

EVERY YOU, EVERY ME

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AT THE LAST SECOND OF HIS LIFE, Jay reached out to touch her soul.

He knew his life was at an end—had ended days before, really. His short sixty years on the planet were already a sad abstraction. Yet, she was with him. The uncertainty before him shaped images from his past. With his arm still outstretched, he began to fall.

Jules “Jay” Cary stared at the blank space after Katy Becker’s name and student ID. The blinking cursor was like a question he didn’t want to answer. *She’s so damn smart. Why didn’t she just do the work?*

She showed no interest in passing his sophomore Introduction to Fiction course. Her presence in the classroom challenged, defied. She’d show up with Kool-Aid red hair of some sort of punk diva, ready to argue the minutiae of each text, from Poe to Pynchon. She knew the texts, maybe better than the newly hooded Dr. Cary did. She was not intimidated by his intense classroom approach and had no problem disagreeing with a point, arguing a detail, or chuckling at an interpretation she obviously didn’t share. Other students listened to Cary and red hair discuss literature they would never understand, nor care to. They even seemed to like it when Dr. Cary and Katy would go off on some tangent. Cary wouldn’t even notice the iPhones popping out of backpacks and purses, or so they thought.

Jay input an “F” next to Katy’s name on the grade report and finished recording the rest of the students’ scores. He was about to submit the form when he changed the “F” to an “I.” *I’ll ask her to write a paper, if she even comes to see me.*

He didn’t see her until midsummer. She had left a CD behind the temporary name tag on his office door. She even ripped off part of the card to write him a note: “Dr. J. Here are a few songs I thought you’d like. K.” He did

like them. In fact, he already owned about half of them. That CD became the soundtrack for his summer. She never did write that paper.

Two years later, Katy earned an “A” in Dr. Cary’s Postmodern Fiction course, a senior-level seminar. Her hair was now short and black, but her contention was still red.

About mid-term, Katy brought her boyfriend to class. She introduced Gary as the “love of her life.” Gary wore a Hipster’s beard, and his eyes were kind and a bit sad behind his thick glasses. He was in computer science, but his style was not a typical computer geek’s. Jay thought he shook hands a bit too firmly.

“Gary’s a programmer, and I’ve started designing games with him,” said Katy.

Gary smiled: “She’s quite good at it.”

Jay raised his eyebrows, *oh-yeah?*

Gary seemed indifferent and staid, as if Katy’s passion was enough for them both.

“In fact, I changed my major last year,” Katy explained, “and I’m learning to program. It reminds me of poetry in an odd way.”

Gary’s buzzing pocket called him away.

“In what way?” Jay asked.

“Code’s elegant language put in just the right way. Like good poetry, the best is short but intense.”

“Computer code for *games*?” Jay chuckled, and started packing up his lecture notes on DeLillo.

“Yes. I see life in it. I’ve never been good at math, but Gary helps me with the left-brain stuff. When the various pieces are put together just right, the result is magical.”

“Listen to you: the neo-Romantic.” Jay laughed, feeling his contentious side well up. *It was always good to see her*, he thought. Before Jay could continue, Gary had returned, his phone back in his front pocket. Katy smiled as she took his hand. They walked away, disappearing into the stairwell. Jay wondered when he would see her next, if ever.

* * *

Dr. Jules Cary moved to a small town in central Georgia to take a tenure-track position in a growing college. He went alone, his fiancée deciding that

she'd rather pursue a career as an officer on a research ship in the Gulf of Alaska than to come with him to a small town in the South. He had tried to persuade her by giving her a ring. This ploy had worked for a time, but eventually she had left on a small NOAA plane bound for Unalaska. A colleague who had an office next to Jay's said, "If you want to meet a woman in the South, you have to go to church."

Jay was in the middle of his second year in Georgia when Katy's name appeared in his inbox. She announced that she was driving to Atlanta for a gaming convention and wanted to stay over. She arrived on a sunny April day and greeted Jay like a dear old friend. She wore her hair short—"animé-style," she joked. They caught up over Mexican food. She was sympathetic when Jay told her of his break-up—now over a year ago—with his fiancée.

"How's Gary?" He asked.

"Well," she looked up from her burrito, "let's just say that he and I are too young to be together right now. We both need to grow up."

"That's too bad. Gary's a good guy." Jay didn't really know if Gary was a good guy, but he thought that they had been committed for the long-term.

"He got his degree and moved to New York to work with a gaming start-up, Big Jelly—you heard of them?"

Jay admitted that he had not. "That's a weird name, though." Jay pictured an oversized peanut butter sandwich with grape jelly oozing out the sides. "It's kind of . . ."

"Juvenile? I'm convinced that it has something to do with a boy's fantasy. Gary claims it's a metaphor for the brain, and the coming Renaissance of virtuality. I think it's a metaphor, all right, just not for the brain in his head."

Jay snickered and took a swig of his Dos Equis. "I was gonna say 'messy.'"

"Gary and his friends are good at what they do, though. I think they're gonna change the face of gaming, maybe art."

"Art?"

"Yes. If what we're doing is not the creative medium for this age, I'm not sure what is—computer gaming may be this century's sonnet." Some of that old defiance shown in her eyes. Jay had written his Master's thesis on *Astrophel and Stella*, Sir Phillip Sydney's fifteenth-century sonnet sequence. Did Katy know this?

"Who's 'we're'?"

Katy took a bite of her neglected burrito and pushed her glasses back up

on her face. “I’m working on a project using their physics engine prototype. My interest is in the social aspects of virtual reality, not the gaming.”

“Like Second Life?” Jay had used the popular virtual world for teaching one semester. He still used it occasionally to attend virtual forums and conferences in the wake of tightening university budgets, but he considered the interface clunky and didn’t enjoy the experience that much. Still it was much better than the MOOs some of his older colleagues used.

“Well, kinda. In Second Life, you still see the gaming stuff all around you: inventory lists, radar, and chat HUDs. I’m interested in a more naturalized interface where the technology doesn’t get in the way.”

“Naturalized?”

“Yes, like your hand’s naturalized. You still have to learn to use your hand, but do you remember doing it or do you *think* about doing it?”

Jay shook his head.

“Right. We just *use* it. That’s what virtual reality needs to do before it truly becomes useful.”

“But our hand is *natural*. I’m not sure I see the difference.”

“It’s only natural because you *came* with it. Evolution is the OEM. It’s just standard equipment. Just because it’s attached to our biology and is the product of millions of years of R&D doesn’t make it any more *natural* than a bicycle. In both cases, we train our brain to work it, so we don’t have to think about it rationally in order to, say, pick up a fork”—she gripped her fork in her fist, a bite of burrito was impaled on the tines—“or to make a bike go. Don’t let biology fool you, Dr. Jay. Using your hand and riding a bike *seem* natural, so they’re *naturalized*.” She chewed and watched for his reaction.

Jay had finished his lunch. “So you’re working on a more *naturalized* interface, you say?”

“Yes, one that works well with our standard equipment.” She smiled. Jay watched her smile. Katy loved to laugh, but she smiled so rarely.

“Well, good luck with that. I’ll stick with my sonnets.”

What started as staying for one night turned into two, but Jay was glad for the company. The first night, Katy slept on the couch. They split a couple of six-packs and watched the latest David Cronenberg squish-fest. They both laughed at the brutality of the protagonist’s sexual appetites, especially when he became the victim of a woman he targeted; she turned out to be a more

sophisticated predator. The film combined the softness of human biology with the violent edges of insect imagery. This unlikely film inspired a stronger connection between Jay and Katy. Their good-night hug lingered.

“You don’t have to sleep on the couch.”

She smiled, but her eyes answered. “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

Instead of being hurt, Jay seemed to predict her answer. “OK, sleep well.”

She came to him hours later. He awoke to find her standing next to the bed in the darkness.

“Hey,” his throat croaked.

“Do you have room for me?”

“Sure.”

They seemed to melt into each other. It had been at least a year since Jay felt any skin that was not his own. He could sense her desires, but he wrapped himself around her body and listened to her heart. He dozed for a peaceful moment before he raised his lips to meet hers.

* * *

Jay and Katy began meeting in places their passion led them. New Orleans, Miami, St. Augustine, Savannah, Tampa, and road-side motels in random exits off of I-75. They’d usually decide on a point in a designated city, mostly in the southeast, and make their separate ways there for one purpose: to be together.

They would often take advantage of necessary travel to get together—an academic conference or a gaming convention would be the perfect opportunity. Jay tried to choose conferences that would convene in interesting places, though they honestly never really spent much time out of their cheap hotel rooms. They’d eat and drink the local fare, Jay would present his paper, and Katy would gather in forums with colleagues, but they kept to themselves when possible, enjoying a passion that only time and distance can create and foster.

Though they were passionate and indefatigable lovers, they avoided discussion of it, as if talking would dispel its magic. Jay uttered the word once, and Katy had remained silent, but embraced him even more tightly. He discovered that she responded on her blog just a day after returning from Jacksonville: “I told you as much while you slept, light seeping in through early

morning. I love you.” Like everything Jay read on her blog—always so ambiguous and personal—he attributed it to himself. *Could she love someone else right now? In the middle of this?*

* * *

“I’m moving to New York—Brooklyn, actually.” Katy’s voice sounded hollow through the vidchat. Even though she professed to “loathe it,” they began talking through FaceTime regularly. Jay didn’t like it because Katy was unfocused, or more accurately, she was not focused entirely on him, the way she would be when they were together. She was the consummate multi-tasker, and her proficiency was superhuman. Jay would often test her, saying something subtle when she seemed to be focused on another aspect of her monitor, and even though her face would not register at the time, she never missed a thing.

“*Brooklyn?* What’s in Brooklyn?” Jay, too, was in the process of moving. He had a manuscript accepted by Routledge the previous year, so he was able to secure a job at a more prestigious university in Atlanta. Geographically it was not far, but in everything else, it was like moving to Babylon from a houseboat on the River Styx. He had rented a house in a historical section east of downtown Atlanta and had begun moving his stuff on the weekends.

“That’s where it’s happening, Dr. Jay.” She always said “Dr.” when he was being dense or naive.

“What’s happening? *Gary?*” It hadn’t been the first time Gary’s name had been mentioned during their relationship. Just last year, she had visited Gary while “on business” in New York. Jay only found this out by browsing Twitter during a faculty meeting: “It was great to see you, K.” At the time, jealousy stung him like a flu shot. Dr. Cary had not been paying attention—why should he, really, since this was his last semester—but he shut the laptop a bit harder than he’d intended. He felt conspicuous through the rest of the meeting, like he was radiating heat. Jay decided, from that point on, he would only be with Katy when he was physically *with* Katy. *People will do what they want to do*, he concluded, *and nothing I say will change it.*

“He offered me a position, but it requires my presence. I had been thinking about leaving Tampa, anyway. You know that.” She looked directly at him through the monitor and the thousand miles of fibre-optics that separated them. Her eyes seemed to be the only solid part of her pixelated image.

Jay's thoughts lingered on the word "position," so he didn't hear anything she'd said after that. *I bet he has a position for you.*

"When are you going?"

"Next month. My lease is up here, so it's a good time."

"Yeah."

"Jay, you'll come visit me." It wasn't a question. Jay could hear hope in her voice and see, maybe, a pleading in her eyes.

"Of course. I've never been to Brooklyn," he said with the enthusiasm of a dish sponge.

"Just don't come in the winter, Georgia-boy." She laughed awkwardly, trying to lighten the mood.

"What's the *position*?" If she heard the emphasis in his voice, she ignored it.

"Well, I'm sure you've been keeping up with current medical breakthroughs?"

"Which, in particular?" Over the past few years, there had been staggering progress in genetic research and application. The human genome had been mapped years before in 2003, but only now were geneticists beginning to apply that knowledge into practical applications that were having serious effects on human lives. Many common diseases had been wiped out, and many others were being detected early and dealt with even before they can take hold. Several forms of cancer have been cured, and most others are now easily treated. And since the US Congress had passed the Medical Research and Ethical Standards Act, pharmaceutical companies and medical research labs were required to open-source their research for the common good after initial time of making their profits. Since pharmaceutical corporations have continued to post record earnings, Jay thought they've found a way around this "socialism."

"Consciousness," Katy said.

"What about it?"

"They've found human consciousness." She was distracted again. A URL popped up on his screen. Jay clicked it unconsciously. A press release from Johns Hopkins announced a cure for Alzheimer's.

"That's great, an Alzheimer's cure."

"Keep reading. It's further down."

"Why don't you just tell me." The press release seemed to be addressing the medical community, so Jay wasn't getting much of it.

“In their research to cure Alzheimer’s, they’ve discovered where human consciousness is housed. Look, I don’t understand it exactly, either, but they seem to have uncovered a gene combination that produces what they thought was a common protein. Further analysis shows something working on a level close the atomic: this reaction is spread throughout the neurons in their cell cores. Considered as a whole, they seem to define our conscious minds and are connected on a quantum level.”

“Wow.” Jay wasn’t sure that he understood the implications, especially how this impacted Katy and her interest in virtual social spheres.

“I suppose you’re wondering what this has to do with me?” She smiled. “Sonnet has been working on a new interface since they’ve been favorites of the venture capitalists for a while. This new interface uses ersatz neurons, made up of grown and programmed viruses, to communicate and stimulate the player’s own neurons. What if we were able to somehow do this on the level of consciousness?”

“Sonnet?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you? That’s the rebranded Big Jelly—a more adult name that I came up with.”

“I like it.”

“I thought you might.”

“So, what’s this about consciousness and a new interface?”

“Well, I’m not sure of the implications, entirely, but it might be the first step in disappearing the interface—a true *mixed* reality. Say good-bye to keyboards, clunky haptic interfaces, VR helmets, and anything else vaguely reminiscent of 20th-century science fiction.”

Jay had never liked science fiction. “I haven’t read those stories.”

“You really should read more, Dr. Jay.”

“That sounds like an exciting opportunity, Katy. Really.”

“It is. Things are changing, and I have the chance to actually be in the middle of it. I need to take it.”

“OK. When can I see you?”

“What do you think about a road trip?”

Brooklyn might as well have been the moon. But their connection to each other grew with distance. If their meetings were all fire and star shine before Katy’s move, then after, their intensity blazed like twin stars in a collapsing orbit. They met less frequently and for shorter times, as both their careers

began demanding more of their attention. Dr. Cary was invited to speak at multiple conferences a year, sometimes in Europe and regularly in Dubai. Katy liked to travel less, physically, but maintained a busy virtual schedule. The conference organizers in Dubai were generous to their speakers, so Jay always had accommodations and travel expenses for two, but he could never get Katy to go with him. When they met these days, Jay usually came to her.

“I wish we had just stayed in bed.” Jay was feeling New York’s winter in his bones. Katy wanted to show him a “surprise” at her office, but even mid-day in February left the bundled Jay short of breath. Katy’s white skin was ruddy with cold, but that seemed to be her only reaction to the wind off the East River.

“It’s *only* 25 degrees.” Condensation from her laugh hit him in the face as she grabbed his coat to hurry him along. They walked arm-in-arm for a few blocks toward the heart of Brooklyn.

The Sonnet offices were smaller than Jay had expected. They occupied a new construction among the more historical structures of the borough. The bottom two floors of the building were occupied by Einstein’s Books, a bookstore that catered to NYU’s scientific community, and Sonnet occupied the upper two. Even inside, Jay was reluctant to part with his winter gear.

The contemporary look of the lobby seemed appropriate: subdued lighting, darker accent paint, and minimalist furniture suggested a serious tech company. The Sonnet logo hung prominently along the wall: a stylized script spelled the name of the company and it floated on top of a vaguely cartoonish human brain. “It was a compromise from the Big-Jelly days, but it does make a great icon,” said Katy.

Katy’s office was upstairs, she pointed, “but I want to show you something first.” She switched on some lights and headed further back. Jay felt like he was outside again as they approached a centrally located room. The door was shut, and tiny writing in the middle said “STANZA.” Katy used a biometric scan of her hand to slide open the door to a keypad. She entered a series of numbers and Jay could hear a several bolts release on the door.

“C’mon, quick.” They entered a cold, dark room with several audible hums and constellations of LEDs. Katy pulled the door shut behind them, and the bolts snapped back into place. As they did so, overhead lights flickered on. The room was slightly larger than a closet. In the center stood what Jay could only surmise was a computer of some sort, but it seemed to have no obvious interface. Jay had seen the racks of servers at the university many

times, this did not look anything like those. In fact, this was unlike any computer he had ever seen. The shape was more organic than machine-like: it was bulbous and charcoal-colored, resembling the half-built Death Star from *Return of the Jedi* that Jay had half watched on the classics channel as a child. The bulb was suspended on a steel frame and a thick stem of fibre connected it to various routers in the rear wall. Yes, Jay thought, *it does kind of look like a brain.*

“This is Stanza, the center of Sonnet. The shape is more efficient than your standard chip on a silicone base. It’s much more dense and smart. Everything you’re looking at here is built for processing. Period. In standard computers, there’s a lot of wasted space, but this is all computer. In fact, Gary thinks this might be the most advanced computer on the planet.”

Gary. Jay couldn’t help but feel uneasy, like an intruder. Brooklyn was Gary’s domain, and Jay was in his house. Yet, Katy had said, Gary was “working a deal” in Hong Kong.

“How did Sonnet get the most advanced computer on the planet? You guys just make *games*, right?” The mention of Gary irritated Jay. He was getting cold again; the continuous flow from the air conditioning was beginning to remind him of the New York winter.

“Yes. That’s another coup on Gary’s part. We are now one of several Tsaicon R&D teams.”

“Tsaicon? The Chinese chip maker?”

“Yes. This is their 3D prototype. Not only does it speed up our game production, but we are helping develop the next generation of computer technology for the largest chip maker in the world. Come over here.”

Katy walked around to the back of the computer to where the fibre made its connection. Around the circumference of the base, there seemed to be a gelatinous sack surrounding the cable, like the synthetic leather around the base of the stick shift in Jay’s old Toyota.

“Look closer,” Katy let him in. Jay peered at it as close as he was comfortable getting. It looked like the same material extended up the length of the cable.

“I’m not sure what I’m looking at here.”

“That sack of jelly is Sonnet’s contribution. It’s essentially a matrix of re-programmed—lab-grown, really—viruses.”

Jay stepped back. Many new strains of super viruses had developed—both in nature and in the lab—since the beginning of the century in an in-

creasingly post-antibiotic world. Mostly they were relegated to developing nations, but each year it seemed that the news media spent much of its 24-hour flow on the latest killer strain to come out of a rice flat in Asia. Most of the US was now virus-paranoid though no domestic outbreak of any significance had yet been recorded.

“They’re *good* viruses, Dr. Jay.” Katy’s amusement bristled in her eyes. “I programmed them.” Looking closer, the sack and fibre seemed to be teeming with small insects, but Jay dismissed it as his eyes playing tricks in the low, cold light.

Jay was about to respond when Katy turned around: “There’s more. Let’s go to my office.”

After passing through a similar security regimen to exit the room, they made their way upstairs and to the rear of the building. The forth floor was taller than the third, having maybe been two floors at one time. It used the same open plan as the third, but it incorporated lofts on each end.

“Gary, Jerome, and Tyler have offices toward the front of the building. They have windows overlooking the street. There are only two lofts back here.” They climbed an antique spiral staircase up through the floor of the loft, emerging into a comfortable, well-lit room. There was a couch against the wall, a small seminar table, a white board that currently looked like a palimpsest, and a corner of bean bags on thick carpet. “They’re game programmers,” Katy explained. “They like to be comfortable and informal.”

“My office.” Katy pointed to the only other door Jay noticed in their offices. The door to Katy’s office had no label, but similar security as the core room downstairs.

Katy’s office was dark. The windows had been blackened and the walls were a similar color, sharply contrasting the bean-bag room. When the door shut behind them, cans in the ceiling provided a dim light. Several identical workstations on a U-shaped desk seemed to be continuing their work, even on the weekend. An old futon lay open in the corner; several books and a blanket were thrown on top. Three chairs that looked like they belonged in a home theatre faced the largest blank wall. It smelled of pachouli and plastic.

“Have a seat,” Katy walked toward him and indicated the theatre chairs. They both sat, and the chair immediately started to conform to Jay’s body. It felt like sitting in plush leather. He was immediately comfortable.

“Stanza, wall on.” The wall of jet was immediately transformed into the

largest computer monitor Jay had ever seen. Sitting this close, it looked like a screen designed to accommodate 70mm film. Generic light dissolved into a view of Earth from space. The moon was present in his virtual view, and Jay assumed the sun was over his left shoulder. He looked down on the eastern seaboard of the United States, and most of New England was covered with winter clouds. Jay was astounded by the detail, and he started to rise to get closer.

“Hang on.” Katy touched his arm and stopped him mid-rise, yet as he rose, the images before him began to lose cohesion, like they were fading out. Jay sat back down and continued to look toward the familiar blue planet, becoming hyperclear again as he settled back into his chair.

“Stanza, take us home.” The sensation of flight was visceral. They started moving toward Earth at a graceful, gliding pace. As the planet grew to encompass the entire wall, Jay felt vertigo and nausea almost simultaneously. He closed his eyes until it passed. When he reopened them, their imaginary space ship had entered the atmosphere and sped through the clouds. It looked like they would hurdle into Manhattan, giving Jay only an instant to marvel at their bomb’s-eye view.

“Hold.” At Katy’s command, the images slowed to a halt above Manhattan. Jay could make out Brooklyn to their right, Central Park in the center, and Staten Island to the south. The detail was extraordinary: cars stopped and started, smoke rose from chimneys, *people* walked in parks and along sidewalks. Times Square looked like an anthill. *Was that a flock of geese in a v-pattern flying south over the Hudson?* The more Jay concentrated on a particular detail, the clearer it became. He ran his gaze slowly along Wall Street, and his god-like view watched life swarm below him.

“Is this . . . ?” He asked.

Katy had been watching him, he realized, and he reluctantly turned his attention to her sitting next to him. She looked pleased at his reaction.

“Real? That’s a good question. I can answer technically. The image is generated in Stanza. What looks like a spaceship’s view of Manhattan is computer-generated using the most bleeding-edge physics and social algorithms combined with the most current satellite, weather, topographical, visual, and environmental data available. Stanza’s AI is manifest through massive parallelism in the computer I showed you downstairs; it combines all the information and calculations and presents you with the experience you’re having.”

“Is Stanza an artificial intelligence?”

“It’s more like IA, or ‘intelligence amplification’; AI has so far been a dead end, but extending our facilities has proven easy with our new interface.”

“That makes sense,” said Jay, “it seemed to know where I was looking. It allowed me to look at what I was interested in. It was personal, like it was keyed into me somehow.” Jay could not stop looking at the very real image floating before him.

“It is.”

“What do you mean?”

“The ‘new’ interface I mentioned: the chair you’re sitting in is made of the same viral material you saw coming out of Stanza.” Jay stood up. As he did, the wall faded to black. He looked toward it, squinted. It was only a matte black wall. Katy stood up and took his hands. The chairs had conformed to the exact shapes of their bodies, but were now starting to ooze back into cushion shapes.

“It’s OK.” She laughed. There was no mockery there, only kindness. “There is no screen. All of that was projected into your mind. The viruses—our proprietary human-computer interface that we call an IAI—mimic human consciousness, so you, in essence, become one with Stanza. The more you concentrate, the more your consciousness becomes part of the simulated reality.” She let that sink in.

“*Wha . . . ?*”

“Cool, isn’t it?”

* * *

Jay married Madeline Lockheart just after his fortieth birthday. Dr. Cary had met Maddee on a speaking engagement at the University of Alabama. She wasn’t there for his talk, but shared a bench with him outside of Foster Auditorium as he reviewed his notes. It was a beautiful April day, and that beauty was augmented by Maddee’s charm and young enthusiasm. While he was shocked with himself afterward, Jay asked her to dinner. After her class ended at eight, they met at Topio’s Pizza for beer, conversation, and a couple of slices.

That might have been the end of it, but Maddee lived in Atlanta. They began seeing each other regularly. Maddee seemed much older than her twenty-two years, and Jay felt a closeness and comfort with her that he had

never felt before. She exuded a *joi de vivre* that was such a departure from the staid academic life that Jay had been compelled to accept and to adopt. Life with her was happy and easy. Just after the new year, he gave her a ring. Her excitement was infectious, and while her father, a lawyer for the state, eyed Jay with mistrust, her mother accepted him with open arms: “Anyone who could win my Maddee’s heart must be someone special!”

The wedding was a southern affair at the governor’s mansion. While Maddee’s family was not wealthy, the Lockhearts had a historical importance in Georgia, so they were part of the southern aristocracy in Atlanta. Jay had little influence over the preparations, and that suited him just fine. He wore what he was given, said what he was asked to say, and smiled when expected. The wedding was when the autumn color was at its peak.

One mid-summer day before the wedding, Jay met Katy at the Atlanta airport. She was in Georgia for a cousin’s graduation from UGA, and she reluctantly agreed to a quick meeting before her flight back to New York. She arrived at the airport late, sitting down in a huff. She had discovered Jay’s impending wedding from a web site that Maddee had set up for friends and family. Apparently Stanza had been working overtime.

“It’s good to see you,” he said. Jay had already had a couple of beers.

“What the hell, Jay?”

“I’m sorry . . . K. I need someone closer.”

She was having none of it. “I gotta get my flight.” Jay saw her eyeing the security circus. “I better go.”

“Let me pay for this, and I’ll walk you.” He stood up and started looking for the server though the crowd of travelers.

“No.” She stood up, put her right hand around his neck, and stared him in the eyes. Her smile was sad. “Don’t contact me, Jay. Go home to your child fiancée and forget about me.” She held his eyes a second more, then she was gone, swallowed by the security line’s biomass.

The sting of her words stayed with him for years, maybe the rest of his life. His wedding and subsequent week of overindulgence in Jamaica started his new life with Maddee on several high notes, but Katy’s anger continued to haunt him.

Life with Maddee remained Jay’s constant joy, his asylum from an increasingly hostile world. The United States’ economy never fully recovered

from its crash early in the century. Numerous attempts by the progressive politicians failed to alleviate massive unemployment, fears of domestic terrorism, or growing distrust in government. The continuing economic crisis further solidified the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the government, mostly funded by the corporations, allowed it to happen. The largest corporations grew larger and earned yearly record profits while more of middle America joined the destitute. By the third decade of the twenty-first century, America was essentially a plutocracy, run by a handful of powerful corporations that wore the clothes of a democratic republic. The middle class continued to make less, Christian evangelism became more prevalent than ever, elected officials sounded more like professional wrestlers, and environmental concerns of the left were rendered moot by a series of severe winters and on-going droughts. As a result, many of the scientific, artistic, and educated began to expatriate.

Jay continued to teach, but began publishing a series of articles and books about the waning middle class in America and the demise of the liberal arts. He became a local voice of dissent, in a state whose government grew increasingly anti-intellectual, jingoistic, and evangelical. Funding for higher education was cut every year and massive layoffs of faculty and staff accompanied the closure of nearly a third of the colleges and universities in the state. Dr. Cary continued to resist.

Katy's call was expected, even though he hadn't really talked to her for ten years. He had received a snail-mail envelope from her a couple of days before. It had contained what looked to be a small, thick, and colorless bandage; a sticky-note said a call would be forthcoming. He was working in his office on campus, after his Thursday evening graduate seminar. When her name flashed on his monitor, he quickly received the call.

"Hello, Stranger." He couldn't hide his pleasure at seeing her again. She was just as he remembered: her hair was short and black, spiky and disheveled like a hermaphroditic animé hero, and her steel blue eyes looked as sharp as ever. She might be a bit thinner, and she was definitely all business.

"Did you receive the IAI patch?"

"Do you mean this?" He held the grey band-aid up to the web cam.

"Yeah. It'll work best if you put it on the back of your neck." She turned in her chair so he could see that she wore an identical patch at the base of her skull.

He started to peel off the back of the patch. "What is this?"

“It’s an intelligence amplification interface that’ll allow you to connect with Stanza. I’ll tell you more when we’re together. After you put on the patch, install this software—” his computer binged and asked him if he wanted to receive “a potentially harmful attachment from K. Becker.” He clicked “Accept” and a new, generic application icon appeared on his desktop.

“Got it. Katy, what’s going on?” She seemed hurried, more urgent than he’d ever seen her. “Is everything OK?”

“Ping me, so I can test your bandwidth.” He sent a ping to her terminal; the university had been running on nanofibre with the latest wireless standard for at least a decade, so Jay knew that his bandwidth would not be a problem, no matter what Katy had in mind.

“Good, that’ll do. Do you have the patch on? Let me see.” He turned slightly to display his new accessory to the camera. “OK, now listen carefully, launch the program I sent you; it’s going to interface wirelessly with the patch. Once that happens, sit back and relax. I’ll see you in a minute.”

You’re seeing me now, he thought, but did as he was instructed. The patch tingled on his skin, and as he sat back in his leather office chair, the room began to fade. Jay felt as if he were being pulled forward, but when his brain began to register panic, he appeared to be standing on a beach. The sensations were dramatic, hyperreal. He could smell the salty sea, hear it gently wash onto the shore; the sun, high overhead, warmed his skin and he could feel the coarse sand between his toes. A gentle breeze barely disturbed the palms. Jay was immediately at peace, or would have been if he understood where he was. He sat down on the sand. He lifted a handful and let it flow through his fingers. As he watched it fall, like the grains through an hourglass, he began to see the light reflect off of individual granules. As he looked, each grain of sand became distinct, seemed to slow down as the breeze caught the waterfall of molecules, causing a slow-motion spindrift, like a stylized art film. Looking closer, his whole being seemed enraptured by the movement of the sand, dancing as each atom slowly—

“Hey, Jay!” He snapped out of it—his senses pulled back abruptly so that he once again saw the beach, the sea, the sun. Katy had her hand out. As he stood, he felt her embrace and the familiarity of her small frame. Jay marveled at what could only be called the *hyperreality* of this virtual landscape. She pulled back and smiled at him, though he couldn’t help seeing some of her sadness from ten years ago in the airport.

“Katy, this is . . . *stunning*. Unreal!” His avatar’s arms felt like his very own as he waved then around at the breadth of her achievement. “It makes me *feel* young again. Younger, anyway.” He laughed.

“I know, Jay. It’s my private place across the reach of space and time. But we need to focus now.” She took his hands.

“What’s up?”

“I’m leaving.”

“Leaving what?”

“The United States. Sonnet’s getting out—to Hong Kong. And I’m going, too.”

“Really? Hong Kong? It seems so far away.” Even though they had a ten-year distance between them, Jay always felt that he could still reach Katy at any time. But China was the literal other side of the planet.

“I know, but we feel like we have no choice, both politically and economically. Wack-job military types have been poking around here, both physically *and* virtually. They’re interested in Stanza, I guess—what else could it be? Paranoid freaks.” She seemed a bit paranoid herself.

“So you’re moving the computer?”

“If by ‘the computer’ you mean *Stanza*, yeah, we have to, though it’ll be risky.” She seemed genuinely offended, and the fact that he could see such human nuances in her avatar made Jay reel at the complexity of this simulated environment.

“Couldn’t you just download the information and destroy the machine?”

“No.” She seemed annoyed. “Stanza doesn’t work like that. It’s more like your brain: the information is a physical part of the machine, so separating it would be like trying to download your consciousness into another container. While a copy could be made, it would lose the . . . uh, the uniqueness—the *magic*.”

Jay let it go. “Is this *in* Stanza?” He spread his virtual arms wide to indicate the beach.

“Well, some of it. Your consciousness also supplies much of the *reality* of it. Look, I can’t go into that right now. I gotta go; I needed to tell you.”

“OK. Is there anything I can do?”

“Jay, Gary and I were married three years ago. I’m pregnant. Many things are in flux, but I needed to say good-bye.” She started to turn. Jay’s feet seemed to be part of the sand.

“Jay, keep the patch on. You’ll see why.”

“OK. Wait, Katy.” He tried to follow, but beach was fading. “Katy. K!”

“I’ll contact you again when I can, Jay.” The beach dissolved.

Jay sat under the fluorescent lights and listened to the silence of his office. He looked at his hand for remnants of sand.

“Only *poor* people get older,” said Sawyer Lockheart. Jay and his father-in-law avoided political and religious discussions when they were together, and they were rarely together. The “poor” for Sawyer was not only about economics, but about an attitude, or, as he says, “a certain enthusiasm about life.” Jay discovered that Sawyer’s enthusiasm was about getting rich, supporting your family and church financially, and being sure the state was most effectual in staying out of corporate practices. It also meant buying the best health rejuvenates he could to stay young.

Sawyer Lockheart was not solely responsible for pushing Jay into the public sphere, but the picture Maddee had put of her father in their home office inspired a certain *enthusiasm* in Jay to resist Sawyer and all he stood for. Jay’s last book had uncovered fifteen separate arrangements between politicians, church leaders, and Georgia corporations that were not necessarily illegal, but that certainly implicated a government that supported the interests of Georgia’s largest companies and churches over the growing poverty of its citizens. Jay became a public figure overnight, as polarizing there as he remained in the classroom.

Jay took to talk shows like he did to teaching: he was measured but passionate, and he always did his homework. Reverend Mooney, a Baptist minister and host of the morning show *Son Over Georgia*, was normally very reserved and respectful to his guests, but within five minutes of introducing “Dr. Jay Cary, author of *The Importance of the Liberal Arts*,” Mooney’s face was red with rage and indignation. Jay had had enough of seeing what callous practices of capitalist status quo were doing to the US, and he was no longer content to quietly resist. Jay made new friends and new enemies.

Jay and Maddee’s family grew along with Jay’s celebrity. Jay never saw himself as a father, but his three girls, like his wife, could dispel his darkest moods. Despite Jay’s busy teaching, writing, and speaking schedule, the family found time to travel south to the beach or north to the mountains for Maddee’s “family-focus time,” away from the evidence of a crumbling Amer-

ica. Initially, Jay's fifth decade was happy, though he found himself, particularly when he was alone on the road or in his office, thinking of Katy.

He had not heard from her in years, though he had tried to contact her a couple of times. The patch she had sent him wore out within a year, but during that time it had allowed him to use the Net in a much more intelligent way, through Stanza. Even while Sonnet moved the computer around the world, Jay was able to *feel* its ubiquity. It seemed to be able to use any network to maintain connection, like a portable computer. Jay even felt the IAI pad connect to his phone, so he could talk through the phone in his pocket without actually talking. Whatever was in this pad augmented his connection and it was *active*. He found himself in class able to recall information that his aging brain should not have contained. His intellectual breadth became superhuman, and his knowledge encyclopedic. He found he could talk about anything with authority, recalling facts and figures—something his brain never seemed good at—as if they were lines from Shakespeare.

His augmented intellectual abilities lasted only as long as the patch, however. He awoke one morning to find it had come off of his neck and seemed to shrivel and die on his pillow. He regretted having to go back to relying on his own failing equipment, and for the first time seemed to understand Sawyer's wish to remain young.

After a period not unlike caffeine withdrawal, Jay believed his brain to be stronger, as if his connection with Stanza had refortified his biological connections. Mentally, Jay was still sharp, and he continued to challenge America's business-as-usual attitudes and practices, both cubically and in the classroom.

As Jay's passion for work grew, his relationship with Maddee chilled. Jay saw her father in her more every year, and when she opted for her first cosmetic rejuvenation at thirty-five, Jay knew it was only a matter of time before they parted ways. He loved Maddee, but he could not stomach being married to her father. The girls didn't understand any of this, the oldest one only fourteen, and her siblings eleven and eight. They were precocious, but also southern: they blamed their father for breaking up the family. Jay knew it would be years before the the girls could assimilate this change, like it had took him when his father left his mother. On his fifty-ninth birthday, Jay left their comfortable house in Buckhead and moved into a high-rise condo in downtown Atlanta. The picture of Sawyer seemed to mock him as he packed up his belongings.

To his delight, Jay received another patch from Katy. He knew what it was immediately when it fell out of the well-travelled envelope. It was smaller—perhaps a bit thinner—and less opaque. Like an addict craving his next fix, he immediately put the patch on, but nothing happened. There was no note this time, but he began to spend more time by his computer expectantly. His waiting was rewarded later that afternoon.

Jay was sure Katy had not changed a bit; if anything she had gotten younger. He looked at his aged hands, loose skin peppered with brown spots; he knew his face bore similar marks, like worn and stained carpet. Katy's smile, always a bit sad, refreshed him. Her eyes took in his visage, and they seemed to see him half his life ago. Jay felt a surge of emotion, attributable to either his life's new loneliness or to seeing a young Katy again, he wasn't sure.

"K—" Jay cleared his throat, "you look great."

"Hi, Jay." She laughed awkwardly. Despite her beauty and youth, she did seem a bit sad. Jay could tell as much even with the patch still dormant.

"How are things? Are you still in Hong Kong? How's Gary?" The bitterness that usually accompanied any mention of Gary was not there. After a time, Jay just wanted Katy to be happy, and if Gary could do that for her, Jay approved.

"Gary's fine. He's as busy and brilliant as ever." *OK, that stung a little.* "He's been taking on environmental projects. Currently, he's working on shoring up Hong Kong against rising sea levels. He's not happy unless he's conquering the world."

"So Hong Kong's treating you well?"

"Oh, yes, there's a huge expatriate community that grows everyday. The Chinese call where we live 'America Town.'" She laughed. "The community is close and diverse. And active. You?"

"Good. The girls are doing great. I think little Hallie—the youngest—is interested in physics. I'm not sure where *that* comes from." They both laughed.

"How about *you*? Are you happy?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"Convincing. If nothing else, you're a national figure. I read your latest book about the Neovangelical movement in national politics, particularly the south. I'm surprised you're still there."

"I could go, but that would be the easy way out."

“Ouch.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. Anyway, it’s where Maddee wants to raise the girls, close to family. I’m not sure why she wants to stifle them like that.”

“You don’t like her family?”

“They aren’t bad people; they’re just part of a bad system. I see what’s it’s done to Maddee, and I don’t want it to happen to the girls.”

“Yeah.” There was a pause. Jay considered his next words.

“Maddee and I separated. I’m living on my own, now. The girls won’t even come to visit, though I got a comfortable condo. I’m happy the semester’s coming to a close. I’m thinking of getting away for a while.”

“I see. . . . Why don’t you visit? Come to Hong Kong. I’d really like you to see what’s going on in the community and what I’ve done with Stanza. You’d love it here, feel right at home. I can show you a lot virtually—oh, let me activate your new patch. Do you have it on?”

“Yes.” He felt a familiar tingling sensation on the back of his neck that spread through his head and down his back, like the AC kicking on.

“This one’s an upgrade. Sorry that I didn’t send you a replacement when your last one went out. I see you enjoyed it.”

“I did.” Jay assumed that, like any other server, Stanza keeps track of everything, including all his connections.

“Be *sure* to keep this one on at *least* a week,” she said mysteriously. “So, what do you say? You wanna come? Sonnet can pay for it; we’ll call you a consultant.”

“That’s a stretch.”

“When should I book it?”

“Well, I teach my last class tomorrow morning.”

“So, tomorrow afternoon?”

“That might be pushing it, but . . .” He knew he could do it, but just did not relish the thought of international plane travel. He had stopped speaking overseas a couple of years ago because the US government made it so difficult and inconvenient. Still, it would probably do him good, and he felt an excitement about the prospect of actually seeing Katy again in the flesh.

“Will Gary be cool with it?”

“Yeah. He’s busy,” she said dismissively.

“OK, let’s do it.”

Jay saw only a flash of silver emerge from the backpack. Before he could react, the student had the handgun pointed at him. The first shot would have done the trick, blowing out the left side of his neck, what remained of his carotid artery splattered blood over the classroom's front desks and white board. The second shot was a bit higher, entering his brain from the left temple. Jay's body crumpled over, hamburgered flesh splatting on the desk, while the gunman hurried out of the classroom.

Stunned, Dr. Cary's students watched him bleed to death. A girl in the front row, sprayed with her professor's blood and bits of brain and skull, began to scream, dispelling everyone's shock. Several students called 911. Stanza pinged Katy even before a single call was made.

Brain damage was inevitable. The surgeons had managed to save Jay, easily rebuilding and replacing skin, blood, artery, and bone. Brain, they said, was a different matter. Jay remained unresponsive, and the team of doctors wouldn't know anything until he regained consciousness. "If he ever does," one of them added with finality. "There's nothing more we can do for him here, Mrs. Cary."

That's when Maddee broke down. She and the girls had been summoned to Grady, and they had all been troupers responding with urgent equanimity, until now. Grandma Marlene and Grandpa Sawyer also arrived in time to hear the news and to console their girls. Sawyer Lockheart held Maddee and stroked her hair "It's OK, baby . . . *shhhh* . . . it's OK . . . *shhhh*, now." One doctor wanted to mention the strip of what appeared to be plasticine that he'd removed from the back of Jay's neck, but he figured now was not the place or time.

"Let's take him home, Dad," Maddee managed through tears.

"*Shhhhhhhh* . . . OK, I'll arrange everything, babygirl."

The gunman was a registered student who was caught before he was able to leave campus. "Why'd you do it, son?" Despite the handcuffs, the boy shrugged through his oversized cammo jacket: "I don't like what he says."

Katy arrived shortly after the ambulance dropped off Jay in Buckhead. As the technicians were finishing up with Jay in the master bedroom, the taxi delivered her to the Cary residence, a not overlarge brick house in north, central Atlanta. She took several pills, pausing as if to wait for them to work,

and grabbed a small case before exiting the taxi. The darkness under her eyes were those of a weary traveller about to reach her destination.

Katy's knock was answered by a girl of about fourteen. "You must be Gwendolyn. You look a lot like your father."

"Yes, ma'am," said Gwen, "who are you, please?"

"My name's Katy Becker. I'm an old friend of your father's. May I come in?"

"Just a moment, please." Through a crack in the front door, Katy saw a comfortable foyer and the two medical technicians coming down the stairs. They quietly passed her, nodding. She watched them pack their gear in the back of an ambulance. The police officers sat in their cruiser parked on the street; they had watched Katy approach the door, but had not challenged her.

Maddee opened the front door a moment later. She and Katy had never met in-person, but they knew of each other. While neither had any real reason to dislike the other, each responded negatively to the other's relationship with Jay. "Hello, Mrs. Cary, I'm Katy Becker."

"Hello." Maddee's eye's were raw, but she was holding it together. "Come in," she said, pulling the door open.

"How is he?" Katy asked.

"He's opened his eyes, but he doesn't seem to . . ." A single tear was quickly wiped away.

"I'm so sorry." Katy stood in the foyer, stifling a wave of nausea. She wondered why it was so warm in the house. She wanted to comfort Maddee, but kept still. They were not friends, and an act of even genuine consolation might be interpreted hostilely. Katy considered the stairs behind Maddee.

"Are you OK? Can I get you anything?" asked Maddee.

"Oh, no. I'm fine."

"Please come in," she said with a rote decorum and indicated a formal room just off the foyer. They sat in opposite chairs.

"Mrs. Cary—"

"It's Maddee."

"Maddee, I might be able to help. With Jay." She had Maddee's attention.

"He was wearing an IAI patch, an 'intelligence amplification interface,' that my company developed. It would have looked like a flat piece of skin on the back of his neck," she indicated where on her own neck. "Did you see anything like that?"

“No,” said Maddee. “Why was he wearing it?”

“I sent it to him. It’s to increase his ability to access information, essentially. It’s still being developed, and Jay agreed to help,” she half-lied.

Maddee nodded. “OK, so what does that mean?”

“Well, what Jay didn’t know is that part of the process is mapping his own neural connections and reproducing them within our computer to supply him with augmented intelligence. I think that I might be able to use the last scan we took of him to reconstruct his damaged brain.”

Maddee’s red-rimmed eyes grew wide. “Really?”

Katy indicated the small, metal case that she had placed on her lap. “This device can reprint the damaged part of his brain and restore him to how he was just before the incident. All we need to do is attach this modified IAI patch to his head and the other end to your network connection. The process will take anywhere between an hour to a couple of days, depending on the extent of the damage.”

“That sounds like a lot of horseshit to me.” Sawyer Lockheart stood in the foyer, arms crossed, looking into the room. Katy had not noticed his lurking. “You expect us to believe that a little patch can repair a damaged brain?”

Katy eyed the man who could ruin everything. She had hoped that Maddee’s emotional state so soon after the incident would be easily manipulated, and she seemed correct, until this oaf’s interruption. Katy could see the hope in Maddee’s eyes turn to suspicion. “*Daddy*,” she sniffled, “she came to help.”

“Yes, sir.” Katy looked only at Sawyer and tried to sound confident. “That’s exactly what these do. We’ve developed nanotech that does just that.”

“*Nanotech?! You brought that illegal, Godless science into my daughter’s house?*” He took a physically protective stance in front of Maddee, like his machismo could stand up to nanomachines. “Who the hell are you, woman? *Marlene*,” he yelled toward the back of the house, “*get the authorities in here.*”

Katy acted quickly but calmly. She closed the case on her lap and stood up. Sawyer seemed to tower over her, but she was able to spring past him, through the foyer, and up the stairs. She heard Sawyer boom “*stop!*” as she reached the top of the stairs. She could see the pink of the first two rooms reflected off the hard wood, so she sprinted toward the doors at the far end of the hall. A nurse began to emerge from the door on the left. Seeing Katy

bounding toward her, she tried to step back inside to lock out the intruder. Katy pushed the door hard, knocking the nurse to the floor.

“Get out. *Now!*” The nurse did not argue. She got up and hurried out of the room. Katy locked the door and put an antique chair under the knob. Her eyes finally fell on Jay on the king-sized bed. A tube connected him to an IV. A computer monitored his vitals, animating his heartbeat on a large hologram. Katy wasted no time. As she took the two patches from her box—affixing one to Jay’s and one to her own forehead—she looked around for the network socket—hoping there was a fibre network socket in this old house. Yes, the medical monitoring devices used the physical outlet, just to the right of the bed. She plugged both of their IAI’s into the wall.

“Jay,” she touched his face. “We don’t have much time,” she said trying to breathe. His eyes were open, but they mirrored the blankness of the ceiling.

Someone pounded on the bedroom door. “Ms. Becker, this is the police. Open the door, or we will break it down.” More pounding.

Katy activated their IAI patches simultaneously. Hopefully, Stanza can do this quickly. Tears welled in her eyes, and she gripped Jay’s lifeless hands. “Stanza, . . . GO!”

When the police broke through the door, Jay Cary’s EKG was a flat line. Katy Becker, also dead, lay draped across him. Both of their foreheads were charred where the IAIs had been attached. All that remained of them was burnt carbon.

Jay reached for her, now him. Images from his life mingled with images from hers. He saw her joy and sorrow, her first pregnancy ended by a marine’s kick to her stomach as she tried to board a ship leaving America; he felt her love for Gary, her devotion to him, and her sadness for how she had to leave; he felt her sickness, the growing tumors in her lungs and liver; he saw his fatal gunshot wound to the head—saw his life reconstructed for him in the infinity of Stanza. Moving pictures, sounds, images, feelings, the bricolage that makes a life rushed back to him. He was every one of himself at all places and at all times, some more clear than others. And all the Katys, too, were there. It was too much . . .

Where are we?

Home. Wherever we want. This is our verse.

What are we?

What we’ve always been, but together now. Every you, and every me.