

ROBERT REED

THE MYRTLE MAN

He had a pleasant face, in a reliable, unhandsome way, and his warm brown eyes and easy smile made Amy want to believe the best in him. His name was Jacob Turnbull, the crisp brown uniform and two IDs proving that he came from the library dealership. Gazing at the camera above the sealed front door, he said, "You have myrtle problems, as I understand it." He lowered his passport, then brightened his smile. "Something about John Wayne riding into battle on a fire-breathing dragon. Is that right, Ms. Taylor?"

"Oh," she exclaimed, "it's a lot more than that."

Referring to the reader on his belt, he laughed and said, "And something about the shape of the world, too."

"It's round," she blurted.

"Yes, ma'am. I know."

Amy said, "But my son doesn't. Our library taught him it's like an apple. You know, with holes at both ends."

"It's a common myrtle, ma'am."

"Can you help me?" Did she sound anxious? Vulnerable? Or just crazy?

Crazy would be the worst, she believed. "I don't dare let him read or watch anything. I mean, he's a boy. He doesn't understand --"

"Yes, ma'am."

"The library is lying to him!"

"Ms. Taylor," he said, "I want to help. But first, I need to examine your equipment and determine the extent of your trouble."

"A purge and refill job.' That's what I was told to expect."

"Eventually, yes." He sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "But first I need to check the hardware, then I'll have to protect all the files that belong to you and your family. A general purge would erase them."

She said, "Fine."

She said, "I understand," without meaning it. A long truck was parked at the curb, and she focused on its license, jotting down the number because she didn't trust her library to record this critical detail. Then she touched a button, saying, "Come in," as the door unsealed with a menacing kla-chunk.

These were clever, malicious times.

What if she'd just invited a thief into her home?

Yet Mr. Turnbull didn't appear the least bit criminal. Looking nowhere but at her, his eyes showed nothing but a bloodless, professional interest. And she

still couldn't relax, blurting out, "My husband's going to be home soon. Maybe any minute."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you need me to show you the library?"

The face only hinted at amusement. "It would help, yes."

Then from behind: "Mom? Who is it?"

Harry came charging out of the basement. Her son was wearing shorts and an unflattering mesh shirt, and he was sweating, a large orange ball in his hands and his breathing damp and fast. In a secret way, she was glad the library was broken. Her son needed this exercise. She knew it as surely as she knew she should do it too, but then again, he was young enough to change his ways. A vigorous game in the playroom was a good thing. Harry had inherited her fat-hoarding genes, and that was just another thing to make her lie awake in fear.

"You're the myrtle man," said Harry.

"I am," the invader confessed.

Amy motioned. "It's just upstairs." She took the first few stairs, then paused and looked over her shoulder.

"I'm following," the myrtle man promised. "Lead on."

"So where's your cable?" asked Harry, something suspicious in the tone.

"You're supposed to bring in a glass cable, and stuff."

"I will. My stuff's in my truck."

Harry waited for an instant, then said, "I found the myrtles."

"Did you?"

"Well, a bunch of them."

"So," the man asked, "what's the shape of the world?"

"Round," Harry replied, almost growling. "That's what Mom says." Amy hesitated on the top stair, remaining silent.

"It is round. How can it be anything else?" The myrtle man laughed, then asked,

"What's your name?"

"Harry. What's yours?"

"Jacob."

"It says Jacob on your shirt," Harry observed.

"Very astute."

"What's astute mean?" He shouted up at his mother, "Can I look up 'a-stute'?"

She said, "No."

"Why not?"

She entered the library, suddenly angry. "Because it's lying to us, Harry. Didn't I tell you?"

Jacob seemed oblivious of them. Walking into the little room, he stopped and turned in a slow, observant circle, saying, "Oh, this is a fine one. A beautiful old Universal, isn't it?"

She couldn't say.

"A Universal 8. No, it's the 9."

"Is it?"

"Twenty years old, if it's a nanosecond." Jacob began to stroke the bindings of the false books, then pulled on one as if to test its falseness. No, it was rooted in place. It and the others were camouflage for the machinery set within, the sum total of human knowledge-- every published word and painting video and photograph, plus every recorded musical and dramatic performance -- existed in a digital form, literally at their fingertips.

As were the damned myrtles, too.

"The library came with the house," said Amy, as if to apologize for its age. "We thought about buying a new one --"

"Don't," Jacob interrupted.

She hesitated.

Grinning, he said, "The new ones are smaller, and faster too. I know." Another stroke of the bindings. He had long hands, she noticed. Kind hands, perhaps. "If you're worried about running low on capacity, buy Universal Add-Ons. Another shelf or two would double your space, and you'd keep this ambiance."

"Mom," said Harry, "what's ambiance?"

There was a reader in one corner-- the most unused reader in the house. Jacob sat, adjusting the chair to fit his lanky frame. Then he activated the library, asking, "What was your first sign of trouble?"

Amy beat Harry to the answer. "The cowboy on the dragon."

Jacob laughed in a gentle, knowing way. "You know, my grandfather loved John Wayne. He would have hated that myrtle." On the view screen, in perfect color but without sound, a one-eyed actor rode across a mountain meadow on the back of a golden dragon. "If you ask me, the best myrtles are the subtle ones. The ones we don't suspect."

A "best" myrtle? She doubted there was such a thing, but she wanted to appear interested. "What subtle ones?"

"Well, like with this cowboy. Back when the first libraries came on the market, some of the actor's fans managed to insert a lot of modest changes into them. Some fans removed his weight. Others made him look younger, more idealized. But what really matters, and what's hardest to spot and remove, are the doctorings that made him a better actor. Someone gave him more feeling, a better sense of timing. Things more subtle than subtle, if you know what I mean."

Not particularly, no.

Jacob glanced up at her, shrugging. "Nine out of ten libraries, if they haven't been thoroughly demyrtled, carry the new and improved John Wayne. People who watch don't know better, and why should they? We get better movies as a consequence."

On the screen, in vivid orange and red, the dragon spit up a ball of fire, incinerating the bad men and setting an entire mountainside ablaze.

"That's my favorite part," said Harry, with conviction.

"Tell you what." Jacob winked at the boy. "I'll save it for you. We'll make a special category and keep it, and you can watch it whenever you want."

"Great," the boy squealed, jumping until his belly jiggled.

"Honey," said his mother, "why don't we leave Mr. Turnbull alone? He'll call us when everything's fixed."

"I don't want to go," Harry admitted. "Jacob? Will you save me all the good stuff?"

With a mixture of charm and inviolable authority, the myrtle man shook a finger, remarking, "The best stuff is always saved, Harry. When you're older you'll see what I mean."

After a lot of complaining, Harry left them, exiled to the basement. But despite her own pledge to leave the myrtle man alone, Amy lingered in the doorway, watching him work while telling herself that she wasn't suspicious or unfair. Libraries were important appliances. She kept telling herself that it was time to learn about the damned things.

"Do you know where 'myrtle' comes from?"

She blinked her eyes several times. "Pardon me?"

"The term. The concept." Jacob was squatting on padded knees, an incomprehensible tool in one hand, a dusty component in the other. "Back in ancient times, even before this 9 was built, a top library designer gave a speech about creative viruses and sophisticated forgeries. She likened them to lies told by the software that computers, gullible and possessing perfect

memories, would believe without hesitation. Without end." What was he saying? She waited, unsure what to think.

"In the speech she told a story about her Aunt Myrtle-- have you heard it, ma'am? -- who would leave her house lights burning all day and all night. And why? Because when Myrtle was a little girl she was told that most of the cost of any light came when it was turned on. It only stood to reason that if you never turned the light off, you saved money and energy in the long run. Right?"

Amy could believe Myrtle's logic. But then again, she had no feel for technological questions, deciding just to nod and say, "I guess so."

"For a while," said Jacob, "we called them aunt myrtles."

"Who?"

"The untruths accepted by the libraries. But somewhere along the line, the 'aunt' was dropped."

Amy was a teenage girl when libraries became cheap enough to afford and yet rare enough to appeal to snobs. The attraction of the machines was genuine enough. To be able to say, "I own the sum total of human experience," was always an impressive statement.

Jacob said, "They're called myrtles, and most of the human race knows what the word means. The fictions that our machines believe to be truths, and because we believe our machines, we can be fooled, too. I mean, what choice do we have?"

She considered her myrtles. The worst of them, she believed, were a lot more dangerous than leaving the lights burning all night. After a cleansing deep breath, she confessed, "Harry has found other things, too."

"Kids do, ma'am."

"There's not a planet on the other side of the sun, is there? One just like Earth?"

"No. No, there isn't."

"I knew that." She took another breath. "I mean, Harry loves science. I don't know why, neither of his parents do. But he does, and I let him study what he wants, just so long as he finishes his tutor's assignments." A pause. "He's being educated at home."

"I know. Here's your AI." He patted the shell of an old dictionary. "It's a popular model. Very strict."

"It showed Harry a map of the solar system, and there was this second earth hidden by the sun." She hesitated, reading something in the man's expression. "What's wrong?"

"That AI wouldn't be fooled by such a big myrtle. When it accesses maps of the solar system, it accesses thousands of them, ignoring the odd ones." He paused, giving a charming little wink. "The boy found it on his own, I bet. While

exploring."

"I see."

"And you're probably asking: Why find that one out of the millions of available maps? Because these myrtles are aggressive. The most aggressive ones spread fastest and always put themselves where they can be noticed." An expansive shrug. "why invent an elaborate myrtle just to keep it a deep, deep secret?"

She could understand his rationale.

"On this other earth," asked Jacob, "are the people left-handed?"

"I think so. Yes."

"Oh, that's an enormous myrtle." He blew the dust from several components, then slipped them into his shirt pocket. "You can access a history of that world, build a globe of it, even find census figures and photographs taken from every spot on its surface. In a lot of ways, frankly, it's a lovely place."

"It doesn't exist," she complained.

"Outside a string of zeros and ones, no. You are right, ma'am."

"Harry says that the dinosaurs killed themselves with H-bombs. That's a myrtle."

"I hope so," said Jacob, grinning.

She watched as he opened a service port, then said, "I believe in home educations."

"Many do."

A pause, then she asked, "Do you have children?"

"Yeah. Two."

"Do you have a tutor for them?"

"In part. But they go to public school in the afternoons. My ex-wife and I decided that was best." He almost glanced at her, then used a tiny vacuum cleaner to pull dust out of the port. "I guess it's for the social skills, and to keep them out of my ex's hair."

Amy didn't mention her feelings about public school, but she suspected they showed on her face and in the wringing of her hands.

"I could, if you want, purge and replace the science files."

She said nothing.

"But usually, particularly with an old Universal, there'll be a lot of myrtles. All kinds." He fastened a jeweled device to the port, then rose and punched commands into the reader's keyboard. "Every nanosecond of every day, you've got new information arriving. New zeros and ones. There's always that chance in

some
of them being myrtles."

"I know," she replied, in disgust.

Numbers, tiny and compacted, appeared on the full screen.

Amy said, "We bought filters to keep them out. I don't remember when. A couple years ago, I think."

"Five years ago, I think." Jacob gave a wise shrug. "I saw them, ma'am."

"Well," she groaned, "aren't they working?"

"Honestly? They weren't the best skeptics available even five years ago." A slow
sigh. "Average modern skeptics would do better."

That's right, they weren't called filters. She remembered being rather
offended
by the idea of mechanical agents watching what entered their library, knowing
better than her what was genuine. And now she braced herself, ready for the
sales pitch, this man counting on her ignorance and fears to sell her the very
best at an inflated price.

Except Jacob made no such offer. Instead he asked, "Have you or your husband
noticed other myrtles?"

Her husband? It took Amy a moment to remember her fib about him coming home at
any moment.

"Any other myrtles, ma'am?"

"Well," she began, "I like reading mysteries. Quite a lot, really. And I've
been
noticing some that sound new, but their authors have been dead for years."

"They're new books, probably."

"I thought so."

"It's true with a lot of authors. Big ones, little ones." Jacob paused,
studying
a stream of senseless numbers. "Fans write them and slip them into the Net
traffic. With the right camouflage, a poor home library doesn't know better."

She said nothing.

"Or sometimes, fans improve a classic. Or at least try." He touched buttons,
fingers blurring. "What else have you noticed?"

"Well," she said. And hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I like paintings. Landscapes, I put them on the big screens in my favorite
rooms --"

"Your living room walls are blank, I noticed."

"It was suppose to be a Monet, and it looked like his style." She was sorry to have begun this confession, but the weight of it was irresistible. "The painting was . . . it seemed . . . pornographic. . . ."

"Ah!" he exclaimed. The long fingers tapped at the screen's glass, then he turned to report, "This isn't a prime number. It only looks prime."

She couldn't count the digits beneath his hands.

"Something slipped it into math text. As a joke, probably." A joke?

"AIs, ma'am. They've got their own sense of humor." He shrugged and blanked the screen. "AIs are a different kettle of guppies. In old times, myrtles were human-made. But nowadays, with all these advanced programs and their hardware linked to the Net, with all this imagination to burn. . . . Well, a lot of myrtles come from bored AIs."

Amy felt an enormous, imprecise fear. In an effort to sound strong, she said, "I don't like lies. In fact, I hate them."

"Good for you."

She approached her library, fingers touching the plastic bindings that showed, despite twenty years of existence, no trace of wear. The bindings were lies, she supposed, but not wicked or ugly ones. She willed herself not to see the irony.

"This is a guess, but it looks as if you haven't had a purge in ten years." Jacob reclaimed his jeweled device. "If I may ask, how long have you and your husband lived here?"

"Seven years." The blame wasn't all theirs.

Jacob punched numbers into his own little reader, then with a steady professional voice informed her, "I can do a complete purge, then a restandardization. If you wish. This is the cost, including labor and parts, and taxes too. The total is on the bottom."

Amy couldn't read the numbers. Stress made them swirl, and she had to squint and concentrate, even then needing to read them twice.

"I can do it today. If you want."

Had the myrtle man said something? She wasn't sure.

"I can do cheaper, stopgap work, but your library is begging for maintenance. I'm sorry, ma'am."

She had failed, and not for the first time. If pressed, she would break down now, confessing to a string of private failures.

"Ma'am? Are you all right?"

Almost without breath, she asked, "May I make a call?"

"Naturally."

"To my husband, I mean."

Jacob touched her on the shoulder, very lightly, and with a voice both sympathetic and strong, he said, "Take your time, Ms. Taylor. I'll wait, and you take all the time you need."

The instant Amy saw the expected face, she launched into a harsh summary of her morning, losing momentum only when the face grinned, a soothing voice saying, "Take it easy, little lady."

It wasn't Dan; it was his goddamn answering program.

"I want to talk to him," she warned. "Now. This minute."

The image -- tanned, rested, flattering -- gave a big grin before saying, "He's occupied just now, darling."

"Well," she replied, "tell him to pull his dick out and call me. And I mean soon."

The grin persisted, the image of a sunny apartment behind it, out of focus in the stylish way that was now fashionable. "I'll deliver your message, little lady. Is there anything else?"

She blanked the screen, stood and froze in place. When it came to her husband, Amy had a simple role: He won't make me cry with his first shot. And she managed to remain dry-eyed and sober, opening her bedroom door and walking to the library, finding Jacob sitting at the reader, conspicuously doing nothing.

He glanced at her face, eyes asking what he should do.

"You can start," she muttered, wondering how she looked to him. Under stress, no doubt. Probably frail. A chubby, exhausted woman whose husband had abandoned her for women ten years her junior, all lean and well-rested. "What will you do? Pull your cable up from your truck?"

"Eventually. If you're willing, that is."

A nod. Brief, crisp.

"If you do change your mind," he offered, "we can downgrade my work. If it's soon enough."

Jacob seemed like a very nice man, she was thinking. All men, in some private teflon-lined part of themselves, were the most decent people. It was a lesson she couldn't learn often enough; and with a wave of her hand, she told him, "Do whatever you need. Clean everything. Put in skeptics. I don't care."

Harry helped the myrtle man.

Despite his mother's wishes, and her fears, the boy touched the fancy tools and kept very much underfoot, asking large questions while he pretended to be the assistant. Amy wanted to work; she made extra money fashioning clay pots by hand; some people were willing to pay for good craftwork. But she didn't want to leave the two boys alone. Alert as a security camera, she watched Harry tug at the plastic-coated cable, giggling at some private little joke. Walking past her, humming as he played, he said, "We're going to empty the library, More. Get a bucket. A big, big bucket."

Everyone was laughing.

Shaking her head, she said; "I know better," and closed the front door as far as possible, the cable unwilling to dent.

Jacob said, "Ms. Taylor? I need to make sure what's yours."

Of course. They went back upstairs, and she discovered that he had already arranged the files between private and public realms. What was public was enormous -- the earth next to a grain of sand -- yet on the reader it seemed perfectly balanced with her house records and Harry's accounts and the rest of it. Jacob told Harry, "I put your cowboy on the dragon in here. It's with your own digital designs."

"What about the other stuff?"

"Tell me what you want."

Harry rattled on about the left-handed earth, the one he still partway believed in despite his old mother's denials. With an expertness that startled her, he put up images of blue surf and bluer seagulls, describing this tropical beach as if he was its discoverer.

The reader emitted a quiet musical tone.

"Dan calling. Line one."

Amy retreated, apparently unnoticed. Again in her bedroom, the door closed and her sitting on the bed, she put the call on the full screen, then snapped, "You'll be getting a bill."

Dan looked tired, though certainly for different reasons than hers. Measuring her at a glance, he decided to look perturbed and unfocused. "A bill for what?"

She told the story, in brief, then finished by asking, "Did you ever have the library serviced?"

"I can't remember," he lied. "I thought I did."

"It gets fixed or your son goes to public school. Unless, of course, you want to enroll him at an academy."

"We can't afford that." Dan gave a weary sigh. "How much did you say?"

She repeated the figure, thinking too late of inflating it by some cruel percentage.

"But did you shop around first?"

She said, "Yes."

"Pay half," he advised.

"You bastard."

"Oh, god. Are you going to fight me again?"

"For the rest of your life," she advised. "If you don't meet your obligations, what can I do?"

"What I'm saying is that we both pay half . . . then we let the lawyers decide if I owe more. Okay?"

The lawyers were useless. They squabbled worse than she and Dan could manage, being highly trained professionals.

"How's Harry?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

There was that hesitation, instantaneous but unmistakable, that told her this wasn't a good time. But he said, "All right," because good fathers always want to talk to their sons. "I mean, if he's there and not too busy."

"Not at all." She blanked the screen, then called up one of their private, protected files. Two months ago, as a birthday gift, Amy took Harry to a portrait studio where they made elaborate digitals of him moving and speaking, asking him endless questions in the process. Around that information they built

a computer simulation of him. It was much more sophisticated than an answering program. These simulations were fads in the past--probably years ago, Amy realized -- but she had assumed it would serve as a reliable friend for Harry. Wasn't it said that twins were never alone? Except he didn't use it often or for long, which meant that his mirror image was never quite up to date on his life.

Yet his father didn't seem to notice.

She had Dan talking to the simulation, a couple minutes passing and no hint of enlightenment or anger.

Slinking out of the bedroom, she felt a mixture of poisonous glee and calm fury.

What kind of father could be fooled by a false son? she asked herself. And what kind of woman happily marries such a blind, stupid pig?

The library had been purged, untainted knowledge was flowing into the newly made emptiness.

Amy watched for a while, then said, "I was wondering," without knowing quite

what she wanted. "Could I possibly, when you aren't too busy . . . could I see that truck of yours?" A pause, then she added, "I'm sure it's fascinating."

Jacob and Harry were kneeling beside a control panel, the boy unconsciously mimicking the man's posture. It was Harry who brightened, telling her, "I can take you, Mom."

That wasn't what she wanted, but she remained silent.

Jacob read her expression, at least in part. With a paternal pat on the shoulder, he said, "Do me a favor, Harry? Watch everything." He spoke as if he had told hundreds of boys these words. "Watch but don't touch, and I'll be back in a few minutes."

Harry groaned.

Laughing Jacob informed him, "You'll live."

Amy led the way until they were outdoors, then they walked together, cool air and a high gray sky causing her to cross her arms against her chest. Why was she nervous? It took her a moment to remember why. Jacob leapt into the truck's open back end, then offered his hand, the strong forearm making her fly for an instant.

A modern, commercial-grade library halfway filled the truck.

She had expected a humming sound, some sense of machinery hard at work; but the loudest sound besides her own quick breathing was a mild, dry click-click-click that came from nowhere and meant nothing. The machinery was a wonder of efficiency and compression, Plastic panels encased the countless circuits, and Amy touched the panels, feeling a very slight heat that might have been her own heat reflected back at her. She gave a weak cough, then sighed, growing aware of Jacob's gaze. She forced herself to say, "Very nice."

"Everything we know; everything we are." He chuckled, adding "As of seven o'clock this morning."

She couldn't speak.

"Certified," he told her, fingering some kind of glass tag. "The Bureau of Libraries its own self guarantees our purity."

With a dry mouth, shy said, "You know all about this."

"I guess," he allowed, humility and confidence in balance.

"And you know about myrtles." She glanced at him. "You know a great deal about them, don't you?"

"More than some know."

"Can you make myrtles?"

"Anyone can."

"Good ones, I mean. Ones that get past the skeptics." Ones that are noticed, she thought.

The brown eyes were capable of shrewdness. "For what purpose?"

"For money," she blurted. Then, as if to make it more clear, "For me. Because I'd like to hire you."

"To do what, ma'am?"

"I'm separated from my husband." Her arms tried to cross on her chest, lacked the strength and fell at her sides. "He isn't coming here soon. I just said that." A pause. "I didn't know you before."

"Ah," said the myrtle man.

"If we can agree on terms, I'd like you to --"

"Excuse me. Ma'am? Do you know me now?"

Forget it, she thought, turning to leave.

"What kind of myrtle do you want?"

She hesitated, then turned again. "Something to make my husband look ridiculous.

I was thinking, I don't know . . . we could put him inside a filthy digital. I've seen the homemade ones --"

"Who hasn't?"

"Could you? I mean, what would you charge?"

"To embarrass him, you mean." Jacob almost smiled. "You're angry, and you want revenge."

She imagined her husband fucking a goat. In clear detail, she saw him behind a big shaggy angora, fighting it, trying to screw it while the goat twisted and bleated and kicked.

Jacob said, "I won't."

He said, "Technically, it's a crime. Not very enforceable, but this is my career and my life. I could lose my license. And frankly, I don't know your husband. I have no opinion about him. If I did this just for money, it would take more money than I think you could find. Ma'am."

He hated her, she believed. Suddenly nothing else mattered. He saw a bitter, ineffectual woman -- true enough -- and she wanted to run or scream, anything but stand by passively while this working class technician spoke to her.

Yet that's what she did, hearing the words and the steady click-clicks between them.

"I never finished my story," he said.

He said, "About the origins of the word 'myrtle.'"

She made her eyes lift, focusing on the unhandsome, smiling face.

"It was invented by that old-timer, remember? But what I didn't tell is that a few years later, after the word had passed into everyday usage, a reporter got the very good idea of finding its origins. Not a difficult trick, if you have a good librarian AI. Nobody had such a thing in his day, but he did trace the word to a published account of the speech, then to the speaker herself. She was willing to take credit for myrtles, but when he asked about dear Aunt Myrtle, she got quiet.

"I can't find her," the reporter confessed. "She isn't a close relative, is she? How about distant? Or was she just a family friend?"

Amy found herself listening, concentrating on each word.

"Finally the woman said, 'Oh, I never had an Aunt Myrtle.'"

"No?" said Amy.

"I just invented her. I used that story as an example, and the name seemed appropriate." Jacob paused, smiling with delight. "Do you see? Myrtle was a little white lie told for an unimportant speech, and she had no way of knowing what would happen to her fictional aunt."

Amy leaned against the warm wall of plastic, not touched in any profound way but wishing she could be. In a voice more amused than anything, she said, "Aunt Myrtle is a myrtle. Is that what you're telling me?"

A rakish wink and nod.

"I guess I am," said Jacob, offering a hand to help her climb down again. "There you go, ma'am."

He ate lunch with Harry and her. The work was finished by three, most of the afternoon spent checking his work and installing top-grade skeptics. By then Amy had enough confidence -- in him and in herself -- to invite Jacob back for dinner. As much as anything it was because of Harry's affection for the man; and Harry overheard the offer, bursting into the library and squealing "Please come, please!"

The myrtle man had another job waiting but he graciously promised to swing past, though it might be late.

True to his word, he was late by two hours, full of stories about his client who had wanted to find certain lost files. They were comedians, though later, replaying them in her mind, Amy couldn't discover why they had seemed funny, attributing their joy to the spirited teller.

Jacob left before ten, praising the reheated dinner as he excused himself. He wouldn't return; Amy was certain. Drifting into Harry's room, she blanked the reader, nine authentic planets vanishing to black. Then she went to her room, closing the door and undressing lying on her covers, using her right hand with an expertness, eyes closed, an imaginary man who could have been Jacob hovering over her.

Two days later, when Harry was visiting his father, the myrtle man reappeared. He wore jeans, not the uniform. He apologized for coming on a Saturday and for every inconvenience, but he wanted to know if her library worked as promised. When she said that it was fine, he said, "Good." Then he gave the air above her head a shy glance, asking "Would you like to go out to dinner? My treat."

He drove her to a small restaurant near her home, a tiny place that she hadn't noticed in all the years of driving past it. The food was fair, the company engaging. Afterwards, Amy invited him inside, then with a certain nervous courage to her bedroom, and Jacob stayed through Sunday evening the ready change of clothes in his car seeming like good fortune, nothing more.

The sex was pleasant. Jacob had quirky tastes and an intensity, yet he could appear remote and self-involved in the most intimate moments. He seemed appreciative of her body, complimenting her features without forcing his words.

If she wasn't satiated, at least it was a pleasure to have reentered the carefree world of adults. A lot of tiny fears began to vanish -- Harry's weight seemed less ominous -- and the big fears had softer edges and promising gaps. She found herself looking forward to the weekends and the confidence they brought, and her newfound strength would carry her through a week, and sometimes longer.

Jacob had to miss some weekends. Once a month he could visit his children, and since they were on the other side of the state, Amy could understand his absence, always wishing him a good trip.

Sometimes he visited on weekday evenings, Harry always thrilled to see the myrtle man. Still dressed in the brown uniform with the nametag, Jacob would sit at the kitchen table, entertaining his audience with stories of work, of myrtles seen and clients left satisfied.

Despite her nature, Amy learned about libraries.

Jacob tinkered with hers, sometimes into the morning hours, Harry helping as long as exuberance and his mother would allow. "I love these old 9s," Jacob declared, clucking his tongue in a happy way. "It's like working on a classic car." Spare, second-hand components were added, speeding the library's recall and somehow compressing its files, and he upgraded the readers, their images brilliant and sharp. "More real than real life," he boasted. "Don't you agree, Amy?"

Partly because of her boyfriend's encouragement, but mostly because she was tired of feeling stupid, Amy decided to master one of the more sophisticated digital design programs. "An imagination," Jacob called it. With it, she built a

city beside a foggy sea, mapping every street, every building, then giving each

citizen a recognizable face; and when Harry was at his father's, she and Jacob would sit naked before the living room reader, watching her newborn people remove each other's clothes, then make love without shame or taboos.

Amy did eventually fashion digitals of her husband, then dropped them into a variety of Hells. It was a therapeutic exercise, or it was juvenile; either way,

the images of suffering became tiresome, then painful, and she erased all of them in a moment of contentment.

Once, mostly at Amy's insistence, she and Harry went to visit Jacob at his minuscule apartment. The neighborhood was poor. His two rooms were dirty despite

some hurried attempts to make them presentable. Pity and revulsion in balance, she entertained the idea of asking Jacob to live with them. They had dated for six months; didn't it seem like time? But then she found herself hesitating gazing at the old-fashioned stove, cooking pots set on cooking pots and layers of dust on every flat surface.

Sloppiness shouldn't keep her from offering Jacob her home. But the hesitations persisted.

Walking to the car, flanked by the two boys, Amy tried to force herself to bring

up living together. But then Harry was asking how it was to share a library with

all the other apartments -- the building had an old second-hand library in the basement -- and Jacob told him, "It works fine. I just have to remember to protect everything personal. That's all."

It was then, with those words, Amy realized that he had a private life, or lives, and she knew little about him. His apartment was a census address, little

more, and where did Jacob sleep when he wasn't with her?

A cold spike of metal was in her belly.

Jacob and Harry kept walking, one telling the other, "As soon as I can, I'm going to become a myrtle man."

Maybe Jacob sensed the change in her.

More likely it was a mutual change, both of them aware of their distance and neither willing to mention it.

He arrived every weekend for a month, as if proving his devotion, but then missed two weekends in a row, some vague family trouble taking him out of town.

Amy called his apartment anyway, leaving a string of well-practiced and unemotional messages. She saw him next on Tuesday, very late and without warning. Jacob didn't mention the messages or his travels. He told her that she

looked lovely, then thanked her too many times for a dinner of leftovers. He was

getting ready to break up with her, she believed, which made her more sad than she expected. Yet they went to bed as usual, making love, then resting then making love again.

Now we'll break up, she decided.

Except they didn't. At least they didn't in any familiar way. With a thick, slow voice, he told her, "Here's something funny about myrtles."

"What's funny?"

He rose up on his elbow, saying "They're true."

"What do you mean?"

A long, long stare, then he explained. "I read this once in a physics text. Whenever a particle moves, like an electron . . . well, it moves in every possible direction. At least they think so."

So what? she thought.

"Each time it moves," he said, "the universe divides in all directions. Everything that's possible is going to happen." A long pause. "Remember that left-handed earth? It exists somewhere, and not as zeros and ones. A million million of those earths are scattered across Creation." A deep sigh. "Now isn't that a wondrous thought?"

Amy was more puzzled than enthralled.

"Lives," said the myrtle man, "divide when they're given the chance."

"Maybe so," was the best she could offer; and eventually, after she was fast asleep, Jacob rose and dressed, then visited the old library before slipping away.

Harry discovered the myrtle some weeks later.

By then both of them had finished grieving over Jacob's disappearance, at least outwardly. Amy didn't call him anymore. She didn't like looking at his projected likeness -- a homely man, wasn't he? -- and she decided that an explanation wasn't necessary. She progressed to where she could be alone and content, steeling herself to the prospects of never having another man in her life. And the boy seemed back to normal, if somewhat more quiet than before. His tutor claimed he was studying hard; his father didn't mention odd moods or behaviors. Then one evening he came to Amy, saying, "He's still here." Harry spoke with a mixture of matter-of-factness and happiness, adding, "I can see him and us, too."

She went to look. On the screen in her son's room was the mirror image of her son playing in a room just like this one, save for tiny details. Harry showed her how to change their viewpoint. When she said, "It's just your birthday present," he took her to the other rooms in the fantasy house, the likeness of her kissing the homely likeness of Jacob down in the living room, beneath a projected Monet.

Between kisses, they spoke, voices ordinary and the words as forgettable as real life.

Harry was sent to bed, forbidden to do what Amy couldn't stop doing, watching figures of moving light, a rising sense of horror making her sob and groan aloud.

The myrtle people made love, then began naming names.

"Yvonne," said the woman.

"How about Jennifer?" said the man.

"I like Patricia," said the woman, giving her belly a meaningful squeeze. "My grandmother's named Patricia."

It was. But how would Jacob know?

"We'll name her after your grandmother," said the man, engulfing her and kissing her until the instant Amy blanked the damned screen.

"It's not a myrtle," the technician told her. "A true myrtle has to be sent around the Net. This one doesn't go anywhere."

"I didn't make it."

"I know. Your old boyfriend did."

Amy looked at the woman standing before her. A gray uniform in place of a brown one, and the different sex. Otherwise she was the same as Jacob when he first arrived, an object of suspicion coping with a frazzled and ignorant client. "Can you get rid of it?"

"I can get rid of anything" was the terse reply.

What should she do? Her silly pots weren't selling and her investment incomes were flat, and she sure as hell couldn't call Dan and beg for money now. Not for this. Not if the library needed another purge --

"But you know, you could get rid of it yourself. I don't even need to be here."

Amy straightened. "Pardon me?"

The technician pointed to fake brown books on a high shelf. "They're add-ons. Good ones. Your boyfriend must have installed them. Their entire capacity is being spent maintaining that simulation, and three different AIs are doing nothing but browsing in your files, getting ideas for stories." An appreciative nod, then she asked, "Did you have your library serviced sometime recently?"

"Not that recently."

The technician named the dealer. "Was it?"

"I think so."

"So you know Mr. Turnbull, do you?"

Amy willed herself to say nothing, to do nothing.

Yet the technician read her face, laughing hard and telling her, "I thought the work looked familiar."

"I'll sue," Amy whispered.

"Sue who? You had a personal relationship with the man, and you let him work in here. Am I fight?" Not waiting for a reply, she said, "Jacob does this to a lot of ladies, dear."

She didn't care if she was the only victim. "I can get rid of it myself. You said that?"

"With a crowbar, if you want. Just unplug your connections up there and give a little jerk." Then she laughed, saying, "A little jerk for the big jerk. Isn't that perfect, dear?"

Amy said nothing.

"Yeah, he charms them. Beds them. Then leaves them with some pretend little world." An angry sigh, then she added, "Maybe that's to make amends. Who knows?"

"He said he has an ex-wife and two children."

"Maybe. But I haven't heard about them."

Gazing up at the brown nonbooks, she thought: I can take you down any time I want.

Then the woman touched a shoulder, waiting for Amy's eyes to find hers. "Or if you look at it another way, the jerk's got fifty ex-wives and maybe a hundred or more kids. I bet that's the way he sees it."

"I bet so."

She didn't remove the fantasy that day, or the next. For several weeks, Amy went to bed planning to do the chore in the morning, and each morning there was an excuse that presented itself, making it seem as if some voice was asking for a stay of execution. She had an upturn in orders for her pots, an elderly woman wanting to decorate her home with recreations of certain Indian pottery. Then came a sudden inexplicable interest in the fantasy she had built with Jacob's help, those people in their coastal city having waited too long in stasis. With money from the pots, she bought AIs to help her spin details and biographies. Zeros and ones, she began to realize, were more malleable than any wet clay.

Because she knew so much about disappointment and unhappiness, Amy made the city joyful; and after months of work and growing expertise, she decided to release her project into the Net, its identity incorporated into every willing library, its streets and homes ready to welcome all visitors.

With each use -- by law -- Amy received a modest sum.

She wasn't making any fortunes, but there was breathing room even when Dan's support payments failed to arrive.

Jacob's myrtle -- she always thought of it as a myrtle-- remained in her library. Harry was outlawed from watching it. So was Amy, in theory, though there were exceptions on weak days, and strong ones. The false Amy had a daughter, then twin sons. The false Jacob acted too saintly to be real, but the false Harry lost his weight and grew up to resemble neither of his parents, which was surprisingly accurate.

She didn't destroy the myrtle.

Not contemplative by nature, Amy was slow to understand why. But eventually, after she was remarried and preparing to move away, the answer occurred to her without warning. She thought of Jacob and his odd story about electrons in motion, dividing the universe infinite times. If that was true, then she had saved something that didn't need saving. It existed. A troubling notion, it caused her to sit in the library and stare at the bindings; and after careful thought and some hardwon inspiration, she realized that lives, infinite or not, needed to be lived as if they would have no other chance in Creation.

It was as close to profound as she ever managed, and partly because of that insight, she took the old-fashioned add-ons and AIs with her each time she moved. She didn't look at their contents. Really, she thought, those lives weren't any of her business.

Let them live as they wanted; that was her policy.

Amy lived as she wanted, and when she wasn't happy, at least she was confident that happiness would come again. It always did. Wait long enough, she was learning, and everything always came to your door again.