

My World Is Not Your World

1

I didn't want the suit; I took it on a dare (I know, I'm a child sometimes, but tell me something I don't hear all the time from my girlfriend). That night, as usual, Sam and I were farting around a few minutes into our shift when I took the dare. We clocked in at seven, mopped down the hallway to the break room and decided to riffle through lunch leftovers in the fridge, as usual; I was opening some dude's lunch bag—the note stuck to it reading: "leave this the F alone!!!"—and when I looked up from my pillaging, Sam was gone. Sam likes to take off and explore the premises with his flashlight, so I made no big deal of it and wolfed down the soggy tofurkey sandwich and went to see what Sam was up to.

"Sam?" I shouted down the hall.

"Down here." His voice echoed from around the corner in Section G.

I followed his voice and found him at the far end of the section where engineering ended and marketing began, his flashlight beam piercing into a storage closet—the storage closet.

"What the fuck, man? You're gonna get us canned, and I lose this job Kara's gonna boot me out. You hear me?" The flashlight beam fell on something shiny. I knew it had to be the suit. "Do you hear me? We keep digging around in there and we're fired or worse."

"Don't get your panties in a wad."

"Dude?"

"It's nothing but junk." He held out a slinky silver hood that reminded me of medieval chainmail only with no eyeholes and no apparent opening to breathe through. The rest of the suit, a crinkly silver body stocking, lay heaped over Sam's shoes.

I knew all about the suit. Six months ago, when I worked in marketing, I shot the video of the suit failing spectacularly in front of generals from the Pentagon and agents from The Corporation's (as my attorney advised me to call them) highest levels.

The suit was meant to be a military camouflage experiment. It was supposed to be made of millions of nano-sized calcite prisms; the prisms bent light, bounced it away from the wearer as if he or she were nothing more than a mirror. Perfect concealment for a grunt in the field.

Only, it hadn't work. The engineers couldn't reduce the prisms to the size they needed, so they fudged—a lot. They wove fabric with millions of self-reproducing nanomachines to give it a shine that they hoped would at least fool the studs from the Pentagon. But the day it was tested, Specialist Dixon, the volunteer brought up from Fort Hood, stayed in full view. No sale. Ten mil wasted, and because they thought I knew too much, The Corporation demoted me from marketing to custodial.

Anyhow, I took the dare to put the thing on and walked from marketing to engineering and back. I marched down the hall toward engineering, not paying any attention to what was happening as I walked; my mind jumped from how stupid getting in this thing was to losing my job over this to losing Kara over this. She stopped sleeping with me six months ago after my demotion and she had threatened to kick me out, if I lost this job. Which was pretty fucking likely if the security cameras caught me in this thing. Which would happen.

And it didn't matter that our buddy Trent was the security guy monitoring this section of the building: he had his job to do—arrest us. He was probably on his way to do just that. I could hear Kara when she got my inevitable call from county lockup: “You just don't seem to think I'm worth the effort, do you, Van?”

Wrapped up as I was fretting about Kara, I almost bumped a cubicle wall. I stopped and turned. Sam stood outside the closet looking down a side corridor, where the service elevators were. His face was scrunched up like he had gotten a whiff of a nasty fart and he shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“Sam.”

He looked my way but seemed confused by the sound of my voice.

“Sam? What the fuck?”

He rubbed his eyes and shook his head.

“It’s Trent, right?” I leaned against the wall, as if that might hide me from Trent’s snooping.

“We’re fucked, aren’t we?”

“Bro,” Sam said, finally. “Don’t be messing with me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Give up the hide and seek shit.”

“Hide and seek? I’m right in front . . .” I waved. Then I understood. It was the first time I’d looked at myself in the suit. It was working. It was fucking working. The suit . . . I was invisible. At least my hand was. I looked down at my feet. Gone. Looked at my other hand. Not there. “Oh shit, man. The suit’s working.”

Sam had ducked behind the closet door and was peering around it. “Why you trippin’?”

“You can’t see me, right?” I stepped away from the wall. I cast no shadow and there was no reflection in the break room window.

Sam shook his head. “No, man.”

“That’s what the suit does. Makes you invisible.”

“Bullshit.”

“You see me?”

“No.”

“And you can’t see my reflection in the window?”

“No.”

“Then it works. They threw it away for nothing. The stupid bastards threw it out and it works. Holy . . .” The service elevator dinged. “Shit.”

Sam looked back toward the elevators.

“Trent. It has to be Trent. We’ve got to get out of here.”

Sam ran his fingers through his hair. “Chill. Just chill. I can handle Trent.”

I scrambled a few meters down the hall, rounded the corner into engineering, caught a glimpse of Trent’s white shirt, his black slacks, and then sprinted away from him and Sam. Call me a coward for running, if you must, but I couldn’t get arrested, couldn’t lose Kara over something this stupid.

My thumbprint let me out of the building without any alarms going off. I had to get off the corporate campus; Sam could stall Trent for a few minutes, offer Trent a joint, tell him the door was already open, some line of bullshit, but that line wouldn’t hold long. Trent would have to report something. People would be looking for the suit; they would want their property whether it worked or not.

Briefly, I thought about sneaking aboard the Maglev, which docked at the back of the campus’ main tower, and taking a free train ride around the city. Paranoia about getting caught stemmed any whimsical invisible man fantasies. I had to get away quickly and that meant going through the main gate at the front of the campus and walking home. It was five or six miles, along a path that cut through a park, a hike I made daily because I lived close by and had no car.

The paranoia stayed with me. What if the guards had detection equipment? What if they waited for me to get off the premises before they took me into custody, as if I were a common shoplifter?

I wasn’t a shoplifter. I wasn’t really a thief. I was taking out the garbage.

No one followed me once I was outside the perimeter fence and on the sidewalk that merged into the park. I jogged along the well-lighted cinder track. The distance wasn’t so bad; I had jogged it several times, but in the suit, I was sweating more than if I were in shorts and a T-shirt, and by the time I

was on the path to the apartment complex, felt drenched. And my sweat must've affected the suit: exiting the trail onto the apartment grounds, my skin itched and stung as if pricked by nettles.

Once I reached our parking lot on the other side of the complex, I was itching so badly, I had to yank the suit off. To make sure no one saw me when I took it off, I ducked into one of the fenced-in spots where they stored Dumpsters. It clung to my body like plastic wrap and seemed as if it were reluctant to come off.

Almost immediately after it was removed, the itching stopped. I folded the suit, tucked it under my arm like a football, and headed across our lot and up the stairs to our front door. I hesitated before thumbing the keypad: coming home early from work was certain to get me an ass-chewing from Kara. Unless I was lucky and she had gone out with Lily. Something was going on there with that relationship, I was sure. I took a deep breath. Not my business, I guess.

Our apartment. I went inside. No lights were on and the couch was empty. So Kara had gone out with Lily, or she'd be crashed in the easy chair watching a cop show on the 3D. Her antidepressants were in a prescription bottle on the coffee table, and her quilt was bunched with her pillow in one corner of the couch.

I popped the cap on the antidepressants, shook one into my palm. She wouldn't miss one and they helped me sleep. I took the pill with a handful of water from the kitchen tap and crossed the den into the bedroom.

Our bedroom was empty, too. After tossing the suit under the bed, I undressed and lay down. The front door creaked open a quarter after three, about the time I normally got home from work. Kara, of course. She wandered into the bedroom, heading toward the bathroom. She stopped about halfway there and squinted at the bed. "Van?"

“Got sent home,” I said. I coughed, trying to make it sound phlegmy. “But it’s not what you think.”

“What do I think?”

“A fever. Flu.”

“The flu? Really?”

“That’s what it feels like to me. Aches, fever, nausea.” I sat up in bed. “Feel my head. I’m sweating like a pig.”

She touched my forehead. “Okay, so you’re pretty hot. I’ll give you that. This time. But, Jesus, Van . . .”

“How was Lily?”

She sighed, rolled her eyes and turned away from me. “I’ve got to pee.”

=Poor Van.=

=Poor us.=

=We need him; he needs us.=

=He needs happiness.=

=We need happiness.=

=Van’s happy; we’re happy.=

=Because we are Van?=
 =And he is us.=

“Let’s roll.=

Just before sunrise a noise like a thousand crickets chirping at once erupted from under the bed. I started groggily from sleep. “What the . . .” I peered under the bed. There was a sudden hush, the only

sound creaking bedsprings. It felt as if I had dreamed the noise but it started again when I sat up, this time accompanied by a muffled rustle, as if something were alive under there, a mouse or, god forbid, a rat.

“What’s going on in here, Van?” Kara stood in the doorway, rubbing her eyes.

“Not sure. Mouse maybe.”

“A mouse? Making all that racket?” She lowered head and her bangs feathered one eye like a rusty patch. “C’mon, Van. Really?” She tugged her nightgown close to her body and flipped her hair away from her face.

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“If it’s a mouse, then get it out. I don’t want those things in here.”

I climbed out of bed, pulled on my work coveralls, but was disrupted in tending to the mouse by a loud pop and white flash that made us jump and briefly blinded me. My sight restored after a few seconds, I saw a shiny silver liquid stream slither up the wall and seep under the window sill.

“Holy shit,” Kara said.

I dashed toward the front door.

My feet slapped cement as I juddered down the steps and crossed the parking lot, and my toes were cold and numb by the time I swung open the wood gate that hid the Dumpster. This was where I saw the liquid silver snake ooze. I opened the Dumpster’s lid. The suit-snake lay heaped on top of lumpy black trash bags. I reached for it and it cringed from my grasp.

A siren yelped, not far off it seemed. I dropped the lid and crouched.

Kara called for me, her voice echoing across the lot. I dropped back to my crouch.

The siren closed in. A hum came from inside the bin. Lights flashed up the road. Kara again called out.

I leaned against the bin; the hum inside had evolved into churning and grating, like rocks caught in a blender. Tendrils of stink like a ripening corpse thrashed my nostrils. Something was alive inside. I did not want to know what.

Good god, what I wouldn't give for a normal night. One in which my girlfriend slept with me and not on the couch or with another woman, and especially not a night when something I brought home was now running amok in one of our Dumpsters.

Red and blue flashers dappled through the cracks in the fence. The cops. Or worse. Things were definitely going to hell between me and Kara now. Someone—a cop?—rattled the gate. I was poised to make some sort of move to escape. I thought maybe I could charge the cop like a linebacker, send him sprawling before he knew what hit him.

“Police! Open up!” The cop banged the gate again. “Open up, Mr. Bender. We have orders to use force. If necessary.”

I kept quiet.

Another voice, calm, feminine, familiar: “Van, it's Lily. You can be pissed off with me for spying on you later.”

Spying. “I knew it. Knew there was something more than whatever it was you had with Kara.”

“Still have,” she said. “Van, you're not in trouble. You only need to relinquish the suit. You'll go free. I promise. Everything's been worked out. No harm, no foul. We just want our property back. Do you understand?”

It was then, as I stood to give Lily a piece of my mind, that I slipped in some glop I had stepped in earlier, twisted, and fell into something gelatinous. I was engulfed in cloud-nine warmth. The suit or nanomachines or whatever I'd brought home had grown into a massive pulsing swarm; obviously it had ingested the bin and its contents.

A wave of anxiety and then sudden, absolute terror washed over me as I realized I was about to be eaten alive by a machine or machines. I knew enough that now, semi-alive, the nanos would strip down my DNA, translate it into data. For what purpose, who the hell knew?

A hot wind sucked at my neck, pulling on me. Here we go. Food for nanos.

=Trust us, Van. Where we're taking you, you'll have everything you want.=

The voice—in my head? Outside? Elsewhere?—was so reassuring I believed it. What choice did I have, though? Maybe this was what the swarm of machines told the garbage and the Dumpster before munching them.

=Please, Van. Trust us.=

Then a jolt of pain pinched my right side. Something sticky oozed between my fingers above my right hip. I slipped and kicked, frantic, but whatever pulled at me, pulled with the full force of the universe, then my reality shifted into blackness, hearing the voice once more before going completely out: =Oh, no! =

2

I woke up groggy, cotton-mouthed, a mild sting pinching my right side. Blurry brown shadows capered around me, then blended like thick dog's fur. One shadow took shape, a short woman wearing a blue scrub shirt. I was laying on a gurney in what seemed a hospital recovery room. So I had been shot, I thought. I tried to talk but my throat was parched and constricted. The woman placed a paper cup filled with shaved ice chips on a tray.

=What have we here?=
=It worked?=
=We don't know. Let's watch.=

"Don't try to say anything, Mr. Bender," the woman said. "Just relax. Eat some ice. It'll soothe your throat. It's raw from the anesthetic."

That wasn't what I expected to hear. She seemed too casual, unhurried, for a nurse taking care of someone who apparently just had a copper-jacketed round popped from his gut. I mean, so what if I was a criminal to her and probably should've died on the operating table or been left for dead in a gelatinous mess? Shouldn't she be rushing to get me off this goddamned gurney and into a regeneration shell? Get me out of this hospital ASAP, if only to allow The Corporation's lawyers to prosecute me? I was a thief, after all, at least in their eyes. She should want to help her handlers.

=He remembers the other one.=
=Too much, perhaps?=
=Perhaps.=

"We'll get you to your room soon," the nurse said.

Room? I wasn't a doctor, but I knew enough to know that even a serious shot in the gut, once the bullet was removed and the wound closed, required at most a couple of days in a regeneration shell. And since I was awake, my injury couldn't be that serious. An hour or two suspended in a clear plastic coffin, with tubes in my nose and mouth, pumping all sorts of medications—antibiotics, cell and tissue regenerators—down me would fix me up and send me home. Rooms were for the terminally ill, for those who had no chance.

"I'm sure Mrs. Bender will be happy to see you," the nurse said sweetly.

Kara? I tried to say, but my throat hurt too much. I sucked another piece of ice. I wanted to tell this woman that Kara and I weren't married and protest I didn't need to go to a room. If I was going to die, let me see Kara and then let me die. Don't take me to a room. Don't jerk me around and tell me I'm really going to get to see my girlfriend. I mean we've had our differences, I had taken her for granted . . . and I knew The Corporation's thugs had her in custody. I wasn't going to see her.

=Well, no, not her, not that one. She's no good for you, Van. We sent you here to be happy. You just have to remember who you are. Not who you were.=

The nurse didn't lift me from the gurney. Didn't inject me with sedatives to calm me while orderlies lowered me into a fluid-filled shell. Instead, the orderlies wheeled me from recovery to a room.

I lay flat on the gurney holding my side until the orderlies lifted me into a bed. The bed was rolled up at an angle so I could sit in relative comfort. Past the bed rails emerged a pink-shirted figure. Another nurse, I thought. This woman was not familiar, certainly not Kara.

What happened next was a little twisted. The woman bent over the railing, embraced me as well as she could, and kissed me and nuzzled her thick pile of brown hair under my neck. Her cheek warmed a patch of bare skin exposed by the hospital gown I was wearing. That spot of skin was dampened by tears.

I winced from the pressure. The woman looked up. "Oh god, Sweetie, I'm sorry." She kissed my cheek. "God, I was so worried."

I was too loopy from the meds to react to her misguided affections to do anything more than touch her hand and croak out, as if I were with Kara, "You, too."

"So so glad to see you. Do you hurt?"

I shook my head. She wiped her eyes. I looked away from her. At the bedside the nurse was preparing an IV.

“We’ll put you on a morphine drip tonight for pain,” the nurse said. “Hold out your arm.”

I straightened my arm so she could find a vein. I looked at the woman, the woman who was supposed to be my wife. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying. She smiled.

The IV needle pricked my arm.

Indirectly, I learned the woman’s name was Molly. She talked to me for ten or twenty minutes after the nurse left. She told me over and over how worried she was when the nurse in the emergency room had told us my appendix burst. “I couldn’t imagine losing you, Sweetheart. Not so soon after our wedding.” I had to take that in, accept she believed I was her husband; she was clearly confused, distraught, and I was in the wrong place. I should be in a regenerator, healing. This woman should’ve been with her husband. Once The Corporation prosecuted me, I would sue for malpractice. Mental distress. I’d be the richest man in prison.

But why was the woman so convinced I was her husband? Did we look that much alike? Maybe she had been drugged? Maybe this was some kind of punishment for me? Maybe The Corporation was yanking my brains for stealing their precious suit? I meant to return it, only, well, it ate me, and shat me out here, wherever that was.

=What’s that?=
=That light? Oh, no!=

Crickets seemed to be stirring a ruckus in my head. I shook my head and the noise went away and I touched Molly’s hand. She smiled.

She flipped open a cell phone. "Oops, gotta get the kids. See you in a bit." She stepped toward the door, looked back: "You're okay with me bringing them up?"

"Absolutely." I had a sudden flash of memory of something I shouldn't have known: two girls, eight and thirteen, one brunette, one blond. Shy kids.

=He's coming around.=

=Maybe.=

More crickets, more hint of voices. Shook them off again and leaned back in bed and took in my surroundings, tried to get a grip on just what the hell was going on. The room was medieval, an early twenty-first century medical museum. A monitor measured doses of morphine that dripped from a plastic bag down through the clear tube stuck in my arm. Another kept up with blood pressure and heart beat. Even amenities, presumably to help the patient feel at home, looked like museum pieces: A landline phone and a television, instead of a 3D projector, and not one of those earlier TVs with the converter; this thing, suspended on a wall stand, was actually plugged in to a cable box. Everything was plugged in, not wireless.

And what these butchers had done to my body: Where they cut into me, supposedly to remove a burst appendix and not a bullet, had been sealed with angry crosshatch of stitches and staples. Below the cut they had plugged in a tube for fluid drainage, plugged directly into the skin!

If this set-up was a corporation hoax, it was elaborate. My crime was a minor felony, if I understood corporation law: six months in a re-education facility, job loss, of course, and cut off from ever working for them again. I couldn't see that my minute crime warranted butchery and paranoid mind games.

Screw them. I closed my eyes, felt a pinch at my side and thumbed the controls to increase the morphine drip. At least they were giving me good drugs.

And toys to play with. I picked up the bulky TV remote; the film studies major in me had been jonesing to try the TV out since Molly left. I switched it on and up popped a show that hadn't been on in seventy or more years, if I remembered my film and television history class. This whole set-up was insane in its elaborateness, even for The Corporation. How many mil had they plunked down to get this place just right, down to TV shows?

I set the remote on the bed tray and then pumped more morphine into my veins. The TV flickered, lost its picture for a seemingly hallucinatory moment before I realized it was just a glitch in the reception when it happened again seconds later.

Of course, I expected to hallucinate; I figured The Corporation wanted me to doubt my reality. But I didn't know all that much about morphine or how I might perceive the hallucinations, since its use in hospitals as a painkiller had fallen away about a quarter of a century ago, when better but less mind-altering drugs were made available. Would I see things that weren't there? Hear things? Or would it be like a dream, vague images capering around, merging and melting one into the other?

The TV popped and flickered again. Something was happening. The TV screen went snowy. The edges of my vision blurred and the chirping I had heard several times before began again, this time as if the crickets weren't outside somewhere, but in my head. It wasn't unpleasant, until I tried to make sense of it: then the chirps sounded like tiny voices all trying to speak at once.

=I thought we weren't going to interfere.=

=Just this once.=

=We need him to accept this world as it is.=

=And forget the old one.=

=So he'll be happy?=
 =So we'll be happy.=

As suddenly as the sound erupted, it went away and my vision cleared after I rubbed my eyes. So the hallucination was brief, sort of dreamy. So much for morphine. At least my side didn't hurt. I looked up.

The TV screen had gone blank, no picture, but had a silvery-mercury glaze to it, a vaguely familiar sheen like a beer can. And the chirping began again between my ears; or rather, the sound was closer to whispering. It kept up until it congealed into one single voice, a distinct, childlike voice pulsing through the television's speakers.

I dropped the morphine clicker. "Shit," I said. "Just like that one movie."

"Van, it has nothing to do with a silly ghost story." The voice was like a boy's, sort of undeveloped as my own had been. "I'm real, Van. We're all real." The TV screen flickered, and like a child's sketch toy etched out a smiley-face emoticon.

I stared at the screen, rubbed my eyes again. The TV still smiled. "Fine. You're real. Who are you? You mentioned 'we'."

"I, me, we, us, you," it said. "You'll remember. At your apartment. The Dumpster."

So the Dumpster was real? I thought. The machines. Kara, Lily, the cops.

"All real."

"You—you're the . . .machines . . .the ones that ate me."

"Not ate. Made. You made us," the screen said. "We returned the favor and made you. Or a replication of you from the other Van in the other world."

"There's another me?"

The screen jiggled as if it were a plate of Jell-O nodding. "He's there. You're here."

“In the past?” Time travel? Impossible, not to the past. Some barrier of physics. I knew that much, if TV had taught me anything.

“Not in the past. Not time travel. Same world. Different reality. Thus a slightly different time. We made it just for you. We thought you might be happy here and gave you Molly and the kids.”

I looked down at the tube sticking out from below my abdomen. “Thanks.”

“Sorry,” it said. “It’s the best we could do after that woman shot us.”

“So Lily did shoot me?”

“You, us.”

“Bitch,” I snarled and looked away from the TV. When I looked again, the screen had etched a frowny-face emoticon.

“You just have to accept this reality and forget the other one. In fact, that’s the most important thing for you to do.”

“Forget about the other world, the place I came from?”

“You were never there, anyway,” the screen said. “But, when we brought you here something happened, something not so good. Something that could ruin things.”

“What if I don’t want or can’t accept this reality?”

“You must. We think you may solve a teensy problem we’re having.”

If this wasn’t The Corporation’s project, it was clear I was trapped and had no choice but to solve the machines’ “teensy” problem. “What would this ‘teensy’ problem be?”

“Um . . . think of the omniverse as a series of bubbles, some worlds in it share space, some are far apart.” I nodded, warily. “This world and the other are almost attached. All you need to know is this: to get you here, we made a little hole in the shared space—don’t ask us how; we’re not so sure ourselves—a teensy hole between bubbles. Since then, a lot more have been appearing. We think you’re causing these holes, these breaches.”

“Me?”

“Um . . .yeah. Because you haven’t accepted the reality you’re in now. A small one closed the other day when you thought of the kids as yours.”

The image on the TV screen distorted and the one voice became many, chirping louder and louder. All I could make out was a scream: =Oh, no! Another one!=-

When Molly returned with Dana and Caryn—how did I know their names?—the girls brought me a Mylar get-well balloon. They both acted as if they recognized me as their stepfather and told me they hoped I got better. Was it possible the machines told the truth?

Molly also had brought a plastic grocery bag with a wallet, keys and wedding ring, a cheap sterling silver band that fit perfectly when I put it on. I felt compelled to put the ring on in front of her, in case she was unstable and the machines were lying. She teared-up when I slipped the ring on and told me how much she loved me. “I love you, too,” I said, not thinking.

When she left with the kids, the youngest, Dana, hugged me and said she loved me before they went, and Molly said she would be back tomorrow morning before work. I nodded, kissed her, and was alone.

How could I find out whether the machines were lying or not? I opened the wallet, checked the ID, a driver’s license: there I was on the picture, although my birth date was a hundred years in the past. That didn’t prove anything. Anyone could make up a phony license. I’d never driven a car before, thought I felt I could drive one now.

What about where I was? I hauled myself out of bed. The room was in a blind spot, only one window overlooking a crowded parking lot that could have been as much part of another world as the

room itself: Cars in the lot looked almost a century old, but that could be an elaborate hoax, as I suspected, or I was still just seeing things from the morphine.

If it wasn't the drugs, though, how could I know? The TV. Of course. The screen looked solid now. I tapped it with my fingernail. Nothing liquid about it; it clinked like glass. I turned it on. A picture came up. Local news.

A frantic newscaster was interviewing a physicist about strange 'sunspots' appearing in the sky and throughout town, asking about people suddenly appearing and others disappearing into these sunspots. The physicist said he couldn't explain these phenomena, but did mention something about bubble universes, as had the machines.

I skimmed other channels the next morning. Every news channel led with stories on breaches in bubble universes. Molly came in as I watched a third newscast on the phenomena, almost ignoring a ticker running below the main cast about a war that had never been fought in the other world.

"I see you're getting into all this," Molly said.

"What?" I glanced away from the screen to see her standing at the door. She wore a black and white flowered top with ample cleavage and was stopping by before heading into work. I clicked off the TV. "Yeah, it's something, huh? Kind of crazy."

"Kind of. If you believe it," she said. Her voice was dry, ironic. "It's an 'I'll believe it when I see it' sort of deal." She smiled. "Of course with you and sci-fi, you probably believe it."

I shook my head. "Nah, not really."

She checked her phone. "Gotta go. Don't want to be late for work."

In two days, I was able to walk around the ward outside my room, but learned nothing about where I was. From windows I found, I saw a Zen garden in a courtyard and another parking lot; I could

have been anywhere; everything was so bland and sterile: another world, another town, a film set, for that matter. But nothing convincing enough to say whether it was real or a hallucination of some kind.

Until the third day in my wanderings on the floor, when I saw something I shouldn't have. Molly had come with the kids on a dinner time visit. We went out to an empty waiting room to eat sandwiches from a fast food restaurant. A turkey sandwich for me. Real turkey. Not tofurkey.

While the four of us ate, I asked about Sam—a name that had been on the vague edges of my memory—if he was still working. Molly screwed up her lips.

“Sam?” she said. “Van, are you sure you're all right. I don't know a Sam. Maybe you're thinking about your old job. Or another world.”

“Maybe.” I took a bite of the sandwich. “Speaking of work . . . when do they expect me back? Or do they?”

Molly said nothing. She was tending to the girls, who were squabbling over a toy that came with their meal.

That was when I saw the woman, a woman I recognized instantly: Kara. Two armed corporate intelligence guards were escorting her—cuffed—down the hallway opposite us. I tried to jump up, call out, but they disappeared around the corner of what I presumed was an adjoining corridor to god knew where . . . Chirping again, the voice saying, =Oh, no! We've got to stop this now or he'll never accept it.=

Molly looked up at me as I staggered to my feet and limped to get a better view. “Going somewhere, Buster?”

I glanced at her. “Thought I saw someone. My . . . um . . . a friend.”

“Sam?”

I shook my head.

“Well, sit down,” she said, “before you hurt yourself.”

I hobbled to my seat. I glanced at my wedding ring. I was playing along with this farce. How could I explain this to Kara?

“So, my love, who’d you see?” Molly said.

“Maybe it was no one. Maybe I was hallucinating.”

“You’ve certainly had enough morphine.” Molly giggled.

When the hospital released me on Friday, Molly picked me up in my Nissan. I had never owned a car before; I either walked, rode a bike or took the Maglev, but that was in another universe. I shook my head. I gingerly climbed inside.

Molly smiled. “Are you comfortable?”

“Um, yeah.” I was as comfortable as I figured anyone could be if their reality had shifted. But I had to accept it. Under my feet on the floorboard, the squashed paper cups from McDonald’s were real. Molly was real. So were her daughters. In the hospital, Molly’s kisses had been real, so much so that I had felt emotions stirring that I had not felt in a long time. Certainly not with Kara.

So, Kara was unreal. Molly wasn’t. Austex was imagined; the town Molly and I were driving through now—that was real. The odd thing was, as we drove through this town, there were parts that seemed familiar; I knew, for instance, which turnoff Molly would make to take us home. The place where we lived . . . I had a vague sense of that, too: hardwood floors, a week’s worth of unwashed dishes in the sink and cereal bowls filled with half-eaten chocolate rice puffs and curdled milk that would be a shade of gray-green only seen on movie aliens.

Molly smiled at me as we drove. “You sure are quiet.”

“Just thinking,” I said.

“I wish I knew what went on in that head of yours sometimes, but god, I’m so happy to have you with me, Van. You just don’t know.”

The kids were still in school for a few more hours so Molly and I would be alone when we got home.

The home was exactly as I had imagined, down to the cereal bowls and bad milk. How could I know this? How could I know where our bedroom was when we got inside and Molly told me to go lie down while she made lunch?

The bed was real. I lay down and shortly I smelled hot dogs boiling on the stove. Molly came into the bedroom and lay next to me. "I hope hot dogs are okay. That's all we had. You kept me from going to the store this week." She poked my shoulder and giggled.

Her touch, her nearness, gave me an erection. How long had it been since I'd lain next to a woman? Six months? A hundred years? A week, if this was reality and Molly still slept in the same bed with me. I trusted Molly still slept with me. We were apparently newlyweds.

"Look at you," Molly said. "You must be the horniest man ever, getting hard even after what you went through."

My face flushed. "Um . . . hot dogs are fine."

"I'll bet they are." She put her hand on the lump in my jeans. "God, I don't see how we can wait a week. But that's doctor's orders." She grinned, kissed me and got up from bed.

I watched her walk into the kitchen. Her body was fuller than Kara's, her bottom heart-shaped. I lay back on my pillow trying to imagine what Molly looked like naked. It's something her husband should know, but I couldn't picture her, not yet. I knew, because of cleavage, her breasts were full, pale . . .

A rumbling sound outside our bedroom window snapped me from my reverie.

3

=Oh, no! Another one. That's three today! =

=It' a big one, too. We . . . can we fix it? =

I lifted myself from the bed and hobbled to the back door.

“Honey, what’s going on?” Molly said from the kitchen.

I opened the door without saying anything to her and looked outside. About two hundred meters above the house, I saw something I shouldn’t have seen, at least not in the new reality I was trying to accept—the Maglev slowing to dock at a platform. The whole platform was in plain view, everything, including an escalator. Holding my side with one hand, I shaded my eyes with the other. I was seeing it, feeling a slight push of breeze as the train docked.

Molly touched my shoulder. “Honey, come inside. You don’t need to be up.” She brushed against me.

A lone figure was debarking from the train.

“What the . . . ?” Molly said. She looked where I was staring. “Oh, shit!” Her hand dropped from my shoulder.

The lone figure, a woman, had descended the escalator. The way she walked, I knew who it was. Lily, as I suspected. Come to finish the job. Get what I didn’t have.

=He’s not as safe as we thought.=

=Well no, not with what we’ve created here. We only meant to help. To make his reality better. Bring it under control, for his happiness.=

=We’ve failed.=

=For now.=

=We should leave.=

=We should. We’ll be back. Come back when there’s more of us.=

I shut the back door and stepped out from under the porch into the bright day, Molly behind me.

Lily squinted in the sunlight. "You're a hard man to track down, Van-two." A warm breeze ruffled her hair.

Behind me, Molly clutched my shoulders. This was it. Showdown. "That what they calling me on the other side." My words stumbled from a hoarse throat.

"The suit, Van-two," Lily said.

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about, Lily."

"Don't shit me." She screwed her face at me. "I don't have time for your shit."

"I don't have the suit," I said. My side pinched. I winced. I stepped back into the shadow of the porch, braced myself against the wall. Molly backed against the door. I was hurting but trying to keep Lily from figuring that out.

"Goddamn it, Van-two, I didn't want to do this," she said. "This is not my world after all. I'm not even sure we have jurisdiction over here."

"Oh shit," Molly muttered. She jerked my shoulder as if she were trying to force me on the ground.

Though my side throbbed, I wrested free from my wife and looked up. Lily trained a large pistol on us.

"It's the suit, Van-two," Lily said. "We need the suit."

Molly kept tugging at me, only wanting to protect me, not realizing I was about to collapse on my own from pain. "I don't know where it is," I mumbled.

"Who is this nut job?" Molly shielded me from Lily. "What is she talking about?"

I sighed, a sharp pain wrenching my side.

"Goddess on a half shell, lady! Get the fuck out of the way before I have to shoot you, too!"

Molly craned her neck to see Lily. "No one's shooting anybody."

I peered at Lily over Molly's shoulder, one last look before dropping to my knees.

"Oh, God!" Molly knelt by me, touched my shoulders, her face distorted in fright. She quivered, trying to control her sobs. It was an image I had seen before, in the emergency room when the nurse said my appendix burst.

"I'll be fine, honey." I clenched my jaw. "A little pain where the stitches are." I caught Molly's shoulder and hefted myself up to see Lily.

"Goddess, Van-two," Lily said, "what did you do to yourself?" She lowered the gun.

After getting sight of Lily, I placed both hands on my wife's shoulders. "Appendix," I said to Lily.

She shook her head. "Shit."

"I'll be fine," I said. "Just need to sit down. Maybe take some pain meds. Give a call to nine-one-one."

"I don't know what nine-one-one is," Lily said, "but it doesn't sound promising." She lifted the gun, trained it on me. I suspected there was a red dot spotting my forehead from the laser sights.

After wiping her eyes, Molly reached for a canvas chair that was on the porch and slid it next to me. "Sit. I'll get your meds. And the phone."

She scrambled toward the back door. The gun barrel followed her.

"Lady. Do. Not. Make. Me. Shoot you." A red dot hovered over the back of Molly's blouse.

The gun trembled in Lily's hand.

"I need the meds, Lily. I'm hurting. I think I may be bleeding."

Molly was slumped against the screen door, sobbing.

"Goddamn it, Van-two," Lily's voice caught. "I—I don't want to shoot you or anyone. I'm not a killer."

"That's comforting to know."

“We just need the suit,” she said. “As you can see, things are pretty fucked up. We think the suit can fix it.”

“I can’t do that,” I said.

Lily’s eyes were wet, but she swung the gun toward me. The red dot quivered on my chest.

“Don’t make me do this.”

I looked at my wife; she was easing her hand up to open the screen door. I looked at Lily. She held the gun but was looking away. I took a deep breath, waiting for an explosion, for the shock of a bullet smacking into me.

The screen door creaked. I saw the gun flash, a sound like a balloon popping. I twisted in the chair. It collapsed, slinging me to the porch. I screamed, “Molly no!” and my forehead slapped cement.

I raised my head, dizzy. Heard another balloon pop, a whine as the round slashed overhead, a thuck, and a third pop. My head throbbed. I reached up, touched my eyebrow. Felt something sticky.

A fourth balloon popped and my vision skirled out of control. Before blackness came, I heard the distant whoop of sirens.

A SWAT team had wacoed through the wood fence into our back yard and had efficiently zip-tied Lily and hauled her into a waiting paddy wagon. Molly was giving statements to a detective when I regained consciousness in the back of an ambulance where an EMT was injecting me with morphine and trying to persuade me to go to the hospital. I shook my head. “Just came from there.” I lifted my shirt, showed him the line of staples crosshatching my abdomen. “I want to be with my wife. She’s okay, isn’t she?”

The EMT nodded and pointed to Molly. The kids’ school bus had arrived about the same time as the swarm of police and the girls were huddled against their mom and they were shuffling toward me.

The EMT asked Molly to convince me to go to the hospital. I said no. "He's a hard-headed jackass sometimes," she told the EMT.

It was our neighbor who called nine-one-one, wanting to report the breach as well as gunshots. Molly hadn't gotten to the phone; she had to dive under our kitchen table as Lily fired wildly into the house, missing both of us but shattering windows and pocking walls. The bitch emptied a 32-round magazine into our home.

Molly helped me from the ambulance. A Blackhawk helicopter circled the house. TV crews waited in ambush behind a yellow police line. A guy with a notepad hollered at me. I glanced at Molly and at the girls and at him, ignored him, and took Molly's hand and we limped inside our house.

4

There are nights I lay awake beside Molly, my mind processing my existence, always breaking the equation down to this: Who would I be and where would I be without the machines? That's one reason I visit Van-one in the breach: to figure out the answer to that question. All the times I visit Van-one, however, we never get too far into that discussion because the nanos have never spoken to us again. Mainly we drink beer and decide to let the philosophers and physicists work out the whys.

The one thing I did ask Van-one, on my first visit, was why he didn't come and live with Molly and me, and start over.

"Too confusing." He grinned. "Besides, this is my world. It's what I know. I would be at a loss in your world. And I would only bring you and Molly down." He paused to sip the foamy dregs of his beer. With the last sip, he sat the bottle on the coffee table between us. Like me, he always peeled the label from the bottle as it got soggy from condensation. He propped his feet on the edge of the table and peered up at the ceiling. "Do you acshully listen what we talk about?" He was slurring. "It's like a weird

dream, huh? I mean . . . maybe like what dying is. In you Ima . . . Ima . . . reborn. You . . . a better, happier version of me. . .”

It was a touch maudlin, an effect of the beer, but without true self-pity. I had no idea what to say. I stared down at the beer label sagging from my bottle. I thumbed the label; it swung loose of the bottle and flopped to the floor.

I looked up, shook my head, and Van-one smiled. We clinked bottles, a toast perhaps to new life.