
Dreambox Junkies

by Richard Raymond

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Chapter 1

She'd gone right back to the McClinic and rescued her brain; you could do that free of charge under the statutory seven-day clause. At last her head felt hers again. No one could say she hadn't given it a chance. Some people couldn't handle Mindseye implants—that was the all-too-human fact of the matter,

and she, Processia Roffey, just happened to be one of those unfortunates. It freaked her out, she couldn't cope, so back out the thing had come after barely a day. It would take a lot, a frucking lot, of getting used to at the best of times, having yourself chipped for incoming thoughtmail. And she'd complained about the shitfilters not doing their job, letting ads parade across her psyche all afternoon. One jingle in particular, the very height of whitebread powersoul retrokitsch, had taken up permanent residence, its smirky lyrics etched upon the inside of her skull. Even now, driving home up the Edgware Road and through Maida Vale, it continued to plague her:

SmarTampax for the twenty-first century gir-hirl...

Sma-har-Ta-a-a-am-pax for inside infor-ma-tion...

Of course, Mindseye was merely the first stage. Electrotelepathy was as yet in its infancy; you could only receive, like with early TV. The much-vaunted ThoughtNet remained a dream of tomorrow, along with cities on Mars, inoculations against envy, and men you could actually live with.

Her head ached like fruck. And little wonder, with a hole in it. Pain-free Mindseye removal? The analgesics were crap. Her brain, her eyes and her jaw, her back teeth, even—THROB THROB frucking THROB. She couldn't bear to wear her smartspecs, and to have to keep peering at the poky screen of her mobe was to court ocular peril. Serves me right, Sesha thought ruefully. Early adoption's a mug's game. They rush out all this fadgetry and use us as cost-cutting guinea pigs.

Needless to say, this would put her at a grave disadvantage, marketwise, in the event of her moving on from the Institute. If you couldn't wear a Mindseye—your ticket to the brave, brained-up world of the future—bosses, most bosses, soon wouldn't want to know. To quote that famous Bertrand Laurel soundbite: 'Commerce is combat.'

Not that Sesha would have been contemplating a move, ordinarily. She was happy working for Frances, quite content with the sweet deal all PsyTri employees enjoyed. And they weren't about to dismiss her on incap grounds, claiming a Mindseye *assine qua non*. Frances wasn't a bloodshark. Frances Rayle valued people.

But Sesha had nevertheless felt the need for one or two career precautions. For the sake of her resume she had gone along the previous evening to the new McClinic in Bayswater, taking advantage of their special introductory limited-period low-cost implantation offer, having first okayed it with her stars.

Well, so much for frucking astrology.

It had started out as an unpleasant rumour, that Frances had been undergoing anti-age telotherapy and had begun to show signs of that dreadful, dreadful side-effect, Angel Syndrome. And now today Ajit, the London chief, had confirmed it: Frances was being treated for AS at her hideaway in Spain. It was incredible bad luck; AS was so rare. And no one, so far, had recovered from it. How could you not worry?

And yet, perversely, from time to time Sesha still found herself wondering whether in, say, a decade or so, once the ageing process really went to town on her—and telotherapy was no longer so prohibitively expensive—she would herself turn to telothine to try and stabilize her cells' reparative powers. Probably. Even at the risk of AS? Probably, yes.

Rain coursed across the windscreen, great dirty inky clouds denying the city its sunset, as they had for most of this dull, wet February. The traffic, as ever, was horrendous. Sesha couldn't imagine what it must

have been like before Backseat, although half the drivers out there, if surveys were to be believed, got their kicks from leaving it switched off and relying on their own reflexes. At least there were no more meetings to attend for the rest of the week. Renowned for her quirkiness, Frances insisted on a maximum of physprox and as little telepresence as possible, set great store by face-to-faceness. Which was wise, in all probability, but on a day as damp as this, simply disastrous for someone with Sesha's PsyTri profile. For the weather had, yet again, gone and put paid to her Psychotrichological Congruence. Her hair had fallen out of phase with its Quasiplatonian Ideal: that single, ultimate hairstyle maxoptimizing one's attractiveness, self-esteem and all-round wellbeing. Sesha's own QI had been defined as a glossy black helmet-like bob as worn by Louise Brooks, that old-time actress currently enjoying a giddy synthesespic afterlife. Sesha's hair being by nature wavy, the requisite sleekness was a challenge to achieve, and rain—excessive humidity, even—was an absolute killer.

Fruck it anyway, Sesha thought, feeling victimized, horribly victimized, being cursed with wavy hair when you were a psychotrichological straightie. Who was that in the mirror? Medusa? She didn't know what she would have done without her mobe. If it found her in this state upon receipt of a vidcall its PhonePhace function would automatically smarten-up her screen image. Mobes were the only friends some people had. Sesha wouldn't place herself in that sad category, quite, but she'd been pretty cut up when her last mobe had haywired.

She had a bedboy coming round at nine but the mood wasn't there, what with the head, eye, and jaw ache, and now acute hair depression to boot. She would reschedule the session, take a good long shower instead, fruck the water meter, take two McSnooze and say good riddance to a bitch of a day. And then, tomorrow, she'd arrange a reconsultation. For it was possible that she had been misdefined. It wasn't unknown—there had been rare cases: the odd erroneously prescribed fringe, cinnabar tints that had proven unquasiplatonian, one or two ill-advised headshaves. The Institute of Psychotrichology had never claimed infallibility; Frances was far too humble to allow that.

The Kilburn High Road, as usual, confined her progress to tiny mad sprints with snail's-pace interludes. And to make matters worse, they'd got rid of that ad for Dial-a-Dong, the bedboy agency. She would miss the familiar vidclip of that guy, Italianate and doubledropdead gorg, boogieing away with a big stiffie bulging out through his lime Lycra kilt. Instead, almost every single road screen now proclaimed:

DREAMBOX—THE ONLY LIMITATION

IS YOUR OWN IMAGINATION

It was everywhere, now, that slick, mantraic slogan. Mags, NeTV, e-shots puppeting your mobe, hardmail on your doormat. On buses, advertaxis, on the Cricklewood railway bridge wall when you slowed at the traffic lights. Rapped out on the radio. You could even win a Dreambox—or, if you preferred, a genuine original 1975 Texas Instruments vintage pocket calculator—by sending in a snapshot to the Roody Noody Breakfast Competiton, so the tinny tones of her muesli box would remind her every time she filled her bowl.

That would, no doubt, be the next big move after Mindseyes: they'd be expecting you to box up and put in extra hours under chronocompression. Already it was being tried by hardcore workos, cutting-edgers shooting through a whole week of brain toil in one single twelve-hour box binge. But it tended to backfire on the employers, so Sesha had heard. Dreambox use was so addictive that even the most zealous careerists were dropping out like twentieth-century hippies, lost in their personal boxworlds. Sesha wasn't too clued up on Dreamboxes, the finer details of how they worked, although the onslaught of ads had left her vaguely aware that the box used the immense amount of inf available on the Net, plus the brain's own, no less considerable resources, to construct and store a facsim of the real world, a total

artificial environment which, when subjected to the Berkeley Effect—whatever the fruck that might be—became a playground for the box user's psyche. Apparently, the human mind found this freedom quite frightening, and fought tooth and nail to keep control, sticking all kinds of barriers in the way of facile wish-fulfilment. Weird. Sesha wondered if she would turn out to be allergic to Dreamboxes also. Well if so, then so be it, fruck it. Too much, it was, even with all her FuShok training. A desert island, she thought desperately. A mud hut. A warm sun. A grass skirt.

“Soon be home,” sang her car, its dodgy seat sensors for once reading Sesha's stress level with accuracy.

“Soon be home,” echoed her mobe.

“Soon,” Sesha agreed.

“Sesha?” Her mobe—a cool little sixth-gen Hitachi in the style of a 1950s shocking-pink powder compact—knew all about tone of voice, how best to go about troubling her for decisions. Its vocal pattern was that of rock god Janko Brauch, her all-time crush; although the mobe concerned itself with banalities any self-obsessed superstar like Janko would never have given a flying fruck about. “Sesha, your WARMGLOW debit expires this month ... you wish to continue?”

“Yes please,” she said.

Every month Sesha donated a fraction of her salary to WARMGLOW, that convenient, conscience-salving blanket answer to all your charitable impulses. WARMGLOW took the hassle out of doing good. No need to notice street beggars; you'd already done your bit by giving to WARMGLOW. You were told where your money went, although Sesha never got round to perusing the bi-monthly newsbursts. It was the same story with the weekly bulletins from her bookjuicer, tirelessly combing text libraries, extracting kernels of wisdom, key insights. When had she last found the mindtime for an update? But then, didn't that go for everyone?

“Oh, and Sesh ... shall I renew your McCops contract?”

She had taken out the extra protection a year ago, after her mobe had alerted her to a local newsbite: her next-door neighbour had been attacked in the underground car park, and said she probably owed her life to their building's McCop. Sesha knew the ‘neighbour’ scam to be a common advertactic, but better a safe stupe than a sorry cynic. So she'd gone out and bought a Heartmonitor Alarm Bra (in Funky Fuchsia) and one of those Pepperspray bodyguard bracelets. But she'd decided against image-grabbing contact lenses, being more concerned with preventing rape than recording it.

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Chapter 2

Sitting shoeless and dry-haired and Congruent at last again in the kitchen of her micrapartment in newly fashionable Cricklewood, chilling out with a Janko Brauch album, refuelling with some transorganic pasta and transorganic pesto and trying to remember who had christened this the Age of Solitary Pleasures, Sesha listened to a report from one of her subselves; she kept a dozen out there trawling the Net for loveleads. Four more hits. Two in the States, one in Germany, one right down in New Zealand, all in search of the perfect partner. A banker, a geologist, an epigeneticist and a ThaIrish Fusion restaurateur.

The geologist, from Maine, was an eighty-three percenter, the most promising compat coefficient in weeks, and Sesha immediately asked for a pic.

Cute, somewhat cute. But too thick-necked for her taste; she didn't even bother to check his Korsch-Wrightson mental stability score. To her lovelead criteria pool she appended Neck Girth. As with so many other criterial elements, she cited Janko Brauch as her template. Janko's neck had been gorg. How old, she wondered, would Janko Brauch have been now, had he lived? Mid-forties? Still a rock god, a viable shigshag?

Sesha winced at her crassness. Poor Janko. The manner of his death had never failed to bring a shudder. Murdered at a gig by a fan of fifteen, a warped little girl with a bowie knife.

A couple of months ago she'd seen a synthesp Janko 'acting' in a Wuthering Heights remake. It may have looked just like Janko, with the voice and all the cool moves present and correct, but a computer-assisted guess as to the performance Janko might have given was no real reincarnation of Janko Brauch. They were enormously talented, these Hollywood pixelpuppeteers, but you could always tell a synthesp from a real, live, breathing actor. Always. If you couldn't, you were a stupe. And in any case, the whole idea was gross. She wouldn't normally be caught watching synthpics. She had only looked at that one out of morbid curiosity.

Sipping transorganic red grape juice, Sesha had a quick glance through her idiopape. The big stark headline sent a shiver through her.

'SICK NICK STRIKES AGAIN'

This time Sick Nick had infiltrated the latest in the interminable series of Simon Bermuda spy flicks and, after raping and maiming the suave secret agent, had spent the remainder of the film subjecting the female lead to a particularly unspeakable variety of sexual torture which, mercifully—annoyingly—the 'pape didn't detail. (Sesha could have got more inf, but she disowned that dark little part of herself.)

As always, when hearing or reading about Sick Nick, Sesha felt nauseated and repelled. And yet, every time she saw a film she found herself half-dreading but half-hoping for Sick Nick to outwit the shitfilters and gatecrash the story and get to work, carving up the characters. (With the exception of anything starring Janko Brauch. She couldn't bear the thought of Sick Nick attacking poor Janko, even his inadequate synthesp.)

Naturally, Hollywood was in two minds about the Sick Nick problem. On the one hand, directors were up in arms about having their work intruded upon, vandalized by this malicious cyberspook, and, as secure quantencryption was still some way off, had begun to insist on a return to the pre-digital age, to shooting films on celluloid and sending them out in cans, and fruck economics. On the other hand, though, boxoffice takings were no longer in so steep a decline. And it was the same with NeTV: viewing figures had held steady now for months. Inevitably, it was widely suspected that the whole thing was a desperate corporate ploy to woo back punters from their Dreamboxes. Not just Sick Nick, but also all those other schoolboy-prank pirate programs, like the roving erotoroutines that hypersexualized every image in their path.

Sesha instructed her mobe to delete Sick Nick from her newstopic pool. Grow up, girl. Okay, so Sick Nick's villainies were only ever virtual, illusory; what the cyberspook perpetrated wasn't real violence, but his acts were still emblematic of actual incidents, of genuine crimes committed every day by some sicko or other somewhere out there in the world. All those awful true-life horrors her mobe filtered out when compiling her 'pape. She had no appetite for anything too harrowing; why be harrowed? Who

wanted to be told and told again that you were living on the thin skin of a big balloon that was being blown up and blown up and stretched beyond its limits, and sooner or later it just had to burst? She had no time, by and large, for the non-personally-applicable; life was just too frucking short, and News Credibility Analyzer chips were still nowhere near good enough.

She'd deleted Sick Nick three times already. Doubtless she would weaken and reinstate him again in due course. She always ended up missing the frissons. Pathetic.

She asked for Lifestyle. The smartpape obliged, words dissolving into more words. The reading wasn't helping her eye ache, so she opted for audio. To her delight Sesha heard that raw silk was now officially rehabilitated following a period in the aesthetic wilderness. "So, it's bye-bye to bombazine, girls." She had always loved the look and the feel of raw silk, and she welcomed it back to her wardrobe's front line. She also made note of another couple of tips for next season: royal blue nylon housecoats and, for the evening, unshaven left armpits.

Declining the chance to win a dream kitchen that would be the envy of all her acquaintances, Sesha checked out Celebs & Goss. She was listening to a frank interview with Cheryl Spleke, the EBC topless newsjockey, on shopping, sex, breasts, and her bulimic son Sholto, when a hi-pri call interrupted. Sesha opened her eyes to find the sleekly-bearded face of Ajit on the screen.

"Processia?"

Ajit had big news. Frances wanted to see her ex-husband. Paul Rayle was living with his new partner and child in, of all places, Hilford Abbots in Cambridgeshire, only a hundred kilometres up the motorway. Hilford Abbots was a craft village, one of those painstakingly quaint touristic backwater enclaves full of dropouts, burnouts, people who couldn't stand the pace. The Luddite element.

Or, Sesha thought, those few among us who have seen sense?

It was common knowledge at the Institute, how Frances had married her domestic, a directionless philosophy graduate twenty years her junior. They had been divorced for some time, after what were, by all accounts, several happy years of union. The reasons for their split were none too clear. In the past, such rifts had often occurred over the issue of children. But these days, with all the nataltech options available, Frances's lack of progeny would seem to be a choice thing.

And now, it was her ex to whom Frances was turning in the throes of her affliction. How, Sesha wondered, would Paul Rayle respond? He was proving difficult to contact; Ajit had tried to get through by all the usual means, but zero joy. Unable or unwilling to answer. Someone would have to go out there. Someone non-ruraphobic; poor Ajit never, ever ventured outside of the city.

Sesha asked Ajit if he had heard any more about Frances's condition. He hadn't. But no news was surely better than bad? And whatever came to pass, it didn't have to mean they would all be out of a job. Not so long as their butts were clean and well-covered. Typical Ajit, thinking of Frances the meal ticket. Frances Rayle was a lovely human being, and was only fifty-six, and AS was a horror. And if the mother of Psychotrichology, with her incredible wealth, with all the medical might she could muster, couldn't beat this thing back, then who could? Frances's research teams had conquered baldness and greyness and other such obstacles to Personal Fulfilment Through Psychotrichological Congruence. (Although, oddly enough, it was taking them an age to perfect a hair-straightening pill.) Now surely those same scientists, those madly clever people, would be oh-so-hard at work on a cure for Angel Syndrome?

"How's with the CG?" Ajit wanted to know.

Sesha pulled a face, and drew from her immediate superior a sympathetic grimace.

Someone—indusaboteurs, cranky antibox activists—had managed to get to a whole consignment of PsyTri Pharmdiv's Crowning Glory hair-retention pills and had substituted placebos. Not only would that mean lawsuits from disgruntled scalpsters, but lots and lots of Dreambox junkies getting nasty shocks. For someone had discovered that one half-tab of Crowning Glory, when taken with a thousand-mg Vitamin C capsule, protected you—male or female—from boxmares, kept your dreams nice and sweet; far more reliably, curiously enough, than antideps such as Prozac or Trizac. Now, with only a sugar pill as insurance, all those box users would be open to the ugly side of themselves. Legally, the Institute was only vulnerable on the baldness front. So far as the Dreambox thing went they were untouchable: all packs carried prominent unauthorized use warnings. Crowning Glory couldn't be marketed as a boxdream dethanatizer since drug-assisted box use was currently illegal right across the Union in the wake of a rash of fatalities. Dreamboxes had only been on the market a matter of months, but neural overkill risks had already raised questions in the House, set parents panicking, and contributed more priceless darkside glam than any ad campaign could hope to evoke.

The CG/Vit C cocktail had a reputation as the most effective dethan gear available. Twice as much CG had been shifted since the box junkies had got into using it, and the forecast was that box-related sales would eventually outstrip hair-related. But now, with Crowning Glory proving untrustworthy, they would be switching in droves to rival hair-retention tabs like McKeepit or ReMane.

Sesha had spent half the afternoon, prior to her return visit to the McClinic, doing interviews with news people while suffering hell from her newly-implanted Mindseye. Without openly addressing box users, and thereby flouting the drug & dream laws, she'd had to find away of reassuring both lots of customers, the box freaks as well as the baldinis, that this was just an isolated case, one particular batch, that Crowning Glory was still the number one tab for all your male pattern hair loss or boxdream dethanatization problems.

On top of her spokesperson role, she had been one of those allotted the dreary job of co-ordinating checks on stocks of Crowning Glory to make sure no more unpleasant surprises lay in store for purchasers. But now she was being given something else, something ultimately more important, not to mention far more interesting, and she was grateful as fruck.

“No, but listen, Sesh ... about Frances?” Ajit trotted out that tiresome catchphrase of his: “I've seen the script, and it ends on an up. So Sesh if you could...” At that point Ajit's image got puppeted by a random gerontocidalist morphomercial. He took on the characteristic sneer. “What do young people think about old people? We think they're disgusting. Especially the ones who expected the State to look after them, who stupidly made no provisions. The parasites. And ugly, so ugly, so ugly and old! You're a burden on the young. We don't want you. Take your scrawny stinking chickenskins out of our sight.” Eyes blazing, he screamed, “DO US A FAVOUR AND DIE.”

“Fruck off, crunt.” Sesha told the phony puppet Ajit. Incredibly, this twisted digiterrorism had proved mildly successful in precipitating suicides among the elderly, particularly when more subtle viropirates found their way into NeTV gardening ads and turned some nice old green-fingered Uncle Cardigan into a face-the-facts proselytizer for self-immolation.

“Crawl into your graves where you belong. Think we want you in our world? You think we want to see our taxes pissed away on maintaining your decrepit old carcasses, stinkbreath chickenskins? END YOUR LIFE. One simple way out is to swallow a whole bottle of...” The shitfilters finally shrugged off the loathsome illegal interloper, and phony Ajit melded back into real Ajit. Grimly he asked, “So who

was it got me?"

"Geros."

He was livid. "Just gimme a line of the fruckers and a spewgun."

Only there may not have been enough perpetrators to form a line. Any Netgeek hacker anywhere on the planet could unleash a morphomercial. Or an erotoroutine. Or a cyberspook like Sick Nick.

"Tonight, Sesh. Go up there tonight, yeah?"

Sesha nodded. This was for Frances, a personal task, and she wasn't about to let down her boss, aches and pains and hairdepression or no.

She asked to view the file Ajit had sent.

Paul Rayle was thirty-eight and, judging from the pic, a good deal cuter than that thick-necked geologist, partly on account of a degree of natural Congruence: his hair was a mess but it suited him perfectly. And his neck was of a Jankoesque slenderness. There were no pics of partner or kid. In fact the inf was pitifully meagre: just the one old unenhanced snapshot—supplied by Frances herself?—plus the Sheepshitshire address, and something about them scraping a living making and selling wooden furniture.

Sesha studied the photo again. A good, high Symmetrindex. She zoomed in on the mouth, a nice, wide, kind example with generous lippage. Before she knew it, she had asked her mobe for a screening. Her mobe declared that the photo manifested none of the five Korsch-Wrightson indicators of potential personality dysfunction. On the basis of the visual data supplied, Paul Rayle appeared sound.

Immediately, Sesha felt guilty for having the temerity to KW Frances's ex as though he were a lovelead, and tried to appease her superego with a force-of-habit plea. She didn't anticipate any real difficulties, judging from those lips. In fact she looked forward to making his acquaintance. After all, any ex-hub of Frances Rayle had to be someone pretty special, did reason not dictate?

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Chapter 3

Gazing at *BoxRuth*, at her chunky naked back, its whiteness warmed up by the candlelight; at the red tomboy crop that petered out into down at her nape; at her soft rounded shoulders, the left tattooed with an intricate Celtic design, done long before he'd met her; at where the side of a heavy breast could be glimpsed, with Kali's little fat face nuzzling into it as she took her feed; just standing there looking at the mother of his child, Paulie Rayle felt deeply comforted. Ruth's realitude, her glorious Rembrandt carnality, served as his anchor in this omniverse bereft of absolutes.

All those others, all the *BoxRuth*s he had encountered thus far were equally Ruthesque, the whole ascending chain of them. No diminution, no noticeable increment; just Ruth, again and again, at every level. The thread that held his dreams together.

"Well go on, then, if you're going." *BoxRuth* was irritated; it dulled her eyes and soured her voice.

Paulie hated it when things were less than fine between the two of them. While from *BoxRuth*'s point of

view he would be gone for no more than twelve hours—the maximum period recommended by the manufacturer—subjectively, he would be away much longer. Chronocompression was advancing exponentially. Last time he'd heard the technews they'd been shipping boxes—the latest Sonys, Shintubes, Bengt & Anderssens—that could do you half a day in sixty minutes.

Paulie asked, “Will you be okay while I'm gone?”

“No.” She turned on the sarc. “I'm fucking helpless. You'll have to give up going on that thing and help me look after Kali.” Glancing round, she did her can't-you-see-I'm-kidding face. “Go on! I'll be fine.”

Why did he have to put her through this pathetic, apologetic ritual every time he boxed up?

“What's happened to giving us a kiss before you go? You always used to come and give me a kiss. Sometimes I think...” Ruth's voice cracked, and she looked away into the air, as though struggling to rein things in, certain things, and then she looked back at Paulie. “It's like sometimes...”

Paulie said simply, “Then I won't go.”

“Don't be stupid.” Ruth rocked the baby in her arms, even though little Kali was already fast asleep, hooked up to her breast just as snugly as he hooked up to his box. “Only it's like ... it's not going to be forever, this, is it? I don't know, sometimes I think we're drifting apart. We want different things.”

“No.”

Paulie didn't know what else to say. But on the other hand, words were cheap, as Ruth herself would have been quick to remind him. And when she was in this mood, in this state of mind, there was no arguing with her. Was this, then, her genuine self, coming through at these moments? Should he take these to be her true feelings? Was this the real soul inside her, suffering because of his selfishness?

He put down the box and got up, went across to her, kissed Ruth's forehead, kissed his daughter, delighting in the delicious baby smell, Kali's fresh baby skin.

Ruth turned away. “Look just go. Just leave us alone.”

He touched her arm. She shrugged his hand away.

Before he could stop himself, he said, “Well why did you buy me the box? You might have known how it would end up.”

“Fuck off.”

Ruth walked out and, only because of the baby, closed the door quietly instead of slamming it.

Paulie felt wretched. There he would be, lying boxed up and out of it, REM-ing and drooling saliva. Box users were known for their drooling, slack mouths. Ruth hadn't told him how ugly and stupid he looked, lying there just like every other box junkie, but he knew that was the spectacle he presented.

From the windowsill, he took the carton of Crowning Glory tablets and, as always, had trouble with the babyproof cap. The Vitamin C capsules, he saw to his dismay, were all gone.

He found Ruth in the kitchen, washing dishes. She had put on a t-shirt, that baggy old pink St. Diana

one. Ruth was no Dianist; the garment had come free with her McPregnancy Pack, that was all, and, waste-not-want-not, she had given birth to Kali in it and then hung on to it, sentimentally attached.

He asked, "Where's Kali? Asleep?"

Ruth nodded. Without looking round at him, she pulled open the cutlery drawer, snatched something out and tossed it over her shoulder toward him. "That what you're looking for?"

It was a new bottle of Vitamin C, procured by Ruth for his use. She had even done that for him, got him his precious dethan gear.

Paulie picked up the bottle off the floor.

"Thanks," he said.

And then he said, "I'm sorry."

Ruth said nothing.

"See you in a while," Paulie said.

He returned to the bedroom and sat down on the bed. It was totally his own fault, that it had come to this. His own childish, selfish, stubborn, stupid doing. Poor Ruth. He didn't deserve her. And she deserved far better.

There were two Crowning Glory tabs left. Enough for four more hooks. Half a tab was quite enough to do the job. They had a little indentation down the middle, so you could easily snap them in two, just as if it had all been planned; just as if, when the tablets had been developed by his ex-wife's scientists in order to block dihydrotestosterone production and forestall male pattern baldness, those pharmacologists had also foreseen the widespread use of the tablets by wildcarding Dreamboxers. So outrageously ironic, having Frances to thank for all of this. One full tablet, one a day, was the dosage required to keep your hair growing. But only half a tab plus a C capsule was needed to dethanatize your boxdreams. No one seemed to know who had discovered it, this antinegativity side-effect.

Hilford Abbots was Netless save for a single old landline screenphone—a necessary evil for emergency use only—at the home of village elder Robin Richly. Depending on his mood, Paulie sometimes found life in a media shelter liberating, sometimes suffocating, and he had been in the habit, on his occasional trips into Cambridge, of pigging out on inf and coming back with his head in a whirl. Among the fruits of one such expedition had been the alleged dethanatory power of Crowning Glory when taken with Vitamin C. Another Net myth, it had sounded like, to begin with. But then, when he himself had become a Dreambox user, Paulie had tried out the peculiar combination, and every hook had been clear of dark clouds. Not that dark clouds were necessarily always ready to sweep in, but it was wisest not to risk psychic self-injury.

If, right back at the start, Paulie had known what the dethan tablets could do, he could have guarded against the grotesque little nightmare that had been his first, unprotected boxtrip. Like an idiot he'd hooked up without properly consulting the Dreambox instruction manual, and had plunged straight into what he had later learned was a standard male wish-and-punish complex, in which the primal was viciously scourged by the sociocultural. The net result of this dynamic had been his finding his boxself suffering from uncontrollable penile development. After first becoming too sizeable for *GroundRuth* to accommodate, the organ had gone on to attain such bloated dimensions that he couldn't get it up anyway,

he didn't have the blood supply. He'd gone to the doctor, had operations, several, to shorten it, reduce it, cut it back down to size. But it had quickly grown back again, and rather than have it clutter up the ward, the nurses had coiled it round the bed for him, around and around, over and under, a ridiculous long fleshy hose. Dog-tired but unfailingly sympathetic, the nice, nice nurses had done their best to soothe his distress, and—and then the timer had come to the rescue, fetching him out.

It was easy to laugh, now, looking back on it, and Ruth had pissed her knickers when he'd told her. But at the time, his boxworld terror had felt as real, as deep, as deleterious to mind and body as any fear he had ever experienced down here on the ground.

The physical toll of dethanning was another matter. The long-term effects of excessive Crowning Glory consumption were anyone's guess, and there had even been claims that you could end up with corrupted DNA from too much Vitamin C. But Paulie wasn't intending his box junkiedom to last; once his goal had been achieved, the world would have no need for Dreamboxes.

It was no good expecting *BoxRuth* to understand what things were like for a user; she had never boxed up, never once. She had no interest, any more than she had in the Net, in ware hard or soft, in boxworlds, in anything techy. Little Kali was enough for her, along with her books and her carpentry, the wooden furniture she made and sold to win their bread, along with the occasional supplement of a paying guest. She was right, correct in her adulthood. Someone had to mind the mundane. They weren't rich like Frances. Babies couldn't look after themselves.

Dreamboxes meant nothing to Ruth, personally. But, because she loved him, and was thus prepared to humour him, to listen with patience to his ideas, Ruth had gone out and bought him a Dreambox. She had purchased it out of the money she'd earned for a beautiful rustic pine dresser, stained with cheap tea—which Ruth always used in place of woodstain—and finished off with just the right amount of wax. Times were lean; they'd barely managed to pay their last water bill, and Ruth's artifacts hadn't been selling so well in recent months, thanks to a short-lived, frantic craze for Early Flatpack, the retro peeling-veneered-chipboard look that had briefly made honest-to-goodness pine seem so very five-minutes-ago. Yet still Ruth hadn't skimped, going out and getting him a good, solid brand of box, a Shintube. She hadn't just plumped for the cheapest, one of those fuckawful brands you'd never heard of, with shit chronocomp, hideous neo-1970s mock-woodgrain inlays, and timers that could never fetch you out without inducing panic. They'd been known to give users fits. But there they were, still on the market. Like with everything else in this life it was all up in the air: what to do about safety, what standards to set, what legislation to pass. You kept hearing that a ban was in the offing, total Dreambox prohibition—as the Islamic world was struggling to instigate, in the face of global techanarchy—but now the genie was out of the bottle, it seemed a forlorn hope. Worldwide, the megacorps pretty much held sway in this and most other concerns, and you didn't slap bans on hotcakes.

But once the megacorps found that the Dreambox was causing the consumer pool to evaporate, maybe, then, something would be done. Box sales were soaring; but, he had heard, gamecard sales were significantly down. And the same with cinextrapolation cards; entering into your favourite movie was no longer quite such a craze. It appeared, then, that more and more users were slotting in the supplied wildcard, as Paulie himself had, for freeform psychsurfing, building a boxlife fashioned from one's innermost desires, your own imagination rather than that of some gamegrammer.

Innermost desires, Paulie thought. You live with a woman, you box up, and your transconscious mind chooses the same woman to be there with you in boxworld. Not some model, singer, synthesp, some crush from your past—or even Frances, for that matter—but Ruth, the very same woman you live with, here in the purportedly ontodefinitive Grundwelt, Groundworld. That happens, and surely you know without doubt that you love her, you want her, she's right, the one for you?

He had tried to get all of this through to Ruth, but to little avail. For Ruth, *BoxRuth*, things were simple: Groundworld was real; all those boxworlds just fantasies. Who cared what he got up to in his dreams? He could hook and fuck around to his cold male heart's content, so far as *BoxRuth* was concerned. Down here, of course, was a different matter.

If only they could have hooked together, shared the box and built a new world between them. But you couldn't co-hook; it had been tried, and both minds got sizzled. The Berkeley Effect, the barely comprehensible quantum compliance phenomenon by means of which the Dreambox worked its magic, was fucked up by a di-or multiencephalic intravironment. The two minds cancelled each other out in an unresolvable id war. There was no room for two Fichtean Overminds lording it over the same boxworld. Indeed, Paulie reflected, the Berkeley Effect might more fittingly have been thought of as the Fichte Effect in its identification of the box user with the Overmind; only the support of the worldcopy rendered the boxworld more than a solipsistic phantasm.

All of this was so much gobbledegook to Ruth. And yet, she was his accomplice. Somehow, she had brought herself to believe in him, in what he was attempting to achieve through sheer force of imagination, sleight-of-brain. She abetted his insanity. Out of love, she colluded in his delusion that he was no ordinary box junkie. At that very moment, in compressed time, in affluent bedrooms and scuzzy hovels alike, a thousand million acts of violence, sex, and violent sex were quasoccurring in a thousand million private boxworlds, predominantly male-generated, most of them numbingly near-identical in their swaggering scorn for the cerebral. Well, not for him those paltry little power trips and id orgies, those puerile superhero scenarios stuffed with gunplay and sexplay: Paulie Rayle had in mind a far, far higher purpose than mere self-gratification.

Face it, Paulie thought, I'm a complete and utter flaccase.

Ruth deserved better.

He had been Frances's kept man, and now here he was, a kept man again, a born taker.

Was it worth it, what he was putting Ruth through?

He gathered his saliva and swallowed the half-tab of *Crowning Glory*, followed by the C capsule. Getting water to wash them down would have meant going out there and seeing Ruth again and feeling the knife twist in his stomach.

He felt dizzy. Dizzy from thinking about things. Wasn't that why he had come here, away from it all, to Hilford Abbots? All the shit the world expected of you, nowadays. And it was getting worse. How could they possibly function out there, all those stressmonkeys, up over their heads in the technocosm?

But then, these were the folks who made the world go round.

And people like Paulie Rayle?

Useless eaters. The best that could be said about them was that they did at least refrain from making a more active nuisance of themselves, they didn't go out and commit crimes. Bigger crimes than no-goodness and parasitism.

The door was opened again, more slowly this time.

"Happy dreams."

BoxRuth stood in the doorway, wanting to make up. Somehow, as usual, she had got it into her head that she was the one in the wrong, which could not have been further from the truth of things. He himself, Paulie Rayle, was absolutely to blame, and the tenderness in Ruth's voice, now, and the gaze he received from those beautiful eyes, were completely, absolutely undeserved.

She came into the bedroom, into his arms.

Kissing her, he said again, "I'm sorry."

"We'll be fine." Ruth returned the kiss three times over. "Stop worrying about us all the time. Kali likes to sit and watch me work. I strap her in her little seat, and she's fine. She loves to watch me sawing. Always cracks her up."

"I feel mean."

"Well, you shouldn't. It's not like you're just playing about." She kissed his forehead. "Now go on, don't worry about us. We'll be here when you get back. And you'll never know if it's gunna work unless you keep at it, give it a proper try."

He said, "It's a stupid idea."

"No, it's not. It's worth trying. Now go on." Ruth picked up the Dreambox, held it out to him. "I bought it for you to use, and that's what you're doing. Not like other people use them. Not like a toy. You're using it for something important. I mean, what could be more important than what you're trying to do?"

Paulie took the Dreambox. A third-gen, it was no larger than a paperback novel. Fourth-gens were already available, dinky little miniboxes half this size. How long would it be before they could implant them in your head like Mindseyes?

Ruth should have known better than to have gone and got him started on this. Where would it end?

They kissed again and, before leaving him, she whispered, "Good luck."

He sat down again on their bed, a sturdy, handsome pine construction of Ruth's. He put the box down beside him, checked the timer once again, attached the trodes.

How could he get it through to Ruth, that it could never, ever possibly work, that what he was planning was, if not insane, then ridiculously naive?

He lay back, stretched out beside the Dreambox.

It was so unfair to delude her, to let her keep on believing. Not that she actually believed—how could she? How could anyone? It was, Paulie suspected, more a matter of fidelity to his hopes, of loving support for his ambitions.

How much longer could he let it go on?

He had followed the instructions to the letter. For two weeks, night after night as he settled down to sleep, he had built up in his mind a detailed vision of his Personal Heaven, as the Dreambox manual

termed it. And only then, after this recommended period of conceptual armament, had he put on the trodes for the first time.

It was now—what was it?—more than a month he had been hooking. And how many chronocompressed months of boxtime had it taken so far? How much higher did he have to climb before he got there?

He speakstarted the Berkeley Effect.

His boxworld, all those nanographically stored terabytes faithfully recreating the Earth and its inhabitants from the planet's every available infosource slipped smoothly in to override his physiosensory paradigm. Gaps, problematic lacunae, were either algorithmically airbrushed in picoseconds, or else simply overlooked by the brain's internal homeostatic sanity safeguards. Thus was Paulie's psyche relieved of much of the the primary burden of furnishing the field upon which seeds of meaning could be sown, his energies freed for the task of shaping, moulding, transforming the boxworld's psychoplastic realitude to his own deep, secret needs and ends, like a tailor adjusting the cut of an off-the-peg suit: taking in, letting out, seeking the ideal fit. The box's forebrain implicators kicked in immediately, calling upon intellect to balance emotion, lending intravironmental rigour, Apollo keeping a cool eye on Dionysus.

Paulie thought bitterly, Why can't I stop kidding myself?

The room began to come unstitched.

Wasting my time.

Transconscious, he swam in the soft sweet bliss belly.

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Chapter 4

Enjoying an aromatherapeutic soak in one of the exquisitely-tiled bathrooms in the smallest of her three equally idyllic yet unpretentious European residences, the Moorish casa tucked down an alleyway in the heart of Seville'S Barrio Santa Cruz, where she had, of late, taken to spending one or two winter months, Frances Rayle felt the Feeling again.

Darling Xabier promptly dealt with things, holding her and helping her and administering the Socratosine prescribed to cushion her from her dangerously outrageous joy. Of course, she might have resorted to any of several automedicatory methods. Something called a Homeoresponsive Embed had been recommended by more than one of her doctors. Yet stubbornly, perhaps unwisely—but then, it was her body, her life and her sanity—she had opted for Xabier and his hypoderm gun. She preferred to place her trust in people.

Gently, Xabier lifted her out and towelled her dry. At some point, as always, she had lost consciousness, suffered a brief, delicious pink-out, as it was called, and might well have drowned had Xabier not been there.

The Feeling was impossible to describe with any adequacy. It was comparable to, yet qualitatively distinct from, the most intense of orgasms. It took her, body and soul, and filled her utterly and left her exhausted but exhilarated.

I must, Frances thought, present quite a spectacle, panting with pleasure, a woman of my age and degree of maturity.

She had Xabier take her to her bed, had him fetch the mirror. Naked, weak, but glowing, positively glowing, she lay and studied her reflection. This time, for once, she had not fallen, so there were no fresh bruises.

She heard the word *belleza* murmured.

Xabier had said it before, spoken of her beauty—though never so frequently as to devalue the compliment. He was a sensitive soul. All of her people were sensitive. She considered that *sine qua non*.

Her former self had always taken such remarks from Xabier as a reference to her hair, unarguably her most attractive feature. The old Frances Rayle had regarded her body as something once enviable, perhaps, but now in terminal decline. Prior to the therapy, her policy had been to avoid mirrors. And yes, the mirror still showed her a woman of fifty-six, unretouched by the scalpel. A face that, on close scrutiny, betrayed some leatheriness and strain. The tumble of hair, though, all those Congruent corkscrews, might easily have been the tresses of a teenager. Indeed, without the judicious leavening of grey—nowadays merely a part of one's palette, rather than a plight to be feared—she would most probably have appeared quite grotesque, mutton lurking under lambswool.

The doctors had wanted to keep her brain constantly monitored. In her ignorance, she had imagined that this would necessitate the shaving of her head, a measure she had adamantly refused to even contemplate. Every iota of morale was now precious; any loss might upset what was, her instincts told her, the barest subjugation of dread by excitement. Or was it, more simply, that she wished to look her best for Paulie, couldn't bear to have him wince, show shock at the sight of her? Whatever the case, she needn't have worried: far from the cumbersome, unsightly mop of wired electrodes she had visualized, the monitoring device the doctors had in mind turned out to be discreet almost to the point of invisibility, consisting of a collection of tiny, bindi-like microtrodes stuck to her scalp, hidden under her hair, adhering so tenaciously that even a shampooing wouldn't dislodge them. Well, in theory, at least. In theory, she should not have spotted one of the little things floating on the surface of her bathwater only moments before this latest attack.

Her eyes—Frances couldn't get over the eyes that gazed back at her from the mirror. The sharp, sparkling eyes of a younger woman, of her younger self. In fact, she found it quite comical, the transformation wrought already by the telotherapy. For what else was it but the very embodiment of that old advertising cliché, the treatment that renders one bright-eyed and bushy-tailed? If the therapy proved a success, and she knew it had, she could feel that it had, she stood to see her cells tread water at this stage for who knew how long?

Strange. How removed she now felt from the frightened woman who, scarcely two months ago, had seen fit to spend an unconscionable amount on a new and very dubious treatment with its preposterous promise of—not quite eternal youth, in her particular case, since age reversal had not as yet been achieved, but a halt to the process, a containment.

But she was glad of her vanity; it had given her this.

Angel Syndrome, they had termed it. A new, peculiar form of dementia. Her previous self, her pre-treatment self, had read up on this very rare side-effect of telotherapy: how the sufferer became subject to the most ludicrous delusions, lost touch with reality so completely as to be unable to cope with

the everyday world. To undergo telotherapy, even in a form carefully tailored to one's own genestory, would mean that one effectively risked sharing the pitiful predicament of drug users and their electronically-addled cousins, the so-called Dreambox junkies. And still, she had gone ahead. Why? Because she was human. Because she was tired of seeing her familiar self slipping away year on year, weary of maintaining the pretence of being able to grow old with grace. She could never bear to be operated upon by a cosmetic surgeon; not a phobia but surely a very natural, understandable antipathy when one's mother had died as a result of—why not put it plainly?—a facelift gone wrong. And so when telotherapy emerged, offering to freeze her cells' regenerative powers at their current level of efficiency by means of a simple dietary supplement, it was nothing less than a godsend to a knife-shy femme moyen—vain?—the French word eluded her.

And now here she lay, pregnant with the promise of enlightenment.

Xabier froze, his eyes narrowing, and it was clear that a call was coming through to his Mindseye. He had opted for the device quite independently; she had not so much as suggested that he have the frightful thing implanted. In fact she would have advised against it. But Xabier was young, enamoured with technotoys and fadgets.

The call was from London. They had been unable to make contact with Paulie. He had retreated to the countryside with his partner and their child, a tiny girl child. They were living very modestly, by all accounts; Paulie had never been materially acquisitive. Someone was going out to see him. Processia. A good, efficient girl, if memory served.

How old would Paulie be now? Thirty-eight? Almost the age that Frances herself had been when the two of them had married, sixteen years ago. It felt more like seven, eight at the most. She wondered, Will he want to know? Does he feel anything, still, anything at all? He was the closest she could boast to a son, and she had served as his surrogate mother. Of course, he had entered into this other relationship, now. And there was a child. But Paulie, please, please come. You are the only one to whom I can turn. The only one who will understand.

Yet, he would be warned that she was slipping into insanity. She could not bear to have him recoil from her, to witness his distress, should his feelings for her still run to such a reaction. She could scarcely blame him should he choose not to see her.

Perhaps she was losing her mind? But no. No, she was not. Pregnant with imminent insight, she was on the verge of angelhood.

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Chapter 5

They put baby Kali in her cot for a nap and took a walk down to the bottom of the garden.

*GroundRuth*farted.

“Beg pardon,” she said, keeping well clear of him for a moment or two. Leaning back against the silver birch tree she said, “There. If that doesn't prove it I don't know what does.”

Paulie looked at her.

“Dreamgirls don't fart.” *GroundRuth* mock-frowned. “Well, not unless you've got some funny preferences I don't know about?”

They'd had this conversation before, or exchanges along broadly similar lines. What dreamgirls would and wouldn't do.

Paulie said, “Maybe it's just that I'm the kind of person who can't believe in anything too perfect.”

“Your dreams have to be dirtied-up. You need ... what's that word?”

“Verisimilitude.”

“So is she very different?” *GroundRuth* sank down into a crouch against the trunk. “Do we look the same? Do we act just the same?” She pulled at the grass. “Yeah, I know, I'm always asking that question, you must be sick of it by now. Am I fatter than her? Are her tits bigger?”

Paulie said, “Down there you're...”

“I'm what?” She was rapt. “Mmm?”

He was well aware that Ruth humoured him out of love, was prepared to listen to crap she wouldn't have given the time of day to if it had come from anyone else.

He said, “Down there you're exactly the same. Everything's the same.” He shrugged. “The weather's better here. There, it's winter.”

“So that's all you really want ... nicer weather? I suppose that's flattering, in a way.”

There was of course the bliss belly, maybe that was it? Could it be that he was addicted to the bliss, the massive shots of sheer joy in which your journey to the boxworld would envelop you? Apart from that, he really didn't know why he bothered. From down there on the ground, boxworld seemed to offer everything. And then, once you actually got here...

He thought, Better to travel hopefully.

“You're just the same.”

GroundRuth said, “Well I would've thought I'd be less myself up here, if all I am is a sort of ghost in your imagination, and you're the only real person in this world. What is it we're all supposed to be? Computer puppets, copies of people? What was that word you used?”

“Humiliants.”

Humiliants were your boxworld's supporting actors: the entire population of Groundworld—every person whose existence was on record somewhere or other, the inaccessible remainder generated by best-guess subroutines during the worldcopying process—duplicated as pseudautonomous simulacra compelled by the Berkeley Effect to play whatever part your transconscious scenario required of them. In order that the Dreambox and its user's brain did not run short of raw processing power, an esse-percipi program—'to be is to be perceived'—shut down those humiliants who were, at any instant, surplus to requirements. Out of sight, out of mind. Thus humiliants constantly fluctuated between a kind of life and a form of death, without ever being aware of it.

Depending upon the extravagance of your boxlife, your humiliants could either find themselves having a hard time, a happy quasistence, or being left to go about their daily affairs unperturbed, much the same as their originals in Groundworld. Only in the most megalomaniacal—or imaginative?—of boxworlds would every single potential humiliant be incarnated, implicated, affected, impacted upon. Humiliants could be lived amongst peaceably, brainwashed, tortured, radically altered physically and mentally, or just abandoned to their own devices while the user went off exploring the planets his or her mind had conjured up from the starting-point of the boxworld, restricted only by the human power to visualize and conceptualize. Humiliants were toys.

GroundRuth was a humiliant; her cherished otherness was, at bottom, ersatz, compromised by the Berkeley compliance exerted by Paulie's psyche.

And what, he wondered, about *BoxRuth*? Was she not similarly contingent, having moulded herself, through love, to the contours of his, rather than her own, scheme of things? Paulie felt guilt at his selfish male reluctance to reciprocate, to give as well as taking. To love properly.

"The look on your face!" *GroundRuth* was amused, but also irritated, pissed-off with all this play-acting, could no longer keep it hidden. "Your expression. Anybody would think..."

"...I really believed what I'm saying?"

She was right; it didn't make sense. What kind of boxworld was this? Life wasn't unpleasant, here in Hilford Abbots, but it was scarcely Utopian. Ruth sold enough of her furniture to make ends meet, and baby Kali was healthy and thriving, while he himself spent half his time hooked up to his Dreambox, dreaming a world exactly like this one, in which he spent half his time hooked up to his Dreambox.

Where was his Heaven?

Where was the world in which, for instance, they would be regarded as the model partnership toward which every other couple aspired? A world in which they, Paulie Rayle and Ruth Deitch, faced no aesthetic, stylistic threat from any other pair of people on the planet. That narcissistic Eden infused with the elation Paulie had felt when, as a seven-year-old, he had won his first smile from the best-looking girl in the class. Where were all his petty vanities, those ridiculous aches inculcated by a culture of superficiality, of empty glamour, greed and excess? Or at the very least, why wasn't this the kind of dreamworld in which the wisest, strongest, most acute, and discerning of women were quite unable to take their liquid eyes off Paulie Rayle? A world, to be fair, in which men would look at Ruth, and they would envy Paulie Rayle, but in a gentlemanly fashion, with no trace of nastiness.

Where were his riches? Power? Fame?

So this was all he really, truly desired? The life he already lived? With just a better climate, more warm days, more sunshine? What was he, man or mushroom? Had he no urge to fight dragons?

GroundRuth got up. "Can you hear? She's awake again."

They went back inside. *GroundRuth* gave the baby a feed.

ON TOTE CH

It struck him like a slap in the face.

The tattoo on *GroundRuth*'s shoulder. How come he had never before noticed that it was not in fact a purely abstract design, that a word could be discerned within the pattern?

Paulie Rayle felt, all at once, tremendous excitement.

ONTOTECH.

Seeing the word there on her, reading the word, the magic word, it had all come flooding back to him.

Ontotechnology.

He had forgotten, here, in this thirtieth, fortieth world. It was so easy to forget, to misplace things in your mind as you climbed, up and up, to each higher world in turn and stayed awhile, awaiting the incredible news. The news that had never yet broken. After a time, you forgot what it was you were waiting for. You waited and waited, disoriented, muzzy-headed, but still aware that you had a job of waiting to do. So many levels, all indistinguishable. Your mind, seduced by the boxworld's subreality, would relegate such knowledge as you arrived with to the status of mere passing notions. But a part of yourself would still know, would find ways of reminding you why you were there. Sometimes the message from your mind to itself would make no immediate sense, would take hours, days to get through. This time he had been lucky; the word had worked its magic straight away.

You were warned about all this in the Dreambox instruction manual, right at the beginning, in Section One: Dreambox Basics. After thanking you for purchasing your Shintube Dreambox, clean with a damp cloth, NOT furniture polish, and wishing you many, many years of trouble-free use, the manufacturers saw fit, on that very first page, to advise:

The attainment of your PERSONAL HEAVEN is a GRADUAL PROCESS. It is a characteristic of the human psyche that WE OFTEN DO NOT CONSCIOUSLY KNOW WHAT WE MOST DESIRE, and, furthermore, WE ARE, DEEP DOWN, EXTREMELY FEARFUL OF HAVING THESE INNERMOST DESIRES ACTUALLY GRATIFIED. Therefore, do not be surprised if your first, second, tenth, or possibly even hundredth attempt at gratification by means of your Shintube Dreambox results in a seemingly infinite regression of dreamworlds quite indistinguishable from the original Groundworld. (i.e. THIS, THE TRUE AND REAL AND ULTIMATE WORLD.) You must persevere! It may well take a good many levels and dreams-within-dreams-within-dreams, but, by degrees, your underlying fear of gratification WILL diminish, leaving you free to enjoy your very own PRE-IMAGINED UTOPIA—thenceforth, access will be INSTANTANEOUS.

As a defence against possible PROGRESSIVE MEMORY DETERIORATION associated with this initial induction process, you may find your mind sending itself small reminders, helpful signs to guide you on your way. Sadly, Shintube Corp. cannot guarantee that this assistance will be in every case forthcoming—each Dreambox user's psyche is unique.

The Dreambox was no crude feelgood machine. What it gave you was contingent upon the character of your mind. Part amplifying mirror, part vircscape generator, part Aladdin's lamp, it furnished you with the starting point of a fully interactive Groundworld simulacrum, its pseudoanimate populace rendered subliminally subordinate to your whims by the painfully abstruse workings of the quantum compliance effect named with a wry nod to the good Bishop. The Berkeley Effect had been predicted and then finally, three years ago, isolated and demonstrated by the physicist Erlend Zeller at Stanford University. Commercial exploitation, lucrative licensing, had come hard on the heels of scientific discovery; Zeller, sponsored by one of the electronics giants, had been asked to deliver the ultimate gaming deck.

The computer-constructed boxworld, 'real' to all perceptual intents and purposes, served as the raw material for the user's psyche to shape to its taste, under the organizing supervision of what amounted to an additional cortical lobe generated by the Dreambox, a sympathetic, symbiotic ally in the task of selecting from a field of anything up to 1014 neural connections at a staggering theoretical maximum of 1027 operations per second at full microtubular efficiency—and all the while maintaining full quantum coherence in cytoskeletal activity, as the specifications opaquely informed you.

And yet, such is the human mind that, even with the additional influence exerted by dethanatizing agents, the ultimate result was never quite so controllable as the impressive figures cited in the manual would have you believe. It was said that no single human being, anywhere in Groundworld, had a comprehensive grasp of Dreambox mechanics. Not even Zeller himself.

"Ontotech," Paulie said.

"What?"

"Ontotechnology."

GroundRuth shivered.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"I ... don't like the sound of that word."

"Why?"

"I don't know, I just don't. Something about it. What does it mean?"

"It's just a word," he told her.

He saw that it had gone, now, had concealed itself again, could no longer be read in her tattoo.

Paulie picked up his Dreambox.

Forcing a smile, *GroundRuth* said, "Happy dreams."

* * * *

Ruth showed little Kali her Daddy, lying on the bed beside his Dreambox. If things went on like this, he'd be missing her first words, her first steps, everything. He would miss them just like Mum was missing them. This wasn't the kind of life they were meant to be living, with Paulie absent so much of the time like some city workaholic. They had come here to the craft village to get away from all of that.

The box was more a big black plastic pebble type thing, all smooth and roundy, than an actual box shape; it was a lovely design, the nicest-looking Dreambox they'd had in the shop. But she hadn't gone on looks alone in deciding to buy this one. You couldn't ask a neighbour for advice; if people found out you were buying a Dreambox you'd probably get kicked out of the village. So she had checked out the Which? magazine product reviews. The Shintube box came out equal tops, along with the Sony and the Bengt & Anderssen. All three were really gentle at fetching out the user at the end of the boxtrip; a bad fetch, a really bad one, could bring on a heart attack. Ruth's research had revealed that, in lots of different ways, Dreamboxes could be dangerous; you heard of people getting strokes, going mental, even

dying. And it wasn't good to be taking all those hair tablets and that much Vitamin C. But loads of people did, and things always got exaggerated by the media, and they were still allowing the boxes to be sold, so surely they couldn't really be that dangerous, any more than, say, jetbikes, or those noisy flying cars? And besides, Paulie wasn't an idiot.

While the Bengt & Anderssen Dreambox was a bit too expensive, the others, the Sony and the Shintube, were both the same price; however, Sony, in an attempt to start a design craze which Ruth hoped wouldn't catch on, had given their box a really macho, military-equipment kind of look—not Paulie at all.

Ruth stood and hugged Kali and looked at Paulie as he lay there with this box, off away in his dreamworld. If you went up close you could see movement under his eyelids, just like he was sleeping and dreaming; although she knew that being hooked up to the box wasn't quite the same as being asleep. Ruth wondered what he was dreaming about, what kind of adventures was he having? Or was it right to call them adventures; would it be more like work? For he wasn't just pissing about on there, he was conducting what might be called a scientific experiment. His explanations, the whys and wherefores, were difficult to follow, but Paulie had a brilliant mind, and—all right, so call her sappy, and yeah, it would probably make people throw up—but she loved him and trusted him and believed in him.

* * * *

Along with everyone else, Paulie Rayle heard the incredible news.

An end to suffering. Perfect justice for all. The absolute triumph of Goodness.

Every being that had ever existed, every organism, right down to amoebae, could now be revived ontotechnologically; come to that, even every potential organism that had lost out in the lottery of conception. Because absolutely anything was possible. Ontotechnology was on the point of providing humanity with the power to solve every conceivable problem. History could be modified without destroying the present, its darkest episodes ontodemoted, with the result that they only took place, as it were, at an academic level. The Holocaust? Still of sufficient realitude to stand as a terrible lesson, but no longer any more concrete than the Wandering Jew.

The most fundamental laws of existence could now be amended, even repealed. Gravity could be controlled, the speed of light surpassed, the laws of thermodynamics tweaked and tinkered with. Absolutely anything was possible. All contradictions were resolvable, all antinomies amenable to synthesis. And the question of whether or not Goodness was a mere human invention mattered not at all.

Humankind had suddenly found itself all-powerful.

And yet, everyone had voted to hold on to one problem, purely on account of the sheer enjoyment it generated: the problem of how to have the most fun in bringing about Utopia. They had decided that things should be done not instantly but by degrees, stage by stage. At nine o'clock tomorrow morning all the world's illness, mental and physical, would be promptly, immediately cured. The day would then be given over to celebrating universal health. And then, the day after that would be Resurrection Day. There would be room for all, the once-dead, the never-alive, with no deference to what had formerly been recognized as brute fact. All the necessary amendments to the scope of the feasible would have been made.

And, amid all these wonders, Paulie Rayle would take particular delight in witnessing Ruth's exultation on being reunited with her mother. Of all the myriad miracles, that one would mean the most to him, being there at that moment; even more than would meeting his own deceased parents again. For he knew that

Ruth's mother, who had not lived to see her only child had, in Ruth's mind, become identified with the Goddess, The great Mother Of Us All. Ruth had confessed to him her fears that she too would die young and leave Kali motherless.

Ruth saw his welling tears and hugged and kissed him.

She said, "I'm trying to picture Mum's face when she sees Kali." And there were tears in Ruth's eyes too, now. "I can't believe this," she said. "I won't believe it till I see it."

They took a walk down by the river. The water sparkled. It was so nice, having time together like this, with someone else looking after Kali. Wasn't it wonderful that Kali would grow up now in the best of all possible worlds? No, not just possible worlds—impossible worlds, too.

The best of all worlds.

They came to their special, secret place under the willow, near the river. They might have made love, but they merely held hands. For what else was it but a return to their childhood?

"I shan't believe it till I see it," Ruth repeated.

How could anyone believe it?

Paulie hugged her—how he loved her.

What, he wondered, what would happen when it came to the Ultimate Decision? Would the people vote in favour of ontosupplantation? Could they comfortably take it upon themselves to wrest ontoprecedence from a priori realitude, that thin grey Groundworld in which ontotechnology was nothing more than a figment of Paulie Rayle's imagination?

Imagination, Paulie thought. The only limitation is your own imagination.

And here they stood, at the limit of his.

He felt suddenly cold.

There was no coming Utopia.

This was Utopia.

This moment. Now. Today. Not tomorrow. This moment of triumph, held in perpetuity, replayed ad infinitum for his eternal delectation. Better to travel in hope than to arrive.

The insight blighted his joy. For this was it. This was as good as it got, the best his imagination could do.

Another level, Paulie thought desperately. There has to be another, higher level.

* * * *

Along with everyone else, Paulie Rayle heard the incredible news.

The absolute triumph of Goodness.

Every organism that had ever existed, right down to amoebae, could now be revived ontotechnologically, because absolutely anything was possible. Ontotechnology was on the point of providing humanity with the power to solve every conceivable problem. History could be modified without destroying the present, its darkest episodes ontologically demoted, with the result that they only took place, as it were, at an academic level. The most fundamental laws of existence could now be amended, even repealed. Absolutely anything was possible. Humankind had suddenly found itself all-powerful.

And so, everyone had voted to tear down, dismantle and erase, irrevocably, the omniverse in its entirety. Life, matter, energy, time—all would be no more. For what else was perfection but nonexistence, that state wherein the very concept of existence did not exist? That state of perfection which can only be hinted at, since even the word ‘nothing’ implies the existence, if only as a concept, of its opposite. And there would be no opposites, no logic, no illogic, no existence, no nonexistence.

Accordingly, the omniverse began to unstitch, until all that was left was the belly, taking him into itself. Only this time it wasn't soft or sweet or blissful. It was upset, dyspeptic, churning angrily. And the noise wasn't helping.

Noise. Noise. NOISE.

Whirring, whistling, resonating through his bones as he lay there panting on the bed, shivering, shuddering, sweating like a pig, his heart pounding. Engulfed in NOISE. NOISE. NOISE. NOISE. NOISE, and drenched in LIGHT, streaming in through the window. Someone at the window. Ruth at the window, standing looking out into the LIGHT, cradling the baby. Kali's little scrunched-up face, her crying drowned out by the NOISE. Something flashing on the periphery of his vision. The emergency FETCH light on the Dreambox. Ruth must, he thought vaguely, have fetched him out. Because of the noise. Not because of the boxmare. For what else had it been but a boxmare? The Crowning Glory and Vitamin C were supposed to protect him. What had gone wrong?

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Chapter 6

Sesha's stomach was not mollified by the pilot's bland assurances that the verticar would definitely not drop like a stone should the motor cut out at high altitude. So it was with intense relief that she at last felt solid earth beneath her feet again. She had spent the greater part of the flight up to Cambridgeshire with her eyes closed, curry-combing an imaginary thoroughbred. It was a moderately effective anti-stress tip she'd picked up from, of all people, Immy Nabisco, the controversial hermaph shitshow host she would tune in to whenever she fancied a fifty-minute wallow in her species' asininity. Nor had it helped that the verticar seat was a lumbar torture device. She was not at all looking forward to the return trip. She tried her best to put it out of her mind.

It was windy, which would play a certain amount of hell with her hair, but at least it was not actually raining. The field was soggy, and were those things cowpats? If only her head would stop aching. There was a welcome freshness to the air, though, discernible despite her lingering metropolitan nasal congestion.

The pilot chose to stay put. He was having problems with his mobe, remonstrating with it in the crudest possible terms because, for some reason, it couldn't put him through to his wife.

Sesha climbed out of the verticar. A large animal—a donkey?—was watching her. And two dogs, barking. The cottage was tiny. The door was open. Someone stood there, silhouetted. Sesha kept to the grass. There was a path, but it was muddy. What a godforsaken place.

It was a woman in the doorway, holding a baby. The baby was crying: “Mwrraaaaa, Mwrraaaaa,” the tiny voice crackly and fragile, and Sesha was grateful for her maternosuppressors. She'd been on them nearly two years, now.

“What d'you want?” the woman shouted. “You woke my fucking baby with that racket of yours.”

“I'm sorry,” Sesha shouted back.

Has no one told you? she thought. The new word is frucking, you cobweb. Sesha explained, “I'm looking for Paul Rayle.”

“Are you now?”

The woman sounded countrified. And she was woefully Incongruent, psychotrichologically, her close-cropped, perversely unquasiplatonian all-but-ginger hair block-capitalizing her potato-peasant features, failing to distract from the puppyfat that had outstayed its charm and left her overvolup by any fashionable standard. No more than twenty-five, she was hefty and thick-limbed and barefoot, and wore a Diana t-shirt—please!—under the sort of shapeless great pals-with-the-planet woollen cardigan that had come and gone a full three seasons ago. Altogether, Sesha was appalled. Surely this was not the partner?

“I've a message for him,” Sesha explained to the woman. “For Paul Rayle.”

“What is it?”

“I need to see him in person, if possible.”

“You can tell me, and I can pass it on. Waking my fucking baby up.”

Fruck you too, Sesha thought. She knew the type. Feckless, technophobic, hopelessly naive. They would go ahead and have unplanned, undesigned children totally without reference to the foetal genestory, leaving everything to pot luck, embracing primitivism as natural. How could anyone be so selfish?

A waft of vanilla incense set the seal on her deductions, and Sesha wondered how Paul Rayle could possibly have left Frances for such an uncouth anachronism.

Someone else appeared, behind the woman's shoulder.

“What's going on?” A male voice, groggy-sounding.

“This one here says she's got a message for you.”

“Me?”

“Paul Rayle?” Sesha asked.

None too happily, the woman stood aside, and Sesha received another shock.

He looked terrible. Haggard, unshaven, baggy-eyed. His lips, even, seemed to have shed weight. And his hair had lost its Congruence, tied back like this, which really didn't suit him. He should have left it hanging loose and cool and christjesusy.

Sesha said, "I've a message from Frances."

The partner and Paul Rayle exchanged glances, and only now, as she stepped closer, into the light, did Sesha notice that the woman's eyes were gorg. Large and striking, with very pale irises, they alone redeemed a face otherwise unremarkable.

"Well, what is it?" Paul Rayle demanded, giving Sesha the distinct impression that he was putting on a gruff front for the partner's sake, that his manner might have been different had he been alone.

"Could I come in?" she asked.

The woman kissed the baby. "Long as she don't tread shit everywhere."

* * * *

To Paulie's eyes she cut a sorry figure, Frances's lackey, with her poshname pinstripe jacket and her company poise, and he lost no time in taking a dislike. What was she, early thirties? The full complement of vogueish face-piercings, some inset with solar-powered shimmerjewels of light-emitting polymer, all took pains to say, 'I may be a desko but I'm still Rock 'n' Roll.' And her chopped-off dyed-black hairstyle she doubtless thought Congruent, when in truth it did sod all for her.

She introduced herself; Paulie didn't properly catch the name. To Ruth, who was closest, she extended a small, graceful hand. Ruth ignored it. Kali had finally stopped crying, and now she stared, frowning and drooling, at the visitor.

"How old is ... he? She?"

"She's three months." Ruth might have been giving name, rank and number to an enemy officer.

"She's beautiful."

The compliment's breathy sincerity cut no ice with Ruth, yet for some reason caused Paulie to do an abrupt about-turn and start to feel a little sorry for this officedog, so out of place here with her painted nails and vivid lips and tailored jacket and pelmet microskirt, all in cerise and taupe, and too-thin thighs encased in charcoal tights. "Sit down," he invited, indicating the rocking chair in the corner.

"Thanks." The woman sat.

"So what's all this about?" he asked her.

"It's ... Frances." The reply was tentative, the woman obviously uncertain as to where his ex-wife featured these days in his scheme of things.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Ruth said suddenly, as though in grudging, belated compliance with custom.

"I'd love one, thanks. No sugar. Thanks a lot. That's if it's no trouble?"

"Here." Paulie held out his arms for the baby. Ruth handed Kali over and went out to the kitchen.

The woman said, "You've heard of ... Angel Syndrome?"

My God, Paulie thought. Poor Frances. Taking that telothine crap and going loopy. Learning that there are calamities against which Congruent hair is no shield.

He asked, "How long has she had it? How far has it gone?"

The woman sighed. "I'm not sure. I think it's still in the early stages."

"How long has she been on telothine?"

"I really don't know."

"There must be something the doctors can do?" But he had heard that the condition seldom responded well to treatment. Worse than seldom. Never.

The woman shrugged. "We're all of us hoping for the best."

"Yeah." Paulie couldn't think of anything else to say. Frances suffering from AS? It was unreal. He couldn't quite believe it, couldn't take it in. Either that or, truth be told, he didn't, at the end of the day, care an awful lot.

"Frances would like you to come and see her."

"Me?" He was taken aback, even though he might have known the woman would hardly have descended out of the sky just to bring him up to date with his ex-wife's vicissitudes. She'd been sent to fetch him. He was, plainly, supposed to drop everything and rush to Frances's bedside.

"If possible."

"And what if it isn't possible?" He hadn't seen Frances in years.

"Well ... so be it, I suppose." The woman had matched the hard edge in his voice, but promptly dropped it again as she added, "You know, I think it might really do so much for Frances's morale." This was, she clearly implied, no time for pettiness, immaturity. "If you could just manage to pop over and see her?"

"Pop over to where?"

"Seville."

He had heard about her place in Spain. And her places in Ireland and Cornwall. And her place in California. He said, "I thought you might have brought one of those telepresence rigs?"

"Frances hates telepresence."

Yeah, Paulie thought. That rings true.

From her bag, the woman took out an old-fashioned pink plastic powder compact and flipped it open. "Sevilla, please," she said to it, and Paulie realized it was a mobe.

"Sorry, Sesha, you can't call from here ... you're in an airjam zone."

The mobe's voice was young and male, on the stoned side, and vaguely familiar.

"You mean I can't make any calls out?"

"Or receive them. Bitch, huh?"

The woman—Sesha, was it?—turned pissed-off eyes on Paulie. "I was going to see whether Frances would like to speak with you directly."

"They keep it jammed round here," Paulie explained. "They want the tourists' money but not the radiation thrown out by their mobes. And this is meant to be a media shelter."

"Emission levels nowadays are quite safe." The woman's tone was that of a teacher with explanation fatigue. "In fact if anything, the jamming is far more likely to generate an addictive field or cause brain tumours or explode people's heads."

"It only comes into operation when someone tries making an aircall. They're not stupid enough to keep it switched on all the time."

"Who?"

"The village elders."

The woman's eyes flickered, just as Paulie had anticipated; she was scanning the room for crucifixes. Well, she could think what she liked.

"I could jack into the fibropt," she suggested.

Paulie shook his head. "We're not connected."

I know, he thought. You can't believe it. Not in this day and age. How do we manage to live like this?

He asked her, "How long have you been working for Frances?"

"Nearly seven months." She put away her mobe.

"Enjoy your job?"

"Yes, I do."

"You believe in Psychotrichological Congruence as the key to human happiness?"

"It's proved itself to be amongst the more successful therapeutic aids."

"Personally, though, job aside ... are you a believer?"

“I’ve an open mind. I’ve seen it help people.” The woman stifled a yawn. “Excuse me. Only I’m not really here to debate the efficacy of...”

“So it doesn’t bother you, knowing the whole thing started out as a piss-take?”

“I’m sorry?”

But Paulie could see that she knew. Of course she knew Frances’s deep dark secret.

He said, “The Happy Hair Book.”

Frances had written it as a satire, a sly send-up of the fad industry. The Cool Cut as the Answer to Everything. And with a sound scientific basis. Those who got the joke were like voices in the wilderness. A whole new market had been opened up, and Frances had been unable to resist going a stage further, coming up with the PsyTri Institute. She had thought it hilarious, incredible, depressing, grotesque, that people would pay good money to get a Psychotrichological Profile and be advised to sport a fringe, avoid tight perms, or go ash-blond or auburn in their quest for psychic salubrity.

By this time he and Frances had parted. It had been exceptionally amicable, a simple agreement that the union was over. Decree absolute notwithstanding, his memory told him of a mutual reluctance to close every door, burn every bridge—at any rate, before he met Ruth.

He had gone on to wonder how far his ex-wife, the stage actress come over all Swiftian, would decide to take her little lampoon. Time had passed, and more time, and the next thing he had heard, Frances Rayle was seriously moneyed. The Institute was thriving. He could remember, a couple of years ago, seeing a NeTV interview with the High Priestess of PsyTri. Either she was laughing behind the poker-face, or...

Had Frances found herself growing into the role simply by wearing the crown, developed a case of True Belief in spite of herself through a kind of osmosis? Or had she made herself believe? For there must have come a moment when stopping, coming clean, blowing the gaff, was no longer a viable move. A matter of momentum, of critical mass.

Or, Paulie thought, would it really have mattered if she’d come out and told the world, ‘Hey, suckers, I had you fooled?’ Maybe people would have laughed along with her, even as they continued to sign up for PsyTri consultations. For, if what Miss Whatsername here said were true, and he saw no reason to doubt it, PsyTri could claim as good a record as any other commercialized superstition. And if it did people good and raked in the lucre and enabled Frances to branch out into pharmaceutical research and find cures for greyness and baldness and, by the merest chance, give you a way of dethanatizing your boxlife, then more power to her Institute, and never mind your sound scientific basis.

At least, that was how it now appeared from the perspective of Paulie Rayle; it went without saying that allowances had to be made for his mental condition—his worldview, as he was willing to admit, might well be somewhat skewed.

He said to the woman, “Take no notice of me. I’ve probably got it all wrong.”

She was frowning, ever so slightly, and also smiling, in an equally small way, as though not quite sure whether he was joking, making a candid confession, or what. It was a very nice, polite, sympathetic form of response, but also a touch customer-servicey.

“Listen, how can I put this?” Taking out his cigarettes, Paulie offered one to the woman.

“The baby?” she reminded him.

“Oh, shit, yeah. I'm sorry.” He kissed Kali's cheek. “Musn't smokies near my little Funsized, mustn't do that, must we? No!” His words brought from the woman a spontaneous smile. He felt foolish, spouting infantese in front of a stranger.

“You see, the thing is,” Paulie told the woman, “my memory's a little bit, not to put too fine a point on it, fucked. My long-term memory. I have problems getting things straight in my head. Probably I'm no longer the person Frances expects.”

The woman's sharp little face had assumed an expression of unplastic, authentic sympathy. In fact she wasn't that bad-looking at all, if you went for Little Miss Efficiencies. Which Paulie didn't, as a rule. He began to take back his antipathy. It wasn't like he couldn't understand how a person could be in thrall to Frances.

Pondering, the woman said, “I'm sure it would still be of benefit for Frances were you to pay her a visit.”

“You mean visit her alone? Or does the invitation include Ruth? That's"—he indicated the kitchen door—"Ruth, by the way. She's very tired. She's been really busy lately, with the baby and everything.”

“Certainly Ruth can come along. And the baby ... I'm sorry, what's her name?”

“Kali.”

“You're all invited.”

“Well, we'd better see what Ruth has to say. It's not so easy to just up and...”

“Of course not.”

In a silence broken only by the windchimes, they waited for Ruth to return.

“You've a lovely place here.” The woman surveyed the living-room. “Cosy.”

He said, “I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name?”

“Processia Roffey.”

“Processia? Unusual.”

“People normally end up calling me Sessa.”

Paulie held out his hand. They shook. “It's just that verticars aren't exactly the quietest form of transport. Ruth had only just got Kali to sleep.”

“I should have thought. I'm really sorry.”

Ruth reappeared with the tea.

“Thanks.” The woman took the offered mug. “Ruth, I’m so sorry I woke Kali. All that noise—it was thoughtless of me.”

Ruth shot Paulie a suspicious glance that asked, ‘Did you tell her the baby’s name or did she already know?’ To the woman, Processia Roffey, she said, “Look what’s all this in aid of? I s’pose when you go you’ll be starting up that racket and scaring the shit out of my kid again?”

Paulie felt guilty. Should he not have been equally indignant? What was wrong with him? Ruth’s hostility toward the PsyTri woman embarrassed him.

“Frances isn’t well,” he informed Ruth. “She has Angel Syndrome. She’d like us to pay a visit, if we could manage to.”

“You mean,” Ruth said sourly, “she wants you to pay her a visit.”

“The three of us. You, me, and Kali.”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure she’s desperate to see me.”

“The three of us,” Paulie repeated, catching the woman’s eye and feeling a shameful little complicit twinge. “She’d like to see us all.”

“Would she now?”

To Ruth, the woman said earnestly, “If possible, yes.”

Ruth considered. “That’s serious, isn’t it, Angel Syndrome? Isn’t it to do with some therapy that’s meant to stop people ageing?”

The woman nodded. “Telotherapy.”

“I’m not always this stroppy.” Ruth rubbed at her eyes. “Bet you got me down as a right old cow?”

Processia Roffey shook her head. “Not at all. I know I shouldn’t be too happy if a verticar came waking my baby.”

“Makes you think, though, doesn’t it? Frances. I mean what good’s anything else if you don’t have your health?”

“Absolutely.”

Paulie wondered what the woman must make of Ruth, blowing hot and cold like this. It was Ruth’s trademark; she had always been that way, as long as he had known her. Which was how long? He couldn’t remember. He could recall being married to Frances, but he didn’t know how long ago it was, or precisely when they had divorced, or ... He didn’t know a lot of things he should have known. It was an awkward existential state of affairs.

“So, I suppose,” said Ruth, “the doctors are doing everything they can for her?”

“It’s not the easiest condition to treat, apparently.” Processia Roffey sipped at her tea. “But Frances

does have some of the very best medical..." She halted, as though conscious of a faux pas.

Ruth sniffed. "Frances must be worth ... what? ... millions and millions?"

"I expect so. I don't really know."

Paulie said. "I wish I could remember more." To Ruth, he added, "I was trying to explain about my memory."

"His memory's not good," Ruth told the woman.

Processia Roffey looked at him and said, "It would mean so much to Frances."

"You'd better go and see her." Ruth took back Kali. "We'll be fine."

"You mean go on my own?"

Ruth nodded. "Don't you think you ought to? I think you should."

Paulie felt numbed, deprived of momentum. Now that it came to it, he wasn't at all sure that he wanted anything to do with this. He wished simply to be left alone, to live his tiny life in peace.

"You'd better go." Ruth was firm. "I really think you should go."

He said to them both, "It's not that I don't care."

They both nodded; they both understood.

But did he really care? did he find Frances's condition a cause of any special anguish? Or was it just another news item from the distant wider world? This awful, ugly Groundworld. Here, his ex-wife was ailing. Up in boxworld, she would very soon be cured, along with everyone else, courtesy of the miracle of ontotechnology.

Ontodogturds, Paulie thought savagely

All that effort down the toilet. He had expected so much more of himself, the creation of a new, improved world whose rational elegance inspired him with confidence. Not some slapdash technotopia with its sketchy, hazy pseudoscience. He had been hopelessly naive, not to mention hubristic. He had reverted to a schoolboy worldview, with his Heaven recast in secular terms by and for a mind that found magic more palatable dressed in today's rather than yesterday's mumbo-jumbo. No wonder he could never give that world fundamental realitude. Was it really so surprising that he was unable, when it came to it, to establish it as the new Grundwelt, to will it into ontological pre-eminence over this world? It was all he could do to hold it together as a dream. He was burnt out, dredging up shoddy ideas from the bottom of the barrel. Why not do it the easy way, dream up a nice gentle God to take care of everything? Or, even better, a Goddess; he had never been that much of a man's man.

And now he had the boxmares to worry about. The dethan tabs hadn't done their job—why?

"Paulie?" Ruth's voice, quiet and gentle, brought him back. "Paulie, go with her."

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Chapter 7

"This is a shop? You sell things?"

The PsyTri woman was admiring one of the four wooden boxes Ruth had out on the shelves. The chunky little jewellery box she'd knocked together out of reclaimed spruce and stained with rosewood.

Wise choice, Ruth thought.

It had very nearly been bought by that big-titted American tourist a couple of weeks back. God, she'd had a pair on her, and for once they'd looked like natural human tits. Paulie hadn't been able to keep his eyes off them. That was men for you.

"Is this one for sale?" asked the PsyTri woman.

Ruth nodded and, watching the woman examine the price tag, felt one of her little flushes of pleasure. She always got them when people prepared to make a purchase.

"It's gorg."

"Do what?"

"It's gorgeous. Could I buy it?"

"Yeah, if you like."

Paulie had gone off to get cleaned up. Kali had gone back to sleep again in her cot.

"Look it doesn't have to be immediately," the woman explained, out of the blue. "The trip, I mean. I'm not necessarily expecting anyone to come back with me right now. I could arrange for a car in the morning. Whenever. I only popped over like this because there seemed to be no other way of making contact." She offered her transac ring. "I suppose you think it's all a bit ... overdramatic?"

Ruth touched rings with her. "Shall I wrap it for you?" It was funny, selling something so late at night, to a customer who had come down out of the sky. It was a first and probably wouldn't happen again.

"Where did you come here from? London?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"I couldn't live in London."

"No?"

"It was a mad place last time I was there. Must be even worse now. You wanted it wrapped, did you say?"

"Maybe if you could just pop it in a bag or something?"

Ruth hunted around for a paper carrier.

The woman asked, "You make all these yourself?"

The door to the workshop had been left open; you could see all the tools on the wall.

Ruth nodded. She was wondering how much to say about Paulie. With regard to his problems. She couldn't help feeling that some word of warning was called for.

She said, finally, "Paulie's had ... a bad time."

The woman looked sympathetic, and Ruth tried to decide whether to explain about Paulie's breakdown. But it was their own private business. Yet she felt a need to excuse the state he was in; to make it clear to this woman that the Paulie she saw here was a shadow of the real Paulie Rayle.

And I bet, Ruth thought, you've got this idea in your head that even though it sounds like Frances is going round the bend—she always was halfway round, if you ask me—and even though I'm telling him to go, I'm really shit-scared of him going back to her? Well, cleverclit, you're not wrong.

* * * *

The pilot started the motor. They waited for Paul Rayle. Fidgeting in the verticar's uncomfortable passenger seat, Sesha opened the carrier bag, lifted the lid of the wooden box, and peeped in at Bubu Flumpkin.

Her heart was pounding.

What had she done?

A criminal impulse had taken possession of her, compelling her, when Ruth had gone to put the baby to bed, to reach out with her foot, rescue Bubu Flumpkin from where she had spotted him, in the shadows beneath that lovely wooden credenza, and kick him swiftly out of sight beneath her own chair. And when, in doing so, she had caught sight of—unbelievably—the still-attached Flumpkins tag, she had almost fainted, so unimaginably serendipitous was it. As soon as the opportunity had presented itself, she had snatched Bubu up off the floor and stuffed him into the wooden box; his beany little body had been quite happy to be squashed into a square space.

And then she had sat there feeling dreadfully, dreadfully guilty, and not a little frightened. Had she, in anticipation of her crime, sought to purchase something, anything of Ruth's in order to assuage her conscience? No. The suggestion was unfair; the box was beautiful. She would have wanted to buy it, regardless.

So her collection was finally, after all this time, complete. She now had every single Flumpkin, from Abab Flumpkin to Zizi Flumpkin—and all with the original tags. She had fulfilled the dream she'd first had as a nine-year-old. Two decades and more, it had taken her. And heaven knew how much money. Bubu had been—she knew it was silly—her Holy Grail.

And now she had Bubu.

But to have obtained him by theft...

In retrospect, it seemed more than likely that Ruth and Paul Rayle were both utterly unaware of the value as a collectable of the little purple part-dog, part-rabbit, part ... what? hippopotamus? Or why should it

have been left lying around under the furniture? Perhaps, Sesha thought, they would have been quite willing to sell? She would have met any reasonable demand. Why hadn't she done what any normal person would do and simply asked?

Intuition, was why.

Bubu Flumpkin belonged to their baby. To Ruth, it wouldn't matter what he was worth, how much money was offered. She would not sell—she would not dream of selling her baby's toy. Even if the child was too young to get much out of playing with it, or to miss it. You just didn't go selling your baby's toys to people. Maybe it was what they did in the city, but not here, thank you very much.

Sesha had intuited all of this and understood, accepted, empathized, and approved. And yet, still, she had gone ahead and stolen Bubu Flumpkin. Not out of spite; such playground actions were, she hoped, beneath her dignity. And in any case, she had found herself warming to Ruth somewhat, revising her opinion of the woman, before she'd spied Bubu down there on the floor, recognized those floppy-floppy ears.

So what motive for theft was defensible? Fear of being denied that which she felt she had a right to possess, simply because she had been searching high and low for it for so many years, and there it was, wasted on a small baby?

What would Ruth think of her? Ruth would, of course, know who had taken the Bubu. There was still time to throw it back, throw it out onto the field. With any luck, it would soon be recovered.

Sesha dithered.

There were figures in the doorway of the house. Paul Rayle, Ruth, and their baby, awake once more.

The wooden box wouldn't close properly. Something trapped. Bubu's ear. Sesha pushed it in and closed the lid.

* * * *

Processia Roffey was waiting for him in her verticar. The din of the motor was deafening, and Paulie reflected that the manufacturers would have to do something about that problem if they wanted enclosed-lift vehicles to become more than expensive gimmicks.

Kali was crying again; you couldn't hear her voice, but her face was all scrunched up like a little red cabbage. Ruth was comforting her.

Paulie felt bad.

Ruth gave him a kiss, said she wished Frances well. It caught at his heart; Ruth could be so deeply good about things. He promised he'd return just as soon as he could. He really didn't want to go, and he made a face that let Ruth know as much. Ruth nodded understanding, but then indicated the verticar outside. They were waiting for him, and the sooner he got out there and up and away, the quicker she could quieten Kali down.

Paulie kissed his baby daughter, kissed her mother, then headed out across the field toward the light and noise.

Sesha Roffey had a slightly strange look on her face—getting ready to be airsick? That would make two

of them. He climbed in beside her. The door closed and the soundproofing cut in. She said to him, "Thank you for coming." And then she added, "Sorry about the seats."

Paulie soon found out what she meant. The comfort level left something to be desired. No sensors or auto-adjusts. Was this the only verticar they could get hold of at short notice?

Just as he had expected, the flight was far from pleasant. Processia Roffey wasn't sick, but he puked enough for both of them. Partly for distraction, he had asked for some more inf on Angel Syndrome. Processia had turned to her mobe and lent Paulie her smartspecs, via which, from its library, the mobe had given him loads of inf, too much to take in. A lot of it was already familiar stuff. Telotherapy had only been available for a matter of months, and was ludicrously expensive, primarily because production of telothine, a telomerase derivative, required the optimal protein crystal growth environment offered by the InterPharm orbital station. As for Angel Syndrome, although there were less than half a dozen recorded cases, a lot had been made of it on account of its outlandishness. Even here, in a news-shelter zone, word of mouth had brought it to his fireside.

Angel Syndrome had got its name, unsurprisingly, from the way its sufferers came to believe that they were turning into angels. In every case, death from heart failure had followed, apparently triggered by a kind of emotional overload, a fatal excess of feeling. So far, AS had struck down two rich old biddies in California, one in Switzerland, a Welsh lottery winner, and a Dutch billionaire in the Bahamas. All, curiously enough, had opted for freezing: five cryocorpsicles stashed away in the unsure and uncertain hope of the resurrection to come.

Poor Frances, blowing all that money on burning her brain.

The syndrome manifested itself in random attacks of increasing intensity. The sufferer would faint and, on coming round, would for a short time experience a sense of imminent transcendence, which would then dissipate. A prompt injection of Socratosine, a paraphenothiazine depressant, achieved some reduction in the the physical cost of these attacks, but little else.

Of the others, the wealthy hundreds who had undergone telotherapy without, thus far, any adverse side-effects, it was proving extremely difficult to ascertain whether the ageing process had been halted, or even slowed down. Time alone would tell.

And all of this because there was, supposedly, an 'emortal' mouse in a laboratory in California. 'Emortal' as opposed to 'immortal' since the mouse remained vulnerable to any disease or accident catastrophic enough to overwhelm its powers of cellular renewal.

The mobe interrupted its lecture to announce that they had just cleared the jam zone; calls could now be made and received, and would a Netsearch for additional inf on Angel Syndrome be at all helpful?

Paulie blinked No. He thought, What am I doing here, getting into this? Do I feel sympathy for Frances? I don't know. All of this is light years away from my world.

Taking off the smartspecs and burying his face in the sickbag, he threw up again, reactivating the verticar's OdourMurder unit.

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

Nice of Sessa Roffey, giving comfort and support.

Her fingers dug into him, hurting him.

Paulie looked up.

Sesha Roffey was staring. Paulie followed her eyes to the pilot. The pilot was grinning back at them over his shoulder. Not grinning voluntarily, but being cartooned, forced to grin. The pilot had out his penis and was masturbating vigorously.

Sesha licked her lips, being determinedly obscene and deliberate about it. Not that she wanted to—disgust and embarrassment kept flashing through her eyes—but she clearly couldn't help herself. Then the pilot was licking his lips, and so was Paulie; now all three were doing it together, lascivious and rhythmic, like some experimental theatre troupe.

Paulie felt Sesha grip his wrist. She tugged at his arm, pulled his hand down under her skirt, eagerly parted her thighs to accommodate him while, with her other hand, she unzipped him, fumbled greedily in and seized hold of him. Paulie could do nothing to keep his legs from opening for her. They might have been performing at gunpoint, coerced by some voyeuristic captor.

Mouth open in ecstasy, the pilot came, spattering the windows and flecking their faces.

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Chapter 8

The night, decidedly chilly by Andalucian standards, was to her English bones wonderfully temperate for this time of year. Frances Rayle looked down from her balcony. Below, the city was bustling: Sevillanos riding pillion on their raucous little scooters, dodging tapas-hungry tourists who, despite their computerized guides, still wandered lost in the maze of the Barrio Santa Cruz, marvelling at the prodigal orange trees casting fruit on the cobbles, sighing over the romance of it all, linking arms, and looking out for authentic flamenco. Taxis were squeezing into alleys around the Giralda. So little had changed since she had first come here as a child with her parents, long before the turn of the century. Continuity, reassurance.

And yet, there was a difference, in some ways a return to the earliest days of organized tourism. Sadly, as was the case with so many of the world's overburdened beauty spots, only the wealthiest could now purchase access to the actual Alcazar, the bona fide Barrio, the genuine Giralda, the, as it were, corporeal Cathedral. The less well-heeled donned their electrodes and made do with PseudoSeville. Fortunately, Frances had never been forced to opt for a virtual vacation, surely a thin substitute for true travel. While in principle opposed to these tourestrictive measures, she could nevertheless appreciate the necessity for such a radical approach to conservation in the face of the erosive, congestive onslaught of the camera-wielding hordes, more profuse with every passing season. One had to balance one's ideals against harsh fact, as she had so often tried to make Paulie understand.

Frances climbed the steps to her roof garden pool, slipped off her robe and—if any of those microtrodes came unglued from her scalp then so be it—she dived in and swam a length, two lengths, a third. And then she turned over and called for the heliodome to retract and the lights to further dim themselves while she floated, face-up, drifting gently and waiting for her eyes to become acclimatized to the fierce clear skyful of stars.

She had been unable to rest, unable at all to relax, wind down, meditate. Even Xabier's Zen Shiatsu

hadn't helped. She was poised between euphoria and dread. What would the presence of Paulie achieve? What on earth was the reasoning behind it?

Frances thought, To hell with reasoning. I simply feel like seeing Paulie, want him here with me, at this time. I have no scheme to steal him away, to re-seduce him, reclaim his affections. At least, no conscious scheme. I simply know what I want, how best to safeguard my mental health in this situation.

She swam some more, climbed out. Xabier was standing by with the towel. He had received another Mindseye message. The report was ready, the Youngjohn Emulacrum Report on the Thyncc, Inc. offer.

"I'll read it later," she told Xabier.

She preferred the printed word. It gave her the creeps, conferring with Emulacra, those computer-generated imposters whose programmers were still finding human warmth a far greater challenge than business acumen. In particular, she could not bring herself to interact with an ersatz manifestation of the late Sir Kenneth Youngjohn, her posthumously-employed consultant.

The fact of the matter was, Frances didn't really care what Sir Kenneth's Emulacrum advised with regard to what did seem, on the face of it, a very fair and reasonable buy-out offer from Thyncc, Inc. She knew this apathy to be another symptom of Angel Syndrome, a progressive withdrawal of interest from everyday matters, small and large. She was also aware that the old Frances Rayle had not wanted to sell out to Thyncc, Inc., the enormously successful mindstyling agency which specialized in furnishing the bare, spartan psyches of those too busy making money to have cultivated much in the way of a personality. Raging vapidty was treated with a fully integrated package of tastes, opinions, preferences and attitudes, all guaranteed cool, hardwearingly hip and aspirationally expedient. Everything from food, art, clothes and music to politics, science, and sex. Thyncc, Inc. was a division of the Bertrand Laurel empire. The old Frances Rayle had, after their sole, disastrous meeting, taken against the tediously flamboyant Bertrand Laurel, whose fortune had been made from porn and pimping dressed up as Corporate Hospitality. Bertrand Laurel, surprise surprise, was an utter cynic, holding his customers in the deepest contempt. And he had expected her to be cut from identical cloth.

Frances hadn't wanted to sell, but now she simply thought, Why not? She no longer had much interest in Psychotrichology. Or power. Or money.

But no.

No, she thought.

Selling out to Bertrand Laurel wouldn't be fair on her employees. Bertrand Laurel was a bloodshark.

No, she thought. Never.

She would act responsibly. She would ask Sir Kenneth's Emulacrum to recommend her best bet as successor; the Emulacrum would already, as a matter of course, have scanned the employee records and isolated one or more contingency candidates. And then this person would be aided by another Emulacrum, one derived from Frances Rayle.

She would need, then, to will her interest in PsyTri to return temporarily in order that her Emulacrum be compiled and developed. Apparently, the process involved lengthy interviews, tiresome braintapping sessions.

Or, she suddenly asked herself, should I bother? The prospect of struggling to reconnect so many of those severed links with the mundane felt nothing short of agonizing; her whole being shrank from it, aghast, like a teenager recoiling from study. And in any event, a truly worthy successor would have no need of her ghost.

Perhaps she should have been raising one or more clonedaughters to succeed her? For reasons she had never been fully able to articulate, cloning had struck the old Frances Rayle as repugnant. But now, she didn't really know what she thought of it. She neither approved nor disapproved, no more than she approved or disapproved of rain.

What, she wondered, would be my new, cool attitude toward cloning were I to have myself mindstyled by Thyncc, Inc.?

And was it true, what she had heard, that Thyncc, Inc.'s offer had been drafted in part by Laurel's own Youngjohn Emulacrum? The ghost of poor Sir Kenneth pitted against itself. Two rival recreations, each of them drawing upon the distilled professional wisdom of one of the finest business brains of the last half-century. How Sir Kenneth would have laughed. But then, he had doubtless foreseen such eventualities when co-operating with the Emulacrum compilation team.

Such technotrivia was normally quite foreign to Frances. In this case, however, an element of poignancy forged a link with the human realm. Once, long ago and very briefly, Sir Kenneth had been her lover and, in some measure, her mentor. And on the first of the two occasions on which she had managed to overcome her distaste and converse vocally with these recorded and aggregated portions of his personality, it had been like speaking with the victim of a dreadful mental illness, every facet cruelly stripped away save one. A monotonous monomaniac. Business business business. How she had longed to regain that warm complicity of old, that undertow of secrets and memories shared. That delightful sense of humour. How she had wished for the man in his entirety, a Sir Kenneth unbowed by death, of sanguine spirits, ready to listen. If only her little experiment had met with more success.

She had retained Sir Kenneth's love letters, even after her marriage to Paulie. They were, all four of them, beautiful, touching, tender, almost frighteningly fierce, deeply at odds with the cool, dry wit of the illustrious public figure. Although it had not seemed a particularly healthy way of behaving, she had clung to them, loath to let them go. And then, soon after the Institute had taken delivery of the Emulacrum, she had woken up in the middle of the night with a brainwave. Personally, secretly, involving no one else, she had scanned the letters into the Emulacrum. And then, she had talked with it again.

Patiently, the Emulacrum had explained to Frances that, while it was able to appreciate her motives—and could, if called upon to do so, probably feign with fair verisimilitude an emotional attachment consonant with the material she had supplied—it was woefully unequipped for this form of intercourse.

Had she imagined it, or had that last word really been so deliciously irony-charged, so knowing, so very like a final farewell, one last momentary, miraculous evocation of the whole man? So perhaps the experiment had not exactly failed.

She had destroyed the letters, and had no further verbal contact with the Emulacrum.

How she missed Sir Kenneth now, the ministering father figure—

For she felt, all at once, so very apprehensive of that which lay ahead of her. Fearful yet thrilled. And needing to share and explore it, when finally it made itself known, as she knew it soon would, with a

suitable other.

And who more suitable than Paulie?

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Chapter 9

Sesha had purchased a pack of Disnoids from the autodispenser and swallowed four, but she'd vomited them straight back up into the washbasin before they could mellow her out. She couldn't meet her own eyes in the mirror, not even fully alone, there so late at night in the privacy of the clinical white Luton vertiport washroom. Her whole face burned with heat, soreness, and mortification. She had scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed herself clean. There was no shower. If only there had been a shower, a change of clothes. A change of body. Some means of wiping away memories.

Once more, she found herself sobbing. She retreated to a cubicle. The door autobolted. She sank slowly down into a foetal crouch and, as she had so often done as a little girl in the face of crushing stress, she began to rock.

“You poor thing,” said the toilet, no doubt alerted by her sobs. “Would it help to talk about it??”

“Get frucked.”

Sesha wouldn't normally have let a dumb device dig under her skin, but AE voices always sounded so sarcastic. She didn't know what Frances thought of Artificial Empathy chips, but she could hazard a pretty fair guess.

The toilet switched to Diplomatic Silence Mode, and Sesha resumed her rocking. Her nose was no longer bleeding. She threw away her scrunched-up wad of toilet paper. The diagnostic SmarTissue which the spilt blood had caused to change colour was harsh, nasty, cut-price stuff, imprinted with local bedboy agency ads whose Viagric visual frankness had promptly sent her retching anew.

The nosebleed, along with renewed torment from her unhealed Mindseye incision, had come courtesy of that mad verticar pilot of theirs. As soon as they had all regained control of themselves, of their physical actions, the pilot's way of dealing with it had been to go stark raving apesugar and attack them, giving her a bloody nose and treating Paul Rayle like a punchbag. Paul Rayle had just slumped there and taken it, as though nothing in the whole world mattered any more. She had screamed and scratched and sobbed and wanted to kill herself, and then had remembered her Pepperspray bracelet, and had probably saved Paul Rayle's life by letting the pilot have a faceful of pepper. How they had come down in one piece was a wonder and a mystery; no doubt they had some kind of autopilot gizmo to thank—or curse, for she still wasn't sure whether death would not have been preferable.

And to think that she had given her Heartmonitor Alarm Bra, with its hotline to the McCops, the night off in favour of her old Penny Pert. For whose sake, exactly? Paul Rayle's? What had possessed her? Was she cracked? You sad tart, Sesha Roffey.

But how the fruck could it possibly have happened? At first, in that split-second before the pilot had freaked out and attacked them, she had assumed it to be her own private psychotic episode, scary as fruck but, thank God, secret. But then, their eyes had told her otherwise. To find out that the whole sick thing had not been a product of her mind alone. A subjective delusion could surely be explained more

easily than could the joint acting-out of a sudden, irresistible orgiastic impulse? A foreign substance in the air? Some psychedelic agent substituted for the microcleansers in the OdourMurder unit? An outrageous, illegal testing of—what?—some top-secret military sex gas?

If not for the participation of the pilot, she would have been ready to blame the tea served at Paul Rayle's cottage, or some brainfrucking ingredient in that incense that had turned their minds, grotesquely, to conjuring up that puerile, pubescent excuse for impromptu bacchanalia. Had she really done what she had seen and felt and been totally unable to stop herself doing, behaving like the cheapest, corniest skinvid star?

She took out her mobe, made sure the Phoneface function was active—who would want to be seen looking like this, in this place?—and was about to contact Ajit, when she observed on her cuff what appeared to be a speck of dried semen.

Sesha vomited.

“That's it, dear,” said the toilet. “Get it all out.” And then, after the barest pause consistent with propriety, “Would it help to talk about it? Just touch the red spot with your transac ring to obtain one full, intensive five-minute counselling session for stress, depression, or infosickness. Should further sessions be required, simply touch again to continue our friendly little...”

“Hey come on!” her mobe protested. “Show a bit more sensitivity, yeah?”

* * * *

The McCop, big and butch and baton-happy, plainly didn't like the look of Paulie Rayle, sitting there in the vertiport's bleak little bar, scruffy and bleeding and bruised and beat-up, nursing hurt ribs, armed with alcohol gripped in a trembling hand. And, worst of all, smoking a cigarette; cigarettes were, quite patently, anathema to the McCop.

Well tough shit, Paulie thought.

The McCop was tremendously tall, and Paulie guessed him to be a growth hormone victim. The parents had wanted to give their son an edge, to elevate him above his peers. Trouble was, too many other parents had the same plan, and the commanding heights had crept on up and up and up.

The McCop's peaked cap was doubtless recording him with its smartbadge microcam, and Paulie could guess what was on the man's mind. What, the McCop must have been wondering, was the precise nature of the connection between this scruffy specimen here and that very distressed young lady who had alighted from the verticar and gone running straight into the women's washroom? If only you knew, McOfficer, that the precise nature of this world is what you ought to be worrying about.

Paulie looked across at the washroom door. How much longer would Sesha Roffey stay in there? Had she already put out a help call?

He dragged at his cigarette. His stomach churned. The weight was crushing him. The awful weight of horrible knowledge, now a part of him for the remainder of his life. Pseudolife.

Intellectually, he had worked out what had happened. Emotionally, he was not up to accepting it. Who would be? It was pretty damn grim. As an explanation, it may have violated the principle of parsimony—was it really more credible than, say, a freak chemical reaction leading to the spontaneous production, within the verticar, of some erotogenic substance which had entered their respiratory

systems, triggering the bizarre behaviour?—but he was prepared to bet money on it; he felt its truth in his guts. Of course, there was always a slight chance that there did exist a far less ominous answer; one he could not, as yet, come up with, given the current state of his mind. Maybe his fellow victim would be able to enlighten him?

The door opened. She had tidied herself up. She was bearing up well. She looked around for him, caught sight of him and approached. Her face was mask-like. In order to cope, she'd gone all androidy, sealed herself in an ice-hard businesslike lacquer. You could rat-tat-tat against her with your nails.

Paulie offered her a cigarette. She shook her head. He indicated the second glass. "Thought you might need this."

"Thanks." As she spoke she turned her face away, keeping the movements of her lips hidden, unwitnessable, as though she would rather not have dealt with him directly, but through a series of distancing relays. She took the whiskey, and didn't even let him see her sip at it. Her embarrassment must have been desperate. His own was dire enough. Ironically, the explanation he was about to put forward ought to have offered a full exoneration from any sense of embarrassment.

He said first, "I'm sorry."

One of the reasons he felt apologetic had to do with knowing that all of this was extra-difficult for her on account of who he was, in her eyes. His significance vis-a-vis Frances.

Sipping at his drink, he said, "Look, Sessa, it wasn't really us, doing those things."

At last he received a glance from her, a very brief, grudging flash of eye-contact. "Of course it wasn't us." The words came back at him charged with girlish, dogmatic ferocity.

He said, "We were puppeted. Like with morphomercials. You've heard of erotoroutines, sex programs ... the way they can strike at random? Some stupid little Netgeek's idea of a joke."

He waited for the implications to sink in. Or would they? Were they just too outrageous? Or simply incomprehensible, particularly if she wasn't unduly into metaphysics, outside of her training in visualizing Ideal Hairstyles?

He said again, "We were puppeted, hacked, just like people on a screen, on NeTV, in a film. Like when Sick Nick starts chopping them up. Only we were lucky. I'd say it was one of the milder erotoroutines, quite an old one. The shitfilters shrugged it off pretty quickly."

Sessa Roffey gave him the kind of look reserved for loopy little conspiracy nerds, then turned her head so that she was looking not just away from him, but right away from him, one hundred and eighty degrees away, and Paulie thought, Why am I saying all of this, making myself sound insane? I'm never going to convince her. Am I myself convinced, even?

He asked her, "Well okay then, what's your explanation?"

He was met with a silence, during which the McCop gave him a long, sharp, guard-dog glower, laced with chivalrous concern for the lady.

"I could die," came her words, quiet and bitter, and not for him.

Paulie said, "It could be we're not really alive."

His own statement sounded reassuringly preposterous, that was why he had needed to voice his paranoia. To exorcise it.

Processia Roffey looked round at him, finally, and, clearly to her mind, at any rate, put an end to it by pointing out, "Only we're not virtual ... this is the real world."

There had been movies, countless horror movies, about cyberspooks bursting out from the Net, taking on physical form and wreaking havoc in the world at large. Not that this was what Paulie's explanation actually boiled down to, but it was probably what she was thinking he was thinking. He realized he was being insensitive; the last thing she needed right now was to be confronted with this kind of shit. But before he could stop himself, he had shot back at her,

"So you know that for a fact, that this world is real?"

She didn't bother to utter a reply; her scathing look said it all.

Infuriated by her certitude, Paulie thought, Have you any idea what a fucking fact actually is? But what was the use in lecturing her on the provisionality, the probabilistic nature of all human knowledge? And why not admit that, down deep, he maybe envied her, found strong opinions sexy?

He shrugged. "Then I don't know what happened. It's as big a mystery to me as it is to you. The world's full of mysteries. Let's just try and forget about it." He reached for his glass, his hand still trembling. "So what do we do now?"

"A car will collect us."

"And then?"

"Any ... needs you have will be attended to, and then, if you're willing, you'll be flown over to see Frances. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

"Are you all right? Were you ... hurt?"

She was referring to the punches he'd received from the pilot. The poor, embarrassed bastard had lashed out at them like a loon.

"No, I'm fine, I'm okay." Paulie shook his head, his ribs playing up in violent contradiction.

"I scratched your face." She didn't appear to deem contrition appropriate; she simply stated a fact, and Paulie could imagine her trying to decide whether or not to put professionalism to the fore and make a full and frank report to her employer. It would seem perfectly natural to look to Mother Frances for absolution. It was an impulse with which he himself could identify.

"I'm sorry," she said, formally, not without difficulty.

"It's nothing. Forget it."

Sleep, Paulie thought. My circadian rhythm has been shot to fuck. I need sleep, and plenty of it.

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Chapter 10

Ruth asked herself savagely, What was I thinking, telling Paulie to go out there to Spain? Am I fucking mental, or what? Her worst fear—it had always been her darkest, deepest fear—that Paulie would get back together with Frances.

Kali was crying again, ready for her last, late feed. Ruth got up, went and fetched her, brought her back to the bed.

It felt like, like Paulie had died. Just after he'd left, as the stupid noisy flying car thing was heaving itself up into the sky with him inside, the tears had come and choked her up. Tears partly of rage at how she'd meekly gone along with it, trying to be a nice person and see the right thing get done, thinking about Paulie and thinking about Frances and what Frances needed. Well, fuck Frances Rayle. Serve her fucking right, going cranky after spending all that money on treatment to try and stop herself from getting any older. How could you have any sympathy for her when she'd brought it on herself by being vain? What kind of world would it be if only the rich lived forever, and everybody else had to die? And even if everyone ended up getting the treatment and not dying, and people still kept having kids, how would there be room for everybody?

Ruth winced as Kali tugged at her cracked nipple.

God she could kick herself, sending Paulie off like it was his duty to go and hers to be a martyr. Sending him off with that snotty cow with her fucking basin haircut. Fucking thief, as well. That little purple-coloured soft toy had disappeared from under the cupboard, right near where the bitch had been sitting. And the funny thing was, it had been Frances who had sent them the toy. A couple of times, feeling pissed off with Frances—and because of the way the toy would seem to look at you, just like it was watching you—Ruth had nearly chucked it in the rubbish. But chucking it away had seemed childish. For ages it had been left lying there under the cupboard. Kali wouldn't miss it, she didn't pay that much attention yet to toys, but that wasn't the point.

Perhaps, Ruth told herself, that was why the basin-haircut woman had bought that wooden box, out of guilt because she'd pinched Kali's toy? Not because she truly liked the box, the scheming cow.

Ruth stopped herself. She was tired. Her hormones were everywhere; it took so long to get back to normal after having a baby. The little rabbit-thing was probably still there, kicking around somewhere. Maybe Paulie had picked it up.

And then something else occurred to her, and as soon as Kali had finished feeding and she'd got her back to sleep, she went and checked.

Paulie had taken the Dreambox.

Ruth paced up and down, arms folded, hugging herself. She felt all awake and electric. What was she so ready to do? Go after him? She'd had a chance to go. All three of them could have gone over there to Spain, her and Paulie and Kali.

What could she do now? Was it too late?

“Fucking stupid fucking ... !” she called herself out loud.

She felt completely powerless, standing there rubbing away tears with the palms of her hands.

* * * *

“Anything wrong, Sesh?” Ajit had perched himself beside her, on the arm of his settee. His shrewd black eyes studied her. “There is something, isn't there?”

Sesha shook her head. “I'm just tired.”

Ajit grinned. “All go, isn't it, this line of work?”

It had taken all of her inner resources to prevent the double dose of shame, the theft of Bubu Flumpkin, her antics in the verticar, from reducing her to a wreck. Like a scientist caging a dangerous substance, keeping it separate from every atom of everything else, she was holding the night's memories apart and discrete and outside of herself. It still called upon every bit of her willpower.

Every bit, Sesha thought. Every byte?

Her own words echoed back at her: “Only we're not virtual—this is the real world.”

Paul Rayle quite clearly thought otherwise. But then, Paul Rayle was a box junkie. His sad little secret was out. She had caught sight of the box, wrapped up in that tatty old army-surplus khaki rucksack. Either the best he had available in the way of luggage, or a calculated statement of outsiderdom, or both, the bag was split down one seam, and the Dreambox, swaddled snug as a baby in some item of spare clothing, had peeped out briefly as he'd plonked the bag down on his lap when they'd got in the car that had brought them into London. He had seen her see the box, and he had made no attempt to conceal it. On the contrary, he had responded with a kind of wry grin.

Poor Frances.

Her ex was a fruck-up, headwise. Sesha could see how he might once have been someone worthwhile, but now he was completely offworld. She could no longer harbour so much as a glimmer of hope that his presence would prove therapeutic to her boss. She'd had her doubts, right from the moment she'd set eyes on him at that cottage, but now the whole enterprise seemed futile. How could Frances not be disappointed?

When they had landed and escaped from that awful verticar flight, Paul Rayle's eyes had been pained and haunted. Any embarrassment he felt appeared to have been subsumed under a paranoid, box junkie dread. He plainly believed that something was Wrong, in the deepest possible sense. That he was still dreaming, trapped, suffering a boxmare. Something of that order. Some cranky conviction.

Well, she was sorry, but Sesha had no time for such silliness. It was so unpleasant to see a grown man being silly. Silliness emasculated. What Paul Rayle needed was to smash that stupid box and get himself straightened out, get cured of his ridiculous conviction that what had happened in the verticar proved that this was not the real world, Groundworld, in user jargon. He had leapt straight to what seemed to him, a box junkie, to be the obvious conclusion. To anyone with a healthy head, his paranoia was as plain as frucking daylight.

Okay, Sesha allowed, so something was responsible for the verticar episode, but who cared? Did it have to fit into some scheme, be explained away? It had happened, it was gone; the only problem was the memory.

Ajit patted her on the shoulder. "Excuse me a moment." He went off to the kitchen or somewhere, leaving her alone.

There came a Bleep-BI-Bleep-Bleeeeeeep from her handbag: the first four notes of Janko Brauch's song, Lisa Sleaze. Sesha fished out her mobe.

"Sesh?"

"Mmm?"

"About your feet: you know, Sesha, you're really not alone in thinking they're, well, not QUITE petite enough for your liking. In fact..."

"You go fruck yourself."

Sesha was furious. It was one of those intimads, commercials programmed to target specific individuals, to home in on your hangups. She could vaguely recall, ages ago, going out for a meal with her friend Indie and letting slip the moan that, in an ideal world, her feet would be about a size and a half smaller. Her gripe must have been picked up by one of the restaurant's securicam mikes, harvested by a roving intimad scout and then sold on for exploitation by some footwear or pedicare company. And now the resultant intimad had succeeded in hijacking her mobe, worming its way in through the shitfilters. It had even had the mobe monitor the sound and heatscapes—as best it could from within the handbag—and bide its time until she was on her own; these things were sly, underhanded, insidious. All she could do was wait for the filters to regain control; there was no way of silencing an intimad. Retaining Janko Brauch's vocpat, the ad droned blandly on:

"...surveys reveal that some thirty-nine percent of adult women throughout the Euro Union express, at some point, a real degree of dissatisfaction with their foot size. So you see, Sesha, this is a very commonly-voiced grievance, so why be ashamed? Instead, why not take steps, if you'll pardon the pun, to remedy the problem? Simply by using the new Pedislim Plus Heel-to-Toe Reduction Sock, impregnated with our exclusive age-old Tibetan Herbal Formula, its magic enhanced by the very latest liposomic delivery methods, you can effectively reduce the length and breadth of your feet by as much as two ... yes, TWO ... whole Euro shoe sizes over a short three-month period. How does that sound, Sesha? And it's SO easy to order! Just hit me with your transac ring, and not one but THREE pairs of Pedislim socks, giving you three cool pastel shades to suit your every mood, will be rushed IMMEDIATELY to your doorstep. Because I ask you, Sesha, why put up with a physical defect that could so eas ... eas ... easily b-b-b-b-be ... Sorry about that, Sesha." It had taken the mobe a worryingly long time to shrug off the intimad. "What a crock, huh? Won't happen again. I'm due to download a new filter release in two days. As you know, intimads are illegal. I've just sent a report to the appropriate regulating body. Sorry, Sesh, I feel real bad about letting that one through. Frucker."

"Not your fault."

"That's reassuring to hear. Thanks, Sesh, I appreciate your understanding."

Sesha closed the mobe, and was dropping it back into her handbag when Paul Rayle appeared in the doorway. She felt intense discomfort. Had he heard the intimad?

Seeing her there on the settee, he came in. He smiled. Upon waking from his doze in the car, his manner had been one of ironic amusement. His second snooze appeared to have heightened this, if anything, though Sesha grimly suspected that his wry smile signified not a new sobriety but a fatalistic acceptance of some delusory plight.

It would have been stretching the word's definition to have called him presentable, but one or two of the least becoming aspects of his appearance had been favourably modified. And all without the need for even the gentlest of hints from herself or from Ajit. Paul Rayle had made use of the offered bathroom to tidy himself up, and the bed to continue the nap he had begun in the car. Undeniably, he had made an effort; his unkemptness did not seem to be ideologically motivated. All in all, he didn't quite fit the craft-villager stereotype, despite the rucksack and his rough woollen nonconsumer tunic thing, and clumpy boots.

Once again, though, Sesha noted that his natural Congruence would have transformed him even further had he only allowed his lovely hair to hang loose. And it would have obscured his bruised cheekbone, and the scratches she herself had inflicted, the sight of which brought another surge of shame.

"Nice place," he said, surveying Ajit's cool, spacious living-room: elegant, unfinicky, and uncompromisingly masculine. It was, Sesha could tell, no more to Paul Rayle's taste than to her own.

She nodded. "Isn't it?"

Ajit had decided that Paul Rayle ought to be brought here to Highgate to freshen up—blithely unaware that all the freshening-up in the world wouldn't do the trick, for the trick could not be done in mere hours, even days. Paul Rayle needed treatment. Several different kinds. Showering, shaving, and resting constituted a start, but, in all honesty, to deliver someone to Frances in even this washed and brushed-up state smacked strongly of professional ineptitude. And Ajit was of the same mind, clearly, as was his cute new boyfriend Bill; all those glances shuttlecocking back and forth. But needs must. Frances's condition was unstable. The sooner they got Paul Rayle flown over to her, the better. What else could match that for importance?

"How are you feeling?" Sesha asked.

Paul Rayle yawned. "Not so bad. How about you?"

She was taken aback by his tenderness. It was as though he genuinely felt for her, knowing, as he did, what she had been through. What the two of them had been through together, along with that pilot, whose wild orgasmic rictus was a memory she would pay any price to have expunged.

"Tired," she said. "Otherwise I'm okay."

She had not told Ajit about the verticar horror. She would never, ever speak of it to anyone. Not even her best friend Indie. Not that she had been in touch with Indie in weeks, or was it months?

I'll call Indie tomorrow, she thought. Time to take a stand against the isolating drift of twenty-first century life.

"What's it like," she asked, "living in a craft village?"

"Pleasant. What's it like in the city?" Paul Rayle's eyes made a gentle joke out of the reciprocity dictated

by etiquette.

Sesha was considering her reply when she was brought up short by the sight of her own face suddenly appearing on Ajit's NeTV; the set had been left on in the background, tuned in to the EBC No-Shit News with top anchorslob Troy Formby. The sound was muted. It was one of those interviews she'd done about the dummy Crowning Glory tabs. The image on the studio screen was not her genuine self of the time—tense, harried, hair losing its Congruence—but her smart, crisp, never-weary PhonePhace avatar, superimposed at the first signs of physiognomic strain.

Recognition hit Paul Rayle. He glanced at her, then back at the screen, frowning, attempting to lipread.

“Sound,” he requested.

“—for the express purpose of hair retention,” Sesha's NeTV voice frostily intoned. “We are not in the business of helping out Dreambox users ... unless, of course, like anyone else, they come to us with a hair problem.”

Manoeuvring his mouthful of gum, Troy Formby constructed a large pink bubble, then sucked it back in again. “I don't think they would come to you. I think they'd just make perfect hair a part of their dreamworld. Who needs PsyTri in Heaven?” Sesha's face faded from the screen as Formby let out a belch, followed by, for good measure, a loud, fruity fart, and cheerfully changed the subject: “Now, that perennial piss-off: the Email Shemale. What do so many men get out of posing as women on webdates?”

Sesha asked Paul Rayle, “Do you use Crowning Glory?”

“To keep my hair?”

“I mean as a dethanatizer?”

He looked at her.

“Have you any with you?” Sesha held out her hand. “Can I see the carton?”

Paul Rayle hesitated. Then, from a small side pocket of his rucksack, he produced one of the familiar pale blue plastic cartons, its label grubbied, and handed it over. Sesha turned it upside down and peered at the printed batch number.

“These are fine,” she informed him, handing back the carton.

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

Ajit reappeared.

“Paul? Sesh? I just spoke to Frances.”

“How is she?” Paul Rayle wanted to know.

“She's eager to see the both of you.”

“Both of us?” Sesha was astonished.

“I asked if she wanted a word with you now, on the phone, but, well, you know Frances.”

To begin with, before she had met her boss, Sesha had taken Frances's aversion to comtech devices—telepresence, even simple phones—to be some Machiavellian tactic for maintaining a regal distance. But her first, long-awaited face-to-face encounter had dispelled such cynical notions. Frances was very much a person person: tactile, sensual, and it was understandable that, with these warm, human proclivities—some might call them eccentricities—she would consider it unseemly that her first contact with Paul in years be cold and mediated. Frances wanted him there with her. But why should she want Sesha Roffey there as well?

“Sesh?”

Excusing herself, Sesha complied with Ajit's discreet eye-flick of a request that she join him in the hallway. There, from behind his back, Ajit produced something small, purple and extremely, embarrassingly lovable.

A Bubu Flumpkin.

Sesha went rigid.

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Chapter 11

To whose psyche are we slaves? wondered Paulie Rayle as he sat aboard the plane to Seville. Was he himself, and Processia Roffey, snoozing in the airseat beside him, and Ruth, and little Kali, and Frances—were they all of them mere humiliants in someone's boxworld?

And if so, as humiliants were they truly alive? The precise ontological status of humiliants was still under debate, a source of the fiercest ethical controversy. Were they nothing more than empty vessels dangling from psychic strings spun out by the solipsistic box user? Or, as antiboxers claimed, did the process of making a Berkeley Effect copy of Groundworld and its inhabitants somehow preserve and, in a sense, steal all those separate subjectivities? Did the esse-percipi program really see to it that humiliants only came alive, as it were, within the box user's pseudoperceptual field, much as old-time movie actors ceased performing once the camera panned away? Or did the Dreambox actually do far more than was realized, perhaps offer access to some parallel world of equal ontostatus?

Well if the e-p program does work, Paulie reasoned, and all non-essential humiliants stay shut down, then that would indicate that the user is someone close to me, someone who is keeping me in mind, all this time.

I think, therefore ... Or rather, Paulie corrected himself: There seems to be an I that seems to be thinking.

It amused him, the thought of Frances residing in what was ostensibly the actual, non-virtual, historical heart of Seville, blissfully unaware that she was less than a real person in less than a real place. Amusement, he felt, but also guilt and discomfort. Should he tell Ruth all that had happened, try and explain about the erotoroutine? What was the point? She wouldn't understand. She would be hurt, more

than hurt. Why subject her to that? And why feel guilty when it wasn't his fault?

As he sat there on the plane, his eyes closed, his mind still starved of the good, genuine, non-box-induced night's sleep for which a couple of hard-won catnaps had been scant substitute, Paulie found himself wishing that his travelling companion had been on the same wavelength, been less reluctant to consider what his instincts told him was the true explanation for that grotesque little incident in the verticar: this world was not Groundworld. But then, finding oneself forced into sexual acts by a pirate computer program was likely to be doubly traumatic if you were a grounder with no box hours under your belt. No doubt Sessa Roffey would have scoffed at the little game he was playing. A game of possibilities. Listing them. Entertaining them, one after another. Trying them for size.

Possibility Number One: she was right—he was nuts.

Possibility Number Two: this was Groundworld, but someone, for some reason, wanted him to think it was a boxworld, and had somehow tampered with his perceptions. Was he paranoid enough to go with that one?

Possibility Number Three: this world was his own boxworld. After all, it wasn't unknown for users to develop 'levelitis', a condition wherein the box user's imagination, spurred on by a self-protecting drive toward inner stability through the avoidance of existential stress, sought to further authenticate its boxworld by incorporating a spurious Groundworld recovery stage into its subreality. In response to a perceived threat to sanity, such as the mental toll of excessive box use, the psychic component of the user's immune system acted by fabricating a conviction that you were home and safe. This sanctuary state could not be maintained for very long before affronts to your Groundworld paradigm damaged the self-delusory mechanism. Strange things—things you just knew couldn't come about in 'real life'—would start to happen either through the transformative effects of your own deep wants and needs upon what was still a subreal environment, or, perhaps, due to an outside invader such as an erotoutine; boxworlds were vulnerable to all manner of compuviral infiltration via any of the myriad infosources during the initial worldcopying process. Perhaps they should be thankful that some cyberspook like Sick Nick hadn't yet paid them a visit. For within the confines of a boxworld, Sick Nick would be their ontological equal, his long knifeblade tongue no mere outlandish apparition.

And yet, Paulie observed, if this is my boxworld, then it's a world in which my little magic word, 'ontotech' counts for nothing, an empty term coined in ignorance as to the limits of science. An inchoate concept.

Imagination had wrestled with defeatism and lost. He had been unable to cut through the carapace of cynicism, pierce adulthood's armour in order to reach the child within and let the word be wondrously reified. Was that inner child no longer alive? Was that why he had journeyed but never arrived, why ontotechnology remained bullshit, his dream of Heaven doomed to collapse under the weight of its own absurdity? Was that why the dethan gear, the Crowning Glory and Vitamin C, hadn't stopped things going sour? Was he generating more negativity than the chemicals could cope with? Or did he have it in for himself so viciously that his thirst for failure was insufficiently distinguishable from his vision of Paradise for any dethanatic drug to muffle one without choking the other? What a fuck-up he was. He had even sought ethical justification for his aim of pre-empting Groundworld by putting it to the vote—a vote by humiliants, his captive constituency, forced to accommodate to his whims by the Berkeley Effect. What kind of democracy was that?

Self-flagellation aside, the big question remained: if this was still his own boxworld, how long would it be before the timer fetched him out? But what if the timer was malfunctioning? What if the Dreambox itself was in some fashion fucked? It would be up to Ruth, the real*BoxRuth*, to rescue him.

Dreambox junkie that he was, he had brought along his box. He could box up, ascend to—to where? Would he be any more safe, deeper within himself? You couldn't go down, you could only go up; to travel groundward you had to wait to be fetched out. And anyway, what point was there in dreaming when he was all out of imagination? It would only make things worse.

Paulie opened his eyes. Sesha Roffey was still sleeping. The best place for her; she hadn't been able to hide her acrophobia.

He looked down at the cotton-wool clouds.

Cloudcopies?

Possibility Number Three: not he himself, but another Dreambox user, was the demiurge, the secret guarantor of this world. If so, then at what point had the worldcopying occurred, the subjectively undetectable branching-off from Groundworld, the creation of his present, simulacral consciousness? It could, he knew, have taken place at any time, totally unbeknown to all but the box user. It would be happening at every moment of every day, millions of new boxworlds popping into existence, ready to be wrapped around their users, moulded, manipulated.

So how long would this world survive? If 'survive' was the right word. It had been established that—and this was something that no one, even Zeller, could adequately explain—the esse-percipi program notwithstanding, pseudolife within the boxworld would progress according to identical laws of probability, the self-same factors that governed Groundworld. Except that in the boxworld, there would be one additional, pre-eminent set of forces now shaping events: the innermost desires of the box user. What did he or she have in store for his or her private domain? What would be required of them all as humiliants? The changes would happen, and they would be totally unaware of how their world was being altered.

And this erotoroutine was bound to strike again, and other people—at any rate, box users—would put two and two together and conclude that this was a boxworld, and they would share his terrible burden of knowledge.

All at once Paulie thought, What if this is a military boxworld, employed for testing out new weapons of mass destruction?

* * * *

Sesha knew that, had she not pretended to be asleep, Paul Rayle would have been trying to convince her that the world wasn't real; resurgent paranoia hung about him like an unpleasant smell. She wanted no part of it. She wished she could have slept, but there was too much on her mind. Her head was spinning. At least it was keeping her from dwelling on where she was right at this moment, shooting through the sky at a ludicrous altitude. Planes were bad enough, let alone verticars. She had never enjoyed being airborne.

Ajit had said they had done it for Frances's sake, stuck a bug in Bubu Flumpkin. For Frances's sake? Frances would have gone completely apesugar.

Or would she? Sesha really didn't know. Perhaps Frances would have thought it ethically sound that the baby be watched over by an electronic guardian angel equipped with a pair of tiny camera eyes and microphonic ears, a secret supplement to parental care. An emergency measure, merely. Ajit wouldn't say who at the Institute had authorized it. Surely not Frances herself? Ajit had wanted to know if Sesha

had seen the toy, could confirm that it was there in the cottage. The Bubu Flumpkin Ajit had produced was not the Bubu Flumpkin she had stolen, but a second Bubu Flumpkin. Ajit had intended for her to take this identical Bubu with her to the craft village and switch it with the first Bubu, to whose signals the airjam had proved impermeable. This substitute Bubu contained the very latest airjam-busting transmitter. Trouble was, Ajit had forgotten to give it to her before she'd flown out there. So now he'd asked her to sneak it into Paul Rayle's rucksack, in the farfetched hope that Paul Rayle would think it was Bubu Number One, packed by accident, and would take it home, give it to the baby, find to his surprise that she already had a Bubu, but shrug and say what the hell.

Sesha couldn't get over it. Someone at the Institute—Ajit alone? Ajit and others, a bunch of them?—had concocted this hare-brained, half-baked, cynical, ridiculous and horribly insulting little scheme. They had installed their little bugging device, sent to the cottage as 'a present from Frances.' In the event of its at some point proving instrumental in saving the baby's life, perhaps by sounding an alarm, alerting the meds, even shooting out a microdart of some drug, they would claim credit for averting a tragedy. This would of course be risking Frances's wrath, but they were gambling on her gratitude being the greater. Promotion, bonuses, the sky would be the limit, they doubtless thought. How on earth could such a preposterous idea have arisen? Was it that the baby was being brought up in a craft village? To people like Ajit—and, in all honesty, to Sesha herself—that had seemed tantamount to growing up in the grim, dim, dirty past.

It was almost as far beyond belief as Paul Rayle's rantings.

Ajit still didn't know that she had stolen the original Bubu. She had taken both Bubus to her flat, along with the little wooden box, when she'd gone there to shower, change her clothes, and throw together some stuff for the trip to Seville. She had carefully cut open both Bubus, removed the implanted spying gizmos and thrown them in the trash. One Bubu she had kept for herself; the other was with her now, and would go into Paul Rayle's rucksack. Only then, perhaps, would she feel a tiny bit better about the whole thing.

And what if Paul Rayle and Ruth were to learn of all this crass intrigue? In fact it was surprising that Ruth would have accepted a gift from Frances in the first place. And not only that, but the whole mad plan had been doomed right from the beginning; Ruth almost certainly wouldn't let the toy, Frances's toy, become the baby's close companion. The toy was only there on sufferance, no doubt because Ruth didn't want to feel petty.

Sesha thought, I am sick to frucking death of plots, of paranoia, of bizarre and disturbing experiences that I cannot explain and do not want to have to bother trying to explain but just want to forget. I am a woman doing a job. My boss wants to see me, and so I am flying out to visit her. My boss is unwell. I hope she gets better. I made a terrible mistake; I stole a baby's toy. I shall return it. Like everyone else, I have my faults. But I also have strengths. Such as a good, level head and inner discipline.

I AM NOT losing my grip.

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Chapter 12

"Hello Paulie."

"Frances."

How long was it since last they had met? Paulie Rayle had no clear recollection. His ex-wife's voice, a velvet contralto, was disconcerting in its lack of immediate familiarity. And her general appearance—The Frances installed in his mind had eroded into a vague approximation; the woman before him was neither so tall nor so angular. Only the wanton witch hair, now with some grey streaks allowed, and the quiet sense of chic, the impeccable couture, and the big, strong, healthy, pearly teeth were true to his expectations. The years had been kind to her.

The hammering of his heart was surely audible to everyone in this siesta-time quietude? And how, he wondered, did she see him? Did he disappoint? If she was shocked, she hid it well. Her luminous eyes—did she wear contacts, these days?—betrayed nothing save gratitude. A frightening amount of gratitude, as though he were an eminent surgeon, the only one qualified to operate, capable of saving her.

So this, Paulie thought, is what I secretly want to happen, in this boxworld of mine? My hoped-for scenario. For I am, most likely, still boxed-up and dreaming.

Framed in the arched doorway, the actress in her ever conscious of proscenia, Frances said, “Thank you for coming.”

He shrugged. “That's okay.”

Frances smiled, and it took him by surprise; how could he have forgotten her power? That way she had of making you feel you were transparent to her. She was able, without effort, to read anyone and everyone. The world's wise mother. But most easily of all, she could read Paulie Rayle. He had always been naked before her, and her smile, small and fond, was the sign of her own reacquaintance with this fact.

“Processia.”

“Hello, Frances.”

Sesha Roffey was stiff, her voice taut and hoarse, that of a fan at the feet of an idol.

“How was the journey?” Frances came forward, gave him a peck on the cheek. And then suddenly she was putting out her arms, and they were hugging, not without some awkwardness on both sides. She gave off a scent of essential oil, heavy, lemony. Her body lacked substance in comparison with Ruth. Up close, the marks of age were more apparent; her lips, besieged by tiny radiating lines, were no longer so full as her lipstick pretended, he noticed as, briefly, she pursed them to kiss Sesha Roffey.

“I'm sure the both of you could do with a rest?” Frances tossed back her hair. “A freshen-up? We'll talk later.”

A young Spaniard, so ludicrously handsome and psychotrichologically Super-Congruent he made Paulie feel like Quasimodo in a fright wig, escorted them up stone steps of such worn, well-trodden substantivity as to set him marvelling at the flimsy things the world let a person parlay into real estate. The Happy Hair Book. What a strange old game life was.

Sesha, Paulie saw, was in a trance. “Beautiful place,” he murmured redundantly.

Her response was an awed pant.

The rooms were adjacent. His was small, the furnishings basic, almost spartan, exquisitely timeless. Ruth

would have loved it. They had similar aesthetic tastes, Ruth and Frances.

Paulie stretched out on the bed and thought, I should never have come. This is ridiculous, pointless. He could do nothing for Frances. Requesting his presence was a symptom of her illness. He could be of no help, and just as long as that was understood.

But of what consequence was any of this in a world—incredibly, it had slipped to the back of his mind—in a world that was, very probably, not Groundworld, but a boxworld, a mere recording of the real world, stored in the innards of a Dreambox? Perhaps his own box, or maybe someone else's.

There was a knock at the door.

SenorSleek again, Frances's factotum, swift and efficient. Paulie had requested the use of a mobe and, a bare two minutes later, here it was, a bang-up-to-date Shintube wrist model, along with its attendant pair of smartspecs and, rather touchingly, a jug of fresh orange juice. Paulie thanked the man, took a shower, poured out some juice and then, returning to the bed to rest his aching back, he donned the 'specs and asked the mobe to put him through to Hilford Abbots.

But first, the mobe had a question: "Does my voice please you?" The vocpat was female, the mobe having established his sex from his own telltale timbre. It was the standard default vocpat, that popular international business choice: Classy Girl Friday.

"You'll do," Paulie told it.

"Does that mean you're pleased?"

"Immensely."

"I'm so glad ... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"Big Boy."

"And your preferred demeanour and vocab level is....?"

"I don't know, what've you got?"

"Streetslut, Cutesy No-threat, Jailbait Ear Candy, Exotic Flower, Postgrad Compeer are the options currently loaded. These are merely a representative sample of the wide range of demeanours available. Additional demeanour chips may be obtained from your nearest Shintube stockist or any good infocoms outlet, or downloaded with payment by transac ring. I can, should you prefer, adopt a male persona, and you may also program me to share up to sixteen prejudices—although please note that this is purely polite indulgence and in no way constitutes an endorsement of bigotry. So name your demeanour, Big Boy?"

"Postgrad Compeer."

"Nice choice. But can I just say," the mobe's voice adjusted itself, acquiring a more aptly sonorous texture, "that hardly jibes with your name?"

Robin Richly, the Hilford Abbots elder in whose custody resided the village's sole sliproad onto what people of Robin's age still called the 'Information Superhighway', was a sometime folk singer turned

trader in vintage home electronics, those ancient LED Sinclair calculators and clunking great analog video decks that were currently de rigeur collectibles among London's trendiest fadgeteers. Robin treated the things like faithful old animals cruelly dumped once cooler pets came along. His love-hate relationship with technology Paulie found refreshingly congenial; the back-to-nature fanaticism of some others in the village was a state of mind with which he was unable to identify. Purism was untenable; the compromise reached was to advertise the village itself on the Net, but to buy and sell face-to-face with visitors or via snailmail. It was a situation increasingly precarious, the commercial value of its quirkiness in decline.

Use of Robin's phone was not meant to be casually contemplated—a good villager was always cognizant of the distinction between luxury and necessity—and Robin's moods could range from effusive to curmudgeonly. Paulie steeled himself as, via landline fibropt, Robin's demi-goatee and Einstein mop materialized on the smartspecs' v-screen, the diamantine nose-stud that was his latest bid for youth cred undermined by the stale fashion statement of an intricately henna'd forehead.

“Paul?” He was slightly taken aback, but otherwise buoyant and affable. “I was told it was someone name of ... Big Boy? My little friend here says you're in Seville?” Drily, Robin asked, “Real or Pseudo? Is that orange juice you're drinking? How very touristic. Give my love to Carmen. I take it all this is connected with with that abominable racket ast night? Don't say that's what we have to look forward to, tourists descending from the heavens in flying Fords and Chryslers? Damn thing must have woken up the whole village.”

“Sorry. Bit of an emergency.”

“Oh. Oh dear. Anything we can do to help?”

“No, no. Everything's fine now, thanks.”

Robin's caterpillar eyebrows maintained their quizzicality, but Paulie offered no further elucidation; Robin was a terrible gossip. Not that word wouldn't get round the whole village at light-speed. Others must have heard the verticar. Paulie didn't much care for Hilford Abbots' share-your-troubles-and-lighten-the-load policy. It may have been good for the soul, but he was too much a child of the age not to find it invasive. Or maybe, to be brutally cynical, he sought insulation from the woes of his neighbours. And Ruth, for all her bucolic nostalgia, set a similar value on privacy.

“So anyway,” he asked Robin, “how are things?”

“Oh, no real cause for complaint. How's about you?”

“Not so bad.”

“Ruth and the baby?”

“Fine, last I heard.”

Robin put his long, vampiric fingers to his temples in the manner of a stage psychic. “You'd like to speak to Ruth ... am I right?” He paused to yawn spectacularly. “Listen Paul, if you've any problems ... I mean, old mate, forgive my bluntness, but what are you doing in the village if you prefer to live like city folk? We're here to help each other. Ever heard of the word ‘community’?”

Spare me the sermon, you old fart, Paulie thought. He said acidly, “So you're going to kick us out for lacking communal spirit, for not being true adherents, disrespecting the craft village ethos?” He sighed,

regretting the outburst. "Look Robin, I'm sorry, I'm tired. And I apologize for the verticar waking you up. It won't happen again. And I promise we'll do our best to turn over a new leaf and be model villagers if you could just do a little tiny favour for me and tell Ruth I arrived safely and I'll be back just as soon as I can."

"I'll do better than that. I'll pop over and get her round here so you two can have a..." Robin grimaced cartoonishly then took on the air of a raddled old roué straight out of de Sade. "Why shut off a part of yourself? The primitive part. We all have it, us males ... we're all part beast. Why not..."

Paulie pulled off the 'specs; he knew the sort of perverted pirate morphomercial spiel he was in for. With weary disgust, he listened as Robin's sampled, mimicked voice lisped wetly on, "...indulge this dark side of your nature? Sonia wants someone to punish her. Sonia is real, live, flesh-and-blood, bruisable. Let me repeat that: SONIA IS A GENUINE, REAL, NOT VIRTUAL, TEENAGE SUBMITRIX WHO WILL DO ANYTHING ... ANYTHING AT ALL ... to appease your libido. Rip off her clothes with our RemoTouch manipulators! Violate her from the privacy of your home! Enjoy the full panphonic splendour of her screams! Do as you will with her! In Fist Mode our RemoTouch manipulators can deliver jaw-splintering, rib-crushing blows with greater speed and accuracy than any heavyweight champion. Or if it's chops you prefer, choose from twenty-four key Martial Arts moves. And, if all that crunch potential isn't enough, why not try our new RemoTeeth biting mechanism? To all of these devices Sonia will eagerly sub ... sub ... sub ... submit herself." The hiccups signalled that the mobe's shitfilters had finally made headway in their fight to shrug off the morphomercial and restore the true Robin Richly. Paulie donned the 'specs again. The phony Robin's face was contorting grotesquely, leering and sneering and scowling as the puppet program battled on to the bitter end: "For furt ... fur ... further information and an appetite-whetting audvid clip, simply swipe your transac ring by the sensor on your mobe, or, altern ... tern ... tern ... tern ... ternatively..." And then at last the shitfilters did away with the sick, illicit Netvert that had hijacked Robin's screen image.

"What was that?" Robin demanded grimly. "What was it making me say?"

"Some kind of crap." Paulie shrugged. It would only upset the poor old sod. "I don't know, I wasn't really listening." What a fuckawful world, he thought. No wonder they want to keep the village Netless.

"Well anyhow, before I was so rudely interrupted, I was saying that I'd nip round and get Ruth for you ... how's about that? Stay tuned. Shan't be a sec."

"Okay." Paulie felt warmth for the man. Robin always tried to be kind, and that, in Paulie's scheme of things, was perhaps the most admirable of traits. "I'm humbled by your neighbourly example. You'll make a villager out of me yet."

"Smart-arsed young herbert."

"Thanks, Robin."

"Don't mench, old mate."

While he waited for Robin to fetch Ruth, Paulie asked the mobe whether there had been any reports, anywhere on the planet, of Sick Nick copycat violence. There had. Several, from several countries. Paulie then asked the mobe if anyone out there was claiming that this world was a boxworld.

"Okay, Big Boy..." After an impressively brief interval, the mobe came back with: "Two hundred ninety-four hits."

“How many in California?”

“One hundred eighty-one.”

“Typical example? Leave out California.”

“Okay ... Humberto Sfat, Sao Paulo, Brazil ... and I quote, translating with Shintube FideliTrans software, the Number One choice for all your...”

“Just do it.”

“Quote: This morning a considerable portion of the body of one of the neighbourhood tomcats, the uppermost thirty percent, including virtually the whole of the creature's head, suddenly vanished off the face of the earth for a period which, as I was without a timepiece, I could only estimate to be in excess of one full minute and a half. The remainder of the cat's body could plainly be seen to be hollow, and yet the animal was going about its business perfectly as normal. The absent body portion reappeared with equal abruptness. None of this should happen. I do not take drugs or own a Dreambox, and have no history of psychosis or brain damage. The cat, a friendly tortoiseshell, was flesh-and-blood, most certainly not a mechanical or holographic simulation. The only theories I can come up with to explain this most bizarre occurrence are: A. I am insane. B. I do take drugs, but am in denial. C. Unbeknown to myself, I do in fact own a Dreambox and am using it now; or D. I am not my original human self but a humiliated copy in someone else's boxworld. Ergo the animal suffered a data dropout, rather tardily corrected. Can anyone else cite comparable experiences?”

Paulie had known there would be many such claims out there; the Net was overflowing with every kind of crap imaginable shat out by the world's massed ranks of flaky flanses.

“Another?”

“Quote: Some of you out there, you people reading this, SOME OF YOU KNOW THIS IS NOT THE REAL WORLD. Things have happened to you, strange, inexplicable things...”

Paulie listened to a whole bunch of them: reports of events that supposedly couldn't take place within the normal realms of possibility. Stories from all over the globe. Everything from heard-it-a-million-times ‘miracles’ to the sect in Austin, Texas who believed that the entire human race, except for one solitary US astronaut, had been wiped out in 1962 by World War Three. Apparently, an indestructible alien observer who had bemusedly weathered the thermonuclear exchange took pity on the lone survivor and, with the aid of a ‘hyper-advanced Dreambox-type device’ had set about generating this present world in order to keep the one remaining human from losing his mind through loneliness. The man had since died of old age, and the alien had felt so sorry for us poor pseudohumans that it was keeping the dream going. But for how much longer?

Paulie was about to call a halt to the parade of paranormality when the mob dug up a snippet that brought him up short, for it surely had erotoroutine written all over it? Members of a Lutheran congregation in central Copenhagen had found themselves staging an impromptu, involuntary orgy, blame for which was being put on everything from demonic possession to mass hysteria/hypnosis to some form of airborne erotogenic agent released by the local branch of the worldwide gerontocidal terrorist network—practically all the churchgoers were of pensionable age, and four fatal heart attacks had ensued—or even an incredibly callous secret NATO psychotropic weapons test. Suggestions that an erotoroutine had somehow escaped from the Net, assumed biological form and infiltrated physical

reality—or even that this world was a boxworld—were not, it would seem, being taken very seriously by the authorities.

Paulie asked the mobe to check for chronocorrespondence. Of the two hundred and ninety-four hits, one hundred and thirteen cited a common timeframe: between 4 and 7pm GMT on the previous day.

Paulie thought, While the real Paulie Rayle was asleep, I, this Paulie Rayle copy, was struck off from my Groundworld original, along with all these other humiliants around me in this ontologically inferior world.

Or had he already been hooked up and dreaming. Was this his own boxworld, still?

His mind reeled.

So already, people were beginning to suspect? There had always been a quota of hardcore paranoiacs who, right from the moment they'd first heard of Dreamboxes, boxworlds and the Berkeley Effect, had seen the possibility that this was a boxworld. But now—if he was right, and not himself a rubber roomer—momentum would build and build as more and more boxworld flaws manifested themselves. And then eventually, what? Would millions hook up to their Dreamboxes to try and escape, only to plunge ever deeper into irrealitude? What could anyone do? What would happen if the box was switched off, damaged, destroyed? What if they were on one of those dirt-cheap, bargain-basement boxes, especially vulnerable to entropic declension? Even with the very best boxes, a certain amount of data corruption was, over time, unavoidable, and the user's forebrain could not always be relied upon to rationalize every anomaly.

For the majority of this pseudoplanet's population, Paulie surmised, understanding of their plight would be a gradual, painful process. For the longest possible interval, they would refuse to be unduly troubled by the increasing proportion of weird phenomena in a world that was already too weird for them. They would regard the disillusioned, knowledge-burdened minority as the latest in a long and tiresome line of doomsday merchants, religious nuts with a hi-tech dusting.

Paulie thought, What a bleak, dour creed. Or could it be that humiliants have souls? Will God save us? Is that our only hope?

Except, perhaps, for that same mad hope he himself had once harboured: the hope that the human mind, his own mind, possessed somewhere within itself the power not only to dream up a better world, but to make it the realest of worlds. And yet, whose mind, in this world, was anything more than simulacral? Would it not be fair to assume that the only minds of any depth, the only effectively pseudohuman humiliants, were those entities directly involved with, interactive with, the box user, with everyone else in the world mere cardboard cut-outs?

My own selfconscious reflections appear to qualify me as one of the Elect, he concluded wryly.

He asked the mobe, “And what about you? What do you think? How real is this world?”

“I'm afraid I cannot help you there, Big Boy. Questions of ontology are outside of my scope.”

“You mean you don't care.”

“Well let me put it this way: the lack of that basic human motivational underpinning, a dread of death, imposes a limit on the profundity of my sentience. I would refer you instead to a fellow human of suitably like mind. Do you wish me to conduct a search?”

“Do I detect a sarcasm chip?”

“Mine ... I am a Generation Six-B, emphatically NOT to be confused with a common-or-garden Six-A ... is the first generation of mobs equipped with an aptitude, albeit modest as yet, for the recognition and deployment of irony, or something superficially analogous to it.”

“Your filters aren't so hot, though, are they?”

“Big Boy, you should hear some of the ads that DON'T make it through.” The voice, Paulie could have sworn, registered an affront. “All Shintube mobs ship with the Strictmother Seven, which, as you may have heard, is currently VaticaNet's benchmark filterchip. In any event, I can scarcely be held accountable for the ability of illegal software to out-evolve antipiratory ... You have a call. Hilford Abbots, England.”

Ruth bloomed up onto the screen. Her face looked unrefreshed, left over from yesterday.

Softly, Paulie asked her, “Are you okay?”

Ruth nodded. “What's it like in Seville? Nicer than here, I bet.”

“Too tired to take it in right now. How's Kali?”

Ruth held up their little daughter to the camera.

“Hello!” Paulie waved. “Hello, Funsie.”

Kali's bewildered saucer eyes were looking everywhere but at him.

“How's Frances?” Ruth wanted to know.

“She seems okay.” Paulie shrugged. “I mean I've only spoken to her for a moment, so far.”

“Pleased to see you, was she?”

“Look don't ask me what she's expecting. I'm not a doctor. In fact I'm still not sure I should've come here at all.”

“No? Why's that?”

Ruth had lapsed into full-blown sullenness, and Paulie thought savagely, So why did you say I should go to her? Did I mistakenly take the gesture at face value? Was it a test? Am I being unfaithful just by being here?

He said, “We're both tired.” He forced a yawn to illustrate. Tiredness, he thought. The great catch-all.

Ruth asked, “So how long do you think you'll be staying?”

“Not too long. Not once she finds out I'm no use to her.”

“Have you talked to doctors or anybody? What do they say?”

“No, I haven't, yet. Haven't been here that long.” He thought about showing her the room, doing a full-circle pan with the mobe. But no. Instead, he reminded her, “It was you who said I should come. I was hesitating, if you recall?”

“You took your Dreambox.”

“I haven't used it.” And then it hit him again, bringing with it a wave of nausea, this was not the true Groundworld, so what the fuck did any of this matter?

“Is there anything else?” Ruth sniffed and wiped her nose. “Only Kali needs a feed.”

“Talk to you again soon, then.”

He had that tightness in his stomach, that churning, somatic recognition that, as had always been the case with Frances, Ruth's insight surpassed his self-knowledge.

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Chapter 13

Coming back from Robin Richly's she had Kali facing inward, nuzzling close against her, the two of them pooling their body warmth. Sometimes it was nice for Kali to face outwards in the sling; that way she could see the world around her. But today it was cold.

Ruth climbed the stile and, instead of going straight back to the cottage, followed the other footpath down to the riverside. Bolo bounded along after her, braked to a halt near the water and sat panting, showing sheepdog sense, knowing better than to jump in, today.

There stood the willow tree where, last summer, she and Paulie had ducked in under the leaves, hand in hand. Ruth tingled at the memory of it, of the way that Paulie, as a lover, would treat her like the sacred centre of his world. She was starting to feel ready again at last. And where was he? Off in another country. Anyway it was muddy now under the tree, and far too freezing.

In years to come, they might not be able to return and see the willow again. All of this area, in fact a whole big chunk of East Anglia, might end up under the North Sea before too long, if the climate changed like they were saying it might. Everyone would have had to leave the village. But then, the village had never really felt like home to her. Could any place, in this world?

Kali was whinging. It was time for her feed. Ruth fumbled with the feeding zip. Another good thing about babies facing inward was the way you could feed them as you walked along, sort of like planes filling other planes' fuel tanks in the air.

The sucking put her in mind of Paulie, of the way he too liked to suck on her. It wasn't so bad, now; the two things, the two images, completely different but in one way not so different, were no longer at war. She was more used to motherhood, now. Before, at first, it had been unthinkable that she should let him do the same as little Kali did, that he should even want to.

“There you go, babes.” She lifted Kali into a better position, a more comfortable one, and held her there against her in the sling. “Did you see your Daddy? Did you see Daddy on the phone?”

How long would it take? Ruth wondered. How long would Frances keep him there in Spain?

“Your Daddy loves you.”

Tears welled. What was she doing to herself, sippy cow? What was she worried about? Frances grabbing him back? Anyone would think he didn't have a mind of his own. If he went back to Frances, well, he went back. People did such things. You were always hearing about people walking out on people; they always had, and probably always would. It was Paulie who had walked out on Frances in the first place, after all. And perhaps, Ruth considered, once you'd left one person, it wasn't too hard to do it again. Even old Robin Richly was said to have walked out on two women and left two lots of kids behind.

Well, she thought, if Paulie wanted to fuck off he could fuck off. He'd been given the ideal opportunity.

Would you just fucking listen to me? she said to herself. “Eh, Kali? Mmm?”

Kali ignored her; she just kept guzzling, her little cheek busy pumping in and out.

There was, Ruth told herself firmly, such a thing as trust. Not that she didn't trust Paulie; it was more that she didn't trust life to be kind to her. Why should it, when it wasn't particularly kind to most people? Why should she be spared being dumped?

If only poor old Mum had still been alive. When Paulie had first been explaining about Dreamboxes, what they could do, one of the very first things he had said was that it would be a way of bringing her mother back to life. She could hook up and have Mum—and anybody else she wanted—with her there in the boxworld.

The idea had revolted her.

It was like when they'd bring to life dead actors with computer tricks and use them in ads. It was like that, a bit, only worse. She hadn't been able to tell Paulie why, exactly; he should have known why, the feeling part should have, never mind the thinking part. She told him to leave her mother alone. She made him promise that, when he boxed up, he didn't have Mum in his boxworld. She knew she must have sounded cranky, and she hadn't minded Paulie dreaming about her, and even about Frances, if that was what he really wanted.

But not Mum.

Paulie hadn't come out and called her superstitious and primitive, but he must have thought it.

“You have a diaper leak,” whispered the sling in its obnoxious little singsong Disney voice. It was American, fancy-arsed and computerized, and was covered in garish stars and stripes, but the padding had looked comfortable when she'd caught sight of it in that charity shop in Cambridge.

“Fuck off,” she told the baby sling.

“Is that appropriate language to use in front of an infant?”

Bolo growled; he was a discerning dog, he didn't like the sling's voice any more than she did.

“Bol-locks,” sang Ruth with feeling. “Bollocks bollocks bol-locks.”

“I have no record of that term, but it sounds indecent.”

“Balls.”

“Is that appropriate lan...”

The voice had been coming from a little round flat speaker sewn into the sling's left shoulder strap. Ruth had managed, with her teeth, to rip out enough of the stitching to be able to hook her finger in under the speaker and tear it loose, and now she held it in the palm of her hand.

“...guage to use in front of an infant?”

She nearly dropped it, the thing was so creepy, still alive, still talking back to her. It must, she thought, be an all-in-one thing, computer brain, speaker and everything, together.

“SAGRADA.”

The Spanish word, crackling totally unexpectedly out from the speaker, brought forth from Ruth an involuntary yell. With all her force she flung the thing away, sending it skimming across the surface of the water. Three, four times it bounced before sinking out of sight. Ruth stood there shaking, startled, disturbed. The Spanish word meant ‘sacred,’ in the feminine, and the sound of it had stolen the breath from her lungs. For it was like a message, a reminder. But of what, she couldn't say.

* * * *

Sesha lay atop the gorg Islamic throw and rested, sinking briefly into something like sleep at its lightest but never quite fully shutting down. Frances, Bubu Flumpkin, that dreadful episode in the verticar. Why had she been summoned here? What did her boss want with her?

This was only their third, no, fourth, encounter. Frances had always looked stunning, but never quite so radiant. The telotherapy? What, Sesha wondered soberly, were the visible signs of Angel Syndrome? Were there any? It was impossible to believe that someone so vibrant was seriously ailing, might soon be lost to the world.

And that beautiful, beautiful Spanish guy who had shown them to their rooms! And the house, this place—heaven or what? She had to keep reminding herself that this was the real thing, not PseudoSeville; although poor, frucked-up Paul Rayle would doubtless dispute that. It was galling, the man having been brought here to help when he himself was in dire need of treatment. Frances still felt for him—any stupe could see that. A good start would be to take away his Dreambox. Was he on it now, there in his room next-door, making matters worse for himself? He'd lost the plot, the poor guy. Totally.

Sesha thought, And so have I, stealing a toy from a baby. She had brought along one of the two the Bubu Flumpkins, hoping to find a way of restoring it to its rightful owner, Paul Rayle's baby daughter Kali. Her conscience demanded that the Bubu be returned.

A pang of hunger made Sesha realize that she had eaten absolutely nothing since the previous evening's plate of designer pasta back at her flat.

Cricklewood seemed a world away now.

And then she thought, The Spanish office. Why don't I ask for a transfer to the Spanish office? All right, so I don't speak the language, but there are ways and means and all manner of hi-tech assists to accelerate my learning. Why not? Why ever the fruck not?

Sesha got up from the bed. She was pouring herself a glass of the juice that the lovely Spanish guy had brought for her, when there came a gentle little knock at the door, followed by a soft voice:

“Processia?”

It was Frances.

“Sorry to disturb you.”

“That's quite all right. Really.” Sesha stood aside for her boss to enter. So this was the legendary Frances Rayle informality? Enchantment became alarm when Sesha saw how vulnerable Frances looked. Tired, older, under some kind of cloud. Disoriented, almost.

“I should be letting you rest, I know, but...” Frances heaved a deep sigh. “I can't rely on being ... *compos mentis* ... indefinitely.”

Sesha was speechless in the face of so frank a confidence.

“I need someone to look after the Institute.” Frances regarded her levelly. “I believe I may have found the right person.”

Paul Rayle?

Frances was soliciting her views on the handing over of the Institute to a saddo Dreambox junkie who sneered at PsyTri? The shock turned Sesha's legs to jelly. Was this is a bad dream?

“I believe you to be eminently qualified.”

“Me?” Sesha couldn't prevent herself blurting it out, to her profound embarrassment.

“Your record, since you've been with us, is second to none. What's that word?” Frances kneaded her forehead with the heel of her heavily-ringed hand. “Exemplary. You would definitely seem to fit the bill, so far as I can...” She paused, presumably at the sight of Sesha's stupefaction. “Forgive me. The decision is yours.”

Sesha struggled for words.

Frances eyed her keenly. “Would you at least consider the offer?”

Sesha could do nothing but nod blankly, excruciatingly aware that she resembled more a besotted schoolgirl than the outstanding employee to whom Frances was appealing, and in whom she did not recognize herself.

This cannot be, her common sense protested.

“I know it's right out of the blue,” Frances sympathized, gently touching Sesha's arm.

"I really don't know what to say."

"I'd be grateful if you'd think it over." With a smile, Frances whispered, "You'll be fine."

And then she collapsed.

Sesha caught her, breaking her fall.

"FLIF!" she shouted desperately.

Her Personal Dangerword, selected on the basis of its unlikeliness to occur in normal conversation, aroused her mobe from its slumber in her handbag. "Seeking assistance," came the muffled mobe voice.

Oh please God, let her be all right! Tears were flooding Sesha's eyes. Oh God, PLEASE DON'T LET HER DIE!

Already, she could hear someone approaching, running to her aid. The door flew open. The Spanish guy. He took hold of Frances, scooped her up like a child, carried her across to the bed.

"She just ... fainted." Sesha told him.

"Is she all right?" asked Paul Rayle, from the doorway; he must have heard.

"I..." Sesha watched the young guy press a hypoderm gun into Frances's bare arm. "Frances fainted."

Paul asked the guy, "Does this happen often?"

"Increasingly, I'm afraid." The reply came from Frances herself. Smiling wanly at the Spanish guy, she coughed, "Thank you, Xabier, I think I'll be fine now."

"You are sure?"

"Mmm-hmm. Yes. Thank you." Frances let Xabier help her up into a sitting position. "I wish I could describe the sensation. It isn't painful ... not in the ordinary sense. But it does leave one drained." She swung her legs down off the bed. Very good, smooth legs, Sesha noted. "I'm sorry, Processia, if I startled you. You must think me ... bothersome."

"Not at all."

Frances turned her eyes to Paul. "It's so hard to describe," she said again.

"But it's not painful?"

He might have been mocking her; there was some slight thing in his tone, and Sesha felt angry.

"No," Frances replied, getting up, the Xabier guy coming to her aid. "Quite the opposite."

Paul Rayle stood there and said nothing more.

"I'll let you rest, now." Frances took a deep breath. "Please forgive the intrusion. And yes," she gave Sesha a think-it-over look, "the offer is genuine."

Sesha nodded.

A little unsteadily, with Xavier supporting her, Frances walked toward the door. Paul Rayle made way for them. Only when they had gone did he seem to feel it safe to murmur, "Panic over."

This was meant to be amusing? Sesha felt loathing for Frances's ex-husband, with his self-absorbed self-importance masquerading as modesty.

Suddenly he asked her, "Have you ever used a Dreambox?"

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Chapter 14

In the jacuzzi aboard his yacht in the Aegean, megatycoon Bertrand Laurel took a briefing from P. Wendell Murchison, his Technical head honcho. The report came via the Mindseye of Mitzi, the off-duty captain of Laurel's all-female crew, as she rode her employer at a canter, breasts bobbing like buoys, splashed water and sweat gathering on her in beads, running in rivulets down her smooth-shaven ebony scalp. Laurel couldn't stand Murchison's nerdy pencilprick voice; and anyhow, who wouldn't prefer to hear it this way?

"As a means of predicting upcoming trends and developments, the Dreambox falls well short of infallibility," Mitzi relayed. "The ongoing pattern of events in each individual boxworld does not accurately prefigure future happenings here in Groundworld. Indeed, the Dreambox has been cited as evidence against determinism. It seems that God does, in fact, play dice, if only at the level of human life."

What a load of ass-gas, Laurel thought.

He did a little yap-yap-yap mime that caused Mitzi to grin, squeeze on him tighter with those vicelike vag muscles and work her right index finger, packing a knuckle-length smartstim vibrothimble, further up him, locating his M-Spot with her customary expertise.

She continued—or rather, to exonerate the poor chick, Murchison continued, Mitzi being merely his mouthpiece: "Of course, it may well be that one of the boxworlds represents a perfect or near-perfect reflection of what, for convenience, we might call the real future. But the problem is, which boxworld?" Mitzi bit down on her luscious lower lip as she started squirming herself toward another climax. "And if we instruct box users to conjure up a forward-time-travel scenario, then the futures they visit can be nothing but imaginary futures, of no more practical utility than the forecasts of conventional futurologists." Mitzi closed her eyes, committing half her mind to what her body was engaged in below water level, and the other half to passing on the shit she was receiving through her implant. "In short, I would recommend that the best use we can make of Dreambox technology would be to concentrate all our resources upon developing..." Mitzi gasped, "...a method of advantageous Groundworld pre-emption, for it would be wise to assume that our competitors are currently engaged in this very branch of..." Mitzi came, hitting soprano with the last word, "...reSEARCH...!"

She was a wild thing when she came, and Laurel always enjoyed watching her in the throes, thrashing like a hooked marlin. Of all his crew, Mitzi was the least likely to ever be faking it on him; no way could anyone simulate such a pitch of abandon. Not even Frances frucking Rayle, with her extensive English theatre training, could have put on this kind of a performance, back when she was of fruckable age, there

on his screen in his bedroom when he was a kid, back before she'd made it big with that hair idea, that frucking Happy Hair Book and all its lucrative spinoffs..

Whilst being entertained by Mitzi's testament to his potency, Laurel pondered over the Dreambox report. So Murchison was, in effect, saying, 'Let's forget the oracle idea and go for the Big One. Let's see if we can change the frucking world, replace it with a better version. Because, hey, if we don't do it, some other frucker will. Because commerce is combat.'

"As a matter of fact," Murchison went on, through Mitzi, "Erland Zeller, discoverer of the Berkeley Effect, has recruited a team of top imagineers—people with measurably exceptional imaginary powers—and is currently engaging in secret Dreambox Research over at Palo Alto."

"Well, find out what the fruck he's doing."

"We're trying to. One thing we can be pretty sure of: he's trying to replace this world with his own idea of an improved version. And Zeller's a Utopian. You only have to read his theoretical..."

"Yeah, yeah."

Oddly enough, now that he thought about it, Laurel realized how very much he liked the world just the way it was. He had come up from nothing, made a multibillionaire of himself. He influenced fashions, tastes, opinions worldwide. He engineered reputations, sculpted worldviews, set the agenda for the zeitgeist; for instance, he, Bertrand Laurel, had coined the verb 'to fruck.' Such cool and quirky Laurelisms had conquered the planet. Nietzsche would have approved. He had his health, no trouble sleeping at night, and not at all did he dislike the way he looked. He was only in his thirties. How could things be any better? And besides, wouldn't life in a whole new, custom-built Groundworld just wind up robbing him of his sense of achievement? Even if he didn't know that the odds were stacked in his favour, the secret truth would remain, and Bertrand Laurel could not bear the thought such a state of affairs existing.

But commerce is combat. It had to be done. How could he afford not to take part in this struggle? The race was on to find a way of dreaming real. The winner would dominate the world. And maybe if the Zeller team won, domination wouldn't be an option, not in some fairyland of sweetness and light. A world entirely without balls.

The whole thing still struck him as crazy—beyond crazy—but Murchison took it seriously, and Laurel hadn't gotten where he was today by running scared of crazy schemes. Gotten there and stayed there. That was why he would give Murchison the go-ahead.

Mitzi started off again, but Laurel found the urge had left him, and he clenched at the approach of her fingertip, denied re-entry to the vibrothimble. Limp, now, he had already slipped out of her. He dismissed her, awarding an appreciative slap on the butt as she stepped out of the jacuzzi. Then he asked to speak to Murchison, aud only. His Rolex wrist mobe put him straight through. Soon, once they perfected a send-receive neurochip, he would be doing the bulk of his business the pretty way, through one or another of his girls.

"Mr Laurel?" came the beat-me-up bleat of his Tech chief.

"About that Dreambox idea ... replacing this world with a better one?" The notion sounded, spoken out loud, so completely and utterly nuts that Laurel felt anger at Murchison for having given him cause to voice it. The thing felt somehow like an affront to his authority, so lunatic was it.

“Advantageous Groundworld pre-emption?”

“Whatever.” Fruck your goddamn nerdese, Laurel thought. “So like, how do you figure this can be achieved?”

“Not very easily. We'd need to find ourselves a person with a certain special kind of imagination.”

“Special? How so?”

“Someone possessing the ability to focus quantum compliance down to a single conceptual monad, that of ontosupplantation.”

“So tell me, Murchison, you get your rocks off from this all this frucking jargon?” Sometimes, hearing the horseshit he came out with, Laurel couldn't believe he was paying this dwoip. At the end of the day, though, he knew that Murchison was well worth his salary. The thing was, Bertrand Laurel didn't like to be on someone else's ground, like he definitely was here.

He said, “You mean someone who can make their dream more real than real?”

“Exactly.”

“And how do we set about finding such a person?”

“I really wish I knew,” Murchison confessed. “Aside from trial and error, getting one person after another to hook up and dream, I can't at present think of any way of proceeding.”

“I'm expecting you to come up with something.”

“Of course, there's always the Zeller team. But I hear they're under very heavy guard. Security like nothing you've ever seen. All except for...”

“Except for what?”

“Well apparently one of Zeller's imagineers, a real star, one of the very best talents in the business, had a disagreement with the old man and quit the team; seems this person has their own idea of what constitutes Utopia. Whoever it is, they've gone underground, working alone. Now if we can track down this person...”

“I trust you're already working on it?”

“Yes, sir, Mr Laurel, have no fear.”

“And can we safely assume that everyone else is stuck in the same shithole? Excuse me a moment.” Laurel was straining to get his left big toe up to his mouth so he could bite off a hangnail he had just noticed. “Way I see it, there are probably people all over the planet—not only this team of Zeller's, but other organizations, individuals—who have hit on the idea of supplanting this world with their boxworld, and who are now, even as we speak, hooked up and turning mental somersaults.”

“That's very probably true.”

Laurel finally got to the nail sliver, tore it off and spat it away. His bodily suppleness pleased him. "And I guess if any of them do succeed, we won't know anything about it?"

"That's almost certainly right—human memory, human consciousness in its collective entirety will have been altered to accord with the amended realitude. There's nothing to say that it couldn't already have happened."

Well, whoever may have loaded the dice, Laurel thought, I'm still in the game. I haven't started losing yet. He said to Murchison, "Find me someone who can replace this world with a new world in which the Dreambox was never invented. Even better, a world in which it could never, ever be invented."

"Mr Laurel, with all due respect, I'm not too sure that this would be a particularly shrewd..."

"Shrewd? Leave shrewd to me. You make with the science, I'll handle the strategy. A better world would be a world without all this frucking Dreambox shit. The problem solved in one fell swoop." And, Laurel thought, with no cost to my self-esteem, my accomplishments left undiminished. "In fact why can't we get a whole bunch of people dreaming together, hooked up to one box? Maybe between them they can..."

"It's already been tried." Murchison, for once, had the balls to cut in on him. "And, I'm sure, it's still being attempted. But it doesn't work. No one can figure out a way of stopping the psyches from attacking each other, competing for dominance, cancelling each other out, messing up the Berkeley Effect. Maybe one day we'll find a way round it, but that could be a long way off."

"Well whatever, let me know of any progress."

Laurel broke contact. He was getting hard again, his body's contribution to his self-congratulation. Another bout with Mitzi was in order. No, not Mitzi. Damaris, this time. Laurel asked his mobe to summon the bosomy bosun.

If he had been a cigar smoker, now would have been the time to light up. Laurel felt, at this moment, capable of scheming his way out of any depth of shit. It would be doing this whole world a favour, dreaming the Dreambox right out of existence. Maybe that was the source of his optimism, his sense of mastery. In a funny, superstitious kind of way, it felt like praying to God for some social, as opposed to personal, break, with God being therefore somewhat more likely to deliver the goods. And even though Laurel wasn't nearly so at home as he would like to have been with all this levels-of-realitude monkeygunge, the challenge identified by Murchison excited him. As things were, the only other piece of business to pique his interest of late had been the PsyTri thing, the prospect of eating Frances Rayle, commercially speaking, gobbling her up and thus eradicating his envy of her clever little Institute's hold on women everywhere from Reykjavik to Riyadh.

Commerce is combat.

Could even Machiavelli himself have cooked up all these little side-bets, such as the spychip in the soft toy sent in Frances Rayle's name to her ex-husband's kid? At a crucial stage of negotiations, if Frances started stalling, not meeting Laurel's terms, all he needed was to say the word, and the toy would send out an infrasound burst of precisely the right frequency to induce a seizure in the baby without affecting more mature sensory systems. Things would look bad for the kid, and Frances would get to hear about it—the Asian guy in London, Laurel's PsyTri plant, would make sure of that—and Frances Rayle would be distraught, distracted, and hopefully more agreeable and amenable; or so her psychoprofile strongly suggested. The kid would soon recover from the infrasound—the profile cited stress, not grief, as

harvestable—but in the meantime the ace would have been played, the edge exploited. Okay, so it was the nuttiest ploy since the CIA's legendary last-century attempt to depilate Castro, but wasn't that, when all was said and done, the very root of its appeal? Didn't you just love being at the centre of a web, the more labyrinthine the better? To that, sex came a poor second.

Frances Rayle had no conception of what she was up against. Laurel grinned to himself. He had yet to fully factor in the Angel Syndrome, an unknown quantity but probably a bonus. Vain old bitch. Whose fault but her own?

Commerce is combat.

And combat, as Mussolini used to say, sees man at his finest. With this most profound of human insights Bertrand Laurel settled back in the jacuzzi, adjusting the water level so that his erection just crested the surface, to await the arrival of Damaris.

Less than thirty seconds later she was present and correct, crossing the room toward him, saluting playfully, and throwing off her uniform, letting loose her long straight deep-dyed hot red hair. When she got down to her skin she unzipped that, too, and Sick Nick stepped out from inside.

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Chapter 15

Sesha Roffey was regarding him with unconcealed disgust. “No I haven't used a Dreambox,” she said frostily. “I've better things to be doing with my time.”

But to Paulie Rayle the theory made a good deal of sense. Sesha was Frances's nominee as her successor. A promotion beyond her wildest dreams.

“Just consider this a moment,” he asked of her. “No offense, or anything, but doesn't it seem just a little too good to be true, Frances choosing you to head the Institute? I mean you yourself sounded...”

“I beg your pardon?” She was furious, now. “That happened to be a private conversation.”

Paulie shrugged. “I couldn't help overhearing. The walls are so thin.”

In truth, the only word he had inadvertently caught was when Frances had whispered Sesha's name from outside her door. The rest had been gleaned with the assistance of his mobe, with its amplifying Eavesdrop function. It didn't make him feel very good about himself, but this was an exceptional situation.

“What exactly do you want?” She might have been the class dreamdate squashing a pass from a dweeb. “If it's more of this realworld/boxworld shit ... please, I don't want to hear. You have an addiction. You need help. And, may I just remind you, you're here for Frances's sake?”

He said to her, “If you had a boxworld, this would feature in it. Your dream job. Be honest with yourself.”

“Oh look, go away and get some medication!” Sesha Roffey was, plainly, loath to swear at him, so great was her respect for Frances and, by extension, people of importance to her boss. “You don't know me. You have no conception of what I want out of life, the things I might choose to base my dreams around. I

mean how dare you!" More calmly, she continued, "This is nothing but paranoia. This world we're in is the real world ... only someone very deluded would doubt that."

"Then what about the verticar?"

"What about it?" She refused to be embarrassed. "I may not be able to give an explanation, but that hardly means I have to accept yours. I can live with not knowing, without jumping to ridiculous conclusions about," her voice thickened with scorn, "the fabric of frucking reality."

And then she stood there looking ashamed of herself for losing her cool. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, "but this is too much."

Paulie said, "You must think I'm insane."

"Perhaps you're just tired. I certainly am." She looked away from him as if to contain anger. "Can't you see Frances needs you?"

"I don't know how I can help her," he said truthfully.

"You're helping her already just by being here."

"I hope so."

"What doesn't help is all this constant paranoia."

"I know," he said. "Listen, ignore all that shit. I don't know what's been getting into me lately."

Now he felt stupid, his outlook having shifted in an instant like the pattern in a kaleidoscope. Sessa Roffey had shifted it for him, by so kindly, so very wisely withholding her sympathy. He should thank her. She was absolutely sensible and right; why not just draw a veil over the verticar business? Why did life's grotesque grab-bag of happenings have to add up to a meaningful whole? Wasn't that presupposing order, telos, deity? Sessa Roffey was the adult, measured and level-headed. Like Ruth was the adult. Like Frances. They were all of them identical in that one essential respect. Adults to his child.

And then Paulie thought, But one would be right to presuppose deity, were this a boxworld. And this woman before me, this poor put-upon PsyTri employee, might well be our Maya, the secret weaver of our world. As such, she would be above petty vanities like presenting herself as the planet's foremost beauty; her subtlety of feeling would find more flavour in the humble quotidian, in ordinary personhood. She would be unaware, almost certainly unconscious of her status, much as I myself often come to forget when ensconced within my boxworld.

"You're still thinking..." She was staring at him, reading his eyes. "I don't believe it." She came forward and grasped the doorhandle and stood there waiting. "Please just go."

He said, "Maybe it's the dethan tabs, the Crowning Glory. And the Vitamin C. Maybe it's a deadly combination."

Sessa Roffey said nothing. She just remained there, tight-lipped, holding the door, ready to close it on sick Paulie Rayle and his ramblings.

"Okay. Enough is enough. I know. I'm sorry. Forget it." He did what she wanted, and heard the door

shutting firmly behind him.

* * * *

Back in his own room, Paulie took out, from the folds of the two spare shirts in his rucksack, the Shintube Dreambox, the trodes wrapped tightly around it. Here, he reminded himself, is a source of the most profound bliss. All I need do is hook, speakstart and enter into the bliss belly. And yet, I have no desire, none at all, to avail myself of this wonderful release. So can I be a genuine addict, a true Dreambox junkie?

I need sleep, he thought, lying down and attaching the trodes. My precious siesta. What was the time? Five minutes to three. Although he didn't really like having to use it, you always woke up with such a splitting headache, he activated the Chill function. The Dreambox set about coercing his reticular system into instigating a shutdown.

He was fetched out when the box heard a knock at his door.

As he had expected, his skull had turned to lead whilst shrinking two sizes too small for his brain. With any luck, though, the sleep would have curbed his paranoia.

He tore off the trodes, fumbled the box out of sight under the pillow and opened the door. It was *Senor Sleek* again, and Paulie wondered mock-indignantly, If this is my own boxworld we're in, why am I letting you trump me in the handsome stakes?

"Frances invites you for a drink," the man said solemnly. "Providing it is convenient, yes?"

Paulie nodded. "Okay, yeah. Thanks." He yawned. "That's fine. That'd be nice."

"If you would care to come this way..."

As he followed the man out along the passageway Paulie noticed that he sported a small round shaven patch of scalp around a tiny red zitlike scar, not quite concealed by the lustrous blue-black hair. A Mindseye? His own head felt like it had been fitted with one of the things by a cowboy clinician with a blunt-bitted hand-drill.

Senor Sleek did not stop off at Sessa Roffey's room; the invitation was evidently exclusive. Paulie wondered if Sessa had yet managed to clear her mind of all the crap he'd laid on her? Sleep might have helped with that.

The man led him up another flight of steps, and then another, up and up around the great cool shady central patio with its opulent tiling and its jungle of lush terracotta-potted ferns. Frances had always been fern-crazy. The whole place might have stood unchanged for a thousand years, one felt. Ruth would have been in her element.

They emerged onto a roof garden protected by a photochromic heliodome that tamed the blazing orb overhead. A riot of flowers, to very few of which Paulie could put names. A swimming pool, with wet footprints leading from it to a heavy dark antique wooden table. Drinks. And Frances sitting there, smiling, in a sheeny black swimsuit under an open turquoise towelling robe, her sodden hair backswept, her facial lines and creases more apparent, here, yet at no cost to the sensuality of her countenance; time's tendency toward caricature was, thus far, at any rate, working in her favour. She would still turn heads at seventy, he thought. A woman never less than handsome.

“Did I wake you?” she inquired with concern. “Do you need more time to rest?”

Paulie shook his head, paying dearly for it. “How are you feeling?” he asked her.

“A little better than you, at the moment, I should say. Is that a headache? Can I get you something?”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Nonsense, why suffer? Xabier?”

Her man nodded and disappeared.

Paulie sat down.

“Sangria? Or would you prefer horchata?”

“What’s that?”

“Milk, tiger nuts. Nice. No?”

“Yeah, why not?”

She poured him a glass.

“Thanks.”

It was irritating, the way she felt so free to sit there studying him, looking him over like an artifact.

“Bruises,” she observed. “Scratches. I noticed them before.”

He shrugged. “Don’t ask.”

“You know you really ought to wear your hair down, the way you used to.” And only then, after commenting on his appearance, his sad lack of Psychotrichological Congruence, did she inquire,

“How are Ruth and Kali?”

It was an order of priorities that abruptly brought home to him the simple fact that Frances was not some neutral mentor. She was a woman he had married and left, was someone not necessarily beyond ex-wifely behaviour, for all his sentimental sanctification of her.

“We’re all fine,” he said.

“That’s good.” Frances sipped at her drink. “Why don’t we have them join us?” She was ahead of him, ready to prove him wrong. “It can’t be much fun, stuck out in ... where is it? ... Cambridgeshire?” He found it disingenuous, the haste with which she sought to correct any mistaken impression. “And I’d love to see the baby. How old is she now?”

“Three months.”

“See if Ruth wants to come over.”

The 'See?-You-shouldn't-misjudge-me' subtext could scarcely have been more blatant.

"This is Ruth's kind of place," Paulie admitted.

"And your kind?"

She knew he liked this part of the world; they had come here together, years ago, spent more than one long lazy weekend escaping cold, grey, wet northern climes. Weekends of wine and sunshine and lovemaking.

How they had made love.

He said, "You've done very well for yourself."

"I've been lucky." Diplomatically, she did not touch upon his own, somewhat less exalted position. "Although I suspect you don't entirely approve of psychotrichology?"

"If it helps people it helps people."

"Believe me, Paulie, it does help."

"If you say so."

Frances looked away. "I might have known you would carry a chip on your shoulder."

She shifted in her seat, the robe fell from her thigh and Paulie saw that the crotch of her swimsuit had gone askew, cutting in between the labia, leaving her half-exposed to his gaze. To his embarrassment, Frances caught him before he could avert his eyes. She seemed amused, and did not close her thighs immediately.

Yeah, Paulie thought. Yeah, I know. How crass. His physical response had been instantaneous, taking precedence over everything else. And all because of that one little glimpse. He was hard, his stomach churning with the hot, sickly syrup of desire, and Frances knew it. How crass and pathetic and male.

He turned his head away, gave her the time and privacy to adjust herself.

"Find out if Ruth would like to join us," Frances repeated, and then asked, "Would you care for a swim?"

"I never learnt. Water scares me. Don't you remember?" Already, he was slipping into old patterns, assuming the same old stance with her. "Never did overcome it." You're dead right about that chip on my shoulder, he thought. I wouldn't blame you if you felt like sending me straight back. For I can't help you. I'm no good to you.

*Senor*Sleek reappeared with two headache tablets. Paulie thanked him and took them.

"They're very good," Frances assured him. "Gracias, Xabier."

Her man went off again, and Paulie wondered whether that billowing white shirt featured in Xabier's terms and conditions of employment.

“I thought...” Frances began, weighing her words, “You see, Paul, I thought you might be the one to understand.”

Paulie couldn't deny that he was flattered. This would be catnip to anyone's ego. As to what he was being called upon to comprehend, he had little idea, and even less confidence in his powers of ratiocination. He was, after all, no great shakes as an architect of utopias.

“Something,” said Frances slowly, “is about to happen to me. I believe it will be something in the nature of a ... of a rebirth.”

His innards knotted as he thought, Oh God no, no, please, not Religion. Bitterly, he asked himself, Why didn't I anticipate this? Why else would they call it Angel Syndrome? He couldn't for the life of him see why she should choose him, of all people, to bear witness to a declaration for Jesus.

“I seem to have offended you,” she observed.

“It's just the taste of those tablets.”

“Do I sound as though I'm raving?”

“I'm just not sure what you're telling me.”

“You've studied philosophy. All of this is your *métier*. As I recall, one of the reasons we ... parted company was your desire to devote yourself to the life of the mind.”

She was giving him undue credit. His motives had been twisted, sick, selfish. He recalled them now, recalled them clearly. He had treated their parting as a test of his integrity—could he turn his back on all that wealth?—and had justified it by deciding that there had never been a true meeting of minds, that they were mismatched as a couple in terms of temperament as well as age. He was warped. If what Frances now required were the services of a thinker, there were countless better bets. With her money, she could hire pretty much any Professor Emeritus, amass a team of top-notch emulacra. What was this, keeping it in the family?

“I have great respect for your intelligence, Paul.” She spoke earnestly. “But more than that, I know ... I just feel, very strongly ... that you are the right person to approach with this.”

Paulie told her, “My mind's not what it was.”

Acknowledging his warning with the faintest of smiles, she continued, “I believe that I am about to undergo some form of transcendence ... does that make sense?”

Oh Christ, he thought bone-wearily. Oh God. Here we go.

He asked, “What makes you think that?”

“It's more a case of feeling.” She reached out and, gently, placed a hand—warm, laden with rings and immaculately manicured—on his. A shiver, electric, intense, sent his whole arm tingling; he still hadn't become reaccustomed to physical contact with her. “Something very strange is happening to me, Paul. It's as if I'm preparing for something.” Apologetically, she added, “I expect I'm starting to sound deranged?”

Paulie shook his head. "Weird things happen to people." He thought, If it's derangement we're dealing in, let me give you my thoughts on this world. This subreal boxworld.

"For some while now there have been intimations." Frances lifted her glass, and Paulie saw that her hand was trembling. She sipped. "I've looked into those other cases of so-called Angel Syndrome. Every single one of those people developed the conviction that he or she was in the process of becoming something more, something other than a mortal human being."

"An angel?"

"Exactly. Perhaps because of their age ... telotherapy was considered very risky, to begin with, potentially carcinogenic, and these elderly people must have felt they had very little to lose ... their age might account for it, or perhaps it was simple coincidence, but they all appeared to share a rather narrowly religious turn of mind. And so they interpreted the experience accordingly." Frances's fingers gripped his hand. "Don't worry, Paul ... I'm not professing to be about to sprout wings."

"So what made you go in for it?" Paulie wanted to know. "Telotherapy. Doesn't it cost the earth?"

Frances nodded gravely. "The expense is horrendous. I can only say I succumbed to fear and vanity. Does that surprise you? Perhaps these are my just deserts."

He forced a wry smile. "So does it seem to be working? Is there any way of telling, yet?"

"You mean is the AS an additional effect or does it supplant the intended outcome? Am I going mad instead of staying young?" Frances shrugged. "It's very hard to ascertain. One thing I do know is, it would be a mistake to force all of this into a comfortable category, such as Religious Experience. I've always thought of myself as an agnostic, and then when you came along, and presented me with an entirely new set of perspectives on life. You see, I did take you seriously, listening and learning. I loved our conversations. Why couldn't I get it through to you that I wasn't bored, that this head-in-the-clouds business wasn't spoiling things between us? You'd be amazed, Paul, at how much of your outlook rubbed off on me. You dismiss yourself far too readily." She squeezed his hand again. "As I was saying, those others who went in for the therapy all chose, or were led, to explain their feelings in terms of established religion, which is something I've managed to resist, touch wood. Although I don't see why I shouldn't define religion a little more loosely than they did ... or do, depending on which side of the Styx one ought to consider people frozen at the point of death. Curious, isn't it, how every one of them went for cryostorage?" Frances toyed with her glass, traced the rim with her fingertip. "And another curious thing: three of them ... one man and two women, so I believe ... during their final, vegetative phase, were more than once heard to murmur a word that sounded like," she leaned toward him and whispered it, "Undertake."

Ever the actress, Paulie thought. The sense of theatre.

Frances frowned. "Undertake ... now what do you suppose that might signify?"

Paulie thought, Scared old people dreaming bad dreams about men in black top hats come to take them away? But he said nothing, for Frances's own mind had doubtless conjured up a similarly morbid image.

"Undertake ... a journey?" He spoke softly, reaching for, if not a positive gloss, at least an interpretation less macabre.

But his ex-wife's face had taken on a strained, haunted look. Before he knew it, he had grasped her hand in his.

She looked hard at him. "I'm frightened, Paul."

He wished he could have done more to help her.

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Chapter 16

Ruth was giving Kali a change when Robin Richly turned up at the door again. She knew it was Robin Richly because he always did a certain kind of knock, like he wanted to amuse you by rapping out his own jaunty little signature tune. He was one of those older people who irritated Ruth by trying too hard to appear young-minded, as if it was something offensive, being ninety-five or whatever he was.

She let him wait, only answering the door after she had finished with Kali and washed her hands.

"Ruth? Apologies for bothering you again. Hello again Kali, my lovely little darling." He chucked Kali's cheek. "Only Paul's back on the line. I'm sure he's really missing you both. I know I should, in his position."

Ruth got the baby sling out again and walked with Robin across to his cottage. On the way, he burst into some annoying old folk song, catching Ruth's eye two or three times as he sang the silly diddly-daddy lyrics, as though trying to get her to join in. Fat chance. If nothing else, the song put Kali to sleep.

When it came down to it, though, Ruth reflected, it wasn't so bad, having Robin Richly for a neighbour. You could do a lot worse. She thought, I'm a cow when I'm stressed.

Down the path at high speed on her decrepit yellow foldaway bike came Miranda Portland, who organized weekend retreats and offered individual tutoring in poetry and macrame. She went around in a camouflage army coat, Wellingtons, and a light-blue headscarf with a red cycling helmet stuck over it, yet didn't quite qualify, to Ruth's mind, as a classic English Eccentric; she was a bit too knowing, too deliberate about it. Ruth wasn't pleased to see her now; she wouldn't have felt like chatting even if there had been time.

"Ruth! How've you been keeping? You're looking well."

You liar, Ruth thought. I look like shit.

"How's the little one?" Miranda braked shudderingly beside them. "Oh, she's asleep, the little love! Ruth, you really ought to drop in and see us. Although I know what it gets like with babies, they can become your whole world. So how's Paul?"

"He's all right, yeah."

So far as Robin, Miranda, and all the others knew, Paul did most of the furniture-making while Ruth herself took it easy and looked after Kali. If any of them found out that he spent half his time lying hooked up to that box, they'd probably vote to kick him out of the village. Miranda didn't mention that flying car the PsyTri woman came down in, but Ruth could tell there had been a lot of talk. Well, they

could keep their fucking noses out.

“Well, do stay in touch.” With a nod to Robin, Miranda stood up from her saddle and pedalled off.

Five minutes later they were at Robin Richly's place. It was full of ancient electrical junk and had a musty smell about it, that usual man-living-alone smell.

“Cup of tea?” Robin offered.

“Yeah, please. Thanks.”

The phone, a big, fixed, old-fashioned one with only a piddly little screen, was on the wall in the kitchen, which didn't give you much privacy with Robin in there with you making the tea. Paulie's face was on the screen.

“What's wrong?” Ruth asked him, uncomfortably aware that she was acting like a bear with sore bits, but knowing from experience that she couldn't do that much about it, that it would pass, it wasn't her real self.

“Would you like to come over, you and Kali?”

“To Spain?” If only she could have gone and left herself behind; she didn't want to have to inflict her mood on anybody else. Automatically, she answered, “No, that's all right, we're all right here.”

“I'd like you to come.”

“Would you now?”

Robin Richly, she noticed, was doing his best to pretend he was deaf. Why did he always have to make tea? She didn't want a cup of tea. He could keep his tea, he could stick it.

Paulie said, “You'd love it here. And I'm talking about the real Seville, not the virtual one.”

Ruth knew full well that, normally, it would cost the earth to be allowed into the genuine city. But she didn't want to have Frances to thank for it.

She pointed out, “I've got Kali to look after.”

“It wouldn't hurt Kali to fly ... Frances said she'll pay. Her people'll make the arrangements, send a car to pick you up.”

I am not, Ruth thought, going to end up obliged to that woman. Frances Rayle can stuff her money.

“Ruth? Come on. Please. I'm missing you.”

What if, Ruth suddenly thought, it's all a load of shit, a big giant bluff? What if the very last thing Paulie wanted was for her and Kali to turn up and spoil his cosy tryst with Frances? What if they knew full fucking well she wouldn't go, and that was why they felt safe to invite her? Did they think she was born yesterday?

“Oh come on over ... please, Ru...” His face went all nasty. “What do young people think about old

people? We think they're disgusting. Especially the ones who..."

Ruth muted him. It was one of those horrible puppet programs that seized control of people's screen images. She'd heard it before, the one that tried to get old people to kill themselves. It was sick. It made her ashamed to be young. This wasn't the kind of world she wanted Kali to grow up in.

"Come on, filters!" Robin sighed. "Sorry about this."

"It's not your fault." Ruth felt embarrassed, and she hoped that Robin Richly didn't think she was in sympathy, even the tiniest bit, with these sickos.

Robin said some word she didn't catch.

"You what?" She tempered her gruffness. "I mean, I'm sorry?"

"Gerontocidalists."

He pronounced it really slowly, like it was a really interesting word. To Ruth, the word was horrible, and she would have preferred him not to have dignified it with use.

"DO US A FAVOUR AND DIE." Paulie screamed that bit so loudly the mute failed to muffle it. He looked completely mental, like no Paulie Rayle she had ever known or wanted to know.

"Charming," Robin commented. "Would you believe there was a time when puppets were just things you stuck your hand up, and computers filled up rooms and cost a bomb, and you could count your TV channels on the fingers of one hand?"

Ruth smiled politely in response to his ramblings. She found it hard, putting on fronts; she wasn't good at humouring people.

"Oh, take no notice of me, Ruth."

He opened a cupboard door of painted MDF. Ruth hated Medium Density Fibreboard. It had no texture, no soul, summed up so much of what was wrong with the world. But without it, would there have been enough real wood to go round?

"Where are you, bloody useless bloody filters?" Robin took down a packet of teabags. "Come on, for heavensake!"

They had to wait ages for the phone to regain control of Paulie's image. When it did, and the real Paulie was finally back, Ruth told him yes, all right, she would fly over with Kali to Spain.

Paulie looked like he was really, honestly glad, like he wasn't secretly horrified, and Ruth told herself she was a stupid cow, getting all these mad ideas in her head, getting paranoid.

* * * *

The meal, served in the garden court, was scrumptious; though Sesha would have enjoyed it even more had she not been over-hungry, so prone to wolf down the food, skimp on savouring it. Frances's appetite, she observed, was encouragingly healthy. Paul Rayle, however, had scarcely eaten at all. He sat there nursing a glass of Rioja and looking abstracted.

"It's unfortunate that you didn't all fly over together." Frances picked up her napkin. "I never meant for Ruth to feel excluded."

The situation, Sesha knew, was a delicate one. Ruth's arrival was bound to generate tension. Sesha couldn't make up her mind as to whether or not she actively disliked Ruth. It was so hard to separate out loyalty to Frances. And some mischievous part of her was relishing the prospect of the chalk-and-cheese encounter; so far as she knew, Ruth and Frances had never met. As for the baby, Kali, she was a sweet little thing, if genetically unfiltered and thus doomed to a low-tier life in tomorrow's world. Sesha had so often wished that prenatal filtering had been available at the time of her own gestation, and that steps had been taken to try and increase the size of her eyes relative to her face, and the width of her mouth, and decrease her foot size, among other adjustments, since genetic remoulding of adults remained out of reach of present-day medtech.

"Big Boy?"

The voice, emanating from nowhere, caused Sesha to start and drop her fork on the tiles.

"What is it?" Paul Rayle asked his hand, and Sesha saw that he was wearing a wrist mobe. He nodded apologies to the table.

"Big Boy, you were inquiring about Sick Nick copycat violence? Well I've just caught a newsburst that may be of interest. There are reports of a yacht being found in the Aegean Sea with all personnel aboard murdered and mutilated in a manner ominously reminiscent of the modus operandi of the notorious cyberspook. According to another, unconfirmed report, the yacht's owner, the entrepreneur Bertrand Laurel, is among the dead. A third report, likewise not yet confirmed, has it that a mayday message sent out actually mentioned the words Sick Nick. How about that, Big Boy ... Is that of any use to you? Do you wish to hear further reports as I receive them?"

"No," said Paul Rayle, deep in thought. "Don't disturb me again."

"Very well, but can I just remark once more upon the curious mismatch between your name and mobe demeanour choice?"

Over and above the horrified amazement she was feeling at this news about the famous billionaire, Sesha found it worse than distasteful that Paul Rayle should let his mobe intrude upon their meal in so cavalier a fashion, that he should subject other people, herself and, particularly, Frances, to his insalubrious interest in Sick Nick.

Sesha turned to Frances in the expectation that her boss would be sharing her displeasure.

Yet Frances's reaction was undiluted shock. "Bertrand ... Laurel....?" she murmured disbelievingly.

"You knew him?" Paul Rayle asked her.

"Bertrand Laurel?" Frances repeated, still stunned.

Sesha exchanged a glance with Paul Rayle. Not a friendly one on her own part; she felt anger at his having upset Frances so needlessly. And that 'Big Boy' thing wasn't funny, either, merely puerile.

Frances said quietly, "I just can't believe it."

"Piracy," Paul Rayle said. "There's a lot of piracy on the high seas, these days."

Something in the glib way he came out with the comment, the Long John Silveriness of the phrase 'high seas', convinced Sesha that this was really far too flippant an explanation for a mind so seriously frucked-up as Paul Rayle's.

"Bertrand Laurel isn't ... wasn't ... the nicest person in the world." Frances was shaking her head, still coming to terms with it. "Do you know, he had designs on the Institute?"

"Really?" It was news to Sesha. "And you weren't interested?"

"No," said Frances firmly.

"Look forgive me, I should never have..." Paul Rayle's apologies were interrupted by Xabier, hurrying down the stairway.

"*Senora?*"

Frances looked up. "Yes, Xabier? What is it?"

With a sense of discretion that put Paul Rayle to shame, Xabier whispered something in Frances's ear.

"I see. Gracias, Xabier. Thankyou very much for letting me know."

"You've a very efficient little news-gatherer there." Frances indicated the mobe on Paul Rayle's wrist. Xabier must, Sesha guessed, have been relaying the same inf.

"It's not mine," Paul Rayle told her. "Xabier very kindly lent it to me."

Sesha bridled; did the man have to keep up this little undertone of sarcasm? Having started out, years ago, as Frances's domestic, was he jealous of her current factotum?

Well, all right, Sesha grudgingly allowed; Frances would have heard the news from Xabier and been upset anyway. Also, to be scrupulously fair, she herself had frequently succumbed to a morbid fascination with matters Sick Nickian. Still, she thought, Paul Rayle's table manners left a lot to be desired.

"Who," asked Frances suddenly, "is Sick Nick?"

Sesha was astonished; hadn't everyone heard of Sick Nick? Or maybe not, up here in life's rarefied heights.

Paul Rayle said, "It's an outlaw computer program that shows up on screens in the shape of a devil, attacking and murdering other screen images ... not real people, just their images. He can find his way into films and mess them up by killing off the characters, or he might appear to murder someone on a vidphone screen. It's all just simulated. A lot of people find him entertaining."

"Sounds absolutely dreadful." Frances ran a hand through her consummately Congruent hair. "But what has this to do with Bertrand Laurel?"

Paul Rayle considered a moment, then replied, "It looks as though someone out there has started imitating Sick Nick, but committing real murders."

Frances's face showed revulsion. "Really, Paul, it doesn't seem at all like you to take an interest in such..."

"It's a long story." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter; it's not important. Sorry about the interruption."

Frances looked at him as if to say she was willing to listen, she wanted to be of assistance to him in any way whatever. But Paul Rayle said nothing more.

And then it came together, all at once, in Sesha's mind: realization of what the stupid man must have been thinking. He saw, in this news report, further proof that this world was not the real world but a boxworld. Poor nutty Paul Rayle believed that Bertrand Laurel had been murdered, actually, physically murdered, not by some Sick Nick copycat member of a seagoing pirate gang, but by Sick Nick himself. According to Paul Rayle's twisted reasoning, if this was a boxworld, then Sick Nick was no less real than they themselves were, and liable to turn up anywhere and kill any of them at any time.

Well at least Paul Rayle was considerate enough not to burden Frances, to keep his crackpottery to himself. Sesha remembered that, back in her room, he had even put forward the ludicrous theory that she, Sesha Roffey, was the one in control of this world, the Big Box User. And all of this on the basis of Frances's job offer, made during a private conversation upon which he had seen fit to eavesdrop. Send out for a straitjacket, someone.

Granted, it had occurred to Sesha that the nomination should not, in view of Frances's condition, be regarded as valid. And even though Frances had anticipated her concerns and repeated the offer prior to Paul's joining them at the table, Sesha had thought it prudent to let the whole thing hang in limbo for the present.

"You should take a walk around," Frances suggested, addressing the both of them, Sesha and Paul. "The Alcazar gardens are beautiful. You've visited the gardens, haven't you, Paul, when we came here together?"

He nodded distractedly.

"I'm sure Ruth will find so much to enjoy here." Frances sipped at her wine. "The English winters are dreadful, even though they're not so cold as they used..."

"Ontotech," said Paul Rayle, cutting in rudely. "Have you ever heard that word? O-N-T-O-T-E-C-H?"

It was outrageous, his discourtesy, and Sesha was about to admonish him with another sharp look when she was brought up short by the weirdest reaction from Frances. Her boss was sitting there staring into space as though posthypnotically transfixed.

"That last word spoken by those people with Angel Syndrome." Paul Rayle's voice was dangerously brittle. "It wasn't 'undertake'."

"Ontotech," Frances murmured.

"What's going on?" He was almost in tears. "I just don't understand."

A chill ran down Sesha's spine. She didn't know what the fruck they were talking about, but their solemnity scared her.

Chapter 17

The flight attendants, each one plasticky-perfect, wore uniforms of a special material which, if you put on the glasses from the pocket at the side of your seat, became transparent. Pink glasses to view the stewardesses, blue for the stewards. Some passengers, nearly all of them male, had put on their glasses, all but two the pink pair. A stewardess whose eyes left all the smiling duties to her mouth was running flatly through the safety spiel:

“This Corporate Class section of the aircraft will automatically seal off into a self-contained, pressurized capsule and eject from the main fuselage in the unlikely event of an emergency. Many thanks for your kind attention. Enjoy your flight.”

Too bad, Ruth thought sourly, for poor peasants who can only afford Economy. Like me, ordinarily.

The business execs all around her, those who weren't asleep, or using the Dreamboxes built into their seats, must have decided that she had been put in there by mistake, this pleb with the crying kid. She'd lost count of the pissed-off looks. They weren't all of them snots, though; she did get the odd friendly smile. The seat was nice, adjusting to your shape, even giving a massage if you asked for one. She wasn't mad about the way it continually scanned your thought-patterns for evidence of fanatical fixations; although, with the world as it was, all these security measures were understandable enough. The food was the best airline food Ruth had ever tasted—which didn't mean brilliant, just edible, for once—and they even offered a choice of wines. She didn't finish her little bottle, alcohol not being a good idea while breastfeeding. Although the steward didn't show it, she couldn't help wondering if he thought her unworthy of his polished attendance—even if all she needed to do to cut him down to size was put on her blue glasses. She didn't feel comfortable, being fussed over, with Frances footing the bill.

Paulie was waiting at the airport. He looked terrible, burdened with worry, but seemed genuinely glad to see her. His face was bruised and scratched; she hadn't noticed on the phone.

“Thanks for coming.” He hugged her, kissed her, hugged and kissed Kali. A man with him, a Spanish man, took their bags.

“How was the flight?” Paulie asked her.

“Fine ... nice ... not too bad.” She put her fingers to his cheek, where it was bruised. “What happened? Somebody hit you?”

He just shook his head, and Ruth thought, Well, stuff you if you want to be secretive about it.

He said, “How's Kali been?”

“She's been a good little girl. She needs a change now, though ... can't you smell her?”

Paulie waited outside while Ruth changed Kali in the women's toilets. The soap dispenser started talking to her in Spanish, wanting to know, so far as Ruth could make out, whether she'd bought travel insurance. Then it tried again in English, and she found she had translated correctly.

“Piss off,” she told it.

She rejoined Paulie. He was still looking worried.

“What's the matter?” she asked him.

But he wouldn't tell her.

He led her out to a waiting car, and a few seconds later they were whizzing down the highway. Giant moving posters, at least half of them advertising Dreamboxes, flashed by on either side. Ruth wondered if that was it: had Paulie been hooking up to his box again, trying to dream up his perfect world and make it more real than this one? Was it a bad thing to have done, to have played along with his fantasy—for what else was it? Should she never have let him draw her in, until she sort of half-believed in what he was trying to do? She'd woken up, now, at last, and could see it for what it was. She wished she'd never got him the box. The stupid things did no one any good. People were getting addicted left, right, and centre. It was a wonder Dreamboxes weren't banned.

Paulie sat there holding Kali and staring out, lost to the world as the Spanish man drove them at speed to Frances's place.

The trouble with Paulie was, he couldn't handle life. He'd always run away from it. He was a dreamer, and would always be a dreamer, and if she and Kali wanted any sort of life beyond hanging on forever, waiting and waiting for his dreams to come true, then they would have to start thinking about going their own way, making a new and more real life for themselves.

Ruth felt sick.

The sun was blazing down; you wouldn't know it was February. The driver took them through lots of ugly industrial build-up that could have been anywhere before finally getting to the older, more picturesque part of Seville. The houses were lovely. The streets were barely wide enough for the car to squeeze through, and tourists kept getting in the way. These, Ruth knew, were people with enough money to visit for real, rather than having to take a tour round the very much cheaper, computerized version. Normally, she and Paulie could never have afforded to come here.

Frances's house was tall and whitewashed, very discreet from outside, and Ruth caught a glimpse of a beautiful tiled patio behind ornate iron gates before a pair of big heavy wooden double doors opened automatically and the car crept in and down into the basement. They stepped into a lift, the driver taking the bags again, and came out on the patio.

Frances was there waiting for them with that skinny black-haired woman, the one who'd come out to the village in the flying car.

“Ruth.”

Smiling, Frances held out her hand. She was fantastic-looking, really amazing for her age, if not so tall as Ruth had expected. All wild, grey-streaked hair and the sort of face that could take all the years life threw at it and make them work in its favour. You couldn't tell that she had an illness. She wore black, a silky sleeveless top and slacks, and bangles, and lots of rings on her fingers, and in some ways she even seemed younger than Paulie, so careworn did he look.

“Ruth I'm so glad you could come. And this is Kali? Oh isn't she beautiful! May I hold her?”

Ruth handed Kali over. "You're looking well, Frances."

"Thank you."

"Hello Ruth," said the PsyTri woman.

"Hello." Ruth had forgotten her name, if she'd ever learnt it.

"Was the journey okay?" the woman wanted to know.

"Yeah, fine. Yes, thanks, yeah."

"That's good."

"How old is she?" Frances seemed a bit stiff, a bit awkward with babies. She kissed Kali's forehead.

"Three months?"

Ruth nodded. She could sense an atmosphere, a tension; the air was thick with it. There was something going on, something very peculiar, the feel of which she didn't like at all.

* * * *

Paulie stood by the window in their room and watched Ruth, sitting on the bed, quietly feeding Kali, for whom, on Frances's instructions, a cot had been obtained and made ready.

How could he explain it to Ruth? When should he start? Should he even try? She would only think him insane, or, worse still, see it as some kind of roundabout way of saying he was getting back together with Frances.

He stood there full of revulsion at the cunning of this ersatz environment. These pretend people. They seemed so solid, these phantoms before him. This *BoxRuth* and little *BoxKali*.

He said, "It's a nice house, isn't it?"

"Gorgeous." Ruth took Kali from her breast, sat her up and winded her. "Look, you'd better tell me what's going on."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You know full fucking well what I mean."

All right, then, Paulie thought. He said, "You know when I use the Dreambox? You know what I mean when I talk about boxworld as opposed to Groundworld, the real world?"

Ruth nodded her head, her jaws clenched grimly; she must have anticipated some crap of this order.

His heart pounding, Paulie said, "This isn't the real world."

Ruth said nothing.

"It's a boxworld, either mine or someone else's." Paulie hit back at the wall with the heel of his hand. The

solid, unyielding, yet phony, unreal adobe. "Strange things have been happening. Bewildering things. Not just to me. And there's this word, 'ontotech.' Short for ontotechnology. Does it ring any bells?"

"Should it?" she muttered indifferently.

But he had noticed a shiver; he had registered her distaste. She had, for some reason, an aversion to the word. As had all those other Ruths, those *BoxRuth*s. A sudden impulse had him looking now for the word in that tattoo on her shoulder, but he could not find it; the elaborate pattern remained stubbornly abstract.

He had asked his mobe about ontotechnology. To the best of the mobe's Netknowledge, there was no meaning attached to the word in either full or abbreviated form. No mention of the term could even be found in any known work of fiction.

And Frances had been unable to recall her odd response to his utterance of the word, nor, indeed, that whole creepy little episode during the meal yesterday, with all that stuff about transcendence, about dying, about angels.

He said to her, "Something's going on. I can't understand what it is, but there's something that's not at all right. The only way it makes any sense is if you assume that this is not the real world, and that we're not..." He gave up. What was the use?

The crushing effect of his words was all but visible; Ruth now knew, beyond doubt, that he was a hopeless box junkie, a lost cause. And here she was, right out here, being brought face-to-face with it, no longer able to set it aside.

Paulie's eyes filled with tears.

Even if he were right, and this wasn't *BoxRuth*, were not the principles, dynamics, the emotions authentic and valid, still? Who was he to say humiliants couldn't feel? For all he knew, he was one himself, an illusory entity, but what he was feeling now was real enough to hurt, and hurt like hell.

Dreamboxes send you mad, he thought.

And then he realized, If I were a true paranoiac, I should have convinced myself that all of this is an elaborate plot to get me to believe, for some sinister reason, that this world is less than real. Maybe Frances wants to drive me and Ruth round the bend so she can have us declared unfit parents and thus get her hands on Kali. Maybe it's all a big act, she did used to be an actress, and the word ontotech doesn't really mean anything to her. For how could it, unless...

Unless this was still his own boxworld. Or, unless ontotechnology was not truly his own personal invention, was more than a figment of his imagination. But how could that be?

He glanced at Ruth. She still sat there on the bed, absolutely silent, like she'd drawn herself up into herself. She was confining her attention to Kali, patting her on the back, and not once looking in his direction. Kali brought up some milk. Ruth wiped the baby's mouth on her Little Sunshine bib.

There came, from somewhere down below, a sudden thud, followed immediately by a loud, protracted moan, as though from a woman in childbirth.

Ruth looked up at him.

Paulie went out onto the landing and looked over. Immediately below him, Frances lay writhing on the tiled floor of the garden court. Nearby, a potted fern, knocked over on its side, rolled through a short arc then came to rest.

Xabier was in there immediately, scooping her up.

“Paul!” Her voice, though weak, carried clearly.

Paulie descended the steps with a measured briskness that he knew to be a ludicrous compromise between concern for his ex-love and loyalty to her successor.

Xabier was administering the Socratosine, shooting her with the hypo. Frances was laughing, squirming in his arms. Paulie had never seen her laugh with such a lack of inhibition. And then he saw that she wasn't laughing at all. She was crying.

Xabier attempted to comfort her. Frances wrested free of his grip, staggered as she tried to stand unsupported.

Paulie sensed a presence just behind him. He glanced round. Sessa Roffey, looking pale, looking out of her depth.

“Paul...” Frances had thrown back her head and was staring up at something. “Paul it's not your world, it's not Processia's, nor mine, it's...” She raised a trembling arm and, like one of those Greek tragic heroines Paulie had seen her portray on the stage so many years ago, before they were married, pointed heavenward. “TELL THEM THE TRUTH!”

Paulie looked up to find Ruth watching them from above.

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Chapter 18

Stepping into a pleasant little eatery on the Avenida de la Constitucion, close by the Cathedral, Sessa Roffey ordered a cafe con leche. She'd had to get out of that house, get some air. She felt beleaguered, surrounded by madness. Paul Rayle was deranged. Frances was decidedly unwell. And now here was Ruth, surly and prickly, and no kind of ally in the sanity camp. About the only soundness to be found was in the cool, together heads of Xabier, the other guy, and the two pretty Spanish girls who made up Frances's staff. Xabier was gorg. He would make an excellent bedboy; did Frances ever employ him in that capacity? What a waste, if she didn't.

Poor Frances.

Sessa was finding it unbearable, having to watch her boss deteriorate. Frances's fugue had terminated in another dead faint, leaving her with no memory of the way she had screamed up at Ruth. How many more of these AS attacks were there to be?

Sessa had received a call from Ajit but had divulged very little. She didn't dare imagine his reaction on finding out that Frances had offered her the succession. Ajit had been with the Institute seven years to her seven months; he had worked for Frances almost from the outset. And there were others, plenty of

others way ahead of her in the pecking order. A score of noses would be put out of joint, enemies instantly made.

She thought, This doesn't feel real.

She wasn't even sure that she wanted the job. Conventional wisdom screamed *Carpe diem!* Common sense called upon her to grab with both hands the biggest break that would ever come her way. And yet, her instincts weren't nearly so hot on the prospect. Was she really that ambitious?

But then, Sesha reasoned, Frances must have fed all of her emp records through whatever gizmo took care of these things, and, incredibly, the name Processia Roffey had been the answer. Was it not possible that the computer knew her better than she knew herself, could claim a superior grasp of her capabilities? Might she be a secret wonderwoman?

What I need, Sesha decided, is to talk it over with someone. But who? About the only person to whom she felt able to turn was Indie, her best friend from her Uni days. She asked her mobe to see if Indie was available. The call was answered by the sweet soulbrother voice of Indie's mobe. Indie was at present incommunicado, on stress retreat in Ireland. Sesha didn't bother leaving a message.

For the desperate and friendless there were always the AC lines: SympathEar, McMother, Uncle Walt, dozens more. Artificial Caring was big business. But intimid scouts were ready to pounce on anyone rash enough to pour out their problems; your insecurities would be noted, traded and mercilessly milked in a series of personalized sales campaigns. And anyway, Sesha was frucked if she would be reduced to confiding in chips, the first sign of sadness.

"Hola."

The word was grated out by a painfully cheapskate vocpat module.

Sesha had noticed and been deeply unnerved by the himp with the supermercado carrier-bag. Pestering his way through the ultrasmart clientele, he was ignored, waved on and cold-shouldered by turn, leaving a trail of palpable embarrassment. Guilt had forced Sesha to remain seated, defying a desperate urge to flee. Sooner or later, she knew, the himp would arrive at her table, and now here he was. From the carrier-bag he produced a Dreambox, held it up in front of her. Inside the sagging, bulging, split and taped-up bag he had another half-dozen of the things: Philips, Shintube, Hitachi, Toshiba. All were obviously counterfeit, most probably Chinese; heaven knew how they would fry your mind. And, if they were any good, why wasn't the himp hooking up, dreaming a better world for himself rather than hawking and peddling the boxes with what must have been scant success? The himp's body odour was noxious, and Sesha shook her head resolutely in the face of a fusillade of poorly-synthesized, barely decipherable words.

"Francais? Deutsch? English?" rasped the tinny cut-price voicebox, the large brown eyes holding her like tractor beams.

Sesha had never before met a himp, not in genuine physprox. She had seen them on NeTV, of course, and, like everyone else, was aghast that they existed. The himps were not the abomination, it was the humans who had created them.

This, Sesha told herself, is the result of your vanity, your greedy desire for a means of rewriting your genestory.

Shame engulfed her.

How many of them were there, these chimpanzees given the so-called 'IQ genes' by researchers into Genetellectual Enhancement, or whatever they'd called it? The most notorious legal battle of the early twenty-first century had finally resulted in the recognition of full human rights with respect to these creatures, although the question of financial compensation was still pending. In the meantime, the himps' attempts to adjust to sapient society were generally said to be on a par with the efforts of severe schizophrenics to stay in step with the common herd. It seemed that help had been proffered from various quarters, and reactions from the himps had varied wildly, some submitting themselves as patients to be ministered to, others shunning the company of humans, preferring their own, and still others deciding that their visible presence in society was the most powerful weapon they could wield.

The himp still stood there with his shoddy copy of a quality Dreambox. Sesha handed over all of her cash. The himp made to leave the Dreambox on her table. She pushed it away, gestured for him to keep it.

"*Gracias,*" the sub-par voicebox croaked, the word all but lost under the crackle and hum of sonic malfunction.

Her shame unabated, Sesha watched the himp weave his agile way out through the crowded tables and onto the street, where he immediately began accosting passers-by. From nowhere, two armed policemen appeared. One grabbed hold of the himp, and his fellow officer literally pulled the creature's head off.

Sesha's shock was audibly shared by others in the cafe who had witnessed the incident.

The himp was now a himp with the head of a human female, a petite, hard-faced, black-haired woman of indeterminate age. The two policemen led away the wearer of the chimpanzee suit, the counterfeit himp with her counterfeit Dreamboxes.

* * * *

"She says she doesn't remember. I wouldn't take it personally." Holding Kali's legs up out of the way, Paulie cleaned his baby daughter with a wetwipe. When was the last time he had changed her, seen to any of those parently chores?

"Well I'm sure you'd take it personally if she pointed straight at you and started screaming. 'Tell them the truth.' What fucking truth? What's she talking about? Look get out of the way. She's a baby, you've got to be gentle with her, you're not sandpapering a bit of fucking wood." Ruth pushed him aside and took over. "I can't handle this, not someone in that state. I don't know why I came here. I want to go home."

Dejectedly, Paulie thought, You would be loving it here, under normal conditions.

Outside their window, somewhere down below, he heard a laugh, loud and male and hearty and raucous. The evening air had a scent to it, blossom-rich, blending grotesquely with the dirty-nappy smell. Were all such details faithfully reproduced in the travel industry's VR pseudodestinations? There had been accusations of skimping due to rushed programming, particularly in the field of synaesthetic olfaction, making the simvacation even more of an attenuated experience. It was, Paulie reflected, another technofix rendered obsolete by the Dreambox, only to linger on regardless with a myriad other outdated things, thanks to the great grey blanket of inertia.

His mind was wandering, scrabbling desperately for an escape, like a wildcat in a locked room. He handed Ruth the Sudocrem. Kali squirmed and cried out as it was applied; she had a rash, poor little

thing.

"I was thinking," he said, "that the problem might be those Crowning Glory pills."

"What?" Ruth's voice was full of dread and anger. "Look Paulie, I don't want to know. If it's not one kind of shit then it's another. That's all I ever get from you. Well, I've fucking had enough. I'm not staying here. I should never've come."

"People sometimes have allergic reactions." From the pocket on his rucksack Paulie took out the CG carton. "Look what it says on here. 'The user may experience side effects such as headache, mouth ulcers and inflammation of the mouth, stomach upset, skin rashes, itching, blurring of vision, effects on behaviour or mood, or hallucinatory ...' And with the Vitamin C as well ... I mean who knows? What I do know is, I'm not taking them any more, I'm not using the box any more, I've finished with it. No more dreaming. I'm going to work. I'm going to help you. Isn't that what you want?"

Ruth's elbow smashed against his breastbone; Paulie staggered back, gasping, agonized.

Kali screamed out in fear.

Ruth was looking at him, ashen, appalled with herself. Never before had she physically attacked him.

"Don't ... worry," Paulie gasped. "It's ... my own ... fault."

Ruth shook her head numbly.

Kali was shrieking, crimson-faced, clenching and unclenching her little fat fists.

"It was never meant to," his voice cracked, "be like this."

Ruth had picked up Kali, now, and was cuddling her, right up close to her face. Tears were streaming down Ruth's cheeks. Paulie put out his arm. After a moment she stepped forward, allowed him to touch her, to pull her toward him. He held her, kissed her. Ruth nuzzled against him. Her shoulder pressed into his chest, right in the centre, right where it felt as though she had whacked him with a pickaxe.

"Do we have to stay?" she asked him plaintively. "I mean, what can you do for her, for Frances?"

But his clutching at straws, his hopeless attempt at reassurance, at wrapping up Ruth and himself in one nice, big blanket delusion, his convenient allergy fantasy was already coming unglued like a cheap sticking plaster. He had no way of setting Ruth's world back to rights.

But, if this was still his own boxworld, why was this particular *GroundRuth* so intractable, so unsympathetic to his existential crisis? Other *GroundRuth* s were at least prepared to entertain his hypotheses. Even *BoxRuth* . But this one, although ultimately a part of him and not an independent entity, nevertheless persisted in exhibiting a degree of quasautonomy the inevitable result of which was misery for them both. He had done too good a job, made her too real. If this were the highest level of boxlife he had yet attained, then he had finally, incredibly, performed the Hegelian feat of bringing otherness out of sameness. But this very otherness was now opening up a deeper divide than he had ever before known. What had become of the patient, supportive Ruth of old?

And if his worst fears were justified, if they were both humiliants stored in someone else's Dreambox, bit-players in some box junkie's private universe, then worldcopying was wrong, it should not be

allowed. For humiliants were, to all intents and purposes, the equals of their Groundworldly human counterparts. He knew that now from the inside.

We live, he thought. We feel. We suffer.

But then, who was to say that this wasn't a boxworld, and his mind had got fucked by too much dethan? Bad luck knew no limits.

He still held Ruth in his arms, Ruth and Kali. The baby was sleeping, now, lightly, her tiny lips parted. He watched the faint, lazy, rhythmic undulation of her little pale throat.

“Can't we just go?” Ruth whispered.

But Paulie didn't want to go; that was the straightforward truth. He wanted to be there when it happened to Frances, whatever it was, whatever impended.

For if there was any hope at all of salvation, it resided with his ex-wife.

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Chapter 19

Sitting alone by the pool, a sheet of smartpape on her lap, Frances Rayle replayed the securicam recording yet again. She hadn't even known such things were possible till Xabier had suggested it and shown her how to use the technology. The image seeped onto the paper and she watched herself collapse, moan, writhe, be rescued by Xabier, declaim at the heavens and, finally, faint a second time. She might have been auditioning for RADA.

It was eerie, not remembering.

The camera had also caught Paulie. With her fingertip, Frances ringed his haunted, strained face to bring him up close. And there was Processia, standing behind him, eyes wide with alarm, her pallid skin and deep-black bangs putting one in mind of a Noh player.

Displaying images from other cameras, Frances finally found one that revealed Ruth, looking down over the balustrade. Frances knew that her outburst had appeared to be directed at the poor girl, who must have been brought from her room by the commotion. An unfortunate coincidence, obviously—doubly wretched in that it would do little to allay the suspicion, the hostility Ruth so clearly harboured toward her. What a bad start.

And what a shock Paulie's appearance had been. He looked so wasted. And now, she knew why: he had been using a Dreambox. Not as an escape, he had hastened to explain—without really explaining at all, or even really wanting to, and Frances knew him sufficiently well as to be unable to believe that Paulie would retreat into fantasy at whatever cost to Ruth and little Kali. Yet, when it came to the question of why, precisely, he spent so much of his time dreaming dreams, Paulie was vague, abashed, evasive to the point of incoherence. The word ‘ontotech’ was repeatedly uttered with a strange obsessive dread. His theory that this word, and not, as had been thought, ‘undertake,’ was the last word spoken by those other AS sufferers was, undeniably, an intriguing one. And when Frances had replayed the securicam recording of her own response to his utterance of the word, it was startlingly clear that this ontotech did appear to be of significance to her when under the spell of Angel Syndrome. But for the moment, these

things were occluded. The Feeling came and went. There were answers, Frances felt sure. That was why Paulie's presence was so necessary. He was in some strange fashion implicated; this much she could now clearly see. From what she could gather, Paulie was troubled by suspicions that this world was in some sense a false world. The old Frances Rayle would have dismissed such fancies out of hand, even taken them as symptoms of nervous collapse. But now, in time, all would be known. They would just have to be patient.

And meanwhile, Ruth's world would seem to be succumbing to creeping insanity. But Ruth was strong.

Stronger than me, Frances thought.

How curious that Paulie had chosen, or had fallen for, such a radically different type of person. Inelegant. Incongruent, psychotrichologically. A carbon-copy Frances Rayle would have been—better or worse? Do I detect, Frances asked herself sternly, a twinge of jealousy, even after all these years? Why does the angel within me allow this? Here I am, on the cusp of transcendence, slowly severing links with the lowly human realm, yet still not delivered from the pettiest emotional afflictions.

The smartpape picture had blurred; she felt tears on her face. Wiping them away, she ended the playback. The current securicam image reappeared, then automatically cut to a second live camera, then a third, all swooping through their graceful, vigilant arcs. It was an intrusive device, and Frances resolved, there and then, to have it deactivated, removed.

But really, what did it matter?

Soon, nothing would matter.

The camera swept past the guest rooms, one at a time. Alongside each door was a dainty little curtained window. All of the curtains were imperfectly drawn. Through one of the gaps Frances happened to catch a flicker of movement and, before it had gone, some impulse made her ring the spot. Immediately, the camera halted, backtracked and zoomed in until the sliver of guest room visible between the curtains filled the smartpape.

Two people, half-undressed, tightly entwined, were making love on the bed. Kneeling, pressed hard together, holding, hugging, kissing with the enormous, fierce passion of the end of the world. And then the two of them, Paulie and Ruth, fell out of sight, away from prying eyes.

Or had she dreamt it? Frances did not play back the recording to check. Instead, she crumpled the smartpape.

* * * *

Babies. Sessa peered into the pram pushed by the woman beside her as they crossed the road. How lovely, she thought. How wonderful, how beautiful they are. And what will my own baby be like? How shall I edit the genestory? Should I push toward pulchritude, athletic prowess, intellect? Or should I go for the standard, general push? Biggest question of all: girl or boy, which will I choose?

It had descended upon her so suddenly, this simple realization of what she was about, what life was all about.

She stopped to look in a shop window. Dear little pink and yellow baby dresses, the sweetest all-in-one sleepsuits, newborn-size cardigans, so incredibly tiny.

She thought, A man would come in handy.

The idea of purchasing McSperm and going it alone, although it was certainly not something to be completely ruled out, was no more than a last resort. The funny thing was, the sexual act itself felt so utterly necessary, indispensable; she was aching for it all of a sudden, even after what had happened in the verticar over East Anglia, when she and Paul Rayle had been compelled, by some strange force outside of themselves, to—

Sesha found herself drooling at one gorgeous guy after another. There were so many of them, so many who could father her child.

And then she remembered what Frances had said, “Xabier would be happy to give you a massage.”

Sesha hurried back to the house, her mobe guiding her through the maze of twisting little streets. It was two in the afternoon; would Xabier be having his siesta? Would she have to wait? It was so hard to wait.

She ran across the garden court and up the steps. Just as she reached her landing, Paul Rayle and Ruth emerged from their room. Paul Rayle was holding their baby.

Sesha smiled at the baby. The baby stared back at her, as if not quite knowing what to make of the smile.

“Hi,” she said to Paul Rayle and Ruth. “Are you going out for a walk? It's gorg out there.” To Ruth, he said, “Do you think I could just ... hold her for a moment? I'm sorry, I've forgotten her name?”

“Kali.” Ruth regarded her with a mixture of surprise and suspicion.

Paul Rayle held out the lovely little baby. Sesha took her. It was heavenly, like nothing she had experienced, holding this tiny lovely warm thing in her arms.

“She's beautiful,” Sesha told the parents. The proud parents. All parents were proud. How could they not be proud?

In her room, Sesha took a shower. She put her hands to her stomach. How would it feel, the ripe, distended belly? She would put on a really atrocious amount of weight, but that could hardly be avoided. She tried to imagine the kick, the first kick from inside.

Wrapped in a towel, Sesha sat down on the bed and wondered how long to give Xabier. She had been liberal with the body spray, but still felt sweaty. Would he be put off? Should she take another shower?

Folic acid, she thought. I must start taking folic acid.

And then she remembered the Bubu Flumpkin, hidden in her travel bag. She took out the lovely little purple cutie sweet thing and cuddled him.

She could wait no longer. She asked her mobe to summon Xabier.

“He's on his way.” Her mobe's voice, the sexy voice of Janko Brauch. Had the mobe been humanoid she would have jumped its alloy bones.

Kicking her heel against the bed in impatience, Sesha waited for the knock at the door. If Xabier, for

some reason, proved a flop, Paul Rayle would just have to stand in for him, just as long as she could get him free of Ruth for long enough...

Xabier knocked.

Clutching the towel to her breast with studied carelessness, Sesha invited him in.

“*Senorita* Processia?”

His eyes had flicked over her, up and down. He was interested; the poor chump couldn't help himself. Allowing the towel to slip a little, giving him even more to feast his eyes upon, Sesha asked, “Would it be at all possible for me to have a massage?”

“Of course. There are some ... things that are needed. One moment, please.”

While Xabier fetched his stuff, Sesha lifted the towel and looked again at her belly. Its flatness filled her with shame. How could she, for so long, have neglected her primary purpose? Work? What was work? Career? It all meant nothing.

She asked her mobe, “What else should I be taking, as well as folic acid, for a healthy baby? What are the latest recommendations? Is there anything I should stop doing, or eating or drinking or ... Apart from alcohol, I know about alc...”

“Sesha, listen carefully ... have you taken your maternosuppressor?”

The mobe's voice was loud and sharp, but still pure sex oozing out of a speaker.

“No, and not taking the frucking thing's the best frucking thing I've ever done.”

The little brown bottle of one-a-day tablets, evilly concocted to kill her natural desire to conceive, stood there on the bedside table. Sesha reached out and grabbed it; the only place for those terrible things, the world's most ugly invention, was down the toilet. And even that was too good for them. What a selfish stupe she was for ever even thinking of taking—

Sesha's mobe fired its emergency microdart into her left upper arm.

By the time Xabier returned, the ultrafast-acting hormone-stabilizer had done its work to the extent that Sesha had put on some clothes and was no longer finding the Bubu Flumpkin quite so killingly cute. She thanked her mobe for saving the day.

Xabier knocked. “*Senorita*?”

“Would it be okay if I left it for another time, Xabier?” Sesha spoke through the closed door. Even though disaster had now been averted, she felt too embarrassed to face him. “Sorry about putting you to all this trouble, but I just...”

“No trouble.”

“Thank you, Xabier. I really appreciate your patience.”

She heard him go, the poor guy. Well, maybe later. But right at the moment—Sesha hugged herself—the

very thought of being touched by anyone was anathema.

It had happened once before; twice, now, the mobe had rescued her from madness with a microdart. The first time, she had been planning to pay a bedboy not to take any precautions. It was worse than being drunk. Were it to happen again, she might not be so lucky. She had been foolish, instructing the mobe not to keep on reminding her every day as a matter of course; she'd got tired of having it nag at her. Well, from now on, it would be nag city. Either that or she would have to switch to a maternosuppressing dermaplant and put up with the significantly higher risk of nasty side-effects.

Babies. Nice to hold for a while, so long as there was always someone around to take them back once they started crying, or messed themselves, or puked on you.

Sesha couldn't believe it, the way she had acted. It was hilarious, really, but somehow she just couldn't laugh. She thought, What a grotesque way to be living your life.

Then up it came; Sesha staggered to the bathroom to be sick. In expectation of the nausea, the vomiting her mobe had warned her would occur, she had held off from backing up the microdart with her daily maternosuppressor pill, the one she should have taken that morning.

Again, she thanked the mobe for its prompt action.

"That's what I'm here for ... And could I just be boring for a moment and point out that this feature option can only be found on the new Hitachi mobe range, Generation Six ... Oh, and Sesh, I've just today received news that in around two to three months you can expect Generation Seven, with even more neat new features, such as SalivAnalysis: after the first kiss choose a discreet moment, press the sensor pad to your lips and find out then and there whether the guy or girl has anything you would NOT like to catch ... need I elaborate? Works with all human bodily fluids, animal module available on request. So what d'you say, Sesh, shall I place an order?"

Sesha took her tablet. "Oh ... go on, then."

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Chapter 20

Frances wore small round dark glasses which, Paulie thought, made her look famous. Yet the few people around paid no more attention to his ex-wife than they did to him, or to Ruth. If anyone, it was Kali who was noticed and, invariably, smiled at, dangling there in her sling like a little lost paratrooper as they wandered among the trees of the Parque de Maria Luisa. In fact so fetching must Kali have appeared to all comers that even Sesha Roffey, back at the house, had come over broody, begging to hold the baby, stepping weirdly out of character.

Frances would have looked more stellar still accompanied by a retinue. But, typically, she had eschewed the close and constant presence of a medical attendant or even a bodyguard; although her man, Felipe, not quite so fine-featured as Xabier, and a little older, was waiting back at the car, and could doubtless be at her side in a matter of seconds. Paulie wondered whether Felipe packed a gun. Armed guards, whole private squads, were said to be all the rage among those with serious money. It still seemed to Paulie completely bizarre, Frances having been elevated to that stratum. At least, he thought, she'd had the wisdom to join the ranks of the Great Invisibles, low-profilers with the clout to keep themselves out of the news.

To Frances, Ruth said, "I bet you don't miss February in England?"

Paulie's heart went out to her, doing her part in staving off an awkward silence. They were having a hard time of it, both women, maintaining this conversation of fits and starts.

"English weather's so ... schizoid." Frances forked back her hair. "I was born in England but I'm not sure I ever really felt at home there." She stroked Kali's nose. "Would you like me to take the baby for a while? I expect she's pretty heavy, and you must be getting hot as well as tired?"

"No, no, I'm all right, thanks. Really."

"You look a little overheated, that's all."

Ruth shook her head. "I'm okay."

Frances grimaced. "Oh dear, I wasn't thinking, was I? I suppose it wouldn't be safe, what with my penchant for collapsing."

"I'll take her," Paulie offered.

Ruth shook her head again, and didn't look at him, fixed her eyes on the ground, and Paulie could tell that she was getting pissed off.

"Shall we sit down?" Frances suggested.

They went across to a bench.

"I think you're both very courageous," Frances told them. "Having children has become such a ... One finds oneself confronted by a horrifying number of complex decisions, when in the old days..."

Paulie said, "It's still the old days for most people in the world. Not everyone has the chance to mess about with genes."

"No," Frances agreed. "But I could have helped you. I could still help you."

Paulie saw Ruth stiffen.

He said, "We're fine as we are."

"And Kali? You've thought of Kali? What of her future?"

Ruth stood up sharply, holding onto Kali to steady her. "I didn't want this. I never came here for this." She said it without looking at either of them, and having spoken, she walked quickly away from them, down the path, into the trees.

"I'm sorry," Frances murmured. More loudly, she said, "I'm sorry, Ruth. I didn't mean to offend you."

Paulie said, "Well she's right, we didn't come here for this."

He got up and hurried after Ruth. Why, he wondered, did I myself not feel offended? Should I have

been? Do I lack sensitivity, self-respect if I am in any way prepared to entertain the notion of Frances's helping us out?

He caught up with her.

"Ruth, are you okay?"

She kept walking.

"Ruth hold on a minute."

"She should keep her fucking nose out. I might've known this was what it was really all about. Go back to her, if that's what you want. She's after not just you but Kali as well, isn't she? My God."

"No, it's not that, it's not that at all."

"Then why's she saying all that shit about Kali?"

"Frances isn't perfect, any more than any of us."

Ruth turned away from him, headed off between the trees, across the sand and scrubby grass.

"Look Ruth, come back, come on."

"Fuck off."

"Ruth!" Frances, panting a little, reached his side. "Ruth I'm sorry."

Ruth ignored her.

"Thanks a lot," said Paulie bitterly.

With confidence, Frances said, "She'll have to come back."

"You don't know Ruth." He began to walk after her, Frances grimly keeping pace.

"She's very proud." Frances sidestepped some dog crap. "She's already made up her mind about me, hasn't she?"

"I was hoping the two of you would be able to get on."

"When all that we have in common is you?"

It was farcical. The world was almost certainly subreal, a copy run off from the Actual, and here they were, not real, true people at all but humiliants, wrestling away, nevertheless, with these age-old everyday problems.

"Are you trying to ruin things for us, or what?" Paulie wondered if he ought to have been angry; what he felt was more like melancholia. "I came here because I was told it might be good for you psychologically, in terms of your health. I couldn't see it, myself, but ... but Ruth insisted I should. So you have Ruth, not me, to thank for my being here in the first place."

“You love her very much, don't you?”

“What do you think?”

“I think I can see what you see in her.”

“Well, can't you put yourself in Ruth's position, then?”

“You imagine I haven't done that?”

“Are you capable of doing that?”

“There's no need to be snide, Paul. You know as well as I do how important it is to Ruth's morale that you and I don't get along too comfortably. Perhaps if I were to give you a good hard slap in the face at some appropriate point, when Ruth's looking ... You see the trouble is, Paul, Ruth can tell that you still feel for me, and I you, and she doesn't like that. She forgets that I'll soon be ... dead.” Frances clutched at his sleeve. “Please, just a little more slowly. We're keeping Ruth in sight. She'll come to no harm.”

Paulie slackened his pace. He did feel anger, now. Contempt toward himself, for he had caught a tiny, secret part of Paulie Rayle that was enjoying this. And it would not have escaped Frances's notice. “Put yourself in Ruth's position,” he repeated, miserably. “Wondering what we're saying. I daren't even think what she's imagining. You really enjoy doing this to her, making her feel threatened, don't you?”

“Do you?”

Full of tight, acrid fury, he said, “What is this? Did your doctors suggest it would be good for you to get involved in emotional competition?”

“You flatter yourself.”

“Well, that's what boxworlds are all about, isn't it?”

“Boxworlds?” She looked genuinely perplexed. “What are they? I'm sorry, Paul, I don't understand what you're saying. Is this connected with what you were telling me earlier, about the unreality of things, that strange feeling you said you'd experienced?”

“Either I'm going mad, or this world's not real.”

“So which of the two do you believe is actually the case?”

This was a million miles away from the hard-headed Frances of old, and it took him aback. In fact, he realized, she seemed more like one of the *GroundRuth*s in her willingness to listen.

He confessed, “I don't know what to believe. When Sesha came and collected me, when we were in that verticar, all three of us, me and Sesha and the pilot, found ourselves forced into ... Call it inappropriate sexual behaviour. And then, just as suddenly, it had gone. If Sesha seems a bit upset, troubled by something, that's probably it. That's how I got the bruises ... the pilot couldn't handle his embarrassment, started hitting me. Yeah, I know, I'd be laughed out of court. You'd be well within your rights giving up on me.”

But as if to make amends by humouring him for having let slip hostile feelings toward Ruth, Frances showed no trace of scepticism. "It was as though you were under hypnosis?"

"Or drugged. But I don't think so. I think it was something else."

Frances regarded him quizzically.

He said, "We behaved exactly like screen images do when manipulated by an erotoroutine, a pirate joke program that sends screen characters sex-mad, going at each other like rabbits."

"A program similar to this Sick Nick you mentioned?"

Paulie nodded. "Only sex, not violence."

Frances frowned. "So this led you to suspect that we're none of us real people?" She made the assumption sound almost reasonable.

"Each Dreambox makes an electronic copy of the real world ... the people, everything there's inf on. What happened to us in the verticar would make sense if we were not real people but copies of people, not originals but recordings. And someone's dreaming this world with a Dreambox. It could be me, someone else, I don't know. Alternatively, I could be rubber room material."

"And you've told Ruth?"

"Not about what happened in the verticar. The rest, though, yeah. I don't blame her if she thinks I'm just a stupid boxhead."

"So, tell me how," Frances asked him, "you came to start using a Dreambox? As I remember, you were always so scathing, so dismissive of escapist fantasies."

"How did you ever put up with me? I must have been about as much fun as chronic dysentery."

Paulie felt her squeeze his hand. He glanced at her. She said, earnestly, "Believe me, Paulie, I treasure those times." And then she asked, again, "So why the Dreambox, I don't understand?"

"I've been trying to turn the world into Heaven."

"You've been doing what? I'm not sure I follow you."

He thought, Follow me? You ought to be recoiling from me. He said, "I've been trying to dream up a better world, bring it into actual existence, make it more real than this one. See? I'm mad, fucking mad, I'm round the bend."

"How on earth did you imagine you might set about achieving such a thing?" Frances gave a good impression of taking him seriously. She was, after all, a trained actress.

"God, I don't know, just by thinking the right thoughts, before someone else hit on them and thought them. Like some teenage geek whose idea of Heaven would be closer to Hell." It came pouring out of him; he couldn't stop it. "I'd like to say I was doing it for all the millions of people in the world still suffering and starving, but ... I just want a better world for Kali. And for Ruth. The kind of world she deserves. She can't live in this world as it is. She hates it so much. She belongs in a better world than this."

I just want Ruth and Kali to be happy. But..." He shook his head, "I couldn't do it. I don't have the imagination. I don't have the talent. Ruth believed in me, but I couldn't come through for her."

In silence they continued to pursue Ruth across the park. Paul was dimly aware of Felipe, creeping along in the car, trailing them, staying as close as the road would permit.

Frances said, "So, if the whole world were to change, would we all be conscious of the change, or would..."

"Don't humour me. Why do you humour me as well?" Misery drained him, brought him finally to a standstill. Anguish strangling his voice, he sobbed, "Why does Ruth humour me? Why don't you tell me to grow up? Why isn't there anyone to make me live in the real world?"

"So Ruth knows what you're trying to do?"

"Can't you see? The problem is what I'm doing to her."

Ruth had given him such love, and he had taken it so casually and squandered it. He had left her alone, emotionally, in this world she so detested. Her complaints were justified, her appraisal of the situation spot-on; she had been having to look after two babies. He had exhausted her near-limitless capacity for giving. And all for what? The most patently ludicrous of dreams. A hopelessly naive delusion.

Crushed down by despair, Paulie fell to his knees.

"RUTH!" he shouted.

She was a long way ahead of him, now. She didn't stop, she didn't slow down. She didn't even turn and look. Paulie was desolate. The woman beside him, his ex-wife, had revealed herself to be nothing more than a woman. Not the saviour his mind had built her up to be. Not what he needed. Not the world's wise mother, after all. And the Angel Syndrome? Maybe just a cunning ruse to get him back. Not that he could see how he was worth so much trouble.

"RUTH!" Paulie shouted again.

The trees had swallowed her up.

"Paul?"

He turned to find Frances on her stomach on the sand, trying to lift herself, having fallen on her face. Sand was sticking to her nose, to her lips, to the lenses of her costly designer shades. Blood trickled from her nostril. She looked old. He felt no pity for her, pulling this stunt at this time to stop him chasing after Ruth. All he felt was disgust.

Unless, of course, he chose to be honest with himself.

He bent and took her up into his arms, helped her to her feet.

Frances clung to him, and he to her.

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Chapter 21

It was just the two of them now. Herself and Kali against the world. Ruth looked back. Paulie and Frances were no longer coming after her. They'd given up. What more proof did you need that neither of them cared, that Paulie was back where he wanted to be? Well, she hoped he and Frances would be happy together. She wouldn't trouble them again. She would find her own way home and get on with life, hers and Kali's. That was it. The end. Why prolong it?

Funny, Ruth thought, how suddenly the fog lifts, and you see things straight. Had he ever loved her? Had he—fuck. What a sucker he'd played her for. What a dope she'd been, putting up with his shit for so long. Living with a Dreambox junkie. What else was he cut out for? Selfish, a dreamer. And she, big dumb doormat, had actually gone and bought him the fucking box! And now, he'd had enough of even that game, having failed in it too, like he failed in everything, and had grabbed at this chance of getting back together with Frances. What a twisted, evil fucker he was. He had got her right out here to Seville so that he could parade around in front of her and show how much his ex-wife still wanted him. And Frances, the two-faced old hag, she probably wasn't ill at all—it was probably just a scheme to get him back. Well, Frances could have him. She was welcome to him. They belonged together. What a twisted, evil pair.

Ruth kicked a fallen, rotten orange.

Where would she go? What would she do? She had hardly any money. She had her transac ring, but it had already been used up to its limit. She knew a little bit of Spanish, just about enough to get by. She had no ticket home. That was why they had left her to wander off; they knew she would end up slinking back to them with her tail between her legs. They probably thought that, since she didn't have one of those mobe things, she would have to go to a phone box and either ask Tourinf for directions to Frances's house, although that would surely be private, secret information, never given out to tourists, or else contact Paulie through his borrowed mobe. They knew she wouldn't keep Kali out too long. They knew she knew she was stuck, and they were laughing at her.

Ruth passed a little open-air cafe. Kids were running about with ice cream cones, dropping lumps and dripping trails of coloured ice cream. Parents were sitting drinking coffees. Everybody looked rich. Ruth knew that only well-heeled tourists were allowed into the real city. Any poorer people you saw were natives legally permitted to live there.

A couple of the rich tourists were looking at her. What were they seeing? An unusual-looking poor peasant woman?

In the window of a parked car Ruth caught her reflection, and she thought, An unusual-looking fat peasant woman, and hardly Spanish. White arms. Fat white thighs. Fat white bumpy wobbly thighs, and big backside.

There was something very wrong with Paulie Rayle, the way he'd look at her body and seem to like what he saw, but wouldn't compliment her, not most of the time. Any compliment would have been a lie, but that wasn't the point. Most of his looks would be stolen ones, taken as though a man had a God-given right to look without having to give anything in return. And what a perve he was, going at her with his tongue while she rested her legs on his shoulders, or squatted over him. Getting her to clamp her thighs tight round his head while he'd be going at her, hugging her round the thighs, lapping happily away. Sometimes, it was like he was doing even that for himself, not for her, like it was just another private Paulie Rayle thing. Who else but a perve got turned on by big fat wobbly thighs and big tits like udders?

And sometimes, when the sight of her thighs was making her uncomfortable, and he was going at her with too much roughness and madness, like a licking dog gone mental, she wouldn't be getting as much out of it as he'd obviously want her to be getting, so she'd make moans to please him. Sometimes. Other times, she really was off on a cloud. So, did he do that kind of stuff with Frances, even though she was old enough to be his mother? He probably even liked the mother thing. What a fucking perve he was. When you thought about it, all men were perverted.

Ruth came to a road junction, crossed along with a bunch of other people. Wasn't that big building the old cigarette factory out of Carmen? She could have done with a smoke. She'd given up on becoming pregnant with Kali. It hadn't been so difficult. The taste of cigarettes had suddenly gone horrible, like her body had known what was best for her and had taken action. She could have done with one now, though, and if she hadn't had Kali on her in the sling she would have bought some.

She followed a long, high wall. All along it were posters, the same poster over and over again. That dead singer, Janko Brauch. Greatest Hits.

She came to shops. A touristy knick-knack shop full of tiles and garish majolica and frilly flamenco dresses. An Irish pub. An electrical shop, its window crammed with Dreamboxes. A sign urged in Spanish, 'BUY BEFORE THE BAN!' She felt like chucking a brick.

A pony and trap clip-clopped past, carrying Oriental sightseers. Kali woke up, yawned her face half inside-out. Hoisting her up in the sling, Ruth kissed her baby's dandelion-clock head. "Just you and me, babes," she murmured softly.

A clean, clear, sweet and simple life was all she'd ever wanted. Paulie had given the impression that he was seeking the same thing, back when he'd come to the village looking for a quiet room. Only what she hadn't realized then was that his kind of simplicity was the simplicity of being looked after, of not having to work, earn money, bother about bills or care for children; of having somebody stupid enough to do all of that for you, and take your crank fantasies seriously. Better still, why not get your rich ex-wife to buy you simplicity? Why he'd left Frances in the first place was the biggest fucking mystery of all.

Ruth looked round for some public toilets. Kali had just done another nappysworth. She stank to high heaven, poor little mite.

* * * *

Settling into a comfortable chair, Sessa donned her smartspecs and embarked upon a leisurely surf of the city's securicams; something she would often do when travelling. She found it an enjoyable way of getting her bearings, this literal overview of her environment. Even though less immersive an experience, it was nonetheless preferable to PseudoSeville; this was the real world she was looking out on, not the substitute stored on computer for the plebs.

She had remained in her room, too embarrassed to risk bumping into Xabier. And she had needed a break from agonizing over Frances's job offer. Sitting back and observing the streetlife was a tried-and-trusted chillout tactic. She had no control over the cameras; it was like being an upstairs passenger on a double-decker bus, a flaneuse watching the world go by.

She soon found a pleasurable rhythm, cutting from camera to camera to camera, from shopfronts to squares to public parks. She spotted the cafe where she had sat not two hours before. At one point she thought she saw Frances, Paul and Ruth, with the baby, in a park. But they failed to reappear on any other cameras, so perhaps they had walked out of range. From the securicams atop the Giralda tower she enjoyed spectacular views across the cityscape. Down in the streets, she spied plenty of cute guys,

not potential seed-providers; she had fully recovered from that madness. She recalled hearing somewhere that, within the next two or three mobe generations, it should become possible to tap into a securicam feed, run an ident scan on any one of several billion earth inhabitants caught on vid and get a Korsch-Wrightson Potential Psychosis Report and a Semiotic Attire Assessment, plus a biog compiled from all harvestable inf. Great to be able to do that to others; scary to think of them doing it to you.

Sesha noted three or four shops with cool clothes on display, and suffered an envy attack brought on by the sight of a young girl, killer gorgeous, in a Janko Brauch t-shirt. In fact, a good many of the Spanish girls on view had incredibly high levels of natural Congruence, although the majority would still have benefited from a PsyTri consultation. All in all, she spotted very few outright haircripples, female or male.

She was looking down from the corner of a small square, a not especially riveting view, with little going on, and nothing much of architectural interest, when the gliding camera suddenly revealed, standing large as life on the cobblestones, none other than Sick Nick himself.

Sesha started, heard her own gasp of horror, felt the familiar ice-cold shiver that always brought her out in goosebumps.

Her heart was pounding audibly.

Bizarrely, no one else down there seemed scared of him. Well, some passers-by were clearly startled to see him there, but as many, if not more, were incredibly blase, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, finding Sick Nick looming over you, standing stock-still like a statue.

Someone bent and put some cash money into—what was it?—a box, a small cardboard box on the cobbles nearby.

With shocking suddenness, Sick Nick sprang into life.

And bowed, very grandly.

Only then did Sesha realize that he was a mime, a performance artist, a clever clown of a Sick Nick impersonator. And anyhow, she was forgetting: Sick Nick was strictly virtual. He couldn't appear in real life, on the street, in front of people. His stamping ground was the NeTV or cinema screen. He was nothing more than a cyberspook, a two-dimensional imagepirate who could turn any digitized movie or NeTV show into a bloodbath, wreaking untold audiovisual mayhem, but was forever confined to that less-than-real world of simulations, representations, sheer make-believe.

Sick Nick was a mere computer program.

The camera, meanwhile, was gliding on, leaving Sick Nick behind, and only after it had completed its arc and swung back did it reveal him again. He had reverted to his former, eerie stillness. People passed. One or two put money in the box. A young couple, holding hands, paused to laugh and admire. Sick Nick's tongue came shooting out and, forking into scissors, neatly snipped through their wrists, one after the other. The two joined hands fell, amputated, onto the cobbles. The view switched to that of another camera, sited in front of some imposing public building.

Sesha felt nausea.

“Last camera.” She could barely get the words out. “Hold.”

Her mobe returned her to the scene. All was chaos, anguish, terror, somehow all the more appalling in its soundlessness. The young guy was scrabbling frantically to retrieve the severed extremities, the two sets of fingers still grotesquely intertwined. The girl was catatonic, able to do nothing but stand there and watch the blood spray out from her handless arm and splash her face and soak her hair. The camera caught onlookers, wide-eyed, screaming silently.

Sick Nick was laughing.

People ran—everyone except for the catatonic girl and her fumbling boyfriend, both crimson-drenched, standing in widening pools of their own blood. Dark lines seeped out between the cobbles. The young guy, hugging the severed hands close against his chest, turned to the girl and attempted to comfort her. Sick Nick's tongue shot out again, snaked under her bloodstained frock and emerged from her mouth, the glistening tongue-tip wagging roguishly. In one smooth, fluid sweep, the wet pink razor tongue came up like a cheesewire, bisecting the girl before the boyfriend's numb gaze. The two limp halves of her body fell backward, separating, spilling viscera.

Sesha heaved, felt her hands grip the arms of the chair.

With the tip of his tongue, Sick Nick plucked out the boyfriend's eyes and flicked them away. Coiling itself around the young guy's throat and picking him up from the ground like a cut flower, the tongue morphed, becoming pincer-tipped, and set about removing the guy's teeth, one by one.

Sesha closed her eyes; she couldn't watch any more.

Yet after a moment she found herself peeping again.

Sick Nick was still milking his horticulture/dentistry gag. Blood gushed from the guy's toothless mouth. A vehicle drew up at the kerbside nearby. A small van. Clearly visible on its side was BENGTT & ANDERSSSEN, which Sesha recognised as the name of an upmarket fadget manufacturer. From the van emerged a Bengt & Anderssen maintenance man. He had B&A emblazoned across the back of his bottle-green boilersuit, carried a toolbox, and wore a Viking helmet. Sesha had seen the guy before, in ads for the company's products. The man put down the toolbox on the cobblestones, taking care to avoid the blood. From the box he selected a small, fat-barrelled gun with a foldaway butt.

Sick Nick let the young guy drop and turned to face the maintenance man.

Sesha's heart stopped.

The maintenance man took aim and fired the gun. A net of fine mesh enveloped Sick Nick. The razor tongue hacked at it, but couldn't cut through. The net tightened. Sick Nick was now a whirling, hacking ball of gleaming blades.

But still, he remained trapped.

The maintenance man folded up and put away his special gun. Sick Nick struggled. The net tightened further. Sick Nick struggled harder, lost his balance and toppled. The net had him caught.

And then, all at once, Sick Nick was staring at her, staring straight out through the securicam at Sesha Roffey. His burning eyes bored into her, as though he knew she was there, rapt witness to his downfall. The razor tongue shot out again—

Sesha flinched, let out a horrified scream as the tongue-tip burst through the screen of her smartspecs and brushed her cheek, only to be yanked back into the image by the man from the van. Clutching the writhing, eel-like tongue in a thickly-gloved hand, the Bengt & Anderssen man produced from his toolbox a heavy-duty cutting tool. Coolly, he snipped off Sick Nick's tongue and tossed it into the gutter, where it lay jerking and twisting and squirming. Without haste, the maintenance man then removed from his toolbox a pair of vicious-looking meathooks. Stepping gingerly across the bloodstained cobblestones to where his tongueless adversary lay vainly struggling, he swung the hooks with businesslike force, digging them into Sick Nick, and then proceeded to drag the captured cyberspook across to his van. A very big, very strong, strapping specimen, quite constitutionally worthy of the horned Viking helmet he wore, the B&A man had little trouble in dragging Sick Nick to the van, pulling him through the blood of his victims, leaving a dark smeary trail. The van's tailgate had been left open. With the two hooks, the man hoisted Sick Nick up off the ground and deposited him inside, then allowed himself a slight breather before swinging down the tailgate and securing it. Throughout, he had given the impression of all-in-a-day's-work. He walked over and retrieved his toolbox, then got back into the van and drove off.

Bewildered, Sesha tried to make sense of it. Never before had she seen, or even heard of, Sick Nick being defeated by anyone. Sick Nick was invincible. This was an entirely novel development.

And the tongue—oh wow, WHAT an effect! Her cheek still tingled from its razor caress.

Of course, none of this had really taken place. The securicam image had been puppeted, first by Sick Nick himself, and then by a very sharp, clever and cool Bengt & Anderssen ad. The B&A 'grammers had found a way of outpuppeting the world's most formidable cyberspook, pursuing him through all of his random manifestations and bringing him to poetic justice in hijacking him to their own ends, not to mention evidencing a state-of-the-art sense of humour. The ad would win awards.

Sesha took off her smartspecs. Her heart was thumping, still. So much for relaxation. By a macabre coincidence, somewhere out in the city the faint wail of sirens gradually rose to a high pitch of urgency before dying away again.

She touched her cheek.

Her fingers came away smeared with blood.

* * * *

Ruth turned a corner into a cobblestoned square. It was full of police. She had heard their sirens streets away. Police with big ugly machine guns were standing around everywhere. A covered stretcher was being put into an ambulance. Something serious must have happened.

And then, she saw the blood.

It was all over the place. It turned her stomach. Instinctively, she hugged Kali tight. What was it, a crash? Had someone been knocked down? But then why all the guns? Was it a shooting? She'd heard no gunshots. Whatever it was, for all that blood to have been spilled, that terrible amount of blood. And what was that, lying there in the gutter? A glistening, coal-black snake of a thing, throbbing faintly, obscenely.

People were standing and talking. It was hard to understand them, they were speaking so fast. In her halting Spanish, Ruth asked the woman beside her what was going on. The woman shrugged, her padded shoulders knocking into her gigantic round earrings. "*Se dice que es Sick Nick.*"

Ruth recognized the name. Was it a character from a film? She seldom watched television, hadn't gone to the cinema in years, and never kept up with the news. But the name was definitely one she'd heard before, although this did nothing to make the situation here in the square any clearer to her.

She was hot, boiling hot, and Kali was heavy. What else was there to do but find a phone box? Not that they weren't finished, the two of them, Ruth Deitch and Paulie fucking Rayle.

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Chapter 22

He was unable to cry, laugh, scream; to do anything but feel dismally numb. His ex-wife was insane. Angel Syndrome meant that and nothing more. The things she had just now told him, here in the park after this last attack, as he had held her, as Felipe had come charging in with the Socratosine, the things she had said amounted to final, conclusive evidence of her descent into madness. The crap she'd spouted, and the beatific smile she now wore as, earnestly, she informed him, "Paulie, it's not how you think it is, all of this."

He said, "I have to go and find Ruth and Kali."

"Big Boy?"

"What?" he snapped back at the wrist mobe.

"Must I keep calling you Big Boy when I know your name is actually Paul? Does it generate adequate drollery, still? Or might a fresh pseudonym, such as, for instance, Hot Rod, serve to refurbish this running gag somewhat?"

"Look, what do you want?"

"The name you just mentioned ... Kali ... is part of the flashtransmit ident from a ResponsiCare infant transportation sling currently being employed in this city. The sling is registering a high temperature, and also some stress conducting to the child from the sling-wearer. Unfortunately, the sling's metaparental vocalizer module is for some reason inoperable, preventing the wearer from being informed, plus no local ResponsiCare infant health account has been initiated ... therefore health centres are refusing to accept alarm signals."

Could the mobe be talking about Ruth's baby sling? It wasn't like Ruth to go for that kind of hi-techery; so far as Paulie could recall she'd bought the sling second-hand, like almost all their other baby stuff. Maybe she never realized what she was buying? He himself had never paid it much attention.

"So can you locate this sling?" he asked of the mobe.

"At this moment, the sling and, presumably, its wearer are proceeding along Calle Castelar in the El Arenal quarter."

"We'll go in the car." Frances looked to her man. "Felipe?"

As they drove, Paulie thought, I am dreaming, of course. This boxworld is mine. All of this is merely my own brain's unique, intricate, hyperconvoluted way of granting me my deepest desires.

To Frances, he said, “You do realize you're just a humiliant? A pseudoperson, a piece of furniture in someone else's fantasy? And that someone happens to be me.” His own cruelty shocked him. “I'm sorry.” He looked away from her.

Frances said calmly, “Ruth will be fine. Everything will be fine, as soon as I gain possession of my full range of powers.”

“Now that you're finally an angel, you mean?”

“I suspect it's anamnesis, that it was there all the time, occluded, unavailable to me in my former state. The telothine released it retrotemporally.”

“How, exactly?” Paulie was intrigued; he wanted to hear how his imagination had arranged things. It wasn't really so surprising that his transconscious psyche had chosen to displace agency onto Frances; he had always thought of her as some kind of Goddess. Vanity? Did he refuse to fall in love with anything less? Then what of Ruth?

Frances said, “The telothine will make me emortal, enabling me to live to see the Ontotechnological Revolution, whereupon, along with everyone else on this planet, I shall partake of the coming Paradise.”

Paulie laughed out loud. “And let me guess: those others, the ones who went for telotherapy and ended up with AS ... they were just too old and weak to handle what you're going through, but retained just enough presence of mind to have themselves frozen? Not on the off-chance that they might be revived in the future, but knowing, without doubt, that they are going to be?” He laughed again, harshly, bitterly; it was all so ludicrous. “Can't you see, this is the work of a second-rate, washed-up, pathetically desperate imagination? I know what I want, more or less, but I'm just not up to conceptualizing it. Ontotechnology ... that's just my word for magic. Or, if you like, divine grace. And the funniest thing, the biggest joke of all, is that it's just myself I'm talking to. Has the timer jammed or what? I should have been fetched out long before it got to this.”

He felt Frances's hand close over his. He shrugged it off.

* * * *

The second phone box was also Transac Ring Only; Ruth couldn't find one that accepted cash money. She asked the computerized operator to put through a call, collect, to Frances Rayle. No number for that person was available.

I might've known, Ruth thought, that she'd be ex-direc.

Beside the box ran a low stone wall. Ruth sat down on it. Kali was so heavy, and probably boiling up in the sling. She took the baby out and held her. The poor little love was hot, she was sweaty and red in the face, and Ruth thought, Some mother am I. Me and my fucking hormones.

For wasn't it always possible—she'd learnt this trick from Paulie, turning situations round till they looked different—that she was pushing them together, Paulie and Frances? Making her own worst fear a reality?

She didn't know what to think, couldn't work out which was the true way of seeing things, sitting there on the wall and being looked at by the tourists like another little dab of local colour. She felt that they expected her to be begging, and that she'd brought the baby out to drum up pity.

The road was noisy. Cars, vans, lorries.

SAGRADA.

Ruth started, as though slapped in the face. The word had come out of nowhere, come and then gone. A word on the side of some vehicle. Sagrada something. Something Sagrada. That same word again, the very same word the stupid voicebox from the baby sling had spoken. As if to remind her of something.

But what?

A car pulled up. A black car, just like the one in which they'd gone out to the park. The door opened and Paulie got out.

"Ruth, are you all right?"

She said to him, "What do you care?"

She didn't know how they'd managed to find her. They must have been driving around, looking. They must have driven down no end of streets in search of her.

Paulie came over to her. "I was worried."

"I want to go back," she told him. "I want to go home."

"So do I." He held out his hands to take Kali.

Ruth gave their baby to her father.

Paulie said, "There's nothing I can do here."

Ruth was taken back. He seemed serious, and he looked more troubled than ever, really, truly loaded down and woebegone. He hadn't looked that bad when they were in the park.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go home."

Ruth followed him back to the car. Frances was there, sitting in the back and smiling at her. Not a smug or nasty smile, but a warm and friendly one greeted Ruth as she got into the car. Paulie squeezed in after her with Kali and shut the door. It wasn't a big luxury car, just ordinary-sized. That was one nice thing about Frances, she didn't go in for showy status symbols.

They pulled away, and Paulie said, "I think it would be best if we went home," and immediately, despite everything she had thought while off on her own, Ruth felt guilty.

Frances said, "Everything will be fine."

There was—you couldn't fail to notice it—something odd about Frances's manner; she too had changed since the park, but in an opposite way from Paulie. While Paulie seemed to have had the stuffing knocked out of him, Frances looked and sounded on top of the world.

Ruth thought wearily, Why can't people just be normal?

They drove back to the house in a silence broken only by Kali, who suddenly went into what Ruth recognized as one of her 'want-to-go-to-sleep-but-can't' crying fits.

"May I hold her?" Frances asked.

Paulie looked to Ruth. She nodded. He handed Kali over. Kali stopped crying and stared up at Frances.

"Who's a little beauty?" Frances whispered.

Ruth saw that Paulie was watching them, looking at Frances and looking at Kali. She wondered what he was thinking. She wondered if it was really now finally over between them, between herself and Paulie. She wondered this despite her change of mood while sitting on the wall, and despite his having said that he wanted to go home.

They reached the house, and Frances had handed Kali back to her, and they were stepping out of the lift onto the patio when, right out of the blue, Paulie turned on Frances and asked her, in an ugly fraught voice, "So just how are you going to put everything right?"

Ruth saw that he had tears in his eyes.

Frances, far from being shocked or offended, couldn't have been more sympathetic in her response. "You're confused. I understand that. But have faith."

"Can you fetch me out?" Paulie wanted to know. "Can you do that, fetch me out?"

Ruth's stomach tightened.

"Can't you see I can't take any more?" Paulie looked like he was about to grab hold of Frances and start shaking her. "But you really can't do anything, can you? And you know why? Because my imagination's not up to it. I can't think what you would do. I don't know how the fuck ontotechnology would work, were there such a thing. I have no words to put into your mouth. I'd hook up again, try and get to another level, but what would be the use? I just don't have it in me, what it takes."

Frances said gently, "Paul, you're tired."

"Yeah, too right I'm tired. I'm tired of trying to imagine the impossible. The unimaginable. Well I've had it. I've done my best. I give up." He broke down into sobs, then suddenly screamed out, "JUST TELL ME WHOSE FUCKING DREAM THIS IS."

Kali shrieked in terror.

Ruth walked quickly away, took Kali up the steps, up to their room, leaving him behind, back there with Frances. The two of them belonged together; they were both round the twist. She'd had enough. This was it. The finish. Goodbye.

On the landing, she caught the PsyTri woman sneaking out of her room and into theirs. The woman stopped dead with her hand on the doorhandle, a picture of embarrassment, when she saw Ruth looking at her.

"Ruth."

In the woman's hand was a little purple soft toy, one of those Bubu things, or whatever they were called. It was just like the toy Frances had sent Kali, the present that Ruth had grudgingly accepted only because she wasn't petty enough to chuck it out. The toy that had gone missing from the cottage.

"Here." The woman held it out to her. "It's yours. I stole it. I'm sorry."

"Keep it," Ruth told her, surprised to find that she didn't feel angry; or to be more exact, that she was able to choose not to be angry, not to care.

"I suppose you think I'm a klep..."

"I don't want to know," Ruth cut in. "I'm fed up of the whole fucking lot of you. I never wanted this. I never wanted to be mixing with people like you, any of you. You're just, I don't know, you're all just completely fucked-up."

"Mmm," the woman agreed, tears running down her cheeks. "Frucked-up."

"The word's fuck, for fucksake!"

The woman was sobbing, now, sobbing her heart out, and before she knew it, Ruth had her arm around the woman and was sort of hugging her, as best she could, what with having to carry Kali at the same time. "Oh look, it's all right, don't worry about it." A tear fell on the back of her hand, ran tickling down her skin. "It's only a kid's toy, it's not the end of the world."

Standing there offering comfort to this woman she barely knew, Ruth thought, Who is there to mother me?

And then she thought, Sagrada.

How could I have not remembered?

How could I have forgotten my own mother's name?

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Chapter 23

Weightless, formless, yet magically able to move and feel and see and read and drink in scents and sounds and atmospheres, to study expressions on faces and listen to his songs being sung before floating off again, silent, invisible, Janko Brauch never tired of touring his world, soaking up sorrow, basking in love.

It was a gas, the ultimate gear, a hit like no other. He'd been burnt out, brought down, drained, a joke who couldn't cut it any more, these last sixteen years. A figure of pity and ridicule. A wreck on a permanent guilt trip on account of what he'd done, the two people he'd killed with that car. Now computers copied his voice, stole his style, came up with megaselling songs. They could fake his physical image and put it in movies, thus avoiding his 'difficult' demands. They could do very well on their own, thank you very fucking much, or frucking, as kids said nowadays. Live fast, slow down and die old and uncool, crowded out by younger flowers. Have your turn and hand over the torch, it used to be, which

was kind of a cool thing. It was something to be appreciated shrewdly once you got onto the maturity and mellowness kick, found true wisdom in the fullness of time; once you saw the sin in living on as a dumb digizombie, an animated trademark, hawking yesterday's wares in eternal recycles for this year's and next year's kidsumers. Kids who hadn't known about the car crash, who would have anyhow just shrugged and said, 'so frucking what?' Kids who admired the way you'd bought enough lawpower to get you off and keep you out of jail. Kids of scant sensitivity, who went ahead and loved you, still. Loved you while you hated yourself.

For sixteen years Janko Brauch had lived in the knowledge that living was something he didn't deserve. Not only that, but the whole neat Elvis/JFK/Lennon/Luther King/Janis J/Princess Di/Marc B/Marilyn M/Sherry Freaan/Jimmy Dean/Kurt C/Jimi H/Jesus Christ trip, he had always envied that riff, liked the idea of joining that company. Who wouldn't want some of that outpourgasm action? Love like that. Love for him, for Janko Brauch. Love like you only ever got when it was too late. Who could have imagined things would turn out just the opposite: that he would go down as a killer of innocents, and the kids, the frucked-up kids, would see that as a cool enough deal?

Janko Brauch didn't see it as cool, being the cause of a crash in which he himself, and not that married couple, should have died. A matter of conscience, yeah? You know it should have been you.

But when finally he'd got the chance to go back in time and stop it ever happening, and had saved his victims' lives without them ever knowing, Janko had found that he hadn't wanted to switch fates, after all. When it came to the death of Janko Brauch he'd wanted something more individual. So he'd come up with something better, a death more memorable.

So picture it, man: you're live on stage, yeah—sixteen years ago, this is; the night before what would have been the crash—and you've just done your set, and they're screaming, and this beautiful, frucking BEAUTIFUL girl scrambles up on the stage, and, right there in front of them all—in front of everybody there, and all the millions watching all over the world—right in big, big, big, big close-up, this frucking lovely gorgeous beautiful girl whips out this bowie knife and slits your throat.

It's just her way of loving you.

And down you go on your knees, and this chick stands there holding you up by your hair, and holding the knife, and holding your head back, with your throat gaping open, and the cameras zoom in close, big, big, big, big, and just as you're dying, just in the second before you cash in, you give this girl a little look that says you understand, and you forgive her.

Cool, no?

So then you die, you leave your body, float, and witness. And what a frucking Grade A trip. All the shit he'd ever done, the chemmies, sex, came nowhere close, man, feeling them mourn you, drinking in that EMOTION.

* * * *

He floated down into a girl's private bedroom. A pretty little, shy little fox of a thing stuck out in some godforsaken town in fruck knows what part of the world, with smartpape posters all over her walls. A living, moving poster of Janko Brauch, singing, stomping, wanking his Fender. And next to it another shot, Janko Brauch and his killer. A still photo, this one, stark and frozen, in grainy, superstyley black-and-white. The Notorious Photo Taken Just Before The Act. You could see the knife very clearly. And his killer's luscious big black mad girly eyes.

Sixteen years ago.

Before this other chick, the girl in this bedroom into which he had floated, had even been born. He was as old as her old man. Or he would have been, had he lived. This lonely secret little girl with all the posters of Janko Brauch was sitting cross-legged on her bed looking at the posters and mouthing along as he sang Lisa Sleaze—and sobbing and smudging her kohl and letting her hair hang down all in rats' tails and feeling this deep, deep, deep, deep love for the dead Janko Brauch.

Janko drank it in.

The chick was what, fifteen? Same age his killer had been. Wouldn't it be a gas if he materialized, came back to life in her bedroom, just for her, as if her love had been so strong it brought him back? Janko wanted to hold her, hug her in his arms, so eat-me sweet she was, so cute and soft and perfect-faced. He wanted to cradle her. But it wouldn't be fair on her head to do that. He was floating in the bedroom of this sobbing little fan of fifteen. D-e-n-y-s-e, her name was, she had on this metal necklace in the shape of her name, like the nameplate on a chromy old car. Janko was floating around pretty Denyse when his timer fetched him out, sucked him gently back down into Groundworld. Being a neat Bengt & Anderssen, his box had the gentlest fetch on the market, a tender tongue-tip caress of a fetch. And it was known to be one of the best at keeping at bay any bad shit picked up when your boxworld was being put together, stuff like erotoroutines and spooks, even the archspook, Sick Nick.

To start with, Janko had used the box with gamecards, conquering universes, shooting and shagging like millions of others. But when, just the other day, he'd found out you could wildcard your box and do whatever you wanted with its copy of the world, well, then there'd been no stopping Janko Brauch. He had gone back in his boxworld sixteen years and changed the past.

Janko lay there while the real world came into focus. His veins were fiery, still, his heart and his head hypercharged.

And then the process began.

You pathetic old titsphincter.

He lay there with his Dreambox in this cheap cockroachy hotel room where no one would find him or disturb him and he told himself, You think it's love for YOU, man, but it's not.

You did your dethan shit, half a hair pill and the Vitamin C, and still you ripped into yourself as soon as you got back in the Real. It was the price you paid for having such a frucked-up shit-filled head, the selfsame shit that made you a Sensitive Artist, an authentic human person who faced up to yourself, so maybe this was right and cool and proper, that straight away you should start ripping into yourself, killing the bliss of coming back. Now and here, in Groundworld, Janko ripped into himself by reminding himself that it wasn't love for him they were feeling, all these kids, sixteen years on and still torn up and pining. It wasn't a him thing, it was a self thing, all their little separate selves they were feeling for. Ten million private Janko Brauches, no more real, no more him than the computer ghosts the moviemakers used.

You sad old gusset-sucker, Janko Brauch.

There was no going back, no undoing the crash in this real world. Those two people had died. He had run them down and killed them. End of story. It might have turned out differently, but it hadn't, so tough fucking titty. He could dream up any shit he desired, but the REAL TRUTH was written in stone. In his boxworld, Janko Brauch was a slaughtered lamb legend. Here in Groundworld, he was what he had

always been these last sixteen years: a ruined soul, a taker of lives, a grey-haired once-was, turned forty-six, with blood on his hands. The blood of those two newlyweds, robbed by him of the rest of their lives.

What kind of lives? Janko had wondered, and he had thought that maybe seeing them happy would make him feel better about himself. To start with, he had left them well alone in his boxworld. But then all of a sudden this impulse—why not pay a visit, make sure that things were okay, fine and good? If things weren't, then that wouldn't be his fault, not in his boxworld, a world where he hadn't gone off the road and hit them sixteen years ago. But he hoped life was good for them. All he had to do was wish to see them, and his little magic box would do the rest.

And so, two boxtrips ago, the bliss belly had shat him out over a city. Southern Spain. Seville. He knew it, he'd played there. He'd floated down toward a house with a big glass sun dome. He'd floated down through the dome, down into the open garden court the house was built around.

And there she was, the woman, older now, but still a looker. She was standing alone, and just as he'd floated down toward her she'd raised her face and stared right up at him, right at him, as if she could see him there, even though he was invisible to her and to all of them, every one of his humiliants. And then she had collapsed, knocking over a plant in a pot, and had thrashed about on the floor and let out a weird, weird moan.

Like she'd seen him there, looking down on her.

Janko had checked to make sure he was invisible. He was; he could see nothing of himself.

Some Spanish dude had come rushing in and picked the woman up and shot her with a hypo.

“Paul!” the woman had called.

The name had put a knife through Janko Brauch's invisible guts.

The woman, Frances Rayle, had started crying, the young Spanish guy in the white shirt trying to soothe her.

And then, somebody else had appeared, and Janko had recognized Paul Rayle. Sixteen years on, he wasn't looking well, he wasn't looking too healthy.

But there they were, though, both still alive, the married couple he'd killed.

And married, still?

No.

All Janko had to do was ask a question and his boxworld supplied the answer in the form of an intuition. That was one of his wished-for supernatural powers—instant knowledge, along with weightlessness and utter invisibility. He'd ripped off the idea from DR SPEKKTRO, a comic he had read as a kid. The extra bit he'd added on by himself, a unique Janko Brauch invention, was the ability to drink in people's feelings for him. Like with that other chick who had been there in Seville, the chick with the Louise Brooks hair. Janko had detected quite a little lovesource there. But she was old. Thirty, if a day. Back when she was a teenager, maybe—

Seeing them both there in that house, his two once-victims, Paul and Frances Rayle, Janko had been troubled to find the woman having such a tough time of it, even though he knew that she was rolling-in-it rich. But more than that, something scared him about what was going down. In bewilderment, and with very deep unease, he had floated there and watched as Frances Rayle freed herself from the young guy and, unsteadily, stood up and looked straight up at him, Janko Brauch, once again, just like before, staring straight up at him and giving him the shits. You weren't meant to get the shits in your own boxworld. Not unless you hadn't dethanned. Had he boxed up without any dethan, gone in uncushioned? Was that why what was happening was happening?

“Paul ... Paul it's not your world, it's not Processia's, nor mine, it's...”

And then she'd she'd pointed up at him, at the invisible Janko Brauch—just as if she could see him there.

“TELL THEM THE TRUTH!”

The words, screamed up at him by Frances Rayle, had caused Janko Brauch such severe shock that the traumafetch, a brand-new safety feature exclusive to Bengt & Anderssen, had yanked him out through the bliss belly as if by Caesarian, and dumped him home in Groundworld, for him to wake to the discovery that he'd used his pants as a toilet. From now on, Janko had vowed, he would keep well clear of Paul and Frances Rayle. He had put things straight, in his boxworld if not in real life, by undoing the crash that had killed them, by not even driving along that road that night sixteen years ago. He had settled the debt, and could hardly be held responsible for any other shit their little lives happened to drop them in subsequently. He would be leaving them to themselves, from this point onward. After all, they were only frucking humiliants, electronic pretend people, just like all those billions of other little ghosts in the private, secret boxworld of Janko Brauch. That was why it did your head in, doing Dreamboxes. You started thinking of your boxworld as real, when it wasn't real. You started thinking you'd put things right, healed the past, when you hadn't, man, not at all. That was why, when your brain mellowed out and you saw things straight and got your head round the real state of play, you started ripping into yourself. And the more of a Sensitive Artist you were, the more you beat yourself up, the higher the price you paid; it went with the territory.

Janko got up from the bed. He felt like ratshit. He had three immediate needs: a slash and a spliff and a shot of Jack Daniels. Too late, he realized he was still wearing the trodes. The Dreambox, yanked off the bed like a dog on a leash, smacked into the bedside table and thumped down and bounced on the thin-pile carpet.

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Chapter 24

It was as though a gaggle of electronic geese had been let loose in Frances's house. One of the birds could talk. It kept squawking: “INTRUDER ALERT! INTRUDER ALERT!”

Xabier instantly appeared, wielding a snubnosed buzzpistol. Felipe emerged from somewhere else, similarly armed. Sesha Roffey and Ruth were looking down over the balustrade, brought out from their rooms by the raucous alarm.

Frances just stood there as though in a trance. Xabier grabbed her and hustled her into an alcove, body-shielding her. Felipe did the same with Paulie as, onto the patio, strode a tall, muscular man in a bottle-green boilersuit and a Viking helmet. He was carrying not a firearm but a toolbox. Steadying his

buzzgun with both hands, Felipe addressed the trespasser in Spanish, his voice taut and threatening. The Viking said a word, Paulie didn't catch it, and Felipe froze in his shooting stance like a waxwork exhibit. Xabier was likewise rendered inert.

The Viking said, "You are Paul and Frances Rayle, yes?" His accent was so gelatinous as to court amusement.

What am I dreaming up now? Paulie wondered, trembling.

"Paul and Frances Rayle," the Viking spoke gravely, formally, "I regret to inform you that this Bengt & Anderssen BeaBox Ninety has suffered a physical shock of a magnitude sufficient to necessitate a complete reversion to initial worldcopy mode. All user amendments are forthwith rescinded. Sadly, this reconfigurative measure involves withdrawal of epicentral humiliating status from the aforementioned pseudopersons: namely, yourselves."

Chilled to the bone, yet at the same time grimly gratified by this broad confirmation of his ontological suspicions, Paulie asked of their visitor, "Are you the Viking from the Bengt & Anderssen ads?"

"I am indeed that personage, yes."

"Is this one of those new holo ads?" Sessa Roffey, more than a trifle perplexed, was standing at the bottom of the steps. "They beat Sick Nick," she marvelled. "No one ever beats Sick Nick. You should have seen it. So you're a holo ad, right?"

"I am a boxworld janitory program manifesting itself anthropomorphically." The Viking put down his toolbox. "And you would be ... Miss Processia Roffey? Miss Roffey, your own situation is somewhat more sanguine than that of Mr. and Ms Rayle, since the Ground-original self to which, directly, you shall be reverting is alive and well. These events may even be preserved in your memory at an oneiric level."

"So some of us aren't alive and well in Groundworld?" Paulie was aghast. "Whose boxworld is this?"

The Viking pondered. "I see no reason not to divulge the requested information, since the coming reversion will..." He broke off, as if not to belabour harsh truths. "The user's name is Janko Brauch."

"Janko Brauch?" Sessa Roffey shook her head. "Janko Brauch died ages ago. That girl killed him onstage. Slit his throat with a bowie knife. Everyone knows that. What am I doing, arguing with a holo ad? And what's wrong with Xabier and the other guy? Am I sleepwalking or what?"

She's right, Paulie thought. It's common knowledge that Janko Brauch was murdered, elevated by a mad fan to the pantheon of showbusiness subchrists.

The Viking turned to Frances. His politeness, the care he took not to have her feel excluded from the conversation, was commendable. "Ms Rayle, there is no pleasant way of putting this, but, in Groundworld..."

"...I do not exist?" Frances still showed no fear; in fact, she alone seemed to understand what was taking place.

"You do not exist," the Viking confirmed. "Or to be more precise, you are no longer animate. And neither are you, Mr Rayle, I'm afraid."

Paulie almost collapsed. Dry-mouthed, he inquired, "Why is that? How can that be?"

"You were killed in a traffic accident by a driver who was, regretfully, in no fit state to be in command of a vehicle. That driver was Janko Brauch. The accident happened some sixteen years ago."

"But Janko Brauch is dead," Sessa Roffey pointed out. "Janko Brauch died sixteen years ago. You're talking crap. He never killed anyone. I never heard of him killing anybody."

"That much is true in this boxworld only," the Viking corrected. "As to Mr. Brauch's motives for resurrecting Mr. and Ms. Rayle and doing away with himself, I am sorry to say that I can furnish you with no further insight. The Bengt & Anderssen BeaBox Ninety creates for its user a psychoplastic Berkeley Effect worldcopy without in any way understanding, in a human sense, what it is doing. Any appearance of comprehension on my part is merely clever programming."

Paulie asked, "Why is it necessary, the reversion? Just run it by me again."

"Physical trauma. The BeaBox Ninety received a shock of such intensity as to render the Berkeley Effect susceptible to exponential aberration. Henceforth, the user will progressively lose control of his boxworld. Reversion resets and restarts quantum compliance ... the aforementioned Berkeley Effect."

"Then why not just automatically revert?" Paulie's own Dreambox boasted a similar safeguard; he now recalled skimming over that section in the instruction manual. "Don't you think it would have been kinder not to have notified us?"

"Undoubtedly. But I have my programming."

"What are they, these programmers ... a bunch of fucking sadists?"

"Quite possibly. Programmers are human, with human faults and foibles. Given the choice, I should not have discharged my duties in this somewhat cruel, theatrical manner. But that is academic," the Viking smiled mirthlessly, "since every facet of my apparent 'character' derives from a subroutine incorporated for the express purpose of further advertising the subtle artistry and zany eclat of my creators ... although it could perhaps be that my hinted antipathy toward them reflects a measure of self-reproach on their part. But I digress."

"When was this worldcopy made?" Paulie asked.

"At four twenty-three p.m. on Tuesday February Seventh."

Oh my God, Paulie thought. The other day. When I was asleep. Just as I suspected. "And the user ... Janko Brauch ... he dreamt himself back in time and changed history, saved us from himself? Why? Out of remorse?"

"Presumably."

"So that's the only reason we're here, myself and Frances? Because of Janko Brauch?"

"That would seem to be the case, Mr. Rayle," said the Viking. "Although in boxworlds generated within this world, copied from it, yourself and Ms Rayle are, of course, extant subjects."

"But those worlds will all be wiped out when this one reverts."

“Indeed.” The Viking's tone was suitably sombre. “Their realitude is contingent upon ours ... or rather, yours, my own ontostatus being slightly more problematical.”

Ruth had come down the stairs. She was standing beside Sesha, holding Kali. The sight of them tore at Paulie's heart. Ruth was looking to him for some kind of explanation. She was scared and she wanted reassurance. What could he say? Ruth, being grounded, blessed with true existence in the real world, would survive the reversion, but her life would then recommence upon a course so different it would be tantamount to death for this *GroundRuth*. In the new, reverted boxworld there would be no Paulie Rayle for Ruth to meet—he would have died when she was a child—and, while she might well have given birth in Groundworld, there would be no Kali as such.

And Paulie and Frances Rayle? Ungrounded humiliants, conjured up out of corpses by the mind of Janko Brauch. Not the nicest discovery to make about oneself. Of course, there was always the possibility that Janko Brauch would do it all over again, dream them back to life, start the puppet-play a second time, or an umpteenth time. Maybe this whole farce had happened before?

Paulie felt nausea.

“It's a new type of ad,” he explained to Ruth, talking fast to keep the despair out of his voice. “Holographic. He looks real but he isn't, he's just a projection. Nothing to worry about.”

Ruth was staring at Xabier, still frozen with his buzzgun, and only now did Paulie notice that both Xabier and Felipe had lost their facial features. They were bland, faceless dummies, like lifesize toys or cheap shop-window models. Paulie couldn't think how to explain away this development, so he just tried his best to convey to Ruth a sense that none of this was really too out of the ordinary, providing you were up on all the latest technotrends. He forced a smile. “Bit creepy, isn't it?” Inside, he felt rage. At the Viking? At Janko Brauch? He wasn't sure. To the Viking, he said, “So you don't feel sorry for us? Not even for my daughter, three months old?”

“Please do not expect too much of a mere boxworld janitory program.”

Paulie could have punched this boxworld janitory program equipped with an answer for everything. But the Viking was exceptionally burly, and Paulie knew that even if he could pry loose the pistol from Xabier's fingers and pump that big barrel chest full of buzzslugs it would achieve nothing.

“Well, come on, then.” Paulie raised his arms in a gesture of surrender. “Get it over with ... at least have that much decency.”

Goodbye, Ruth, he thought. Frances. Tears clouded his eyes.

So, he mused bleakly, I finally get to learn the truth.

His heart hurt like it was being skewered.

Goodbye Kali.

“Mr. Rayle, could you describe to me exactly how it feels to be vouchsafed this awareness of your existential plight?” Like some NeTV newsjockey with heavyweight pretensions, the Viking inclined his head and, keenly, awaited a response.

Paulie's mind was a blank. "Can you repeat the question?"

"Certainly. Could you describe to me, Mr. Rayle, exactly how it feels to be..."

"Who wants to know?" Paulie demanded. "What's the purpose of this?"

"The United Nations Commission for the Study of the Ethical Dimension of Dreambox Use has legislated for the installation, in a small but representative proportion of Dreamboxes, of datagathering adjuncts. This encounter is being recorded. All information gleaned on the topic of humiliating subjective experience will be transmitted to UNCSEDDU for incorporation in its database." The Viking paused. "May I stress that Bengt & Anderssen have no choice but to comply with this UN directive, and thus are in no way responsible for this unfortunately protracted boxworld reversion process; the standard B&A reversion routine is instantaneous and fully humiliating-friendly. Should it transpire that humiliating suffering is ruled to possess such realitude as to call for the granting of protective rights, then Bengt & Anderssen extend our deepest sympathies to all concerned. In the interim, we advise full and honest co-operation with the UN adjunct. It is, in part, on the basis of your answers to its questions that a ruling will be formulated. Mr. Rayle, would you like me to repeat the question again?"

"Will somebody just please tell me what the fucking hell's going on?" Ruth's brittle voice made Kali cry.

Acidly, Paulie remarked to the Viking, "This is a bit of an unkind way of going about things, wouldn't you say?"

"The blame lies with the software house contracted to produce the adjunct. I understand that there were time constraints. Bengt & Anderssen cannot fairly be held to account for..."

"So how many questions are there in all?"

"Twenty-three." The Viking turned to Frances. "And you, Ms Rayle ... could you also provide a set of replies?"

Frances was watching. That was all she had been doing, throughout, observing, as though sympathetic but not personally involved. It was beginning to annoy Paulie, quite unable to conceal all the proliferating symptoms of his terror, while Frances just looked on, laid-back, detached, without even so much as a bead of sweat breaking out on her brow.

"And when we've finished answering the questions," Paulie wanted to know, "what happens then?"

"Reversion," the Viking said simply.

Paulie thought, Back to the grave for Frances and me.

He said, "And the others? They'll be brought back into line with their true, Groundworld selves?"

The Viking nodded. "Correct, sir."

Paulie felt like saying to Sessa Roffey, Well, didn't I tell you? I was right about this world of ours, wasn't I? The erotoroutine, everything. You wouldn't listen. You wouldn't believe me.

But it would do no good—she would go on believing that this was the real world and he was a stupid Dreambox junkie and the Viking was a weird holo ad. And perhaps, Paulie considered, that was a good

thing. She would not be anticipating the reversion, and therefore, like Ruth, like Kali, she would not suffer. He wondered where Sessa Roffey would find herself in the new scheme of things. For there would be no Frances, no Institute of Psychotrichology, no job. Her life would be decidedly different, as was her true Groundworld life.

Unless and until Janko Brauch brought this world back into being...

“Look, Paulie, what's going on?” Ruth was still scared, and doing her best to comfort Kali.

Frances collapsed.

“Frances!” Sessa Roffey darted forward. “Help her someone!”

The Socratosine hypo protruded from a small holster on Xabier's belt. Paulie grabbed it but, before he could work out how to use it, Sessa had snatched it from him. She was about to shoot Frances in the arm when all at once, with the grace of an angel, Frances floated to her feet and said, “Thank you, Processia, but that won't be necessary.”

Like a very small girl, Ruth was gazing at Frances.

And then Paulie heard Ruth say, very quietly, “Mother....?”

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Chapter 25

The Bengt & Anderssen Dreambox janitory program in the guise of a boilersuited Viking gave expression to a mild measure of impatience by simulating throat clearance. “If you could please return your attention to the UNCEDDU verbal questionnaire, Mr. and Ms. Rayle?”

But the Viking was beginning to dematerialize: one horn of his helmet had coarsened, degraded into pointillistic pixels, and also one leg, from knee to ankle, plus a corner of his galvanized toolbox—now two corners, now three. And Paulie noticed that the beautiful house around them, Frances's house, was no longer such a flawlessly-rendered pseudoenvironment; by the moment it was shedding its textures, eschewing aspect after aspect of its former authenticity, degenerating further and further into the crude approximation of a cartoon.

Frances held Ruth in her arms. Ruth was crying on her shoulder. Kali's baby face was slowly scrunching up, making ready to burst into tears. Paulie caught the eye of Sessa Roffey. She gave him a beats-me-too shrug; her tiny gesture of human solidarity in the face of all this grotesquerie touched him deeply, and he felt bad for ever having judged her uncharitably.

“Now, Mr. Rayle,” the Viking pressed on doggedly in his pantomime lilt, “could you describe to me exactly how it feels to be vouchsafed this awareness of your existential plight?”

Instead of answering the question, Paulie put one of his own, “Why are you disappearing?”

“I am ceasing to manifest? That would be because the BeaBox Ninety requires maximum battery power for the reversion procedure. I am afraid we are out of time. Further delay will compel a complete repetition of the basic worldcopying process, incurring unacceptable inconvenience for the user. Bengt &

Andersson have a reputation for reliability second to none, and are legally permitted to abandon UNCSSEDDU questioning if and when it interferes with the reasonable maintenance of a positive percept-profile in today's overcrowded market." The last three words came out reedy and hollow, like from a trashy toy; the Viking was barely more than a vestige now. "Bengt & Anderssen wish me to convey to you their sincerest apollllllllllllllllllll..." The word trailed off ludicrously as the remaining aggregate of pixels dissipated into a fine fog before departing the scene entirely.

Turning to Frances, Paulie asked, "How can you be Ruth's mother? This is ridiculous."

Inside his head, he heard her say, "Don't be afraid, Paulie."

"Well what you're doing now doesn't help," he told her. "I'd rather you spoke to me in the normal way, by vocalizing, if that's not too much trouble?"

Smiling sympathetically, Frances said, "I'm sorry." She was stroking Ruth's hair. Ruth was still sobbing and snuffling, but Kali's little face had unscrunged. Her eyes were wide and alert.

Again, Paulie demanded of his ex-wife, "How can you be Ruth's mother?"

"I am many things. I have many names."

"Have you the power to prevent this world from reverting?" He too could have done with a hug from Frances, a nice fierce motherly protective hug. "I'm sure you can appreciate my confusion? And imagine how Sessa here must be feeling."

"I still don't understand about Janko Brauch," Sessa Roffey put in. She was maintaining an incredible degree of composure; indeed, she displayed all of the coolness one might expect from Frances's nominated successor as head of PsyTri. "In fact I can't see how any of this can really be happening. I mean, the house ... neat effect, but I just don't get it. And where's Xabier's face?"

"Xabier," Frances said quietly. "Felipe."

The facial features of both men promptly grew back, causing them to blink and start violently. A glance from Frances and they relaxed. A little dazedly, they put away their buzzpistols. Felipe murmured something in Spanish, and Xabier admitted, "I cannot comprehend the current situation."

Frances spoke briefly, softly to the two men in their own language, and they immediately fell silent, as though their duties included curtailment of curiosity wherever appropriate.

To Frances, Paulie said, "Is this really Janko Brauch's boxworld? Or am I the dreamer?" Like Sessa Roffey, he couldn't figure out the Janko Brauch connection. The late singer-songwriter had been to Paulie barely more than a name. Why, Paulie asked himself, should I choose, at whatever mental level, to grant Janko Brauch this key role in my boxlife? Why should I have conjured up this scenario in which he kills and resurrects me? If Janko Brauch's boxworld is merely a subsidiary of my own, if I am dreaming him dreaming me, what on earth could I be playing at? "Can you take us back to Groundworld?" he asked the being that Frances had become. "Is it over now? Are we saved? Is this the wonderful happy ending my mind has dreamt up for us all?"

"Concerned about your stool consistency?"

The words were uttered by Xabier, in slick, smooth ad agency English, as though he had chosen this of

all moments to demonstrate a hitherto hidden talent for mimicry. “Colour? Texture?” He grimaced sympathetically. “Abnormalities in terms of ... well, hey, let's not beat about the bush ... in terms of odour? Problem, huh? And let me guess ... you find diagnostic paper too rough ... am I right? Well, why not install a CoproCare Plus Home Faecal Analyzer and flush away that toilet-bowl torment...” The ad spiel terminated abruptly as Xabier, assuming an expression of good-natured disdain and a whole new voice of greater depth and authority, shook his head dismissively. “That's all very well and good ... and don't get me wrong, the CoproCare Plus is a darn cool piece of kit ... but,” he winced, “it's just a tad on the pricey side. The Plimpton Anal Output Inspector, on the other hand, offers comparable performance at a considerably more competit ... compet ... com...” At last Xabier's true demeanour succeeded in reasserting itself. In rapid Spanish, he addressed Frances, cursing, gesticulating, indicating his Mindseye implant scar.

Paulie wasn't unduly surprised by this new-found ability on the part of pirate ads not merely to gatecrash and annoy, but to actively puppet a Mindseye wearer. And not just a single ad but a pair of rival, competing morphomercials. No let-up in the ad war, not even at the end of the world. Zombimercials, he thought. That's what they'll be calling them. Only not in this realitude, they won't. For this world is about to de-exist.

“Paulie!”

Ruth was looking at him over Frances's shoulder. Such an odd, unnerving look. Unnerving for its total lack of bewilderment; this was absolutely not Ruth as he knew her. This knowing, burdened, haunted, sad-eyed transRuth.

“What is it?” Paulie asked her, suddenly very frightened.

Sesha Roffey was staring. And so were Xabier and Felipe. Even little Kali was staring at him. Because, Paulie Rayle discovered to his horror, something was befalling him. As with the big Bengt & Anderssen Viking, he was leaving the scene, albeit in an even weirder way. He wasn't fading, losing resolution—instead, the entire front half of his body had been shaved from sight. Like Humberto Sfat's entropic tomcat, he was hollow, an empty shell: Paulie Rayle on the outside; on the inside, smooth neutral grey. A jelly mould in the shape of Paulie Rayle. Additionally—and this was the truly bizarre aspect—when he felt for his face, it wasn't there, yet he could still see his hollow hand reaching into his hollow skull. He was still able to see and hear and think. How could that be?

“Make him real,” said Ruth to Frances. “You're the Goddess ... make him real!”

Frances hesitated, seemingly at a loss.

Strange, Paulie mused. How peculiar for an angel, indeed, a veritable Goddess, to be stumped, unable to assist.

He found that musing now required considerable effort. Not that his current straits were causing him any physical pain. Psychologically, though, the experience was deeply unpleasant.

“MAKE HIM REAL!”

Ruth's screamed plea startled little Kali, set their tiny daughter shrieking with fear.

Stepping forward, Frances turned and fitted herself into the hollow half-shell that represented Paulie Rayle.

* * * *

Ruth Deitch awoke.

Her body tingled from the caressing cocoon of the bliss belly. Bathed in sweat, heart galloping, she lay there, the tiny Fetch light on her Dreambox barely discernible in the welcome winter sunshine streaming in through the cottage window.

Once again, she had failed. How many more times would she have to try?

She listened out for Kali. Still asleep, little love. Either her baby had woken for a moment before dozing off again, and the box, registering the cry, had fetched Ruth out prematurely; or else, Ruth thought, I've used up all my time, been dreaming for as long as is consonant with keeping your health.

Either way, the dream had failed. She had not brought Paulie up to this level of realitude. Or he would be here with her, now. Here with her, and with his child.

For Paul Rayle was the father of Kali; the DNA left no room for doubt. Poor, long-deceased Paulie Rayle. Every single healthy cryostored, pre-UMS spermatozoon from the samples he and all those other good, caring men had donated more than a decade and a half ago to BIRTHRIGHT, the ethical partnerless parenthood charity, had now been raffled off; and she, Ruth Deitch, had been the last lucky winner. And how incredibly, incredibly lucky she was. She had wanted a child, not a clone. But in this polluted, poisoned world of Universal Male Sterility, such a wish was for most no more than a boxdream.

The agreement was that the donor remained anonymous. Yet Kali was so beautiful, such a gorgeous little thing that Ruth had found herself desperately wanting another child by this man. She had got the crazy idea into her head that, if she could track him down, there might still be a very, very, very slight chance of his producing more sperm. Although well aware of her straw-clutching, she'd gone ahead and had a DNA trace carried out. And anyone else might have given up on making the grim discovery that Paul Rayle had died so many years ago, killed along with his wife by a stupid drug-driving rock singer named Janko Brauch. Anyone else might, at that juncture, have come to their senses. Especially when they ought to have been concentrating their imaginatory powers upon matters more pressing, such as saving the world through SAGRADA.

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Chapter 26

Ruth Deitch, renegade imagineer, lay with her Dreambox in her hideaway in Hilford Abbots, Cambridgeshire, and calmed down and considered. Clearly, another approach was called for. But where to begin? She had run out of approaches, and very soon now some member of the Zeller team over at Palo Alto, one of her ex-colleagues at ONTOTECH, would finally hit the jackpot. And then, an ontotechnological Paradise? Or the death of meaning? The death of value? Morality? Humanity? Absolute power universally available. Science's ultimate, unspoken goal. Not just understanding but power. The power to do anything. To change even the most fundamental laws of existence, of logic, of thermodynamics. Any or all of the laws of the omniverse. Absolutely everything up for grabs.

The omniverse needed help. The omniverse needed saving. Meaning had to be preserved; what else could be more precious? But she, Ruth Deitch, had failed properly to invoke the Goddess who could

accomplish all of that, and so now she would have to try all over again. Her imagination, that mysterious faculty by which she earned her living, but which was, ultimately, outside of her conscious control, would just have to do better next time.

Ruth lay and agonized.

She was sabotaging her own efforts with her Paulie Rayle fixation. But there, that was the path her imagination had chosen. The route of least emotional resistance, and there was no time to stop and get her head straightened out. The world might end at any moment.

There was nothing else for it but to make another attempt. And hope and pray. There was no controlling the Berkeley Effect. The best you could do was influence it to some extent. Once triggered on behalf of the box user, the Effect went about its business in such a curiously intricate fashion, forced into the most tortuous machinations by the vagaries of the psyche in whose service it functioned.

Her head was giving her hell. The PhantAssist chip didn't agree with her; brain implants didn't sit well with anyone, truth be told. An incredibly high percentage of people had them taken back out after less than a week. Granted, most of those were your everyday simple old Mindseyes, but the cerebral cortex really didn't take kindly to any form of electraugmentation. Commensality had vastly improved since the earliest days, but still you got headaches, horrible ones that no drugs could damp down. Still, it was supposed to be worth it. The PhantAssist was meant to help you focus the full force of your imagination upon one point, a single, elementary conceptual monad: ontosupplantation. The dreaming of a metadream that would become the Real World.

The PhantAssist was, Ruth reflected, quite a biotechnical achievement—two months from raw idea to implantation—even if six of the ten ONTOTECH imagineers who had volunteered for the embed had since succumbed to infarcts and haemorrhages. And of the other four, well, survival, hope's preservation, was more or less their sole attainment thus far.

From time to time Ruth harboured suspicions that the whole thing was one big placebo con trick, that the PhantAssists were mere articles of faith. And the Dreambox itself, too, why not? Sexily moulded plastic, flashing lights, a massive marketing campaign. What if that were the whole of it?

Later, with Kali and Bolo the sheepdog, Ruth went for a walk by the river. Though cold, it was a clear, bright day, the grass crisp and glinting and silvery. As she walked, Ruth reviewed this latest boxtrip, mused over every detail she could recall.

The Effect had this time chosen, with its customary obliquity, to operate through Janko Brauch. Slyly, it had farmed out a large portion of her imaginatory requirements, annexing Brauch's psyche as her subsidiary. The singer had dreamt her second level for her, resurrecting Paul and Frances Rayle. Both of them, as always, not just Paulie. So, Ruth wondered, could she congratulate herself upon her fundamental generosity of spirit in not having eliminated Frances, her rival for Paulie's affections? But she was well aware that Frances's presence had been demanded by her own self-doubts, inferiority feelings; fears that a deceased rival, a lost love, might prove a greater threat; plus desire for the mother she had never known, the woman who had died at her birth.

Evincing all its usual flair for economy and integration, the Berkeley Effect had chosen Frances as the embodiment of SAGRADA. And perhaps, Ruth conjectured, that was what had fucked things up: her conflicting emotions toward the Mother/Rival/Goddess figure. Love and fear.

SAGRADA.

Ruth shuddered at the memory of coming upon the word, her mother's name, glimpsed on the street in Seville. The word's true import had been occluded by her obsession with saving Paulie. The unconscious mind decides its own priorities, what to elevate, what to obscure for some higher end. Sometimes its choices are at one with conscious desires. For instance, UMS, Universal Male Sterility, had not come to pass in her boxworld.

Undeniably, though, in one respect at least, the PhantAssist was functioning as intended: Ruth's boxself, her sanctuary self, had once again assumed the form of that earthy, forthright, somewhat irascible country girl with her woodworker's hands and distaste for the newfangled: Ruth Deitch pared down, psychologically, almost to the bone, stripped to the quiddity, reduced to basics so as to safeguard her boxworld from the disruptive contradictions inherent in a full, rich human personality with all of its dissonant aspects. In theory this left the box user better able to train all her energies upon ontosupplantation, her essential self freed, her problematic complexities siphoned off into a Displacement Persona. In this case the DP had been Processia Roffey, an ungrounded humiliant created with the help of the PhantAssist specifically as a vessel for those elements of Ruth Deitch that made her mind too chaotic a place for any serious imaginatory toil. One such job was the absorption by the DP of Ruth's bitter hatred of Janko Brauch, and its transmutation into a more helpful affinity.

And what, Ruth wondered wryly, if I too am in truth ungrounded? What if Ruth Deitch is merely another Displacement Persona, a repository for the spare constituents of some greater, more complex consciousness? Seeing as I am, even here, still no more than a humiliant. Seeing as this world, even this world, is not Groundworld.

What was it now, almost five months? The split, the precise point in time at which this boxworld had emerged into being, could be traced back to the beginning of last October, when Dreamboxes had been on the market only a matter of weeks. October. Which made Kali a less-than-real baby born to a less-than-real mother in a less-than-real world. And yet, what could possibly be more real than the agony of childbirth?

Prior to October, worldwide reports of inexplicable phenomena had been in a slow, steady post-millennial decline. By November, a sudden sharp rise had been noted. At present, the media were swamped with strange stories: the ever-increasing ranks of Sick Nick copycats committing real murders, ordinary people forced suddenly to copulate with strangers, behaving just like digital images pornographized by erotoroutines, odd little bits and pieces of the environment temporarily vanishing. What could barely, nowadays, still be called the general public—a more accurate term would be 'aggregated private'—preferred to put it all down to the psychological fallout of widespread box addiction. Surely, people reasoned, only cranks, Dreambox junkies, would keep seeing all about them signs that this world was not the genuine, real, solid, ultimate world it had heretofore been taken to be? Life, pseudolife, went on pretty much as normal. For now.

And yet, even if you happened to be in the business, so to speak, even if you were a professional imagineer, a person of uncommon imaginatory prowess, with a PhantAssist embedded in your brain, and you accepted your own subreality for the fact it indubitably was, you were no less prone to the psychic toll this grim knowledge exacted than were those ordinary box freaks who had put two and two together.

At least, Ruth allowed, some slight comfort could be gleaned from the Palo Alto team's apparent failure to concretize the concept of ontotechnology. And yet, at the same time one had to bear in mind, paradoxically, that if ontotechnology could exist, then it must exist already. If at some future moment in time the Palo Alto team succeeded, the result would be retrotemporal.

And here was the point at which human imagination faltered and failed. Ontotechnology—total, godlike power over creation, over existence itself, even over contradiction and antinomy—absolute power over everything. Erland Zeller had wanted to see if a sufficiently clear, adequately rigorous conceptualization of this most outrageous of human dreams might be reified, brought under the Berkeley Effect, by sheer force of imagination. To secularize St. Anselm's argument: ontotechnology would, by its very definition, make the boxworld within which the concept was actualized into the realest of all worlds—the Grundwelt. As Zeller had put it, “The omniverse couldn't give a damn what we do to it, or with it. Everything is permitted.” The hard part was getting the concept to cohere strongly enough to become Berkeley-amenable.

Like some kids' game, Ruth thought.

The shrewdest of children would know just what to ask of any genie who offered to grant them three wishes: their very first wish would be for an infinite supply of wishes. Ontotechnology promised even more: wishes without number for all. A more respectable redescription of magic.

Yet was SAGRADA any less of a challenge?

She would just have to try again. And again. And again. How many times already had she tried, tried and failed? As with all of Zeller's Palo Alto people, she went into her boxdreams undethanatized—Zeller had suspected that dethan drugs blunted the imagination—and so, there was nothing to prevent her trips from turning into nightmares.

But really, Ruth Deitch knew, the simple fact was that she could not invoke the Goddess because she had insufficient faith. She liked to think that the Goddess existed, but that was as far as it went. Not enough faith, nor adequate imagination. Her heart was elsewhere, bound up with Kali and Paulie and her desire for more children. Perhaps if she had not been wracked with guilt, the guilt of constantly judging herself a poor mother. Perhaps if she hadn't been allergic to maternosuppressors.

She wasn't the right person to be doing this. It needed someone less fucked.

And besides, what was so bad about ontotechnology? If limitless power would become available to absolutely everyone, what was there to fear? How could it possibly be a bad thing?

That was the trouble, a part of her actively wanted to see ontotech made real, felt sure that ontotech would give her, along with everyone else, all that she had ever desired. Kali would grow up not in a grim, hard world, but in Heaven.

But is that, Ruth wondered, what I truly believe?

When it came down to it, she couldn't truly believe anything about anything. True belief she found an impossibility, being a child of her time.

She would rest, and then she would dream again. Because of Kali. The Goddess had to be invoked, and would mend the split with Groundworld, and would put everything right, and save them all, because otherwise what would happen to Kali, poor little Kali?

Ruth was crying, now, walking along by the river with tears in her eyes.

Greed had made the world unreal. The Dreambox had been rushed out onto the market before anyone properly understood how it worked, what it actually did. Technology had got the world into this mess,

and it was going to take more than technology, even technology taken to its ultimate, from the physical realm into the metaphysical, to get them out.

ONTOTECH versus SAGRADA.

But how could you coolly evaluate, judge between two things you found equally hard to comprehend, which left the imagination reeling? ONTOTECH's answer simply felt wrong, whereas SAGRADA felt right. That was why Ruth had quit ONTOTECH, left her job as an imagineer with the Zeller team at Palo Alto and come here to this quiet little village in order to embark upon an alternative scheme for reincorporating this subreal world, this errant offshoot, into Groundworld.

Kali stank. She needed changing.

Ruth turned and headed back toward the cottage. It was so difficult to keep in mind that even this world was not the true one, merely a copy, and she and Kali and, with one exception, every other person were all humiliants in someone's boxworld. But it was no use; you couldn't feel the truth of it in your bones. It was far too counter-intuitive. Unless you had personally undergone an experience that led you to question your own realitude, you could only accept the situation on an intellectual level; much as, in Groundworld, you had to make a mental effort to grasp that you and everyone else were hurtling through space on the surface of a giant rotating ball. Were she to go out and lose herself in the frantic mad rush that was, for most people, everyday life, the burdensome knowledge of her true ontostatus would soon slip away. And, in a sense, that would be merciful. But respite, as Ruth well knew, could only be temporary. Before too long this world, this disintegrating boxworld, would show itself to be ersatz, illusory.

Ruth felt anger. Terrible rage. She hugged Kali close in the sling. Okay, so there was no reason to believe that there was not still a Groundworld in existence, a Groundworld that included their own groundselves, their true selves, alive and well. But how could it possibly be that Kali, this dear warm little thing, was merely a copy of her real, true, genuine baby daughter? That there were millions, literally millions, of such copies, copies of everyone, ready to spring to pseudolife in any one of millions of coexistent boxworlds? Was there any comfort to be derived from the knowledge that she herself, this particular consciousness, this particular Ruth Deitch, was merely one of millions of sentient Ruth Deitch copies, versions, simulacra?

I'm insane, she thought.

I shouldn't, by rights, be in charge of a baby. Maybe that thing stuck in my skull isn't really what I think it is. Maybe it's a sanity chip, installed in accordance with the law to make sure that my maternal instincts don't get warped like everything else inside this fucked-up head of mine, a strict precondition of my being allowed to keep Kali. Maybe this is one of several little intimations of the truth that, thanks to my sorry mental state, get no further than fleeting suspicions. Could it not be that this is the way things really are?

She was, after all, recovering from a breakdown. The breakdown brought on by her work at ONTOTECH, brought on by the irruption into her life of the Goddess who had made it clear to Ruth Deitch that ontotechnology was not the route to salvation. Who had offered SAGRADA as another way. A better way. The only way.

Sane or insane, she had got pissed off with Zeller. He had rejected SAGRADA out of hand, ordering everyone to concentrate instead upon his own pet obsession, ontotechnology. She had tried her best to go along with him, and an obedient, dutiful part of herself had been trying still, via the medium of poor Paulie Rayle, even after she had quit Zeller's team and gone to earth at the behest of the Goddess.

With a loud, unmistakable Bphrrrrrrpppppp! Kali added to the contents of her nappy, then immediately started wriggling in discomfort. Ruth took the baby into the bedroom to change her.

And found Paulie on the bed, hooked up to the Dreambox.

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Chapter 27

Your world was somewhat less than real, and so were you, but there you were, still pitifully vulnerable to nausea, still puking up your guts, responding to stress, extreme stress, in the same old far-from-pleasant human fashion, so faithfully had you been counterfeited. There you were, sick stomach, loose bowels, even though you only quasexisted by the ontological standards of Groundworld.

Paulie emerged from the bathroom to find Ruth sitting in the rocking chair, singing softly to Kali as, her sweater hiked up awkwardly, she breastfed the baby in the candlelight.

“Better?” she asked with tenderness.

He nodded.

He was more than a little frightened of this weird new Ruth who suddenly knew fully as much as he himself did about ontology, technology, the works. This Ruth Deitch who was too good to be true. This awesome new brand of *GroundRuth*.

For what else could this be but his own boxworld? Who else would have conjured up this augmented, supercompatible Ruth who was the old Ruth still but much more besides?

“Here.” She held out a glass.

Paulie took it. Water. “Thanks.” He sipped.

“I’m just as bewildered as you are,” Ruth confessed.

It would take some getting used to, the change in her voice. The enriched timbre. This eerie new level of refinement, like she’d been attending elocution classes.

As though able to read his mind—such an ability on her part should not have surprised him, what with everything else—Ruth said, “I know I’m not ... how you’re used to having me be. But if you could manage to think of me as a more complete version of myself....”

“I can barely manage to think at all.”

Ruth smiled.

There was no physical change; she was no different, no less or more beautiful. And yet, she had taken on something of Frances, in her way of looking at him, of speaking to him, of breaking out into a knowing smile. And, incredibly, something about her now even reminded him of Processia Roffey.

So was that what she was, a composite pieced together for his delectation? Had he arrived at the point

in his boxlife where his imagination finally felt safe to 'improve upon' his beloved, to draft in additional elements ransacked from others who had happened to catch his eye? In particular, his ex-wife.

"How are you feeling now?" Ruth asked.

"How do you imagine?" His response had come out gruff. He hadn't intended it to. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap." He sipped again at the water. "How's Kali?"

"She's fine."

"So we're agreed that..."

"...that this is a boxworld? Mine? Yours? Someone else's?" Ruth stroked Kali's tiny wispy head. "No doubt you're of the opinion that it's your own?"

He shrugged.

Before he had vomited up his guts, she had been telling him all sorts of stuff, this new Ruth, this latest quasincarnation served up by his psyche. One moment he had been—what word could describe the experience?—reduced to a hollow jelly mould, yet still sentient; and then suddenly here he was again, being fetched out by his timer and wondering why the fuck his dethan gear hadn't kicked in when it was needed. How much more of this crap could he take? Was this the lot of every Dreambox junkie, this subtle psychotorture?

He said glumly, "There could be something in it, I suppose, if I heard it from that Viking character, and now you're giving me the same story." His true, original Groundworld self had died in a car crash some sixteen years previously. Frances too. There was no Institute of Psychotrichology. "And Sessa Roffey ... there's really no such person? That was just your ... what was that term you used? ... your 'Displacement Persona,' right?" Ruth had told him all about the PhantAssist, had even showed him the implantation scar, hidden under her hair. He thought, Poor Sessa. The creation of a brain chip. And here am I, feeling sorry for myself. He said, "So that's the harsh truth of it?"

"Perhaps everything's true." Gently, Ruth kissed Kali's ear. "Perhaps everything exists, and ontological status is just..."

"...another Kantian category, a way of carving up the manifold?"

She said, "I bet you must have felt really lonely?"

"Lonely?"

"Being unable to discuss, properly discuss with me, so many things."

"I could always discuss anything with you."

"Kantian categories?" Her smile was more Frances than Ruth. "Tell me, Paulie, what did you see in me, hmm?"

He thought, Whatever you wanted me to see, if this is your boxworld. Or, if it's mine, then whatever I wanted to see.

He said, "Maybe you had a better idea than me of what's important. I mean, who's to say metaphysical speculation isn't just a kind of mental illness? But look, this isn't fair," he pointed out. "You've become more like me without my becoming more like you. I'm still, so far as I can tell, worse than useless at a practical level. A dreamer who relies on you as much as Kali does. So, can you blame me for being pretty convinced that this is my own boxworld we're in?"

"That's not quite how it appears from where I'm sitting."

Kali had finished her feed. Ruth held the baby out to him. Paulie took his daughter and wined her over his shoulder, tears clouding his eyes as, gently, he patted her little back.

How he loved her.

How he loved the both of them.

Ruth sat there with her breast bared, still, the nipple all swollen and glistening, the areola large and dark, and with a couple of hairs, familiar hairs, caught by the light as she drew in a breath. A sight mundane yet magical. She tugged her sweater back down over herself. When was the last time they had made love? How he ached for her.

Ruth murmured something he didn't quite catch. She spoke again, this time slowly, deliberately. "Universal Male Sterility."

It was one of those dire ecopredictions, grim warnings trundled out by the media with numbing regularity. You heard them so often that they came to resemble ad slogans, in one ear and out the other. Overpopulation. Ozone Depletion. Agricatastrophe. Universal Male Sterility. How ironic it was that the most immediate danger facing any given member of the human race had turned out to be none of these, no form of ecoperil at all but, instead, a bizarre and evidently unforeseen side-effect of consumer electronics technology. Ontodemotion, the danger of discovering yourself to be nothing more than a copy inhabiting some disintegrating boxworld, a humiliant at the mercy of the Dreambox user.

"Paulie?"

He looked at her.

She asked him, "Has UMS become a reality?"

"Not to the best of my knowledge, no." He cuddled the baby. "Why?" Ruth's question, something about it, had launched another wave of nausea. He gritted his teeth against it.

"In my world it has," Ruth said simply, chillingly. "So tell me, if this is your boxworld, why you should be dreaming of a world in which that's the case, in which all men are sterile?"

"I don't know," he conceded. "Unless..."

"Unless it's some deeply-buried fear coming out?" Ruth didn't sound very convinced by this hypothesis.

Paulie's heart was pounding. "So you had Kali by artificial insemination? All men are sterile, and parthenogenesis hasn't yet been perfected, but years and years ago I'd donated sperm for this charity ... which is true, I do remember donating it. It was Frances who encouraged me to, as a matter of fact. So you didn't want to go the cloning route, and mine was the only sperm available; the rest had been

distributed by lottery?" The more he thought about it, the more the whole scenario amused him. "Come on, honestly ... have you ever heard of such a conceited little fantasy? It's really embarrassing, to be dreaming up something like that. Shame on you, Paulie Rayle."

He heaved a sigh. "I suppose that's just my good old reproductive drive, wishing for a world in which I end up fathering kids by all those thousands of women."

Ruth looked troubled, and Paulie felt guilty.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But isn't that a fair interpretation? Okay, so my memory may be fucked, but as I recall, in my Groundworld UMS is just one of a bunch of standard ecothreats. So you're saying in this world it's a reality?"

"This world? I don't know. All I know is..."

"...that I'm dead, and you got Janko Brauch to bring me back to life? Don't you think it would have been better not to have told me I was dead? I mean, thanks for your frankness but, you know, it can really screw you up, finding out you're a ghost." Wryly, he thought to himself, The ghost in the machine. One of billions in millions of machines.

"You're not dead," Ruth assured him. "Not so long as I'm alive." She got up, held out her arms. "Look at Kali ... she's yawning. It's time she went to bed."

Paulie kissed the baby again and then handed her over.

* * * *

Lying naked together, intertwined, they held each other. He took enjoyment in the feel, so deliciously intimate, of his seed spilling out of her onto his thigh. Ruth kissed him fiercely, then pushed him gently back, separating from him so as to see him. Under her gaze, and then in her grasp, his penis stirred, stiffened again. Clutching him, kissing him once more, she smiled at him, as if to say, All for this. Strange, life, isn't it?

Again, they embraced. He ran his fingertips down the centre of her back, down, down and, with her worldless assent, found her hot secret stickiness. She clenched her thighs tight around him and their tongues sparred playfully, then savagely, each in turn surrendering and, for a time, real or not, Paulie was free, lost, safe, home and happy.

* * * *

As Ruth slept in his arms, he thought of the Goddess of whom she had spoken.

SAGRADA.

The Goddess whose name was the name of Ruth's mother.

But how could all of this be? According to Ruth, no less a figure than Erland Zeller himself was leading a team whose aim was to supplant this world with one in which ontotechnology was a reality. Yet so far as he, Paulie Rayle, was concerned, the very concept of ontotechnology was nothing more than a figment of his own imagination. So what was going on? Were all of these things part and parcel of the labyrinthine workings-out of the Berkeley Effect? Was it all just one big intricate boxdream being dreamt by Paulie Rayle?

Or was Ruth at the centre of it all?

Was he hers, mind and body, an imaginary resurrectee endowed with pseudolife by her psyche, totally dependent upon the Goddess for his quaxistence? Ruth's Goddess? For he was aware of what Frances had done. In fact it was the very last thing he could remember prior to his waking up in the bedroom. Frances had—how could you describe it?—entered into him, filled his empty shell, imbued him with herself, and delivered him from all fear. He had not mentioned this to Ruth, that he could remember. He wished almost that he had no recollection. Although he could make little sense of the act, it weighed upon his mind as somehow alien to his imagination. But he lacked the energy to worry at it, to gnaw at it, to attempt to draw out, like blood from a stone, some disarming rationale. He felt so weary, so sick of speculation. In the end, you just came down with conjecture fatigue. Your head packed up on you, your brain just couldn't—

A deafening CRUNCH of splintering wood.

A blast of freezing cold air.

“You frucking move you DIE!”

Held rock-steady in the hands of the black-clad, pulverbooted goon who had kicked down the door and issued the injunction was a compact silenced spewgun.

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Chapter 28

They lay there shivering in their own urine, the terror having gone straight to their bladders, while the shortest of the goons—there were three of them in all—sought to entertain the others with a touch of slapstick, carefully closing what was left of the splintered cottage door, reducing the onslaught of bitter night air to a fierce icy draught. In the other room, Kali was making it known that the commotion had caused her deep distress.

Fury, the most intense, burning fury, rose up within Paulie Rayle.

“Let me go to my baby,” Ruth implored. She sounded distanced, numb, and yet, beneath it all, immensely strong.

Ignoring her, the first goon, lean and rodenty and obviously the leader, indicated Kali's door. The short goon kicked it down. Ratface and the third goon, distinguished by a trendily tattooed nose, stood brandishing their spewguns, richly amused by Paulie's impotent rage.

The short goon re-emerged, Kali crying in his arms.

Paulie moved, and Ruth was even quicker; she was up off the bed like a shot. But Ratface, more swift than either of them, backhanded Ruth hard across the face, sending her crashing back down on top of Paulie, knocking the wind from his lungs and leaving him agonized, gasping for breath and dully reflecting that a dethanatized, unmasochistic boxdreamer would almost certainly have been spared such an ordeal.

So that settles it, he thought. This is Ruth's world, not mine.

Or, God forbid, it was Groundworld.

He knew that Ruth hooked up without dethan, didn't protect herself; she'd told him as much. But why the fuck would her psyche go and do this to her?

They hauled Ruth up off him. Ratface had hold of her hair and was dragging her up, pushing her away against the wall, while Nose-Tattoo kept Paulie in the sights of his spewgun, mutely challenging him to make another move.

The short goon plainly knew about babies, perhaps had children of his own, for he had worked some kind of magic and quietened Kali down. She gazed around with big curious eyes.

“Give me Laurel,” Ratface snapped, bringing his wrist up near his face as though testing scent.

“I'm real sorry, hon, but this is an airjam zone,” the goon's wrist mobe purred in a vocpat Paulie guessed to be Jailbait Ear Candy.

Ratface hawked and spat and swore.

Laurel? Paulie struggled to make sense of it. Bertrand Laurel? So in this world Bertrand Laurel hadn't been murdered by Sick Nick? Not that the deduction made things any clearer.

Ruth threatened icily, “Don't you hurt my baby.”

Ratface poked out his studded tongue.

Had he been within reach of a firearm, Paulie could quite cheerfully have cut the goons down like mad dogs. Yet, all his instincts urged him not to antagonize them. The spewguns were as real as anything else in this world and, to all intents and purposes, lethal.

Ratface held out his hand, snapping his fingers with impatience. From a bag, Nose-Tattoo produced, of all things, a Dreambox. Ratface snatched it and held it up. “You,” he told Ruth, “are going to dream us a nice little dream.”

Ruth stared stonily.

Ratface said, “You know the deal ... you don't co-operate, we do things to your partner in piss here. You still don't give suck, we start on the kid.”

“I'll kill you first,” Paulie told him.

All three smirked at the bold counterthreat, and Paulie wondered why psychos like these were not themselves box junkies, gleefully making pseudolife hell for their humiliants.

Unless, he thought, this is Ratface's boxworld?

“I'm doing nothing unless you give the baby,” Ruth indicated Paulie, “to him.”

Ratface considered, then gestured to the short goon, who stepped forward and, not without reluctance, handed Kali over to Paulie. She started crying again. Ruth looked to Ratface, contemptuously awaiting instruction.

“Dream that the Dreambox was never invented,” Ratface commanded. “But leave everything the same apart from that.”

If not for the anger and the fear and the pain, Paulie could have laughed in the goon's ugly face. The plan was obviously a product of extreme desperation. How could Laurel, presumably the mastermind behind all this, have possibly imagined that Ruth would play along? What was to prevent her from dreaming that Laurel had never been born? Provided, of course she knew who Bertrand Laurel was. And were Laurel's goons also holding the whole ONTOTECH team at gunpoint, making the same demand? Or had they singled out Ruth, Zeller's onetime star imagineer, as their best hope? Over and above all that, though, surely the goons realized that fulfilment of Laurel's demand would have ramifications with regard to themselves?

Ratface's thin lips twitched in mirth. “I know exactly what you're thinking: if the dream works and the world changes, we'll never get our money, us three. We could end up anywhere. You're thinking we must be thick as shit, not thinking it through.” He glanced at his companions, likewise smug. “Well, you see the thing is, nanoprick, the three of us were chosen for this mission on account of us all having had people close to us suffer Dreambox-related deaths ... in my case a twin brother. We're all of us unbalanced by grief, united in our hatred of these disgusting devices ... so I shouldn't bother playing the rationality card.”

Ruth's eyes let Paulie know that she too was wondering whose imagination it was, her own or his, that was smoothing over the lacunae, painstakingly patching up logical flaws. And yet, like him, she was also bearing in mind the grim possibility that this was the true and actual Groundworld.

Ratface tilted his spewgun toward their own Dreambox, still there on the bedside table. “A philosophical question: are millies really alive? Humiliants ... can they really,” he fired the spewgun, “be murdered, a whole worldful at a time?” The Dreambox leapt, splintering fragments, and landed in front of Nose-Tattoo, who finished the job with the heel of his pulverboot.

Paulie thought, You sick bastards.

Kali was crying again. He did what he could to comfort her.

Ratface thrust the other Dreambox into Ruth's hands and shoved her down onto the wet mattress beside Paulie. “WELL, FRUCKING MOVE IT ... WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?”

Ruth fumbled on the trodes, sank back onto the pillow and, after a brief glance at Paulie, closed her eyes and hoarsely whispered the speakstart command.

The box hummed into action.

Ruth gasped orgasmically as the bliss belly ingested her.

Nose-Tattoo guffawed.

“Just tell me something.” Ratface turned to Paulie with a grimace of revulsion. “How can you fruck something with all that unsightly underarm fuzz?” Pointing his spewgun at Paulie's head, he broke into a big, manic Cheshire Cat smile. “Bit of a run of bad luck on your part, wouldn't you say, what with me being deranged, given to acts of senseless violence straight out of your worst nightmares, and now looking for one last little bit of fun before the big change.” He adjusted his aim. The weapon was now pointing at Kali. “You know what I always say? If you feel an evil impulse coming on, well, what the

fruck, why not give in to it? After all, you only live once."

He squeezed the trigger.

"No!" Paulie heard himself screaming as he whirled, twisted, tried to shield his daughter from the bullets. "NO!"

LIGHT. BLINDING LIGHT. AND THEN SILENCE.

"Here, let me help you."

The voice was both familiar and unfamiliar. The blurry image sharpened into a face, a face Paulie both did and didn't recognize. The sun was blazing outside. It no longer felt cold. One moment darkness and ice—the next, daylight and warmth.

"Here."

Something was being offered to him. A coat, his own coat from the back of the door. A coat to cover his nakedness as he stood there shivering, his baby daughter still warm, living, breathing, in his arms.

"Here."

The coat was slipped on over his shoulders. The change in the weather had rendered such an item of apparel highly inappropriate, but something said it would be wrong to reject the tiny gesture of atonement from this person who, scarcely more than an instant ago, had been a vicious ratfaced goon.

"I can't believe it."

Ratface sank to his knees. In fact it was no longer fair to call him Ratface, for he now looked altogether ungoonlike. "I can't believe how I was, the way I behaved, the life I led." He stared at the five transplusive spewshells hanging frozen, in stark defiance of omniversal laws, a mere arm's length from Kali's head, from Paulie's chest. One by one they dropped, bounced, clattered to the floor. "I just can't believe it." He looked all at once bewildered and embarrassed and appalled to be in possession of the spewgun. Reversing the weapon, he offered it to Paulie.

Oddly enough, Paulie felt no suspicion, no urge to unleash pent-up anger. For there was no anger, none at all. He took the gun and, for want of a better means of disposal, dropped it into his coat's capacious pocket. Respiration, the complaints he was receiving from his ribs, left him in no doubt at all that certain elements of the former state of things remained distinctly untranscended. Pain still had a part to play, even in this strange, sun-drenched place.

"Paulie?"

Ruth was sitting up in the bed, hugging the quilt up around herself. Her jaw was bruised, her smile wan but reassuring.

Their three erstwhile assailants were weeping profusely.

"I know it's not enough to say I'm sorry," sobbed the man who was no longer Ratface, gazing down at the shattered, spewshell-ridden Dreambox. "Nowhere near enough. But I guess the best thing we can do for you people right now is get out of your sight."

Much as he appreciated the goons' miraculous transformation into civilized beings, Paulie thought the idea a splendid one.

Aghast, Ex-Ratface said to Ruth, "I can't believe I hit you."

"And sorry about the door," added the second reformed goon, whose nose, though still tattooed, now adorned a nicer face.

"Would you like me to come back and fix it for you?" offered the third, no less diminutive but, like his friends, a good deal kinder now around the eyes.

Paulie shook his head.

"You sure now?"

Paulie nodded.

"Bye, then ... and take care."

The trio of penitents gingerly reopened the broken cottage door, taking great trouble not to damage it further.

This is insanity, Paulie Rayle thought. But a whole new sort of insanity, one far preferable to the old. He needed a cigarette.

But wait—no, he didn't need one.

Funny.

Ruth got up, kissed him, took Kali from him and cuddled her. "I remember it occurring to me that maybe the only thing that would do it was a direct threat, a physical threat, to Kali, to you." She eyed him solemnly. "I want you to forgive me. I should never have put you both through all that. Not that I was doing it at a conscious level. That's if it really was my doing."

Paulie could do little but wait for his emotions to catch up; they seemed to have been mislaid in transit between worlds.

"You often hear of amazing physical feats performed on behalf of a loved one. So why not psychic feats, too?" Ruth wrinkled her nose. "This whole place stinks of piss. I think we've ruined that mattress."

Paulie asked her, "What was it you dreamt?"

"I don't know, I don't remember. Whatever it took to save you and Kali."

"ONTOTECH or SAGRADA?"

Ruth shrugged.

Paulie pushed open the window. He was greeted by the scent of honeysuckle. Ruth brought Kali over to see this miracle of a fresh summer's day in the middle of a February night.

Rain began to fall. Big droplets, slow and lazy. A summer shower. Rain and sunshine both together. They went outside. The warm rain washed them, and there was a rainbow, and it was all just a little too rosy and cosy. To Paulie Rayle's mind, at any rate. Yet Ruth appeared at home here. And so did Kali, gurgling contentedly.

They went back in. Handing him the baby, Ruth grasped his discarded shirt between her toes, flipped it up off the floor and caught it. Dropping it down over her head, she wriggled sinuously into the garment and grinned at him. How he loved her, this Goddess to whom he owed everything.

She said to him, "Believe."

He would try. It wouldn't be easy. But he would try his very best. For he had never seen Ruth so happy. And it gave him such pleasure, her happiness. And this world did indeed feel different. And something told Paulie Rayle that it would prove radically unlike any other world he had ever known, or even imagined.

He thought, *Deus ex machina*.

And watched Ruth rummage in the drawer and step into a clean pair of knickers.

—THE END—

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