

father

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

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

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

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

"Your brother has a name."

"How's Mom?"

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

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

My father asked me to tell him what happened. I told him, leaving out some parts, like trying to break in to the

minibar. He just kept shaking his head and going, "Yeah," "Yeah," "Yeah," "Oh, yeah," "Yeah," "Shit," "Yeah."

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

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

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

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

He hit me on the knee and left.

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

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

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

"Busy?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

She whispered, "Aspirate. With the tongue."

People were really impressed. Link and Marty were completely hitting on Violet for it, but she didn't pay them any attention, and sometimes she would stand there with one hand on my shoulder. I could feel that she was putting pressure on it, and that she didn't need to stand with all her weight because I was there.

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

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

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

Quendy actually cried one tear.

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

We still were like that, looking into each other's eyes and all, when the doctor came in and was like, *What the hell had happened in the examination room, what's with all the needles?* and he was upgrading to homicidal and going all, *Da da da professional care unit, da da da dangerous and costly da da infection da da da*, etc. Luckily, Link's mom heard him yelling at us, and she's a complete dragon, so

she gave him a piece of her mind. She told him that we were all suffering from a very stressful experience and we weren't used to these kinds of stresses and he had to understand that we had to have our fun, too. I still felt kind of bad about it, because we made a big mess, and Violet was completely meg blushing, but at least we didn't get like shoved into orbit on cybergurneys or something.

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

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

"It weirdly is," I said.

"Maybe these are our salad days."

"Huh?"

"You know. Happy."

"What's happy about a salad?"

She shrugged. "Ranch," she said.

the garden

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

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

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

She walked in front of me. Her slippers went *fitik*, *fitik*, *sliss*, *fitik* on the floors. They were soft sounds, like the sounds mouths make when they open and close. I watched her from behind. When we stopped to wait for an uptube, she lifted her ankle so her heel came out of

the slipper, and with her toes she slid it back and forth on the tiles without thinking about it. She massaged the floor. When the uptube was free, she settled her foot back in, and walked, *fitik, fitik, sliss, fitik*, right on in.

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

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

"Whoa," I said.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

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

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

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

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

dead language

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

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

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

When I asked her what her dad did, she said, "He's a college professor. He teaches the dead languages."

"People study that?"

She shrugged. "I guess."

"Okay. So what are the dead languages?"

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

"Like what languages?"

"You know, FORTRAN. BASIC."

"What does one sound like?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the paper, it said:

002110 Goto 013500

013500 Peek 16388, 236

013510 Poke 16389, 236

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

"So what does that mean?" I asked.

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

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

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

"Do you write . . . stuff?"

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

"On paper."

"Yeah."

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

She nodded real quiet.

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

She shook her head and smiled.

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

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

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

"Seriously."

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

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

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

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

release

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

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

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

One by one, we went into the examination room.

In there, there were nurses and the doctor and the technician. The nurses were watching the relays, our blood

pressure and all. They were like, "Don't worry about anything. You'll feel it all coming back in a few seconds." The doctor touched a bootstick to my head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hold your head still," said the doctor.

He shifted the bootstick and it beeped again.

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

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

Limbic activity okay?

He's just nervous.

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

We have readings on engram formation.

Signal engaged.

Don't drop the exterior relays yet.

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

"There you go," said the nurse.

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

They slapped me on the back. I laughed, and the doctor and I did these big grins. I went back out into the

other room, and we were all starting to feel it now. We were all starting to feel it good—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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