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Of Fiction and Second Life

Autumn 2007

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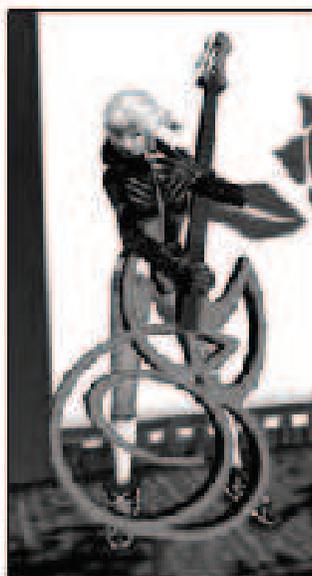
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SLITERARY

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girl who
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*Autumn
2007*

stories
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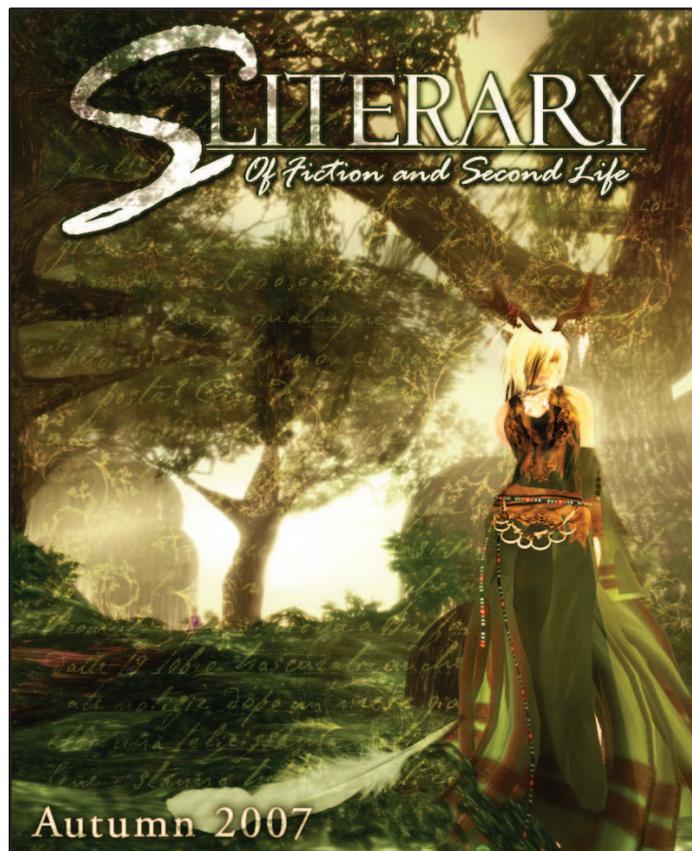
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Editor Emeritus
Jackline Hugo

Executive Director
Ina Centaur

Editor in Chief
Mary VonDrehle (RL name)

Associate Editors
Morrhys Graysmark Ina Centaur

Advertising & Distributing Directors
Ina Centaur Honor Lehane

Advertising & Distributing Associates
Nevar Lobo Vixen Perfferle Harman Mayo Licentious Maladay

Art and Design Director
Kailie Quinn (RL name)

Web & Inworld Technology
Ina Centaur Si Arcadia

Cover Illustration for Autumn 2007
Kailie Quinn (RL name) & Ina Centaur

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AUTUMN
2007

EDITOR'S

INTRODUCTION

Let us begin with a memory and a vision...

The perpetual theme of the magazine—of fiction and Second Life—according to editor emeritus Jackline Hugo:

“Fiction, in my humble opinion, is a worldly thing. Common to all stories is a setting, which even if never explicitly mentioned in the body, forms the metaphysics of the world the string of events exists upon. Fiction is molded by the reality of the world it exists in, and the story that embodies it assumes that the reader is aware of the abstractions the story may attempt to convey. Thus arises the essence of sLiterary—stories that exist based on the dynamic interplay between real life and Second Life. Even if set completely in the metaverse, the stories are ultimately about the user’s perception of it. And, it is always the human story.”

The thought above was the driving force behind sLiterary’s premier issue in March of 2007; six months later, our Autumn 2007 issue continues to uphold the same vision with...

Four poems: Licentious Maladay’s “Knowing” examines in elegant eloquence the interplay between SL and RL. Xen Xenkova’s “Who Are You?” is a polished rhyme with such musical quality that we hope someone will create a melody for it so we can stream the song. “Avatar Dreams” by Jennifer Mahoney is a piece that should appeal to those young or young at heart. The final poem, “Making IT or Breaking IT” by Jeffery Whitman, cleverly bridges the line between poetry and story with its thoughtful free verse.

And, four stories: The first, “As the Wyrms Turn” by Morrhyss Graysmark, deals with a young man who discovers through SL that his girlfriend is more exciting than he thought she was. Those of you who are into philosophy and fun will enjoy Jack Lefebvre’s “Descartes and the Rabbit.” Prospero Lane weighs in next with, “The Ballad of Millissa McGurk” is a wonderful short story about how deceit can affect a person and those around him or her. The section ends with the fun story, “A Perfect Life” by Daryn Writer, showing how SL compares favorably with RL in some respects.

Much to our surprise, we also have a fan fiction Part II of Ming Zhou’s *Black Betrayal* by Prospero Lane, who continues the vivid story, and fills it with unexpected twists and turns.

And, we conclude with two serial novels: Ming Zhou’s romance develops in *Black Betrayal*, Part II and the first installment of a fast-paced SL detective novella *The SLeuth* by Aiji Ducatillon.

We hope you enjoy this issue of sLiterary as much as we enjoy bringing it to you!

The Editors,
Mary VonDrehle (RL name)
Morrhyss Graysmark
Ina Centaur



KNOWING

BY LICENTIOUS MALADY

To know that your camera
 Is focused on me
 The way that mine
 Caressees you.
 To know that we are tuned
 To the same station,
 That a glass of red wine
 Is also by your right hand,
 That my name lingers on
 Your lips
 The way that yours
 Teases mine.
 Knowing this would truly
 Animate this avatar. 

MAKING IT OR BREAKING IT

BY JEFFERY WHITMAN

“There’s the slow way and the very slow way.”
 What else could I say, standing in the plaza in San Francisco,
 where the camping trolley seats don’t pay out,
 where the lag makes everybody walk, run, fly in place;
 legs and arms flailing like so many cartoon characters falling in a dream,
 and she so innocently asked, “How do you make money here?”

It was an unexpected question and it made me think...
 no one would ask that in a MOO fourteen years ago,
 not in that first second life.

There was no San Francisco hustle, Charms swindling SLP Bonus Slots waiting
 for you to pay in your hard earned lindens so a well-timed, bad-luck crash
 could steal all your future winnings.
 Like always, my bad luck is someone elses good.

Now here we got real life concerns... protesters with their placards
 with their real life problems.
 “No More Lag,” “No More Crashes,” “Second Life Sucks,”
 and that’s why they keep logging back on to buy Gucci and live
 like Las Vegas and have the bodies and sex
 they wished they had back at that other life.

But there's an underground here too.
It lurks just beyond the forming-before-your-eyes horizon,
In the middle of that forming-before-your-eyes now,
which materializes after you do.
It's not all fluff and flash, sparkling Barbies and buffed out Kens.
Or even weirded out Goth Star Wars Punk fantasies.
There's an inner matrix more real than the real
and networks sprout faster than the fruit on money trees for newbies,
and NGOs have their islands too and you can learn a lot at Camp Darfur,
or find the all in the none and peace and answers at a Green Tara Temple.

You can internationalize your friend pool while breaking time zone barriers
and subversive librarians still give their information for free.
You can join a real revolution, fighting and winning byte by byte
with the tools of a new brave world:
scripting and building, building and scripting,
opening the pie, create there and edit here with the ease of blue red green
and investing it all in a Kerouakian virtual IT.
Creating a word, spreading a world,
threading IT together and just like making lindens,
there's the slow way... and the very... slow... way.



WHO ARE YOU?

BY XEN ZENOVKA

Are you really a fox with a bow in your hair
A spring in your step and a boldness of air;
A poet, a healer, creator, a friend:
Beloved, yet hopeful for love in the end;
Who doesn't take crap and speaks from the heart
Words graceful, with beauty: your life and your art?

Are you really a noob with no shoes on your feet
And hair that is monochromatically neat;
Confused and yet hopeful this might turn out well
(If only for money, advice and a gal)
Who doesn't take crap and speaks from the heart:
Questions naïve on just where to start?

Are you really a man with a gun in your hand
Rage in your eyes as you ply your dreamland;
Arrogant, boastful, macho or cool,
Smooth-talking, sensitive, leaver, a tool;
Who doesn't take crap and speaks from the heart:
Words angry and bitter; hurtful and stark?

Are you really a star with a house on the shore
And a strut on the catwalk I've not seen before;
Sultry and charming, the men shove and vie
For a glance their direction; a glint of your eye;
Who doesn't take crap and speaks from the heart
But plays the game carelessly thinking you're smart?

Are you really a whore hawking pixels for cash
 With your garter cinched tightly round bare-legged flesh;
 Who says pay me first - you're no naïve waif -
 For the deed, you swear frankly, is perfectly safe
 Who doesn't take crap and speaks from the heart
 Unless it pays better to shut up and tart?

Are you really a couple that dances with ease
 That laugh in the moonlight, the flirt and the tease;
 Who make love as day breaks and waves crash around
 While newbies gawk wond'ring where's this to be found;
 Who do not take crap and speak from the heart:
 Words tender, but fleeting, 'fore pixels go dark?

Is this really a world where we are what we are?
 The fox or the man, the whore or the star?
 Is it truth? Does it matter? Is it all just a game?
 Which is which? Do you know? If you don't it's a shame.
 Life doesn't take crap and speaks from the heart
 The story of who we have been from the start.



AVATAR DREAMS

BY JENNIFER MAHONEY

I spring upright from a sound sleep and
 Emerge from your dream -- Into my reality.
 How can this be possible?
 You do not exist.

Yet, you dream as I do.
 Not of electric sheep,
 But of hopes and aspirations.
 Yearning to become more.

You are no longer just a hollow shape
 Formed from the ether;
 You are aware within me --
 Or is it I, aware within you?

I suppose that depends
 On whose world is real --
 And who is to say which.
 Or if it even matters

Whether I live out my dreams in your world
 Or you dream in mine.
 We will never be apart again.
 Maybe we never were....



AS THE WYRM TURNS

BY MORRHYS GRAYSMARK



“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“Nope, Wade,” says Brice, setting her glass of iced tea on the tan laminate tabletop, where condensation from the glass instantly makes a wet ring. She wipes her pale, red-nailed hand on her white paper napkin, then puts the napkin back on her lap. “She drew your initials and a plus, inside a heart, with flowers, and bells, and ribbons that look like snakes! In all different colors of ink! She put some time into it, that’s for sure.”

“Snakes?”

“Yeah. Weird.” Picking up her fork, Brice stabs at her salad. She holds the dripping greens inches away from her slightly open, strawberry lips, then looks up at me. “Wanna see it?” she asks in a low, breathy voice. “I got a snapshot on my phone.”

Not waiting for my reply, she puts down the fork and opens her tiny, overstuffed red leather purse. Reaching inside, she brings up a little pink cell phone. She flips it open with a deft movement of her bony wrist, turns it on, and pages through some images. Smiling suddenly, she tosses her short, straight straw hair, turns the screen toward me, and locks her water-blue eyes on mine.

I pull my gaze away from her and settle it on the phone. Sure enough, the image fills the screen: WL + JM, encased in a heart, bells and flowers around it, and odd, opalescent ribbons ending in ovals rather than squares or angles. My cheeks feel suddenly hot. I wrest my attention from the screen, and see Brice looking at me triumphantly.

“Pretty low class, huh?” she states as much as asks.

I look at the forkful of Brice’s lettuce, balancing on the edge of her salad bowl. I fantasize her dropping her phone so it hits the fork handle, launching the oily wad through the air into her obvious cleavage. Fantasy is so much better than reality! “I’ll talk with her about it when she returns,” I say in a carefully controlled voice. “I’m sure she meant well.”

Brice’s expression drops from triumphant to sour. She snaps her phone shut and stuffs it forcefully back into her purse. I expect the seams of the handbag to rip, but they manage to stay intact. She grasps her fork and lunges at her food like it insulted her. A sticky green leaf breaks in her teeth and tumbles down her chin, right smack where I want it to land. I smile behind my water glass as Brice gasps and grabs her napkin.

“Hey guys! Mind if I sit?” calls a deep voice.

I look up to see my best friend Max heading for our table. “Sure thing,” I say. “I need to go anyway.”

"That's right, you've got Japanese Humanities in, what, 15 minutes? You'd better move along; class meets halfway across campus!"

I stand up as he sits down. He overwhelms the table with his extra-tall body and extra-full tray of food. "Hi Brice," says Max cheerfully.

"Mmph," replies Brice, blushing giving up on the lettuce down her little lavender knit top and nodding at Max.

"I'll see you guys later," I say, and turn to walk away. Brice waves her napkin at me, and Max nods, his longish black hair partially obscuring his face. I shake my head. She's sure to show him the picture in her phone.

I want to call Jenn. But she's at her mom's for the weekend. Her cell phone won't pick up a signal there, and her three teenage siblings keep her mom's phone busy just about all the time. She's never on-line there, since her mom doesn't have DSL; no way to IM her. But I can check something in my Second Life.

In the on-line virtual world called Second Life, I'm Wyrms, Max is Maxx, Brice is Beautiful, and Jenn is Jem. Jem isn't on tonight, of course, since Jenn is home with her mom. Beautiful is on, but I've seen quite enough of her today. Since she knows where I live in SL, I'm somewhere else, waiting for her to quit for the evening. I sit on the edge of a huge speaker in an outdoor gambling area atop giant black and green boxes making up The Matrix, dangling my legs over darkened ground a few hundred feet below. Stars that never twinkle decorate the black sky in front of me.

"How're you doing?" asks Maxx.

"I don't know. I thought Jenn was cool. I didn't think she vandalized things. I didn't think she was weird." I stare out into space.

Maxx flies up from the edge of the building. He pauses in midair, moves away from the building slightly, then drops in front of me so he can face me. I smile. He's got this amazing three-headed baby dragon avatar that blows smoke rings out its nostrils. "Well, I want you to know I bought you some time," he says.

"Time?"

"You knew Brice would show me the snapshot, right?"

"You and the rest of the world," I agree dejectedly. "I'm gonna look like an idiot. The guy that's with the snake lady. Bleah."

"Well, she'll need to take another pic first."

"What do you mean?"

"I 'accidentally' deleted it."

"No fooling? How'd you manage that?"

"I asked if I could look more closely, and when I took the phone, I 'fumbled' it. Too bad I pushed a button or two trying to grab it."

"You're a good man, Maxx," I say gratefully. "I owe you one."

"NP, loverboy. Now, you gotta talk to Jenn and hear her side of the story."

"Not until Sunday night. Maybe Monday. She usually comes back late on Sundays when she goes home."

"Then go distract yourself. What sounds good to you? A dance? Some music?"



AS THE
WYRM TURNS
BY MORRHYS GRAYSMARK

"I'd just like to sit in my garden." That's a lie. There's something in particular I want to do in the garden, something I don't want to talk about, not even with my best buddy. "But if I go to my garden, Beautiful will find me; her nose will get out of joint if I don't chat with her."

"Well," says Maxx, "How about if I keep Miss B busy for the night? Then you can sit in your garden till your avatar's butt gets flat! Then it'll look even more like you!"

"You sure know how to make a guy feel grateful," I say with a wry smile.

"Anything for you, my friend. Now, stay right here till I IM you."

"Thanks, man! Now I owe you two!"

"Hey, I know you're good for it."

He suddenly poofs away. A minute later, I receive an IM from him. "Coast is clear."

"Thanks!" I IM back.

"NP," he replies.

I teleport to the land Jem and I share. The gardens, animals, gazebo, benches and stone paths make it a great place to chill. The landmark puts me in the center of the gazebo, facing a small pond with splashable water and a croaking frog. But I didn't come to enjoy the view and sounds.

I leave the gazebo and walk down a path to the outhouse Jem built over the last month. It seemed silly to construct an outhouse, since Second Life avatars never use bathrooms. She told me to stay out of the women's side. Why would she even mention that? I didn't think about it until after I saw the pic on B's phone.

I stand looking at the outhouse, imagining what's inside. Gold fixtures? Marble tile? A wasp nest? Nah, Jem's not the type. Of course, a few hours ago, I didn't think she'd deface public property, either. If I take a quick peek, and see nothing, I'll feel a little better.

I open the door to the women's side; it creaks. I go in. After a few seconds, the door closes behind me with a whine and a dull thud. Being nighttime in SL, the interior of the outhouse is dark. I force the sun to noon; white light suddenly illuminates the pristine structure. True to Jem's style, the décor is basic: plain white sink, simple brass fixtures, bare concrete floor, white painted walls. I walk past the sink to the first stall, and open the door. Looking inside, I see only blank walls.

I sigh. How stupid can I be? What did I expect to find? I almost leave without checking the other stall, but something catches my eye: a subtle flash of light. I right click on the door and choose Open. The door swings wide...

...revealing deep purple-black walls with writing and symbols emblazoned across them in elaborate, chartreuse script that occasionally glints like bling. Instead of a commode, a huge, black snake sits coiled in a large terrarium balanced atop a pedestal. As I watch, it undulates sensually, its tongue tasting the air.

This makes no sense. Jenn's an accounting major. She loves nail polish, going to feel-good movies, and eating pizza. She reads romance novels. She never plays my fantasy computer games. She's a normal, rather predictable woman. She couldn't have built this.

My gaze flits from the snake's body to the walls



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of the stall. I alt-click and zoom in on some text. Perhaps I could find our initials; it would take time. A lot of initials and dates adorn the walls, each with symbols ranging from stars to flowers to various animals.

I set the sun back to Region Default. Sweet darkness muddies the writing on the walls and obscures the snake's coils. Still, the serpent's eyes glitter at me, like diamonds baiting some sort of trap. The eyes must be bling, too. I attempt to alt-click on the serpent, preparing to zoom in, but my hand slips, and I right click instead. A menu pops up! It gives me an option to teleport.

Where would I go if I chose that option?

I could wait and ask Jem the question. But I want to know now. I choose to teleport.

Teleporting happens fast in Second Life, providing no time for a person to acclimate. I imagine the experience mimics dying from an auto accident. One moment you're in your car, safe and comfortable; the next, you're in heaven or hell.

I wonder which of the two this place most resembles?

I stand in nearly horizontal light of the sun either rising or setting, a ground-hugging mist clinging about my ankles. Through the vapor I see a meandering walkway of white marble, leading directly away from me. Dark purple flowers with deep green foliage decorate the ground on either side of the path; bushes with black berries provide a backdrop for the flowers. Still further beyond the bushes rise trees, massive trees, with branches that close over me like a living ceiling, festooned with gray-green leaves. I see fragments of an uneasy orange light in the direction of the path. I find myself drawn toward it.

As I walk, the world darkens. Fortunately, the mist thins also; I can see without changing illumination. I catch bits of music as I walk... strange, unearthly music. It grows louder. Presently, a clearing opens in front of me. As I step to the edge, I see an angry bonfire, throwing missiles of white-hot gas into the twilight. Around the fire cavort... dancers. But not human dancers.

Snakes.

Huge snakes, dancing sinuously, lifting their fronts and swaying back and forth, crawling in tortured circles on their abdomens, wrapping around one another in pairs as if in ecstasy. I see them outlined against the flames, like living shadows. They disappear on one side of the fire, only to reappear on the other side and come around again.

I freeze, not knowing what to do.

Wait: the scene appears to be moving!

No, I'm wrong. It's an illusion. It's the ground beneath me that's moving! I lose my balance and fall...

...off the back of a huge serpent. The end of the winding path itself rises up from the ground, shaking off flowers and foliage that covered either side of it. Its alabaster scales shine wickedly in the firelight. It raises its head to the sky, opens its mouth, and emits a terrible hiss. Multicolor sparks shoot from its eyes.

The reptilian dancers stop their writhing and look toward the giant white snake. Shouts arise from the crowd. "The Rainbow Serpent has risen!"

And then... "Who's that standing there?"

They see me! Perhaps I should teleport away. But I find this place strangely fascinating. I choose to stay. I can always teleport away if I want to.

Three of the snakes around the fire rise into the air, disappearing from my sight. Within moments, they swoop down in front of me. They're avatars; 10 foot long, scaled avatars, with unfamiliar names. One avatar is a shiny blacksnake with glowing zenith-blue eyes; another, bloodstone red with hummingbird green eyes; the third, violet-eyed and patterned with scales from golden to gunstock brown. Their nervous tongues flick in and out of their mouths in a hypnotic rhythm.

They all talk at once.

The bloodstone snake asks, "How'd you get here? You're not a reporter, are you?"

The golden snake yells, "His name's Wyrms Lowey. Hey, is this the guy?"

The blacksnake calls, "Coral, you better come here."

I start to explain myself. "I didn't mean to come here. I..."

I stop typing. What can I say now? "I went into the outhouse my girlfriend built, into the women's side where she told me never to go?" I swallow hard and start again. "Someone told me something unbelievable about my girlfriend. I tried to find evidence to contradict it. I ended up here."

As I talk, the giant snake moves deliberately toward the fire. Other snakes greet him with bows and twirls.

A fourth snake, Coral, slithers up to join the group surrounding me. She pulls my attention away from the others with her striking appearance: bands of black, red and yellow wrap around her. I remember the little rhyme: Black on red, friend to Fred; black on yellow, kill a fellow. It has black

bands next to the yellow ones. It comes right up to me. This is bad.

“OMG!” says Coral.

I start typing my explanation again, but before I finish, the blacksnake summarizes what I planned to say. “Says he was checking out his girlfriend.”

“This is the guy, right Coral?” asks the golden snake.

Coral says, “Yes. Why don’t you go back to the fire? I’ll return soon, I hope.”

The three snakes drop down onto their bellies and slither toward the bonfire. I look at Coral.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I planned to tell you, I really did. I just didn’t think the time was right.”

“Jenn?” I ask.

“Yes,” she admits.

“I thought you were at your mom’s!” She lied to me! My face feels hot with anger.

“I was. I’m just spending the night with one of my friends.”

“And your avatar?” I type roughly.

“I made a new one.”

“So I wouldn’t know you were on?”

“I told you I was sorry.”

“I don’t understand! We’re sleeping together! If you’re a member of some . . .” I stop typing for a moment. What would you call this? “. . .cult, I ought to know about it.”

“I’m not in a cult! These are my friends, from back home.”

“Jenn, I don’t know what to believe any more.”

“Listen. Please. My friends and I have known each other since we were little kids. When we graduated from first grade, Meggie said we were like monkeys climbing to the next branch of a tree. We thought that sounded like fun, so we did it! Since then, we’ve created all sorts of fantasies.

“They got more elaborate as we got older. We became moths hatching from cocoons of blankets; pterodactyls diving from the heights of a window ledge into our backyard pool to catch our first fishes; dragons swooping down from the top of a house mountain on bed sheet wings to conquer a city of blocks! When I told them your SL name is Wyrm, we decided we should all be snakes.”

My mouth feels dry. I realize it’s hanging open. I shut it. “You climbed up on a roof and

jumped off?”

“Yeah. We did it at night at the back of the house when my folks were out so no one would see us.”

I try to imagine Jenn, my stable Jenn, flying off a roof like a dragon, though the dark, to land on an imaginary city. I can see why she and her friends moved to SL. It’s safer! “So when did you all start using SL for your acting?”

“Just a year ago. We’ve kept it a secret. Some people think fantasies are for weirdoes.”

The word ‘weirdoes’ reminds me of Brice’s remark in the cafeteria, the one about the snakes on the wall of the bathroom stall. “Jenn?”

“Yes?”

“There’s something I need to ask you.”

“Okay.”

“Did you write something in a bathroom stall on campus?”

“Um, yes. Why do you ask?”

“Brice showed me a picture of it.”

“A picture?”

“On her camera phone.”

“Oh man, I didn’t think anyone would figure it out. It’s in the main library. Brice hardly ever goes there!”

“Why did you do it?”

“It’s part of what my friends and I do. See, whenever one of us gets a crush on someone, we write their initials and the initials of the guy they like in secret places, places where not everyone could or would go, just for fun: on trees in the woods, behind shutters, in bathroom stalls. I know; too childish. We should stick to drawing on our own property in SL. Speaking of which, I guess you found our bathroom stall, too.”

“Yeah. Quite a surprise.”

“I imagine. I had a good time building the snake.”

“You built it?”

“Yes. I did the big Rainbow Snake, too. He’s special; the Rainbow Snake’s an aboriginal symbol of fertility. Seemed appropriate for a relationship I want to . . . to grow.”

I suddenly hear the pounding of my pulse in my ears. I shake my head, trying to assimilate this new information. “I didn’t know you could build like that!” I say, trying to deal with something I have a hope of understanding.

"You never asked me to build anything like that. I thought you were happy with a few stock trees, some bushes and a gazebo."

"I thought that's what you wanted!"

"Here; maybe you'll like this." A window appears; she offers me an object called 'Wyrmsnake Avatar.' "Please take it."

"Okay."

I accept the avatar. I put it on.

My body warps fantastically. I become a snake, red, black and yellow like Coral, but with somewhat different banding. I wear a golden crown on my head, tilted rakishly to one side.

"A king snake," she says, confirming my suspicions. "I made it for you. I planned to give it to you sometime. This seems like the right time."

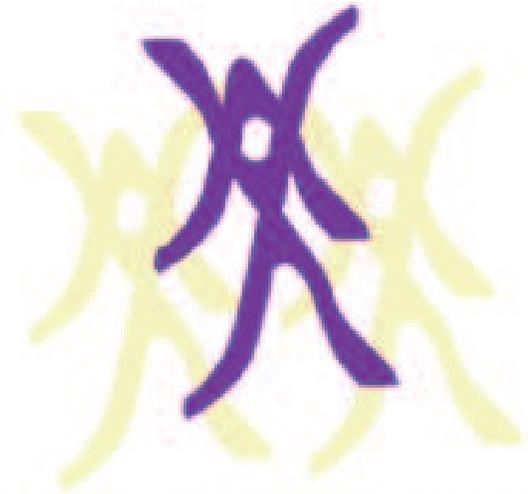
"Thanks. What an amazing avatar!" I look at Coral, and see in her reptilian eyes a spark I failed to see in Jenn's human eyes; creative, exotic. I glance toward the fire. The other snakes appear black before it, watching us, waiting. The giant alabaster snake spirals up from the bonfire itself, enflamed but not consumed.

"Would you join me in a dance?" Coral asks.

I look back at her, my stunning snake lady. Oh yeah, I want to dance! I try to reply, but my fingers tangle. I feel my palms sweating. I wipe them on my pants and hold my hands precisely above the keyboard. I want to type correctly. "I'd like that."

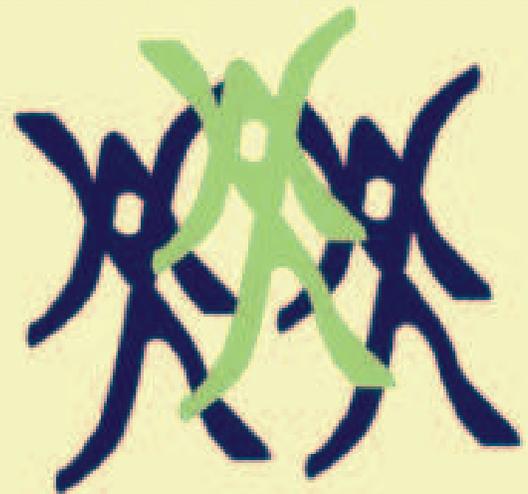
She does a happy undulation, like a playful belly dancer. I wonder if she can make that move in real life. The thought makes me tingle. Then she drops to the ground. I follow suit. We begin to slither toward the flames.

The other snakes start to sway back and forth as we approach, in time with the ethereal music. In my room, in real life, I sway, too.



Virtual Artist Alliance

Chiaksan (15,136,86)



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DESCARTES AND THE RABBIT

BY JACK LEFEBVRE

Woodshed
furniture
MOBIUS (102, 187, 27)



I was talking about Descartes. That's not unusual; it's the sort of pretentious stuff I do in SL. Different this time though. I was talking to a purple rabbit. Quite a tall one. Again, nothing remarkable about that, not in SL. But this was one of those rabbits that disconcert me. She had the Bugs Bunny face and ears, but a near perfect figure: 36D breasts (trust me, I know about these things), slim waist, and a 'two ferrets in a sack' butt. I was getting enthusiastic about the 'cogito' bit of Descartes and a bit concerned that, by the time we got to the 'sum' bit, my gesticulating hands might inadvertently clutch a furry lump of mammary gland and, in the process, undermine my whole thesis.

We were standing on the pebbles of the underwater cave on Camelot Island. Miller's, I think it's called. Breathing without difficulty as the tropical fish swam around us and two couples from Denmark and Holland got more and more enthusiastic about the sets of pose balls inside the little temple there.

The rabbit seemed unaware of them.

"It's the 'I' in 'I think' that's the problem," she said.

I knew that. Everybody knows that. But this was a pedantic rabbit. She needed to spell everything out. I decided to try to disorientate her.

"Kant," I said.

Her hesitation was brief.

"Not only the name of the writer of the 'Critique of Pure Reason,'" she said. "An apt description of its hypothesis, too. And," she added, "just a vowel and a consonant away from encapsulating the man himself."

One of the Danes stood up, a blonde, bronzed individual with ludicrous shoulders. A line of (Danish) chat splashed across the screen, followed by "lol." Danish joke about sex, I guessed.

A dachshund appeared from behind a clump of seaweed.

"Nice put-down, Doris," he said to the rabbit.

That puzzled me. Her floating name tag identified her as Drindle Pinkneery.

“Doris?” I said.

“Yes?” said the rabbit.

“No, I mean, why did he call you Doris?”

“LOL. That’s my RL name. Dennis is my husband.”

“Dennis?” I said.

“Yes?” said the dachshund.

The Dane settled back into the pose ball athletics. I looked at my avatar. Young, dark hair, good looking. Why was he talking about the nature of existence with a purple rabbit and a dachshund? I didn’t have time to pursue the question.

“Wet here,” said Dennis.

“It’s symbolic,” said Doris.

“Of what?” I asked, immediately regretting prolonging my stay with them.

“All sorts of things,” she went on. “The womb, lubrication, rain.”

“Wetness isn’t a symbol of rain,” I said. “It’s a characteristic of it.”

“Alright, just the womb then,” said Doris.

“Dominicans,” said Dennis.

“What?” I said, beginning to feel as if I were being subjected to some sort of brainwashing.

“Founded in 1214,” he said. “Preached the gospel, fought against heresy. Great intellectual tradition, bags of philosophers.”

“And the connection with the womb? Or wetness?” I said, trying to make the words look sarcastic on the screen.

“Ah,” he said, tapping the side of his nose with a paw.

Doris laughed.

“Dennis,” she said, “Stop teasing him.”

“Well, he should have realized by now,” said Dennis.

“Realized what?” I said.

“You think, therefore you are,” he said.

“So?”

“Who are you?”

“Jack Lefebvre,” I said. “Check the label.”

He shook his head. Clever animation. Realistic. I wondered where he’d got it. I wanted one.

“That’s just a tag,” he said. “I asked who you ‘are’ – from ‘to be.’ What’s your essence?”

“What’s yours?” I replied, feebly.

“I have none. I’m a dachshund,” he said.

Smug bastard.

Suddenly, I was being hugged by Doris. Furry arms around me, huge hairy breasts crushing into my rib cage.

“Let’s get back to wetness,” she said.

“Only if you take your head off,” I said, warming to the idea of the breasts, convincing myself that she could be wearing a thick woollen bikini.

“But that’s where my cogito happens,” she said. “Without that, I don’t exist. Without that, no wetness.”

Suddenly, it hit me. She was right. This tall, purple rabbit was right. Here was I, sharing a womb with two Danes, a Dutch couple, a rabbit and a dachshund. We were all breathing under water. Impossible elements. Chaos, mayhem. All held together by the power of thinking, the willingness to believe that we can live our dreams. So Descartes was right after all. If I played my cards right (and got rid of the dachshund), I could make this rabbit pregnant.



THE BALLAD OF MILLISSA MCGURK

BY PROSPERO LANE

The music stream rasped the rhythms of Reggae as Millissa McGurk moved across the beach club's dance floor, her carefully sculpted shape straining against her white minikini. She swayed with her sexy-walk attachment like an electronic Marilyn Monroe, needing only a simulated subway grate.

Here was Millissa the fun-giver. Millissa who would dominate the dance floor, the Queen-of-the-Prom. The girl who would shed her top and maybe the rest and dance naked and anatomically correct. Millissa with the custom-made shape: the big boobs and JLo ass, the long legs and full lips. She had the expensive wardrobe, hair selection and skin collection, jewelry and the fancy house with the L\$12,000 top-of-the-line SexGen bed.

Chat bubbles blipped. "Hey Millissa." "Hi Sexy." She was greeted by dancers, the club owner and Corky, the table dancer. Millissa seemed to smile at the greetings, the popularity, the raw sexual energy her arrival seemed to generate.

"Hey Millissa," IMed her friend, Trixie, her short brunette hair a counter-point to Millissa's shoulder-length blonde flexi-tresses. "You look so cool!!!!!!!"

"So do you! Is Vinni coming back?" Millissa answered.

"Vinni should be back later. Ceria and Parke will be here, too. Enough for a party. And there's Corky, just for you." Trixie messaged, the cattiness coming through.

Millissa's aggressive pursuit of the slim blond in her modest bikini was a bit of joke in the group, so opposite were the two women—Millissa blatantly sexual and Corky demurely sensual. Corky stayed on the table, and in her bikini, all night. Millissa stayed on the dance floor, and usually out of her clothes, all night. Millissa was cheerfully promiscuous; Corky was unapproachable, cool and sometimes icy. Millissa was Paris Hilton; Corky was Gwyneth Paltrow. Millissa never understood why, by the end of the evening, most of the crowd had gravitated toward Corky, leaving Millissa with one or two friends on

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the dance floor.

Millissa said Corky was classy and selective, and very feminine; Trixie said Corky was a tease. Trixie told Millissa it bothered her to see Millissa chase Corky with so little success, especially when there were so many other available women, like Trixie. Trixie said she didn't believe Corky was really bi-sexual as she claimed. There were too many boyfriends and not many girlfriends. Hadn't Millissa gotten only a cuddle or two from her? The modesty was false, Trixie said, and irritating, even if her profile said, "Ain't Misbehavin'." This was Second Life, the place to shed inhibitions and have new experiences like Millissa did. Trixie said it was obvious Corky's flirting plus ambiguous hints of things to come were frustrating Millissa.

Millissa pouted in the middle of the dance floor. "Well, let's see if it picks up; if not, I'm going someplace else," Millissa IMed to Trixie, although she had no intention of leaving, expecting the club owner would later pay her L\$400 to take off her top, and maybe a bit more for the rest.

"Oh!!! Don't leave, stay here." Trixie's desperation came clearly through on the IM window.

Millissa didn't answer; she started dancing. I muted the computer speakers so my parents couldn't hear. I reached for the telephone and made two calls. I ordered a large double cheese pizza and checked with the video store to see if "300" had come in yet. I left my room, took a leak, grabbed a Pepsi and returned. Millissa was still dancing.

There was an IM from Trixie: "Where did you go?"

Millissa IMed: "telephone."

"Nice to have you back, hun."

Millissa shouted "Woo-Hoo" in chat. She paid L\$50 into Corky's tip jar and IMed: "Love you." Corky IMed back:

"Me too :)." I walked into the kitchen and grabbed the bag of potato chips and another Pepsi. I spread my math homework on the desk in case my mother walked in.

Millissa had one IM waiting, from Vinni, her best friend and fuck-buddy: "Stay at the beach club. We need to talk."

The IM made me restless. Did Vinni plan to ask Millissa to partner? Millissa hoped so. She'd hinted at it enough. In fact, she and Vinni often stayed up all night, partying and making love. Recently, they had begun to do it increasingly frequently in three-ways that usually included Trixie.

Millissa liked Trixie but sometimes wished she would go away. She hung on, even when it was clear Millissa wanted to be alone with Vinni. Vinni was just too polite about it, and even told Millissa once she liked three-ways better than anything.

Millissa stayed on the dance floor but it was getting boring just waiting there, sort of like watching people from a tall building; you see them move but you're not in the action. My attention wandered and I turned on the television and loaded a DVD. Occasionally Millissa would shout a "WooHoo, way to GO!!!!!!!" which I had saved to the clipboard and pasted into the Chat window at intervals.

Vinni finally rezzed. I didn't recognize her at first. Her hair was changed, for one thing; it was Annie Lennox short instead of her usual long black flexis. She hadn't dressed for the beach party, either; she was wearing a black tee-shirt and jeans. I zoomed in the camera. She was slimmer, too; no boobs. Maybe she was debuting a new look. I didn't like it.

A blond newbie rezzed just after her: Jennyfer Volenski. I recognized her. She was with Vinni yesterday. Millissa had hit on her, but got brushed off. I really didn't like that.

Vinni walked over to the edge of the dance floor and started typing. A window opened up in the lower left of my screen. Vinni had set up a group IM.

Trixie stopped dancing.

She IMed: "Pay attention. This will be a shock."

I didn't have time to respond. Vinni started.

"This isn't easy to say. I didn't start out to deceive anybody, but the truth is: I'm a guy. I wanted to tell all my friends personally but I also wanted everyone to hear it from me. I'm sorry if anybody's offended. I needed to get this out at this time because my RL wife has joined SL and we intend to partner and extend our life together to SL."

Then the window flashed: "Vinni Varga has left this session."

I was stunned. I stared at the message. First I was annoyed at being deceived; then I considered my own situation. Finally, a sensation much like fear welled in the pit of my stomach. Millissa continued to dance but I was staring blankly at the screen. Vinni was still standing by the side of the dance floor, typing, obviously sending and answering IMs—but not to me.

Jennyfer stepped up next to Vinni. It was pretty obvious who she was. Trixie was next to Jennyfer. I saw Millissa was now the only one dancing. I stopped her dance animation. Millissa stood alone. I noticed many people had left. The guy who owned the club, some of the other women and most of the men were gone. The music stream had been cut.

Fear of being found out for who I was grew in my gut. What should I do? Voice was a threat but it was months away and there was always voice-changing software. Would Vinni's confession spark suspicion, a witch-hunt? I needed to step very carefully. I didn't want to leave SL; Millissa was my only girlfriend.

"Whatever you are, it doesn't make any

difference to me," Millissa IMed Vinni.

Vinni IMed Millissa back a smiley.

That was it? All those all-nighters, making love for hours; she was really a guy. I'm a guy. I had some trouble with that; yeah, it gave me the creeps. Two guys, deceiving each other, making lesbian love. Millissa deserved more than a smiley!

"I told you it would be a shock," Trixie IMed. "But he carried it off quite well, I think."

"When did you know?"

"Vinni told me last night."

"What!!!!!!!!!!!"

"He IMed me out of the blue. I was very surprised."

"Why didn't you TELL ME?????????"

"He asked me not to tell anyone."

Her calm responses angered me. "Maybe he told you first because you're a guy too," Millissa IMed.

"I don't think he believes that, and it's not true in any case. I'm a woman; a 58-year-old grandmother."

I almost spit out my chips. I'd been having sex with a woman older than my mom? A grandmother? That was gross!

"He's committed to changing his life here," she continued. "I think he told me first because he wanted to try out the words on someone he trusted."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"Nothing against you, hun, but maybe Vinni senses you're not who you appear to be. You may wish to use Vinni's 'fessing up as a springboard to explain your own situation to your friends."

The fear feeling came back and started to spread through my chest. My hands began to shake. "What do you mean? I AM a woman, and I'm an adult. I'm 32 and I live in San Diego."

"All I'm saying is you may wish to think about your situation before Voice and Age

Verification come in. This is for you to decide, but you also have to think about your friends and how much more you will have to explain as time goes on.”

Melissa IMed: “There’s nothing to explain.”

Trixie continued. “Vinni’s honesty set a new standard, a very high one. Think about it. Don’t worry, I won’t tell on you.”

“There’s nothing to tell on. Besides if you think I’m a guy or underage, why do you always want to make love to me?”

She IMed: “This is Second Life. Melissa and Trixie are what they are. You take life for what it appears to be and learn to be satisfied with it. You’ll learn that some day.”

“Just one question. Why do you think I’m a guy, or underage? Not that I am.”

“Men playing women, with a few exceptions, act like they would like a woman to act, not how a woman actually acts: fantasy versus reality, the usual Second Life conundrum. Look at Millissa. Really, she’s a cartoon woman, a caricature, a teenager’s wet... well, you know what I mean. You’re not very discreet and certainly not very feminine.”

I couldn’t answer. I stared at the screen for a few seconds and moved the cursor up to log off.

An IM from Corky flashed up. “It’s time. Why don’t we do it tomorrow?”



A PERFECT LIFE

BY DARYN WRITER

Monarch Bay (215, 81, 28)

When only the best will do...

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“It’s going to be a perfect life!” Joanne said happily to Red. “I’m going to make it perfect.” Joanne held up her hand to admire the ring once again. It sparkled upon her finger. In fact, she had set the bling so high that it cast a blue-white light upon anything nearby. She was determined there would be no mistakes; anyone who met her would know that here was a married woman. There was an almost identical ring, sans bling, on the same finger of her real life body, back in the small, ancient apartment they had moved into the day before.

Joanne smiled in satisfaction as she glanced around their new SL home, a double storey beach house with an extensive wooden deck that stood proudly on its stumps over rich, white sands. The side facing the sea was walled in glass, the other three walls and the roof were maple. Double doors opened outwards onto the deck, like arms stretched wide, inviting anyone to enter the large room within. It was so new that the primms had barely had time to rez before she and Red had dived into it.

Their house was an empty shell, ready to be filled.

Joanne was the woman who was going to fill it. She considered the packing cases piled on the floor, all dusty, made of cheap, knotted wood. She was trawling through them, looking for household goods. Red had brought the packing cases home from the junkyards. She sighed. Her newly minted husband had not been particularly discriminating when he’d picked them up; he’d simply swept through the yards, grabbing everything in sight. It was impossible to tell from the outside what any contained; Joanne had emptied a tractor and a combine harvester out of the last box. She would have settled for a bedside table.

Joanne crossed her fingers, picked another box, and looked in the contents.

“It says ‘lamp.’ Wonder what type of lamp?” Joanne puzzled.

Red said, “Your guess is good as mine, honey.”

We need a lamp behind the sofa, Joanne thought to herself, one that cast enough light so Red could sit and read at night. She would place pose balls so she could

A PERFECT LIFE
 BY JACK LEBEVRE

put her arms about him and rest her head on his shoulder. They would listen to the waves wash in their gentle, persistent rhythm against the sand. The wind outside would sing to them, and they would be comfortable in the home they had made. It was what she wanted for them both, a place to be quiet, together.

She dragged the lamp onto the ground.

Sitting before her was a small object, no higher than her ankles. The body of the lamp was rounded and squat, like a sphere that had been pushed downwards. There was a handle on one side; on the other, a spout. It looked like it was made of bronze or tin, but tarnished with dark splotches. A thin wisp of smoke began to curl up from the spout.

“That’s not what I expected,” Joanne commented. “That’s a lamp? It looks more like a teapot.”

Red had been placing a dark brown, wooden coffee table in front of the cream sofa. They were the only items they’d found so far for this room. He ambled over to Joanne’s find, and inspected it from

every angle. “Lamps used to look like that. Whoever made it wanted it to look real old.” He dragged the lamp onto the coffee table.

They stood back and watched it. It sat there innocently and did nothing.

“What do you think?” Joanne asked, in a tone of voice that clearly implied she knew the right answer, and the answer didn’t bode well for the lamp.

Red surprised her by saying, “It looks sort of cool. Like an antique.”

“You like it?” she exclaimed.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I do.”

Joanne considered. “Oh, leave it there then,” she said. “At least it’s something to fill the house.”

The lamp remained on the coffee table, unremarked, until the day Joanne was rearranging furniture. Red was relaxing on the sofa, reading (without a lamp).

Joanne, intending to drag the lamp, accidentally right-clicked it instead. An option appeared. It said, RUB.



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BY JACK LEBEVRE

She hesitated. Joanne didn't remember seeing that before, but then, she realized, they hadn't thought before to check if the lamp did anything. Joanne, curious, rubbed the lamp.

Instantly, a cloud of smoke erupted from the spout of the lamp, almost filling the lounge room. A thunderclap burst, hurting their ears.

Red was so surprised he jumped up. The smoke thickened, to the point that his vision was nothing but a hazy grey murk. It's lucky avatars don't breathe, Red thought to himself, or we'd both be coughing our virtual lungs out. Then another thought struck him.

"Are you okay Jo?" he asked his wife.

Her voice shook a trifle. "Yes, I'm okay honey, but what's happening?"

Joanne and Red watched in astonishment as the hazy grey smoke slowly shrank and coalesced.

"I am the Genie of the Lamp!" a voice boomed in a resonating bass. Floating in the air before them was a huge man with dark olive skin, only partially covered by an open red vest that displayed his massive chest, and white harem pants. A turban of green silk hid his hair, with a red gem set in the middle. The goatee that adorned his chin, and his thick eyebrows, were midnight black. His well-muscled arms were crossed. His nose was long and thin, perfect for looking down, which he did with unblinking eyes of dark brown. His lips were full and, at the moment, impassive.

"Cool!" Red said. "What a great effect!" Red inspected the Genie carefully, swiveling his camera all around. "He looks very realistic. Whoever scripted him did a good job."

"I am the Genie of the Lamp," the booming voice repeated. When he spoke they could see he had perfect, white teeth. "You have released me, O Master and Mistress. Your reward is two wishes."

"Marvelous AI," Red muttered to Jo. He turned back to the Genie. "Two wishes? I thought there were always three?" Red played along with the joke.

The Genie winced. "Normally there are, Master. But there was a problem at Linden Labs. Something went wrong during an update and..." The Genie shrugged helplessly.

"Ahh," Red said. "We understand. Don't worry Genie, everyone knows about the Lindens. It's not your fault."

"The Genie of the Lamp thanks you for your understanding. The Master and Mistress have two wishes. What is your first?"

Joanne and Red looked at each other. "There isn't really anything more we want," Red ventured. "We have each other."

"I have an idea," Jo said.

"Yes?" said Red.

"I want our life in SL to be just as perfect as our life in RL," Joanne declared. "Just the same. We are gloriously happy together."

"This is your wish?" the Genie asked.

"It is."

"Then it shall be so." The Genie disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Jo and Red looked at each other. "That was weird," Red said at last.

"Wasn't it?" Jo agreed.

The lamp sat on the coffee table, looking somehow less innocent than it had before.

Jo hesitated. "Should we...?"

"Rub it again?" Red finished for her. "Ummm...no."

"Well, back to work then." She sounded relieved.

Next morning, when they logged into SL, they were surprised to see a new addition.

"Honey, did you create a bathroom last

A PERFECT LIFE
 BY JACK LEBEVRE

night?" Joanne asked.

"No, why would I do that?"

"Well, we have one now."

Red viewed the house. Sure enough, attached to the side of the lounge was something that looked suspiciously like a bathroom. The extra room was walled in the same maple as the rest of the house; the roof had been altered to cover the addition. No one would ever guess it hadn't been there yesterday.

Red walked inside. "Hey! There's a toilet in here!" The bathroom was small but, apparently, functional. It was covered in pale yellow tiles. A hand basin was attached to the wall. Sitting in pride of place was a white toilet bowl, complete with seat, cistern, and a silver button to flush. Jo and Red stared at the toilet. It seemed to stare back at them.

"Are you sure you didn't build this, Red?" Joanne asked suspiciously.

"Positive, but we may as well let it stay. Might come in useful."

"Honey, we're avatars. We don't need a

toilet!"

"We don't? But I have those dangly bits between my legs and you have..."

"I don't care!" Jo shouted. "Get rid of it!"

"Okay, okay." Red tried to click on the toilet to remove it, but try as he might nothing happened.

"I can't seem to select it," he said. "Not sure why."

"Try editing it."

Red right-clicked to edit. "Nope. Can't edit either. Maybe it's not an object?"

"Then how did it get here?"

"Don't ask me!" He paused. "Jo, between your legs, look down."

Jo looked down. In horror, she saw something beginning to trickle down. "No! It can't be!"

"I think it is, honey."

"Why is this happening? What's going on?" Joanne thought desperately. There was only one thing to do. She right-clicked the toilet and selected SIT. Her avatar shifted



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location. Suddenly a stream of liquid poured down.

“Phew, that was close!”

Joanne was not a happy girl. She ranted, to no effect. She threatened to sue the Lindens, but the lawyer she spoke to at the SL law firm thought she was crazy. She tried throwing the china, but somehow drag and drop in SL didn’t have the same cathartic effect as throwing it did in RL.

“There’s only one explanation,” Red said, after Joanne had recovered her composure. “Jo, it must be the Genie who did this. When you said you wanted everything as perfect as it is in RL, that means everything in our RL lives has come to SL. Honey, was that a good idea?”

Joanne asked, in a somewhat strained tone, “Are you suggesting I made a mistake?”

Red sensed approaching danger. “No! That is...errr...the answer is easy, honey. Call back the Genie and remove your wish.”

“No,” Joanne said firmly.

“No?”

“No. Red, don’t we have the perfect life

together in RL?”

“Errr...yes?” Red said, giving the only answer compatible with matrimonial harmony.

“Well then, it follows that overall, the changes the Genie made must make our SL life better, doesn’t it? After all, SL can’t be more perfect than RL, can it?”

Red shook his head his slowly.

Joanne gestured at the toilet. “Sure, there are going to be some inconveniences, but the advantages will outweigh them so much, we’ll be gloriously happy!”

Brrnngg–rrnngg. Brrnngg–rrnngg.

“What’s that?” Joanne asked, swiveling her head.

“It sounds like the phone,” Red said.

“We don’t have a phone. Whoever heard of phones in Second Life?”

“I was about to say the same thing. But, you know, honey, it sounds just like our phone back in RL.”

Brrnngg–rrnngg. Brrnngg–rrnngg.

They tried to ignore it, but they couldn’t.



A PERFECT LIFE
 BY JACK LEBEVRE

It was like trying to ignore fingernails on a blackboard.

They eventually found the phone in the kitchen, under a pile of old newspaper that hadn't been there before.

Red picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hi there!" exclaimed a man's voice, bright and happy. "How are you this evening? Have you considered the advantages of life insurance?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you have life insurance, sir? Our company can offer you a deal that will blow your socks off."

"Life insurance for an avatar that can't die? No thank you."

"You cannot die, sir?"

"Avatars don't, you know."

"Then in that case, sir, you are facing a remarkably extended old age. Our medical benefits package will help ease you through the difficulties of those twilight years. None of us are getting any younger, you know! Now, we can offer you some amazing discounts compared to other funds that—"

"No thank you." Red interrupted.

"What was that?"

"I said NO!"

The voice was still spruiking as he put down the receiver.

"Who was that?" Joanne asked.

"Just a telemarketer," Red replied wearily. He walked over to the coffee table and took a close look at the lamp. "Honey, are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Of course I'm sure! Didn't we just agree SL can't be more perfect than RL?"

Jo's logic was impeccable, and the couple settled down to their new, more perfect SL life together.

In the days that followed Jo and Red both became used to using the toilet. It wasn't as if they had any choice. The first warning was a low hiss. If they ignored that, a thin stream appeared. If they ignored that then it gushed. If they were out and about they would have to teleport back home before anyone noticed. It was terribly embarrassing when friends came to visit. They learned the basic rule: go regularly to avoid accidents.

One day, Red called from the kitchen, "Honey, what's all this stuff?"

Joanne walked in. Red stood next to the bench top, which was a mottled, dark grey marble, streaked with white. Scattered across its surface were tiny objects, mostly in whites and browns, none of them moving. They held for Joanne a strange resonance with something she had frequently seen in real life.

"Are those... crumbs?" she asked in wonder.

"Check out the floor," Red said.

There was no mistaking it; lying at her feet was a chocolate wrapper. At the foot of the bench top lay the cut off end of a carrot, next to it some potato peelings. An empty take-away bag was alongside the fridge.

A sudden, horrifying thought struck her. Joanne decided not to look any closer. In real life, garbage often came with one other thing, and she really didn't want to know if there were any cockroaches. She protested. "Avs don't leave rubbish. This can't be happening."

But it was. Jo and Red discovered that, if they did not clean it up, rubbish slowly but surely filled the kitchen. All attempts to delete the rubbish where it lay failed. They found a rubbish bin sitting in the corner. Red dragged the rubbish into the bin, then took the bin outside, where the bin suddenly acquired an EMPTY option on right click. He emptied the bin, then took it back into the

A PERFECT LIFE
BY JACK LEBEVRE

kitchen.

They agreed to take turns emptying the rubbish. One of them would have to do it each night.

As the days went on, the number of household chores they had to complete increased. They woke one day to find grass growing around the sides and back of the house; in fact, everywhere but on the sand. Very long grass. It grew to an amazing height within days, and seeded rapidly. Red had to mow it each week, using the old mower he found parked alongside the house. The mower was once painted red, but much of the paint had scratched off, leaving behind rust. The pull start was dodgy; Red had to yank it over and over before the engine would fire.

While Red was mowing, Joanne took the time to wash their clothes in the washing machine in the laundry. It had appeared on the same day as the lawn mower. If she didn't, the textures on all their clothes turned to dull grays and dirty browns.

They learned to live with it. After all, their SL life was now an exact mirror of their perfect RL life. They were gloriously happy together, when they weren't busy doing chores, that is.

One day Joanne noticed something. She let it go as long as she could, hoping for a change, expecting it, but nothing improved. Eventually she couldn't stand it any longer. "Red, why do you always leave the toilet seat up?" Jo asked.

"I don't."

"Yes, you do. Whenever I go to the toilet, the seat is up."

"It's not me doing it. I swear, honey."

"Then it must be the fairies, because I'm not doing it."

Now that Jo thought about it, Red always left the seat up in RL too. Red had always done it, but Jo had never particularly noticed

before. Now it became like a sore thumb to her. She couldn't not notice. Sometimes she even walked into their bathroom to see if the seat was up or down, not only in SL, but in their RL home too. It was always up.

Jo and Red had their first SL argument. It was over the toilet seat.

Red, meanwhile, was becoming increasingly irritable about taking out the garbage. It seemed to him it was his turn more times than probability suggested likely. He hinted to Jo she might like to take her turns.

Jo replied he might like to wash the clothes. Red pointed out there was grass to be mown.

Jo and Red had their second SL argument. It was over taking out the garbage.

It's very hard for two people living in the same house in two different lives not to talk to each other, even pretend not to notice the other exists. Jo and Red managed to achieve this feat for two whole days. During that time the rubbish piled up in the kitchen, the clothes got dirty and the grass began to edge past the window sills.

Brrnngg—rrnngg. Brrnngg—rrnngg.

Joanne picked it up.

"Yes?"

"Good morning!" said a sunny, cheerful woman's voice. "We'd like you to take a few minutes to answer this simple survey—"

"Oh, go away!" She slammed down the receiver.

Joanne burst into tears. "Oh Red, this is all my fault! I should never have tried to make our SL lives like RL. It's just made both of them worse."

"There's only one thing to do," Red said.

Joanne nodded. "You're right." She turned to the lamp, and selected RUB.

Once again the thunderclap sounded,

A PERFECT LIFE
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and hazy grey smoke filled the room. As it cleared, the Genie became visible.

“I am the Genie of the Lamp!”

“Yes, we know. We have one wish remaining, right?” Red said.

“What is your will, O Master and Mistress?”

“Put everything back the way it was. We don’t want our SL lives to be the same as RL.”

“The Master wishes me to return everything to the way it was before the first wish?”

“That’s right. The first wish is cancelled.”

“Very wel—”

“Wait!” Jo shouted.

The Genie halted in mid-wish. “The Mistress commands?”

Joanne turned to Red. “Honey, if he sets everything back, he might set us back too. We might not remember anything that’s happened in the last weeks. We might not remember anyone we met or what we said. And what about the work we’ve done on our avs?”

“Could he do that?”

They both looked uneasily at the Genie. He smiled back blandly.

“Maybe you’re right,” Red muttered. “Okay, how do we phrase this?”

“I have an idea.” Joanne turned to the Genie. “All the inconveniences of RL are to disappear from SL, but the people are to be left alone. Do you hear me?”

“The Genie hears and obeys O Mistress. But... the Genie must ask, people change over time, do they not?”

Joanne saw the trap immediately. “Oh no! You aren’t going to age us. At the rate time runs in SL, we’ll both be old and grey within months. We all stay the same age we are this year, and I don’t want any strangers

calling or visiting or living in our SL house. Got it?”

“The Genie hears, and obeys, O Mistress. All the inconveniences of RL are to be removed. All the people of your house are to be, and remain forever, as they will be in this year?” the Genie confirmed.

“Right.”

“This is your second and final wish. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I’m sure,” Jo said firmly. “What do you think, Red?”

Red thought about it. “I can’t see any holes. Go ahead, Genie.”

“Very well.”

The Genie disappeared, leaving behind a puff of smoke. As the smoke cleared, Jo and Red saw the lamp. It was glowing red. The lamp slowly faded into the background. It was gone.

Jo and Red looked at each other. Their avs were unchanged.

“I’ll check,” Red said. He ran to the bathroom. “No toilet!” he shouted. “In fact, no bathroom. Hooray!”

Jo called from the kitchen. “The garbage bin has disappeared! So has the phone!”

“No grass to mow!”

“No washing machine!”

Jo and Red met in the lounge room and danced for joy. “We’re free!” They danced and danced until something interrupted them. Jo looked at Red. Red looked at Jo.

“What’s that noise?”

Upstairs, a baby was crying.



GALLAND HOMES

Photo taken by Adella Fionella

Come Home to Luxury

message from our sponsor

CZESTATE Kau Lei (166,127,23)

BLACK BETRAYAL, PART II

BY PROSPERO LANE

Synopsis: Ming, an American of Chinese descent, recently broke up with her fiancé after he revealed his prejudice against Asian people. In Second Life, where her avatar is blond and blue-eyed, she literally found a knight in shining armor in Kip. She and Kip hung out in Heaven, chatting and laughing and doing a little building. Their relationship was platonic until...

...until I woke up, and the giant baby statue and great palace in the sky vanished into my ringing alarm clock. I sat up, disoriented. Slowly, I turned my head from one side to the other, stretching my stiff neck muscles. My mind began to clear. Kip and I built, but not a palace. Certainly not a baby! With stunning awareness, I realized I wanted more of Kip: more building, more conversation, more intimacy. I tossed aside the bed sheet

and swung my feet to the cool wood floor, eager to get through a day at work and back to Second Life.

That evening, Kip TPed me to Heaven, just as he'd done dozens of times before. But this time, when I rezzed, I found myself facing him in a large, classical-style open pavilion I hadn't seen before. There was a terrazzo floor laid on the clouds. It stretched maybe 30 meters wide and I guess 40 meters back. In the center was a gushing fountain with a statue of Aphrodite in the middle. Around the sides of the structure stood Corinthian columns 20 meters high. The effect was one of grace and majesty. "Oh Kip," I said. "Did you build this?"

"This is for you," he said. His visor was down, but I was sure I could see a

smile underneath all that metal.

“You did this for me!”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have too. I knew. At that moment I would have done anything for him.

“I love you, Kip.” I said. I put on my Hug-Kiss attachment. “Lift your visor so I can kiss you.”

Here I should tell you a bit about my personal life, so you’ll understand what happened. I don’t know why, but I seem to attract the wrong kinds of guys. They fall into one of two categories: the ones who want an exotic trophy to brag about at the bar, and the ones who want to show how liberal they are by dating a member of a certified but safe minority group. I want to shout at them: Hey! Guys! I was born here. I’m about as exotic as a Coke can. My name is Alice. Alice Ming. You really want to show how open-minded you are? Go date Vanessa Williams!

Kip was different. He was open, funny, talented, intelligent and honest.

“Like me, like my armor,” he said. He wore that suit of armor day and night, or at least when I was around. I asked him once if he would ever take it off.

“When I want to show you my lance,” he replied. I shivered with excitement.

He said you could be anything you wanted in Second Life. In SL, nothing in your real life mattered: gender, race, height. What mattered was who you were inside.

“SL is different than RL that way,” he said.

“No, you’re wrong, darling,” I replied. “SL is better than RL.”

After all the losers I dated in RL,

here was the virtual man of my dreams, Sir Lancelot of the clouds, Sir Galahad of the pixels. He was my Kip, engaging, open, accepting of me as I was.

Or who I seemed to be. I hadn’t really come to grips with the relationship between Alice Ming in RL and Belle Thompson in SL. In hindsight, I now understand I heard from Kip what I wanted to hear. It took a real shock to remove my blinders. But we’re not there yet.

Kip and Belle spent hours in Heaven, exploring, sitting on clouds, chatting. We talked about SL, life and building. Kip wasn’t particularly forthcoming about himself, but I preferred it that way; I was determined to maintain a strict boundary between SL and RL. I wanted to shield the fairy princess Belle from the so-called life of Alice Ming. I wanted Belle to ride forever on a cloud in Heaven, her knight in shining armor Kip beside her, not commute every morning in a seven-year-old Toyota Corolla across the George Washington Bridge in a cloud of exhaust gases like Alice did.

One thing was puzzling; Kip never moved on me. I’m not saying I wanted one of those jerks who IM: “hi. wanna do it?” But I’m not Sister Mary Immaculata, either. Aside from a few suggestive remarks, I didn’t seem to be raising much interest. I wanted to keep the RL-SL boundary, but I wasn’t thinking of the Berlin Wall.

“Aren’t you interested in me?” I asked him one day.

“Interested? Sure. You’re good to talk to, you like things I like. Of course I’m interested. Why do you ask?”

“Because you don’t seem interested in me as a woman. You never lift your visor and let me in,” I IMed. “I mean, I’m not asking for it or anything.” But of course I was.

“Maybe one day I’ll surprise you,” he said. I smiled.

The trouble was the boundary

between SL and RL was thinning, and I didn't know how to deal with that.

Kip still hadn't raised his visor. Instead, he spoke. "Type '/I show' in chat."

When I did, more pose ball sets rezzed than I had ever seen in one place. There must have been thirty or forty of them spread across the terrazzo floor. They came in sets of all color combos: blue-red, pink-pink, blue-blue-red, blue-blue, green-green. My whole body tingled, yet the blatancy of it, the lack of privacy, bothered me. The pavilion at that moment seemed tawdry.

"My brother put the pose balls in. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Your brother?" I asked. Kip had mentioned a brother once; he said his brother was dead. I noticed goosebumps coming up on my bare arms.

"Yes. Didn't I tell you about him?"

"Um, you told me you had a brother... before..." If the chat bubble could speak, it would be saying "Ah, ah..."

"Oh. Sorry. This is my other brother." He said nothing more, just stood and looked at me. Then he raised his visor!

I quickly, nervously zoomed in the camera. I expected a square-jawed hero from Marvel Comics; Captain America meets Superman. What looked back at me was a face from Orientation Island, the new-account "Boy-Next-Door" with the blank eyes, sallow skin and painted-on hair. My arousal level went a bit south. I was still eager to sample the pose ball collection, but some doubts whispered in my mind.

I was an SL virgin; I'd never had virtual sex before. I'd never even been naked in SL with a guy, or a woman for that matter. I wanted Kip to be the first,

but maybe not here. I had pictured a silk-draped four-poster bed, not a stone floor out in the open. And where did that brother come from? We'd been together for months, and he'd never mentioned another brother. What else didn't I know about him? Still, I didn't want to make him feel bad by turning him down. He wasn't asking me to have real sex, after all. It's only a game. The avatars aren't real. The sex isn't real. So what if someone walks in?

Then I looked at my knight and felt an animal thrill at his interest. It pushed me over the boundary. I squirmed in my chair. My cheeks flushed. I squeezed the mouse. This was it.

I took off my shoes and sexy-walked onto the pavilion, checking the labels floating above the ball sets. I found a traditional blue-pink combination, then turned toward Kip and clicked off my tank top. Then my capris. Then my décolleté bra. Finally, my white lace bikini underwear. I stood there next to the pair of pose balls, my realistic skin and trim shape revealed, waiting for him to come to me.

But he didn't. He didn't move at all. He stood as still as a suit of armor in a creepy old castle.

The pose balls suddenly vanished; he'd typed "/I hide."

There I was, nude in a sea of vaporized pose balls, alone with the Tin Man. After the initial shock, I felt a wave of muddled emotions: humiliation, confusion, fear, anger, apprehension.

"What's the matter, Kip?" I managed to type.

"That's not what I had in mind—at least not yet."

"OMG! Why did you bring me here, then?"

"I just wanted to show you," he typed back with rapid-fire IMs. "I thought

you'd find the build interesting. I didn't expect you to...

"It's just not the right time.

"You're not...

"I respect you too much."

This was the real shock that removed my blinders. If avatars could cry, Belle would have; Ming did. The boundary had broken like a New Orleans levee because I had weakened it. And when a guy says to a girl, "I respect you too much," what he's really saying is a 10-foot pole is too short. Tears actually dripped on my keyboard. Hastily, I scurried off the pavilion, stopping some distance from Kip.

"Let's go back to our cloud," he said, as he lowered his visor. "We can talk about this when we get there."

"I don't think so." I found myself typing on autopilot. "Let's talk tomorrow. Or whenever you're on again. I'm tired now. I shouldn't have logged on in the first place."

"Okay, c u." His matter-of-fact reply made me feel angry—and hurt.

I didn't log off right away. I teleported down to my secret beach and sat on the white sand and stared at the wave simulation and cried.

After the tears stopped, I tried to figure out what had happened. I'd thrown myself at Kip, offered Belle to him—something I would never do in real life—and he made me feel like a used paper towel. Didn't knights have the equipment? Sir Lancelot certainly did. Couldn't Kip have welded a funnel to his suit of armor? Belle was staring into the sea; Ming was wiping the tears from her face. Belle was staring into the sea; Ming was humiliated. Belle was staring into the sea; Ming was angry. The boundary had snapped and Ming now realized what that meant.

"Hi. How are you?" I heard suddenly through my headphones. I moved my mouse around quickly. So few people used voice that it was startling to hear it. It couldn't be Kip; he refused to use voice, said it detracted from the game.



INFOTAINMENT ISLAND (50, 28, 31)

BLACK BETRAYAL, PART II
BY PROSPERO LANE

“My name’s Reyno,” the visitor continued. My camera settled on a typical blond-haired hunk in surfer shorts with a bulging crotch. He had a West Coast accent with a quality I couldn’t place. His name bubble said: “SL Party Animal: Reyno Rabbit.”

“I’m Belle,” I said obviously, without enthusiasm. My voice was hoarse from sobbing and sounded rough through the microphone.

Reyno backed up a bit. “Do you know you have no clothes on?” he said, with a grin in his intonation. He was using a cheap headset and his words were staticky and distorted. “Should I turn my back?”

I was in mouselook, and had forgotten I was still naked. “Don’t bother,” I said distractedly. I rummaged through my chaotic inventory and found a bikini, which I put on.

“Much better,” he said. “It’s difficult to have a conversation with a naked woman, even if she is an avatar, that doesn’t include the word ‘bed’; and since there’s usually no bed on a beach, we’d

have nothing to talk about.”

His eyes seemed almost to twinkle. I wondered if he was laughing at me or was just one of those rare good-humored people you can find in SL if you try hard enough. But I was still feeling too low to care. I kept staring at the waves.

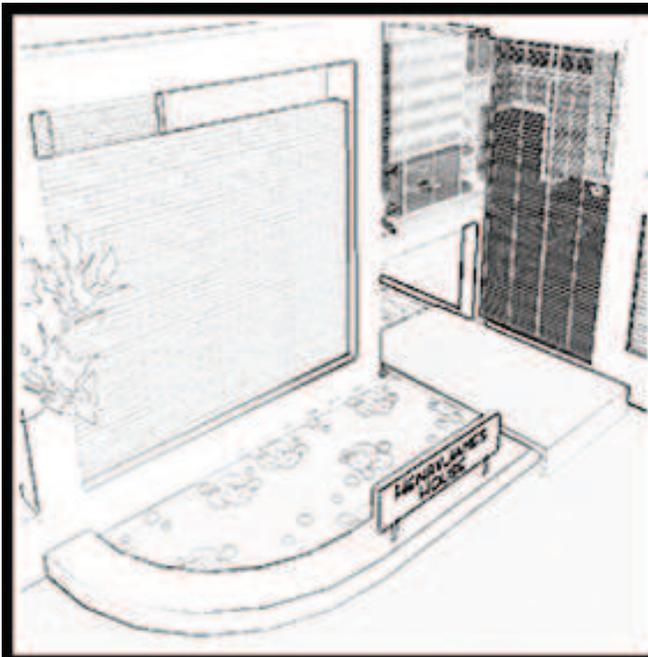
“I wish Chínséuiw n was as clean,” he said, using the lilting tones of a Cantonese speaker. I turned and looked at him in sudden recognition. I don’t know much Cantonese, but I do know the Chinese name for Repulse Bay, Hong Kong’s most popular beach, famous for its floating litter and oily water from its hundreds of suntan-lotioned swimmers.

I zoomed in my camera on his face. “Where are you from?” I asked, curious.

“California. And you?”

“Illinois. But how do you know Cantonese?”

“My folks were from Hong Kong. I was born there, but I came to the States when I was three. Some Chinese I am, huh? A blond, blue-eyed Chinese surfer guy. But



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INFOTAINMENT ISLAND (50, 28, 31)

that's SL. You never know who's who here.

I didn't know if I liked Reyno or not. He seemed a little off, but his voice was enthusiastic and honest.

"You doin' anything?" he said suddenly. "Wanna go sightseeing?"

"Huh?"

"Sightseeing, you know, looking at stuff. There's lots of stuff here besides beaches. Ever see Bliss Gardens? Or the Oil Rig? Gotham City? The Trailer Park? There's lots of things to see. I try to visit one place a day. Yesterday I was in this huge castle that was totally empty; it had a flashing dance floor, sauna, one of those pipe organs and stairs and turrets all over the place. Somebody told me it was built by this nightclub owner who abandoned SL but left her club and castle standing. Put on some exploring clothes and let's go! C'mon. I'll TP a friend when we get there. I think you'll like her."

"There?"

"The castle. Let's go!"

I couldn't resist the enthusiasm and sense of fun in his voice. I hadn't done much exploring. I went to the same two or three nightclubs, hung around sandboxes a lot and, of course, went to Heaven. My own place was a 512 with a library cabin on it. I used it mainly as a start location.

I put on a pair of jeans, a short top and "leeboks", and was ready when the TP came: "Join me in Juney's Mirageland." When I landed, I was in the middle of a huge room made of massive stone blocks. Spooky lighting came through stained glass windows with Gothic tracery. To my left was a big flashing dance floor illuminated by searchlights. A dance ball hung above it. Against the near wall was a bar; against the far wall was a large pipe organ. Corridors ran off in every direction.

Reyno was standing by a corridor near the pipe organ. As I walked toward him, another avatar came in for a landing, almost on top of Reyno. Her name bubble said "Sexy Escort Starburst Vavoom."

She had long black flexi-hair, an L\$4,000 skin, tight mini-shorts that showed most of her butt, and a skimpy top cut so low there wasn't much point in wearing it. Her custom shape was voluptuous; she made Belle look like a tomboy. I hated her immediately.

"Hey, Belle, I'm Starburst. I'm a friend of Rey's, but I guess you've figured that out." Her voice came through clearly. It had a little girl quality I found annoying.

"Let's look at the castle," Reyno said, and he loped up the stairs leading to one of the lower battlements. Starburst followed. I brought up the rear, Starburst's wiggling bottom in my face. Unexpectedly, she IMed: "Did Rey tell u he's Chinese?"

I IMed back: "yes."

We reached the battlement. Reyno was already on his way to the next level.

"I'm not prejudiced or anything, but I hear Chinese guys have really small ones, except in SL, of course. Rey's okay," she IMed. I almost gagged. I got rejected by my knight in shining armor, I was naked on a beach when this nice guy walked by and now I was spending the afternoon with a female Larry, my bigoted ex-fiancé.

Another unwanted IM. "i hear black guys have really big ones. Ive nvr done it with a black guy; don't kno any. Do u?"

"lol" I responded without feeling any humor.

We reached the second battlement. At this height there was no view, but Reyno's enthusiasm was still bubbling over. "Look at this work, look at the detail. This is just great. Did you know Juney owns all this? She and her partner, Essie, built everything. That's amazing. Amazing."

As a builder, I could appreciate what he said, but I was still distracted and, frankly, Starburst was a nuisance. I happened to have experience that proved to me both her theories were wrong.

A wisp of cloud drifted closely by.

BLACK BETRAYAL, PART II
BY PROSPERO LANE

“This reminds me of Heaven,” I said.

“Heaven! Do you know Heaven? Then you must know Kippie!” exclaimed Starburst.

“Yes, I do. And you know him too?” I couldn’t see my sensitive, witty, intelligent Kip with this bubblehead.

“Oh yes, sweetie, do I know Kippie! Did he take you to that neat pose ball pavilion?”

“Yes,” I said warily, sensing I would not like her response. I was so sadly correct.

“How many balls did you use?” she asked. There was a slight laugh in her voice. “Our record was twelve in one session. I don’t know how he did it; I was exhausted by number eight.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to think. Kip would do it with Starburst Bimbo but not me? And do it multiple times in multiple sessions? I started to cry again.

“I have to go,” I said. I logged off.

I stayed off for three days. On the second day, the IMs started to hit my email inbox.

Kip: “Where r u?”

Reyno: “where did you go?”

Kip: “come to heaven”

Kip: “come back”

Kip: “I’ll explain”

Reyno: “I kno a better place.”

Starburst: “Hey, sweetie. Let’s get together.”

Kip: “?????”

Reyno: “??”

Starburst: “:))))”

On the third day, boundary

repaired with a big, knobby knot, I logged back on. There were two pieces of inventory waiting: a red rose from Kip and a landmark from Starburst to some place called ‘Alice B. Toklas Memorial Park.’ I didn’t need too much imagination to figure out the activities in a location named after one of the most famous lesbians in history.

I wasn’t logged on more than five minutes when I got a TP from Kip: “Join me in Heaven.” Then I received another TP, this one from a friend, a builder who invited me to join him in a sandbox. Starburst was next in the queue, with an IM I ignored. Finally, Reyno sent me a TP to a place called ‘Rambler County, Texas.’ I went to Heaven.

I expected to land on our cloud. Instead, I touched down in the pose ball place. The whole scene took a long time to rez. As the pieces began to come together, I saw Kip. I moved the camera around to make sure I was seeing him correctly, or in fact whether it was Kip at all.

He was standing in the middle of the pavilion, in front of that pose ball set I’d chosen. Kip had taken off his suit of armor; he was no longer my shining knight. He was naked, with a huge erection projecting from his avatar.

It was not what I expected. The first thing I noticed—the first thing anybody would notice—was Kip’s penis. It was bright pink. It didn’t match his flat newbie skin; it looked like an orgy room freebie. I don’t mean to be gross, but I thought: Couldn’t he have gotten a better thingee? It also was off-center and made me giggle mirthlessly. Then I noticed the Boy-Next-Door shape, consistent with the face I’d seen last time. He looked like he didn’t take the time to try to please me with his appearance.

I closed my eyes to get my bearings. It’s only a game, I said to myself. He’s not real. The sex is not real. Take a breath.

I took a breath. I opened my eyes. Then I typed, “Kip, what ARE you doing?”

“What you want.”

“Not like this,” I typed. “Not here. I’m not Starburst Bimbo. I’m not getting into a contest.”

“Life is a contest,” he IMed. “And I’m not comparing you with Starry—you’re going to be better.”

“You mean we’ll do thirteen sets instead of twelve,” I IMed, the bitterness and disappointment dripping into my typing.

Kip’s pitiful pink penis disappeared and his armor reappeared. It was shiny and bright, but at that moment I thought it should be black. I set the sun to midnight.

“Let’s go back to our cloud,” he said. We walked to the cloud. When we got there, Kip clicked on a cuddle ball. I hesitated, then clicked on it. We nuzzled silently on our cloud for a long time. We were often quiet together, but this time I felt unsettled, uncomfortable.

“Why did you do that?” I IMed

“I was trying to give you what you wanted. You talked about it enough. I was trying to do you a favor.”

Jeez, I thought. A virtual charity fuck. What was the Cantonese word for pathetic? I was too disgusted to be angry.

And there was something else bothering me.

I IMed: “Speaking of pose balls, Kippie, what’s with Starburst Bimbo?”

“Starry? Just some fun. I haven’t seen her for a while. She’s something, isn’t she? Very different than what you’d think at first. And her last name’s Vavoom.”

I don’t know why, but I didn’t believe him and it saddened me.

“Do you look like that when you do the pose ball two-step with Starry?” I typed, my keys dripping with sarcasm and

hurt.

“No,” he IMed back. “I have a different avi for that.”

Well, where was it, I thought, out at the dry cleaners?

“Anyway, Starry’s going out with a guy named Reyno now. I used to think he was gay but I found out he’s just Chinese. Isn’t that funny?”

“Why is it funny?”

“Because here’s this big blond surfer guy who’s really this short Chinese guy,” he typed.

I’m sure this wasn’t the first time Kip had said something imperfect. This was just the first time it reverberated all the way to my heart. It felt like I was back in the living room of Larry’s house, listening to him berate Asians, berate me.

I tasted acid in the back of my throat as my abdominal muscles tensed in anger. My fingers slammed down on the keyboard. “How do you know he’s short? Because he’s Chinese?”

“Of course not,” he replied. “I know he’s short because he told me. Starburst told me he was Chinese and I asked him some stuff.”

The mood had been broken. I stood up. Kip stayed in his cuddle position. He looked unnatural, sitting with his arm around empty air. If I told Kip I was Chinese, what would be his reaction? I didn’t like the way he talked about homosexuals and Chinese—combining two prejudices in a really nasty way. On the other hand, maybe he wasn’t prejudiced, just insensitive. Would I be more comfortable with Reyno? Why was I hiding behind Belle? What was up with Starburst Bimbo? What did I want from SL anyway? Why was I here? It was all so confusing.

“I’m logging off.”

“Okay. But I’d watch that guy Reyno. He’s weird, even for a Chinese.”

BLACK BETRAYAL, PART II
BY PROSPERO LANE

I stayed off the rest of the evening. The next day at work I almost screwed up a \$12 million financing deal at the bank where I work. Luckily my boss spotted my error and fixed it in time. "Be careful," he said softly, and walked away. I hid in my cubicle the rest of the day. I tried to focus on my work, but Second Life was getting in the way.

That night, I went to the SL website and checked my "Friends Online." Some of my builder buddies were on. I hadn't built anything in weeks. I should bring Kip to my favorite sandbox, I thought; he could give us some pointers. Starburst was on, of course; probably bouncing on a pose ball somewhere. I didn't see Kip or Reyno; for now at least, they weren't part of SL.

There was only one IM in email, a message from Starburst sent the previous day: "Hi. There's a beach party at the park tomorrow night your time. Wanna come shake some booty?"

Jeez.

Feeling lost, I logged on. I must've gone in-world the same time Reyno did, because I immediately got a TP from him. I took it. I landed in a trailer park, complete with front yard trash and weed lawns. The builds were fantastic. We went inside one trailer that had a pose ball over the bed. When you clicked it, you jumped up and down on the bed. I loved it and laughed at my keyboard. I would have bounced all night, but Reyno finally got me to leave.

We were walking down the path between the trailers when I said to Reyno, "I'm Chinese, or rather Chinese-American. My grandparents came from Hong Kong."

"I thought so," he said. "A gweilo— it means 'foreign devil', basically a white person—wouldn't know the real name for Repulse Bay. You know, when your grandparents were in Hong Kong, only white people could live in Repulse Bay or use the beach."

"I didn't know that," I said. "They never told me anything about beach restrictions."

He continued. "Bet you didn't know Chinese were barred from immigrating to the US or becoming citizens from 1884 to 1943. Sixty years they kept out the world's oldest civilization while letting in every peasant from Europe who showed up."

"I didn't know that, either," I said. I could sense the anger in his voice, and I must admit it was contagious. He was telling me things that hadn't been in my high school history books.

We reached the end of the path.

A TP popped up from Starburst Bimbo accompanied by an IM: "Party's started!!!!!!!!!"

"I'm happy you told me you're Chinese," Reyno continued. "We Chinese have to stick together. Take that guy Kip, for example. He talks a big thing about how he respects the Chinese and how he doesn't care about race and all that crap. But if you told him you had slant eyes and an Asian nose, and gave him a choice between Starburst and you, who do you think he'd choose?"

Seems he'd already chosen, not even knowing I was Asian. A question flashed into my mind.

"If we are proud Chinese, why are we blue-eyed blonds?"

"Good question," he said. "Maybe blonds have more fun. Maybe we should do something about it. We could do it together. You're pretty hot now. You could be hotter."

I wasn't ready for this conversation, so soon after being rejected by Kip. "I'm going," I said.

"Remember what I said about Kip. Stick with your own." With that, Reyno logged off, leaving me alone.

I was confused. I felt I was being set up to make a choice I didn't want to

make. It didn't seem fair; SL is a game, not a place to have to make hard decisions. I just wanted to have a good time here in a beautiful place, safely separated from RL. And what was I doing? Standing alone in an ugly trailer park. That was going to stop right now. It was early; there was time to repair the boundary between RL and SL, to go somewhere I was wanted, to see something new, to become part of a safe fantasy. I grabbed a glass of RL wine, dressed Belle in a red Brazilian-style bikini—low-cut and no-cut—and clicked Starburst's TP.

As it turned out, Alice B. Toklas Memorial Park was an entire sim. The landing point was in front of a wrought-iron picket gate with a sign: "Real women only! Voice Chat mandatory!" I clicked on the gate and it opened. Down the road was a beach with a lot of women dancing. I IMed Starburst: "I'm here." My doubts and me.

Starburst was spilling out of the briefest of microkinis and waiting for me as I reached the beach. "I'm so glad you came," she chirped. "Let's dance."

Her invitation felt innocuous. I accepted.

It was strange to be on a dance floor with all women, but I got used to it. The music was good and Starburst surprised me. She had everyone in stitches with her funny, witty comments about the partygoers. One of the great things about Voice is you can hear people laugh. I couldn't stop laughing even when she ragged on my bikini. The little girl voice and a perfect sense of timing added to the hilarity. I don't know what she looks like in RL or her name or age, but I wouldn't mind spending an evening with her.

So it was natural to follow her when she stopped dancing and walked through the dunes to a meadow with pose balls sets, all pink-pink, scattered around at discreet distances. She clicked one ball

and I clicked its sister. It was a charged animation in which legs came between legs, and hands stroked hair. Starburst and I switched to private voice chat and she whispered soft, gentle words into my headphones. I found myself clicking on Belle and straying down to the bottom of the pie menu.

I slept well that night. Everything seemed natural: my attraction to Kip and Reyno, even my time with Starburst.

Kip, Reyno and Starburst were all on when I logged on next day; I didn't know who to choose. I decided to wait for the first IM.

Reyno won. He asked for a TP. "I've taken care of what we talked about," he said.

I sent a TP to him, and waited for him to rez. He popped into the air before me, gray at first. I strained to make out his features. They seemed odd. Was he wearing a hat? As he came into view, I realized with horror that Reyno was not a Chinese guy. What plunked down in front of me was an erect, bushy-tailed wolf!

I was in shock. I didn't like furies. It was visceral. They were weird and just bothered me. I didn't want to be around them.

"What the hell did you do?" I shouted at him. The voice dot waves over my head turned bright red. "You look like a fucking freak."

"I'm a furry," he said mildly. "I'm not a blond surfer anymore."

"You're a furry monster!"

"Just a regular furry. Don't you like wolves?"

Why was Reyno doing this to me? I still hadn't sorted out Starburst, my relationship with Kip needed work, most of my builder friends had probably forgotten me. I shook my head and raved. "I don't

BLACK BETRAYAL, PART II
BY PROSPERO LANE

understand why a person would want to be an animal. All this talk about being one with nature is a load of New Age crap. Furrries are ugly, they need therapy, they shouldn't be allowed in real people areas of SL. I'm not prejudiced, but furrries and normal people are so different they should have their own areas. Don't expect me to go anyplace with you while you look like that."

Reyno's tail wagged like the flip of a hand. "What's the matter, Belle?" he said with some irritation. "It's still me."

"It's not you, it's some sort of mutant werebeast. Why couldn't you pick something normal? I liked you a lot, Reyno. You were supposed to be a proud Chinese. What happened?"

"I'm a Chinese wolf. I just want to be a wolf and the only place I can do it is in SL. Besides, what's normal in SL? And look at you. How many Chinese-American girls do you know with blond hair and blue eyes?" As he spoke, his voice became increasingly hard and animated.

"You're a phony, Belle. And considering everything, you shouldn't be talking to me like this, it's hurtful and unfair. I've done nothing to you but be nice to you."

He was right, of course. But was it any more honest to be a furry than a surfer? My emotions were jumbled like the bricks of a building after an earthquake brought it down. I should change Belle, I knew. I knew where to get a Chinese avatar, complete with skin and glossy black hair. But if I changed, what about Kip—and Starburst? Would they still like me?

"You and Kip deserve each other," Reyno added angrily.

"What?" I said with a hint of annoyance.

"You're both phonies. I'll bet you think he built Heaven, that he owns it. Well, Kip's a builder, but he didn't build Heaven, and he doesn't own it. He just goes there when the real owner's away."

I stopped breathing for a moment. It occurred to me for the first time that Kip hadn't actually said he built or owned Heaven. I hadn't ever examined the constructs in Heaven except for those Kip and I built together, so I couldn't counter Reyno's accusation. If Kip didn't own Heaven, who did? And why hadn't Kip told me about it?



TO BE CONTINUED



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BLACK BETRAYAL

PART II

BY MING ZHOU



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message from our sponsor

Kip and I ran into each other on a large expanse of unrezzed gray pixels. Somewhere in the middle of the endless stretch of mainland, both of us lost trying to find something else. But, both of us finding each other—and lag, instead.

“Damn the horrible lag!” Kip air-typed.

I nodded, my taciturn self. The world was largely a single shade of gray, with a few shreds of textures slowly rezzing. Vague, blurry images started clearing up on towering land beacons. Giant floating boxes textured with red and white “FOR SALE” signs spun mesmerizing in the air.

I gazed at a particular box that had a violet-and-black-clad female avatar next to the words, “Sarah Nerd Buys Land.” My eyes moved onto several other floating spinning boxes, as they seem to be the only rezzed prims. I grew dizzy and my RL finger gravitated towards the left arrow key. Blindly, my avatar stumbled and ran against an invisible unrezzed wall, the thump sound effect going off several times before the lag would allow the wall to rez.

I decided to play trapped-fly-against-the-invisible-screen. I slid across unrezzed walls that would suddenly materialize into TRU-textured surfaces a few seconds after my avatar’s collision. Kip followed, lag-walking next to my sliding.

The steady series of thumps gave way to a sudden silence as my avatar fell through the invisible un-rezzed walls. Kip followed. I passed an array of sitballs, and kept on falling, pulled by a gravity-induced lag. I couldn’t stop moving; my avatar kept falling horizontally, lag trying to push me off the grid. Kip IM’ed me, telling me to sit-hack: to camera-zoom over to the sitballs, and click sit. It took a long moment before the sitball pulled my avatar back onto the grid.

A blue dialog box appeared on the top right-hand corner of my screen, asking for permission to animate my avatar. I was about to click, ‘no,’ but the dusty trackball of my ancient mouse swerved to the, ‘yes’ button.

I landed against a gray rectangular prim that spontaneously materialized, textures rezzing into a pink surface with two small white pillow-like torus-prims at one end of it. Kip landed next to me.

Even before his blue and silver armored avatar hit the surface,

he started jumping into an animation, as did I. Though at first jagged, the animation quickly turned into an oscillating motion that appeared almost fluid. The animation cycled through. Kip was on top of me, and then, in a quick flip, I was on top of him. And, back again. Sound effect moans echoed through the virtual air.

Only on SL can you accidentally click “yes” on a blue dialog box and find yourself engaged in surprise prefab sex the moment afterwards—we had collided against some InvisiPrim trigger for a series of sex animations.

We were probably both laughing in RL, as the script cycled us through missionary positions and odd floating-in-the-air positions and other ones where prim collision had our arms slicing through each other’s chests.

“LOL,” we both typed simultaneously. I pressed the “Stand Up” button, and so did Kip. In the awkward instant in suspended motion after the animation, his arms flailed around him in swooping circles, and then he landed on the checkered-floor of the scripted-bed furniture store chance-lag had landed us in. The lag had finally allowed all the beds and hundreds of pose balls around us to load.

“Well, I think that broke the ice,” Kip grinned.

I nodded, smiling, ROFL-ing in RL. It was a hilarious sexident, the rare byproduct of lag that ends in delight.

“You know what? I was just thinking about you, right there when we ran into each other. I wanted to show you the Straylight sim,” Kip said.

I laughed in RL. Kip really wasn’t your ordinary guy—he’s a romantic. A total romantic, even. Rather than clamoring for “more” after a bout of virtual sex, he’d see things as is: it’s just two avatars being controlled by scripted animations, the scripts like fate puppeteering us into motions reminiscent of sex but without the intimacy of autonomy. Although there are plenty of scripted sex machines on SL, the core of romance just wasn’t in them. Rather, they were elsewhere.

Smiling, I answered, “I’d love to see Straylight.”

“Then, let’s go!” He disappeared in a poof of particles, his teleportation AO.

I landed in a sanctuary of deep green softness. A glimmer of brightness rained onto me. Pale golden light streamed through fractal branches growing from ancient gnarled trunks, whose roots bore deep into the moss-lined forest floors. Off

in the distance, bubblegum willow trees loomed, surreal and faded in the sunset. It was beautiful on first sight, lagless, magical. Blessed.

There was a crackle sound that came through my speakers in RL. The tiny white orb above Kip’s head. Cartoonish-green waves emanated from the nimbus, indicating that he was using the new SL voice chat feature. I plugged in my headset.

“... wherefore the two souls stray beneath His Light; their white presence illuminated by straylight.” Kip’s voice was deeper than I had imagined; he sounded innocent, yet there was a pain in his voice, “And he ordained that the world shall be Purged. And when the Great Flood dries, only the Pure shall remain in the Newfound Green World.”

As he finished, he walked towards a beam of light, which made light streaks on his armor, cast shadows on his face. “Belle—” His voice broke into a sob.

“Kip...” The nimbus above my avatar head glowed, as I heard my voice echo in cracked emotion of digital feedback, “Are you all right?”

He was silent for a long moment, and I could imagine his head in RL bending down, as his hands, the RL-equivalent of his SL knight’s mask, covered his eyes.

“Yes,” He said, breaking the silence, “I’m fine, Belle. Sorry... sorry about that.” With a sudden motion, his avatar started walking down the red-brick path at Straylight. I followed.

We walked silently through deep green hanging foliage, gradient lights that lit up the air, an odd circlet of bright colored techno-flowers. Kip’s name disappeared on the active voice list somewhere along the walk before we arrived at the bridge. The brick road was only a few meters in length before stopping at the bridge above the moat of water around the center island. But, the walk felt like an eternity.

I wondered about Kip. About what might be going on in his RL. I remember him saying that his job gave him a lot of think about, but that he believes in it, that “someone has to protect us.” I imagined him dressed in police uniform blue, riding a cop motorcycle, and then I tried visualizing his face in RL. It was a blur, and I couldn’t take the visor off his helmet.

I knew that he loved the color blue, and that he loved the view from his cloud-prim-heavy skybox

heaven. He enjoyed talking about an ideal world, but in vague words. It would be devoid of crime, filled with equality and justice, people would be happy. It's what we all wish for, given all the drama and corruption ubiquitous in the world. It said nothing about him, other than that there was a part of him that was still innocent and believed that such a reality was possible. But, despite all that I knew about him as a person, the facts of his RL were a mystery to me.

I realized that we had paused there, by the bridge for several minutes now. His knight-helmeted avatar head was peering straight across at the botanical island surrounded by a round-river moat. A long stretch of railingless bridgeway stood high on golden stone bricks that formed arches above the ravine.

He held out his hands to me, as a blue dialog box appeared asking if I'd allow a script to animate my avatar. I tried to click "yes," but the dusty old trackball of my ancient mouse swerved to "no." He stood there for another long moment, then turned to cross the bridge. I wanted to say that I'd accidentally clicked "no," but followed him silently. Invisible walls around the edges of the bridge kept me from falling off.

When we got to the other side, he turned left on the path, and I followed him past fantasy vermillion-leaved trees into a forest of light green drooping willows and pale-barked trees. We walked

through the looped path around the small island, entering a darker forest, and then Kip stopped by a leafless tree, covered in winter's snow. It was the only dead tree in a forest of life, with straylight flowing in angles to break the shadows.

Kip sat on a branch and brooded. I stood on the path, and waited out the long silence. Finally, I said, "Kip, this place is beautiful, but somehow, there's a dark memory in it for you... Let's go to a... happier place..."

"Where to?"

I really wasn't much of an explorer on SL. I went with the first thing I thought of—off the top of my head, "Hmmm... Parachuting, maybe?"

"TP me."

I searched in my inventory for landmarks labeled, "parachuting." After some lag, a LM loaded, and I selected Teleport.

The scenery around me changed object-by-object. The fantasy-realistic trees of Straylight were replaced by the hand-drawn Heart palm trees, the deep green mossy terrain texture replaced by a sandy paleness, with crashing waves ebbing over its edges.

I walked over to a wooden tiki house covering a parachute boarding car. I sent a TP to Kip, then boarded one of the two metal chairs.

Kip arrived in a spray of particles, his

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message from our sponsor

teleportation AO. He clicked sit on the other chair immediately. The platform immediately rose up 600 meters in the air.

“Ready to jump?” I typed in chat.

“No... I don't have a parachute.” The nimbus above his head echoed, as he jumped into voice chat. There was a faint trace of fear in his voice.

I searched my inventory for a parachute, and gave him a copy, “Now you do. ;-)”

A beeping sound effect went off from the platform, which rezzed a red glow spurting out script-text, “Platform to disappear in twenty seconds. Passengers, please put on your parachutes now.”

Static came from Kip, then, “Belle... I need to tell you something. I... I'm afraid of—”

The platform de-rezzed, and all of a sudden we were falling.

A roaring-winds sound effect went off from the parachute HUD.

“Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” I whooped into my headset.

Kip screamed, as he fell.

“Don't worry, the parachute will open automatically!” I yelled back.

Kip didn't stop screaming.

The default gray of the sky faded into a pale

blue, and then into the dark blue of endless stretches of ocean around the island. The dark green waterfall-mountain on the center of the island materialized. The pale yellow of the island sand appeared, then gave way to dots of brown and green. Green dots grew bigger, stretching into stars, and then into palm trees. The fall seem to go faster and faster.

The parachute failed to open.

We both plopped in the ocean, two avatar-stones fallen from above. An instant later, our parachutes opened, floating above the ocean surface, as we hovered beneath the waves.

I laughed, truly delighted, even finding the effect of the lag hilarious. “Kip, so, what were you about to say?”

The voice chat nimbus echoed on his head, as he laughed, “I'm afraid of heights.”

“Me too!” I laughed, “But, not on SL!”

It was true. In RL, I usually held to a rationality behind my fear. My fear of heights was actually my fear of falling splat on the ground—or a more gory episode. It was the type of end of myself I'd rather not take...

But on SL, even if the region were Health-enabled, “death” would only result in being booted from the sim.

Kip was still laughing, “This is great! For



a moment, I almost forgot that we were falling virtually. The roar of the winds, and the Windlight skies---whoooooooooo!"

I smiled, not mentioning that my old writer's computer did not have the features to enable Windlight. I wondered how different his view was from mine.

He sent me a snapshot, and I almost gasped at the view from his screen. His oceans were reflective, and the skies filled with cumulus clouds that swirled magically real.

I camera zoomed to see his shining knight-in-armor avatar floating in the waters, against the background of the waterfall on the center of the island. My screen showed a gray-blue sky over dark blue waters, a flat-looking background. The view from the eyes of a computer that should have gone to the junkyard dozens of Internet years ago.

"You know what? I think SL just might help me lose my fear of heights—let's try this again!" Kip chirped.

We flew back to the platform, boarded the chairs, and the platform rose up again. The platform gave its countdown to de-rez, and we were off and falling again.

"Whoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!" Kip

yelled.

I laughed, happy at seeing Kip going wild for once.

This time, the parachute opened about 100 meters above the ocean. I gazed up at the giant white tarp of a parachute above me, and at Kip's. We were circling down in a scripted animation, but I tried imagining the realism Kip saw through his computer.

We tried this again and again, and even though it's just being raised to the sky and being thrown down, it was a different fall every single time. I could tell from the change in Kip's voice—the inane things he'd yell as we fall—that each fall tore away another layer of armor... freeing his skin to open air. I camera-zoomed back to his parachute, and realized that for the first time since we built our giant prim baby, Kip was having fun.

We landed in the ocean, still deep blue, despite the vermilion sunset sky.

We flew up to the launchpad again, but Kip paused, laughed and said, "Belle! You really have to stop me from going fanatic sometime! You know, I just kinda go crazy on things sometime." He laughed, "Let's go watch the sunset." He flew towards the top of the green hill, above the



SEABOURNE (217, 27, 25)

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cascading sculpted waterfalls. I followed.

At the top of the hill, we sat on a marbled rock. The SL sky was now a brilliant crimson orange. The never-changing dark blue of the sea, as rendered from my computer, stretched off into the horizon, meeting a fading-violet sky.

Kip broke the silence, "When I sit out on a boulder to watch the sunset, I think of the future. Belle, what do you imagine the future would be like?"

I shrugged, "I... I don't know, Kip."

"What would you want it to be like?"

"I... I'd like it to be good, I guess. I dunno. What about you, Kip?"

"Me too. I'd like it if it could be good; I'd like to make it so... I'd like... I'd like the world to function the way it should. That people would be able to do what they want to do—instead of what they have to do to make it so."

I nodded, not really understanding what he was talking about.

"I'd like an ideal world, Belle. One where I can be free to be myself."

"Me too." I said.

"Belle, what do you envision for your

grandchildren?"

"Everything I wanted for myself."

"Yes, yes. I would want them to be free to be mathematicians, artists, musicians, or scholars—free to be able to pursue fine arts... and not get pulled down by the darkness of the world."

I nodded. In RL, there were tears streaming from my eyes.

"Belle, what would you say if I asked you to marry me?"

"I... I—"



TO BE CONTINUED...

**REBELS IN
HELL**



*a novel of
American rebellion*
by
Michael O'McCarthy

From loss, from torture and rape rose two young Americans. Together they do what all others fear: As a dictatorship is imposed throughout the Americas they take revenge in a bloody swift strike deep into the belly of the beast. Around them rose the tens of thousand and together they are rebels in love in the midst of Hell.

Cape Point (144, 80, 35)

SLEUTH

BY AIJI DUCATILLON



Spike sat on the beach shielding her eyes from the sun, and thought of Tennyson. She gulped the last of her drink and read the label: “Please dispose of thoughtfully.” Thoughtfully, she dropped the can at her feet and thoughtfully she pressed it into the soft sand with her prehensile toes. She had always been like that – obsessively reading text. If this were Second Life, she wondered, how long would it be before the can was automatically returned to her inventory? She could picture the blue axis line as she lowered it into the sim.

Confirming the beach was empty she pulled the laptop from her shoulder bag, scanned for a hotspot and logged in as Camellia. The name suited her. Chameleon; always blended in. Yeah, right; with the amount of metal in her face the only place she could hide was in plain sight. The other program activated her HUD and confirmed the money had been transferred from Estonia to a Cayman Islands holding account; always the same amount, always just under the US\$10K for reportable transactions. And they thought that by converting to Lindens the money would disappear off the financial landscape. She smiled to herself. How they howled when the gambling was closed down in SL! Now the launderers were looking elsewhere for a myriad micro-transactions to do their bidding. It was usually the Caymans or Martinique, sometimes Cambodia.

This mob was good though, spreading the transactions throughout the day to avoid a blip, and they used bots – lots of them – to make small donations at a million tip-jars dotted all over SL. But there were gaps still in her knowledge of them. Was this for drugs, weapons or something even more sinister? She pulled out a chunky cell phone and called the Agency.

The basement bar in the Akihabara District was dark and smoky. In the corner a local band played

Tom Waits badly; it was that time of night, more properly early morning. A flash of blue neon silhouetted the latest arrival. His bare arm snaked up as he placed his fit on a ledge above the doorway while the door closed behind him. No one looked up. His first whiskey was gone before his change was returned. The second he took to a table wedged behind a pillar that afforded a discreet view of the door. His hands didn't shake so much now.

The PDA didn't light his face as much as a cigarette. He liked it that way. The old man in the electronics market a few blocks away had built his bluetooth earpiece out of an old phone and it worked well, with no questions asked. Another had built the PDA, with full laptop functionality. The pocket keyboard was already well worn. He logged in.

The polite cough by his ear startled him; he wasn't used to surprises, and he blanked the PDA in a reflex.

The thin-jawed suit spoke flawless English. "Are you as good as they say you are?"

"That depends on the 'they'," he said cautiously.

"My client has some work for you, a missing person – it's quite well-paid."

"So go hire a bureau; you don't need an old has-been for a bit of sniffing. They're cheaper in India I hear."

"Ah so, but my clients appreciate discretion." By now the suit was standing in front of him, a backlit outline, and placing a small package on the table. "Here's a little something to help you think about it. We'll be in touch."

And with that the suit was gone in the smoke haze and darkness. S7ven knew the feel of large bills. He had been one of the best, military trained, and he knew his way around a mesh network like few others. They said he was burned out; it would have been too embarrassing to prosecute him for the little side project they discovered he'd

developed along the way.

These days he survived on snippets the streets threw his way: covert transactions, low level grieving, some brokering of expertise and a reputation for being able to find people in SL and track them in RL. It wasn't much, but he was a survivor. And he had friends.

Spike set her Camellia avatar dancing in the nightclub while she watched the HUD clock the numbers, bringing the holding account up to US\$3.5m so far by \$100,000 a day through a mass of tip-jars that weren't there yesterday and wouldn't be there tomorrow. She looked around at the twenty or so avatars dancing and standing around, each with their names over their heads. Camellia dances better than I ever could, Spike reflected.

She spotted an interesting-looking avatar who had been dancing by himself for an hour. He had nothing in his profile, but he wasn't a newbie. She had watched him come in and there was good control, expensive skin and nice shoes. Why is it so hard to find nice shoes for men in SL, she wondered?

Camellia worked her way over to him and typed a greeting. He was a German kid with a punky attitude and something to prove.

It wasn't long before he was bragging about how he could do more than just digital graffiti and grieving. The time between exchanges got longer, like he was IMing on three other conversations. Yeah, she thought, that fits the profile.

Almost on a hunch, Spike / Camellia dug out a gift: a pet falcon that would swoop anyone on command. She figured correctly he'd take it. What she hoped he wouldn't notice was a little extra script that tracked his IP address and fed the geo coordinates back to her. Yeah, he was German okay. A little while longer and she'd have his precise location, somewhere in or near Berlin.

Abruptly his avatar stopped dancing. "Watch this," he said, and the tip-jar next to the dance floor disappeared in a cloud of virtual smoke. Spike laughed and said, "Is that all?"

Then she saw her HUD. The flows were still working, but the US\$3m had vanished. Blank. Nothing. She looked up.

The German had logged out.

Spike stared at the screen. Coincidence? She went back over the HUD log line by line. And there it was; just a millisecond before the crash, the destination shifted from the Caymans holding account to a German account. Hmm. A bit clumsy for this outfit, she mused.

She scanned the rest of the club. Was the furry with the Great Dane features there before? She logged out quickly.

S7ven put down the cell phone. So they were serious and they wanted some kid tracked down and no questions asked. He knew precisely where to start. A little bird had told him.

Back at the office, Spike fired up three terminals and the cable TV. She had to follow the money before the trail went cold.

There was a series of emails from her boss about her spending too much time online and not enough in the field. Perhaps she could spare some time to work on the money laundering operation. It was the usual sarcastic banter. She promised a report at the end of the week. That gave her four days.

The news had the usual war stuff: another three improvised explosive devices, a racket in the sale of body parts for transplants, and, as she flicked channels, the tail end of a piece on stolen surface-to-air missiles from Eastern Europe. Spike thought for a moment. So maybe it wasn't drugs. And the money's gone. She would have to check back with the team and get some context. It

was just possible the German had stung the wrong tiger.

And she was the last person to interact with the German's avatar.

She flashed the team for a quick conference call and brought them up to speed.

"Jen, run a trace on the IP address and get me the geo coords of the last login point. Paul, please book me on a flight to Europe. I'm on the way to the airport." These days you had to be agile.

In Heathrow she collided heavily with a tall unkempt Scandinavian. Military, she thought without knowing why.

She didn't see him at the baggage pick-up in Berlin. Nor did she see the black BMW behind the cab to her hotel.

Local liaison had tracked down the coords to an apartment block on the outskirts known locally as the Gastarbeiterlager: guest-worker camp or Little Turkey.

As soon as she arrived she knew there was a problem. An ambulance was leaving and the police were there in force. A gambling dispute, they called it. He had been shot. Twice. She shivered.

The trail was cold.

Spike took a cab back to her hotel and walked to a nearby coffee shop. She ordered a cup, double strength and black, and took a gulp. She pulled out her laptop and logged in as Camellia. Maybe there was something she'd missed in the logs.

The IM was flashing. It was from the German. And there was a note card with a long number and the words, "You're next."

TO BE CONTINUED...

