

lose the chemise

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

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

So I flew over to the mall near her house through the rain, which was coming down outside in this really hard way. Everyone had on all their lights until they got above the clouds. Up there it was sunny, and people were flying very businesslike.

The mall was really busy, there were a lot of crowds there. They were buying all this stuff, like the inflatable houses for their kids, and the dog massagers, and the

tooth extensions that people were wearing, the white ones which you slid over your real teeth and they made your mouth just like one big single tooth going all the way across.

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

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

I said, "Yum, yum, yum."

She was like, "You ready?"

I asked her what the idea was.

She said, "Look around you." I did. It was the mall. She said, "Listen to me." I listened. She said, "I was sitting at the feed doctor's a few days ago, and I started to think about things. Okay. All right. Everything we do gets thrown into a big calculation. Like they're watching us right now. They can tell where you're looking. They want to know what you want."

"It's a mall," I said.

"They're also waiting to make you want things. Everything we've grown up with—the stories on the feed, the games, all of that—it's all streamlining our personalities so we're easier to sell to. I mean, they do these demographic studies that divide everyone up into a few personality types, and then you get ads based on what you're supposedly like. They try to figure out who you are, and

to make you conform to one of their types for easy marketing. It's like a spiral: They keep making everything more basic so it will appeal to everyone. And gradually, everyone gets used to everything being basic, so we get less and less varied as people, more simple. So the corps make everything even simpler. And it goes on and on."

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

"This is my project."

"Is . . . ?"

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

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

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

"Yeah," he said. "We have . . . yeah. We have those." He went over to some rack, and he took these big searchlights

off the rack. He showed us some different models. The feeds had specs. They showed us the specs while he talked.

When he went into the back to get another, cheaper searchlight, I said to Violet, "What next?"

She whispered, "Complicating. Resisting."

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure. Then I could swivel it."

"What's this for?"

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

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

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

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

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

We ran through the big hallway with her tapping her head and saying, "Hear that? The music?" It was pop songs. "They have charts that show which chords are most thumbs-up. Music is marketing. They have lists of key changes that get thirteen-year-old girls screaming. There's no difference between a song and an advertising jingle anymore. Songs are their own jingles. Step lively. Over here."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I practically started to laugh snot into my hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm just wondering."

She asked me, "What do you think?"

"I liked the guy in Bebrekker & Karl. I wonder if it's true, about the cockroaches."

"What do you think about resisting?" she asked me really hard. Her jaw muscles were sticking out.

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

I guessed. "A lot?"

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

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

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

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

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

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... 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—”

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