

the others
in mal

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bulb-tweaker?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was like, "Not tonight."

"Come on, unit."

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

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

"What is this, shitheads?" I said. "Cut the *ABC After-school Special*."

"She'll never know!" said Link.

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

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

"What?"

"I said never mind."

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

"I'm with."

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

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

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

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

She said, "You're quiet."

I nodded.

"What's doing?" she asked.

"No real one thing."

We just stood there together.

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

She said, "It was okay."

"You didn't laugh."

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

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

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

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

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

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

I didn't tell her about them upstairs. I just told her about sitting in the living room, and hearing the guy who was like the truffle was undervalued, and the girl who was like he never pukes when he chugalugs. I told her

about them and then I looked for the memory of them, which I still had, and I played it for her. She knew exactly what I was talking about.

She went, *Brittle.*

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

People want to forget.

You can't blame them.

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

"What? In your—in your brain?"

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

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

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

"Holy shit."

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

"Holy shit."

"They say it will probably be fine."

"Holy shit."

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

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

She chatted, *What are you thinking about?*

Nothing.

It can't be nothing.

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

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

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

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

In my dream, I asked them who they were.

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

In my dream, I said yes.

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

In my dream, I said who were they really?

They said that they were going to be running some tests on me, and that I should think about something else.

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

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

I asked if all these games were mine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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