

OUT OF TOUCH

Brian Stableford

“Out of Touch” appeared in the October 1995 issue of Asimov’s, with an illustration by Dell Harris. Brian Stableford has made many sales to the magazine since his first sale here in 1990, becoming, in fact, one of our most frequent and prolific contributors throughout the decade of the nineties.

Like Ursula K. Le Guin, Stableford has done a great deal of thinking about what a future Utopian society might be like—and what problems the people living in such a society might still have to face. Here, for instance, he escorts us to a rich and tranquil future society that would seem wonderful to most of us—unless we happened to be one of those unfortunate souls who were born just late enough that we were doomed to spend our lives with our noses pressed up against the glass, watching the glittering forever-young immortals on the other side. . . .

Critically acclaimed British “hard science” writer Brian Stableford is the author of more than thirty books, including Cradle of the Sun, The Blind Worm, Days of Glory, In the Kingdom of the Beasts, Day of Wrath, The Halcyon Drift, The Paradox of the Sets, The Realms of Tartarus, and the renowned trilogy consisting of The Empire of Fear, The Angel of Pain, and The Carnival of Destruction. His short fiction has been collected in Sexual Chemistry: Sardonic Tales of the Genetic Revolution. His nonfiction books include The Sociology of Science Fiction and, with David Longford, The Third Millennium: A History of the World AD. 2000-3000. His most recent novel is Serpent’s Blood, which is the start of another projected trilogy. His acclaimed novella “Les Fleurs Du Mai,” an Asimov’s story, was a finalist for the Hugo Award in 1994. A biologist and sociologist by training, Stableford lives in Reading, England.

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When he’d moved the cases out on to the roadway and locked the door behind him, Jake went around to the back— or, as he’d always thought of it, the front—of the house, so that he could watch the breakers rolling up the deserted beach. The sea was on the retreat, having delivered the usual cargo of rubbish to the ragged tideline. When he and Martha had first moved into the village, there had been bits of kelp and dead crabs mixed in

with the beached flotsam, but nowadays the waste was all man-made. Red plastic bottle-tops stood out like warning lights.

While he stood there watching the dull gray waves, Peterson, the caretaker, came to say good-bye. "Your kids comin' to pick you up?" he asked, although he knew perfectly well that they were.

"Sam and Doreen," Jake said, although Peterson could hardly be interested in knowing their names. "Sam's my son. They've been married twenty years, but there are no grandchildren. Kids don't seem to have kids of their own anymore."

"Comes of expectin' to live forever," Peterson said, laconically. "Guess you won't be seein' no old people any-more. Quite a change. Never figured on endin' up as one of an endangered species!"

"There are old people in the cities," Jake told him. "Lots of them."

“I warn’t includin’ the Third Worlders.”

“Neither was I.”

“Well, there won’t be lots of ‘em for *long*,” Peterson said, with a sigh. “What’d you give to have been born twenty years later, hey?”

“I’d give a lot not to have been born thirty years sooner,” Jake countered, trying his damndest to look on the bright side. “We missed the worst of the wars, you and I. We missed the worst of a lot of things.”

“An’ the best of everythin’,” Peterson added, sourly. The closing of the Village had only cost the residents their so-called retirement homes, but it had cost the caretaker a living. Peterson had managed to avoid accumulating enough social credits to qualify for the full welfare hand-out—which presumably meant that he’d spent time in jail, although Jake had never asked and Martha’s gossip grape-vine had never picked up a reliable rumor—and he didn’t seem to have any kids to help him out. Who could blame the old misery for being bitter, when he had cause to be envious not merely of the younger generations, who had been granted permission to drink at the fountain of youth, but also of his own peers?

“I’m going to miss this place,” Jake said, softly, as he heard the sound of a car drawing up out front—or out back, the way he preferred to figure it.

“It was allus just a waiting room for the graveyard,” Peterson assured him, his voice grating like an old hinge. “Have everything you need and more where you’re goin’, includin’ ocean views.”

I won’t have Martha, Jake thought, suffering the now-familiar pang whenever that particular thought resounded in his head. All he said out loud was: “It’s not the same when you can only see, and not touch.”

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“It’s not the same,” Jake said, while Sam’s nimble fingers ran through twenty or thirty of the most popular outlooks to which the window had access.

“Yes, it *is*, Dad,” Sam said, patiently. “The image is optically perfect—parallax-shifts and everything. It’s *ex-actly* like looking through a

real window, except that you have the choice of a million *different* windows to look through. Sure, some of them are taped and edited and some are digitally synthesized, but there are more than two hundred that are relayed live. You see exactly what you'd see if the house were really *there*: South Sea atolls, Alaska, the Himalayas ... even fifteen fathoms deep off the Great Barrier Reef! With the remote control in your hand, you can surf the whole world. This is *everywhere*."

By way of illustration, Sam summoned the Great Barrier Reef—which, by virtue of being entirely artificial, was abundantly stocked with pretty fish and virtually litter-free. Apparently, there really *were* dwellings on the ocean floor, which could be picked up relatively cheaply now that the wave of fashion had passed them by.

"It's downtown Brownsville," Jake insisted, stubbornly. "There's nothing on the other side of that wall but *another* wall. If there really were a window cut there, there'd be nothing to see but bricks."

"We don't have bricks anymore. Dad," Sam reminded him. "The outer tegument of the house is overlaid with plates of reinforced dextrochitin."

"I'll try to forget that," Jake replied. "It makes it sound like we're living inside a giant cockroach. The point is, Sam, that it's not a real *window*. *It's a fake. You can look through, but you can't open it to breathe the air. There's nothing to touch.*"

"You can touch if you use the VR set," Doreen put in, helpfully. "It's only a headset and a pair of gloves, I know, but you really do get the sensation of moving through the environments, and the tactile simulators in the gloves are really very good. You don't have the same range as the window, of course, but they're developing so *fast*... every week there's a dozen new scenarios available."

"And you don't have to worry about the cable bill," Sam added. "You can call up what you want when you want—no limit. Honestly, Dad, we want you to be happy here. We want you to be *free*."

"That's the modern way of looking at things, is it?" Jake said, awkwardly conscious of the depth of his in-gratitude. "With a window and a fancy flying-helmet, you can be free, even in a prison. Anyplace is everyplace, just as long as you have the right gadgets."

"Hell, Dad, you had a VR set in the Village, and a cable hook-up for

space-sharing. It's not like you were living in some mud hut compared to which this is Disneyland. You're only twenty-seven years older than I am, and you worked all your life with robots and spy-eyes. Okay, you were a hardware man, a *real* engineer, but you're no dirt-farmer sucked into the twenty-first century wilderness through some time warp. You understand all this stuff just fine. We're trying to make a home for you here and we're doing the best we can, okay?"

"Sure it's okay," Jake said, sitting down on the bed and tiredly laying out his trump card—the one they'd never be able to beat or face down. "After all, I'm not going to be here for long, am I?"

Sam switched the window to a starry night, so dark and so very starry that it had to be on the moon. Doreen picked an invisible speck of dirt off one of the roses that were growing out of the wall around the bathroom-unit. They didn't bother with the customary reassurances; they thought he was behaving too badly to deserve even that. Maybe he *was*, but the fact remained that although Sam was only twenty-seven years younger than his father, *Sam* didn't look a day over twenty-five, and would *never* look any older—whereas every one of Jake's sixty-seven years was indelibly marked on his face and his hands and his irredeemably spoiled heart.

If he were lucky, Jake thought, he might get to occupy this plush cell for twenty or thirty years. Nobody could tell how long Sam might outlive him; perhaps a hundred years, perhaps a thousand. There was insufficient data, as yet, on which to base an estimate of the life expectancy of the eternally young, and the data was likely to remain insufficient for a very long time.

"We'll leave you to unpack and get settled in," Sam said, probably as gently as he could. "You have your own dispenser, of course, but if you'd like to join us for dinner, you'd be more than welcome. We generally eat at seven-thirty. If there's anything you need that you don't have, you only have to ask."

"Thanks," Jake said, as sincerely as he could. "Thanks for everything. You too, Doreen."

"It's okay," Doreen said, as she followed Sam out of the door. "We do understand."

They thought that they did understand. They understood that he'd been set in his ways long before he went to the Village, but was set no longer now that he'd lost both Martha and the Village. They understood that

he was an *old man*, who didn't have their adaptability, their pa-tience, their confidence. They understood that he was a member of a species that was soon to be extinct, who had to be treated with the utmost care and consideration and kindness. Unfortunately, that still left an awful lot to be understood.

"I should be in a zoo" Jake whispered, so softly that no one could have heard him even if the room had been crowded. "People with windows should be tuning in to watch *me*. Maybe I should call Peterson and suggest that he should hire himself out as a specimen for twenty-four-hour-a-day surveillance. Maybe they'd pay him enough to get a window of his own, so that people all over the world could watch him peering myopically out into infinity."

He picked up the remote control and switched off the staring stars. He tried, unsuccessfully, to get a blank screen, or a brick wall, but he had to settle for a beach scene. He could tell that it wasn't an American beach because the dark wrack marking the tideline was all sea-weed and driftwood, without a red bottle-top in sight, but he figured that it would have to do—for now.

There wasn't much to unpack—which was perhaps as well, given that there wasn't a vast amount of space in which to put it. Every square meter of wall that wasn't host to biomachinery of some kind was fitted out with cupboards and drawers, but they filled up in no time at all with clothes and antique junk. There were books and tapes and photographs and other similarly useless things: things that had been Martha's and that she wouldn't have wanted him to throw away; things that had been his and that Martha would have kept if she'd been here instead of him; things that were his own personal museum of the life he'd led, and that—given that he was fated to be one of the last of his kind—he felt he ought to keep.

In the end, after some sifting and rearranging, he man-aged to find a place for everything. He wasn't entirely sure whether that was a good sign or not.

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"It's really very easy to make friends," Doreen assured him.

"It's very easy to make *virtual* friends," Jake corrected her.

"The people you meet in virtual space are just as real as *you* are,"

she said, allowing a hint of exasperation to creep into her voice, “and they can be *real* friends, too. Yes, you only see their simulacra, not *them*, but when you think about it, what do you *ever* see of people you meet in the flesh except the masks they put on for the sake of politeness? Really, you know, *all* social space is virtual space. There’s no real difference between putting your headset on and logging on to a network and putting your coat on to go walking in the neighborhood, except that the scenery’s nicer and nobody ever got mugged in virtual space.”

Doreen and Sam both worked in virtual space. Doreen was some kind of trader dealing in futures; she made more money than Sam, who reprogrammed neurotic AIs, although his seemed more like real work to Jake. Because they both worked in virtual space, Sam and Doreen thought it entirely natural to socialize there. If they could have moved there lock, stock, and barrel, they probably would have. Jake, by contrast, always felt like a stranger in a strange land, like some Third World migrant in the Jersey Sprawl.

“The only people who never get mugged in virtual space are the ones who never tune in to the shopping channels,” Jake told his daughter-in-law, tartly. It seemed a more pertinent comment than pointing out that hardly anyone ever got mugged in the neighborhood either because the surveillance bugs were far too good at seeing in the dark. The Third World might have come to camp on the doorstep of the First, as the newstapes were forever assuring the nervous citizens of America, but the migrants tended to steer clear of streets where they were under constant observation by thousands of electronic eyes. In any case, Brownsville had far less than its fair share of migrants. It was only just over the border, much too close to home.

Doreen flopped down on the bed, lay supine, and threw her arms back in an exaggerated gesture of defeat.

“Okay,” she said. “You win. If you’re *that* determined to be miserable, there’s absolutely nothing Sam or I can do about it. If you’re absolutely dead set on not having a moment’s pleasure between now and the moment you finally kick the bucket, nobody in the world can prevent you. But *why*, Jake? *Why* are you doing it? Is it yourself you’re intent on hurting, or are you trying to make Sam and I feel *guilty* about something? About *what*? About giving you a room in our house? About not getting older? Tell me, Jake—what would you have done if you’d been in Sam’s shoes? Would you have said ‘No! I won’t take the treatment unless my dear old Dad can benefit from it too’? Would you have said ‘No! I can’t insult the wrinkly old

curmudgeon by inviting him to come live in *my* house'? Just tell me what you *want*, will you?"

Jake stood over her, extending a helping hand. When she finally condescended to take it, he hauled her back to her feet—or tried to. He no longer had the strength he had once been able to take for granted.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm really not criticizing. I'm grateful to Sam and to you. I ought to be more cheerful, if only for your sakes, because I certainly don't want to make *you* miserable. I wish I *could* be cheerful, but..."

There was a long pause before she said: "But *what*, Jake?" She honestly didn't know. How could she?

"I really miss Martha," he said, simply, knowing that it would go down better than the truth. Not that it *wasn't* true, of course. He *did* miss Martha. It just wasn't the *whole* truth, or anything like.

Doreen's face softened, as he'd known it would. "I know," she said, reaching out to hug him. He let her, because he knew how much better it would make her feel. At least she didn't launch into a speech about life having to go on, and what Martha would have wanted.

What Martha would have wanted, if she'd had a choice, was still to be alive. Maybe she'd have settled for a win-dow in her grave, but only as second best. She was always ready to compromise, always ready to split the difference. She'd have had an easier life if she'd married a more generous haggler than Jake had ever been.

"I miss lots of things," Jake added, as Doreen released him.

"Of course you do," she said. She could probably have made a list. He missed his youth, and his health, and the world in which he'd been a force to be reckoned with—inasmuch as any fairly mediocre human being could be a force to be reckoned with, in a world that had come storm-ing back from the edge of the ecocatastrophic abyss, even-tually to win the greatest prize imaginable.

"I honestly don't want to make friends," he told her, when the tension seemed to have unwound and they were no longer at odds. "People kept urging me to make friends in the Village, but I wouldn't. Martha always wanted me to be more sociable—I think she'd have been happier if her friends had been *ours*—but I never really saw the need, or the point. I don't want to spend my days jabber-ing away to other old men about the past we've all lost but never really shared, and I certainly don't want to while away my time playing *games*. I was never one for games, ever. I suppose I was never one for people, much. Martha used to say that I spent so much time with robots that I could only relate to disembodied arms and freaky hands, and then only if they weren't working properly."

"That's okay," Doreen said. "It's fine. Sam and I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do, or anything you're not comfortable with. But what *do* you want to do, Jake? What will it take to make the life you've got left worthwhile?"

A miracle, he thought. Another breakthrough just like the one you got. A way not simply to put the brakes on the aging process but to throw the bastard into reverse gear, to undo the damage that's already been done, to turn back the clock. . . .

"I don't know," he said, truthfully. "I'm trying. It may not look like it sometimes, but I *am* trying."

"If you want to join us for dinner," she said, "we'll be eating about seven-thirty."

She and Sam always ate at about seven-thirty. There was never any possibility of either of them being late home from work, and they never had anywhere to go except the further reaches of the virtual universe.

“It’s okay,” Jake said. “I’m not that hungry. I’ll get something from my own unit a little later.”

“That’s fine,” she said, stoutly refusing to be offended. “If you change your mind, you know where we are.”

When Doreen closed the door behind her, Jake felt a perverse urge to lock it, but he wasn’t even sure that the door had a locking function, and if it had, he didn’t know how to operate it. There was so much to learn, and so little time to learn it. His room was no more than four meters square, and yet there was so much to be done within its boundaries and barriers that even an eternal youth like Sam couldn’t be expected to exhaust its possibilities in the space of a single lifetime.

For a man like me, Jake thought, it’s just a cell on Death Row. No use making myself too much at home. He opened a cupboard and took out one of his old paperback books—a book printed before he’d been born—and sat down on the bed to read. He gave up before he reached the third page, wondering what on earth he was trying to prove. *I’ll be chipping flints next,* he thought.

Outside the window, a brontosaurus whose enormous body was half-submerged in swamp water was patiently and methodically chewing its way through the lush foliage of a huge gymnosperm. Jake tried to catch its eye, but he couldn’t. He could look out easily enough, but there was no way the brontosaurus could have looked in, even if it had been real.

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Jake didn’t warn Sam and Doreen that he’d bought the tamarin, so they were somewhat disconcerted when it arrived at the door. He hadn’t consciously planned to lay down a challenge to their insistence that he could treat their home as his own, but he was interested to see their reactions nevertheless.

“It’s okay,” he assured them. “It’s engineered for maximum tidiness and programmed for social responsibility. It won’t make any dirty messes, and it won’t press any buttons it isn’t supposed to.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Sam said, although he evidently did feel uneasy on both scores. “I’m just surprised, that’s all. Why do you think you need it? I wouldn’t have thought cute and fluffy was quite your *style*.”

“It’s just a sophisticated biochip that does the talking,” Doreen chimed in. “It’s exactly like talking to a conversational program on the net. It’s not really an animal— just an organic robot.”

“It won’t give you any trouble,” Jake insisted, dog-gedly. “It’ll live in my room. It won’t bother you at all.”

This turned out not to be entirely true. The pet’s pro-gramming had to be open-ended to allow it to adapt to its owner’s conversational habits, and it did tend to wander if Jake wasn’t paying attention. If it wasn’t authentically curious, it gave a very good impression, and its restless fingers did occasionally push buttons that would have been better unpushed. It caused no disasters, but it did produce a measure of exasperating inconvenience. Perhaps it was all Sam’s fault for making too much of an effort in the first couple of weeks; he only had to speak to the creature a few times to be included in its rapidly evolving response-system as an honorary co-owner, and thus to be pestered whenever he was available for pestering and Jake was otherwise occupied. Even though Doreen never said much more to the creature than “Go away!” she too was awarded a special place in its scheme of things, and its constant craven apologies to her quickly became as much of an annoyance as jeers and insults would have been.

Jake could not have liked the creature half as much had it not been so subtly and insistently wayward.

In the early days of their relationship, the tamarin’s conversation left much to be desired. It had a memory chip which carried a potential vocabulary far larger than Jake’s, but it was programmed to limit its competence to match *his*, so he had to spend time telling it elaborate stories using as many words as he could squeeze in. For a time, this educative process was enjoyable. It injected new purpose into such activities as looking out of the window and watching the TV news, because Jake was able—indeed, *required*—to deliver a running commentary on everything that could be seen, so that the tamarin could be familiarized with his descriptive powers and his attitudes. After a while, however, the whole thing began to seem like a chore, and the increasingly prolific contributions made by the pet came to seem like mockingly convoluted echoes of his own thought processes.

“The trouble with you, little monkey,” Jake said to the tamarin, as they looked out of the window on to a busy street in the market quarter of some tropical city, watching the crowds go by, “is that you’re too good to be true. You’re the whole goddam world in a nutshell: bland, obliging, and fundamentally mechanical.”

“The trouble with *you*, Jake,” the tamarin replied, airily, “is that you don’t know what you want from me. You change your mind from one day to the next, or one minute to the next! I could have had a nice kid for an owner, you know—a lovely little girl, full of hope and excitement and curiosity. You think this is an easy ride for me? Believe me, it isn’t.”

“There you go again,” Jake said. “I call you bland, you immediately start compensating. Too goddam obliging.”

On the other side of the window, a young street-arab made an obscene gesture. He was looking straight at Jake and the monkey, but Jake knew that it was just a performance—something he probably did in front of every spy-eye he passed, on the off chance that someone might be watching. Jake wished that there was some way that the kid could have known for *sure* that he was there, so that the gesture could have been *personal* instead of merely ritual.

“Why did he do that?” the tamarin asked, almost as if it had read Jake’s secret wish. “It’s not as if he can see us.”

“That program of yours is too clever by half,” Jake complained. “It’s better at reading people than *people* are. Heaven help us if your kind ever get the all clear to run for office! On the other hand, you’ll probably run the world a lot better than *we* do, at least until you master the Machiavellian arts of greed and corruption. He did that because he’s saying *up yours!* to the entire First World—because he knows that the things we have today, he’ll have tomorrow. He knows that his time is coming, and that he’ll have all the time he needs to get what he wants. The treatment’s too easy and too cheap, you see. It can’t be hoarded or controlled. It’s spreading like an epidemic, and the only people who *can’t* benefit from it are the people who are *already* old, already damaged. He knows that he won’t always be on the outside being looked at from within, no matter how many rich folks hereabouts are screaming blue murder about population problems and social utility.”

“There are a lot of old people out there,” the tamarin observed, scanning the street scene with his little, dark eyes. “A *lot* of old people. And

a lot of people so very nearly old that they can't wait long."

"That's right," Jake said. "But they're going about their business in a quiet and orderly way, because they don't dare to do otherwise. All their fear and resentment is held in check, because this is one cause it wouldn't make sense to risk death for. They all believe that their time is coming, if only they'll be patient, and they're *right*. All except the ones who've already missed out."

"I'll die too," the tamarin said. "Artificial flesh is designed to be mortal."

"I know," Jake said. "I read the specs."

"Is that why you bought me? Because I'm in the same boat as you, and Sam and Doreen aren't? Is that why you needed me?"

"I wish I knew," Jake said, tiredly. "I wish I knew."

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The tamarin was designed for indoor life; it didn't need space or exercise. Even so, Jake began to take it out for "walks." It clung to his shoulder, ducking low to get under the wide brim of his hat; when he talked to it out of the corner of his mouth, its replies were discreetly murmurous. He took it to places where there were trees, so that he could watch it playing in the branches. It was quite an athlete. Sometimes, he wished it would take the opportunity to make a dash for freedom, but it never did. It had its inbuilt limitations.

On occasion, when the sun was at full blast in a cloud-less sky and the temperature was over a hundred in the shade, the tamarin complained that it would rather stay home, but Jake was never quite sure whether it was protesting on its own behalf or being protective of him.

"The species on which you're modeled used to live way down south," he told it, on one occasion. "I never could understand why natural selection handed out fur coats to tropical monkeys, but it can't have been an accident. By rights, you ought to like the hot weather."

"The species on which *you're* modeled evolved on the plains of equatorial Africa," the tamarin pointed out, "but that didn't stop you from inventing air-conditioning."

“The monkey’s right,” Sam told him, as he stepped out the door. “Neither of you is fitted by nature for wandering around under the noonday sun. It’s not as if you were mad dogs or Englishmen!”

“I wear a hat,” Jake retorted, pausing in order to make an argument of it. “Anyway, I’m not primed for skin can-cer. *My* weak spot is the heart. You know that. Congenital weakness emphasized by wear and tear. That’s the way *I’ll* be going.”

“I wish *you* ‘d talk some sense into him,” Sam said to the tamarin. “He never listens to me.”

“He always listens,” the tamarin riposted, loyally. “He just doesn’t take any notice. He’s old enough to make up his own mind.”

“He sounds more like you than you do,” Sam said, wearily—to Jake, not the monkey.

“Better buy one for Doreen,” Jake suggested. “Pretty soon it’d have everything she’s got and good looks too.” But that was uncalled-for, and they both knew it. He cleared out without further delay.

He didn’t enjoy the outing. Sam and the monkey were right, as usual; it was far too hot outdoors for anything that moved. Even the trees seemed to be wilting under the sun’s relentless assault. The tamarin put on its usual acrobatic display, with all possible zest, but it wasn’t re-ally having fun. It was only pretending. Everything it did—everything it was or might become—was mere pre-tense.

On the way back to the house, they passed thirty-three beggars—four more than the previous record count—but they weren’t menaced in any way whatsoever. There was nothing in the dark and silent eyes that watched them go by but reproach ... and perhaps, in the younger ones, a little pity.

“So much for trying to make the migrants stay home by promising to give full-aid priority to long-established populations,” Jake said. “They don’t believe us anymore. Time was when the word of our politicians was our bond.”

“Would that be Lincoln you’re thinking of, or George Washington?” the tamarin inquired.

“Saint Thomas More,” Jake answered.

“He wasn’t an American.”

“In spirit he was.”

“In spirit,” the tamarin told him, “so are *they*. For that matter, so am I.”

“I was myself, once,” Jake was quick to add, always desirous of claiming the last word. “But that was a long time ago.”

The tamarin politely conceded the game. It always did, but Jake never felt that he’d won. Time after time after time, come blazing heat or pouring rain, he claimed the last line—but he never felt that he’d *proved* anything.

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They’d been walking for a long time, but it wasn’t until they got to the head of the sliproad leading up to the highway that the tamarin finally asked him, wearily, where they were going *this time!*

“I don’t know,” Jake replied, truthfully. “I thought we might hitch a ride someplace. Anyplace would do.”

“Do you think that’s wise?” the tamarin asked.

“No,” Jake said. “If it was wise. I wouldn’t want to do it.”

“I can understand that,” the tamarin assured him, “but isn’t it just a little *too* haphazard? You might count it a bonus that Sam won’t like it, but he really *will* be worried if you go missing and turn up three days later in New York or Vancouver.”

“Nobody drives from Brownsville to Vancouver,” was all Jake said in reply. “We’ll be lucky to get as far as Corpus Christi.” He had already noted that at least nine out of every ten vehicles that passed them were on auto-matic, and that the few manual drivers tended to stare at his outstretched thumb as if he were out of his mind.

“There’s nothing *out* there, Jake,” the monkey said, very softly, as it plucked at the lobe of his ear with its tiny hand. “You know that. We’ve looked at the whole goddam world through your window, and a thousand places more. We know there’s no rainbow’s end, don’t we?”

“That kind of window is just a wall with delusions of grandeur,” Jake

said, knowing that he was repeating him-self. “You can look, but you can’t *touch*. The road is *real*. It goes to someplace *real*.”

“What is it you want to touch, Jake?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll know when I see it, maybe I won’t. Either way, I don’t want to sit around the rest of my life just *watching*. Just for once, I want to *go* some-where. Just for once, I want to *be* somewhere. Anywhere. Nowhere. You can go home if you want to. You can spill the beans to Sam if you want to.”

That was unfair, not least because it was untrue. The tamarin *couldn’t* go home, unless he gave it a definite order properly confirmed—but Jake wasn’t about to com-promise the perversity of his mood by being *fair*.

The car that finally skidded to a halt thirty meters beyond them was just about the oldest model Jake had seen all day. So was the driver, who must have been seventy-five if he were a day. The driver didn’t ask Jake where he was headed; as soon as the door was closed, he put his foot right down and roared off.

The car’s dashboard was an absolute mess, with circuit boards exposed here, there, and everywhere. The top of the windshield, where all the virtual displays should have been, was quite blank.

“I guess you like tinkering,” Jake said. “My name’s Jake, by the way.”

“Never ride in a car that can be hijacked by remote control,” the other advised him. “I’m Conor O’Callaghan. That’s Irish. Family goes right back to the great potato famine. Much better class of immigrant in those days. Not like now. Country’s going to hell.”

The vehicle jagged from lane to lane in the same stac-cato style as his speech, out to the fastest track and then halfway in again. Most of the traffic on the highway con-sisted of disciplined convoys of robotrucks, which Conor seemed to take a profound delight in disrupting. A forlorn red light was blinking in the center of the steering column like a stranded bottle-top.

“I believe that’s a police warning, Mr. O’Callaghan,” the tamarin remarked. It was the first time the creature had ever displayed knowledge that Jake didn’t have, and it was that rather than the red light itself that belatedly alerted Jake to the fact that all was not well.

“That monkey of yours a fink?” the driver asked. “If it is, I’d be obliged if it’d get the hell out before the sirens start screeching.”

“This is a *stolen car*?” Jake said, wonderingly.

“Well hell, a man wouldn’t want to do all *that* to his *own* car, would he?” the driver said, presumably meaning the exposed circuit boards and the various kinds of sabotage that had doubtless been worked upon them. “Don’t worry—she might be old, but she’s got all the safety features. I don’t think I could kill us if I were to throw her off a bridge. Course, that thing on your shoulder ain’t belted in, so it might bounce around a bit when we cut to the chase.”

In the distance, Jake heard the wailing of sirens. They seemed to be getting closer with remarkable rapidity.

“They’re fast,” Conor conceded, as if he’d caught the thought crossing Jake’s mind, “but they ain’t allowed to be *reckless*. Gettin’ on our tail is one thing—catchin’ us is somethin’ else!”

Again the car began to zigzag from lane to lane. Conor recklessly hurled the vehicle at the wheels of mammoth robotrucks, which dutifully swerved and altered pace with lumbering grace. The juggernauts always managed to avoid the car, if only by a seeming thumb’s-width. Jake remembered, though, that nearly one in ten of the vehicles that had passed him on the sliproad had had human drivers. He wondered how many of those drivers had failed to switch to automatic after filtering into the highway traffic, and how many had been messing around with their own circuit boards.

“Do you do this often?” he inquired, astonished by the mildness of his tone. He was afraid, but the fear didn’t seem to *hurt*. Thus far, it was just a kind of excitement.

“Not as often as I’d like,” Conor confessed.

“Do you always pick up hitchhikers when you do?”

“Don’t usually see any. Wouldn’t pick up a Third Worlder, of course, or anyone under the age of irresponsibility, but I figured you might be grateful. Am I wrong?”

Jake wasn't sure what the answer to that question was, but he was saved from the necessity of offering one by the nervous tamarin, which leapt down onto the dashboard to stare through the windshield with evident alarm.

"Central Traffic Control is slowing the traffic down," the monkey said, in a decidedly officious tone. "It would be dangerous in the extreme to maintain our present speed."

"Naw," said the driver. "It gets even *more* exciting when they turn the road into an obstacle course!"

Jake saw that the rest of the traffic was indeed being brought to a gradual standstill. Soon theirs would be the only vehicle on the move, except for the pursuing police vehicles. The robotrucks were drawing inward by careful degrees, leaving the outermost lanes of the highway empty, but Conor didn't immediately move out there; he continued weaving in and out of the middle lanes, cutting across other vehicles with reckless abandon. They continued to avoid him with marvelous agility and patience.

Jake realized, somewhat to his disappointment, that the experience wasn't so very different from a VR "ride," and that his familiarity with such rides, although limited, was determining the oddly qualified and carefully muffled terror of his responses.

I'm so out of touch with reality that I can't even grasp it anymore, he thought. *This is what it's come to. I'm going to die, and it's just another virtual experience.*

"Do you have any idea how many people you're inconveniencing, Mr. O'Callaghan?" the tamarin asked, in a censorious manner that was certainly no reflection of Jake's personality.

"Sure *do*" Conor said, enthusiastically. "Putting a road-block across a twelve-lane superhighway is one *hell* of an operation. Snarls up twenty, maybe twenty-five thousand vehicles. Last lot of fines bankrupted me—from now on, I'm dying on credit!"

"They'll put you under house arrest," Jake said, wonderingly. "You'll never be able to go out again, ever."

"Depends how good their locks are," Conor replied.

“I’ve been a cracker since I was so high. Takes solid walls and heavy bolts to keep *me* inside—software won’t do it. Nice day trip, hey?”

Jake laughed, feeling a strange wave of relief pass through him as the car was forced back into the empty outer lanes. There was now a solid wall of robotrucks to their right, and nothing ahead of them for at least a kil-ometer. As the wave passed, though, Jake began to eye the barrier protecting the grassy median, wondering just how crazy the old man was.

He turned in his seat. The pursuing police cars were coming up fast. Conor began to jiggle the wheel from side to side so that the car veered from one empty lane to another. The pursuers’ safety mechanisms held them back; they couldn’t overtake unless he left them an adequate gap, and he was a very good judge of adequate gaps.

“I strongly advise you to slow down, sir,” the tamarin said, leaping back onto Jake’s shoulder and then slipping down behind the seats. It was taking protective action; it had seen the roadblock that was looming up ahead of them.

Conor didn’t slow down. He just drove full tilt at the roadblock.

The distance separating the car from the block disappeared with terrifying fluidity, and Jake felt his heart— his weak, unstable heart—pounding in his chest like an earth-breaking drill of a type he hadn’t seen in fifty years. The terror inside him back-flipped out of its virtual mode and became suddenly, overwhelmingly forceful. It was *mortal terror* now; he *knew* that they were going to crash, that the car and the whole damn world were going to be torn apart.

The only thing he didn’t know was *why*.

In spite of his authentic terror, that was the thought that seized hold of him as they hurtled toward the barrier: *Why is the crazy man doing this? Because he knows that he won’t die, or because he hopes that he might?*

Conor had obviously done this before. For him, it was just a joyride, just a day out—but it was Jake’s first time, and he had never been in a crash of any kind. As the barrier hurtled toward them like the black horizon of death itself, Jake’s poor heart leaped and lurched and tried with all its pathetic might to explode.

He never felt the impact. He saw it, but he never felt a thing.

* * * *

Jake woke up in his own bed, feeling dreadful.

Sam was stationed to the right, Doreen to the left. Sam was pale, exhausted, and anxious; Doreen was flushed, agitated, and solicitous. It didn't take long for their tender inquiries to give way to harsh recriminations.

"You could have been killed," Sam said. "You very nearly *were*."

"The car had safety features," Jake muttered. "Crazy Conor bypassed all the software checks, but the hardware was still in place."

"That's not the point," Sam persisted. "You had a major heart attack, Dad. If there hadn't been an ambulance wait-ing behind the barrier, you'd be stone dead. As it is, you might have lost five or ten years. It wasn't trivial, Dad— nothing *is*, at your age."

No, Jake thought. *At my age, nothing is.*

"Where did you think you were *going*, Jake?" Doreen wanted to know. She was fussing over him, fluffing the pillows, checking the many wires and catheters which connected various parts of his prone body to the house physician, reading the various displays which were moni-toring his all-too-frail flesh. Somehow, she gave the im-pression of being in her element—which was odd, given her actual vocation.

They've got me where they want me now, he thought, uncharitably. "Nowhere," he said out loud.

"Well," said Sam, "you nearly made it. You won't be going out again for quite some time. Fortunately, that lunatic you were with won't be going out for the rest of his life. Why on earth did you hitch a ride with a maniac like that?"

"He offered," Jake said. "Where's the tamarin?"

They had both been bending over him, but now they straightened up like twin pillars. He felt as if he were somehow suspended between them and drawn unnaturally taut.

“The monkey didn’t have a belt or an airbag,” Sam said, reluctantly. “It must have tried to use the back of your seat as a cushion. It would have been okay if only the back seat hadn’t been sheared from its moorings. That’s why your back hurts—you bruised several verte-brae. The monkey was caught and crushed. There was nothing the medical team could do.”

“I’m sorry,” Doreen was quick to say, as if someone might have suspected her of being glad if she hadn’t said it.

“Oh shit,” said Jake.

The silence was hard to bear, but not as hard to bear as the things they were too diplomatic to say out loud. Things like *it was only a kind of robot, not really alive at all; or you can get another one if you want; or, it was your own stupid fault you stupid, senile old fool*. He noticed, for the first time, that his back really *was* in a bad way. He’d be walking stiffly for some time, if and when he was able to get up again.

He tried to twist himself around so that he could look at the monitors that were collating an objective record of his distress, but his spine wouldn’t tolerate the torque and the displays were too high up on the wall.

“It’s my data,” he said, sourly. “I ought to be able to read it.”

“You can,” Doreen told him, in matronly fashion. “All you have to do is put the VR helmet on. It’ll put a full display right before your eyes. You can watch your insides churning away through a fleet of internal cameras if you want to.”

Suddenly, it didn’t seem like such a good idea.

“No charges have been filed against you,” Sam said, obviously thinking that there was safer conversational ground in that direction, “but we had to extradite you from Mexico as an illegal alien. There’s a certain irony in that, I suppose.”

“I didn’t even know we were heading south,” Jake told him, bitterly. “I guess I’ll be forgetting which way’s up next. But I can still die with a clean sheet. You can put that on my tombstone if you like. *Here lies Jake, died with a clean sheet*. Better set up a spy-eye so you can look out of your window at it any time you like. Show your kid, if you ever get around to having one. One’s still the ration, I suppose, for all right-thinking immortals?”

He didn't add *We could've had two, if we'd wanted to*. It was true; he and Martha could have, if they hadn't had a conscience about Third World overcrowding. Nobody had known way back then that the next generation wouldn't have to *bother* with dying, or that the surplus personnel of the Third World would simply come and set up house in the interstices of the First.

"Don't be like that, Dad," Sam said. His voice was light, but he meant it.

"I *am* like that," Jake retorted, stubbornly. "Always was, always will be."

* * * *

Doreen finally had to get back to work; however uncertain they might be, the world's futures still had to be bought and sold. Sam stayed for a while longer.

"You had a bad shock, I guess," Sam said.

"Let that be a lesson to me," Jake countered. "It's dangerous out there, what with all these crazy *old* people. A man can lose his best friend as easy as snapping his fingers."

"Was the monkey really your best friend?" Sam asked, skeptically—displaying a perspicacity of which even the tamarin's clever biochip might have been incapable.

"No," Jake admitted. "I've spent too much time with smart machines to start grieving for one. It's not like los-ing Martha was, not in a million years. Don't say I won't *miss* him, mind. Hard to find people I have that much in common with."

"Doesn't it get a little claustrophobic, talking all the time with an echo?"

"About as claustrophobic as a cell on Death Row with a million windows and a doorway to a thousand virtual worlds. Okay, so he wasn't really as smart as he sounded—who is?"

"You never used to call it *he* when it was alive," Sam observed. "You never even gave it a name."

"Maybe they ought to make them with sexual organs," Jake said. "Just for decoration, of course. It'd be easier to give them names if they were one thing or the other. It'd be easier to think of them as real animals. I mean, that's the idea, isn't it? We're *supposed* to be able to think of them as real animals, just like us. That way, we really might be able to make friends with them, the way we sometimes can with one another."

"Someone called from the Village," Sam told him. "Saw the news, wanted to know if you were okay. Name of Peterson. Was he a friend?"

"Not really."

"Good of him to call, though."

"Not really."

Sam sat down on the bed and looked his father right in the eye. "If you want to die, Dad, you *can*" he said, very soberly. "It's easy enough. If you want to live and get nothing out of it, that's even easier. It must be hell, having fallen through a trapdoor that was sealed and made safe a few years after it caught you. I ask the same question, you know: *Why you?* I hear the same answer: *Why any-body?* Whenever it came along, *someone* was bound to miss out: a whole generation. I won't try to fan the flames by saying that they might still discover a way to undo damage already done, although they might. All I'll say is that I'd feel a lot happier and a lot prouder if *my* father was one of the guys who did his level best to make the most of the time he *had*, even though he'd lost almost everything that made what he had seem worth having. But then, I always was a selfish little toad, wasn't I? Comes of being an only child, I guess. In the future, there'll *only* be only children. What a world, hey?"

Jake said nothing, because there was nothing he could say that wouldn't make him seem like an old fool. He wriggled and writhed a bit, knowing that the physician would read it as a sign of increasing discomfort and up the endorphin input. He figured that it was time to float for a while, and to feel sensibly detached.

"I'll come in and see how you are in a little while," Sam said. "Doreen'll pop in and out when she can. You want peace and quiet and all those wires out, you'll have to recover. Okay?"

"Sure," said Jake. "I'll be fine. Back on my feet in no time."

"I've moved the window nearer the bed," Sam pointed out, as he paused in the doorway, "so you can see out."

"Thanks," Jake said, lukewarmly.

At first, he turned away from the window, and even shut his eyes for a while, but he couldn't go to sleep. In the end, he turned back again, to face the reconfigured wall. Beyond the imaginary windowpane, snow was gently falling on a meadow.

After watching the scene for a few tedious minutes, Jake found the remote control and switched off the snow. Then he switched off the meadow. Idly, he started surfing through the channels.

Worlds came and went, each one flaring up in a blaze of light and then dying. Some of them were here and now, others elsewhere and anywhere, in the present or the distant past or possible futures or pasts that might have been but never were. Jake couldn't tell the real ones from the unreal at this sort of pace; they were all whirled in together, all part and parcel of the same infinitely confused and infinitely confusing whole.

What an old fool I am, Jake thought, trying to go any-where and nowhere on the highway, when all the any-wheres and nowheres anyone could ever want to see are right outside my window. But he knew, even as he thought it, that the window was really a wall, just like the one Central Traffic Control had thrown across the highway: a wall to keep him from getting out, no matter how fast or how far he decided to go.

He could see *everything*—a world of infinite possibility, full of people, young and old—but he couldn't actually go there. He wriggled around a bit, to remind the invisible physician's programs that he was still there, still in distress.

It could be worse, he reminded himself, sternly. It could be a great deal worse, and a man my age should be wise enough to count his blessings. At least I have a son, and a home, and a few more heartbeats to count—and I have a window right next to my bed.

He waited, numbly, for the brave words to take effect. He was sure that they would, if he only gave them enough time and cajoled enough endorphins from the systems hidden in the wall. They *had* to. What else was there to take comfort from but words, shaped and given life by bravery?

By slow degrees, the caress of the clean sheets on his bruised and careworn skin became breathtakingly and lux-uriously soft. Somehow, it reminded him of Martha, of fine sand wanned and glittered by the sun, and of the tenderness of youth.

For the moment, at least, it was something he didn't want to lose.

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