clad in dull black fabric. My video resolution isn't much.

I tilt my head back inside its Perspex case.

A tall, well-built Tex-Mex man towers over me.

“My name is Francisco Merinda. This is my place. Just do as you're told and there won't be any trouble.”

“Er, where is this?” I intend to say this quite loudly, but there something's wrong with my air supply. A tiny little voice comes out. I sound like one of those old-fashioned record players, the type that you wind up with a handle. Oh, shit.

“They told me to expect trouble at first. Said I'd have to house train you.” Merinda bends down, his face looms over me. His lips are drawn back.

“Okay, shithead. Get this. I work during the day. You clean up. I paid ReBody two hundred grand for you, and another eight grand for attachments. Vacuum cleaner, dish wash, boot polish, shit scraper, can opener, juicer and corer. Got that? An' energy, she expensive. So I got to go now. An' so do you.”

He pulls out a tiny black clicker, points it at me, it's

* * *

It's been a week since he switched me off the first time. It leaves me groggy and useless for hours after I come on again, so he doesn't do it too often.

I've got better at the simple cleaning tasks, but it's not like having hands would be. And I don't like that most of my 'insides' are for collecting dust and spilt liquids. I spend my free time staring at the holovision set.

A DomBot doesn't get minimum wage. A DomBot works for whatever it can get. And at the wages my employers, the Merindas, pay, I'm going to be a freaking DomBot for the next seventy-four years. I somehow think that my artiforgs won't last a fraction of that, let alone my poor old cortex.

The apartment is on the hundred-thirty-second floor of the North Star Mall starscraper. For all I know it could be anywhere, though there is one thing, kind of strange: the apt occupies the whole floor.

Francisco Merinda, 43, the head of the family, is a carbon control officer, whatever that is. Weekdays, he leaves for work at 7.25. He comes back at 6.18 give or take a minute. I never knew a

man so precise.

Señora Martha Merinda, 39, his wife of seven years, is a blondie girl from this side of the US-Mexico border, with tan skin and dark eyes. Martha spends her days eating *jicama* and watching Mexican soaps on the holo.

* * *

The Merindas disappeared for days and left me switched off.

They're back, and I'm in recovery now.

My extensors twitch; grapples open and close spasmodically; and my vision has degraded to poor black and white from half-decent color.

My tracks make an uneven whining sound as I creep toward the bathroom.

* * *

Cleaning the facility, I skid on some puke and throw a friggin' track off the sprocket. It takes me half an hour to get it back in place. Then I pass some time fantasizing about Yolanda. I close down my external video and visualize:

Seven in the evening. I have a couple of aroma candles going. She arrives in white short shorts, a skimpy red tube top, and matching high-heeled sandals. She pirouettes, raising her arms so I get a fine view of her full unfettered breasts and sweet round ass.

"Well? Are you just gonna stand there?" she plants her hands on her hips and smiles, half-sweet, half-aggressive.

"Come in, come in, Yola. Coffee? A *Sol*? I have some Zinfandel in the refri."

She hip-swings past me into the lounge.

I close the door behind her, then follow. In the background one of my old CDs is playing Françoise Hardy, loves lost and recaptured in a husky French voice reminiscent of smoky basement bistros.

Quietly I fade the room lights, leaving the lava lamp as the main source. One of those cute little ultrasonic vaporizers puffs aromatherapy into the air.

Her flirty eyes glance at me sidelong. Her pupils dilate, her nostrils flare, and suddenly her hands are on my face and she kisses me. Her scent, from some exotic orchid, bathes my face.

As we kiss, I reach for her stretchy tube top and, pulling it down, I begin to caress her breasts. I feel them so soft and warm in my hands, her nipples instantly hardening as she offers them to me —

Ow! Mrs. Merinda sends an electric jolt through me with the clicker.

"Hey you! Bozo! Vamonos! Wash dishes! Make toast! Clean bathroom caca!"

Yolanda fades.

I head for the kitchen, thinking about my credit stash concealed behind the washing machine. It's pitifully small: but it's all I've got.

* * *

Ten thirty or so. The kitchen's under control and a full load is chugging inside the washer. I've cleared, washed, and de-grunged the bathroom.

Mrs. Merinda sticks her head around the door.

"Eh! Hugh! I'm goan out the moll. You wanna watch holo, watch. But no pay per view. Got that? An' switch on the *lonche* for one-fifteen. An' wash all the dishes after. OK?"

"OK, Mrs. Merinda. I got that." Just to show I mean business I whirr my track motors.

I wait a few minutes after she leaves, just to make sure she isn't coming back for something. Then I roll into the laundry.

The washer is winding down at the end of its cycle.

After it stops, I take the clothes out and drape them over a chair in the kitchen. I've no need for any extra weight. Then I drag the washer-drier from its alcove. It takes ages; I'm not built for moving large heavy things like that.

Finally I can get at the tiny niche in the wall. It's just a place where the plasterer forgot to finish off to the edge, but it's big enough for my stash.

I count it again, just to make sure. Enough to buy a finger.

Everything comes back to that word: exist.

I have a different attitude now. It seems to me that something other than my body is missing. Seems to me, I have kind of a hole in my personality. I shy away from this idea. It's one thing I can scarcely bring myself to think about.

Carefully, I replace the plastic strip in its hidey-hole and maneuver the loose piece of plaster back into place. I push the washer into the alcove, which is an easier job than getting it out.

It's twelve-fifteen. I have eleven minutes free before starting the lunch, so I lapse back into my fantasy:

* * *

I know she expects me to continue kissing her, but instead I move, slipping quickly to the floor between her legs.

I begin to unzip her jeans.

The zip's coming down —

'CHARGE WARNING'

At the same time as a mechanical voice announces this from my computer speaker, a nasty little shock races through me.

Shit. My battery must be low.

The zipper's down. A quick tug exposes her gorgeous thighs, trembling slightly as I take hold of the hem of her tiny, frilly panties, and —

'CHARGE WARNING'

— oh shut up. Shit, why now?

She licks her lips and, taking that as an invitation, I kneel between her legs and begin to work on her with my tongue.

'RED WARNING: CHARGE: LIFE FUNCTION RISK'

Pain radiates through my brain.

'CHARGE LOW'

Crap, it is my own fault. I forgot to plug in to an outlet —

'CHARGE LOW'

Shit, where is the nearest electrical outlet? It's hard to locate an outlet what with the pain going on and all, but after a moment I remember there's one just next to the washer. I unspool my charging cable and plug in.

'CHARGING'

Ahh, it's almost as good as taking a pee would be, if I could, which I can't. Not just yet, anyway. But those parts are high on my list.

* * *

Over the months I've settled into a routine. Do the chores. Make the lunch, which all seems to end up in the garbage, I don't know why. Load the washing machine, always with the same clothes.

Mr. Merinda wears the same black suit every day. He must have dozens of them in his bedroom wardrobe.

I'm not allowed anywhere except the main room, kitchen, and laundry.

Sometimes they turn me off and park me in a closet.

Most of the time, if I'm honest with myself, I wish I were dead. Sometimes I find myself blaming Yolanda for all this, but what's the point of blaming someone who long since turned to dust? It was my fault; I could have chosen the straight path, flunked her, and found myself a significant other without a maniac father. As usual though, I let my cock make the decisions, and it has no brains whatsoever.

That's one problem I don't have now.

Sometimes I think about switching myself off, but I haven't managed to get into the electronics module. I guess ReBody don't want me to mess with the pain and shut-down controls. But I could wreck something else, a nutrient tube maybe; my brain won't last long without nutrient.

Of course, I have asked the Merindas about buying a new body. The problem is I need a complete torso at an absolute minimum. Even then all the abdominal functions and locomotion, not to mention arms, would be robotic. And the prices!

Mrs. Merinda said, "Medicaid don't cover it. You gotta have the insurance," and laughed.

Mr. Merinda called me a shit-for-brains and the usual other stuff. The worst thing was, when I persisted, he produced the clicker. 'Okay shit for metal, goodnight' and I was out of it.

The apt has a holo system. It fills the whole room, so that I seem to be part of the action. All it shows, though, is repeats. Game show channel. House improvement channel. Violence channel. Soap channel. Cooking channel, too, but the Merindas eat nothing except microwaved green and brown slabs. None of the programs mentions a date. I asked Mr. Merinda about this, and he said, "It's so you don't get upset, Hugh. All those years."

I never see them eating; they take the food into a separate room. Then later I find it in the disposal.

* * *

I'm going to load the washing machine. It isn't too impressive for three hundred years of technological advance. About half the size of the one I had in my old apartment, so you can only get half as many clothes in, but it cleans using ultrasonics and uses about a tenth as much water, and very little detergent. It's very efficient, when it works. This time, it doesn't.

I try all the usual stuff except kicking it, being as I haven't any legs. Nada. Nothing. The Merindas are both out, so I call @Home Inc., who say they'll send an engineer. I guess nothing much has changed after all these years.

While I wait, I recharge myself.

Besides the fantasies of Yolanda, I have fantasies about food. Of course, I don't eat anymore. Brains just need energy and chemicals.

My chassis carries a bank of amino acid containers. Each one has a computer-controlled peristaltic pump that feeds my head. A general-purpose kidney filters waste products. Brain shit drips in an undignified way into a disposal container hung below. A battery pack powers the pumps.

I can function for a bare three hours. Then I have to find a one-twenty-volt outlet. And then, I'm stuck for ten minutes while I recharge. That's better than when they first unpacked me. Then, I had to 'go to sleep' for two hours. Once, they left me recharging next to the garbage bin. I woke in panic, half-covered by some fast-growing mold.

I need power like an addict needs a fix, and supplies for my amino acid containers. I can go maybe three days without a refill. After that, brain death.

ReBody gave me the standard two-prong one-twenty-volt plug. Generous. And a salvaged small piece of electrical cable.

Right now Mr. Merinda isn't stalking the apt with his multi-purpose remote, which carries an extra pink button just for me: the punishment button. And Mrs. Merinda, with her endless demands to clean this or that, is also absent. I am alone.

Now where was I before the last interruption? Ah, yes — I rush to slide my own shorts down, sending them to join her frillies.

Yolanda reaches out to take me in her hand. Many-colored sparks of light reflect from a diamond clip in her hair. A scent of cinnamon and roses makes me almost salivate.

Quickly she takes me into her mouth. I pant for breath, unable to keep from trembling in the heat of the delicious moment when —

CRASH!

— the door to the condo bursts in, smashed off its hinges by Yolanda's truck-driver daddy. He stands there, veins bulging. An ox with a red-veined bulb of a nose. Holding a sledge hammer.

Oh shit. The irises of my cameras dilate, direct vision returns, and I am back in the Merinda's. Bang! Bang! Bang!

Damn, someone's pounding on the door, for real.

The door announcer goes off. “Visitor — visitor — you have a visitor. Engineer Garcivera-nine from @Home. You have a — ”

I use my inducer to send a code to the door. The code means roughly, “Cut the crap. I’m coming.”

I track over to the door and induce the enter code.

It swings open in a manner that makes me think some invisible butler does it.

Then I track backward.

“Dombot. Call your master or mistress. @Home at your service!”

This rugged bot stands there. It has wheels made of limbs, metal legs that bend at the knee; These, I can see, must be quite something for scrambling around.

I wonder what a set-up like that costs. Must take extra power, too.

The bot’s middle is a low-center-of-gravity, porridge-dish type unit studded with what look like ports. Interesting. A pseudo face sits on top of the thing. It doesn’t look remotely human —

“DOMBOT!” The bot’s tin-pan-alley face belts me with about 100 watts from its face-speaker.

My nose detects a strong smell of overheated insulation. On a bot, that’s like body odor on a human.

I track backwards. “Do you mind? I am in charge here.” My compressor must be low on power; my voice squeaks and whines.

“Where is your master? Your mistress?” The bot extends a segmented probe through the door and peers past me. “You are in charge? A primitive, pathetic, little dom? Urk, urk, urk!”

The bot casually wheels forward, shoves me effortlessly to one side, and rolls into the laundry. It turns to face me. “I work better alone!” It closes the door.

From behind the door, I hear “Urk, urk, urk!”

* * *

The need is coming over me again, so I go to plug in. Bathing in the soothing one-twenty-volt glow, I feel sleepy. I close my eyes for a moment —

* * *

“Hey! You! Hugh! Wake up!” It’s Gloria’s voice. She’s back. Oh yeah. I plugged in for a moment. Just for a moment —

I check my charge state. Overflowing. Then I remember: The @Home repairbot. It locked itself in the laundry. Fixing the washing machine.

“Hugh? What’s the matter?” Gloria plants her hands on her hips.

I spin on my tracks and accelerate toward the laundry door.

The door now stands open. There is no sign of the bot.

Inside, the washing machine stands snugly in its niche, pristine and gleaming once more. It bears a vivid green sticker bearing the word ‘repaired’.

“Hugh?” Gloria has followed me in, but I’m already straining to pull the machine out of its recess.

I catch a glimpse of the niche. No. O please, no.

I pull, harder. Now I can see.

The niche is empty. My stash is gone.

* * *

Gone! My body parts! My tracks bite into the carpet and I’m accelerating through the laundry door, through the kitchen, across the living room, out of control. It’s as if someone else is controlling my track motors.

My inducer sends a code, the apartment door swings open and I’m through, taking a glancing blow on my Perspex head shell. Into the corridor. Faster — I’m struggling to get control — weaving from side to side, heading toward the elevator.

I see the elevator lights blinking; it's coming, I must have induced it but I don't recall sending any code.

I send an override command to stop. Nothing. Gonna crash into the elevator door! Override, stop, stop! I'm gonna —

The elevator door opens just in time.

I roll inside, my tracks lock, and, tipping forward, I take another blow on my head shell.

The doors close.

Before I know what's coming next my inducer sends: DOWN