



LITERARY

Of Fiction and Second Life

Spring
2007

Introducing

CONTENT-SEAMLESS

advertisements
that blend directly into the story,
as a *linked* accompanying image.

Click on image
to visit
ABC Guitars!

<http://advertise.sliterary.com>

SLITERARY

SAMPLE

BassHero

by A Writer



ABC Guitars

Once upon
a t i m e ,
there was a
girl who
played a
red elec-
tric bass...

TagAds

GIRL BASS PLAY GUITAR RED

© 2007 sLiterary Magazine

*Spring
 2007*

stories
IN THIS ISSUE



POETRY

1

A Hundred Milliseconds of Solitude
 A POEM BY INA CENTAUR

FLASH
 FICTION

2

Renaissance
 BY JACK LEFEBVRE

A man ascends to love from the perceived mediocrity he sees around him.

5

Griefers Incessant
 BY ANONYMOUS

A young woman in exile is attacked by a pack of griefers.

THE
 STORIES

8

Making Cats
 BY MORRHYS GRAYSMARK

A misanthropic cat-lover discovers the source of his depression.

16

By His Own Petard
 BY MARCEL CROMULENT

Blood and B-robots are amok among us in this wild business venue that evolves beyond the intelligence of its creator.

24

The Avatar's Story
 BY MASON DIXON

Consciousness, love, and loss, following 0th Rez-Day from an Avatar's POV

SCRIPT

29

Happy Thought
 BY LICENTIOUS MALADAY

A daughter tells her avatar-father her happy thought.

SERIAL
 NOVEL

34

Black Betrayal
 BY MING ZHOU

The recovery of a RL lost love in SL.

© 2007 sLiterary Magazine

Second Life® and Linden Lab® are trademarks or registered trademarks of Linden Research, Inc. All rights reserved. No infringement is intended.

Editor in Chief
Jackline Hugo

Associate Editors
Judi Newall Kathryn Evans Sojourna Alexander

Advertising & Distributing Director
Ina Centaur

Advertising & Distributing Associates
Amber Boorman Enzoos Sellers Etienne Brando Pure Noel Snowdrop Slade

Business Manager
Veronica Duvall

Art and Design Director
Ina Centaur

Contributing Artist
Siyu Suen

Cover Illustration for Spring 2007
Spider Mycron

All images in the following pages have been “photosourced” in Second Life.

This magazine is sponsored in part by
seamless content-sensitive advertisement:

A TagAd is a relevant wordlink that might
serve as an inworld travel guide.

A Graphical Ad links to each corresponding
sponsoring patron and helps extend and
illustrate the accompanying story.

Please contact any of our advertising associates
or visit

<http://advertise.sLiterary.com>

if you are interested in advertising in sLiterary.

Spring
2007

EDITOR'S

INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

Every Sunday afternoon, I sit down to tea in front of my computer. In lieu of chatting with friends, I read stories—the small trickle of tales that have arrived at la_story@sliterary.com to my inbox, ever since the magazine first announced its call for submissions. I have enjoyed reading each story, but it was not until I extended the original deadline, and announced the extension, that I received the bulk of the stories you will find in this first issue.

But, before I give you a hint of the contents of this issue, I should briefly digress to the *perpetual* theme of the magazine—*of fiction and Second Life*. 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.

In this issue, you will find a collection of the best stories I have read for the season—a poem, a playscript, and five stories. You will find: Love of the wondrous ideal kind, in Jack Lefebvre's "Renaissance." In "Griever's Incessant," a reclusive bipolar girl's comic discovery that Second Life is really a more "sharpened version of reality." In "Making Cats," by Morrhy's Graysmark, a depressed soul's own realization and confession through both RL and SL events. "By His Own Petard," a polyphonic story by Marcel Cromulent, will make you raise your eyebrow at *what* Second Life can be. And finally, the issue concludes with a common experience of loss of a SL-friend due to RL-matters in Mason Dixon's "The Avatar's Story," and a loss of a matter that one would think extinct in the metaverse—unrequited love based on racial prejudice in Ming Zhou's "Black Betrayal."

Yours,
Jackline Hugo
Editor in Chief

P.S. In addition to reading stories, I have also replied to a number of queries asking for the expected content of the publication. Some have confused sLiterary with being a strictly literary magazine, perhaps stuffed with your usual stoic, but unbearably long-winded essays on literary criticism. *I can assure you that it is not*—nor were any of the hundred or so submissions I have read for this first issue. On the contrary, each story thrived with its own living, *breathing* account of the human condition—despite being set in the metaverse. I bid you turn the page, already, to find out for yourself.



Missions

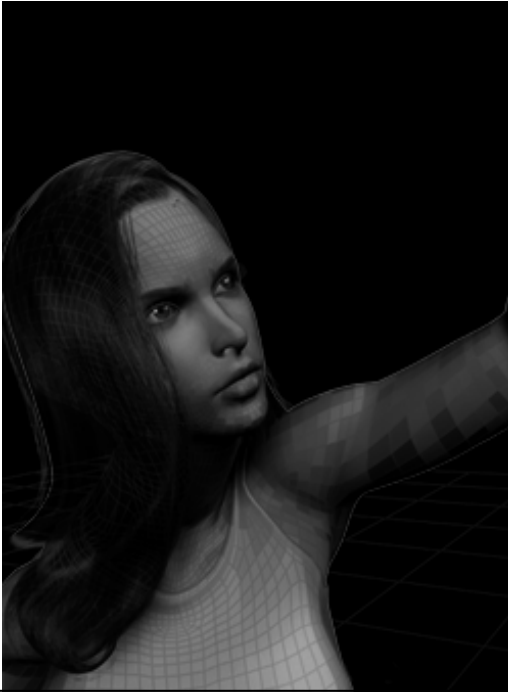
DESIGNER *of* FINE MASKS

Gothic and Alternative Accessories

Carnivale (208, 92, 33)

A HUNDRED MILLISECONDS OF SOLITUDE

A P O E M BY INA CENTAUR



pixels plenty; images sprouting; unto pictures;
a thousand words coalescing converging:
a world inside a world blossoming thriving.

ephemeral surreality; abstrusified multiabstractions;
an idea embodied vision in the real:
from mind to mind freely fleeting flowing fly.

pixels lacking; images fading; unto umbra;
a thousand primis fated derezzing dying:
the kismet of time disappearing ending.

presently, however:
you exist, and i thank thee for that.



Second Life Ballet



Opera Populaire

RENAISSANCE

BY JACK LEFEBVRE



“Football, beer, cars, cricket, darts, pool, women.”

The words lay in his skull, heavy, echoing. The list had been repeated so often, with the same laughs, minor adjustments to the order. Sometimes they found space for things such as pork pies or Ibiza but, in the catalogue of the most important things in life, football (the British kind) always came first and women last. (Except for those occasions when wives were on the list. They were last then. Definitely. No question.) He laughed along with the rest, but hated himself for doing so. He hated that women were commodities, that love was a transaction. How the hell did these guys still find their reduction of experience to such mindless limits entertaining? Were their perceptions really that narrow? Was life so universally drab?

He switched on the television; yes, it seemed it was. Another set of anonymous celebrities were being inane in a wholly artificial ‘real’ environment, squealing at the prospect of having to eat maggots, desperately trying to be like what one of them called ‘ordinary people’, unaware that that’s exactly what they were. Everywhere, it seemed, people responded to mediocrity. No wonder so many were choosing to live a second life. Oh, there were thousands of Neanderthals in SL, too – strutting avatars with limited vocabularies which they supplemented with grunts – but there was also an unashamed dimension of myth and mystery. Dark forces howled in the midnights, elves and furry creatures prowled, but also, moving quietly amongst them, were real, soft, gentle people – people who talked, who were curious about one another. He could avoid the crassness, the fantasies and phantasms, and be as simple or as complex as he wanted.

And there was always her. Beautiful Shylle.

Always shimmering, always draped in silver, with the glitter of pixie dust in her hair and sprinkled over her skin. Green eyes wide, red hair curled around her elfin face, her almost perfect figure hugged by gossamer threads. In a world of unrelenting beauty, she was still special. She'd deliberately chosen a skin and a shape which gave a slight twist to the ideal. It distinguished her from the unrelieved perfection of the herds, got her noticed and, naturally, provoked grunts and propositions wherever she went. But, astonishingly, she'd come to him.

He'd been sitting on the dock of the Enchanted Forest in Kokomo. There was a pub nearby but he hadn't yet tried it, fearful that it might be crammed with list-makers. He'd wandered through the trees, seen the couples, the lovers whispering together or tangled in embraces from the innocent to the grotesque. He'd stood, wondering, as the dragonflies shimmered past and humming birds flickered around the exotic flora. He'd strolled through the clouds of winking stars by the dance-floor. And he was there, amongst it all. Well, he wasn't, but his avatar was, and he was directing him, choosing his company, leading him through the magic.

Then he'd seen the dock, the two balls inviting him to sit, and he'd clicked and sat with his legs dangling in the water, swinging slowly back and forth. And the peace of the forest settled around him. And the lists and the primates that made them sank down through the darkness to the slime they inha-



bited. And she'd come and sat and said 'Hello'.

Over the next two weeks they met again and again, seeking one another online, asking questions, making jokes, laughing at the idea that avatars – avatars, for God's sake – were falling in love and getting married and having babies. They teased one another about it, shaking their heads at its absurdity. But they were drawn back to it, circled around it, the laughter getting more forced, the dismissive ironies weakening. And they started talking of the 'three words' which they mustn't say but which were always lying at the edges of their conversations and in the centres of their minds and hearts.

And then, one day, they were in love. And they admitted it. And the explosion of joy and release was breathtaking. Because this was SL love, an unfettered, liberating love which reached over into their real life and wove itself into the fabric of their days. It reawakened forgotten sensations, permeated down through his being, reviving his soul.

And he rediscovered the poet he'd been before the contamination of the creatures and their lists. Then, sitting in his untidy room, a half-empty beer can beside him, he'd tapped out words on his computer that sent his soul floating beyond their reach. And the lists melted away

We were meant for the days of the forested earth,
 The days of unicorns and tapestries and gentle knights
 Wearing their chastity with pride, but burning
 With lust as much as honour.

We were meant for kingdoms, for castles,
 For times when love songs dripped from the trees,
 When warriors shrill with heraldry and trumpets,
 Fell powerless before the breath of love.

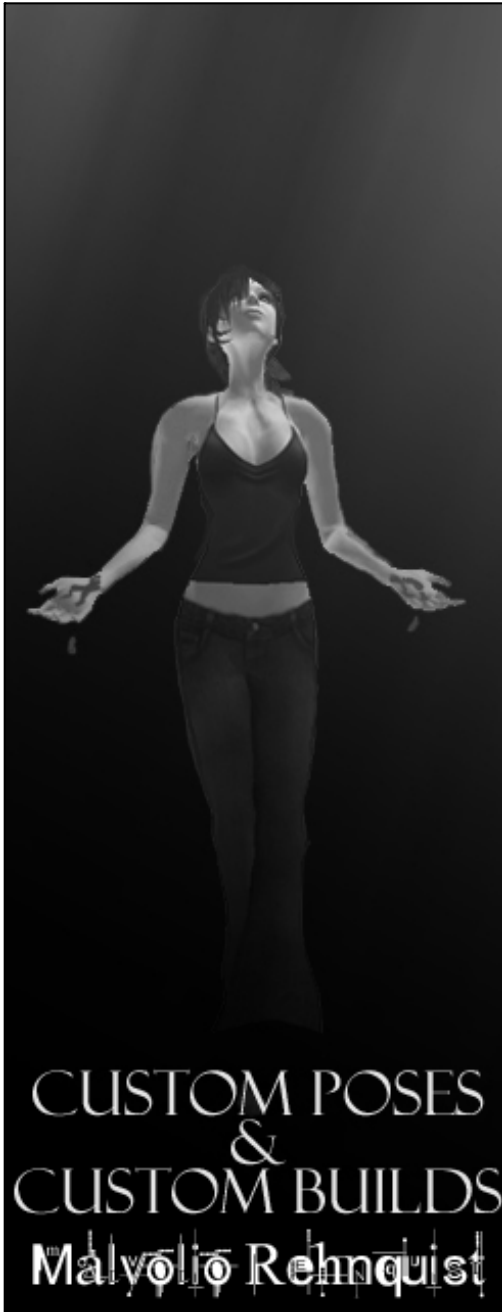
We were not meant for ordinary passions,
 In dull, correct, accommodating days.
 We have the blaze of elemental forces
 Burning in lips and hearts and words and eyes.

Our fast, volcanic love has long beginnings
 In minstrels' ballads centuries ago.
 And now it shakes us, presses on our hearts,
 As, meekly, gratefully, we smile to feel
 Its constant ecstasy and pain.



GRIEFERS INCESSANT

BY ANONYMOUS



With quick strokes, I slash at my virtual skin. Holding my slashed virtual wrists up against my face, I watch through the corner of my eye as my virtual blood runs down my arms unchecked, a fine weave of red dripping downwards. Momentarily, they leave the residue of a bloody mess on my face, my high cheekbones and thin nose.

Ephemerally, I'm drenched in crimson vermillion stigmata. And then, it's all gone, all -my blood, and I'm again this pale white girl, as if my Attempt had not only failed again, but hadn't even been. The animated blood had ended.

I look again at my wrists, streaked just an instant ago with crisscrosses of red. I gaze at my virtual skin, textured based on my real skin, and then, in fury, I throw them down. Around me, there is the darkness of my cloister, a solid blackness stemmed only by the grey light streaming through a tiny sliver of a window. It's exactly like my solitary confinement in real life. My purposeful locking myself away in a forlorn tower of a castle lost in the world. I try to leave, but I just can't seem to escape It.

All of a sudden, I start laughing, unable to control myself. I think of what I'm doing, the absurdity of it all. "Get thee to a nunnery!" My insane brother had said to me, and here I am, alone to repent my Sin, as I must, away from the world. But yet, I'm too chicken to do it; I just can't leave it.

B L O O D

T O W E R

N U N N E R Y

W O R L D

S K I N

Here, in the secluded ancient ruins of a real world castle, I'm gone from the bustling city of my youth. I should be enjoying this quiet sanctuary, but instead, I find myself living my second life as if my first.

The calming darkness of my home reminds me of Genesis, and I shrug off my strange bout of stigmata attempts, with a happy thought to build in the bright green pastures of an open Sandbox. "As God created Man in His image, Man created his Avatar in His image, and the Avatar lives in second life to fill the vast emptiness of the firmament: Creation." So were the words of a pious minister in the Church of Second Life. And, thus, perhaps I may find peace.

Beneath the clear blue sky, I build what's on my mind, an array of primitives sculpted by my stream of consciousness. And then the idea solidifies, and the parts are joined into a whole. Piece by piece, as if stone by stone, my magic castle in the air takes form. I crane my virtual neck upwards, stretching my view to the top of the world to look at my creation, and I rejoice.

"I'd trade my Medieval Dungeon for your Castle." A male avatar breaks my beautiful silence.

"You're not a girl." Another male avatar continues. "Girls can't build."

Slowly, I turn my view around to glare at these wretched trespassers daring to lay siege to my pristine castle in the air. I want to cast them all off, away, with a scripted spell, but...

There's a whole lot of them. A teeming pack of male avatars.



"Whoa..." Yet another male avatar dares to break the silence, "Your face, it's so freakin' real!"

Blatantly, they begin talking amongst themselves, not bothering to use IM's, as if I'm not here. "Can you believe this?" Some avatar named Ivor says. "She's hot!" Some avatar named Michael says. "I wonder what it'd be like to rape a real-looking chick..." Some avatar named Derrick says.

I don't speak, and I'm already writing a batch process to send them all blasting away in magical dust. My eyes are on the scripting window, maximized, and so I let myself ignore their blue-collar jabber.

As I close the scripting window, I see the Abomination.

There's a whole lot of them. A teeming pack of avatars. Naked. With identical organs drooping forth. Ugly.

I grimaced in disgust. "What the bloody hell," I utter in my real life.

"Go away!" I shout in my second life, "Go the fuck away!"

"Fuck!" This brazen male avatar, naked, storms against me. "I fuck u!" He shouts, as he forces his lackluster default avatar against mine. He's stuck in a lame animation.


His twin rushes to me and cries, "My turn!" while butting him away.

And then the whole host of them advance on me. A hundred god-awful bunch of them. "How do you fuck?" Two of them

ask at about the same time. Some idiot boasts of his experience, but asks where's the sex ball, while another explains what animation to use. They pass the same badly looped piece of ani-bomination around, banging their dumb avatars against me and, perhaps accidentally, other male avatars.

I'm surrounded by newbies and amateurs. "Go away!" I cry yet again, but language has escaped them. I'm surrounded by mindless animals, as if rabid dogs in heat—and I'm the bitch they're all lolling their organs against. "Go the bloody hell away!" I shout. "GO AWAY!"

But, they're all quiet now, just their bloody idiotic animation having them hobbling in their cycles. Probably jacking off into some cum jar by their computers in the real world. The free group porn their collective consciousness had rendered them. And then I realize the crux of it all—why I'd found my second life irresistible. It's the fact that even on the bright green lawn, cerulean sky, of a Sandbox, you can't escape the incessant nastiness of the casinos, strip bars, and unkempt prowlers. It's a sharpened version of reality—no, it's the real world boiled down to its very essence. Money. Sex. Power. The bloody hell... The fact that Aldous Huxley had been right... that we really have descended into his Brave New World.

I shudder as I teleport back home, to my cloister in the dark. And I escape back to my life, leaving my castle in the air behind... 



B&B
 SKINS & MORE

HIGH QUALITY
 REALISTIC
SKINS
 STARTING AT
LS1

JOIN THE
B&B SKINS & MORE
 GROUP
for
 first notice & gifts!

MAKING CATS

BY MORRHYS GRAYSMARK



“It’s not like Second Life is heaven or anything; it’s full of airheads trying to have virtual sex and make money. But SL’s virtual world is better than the real world. In SL, no one expects me to waste time taking useless college classes, like Society and the Individual. I can get a job where I don’t have to spend time and money driving miles away from home to sweat for some guy who doesn’t have a clue about how to do my job and pays me next to nothing for doing it. I can own a house without having to prove to an idiot loan officer I’m going to pay off the loan I need to buy the place. I can have all the privacy I want. I can’t get those things in real life. That’s why I did what I did when my sister Kathie tracked me down in SL. I just want to be left alone.”

I’m talking to a dolt. I wish he’d stop nodding his head and looking at me like he’s concerned. He’s just like the rest of them: educated to the point where he’s got no independent thoughts of his own, moronically following every asinine social rule like a sheep. If my mom didn’t pay him to listen to me, he wouldn’t even acknowledge my existence.

“Look, here’s how it went. I signed into SL that Tuesday, and found an Instant Message waiting for me. Stupid invention. IMing makes it so easy for people to talk at one another that they don’t bother to think about what they say, they just blurt out whatever’s on their minds. Anyway, I signed in and found an IM waiting for me. That is, the IM was waiting for my avatar, Swami Loon, from the avatar Morrhyss Graysmark. The avatar, you know, the virtual person in SL controlled by a real person in real life.

“Hello. I’m looking for a real life friend of mine

from Leonard, Michigan whose avatar might be named Swami. Are you that person? If not, I apologize for the inconvenience.'

"I knew right away they were looking for me. First, folks who know my skill fixing things – like motorcycles, cars, anything that runs – call me Swami. That's why I chose the name for my avatar. Second, only about 330 people live in Leonard, Michigan. But who wanted to find me, and why? I'd only mentioned SL to my mom. She doesn't even own a computer, so it couldn't be her. It must be someone she knows. I had my suspicions, based on that and the style of writing in the IM: so polite, so proper. I checked out Morrhy's profile.

"Yup, no question about it. It was Kathie. Just like her to bug me. Last I spoke with her, she said she was coming home for spring break, on St. Patrick's Day. Worthless holiday. You know, people hardly celebrate it at all in Ireland! It's a big deal here in the U.S. because greeting card companies make a killing on it.

"I wondered why she didn't just call me to ask my avatar's name. Well, maybe she wanted to, but I'd been locked in my room most of the time, and when we spoke on the phone it was only a few minutes before she managed to piss me off. Besides, I wouldn't have given her my avatar's name anyway. Why couldn't she just leave me alone?

"At first I thought I'd ignore the IM. But I figured a lot of other Swamis would reply, and she'd be able to use a process of elimination to flush me out. Then I thought I'd tell her Swami Loon wasn't my avatar. But that would've been a lie. So I told her I



was Swami Loon. I figured it wouldn't hurt much; after all, she's a genius math student and programmer, and spends most of her time in class and studying. I didn't think she'd interfere with my second life much.

"So I IMed her back. That was the last of my peace and quiet."

"I can't wait to see you! Where are you?" she IMed.

"I'm in the public sandbox in Mauve." Mauve isn't a color, it's an area in SL. A sandbox in SL is a place where you can build things.

"Hang on, I'm teleporting."

I saw her within moments of her arrival. I knew it was her because she looked remarkably like she does in real life: slender, average height, short red-brown hair, fair complexion, even that maddening wise-happy face of hers. You'd think I could escape it in SL, but no, there it was, the corners of her mouth turned slightly upward, her eyes calm, mocking me. She moved with the herky-jerky walk of a new avatar before they buy a decent walk animation.

"Hi Brian!" she typed in chat.

"I'm Swami," I replied.

"Oh, sorry. You can call me Morrhy's if you like. Do you hang out here?"

"Yeah. I build things."

"Like this bike?" She turned to face the motorcycle I was making.

I walked over, sat on the bike and took it through its paces to show her how it worked. It's a lot better than the free ones in SL. I made some adjustments to the scripts that control it. It handles rough terrain like a paved road.

"Cool! I haven't scripted yet. But I made something for you."

"You did?" Building is my specialty. I didn't expect she'd built anything I'd care about.

She rezzed two objects in front of me. Rez means resurrect, to bring out of inventory. They stood a bit less than a meter tall, and looked like teddy bears. One was gray, the other white with pink feet. Like hitting an unexpected rock on a trail with the front tire of my bike, I suddenly realized what they were. "Your very own virtual Bull Mouse and Cow Mouse! You can take copies if you like," she said.

Bull Mouse is a little gray stuffed animal I like. I identify with him; people despise mice, yet mice are loving, gentle animals. Kathie recently sent Bull Mouse a present: Cow Mouse, a soft, white plush mouse. How ironic my stuffed animal has a girlfriend and I don't. Nothing like rubbing it in. It's not enough for Kathie to insult me in real life; she comes to SL to insult me, too. I felt sick.

"Thanks," I said. She'd know if I didn't try to copy them, so I took one of each.

"I hope you like them," she said.

"They're good," I replied. The ends of the feet and tails were smooth, the ears were lined in pink, and the eyes had both whites and pupils. I imagined her making them with the idea of finding me and giving them to me, like a weaver bird preparing a nest in hopes of attracting a female. I found her

behavior chilling.

"I'm amazed at all the great groups here!" she commented.

"Really?" I wasn't interested at all.

"Yes. Did you know there's a group called Science Fiction Rangers?"

"No." Most modern sci-fi writers produce crap. I have no interest in hearing people tell me how great it is.

"I joined the Science Center, too. Since I'm studying applied math, I thought it might be a good connection."

"What does the Science Center group do?"

"I don't know. I haven't checked it out yet."

"You joined it, and you don't know what it does?"

"I can always quit if I don't like them."

"Oh." What a waste of time.

"I even joined the Depression Support Group."

"Why?"

"Well, sometimes I feel depressed. I want to understand what I can do about it."

She's lying. She joined because I'm de-



pressed. Hell, I've known I've been depressed for years. Even went to a doc once, but he said it was all in my head. So I left his office, and never went back. Just as well. Psychotherapy is a pile of shit, and the meds they give you make you sick as hell. She just joined to try to get me to join, too. That's Kathie, ever into other people's business. I didn't ask for her advice. I just want to be left alone. Kathie can't help me. Nobody can help me. I had to unball my fisted hand to type. "I didn't know you felt depressed."

"It was worse when I lived at home. I feel a lot better now."

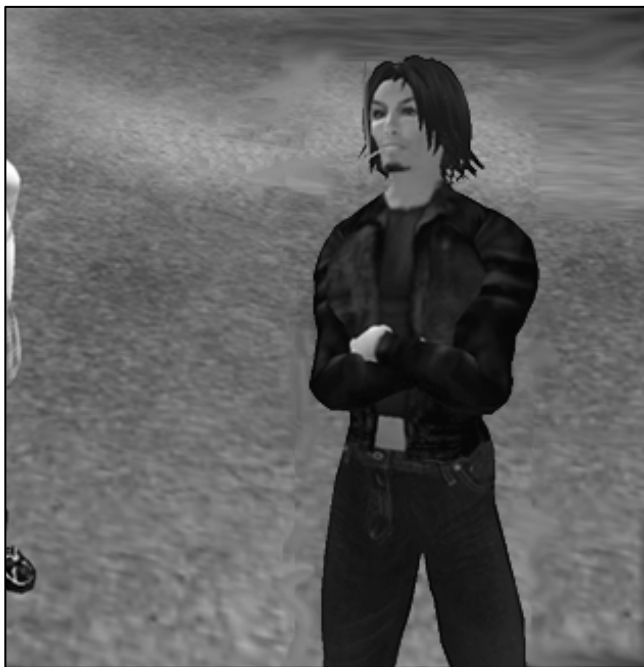
"That's good." I was so angry about her butting in, I could have thrown my keyboard through the monitor, smashing her image into a spray of electrons.

"So how're things with you?"

"I'm okay." I'm pissed.

"How's mom?"

"She's okay. Coughs a lot." She's killing



herself with her smoking.

"Yeah, those cigarettes are killing her."

I'd had all I could take. I wanted to be alone, and she was keeping me from it. "I need to go. Thanks for everything. I'll see you around."

I quit out of SL before I saw her reply.

I feared Kathie/Morrhys would keep bugging me every time I logged back in, so I created an alternate account under a name I'm not going to tell you or anyone else, transferred all of Swami's things to it, and stopped using Swami. Once again I had peace and quiet, for a whole week. Then she called home.

"Hi Brian."

"Hi."

"Hey, I haven't seen Swami logged into Second Life lately. Have you stopped playing?"

"It wasn't fun to be Swami any more." That was the truth.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I was looking forward to spending time with you. Is there some other game you'd like to play online with me?"

"I'm not into online games." SL isn't a game. It's a virtual world, with an economy and everything.

"Oh. Well, I guess I just have to wait until I see you during spring break."

"Yeah."

The rest of our conversation was inconsequential. I didn't think anything more about Kathie until that evening. I was sitting in the living room watching TV, and mom joined me. She started talking as soon as a

commercial came on.

“Brian, Kathie told me you’ve stopped speaking to her in Second Life.” Mom sat on the couch, looking at me through the thick lenses of her glasses. She wore a bathrobe she’d made out of green camo cotton she’d bought on sale. Her curly, graying hair echoed the mottling of her robe.

“I don’t talk to anyone in Second Life.”

“She’s just trying to be a friend to you.” She pulled a pack of Camels out of her robe pocket and tapped out a cigarette.

“Yeah, that’s why she moved to Maryland,” I said sarcastically.

“She can’t go to school here and study what she wants to learn. You can’t expect her to stay here forever.” Mom was pleading again. It made me feel sick.

“You stayed in the area. Gramma and grampa stayed in the area. Kathie chose to study math. She chose to leave.” I got up, went down the hall to my room, and shut and locked the door. I walked right to my computer and sat down, while the faces of no-nonsense heroes and mind-bending aliens from classic sci-fi novels looked at me from posters on my walls. My fingers touched the smooth, black keyboard, and deftly unlocked the door to my second life.

I went out a few days later to pick up some groceries for mom, because she said she had a bad headache. I planned to go to Rochester, but figured I could buy everything at Four Corners instead. That’s good, because it’s closer and smaller; fewer people shop there. Fewer people means fewer idiots.

When I got back, mom was on the phone. She looked surprised as I came

through the door; she hadn’t expected me so soon, of course. As I began to unpack the groceries and put them away, she said, “Kathie’s on the phone. Would you like to speak with her?”

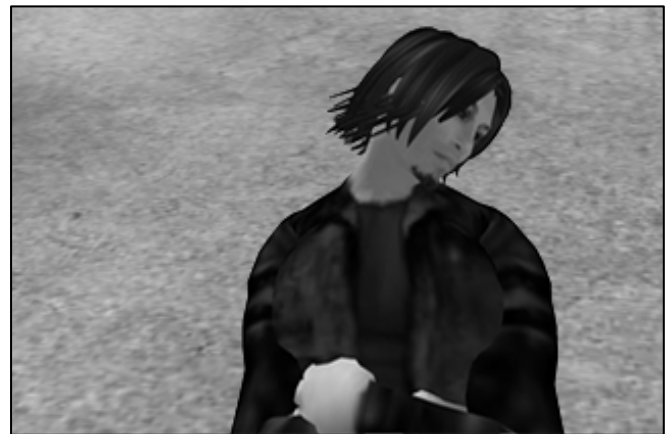
“Okay,” I replied, coming over to take the phone, because I sort of have to take it when mom asks and I’m not locked in my room. Mom handed the phone to me, then headed down the hall toward either the bathroom or her bedroom; I don’t know which. I don’t care which.

“Hi,” I said into the mouthpiece.

“Hi Brian,” she answered. She sounded perfectly fine, as usual. I guess she didn’t really care any more that I didn’t want to be with her in SL. She must’ve moved on to some other project. “Mom said you were buying groceries. I’m glad you’re there to help her when she’s ill.”

“Yeah, she deserves it,” I said. And you’re not going to give her what she deserves, are you, Kathie? You’re in another state, and you’re not here for her when she needs help. I’m stuck with that responsibility.

The rest of what we said doesn’t matter. I went back to my room, and she went back to whatever it is she does.



* * *

A day or so later, I noticed a little avatar working near me in the sandbox as I tweaked my bike; I won't tell you which sandbox, because I want my privacy, but it wasn't the one in Mauve. He had red hair, a matching beard, and fair skin, and was dressed in brown breeches and a brown vest with a white shirt beneath it. His name was Deirfiur Theas. Strange.

He worked about an hour before he disappeared. He returned the next day, though, and was soon a regular. Sometimes he helped someone who asked for assistance. Sometimes he built things of his own. He never talked to me, and I never talked to him. But he got my attention one day when I saw him making an animated cat.

I like cats. I take care of a real life, feral gray tabby. I named her Potato, because she likes to eat potatoes. She comes to the front porch every day for food and water. She's friendly to me, but doesn't trust anyone else. She's a fighter, too! One day, a deer came right up to the porch to check out her bowls, and she smacked it on its nose! Imagine that!

I walked over to take a closer look at the cat.



"You like it?" he said.

"Yeah. How'd you make it?"

"Take a copy yourself," he offered. "It's editable."

"Thanks." I copied the cat, then rezzed it on the ground in front of me. I brought up the animation script. The carefully commented code described how to make the cat follow, lie down, even purr. I right-clicked on the cat and tried some of the commands. They worked like a charm.

"You could sell this," I said. "It's the best cat I've seen in SL!"

Deirfiur turned to face me. "I didn't make the cat to sell. I made it to be free. There's something right about a cat that's free, isn't there?"

I thought about Potato, and how she chose to live wild even though she could have a home if she wanted one. I decided Deirfiur was right.

I continued to work in the sandbox, my virtual cat Russet at my side, and Deirfiur often built nearby. He stayed only a short time each day, but he always had some interesting project going, and he always gave the product away to whoever wanted it. The other regulars in the sandbox began to stop by to chat with him when they saw him, to see what he was building, to ask for advice, and to share ideas. Sometimes, Dierfiur would call me over to answer a question someone asked. People began to ask me questions when Dierfiur wasn't around, respecting me more because Dierfiur treated me with respect.

One day, I felt particularly depressed. I

had trouble getting an animation to work, and got so mad I threw the object I was creating. Deirfiur walked over to me. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"This damn thing won't hover on command the way I want it to," I said.

"May I look at it?"

"Sure," I said, and set permissions accordingly.

He examined it, and said, "I think the problem is in this last section of code. Looks like a parenthesis is in the wrong place. I'll move it." A moment passed. "There," he said, "Try it now."

I did. It worked perfectly.

"Thanks," I said.

"NP," he answered, meaning no problem. "I'm just glad this wasn't a real life object, because it would have broken into pieces."

"I get mad sometimes," I admitted.

"Life can be pretty frustrating," Deirfiur agreed.

"It stinks," I said.

"And then you die," Deirfiur said. "So until I die, my goal is to make life better."

"That doesn't take much," I said, thinking about how unfair life is.

"Yeah. It's funny, though. Sometimes, what makes a person's life better isn't what they want. Sometimes they don't even understand how it might help. Sometimes, maybe I don't understand. But I try anyway."

"Does it do any good?"

"I hope so."

"Brian, I've been thinking," said mom as she entered the dining room. I looked up from my dinner with dread. She never says that when she's going to say something I want to hear.

"Hmm?" I responded reluctantly.

"I've been feeling sort of down lately. Well, really down. Sometimes, I feel bad about my cigarette smoking. Sometimes, I feel bad about the way we get along. I thought I might go see a doctor." Her voice cracked on the word 'doctor.' She walked past me to the dining room window and stared out at the field behind the house. "Would you come with me and talk to him?" she asked timidly.

I put my sandwich down and looked at her small, skinny back, the shoulder blades defined under even her generously-cut shirt. "Why do I need to talk to him?" I asked. "This is about you, not me."

Mom turned and faced me. I saw tears in her eyes. "The doctor said it would help me most if you'd come, too. He wants to talk to you about our family."

I saw pain in her face; it made me feel nauseated and mad at the same time. Then I thought about what Deirfiur said. Heck, I didn't have a job or any plans. Mom would feel a little better if I went with her.

"Okay," I said.



* * *

A few days later, Deirfiur came up to me in the sandbox. It was weird, because he'd never done that before. I stopped working to look at him.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello," I replied.

"I want to let you know I'm leaving SL for good."

I felt shocked. "Why?" I asked.

"Eh, I have cats to make in other places." Then he bowed to me, and said, "Good luck to you."

"Same to you," I replied.

He didn't say goodbye to anyone else. He just quit right there, and disappeared in that idiotic cloud of white puffs.

I stood in stunned silence for a long time. One problem with people and cats is that they leave. Of course, there are a lot more problems with people than with cats, but that's beside the point. Russet and Bull Mouse are different, though. They'll never leave me. I touched Russet; she purred.

I look over at mom's psychiatrist. He's



still nodding. I wonder if he ever stopped the whole time I talked? He's like one of those bobblehead dolls. I can almost see him on the dash of my car, looking like the hollow-skulled twirp he is. I can't believe I'm at mom's sixth session with him. Mom had better start feeling enough better that I don't need to come anymore, because I don't know how much longer I can take this.

At least one good thing came of it, anyway; mom got a different job, because her doc said her old job was bad for her. No shit; she didn't need the doc to figure that out. I already told her her old boss is a turd. Her new boss is okay. The job's pretty inconvenient because mom works into the evening twice a week, and with her bad eyes she can't see to drive when it's dark. Those days, I drive her in and back, and repair things around the place for her boss; you know, trucks, plumbing, electric, that sort of thing. I don't know what he did without me. Nothing, I guess. The place was a wreck. He made out real well, getting mom and me. And I don't mind making a few bucks, either.

"I don't know how my telling you all this is going to help mom, but there it is. Look, what I did to Kathie's no different than what Kathie did to mom and me, going hundreds of miles away to study math and leaving me to take care of mom. People abandon each other all the time, leaving behind all kinds of responsibilities, shits that they are. Loving people is too painful. I just want to be left alone. Nobody can help me with that." ☞

BY HIS OWN PETARD

BY MARCEL CROMULENT



On Monday evening at the Periwinkle Wall, Vera was late. I waited expectantly for twenty minutes before she arrived. Why haven't they invented women that keep appointments?

Vera and I had been seeing each other for a couple of weeks. A few times we had made use of Lyubov's special rooms. He is kind enough to make them available free of charge for second couples like us. As Lyubov formulates it, his secret rooms are full of interesting items for immoral purposes.

Oh, right, you don't know Lyubov yet. So you cannot appreciate that what I just told you is truly mind boggling.

Free of charge. Lyubov.

Yes! I almost succeeded in squeezing those two concepts into the same sentence.

Vera was in a strange mood on this Monday. Not in her usual strange mood, but in a strange new strange mood.

"I have just seen something horrible! You will never believe this!"

"Something horrible? Your husband?"

"No, no, here in Second Life, on the mall. I was checking out the skirts, but there was really nothing new there. But next to me, there was a red haired woman who was also window shopping, and a couple of newbies. Then suddenly, something totally awful happened."

Vera made a pause. I prodded her, "Well?"

"There were two dogs. Or perhaps they were not really dogs, but some other kind of animal. Anyhow, they did look a lot like dogs. One of them caught the woman with his teeth, and the other started to bite her

arms and her chest. Finally he tore out her heart from her body.”

“Avatars don't have hearts.”

“This one had. Those newbies stamped-ed. But I was brave, and I stayed and watched. When the dog had taken her heart out, he started to chew on it. There was blood everywhere. And suddenly her body was crawling with maggots that consumed her.”

“Sick.”

“Yes. But it was all so real! When the dogs held her, the woman tried to write something, but she became dizzy, and could not spell the words correctly. Then she wrote slow, and finally... nothing. She was gone.”

“She was lagged.”

“No, I don't think so. It looked totally genuine.”

“A practical joke then. Vera, this is a game. We are inside a big game. Those things you saw are not real. They did not happen.”

“Yes, I know. Against all appearance, I am not mad.”

The next arrival was sweet Nadeshda. She mumbled “Good evening”, and sat down on the red bench with her back to the periwinkles.

Lyubov came only a minute after her, and our little circle was complete.

Vera started out in her familiar strange mood, “Lyubov, exactly how much money have you earned today?”

“Only about a hundred thousand. It has been a slow day.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself. You are stealing that money from the newbies.”



“No, I am not.”

“You have never told the others here exactly how you make your money. It must be illegal, and you know that. If you are not ashamed of it, why are you making such a secret of it?”

“No, you are wrong. Again. Nothing I do is illegal. Vera, it is a game. A game is about winning and loosing, and I am going to win.”

“Then why don't you tell the others about what you are doing?”

“Are you challenging me?”

“Yes!”

“OK. Maybe I should tell them. Can you guys keep a secret?”

I said “yes”, and Lyubov started to explain.

“I do many types of business. Some of them are clever, some are not so clever. But I make money on all of them. And I am really proud of this one. You see, every day more and more newbies are coming to Second Life. Each of them only has a little money. Not much. But since there are so many of them it pays.”

“What pays, tell them all, you dirty old Mafioso.”

“It pays if you can cash in just a little from each of them. What do you think a newbie wants on his first day here?”

“Or her first day. She wants more money than the few dollars that she has?”

“No. He wants to be helped. They want to know how people do things here. They want to know what they are allowed to do, and above all they want to be accepted. They want love and recognition.”

“Yes.”

“I help them with all of that.”

“You? What a joke. You would really make a marvellous newbie helper. You are the most unfeeling bastard I have ever met. Number one, simply put. The worst. Or the second worst.”

“Yes, thank you for the compliment. It is actually a quite easy job. You have to be friendly with them, you have to tell them that you like them, you have to tell them what to do. And after you have done all that, you can give them advice about what to buy at the mall.”

“I always knew that you are as low as dirt.”

“Of course I am not. I am just giving them what they need. I give them the feeling that they are wanted here. And I give them the satisfaction that they are doing the right thing. I make them realise what people expect from them. But you would never help a newbie out, not if your life depended on it.”

The more I thought about this, the less sense it made. I asked, “I don't understand. You have to talk to a newbie for at least half an hour to convince him to spend twenty dollars buying some of your stupid Lyubov merchandise.”

“No, they do spend more than that. I know that for a fact, because I love statistics. I love statistics about my earnings more than statistics about anything else. But you make a valid point. It does take a lot of time.”

“You are lying. You cannot possibly earn a hundred thousand dollars a day that way.”

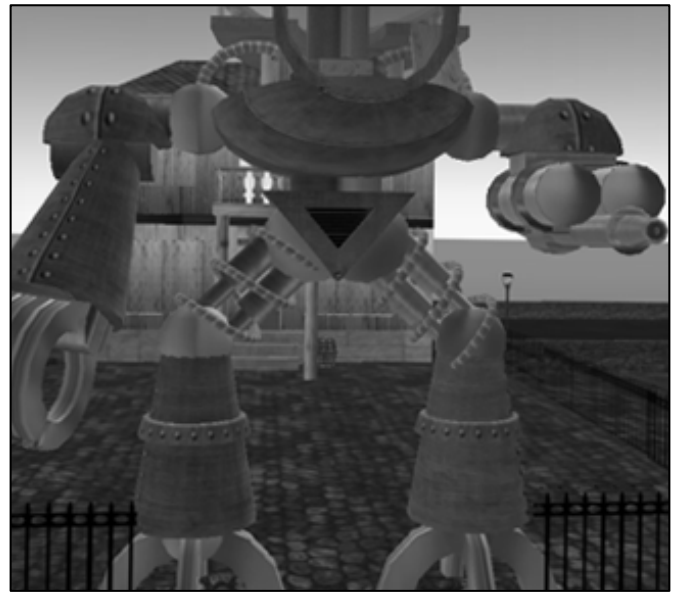
“This is just one business I do. I told you that I also do other things. They all bring me money. But there is also something else. I do not have to type anything myself. I have robots to do the talking.”

Nadeshda commented, “I do not like robots.”

Vera typed fast, “I see now. Your robots make friends with people. They fake it, and pretend to be humans. They make believe that they like the newbies, and then they cheat them out of their money. They get the love of your filthy robots in exchange for cool cash. It is so not fair.”

She continued, “But people will find out. Your robots cannot fool everyone all of the time. And when people find out, they will be angry with you.”

“I don't care. Let them be angry. What can they do about it? They can warn people here on Second Life about the robots, but they cannot warn the newbies.”



“How many robots do you have? This scheme of yours must use up a lot of computing power.”

“Yes. It does. But don't ask about that. Think distributed computing.”

I did think hacking, but I did not want to bring up that can of worms.

“Steve has not been home for the last two days” said Vera. “I know that he has a lover, but I don't know who she is. Tomorrow he has to come home. And when he leaves again in the evening, then I am going to follow him at a distance. Shadow him. I deserve to know the truth.”

“Why don't you ditch Steve. You have talked about how unhappy you are living with him since the first day I met you.” Lyubov and Vera go back half a year or so. When I met Vera, the fire between them was already out, but they were both still addicted to the mutual bitching.

“I want to know with whom he has been cheating me. Then I can spray hydrochloric acid into his ugly face, and into her face, and

get on with my life.”

Before I logged off, I got an IM from Nadeshda. “It feels good that we are friends.” I tried to write back, but she was gone.

All around Periwinkle Perimeter there is a perennial waterfall that falls and falls in a circle. We are the only four that can get through the whirling water.

Next day, while I waded through the blue stream, I saw that Nadeshda and Vera were talking to each other. Or rather, Vera was talking and Nadeshda was listening.

Suddenly, Nadeshda interrupted her. “I want to buy my first land.”

“I did not know that you wanted to buy land. What do you need land for?”

“I can't tell you. It's a secret.”

“It is very hard to find first land, don't you know that? And do you have the money?”

“If Lyubov wasn't so stingy, he could buy it for you. But you know he is almost as bad as Steve. He is stingy in his first life too, that's why his wife left him.”

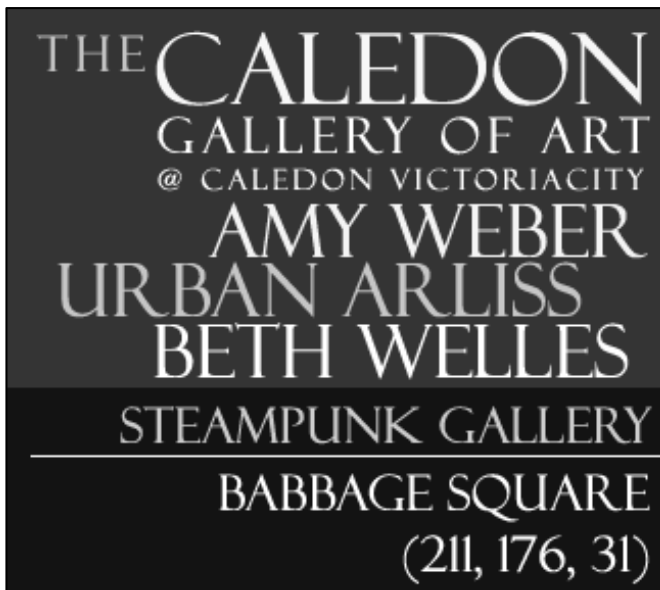
Steve is Vera's husband. By definition, Steve is the enemy.

“Steve did come back home last night. But I threw him out. I can be very strong. I am very strong, both mentally and physically. I solved the problem. It is finally sorted.”

“Did you find out whether or not he has a mistress?”

“It does not matter now, does it? He is out of my life. He won't dare to come back. Today I feel very happy and satisfied. Are you not happy for me?”

Lyubov came striding through the glittering water. The sub tropically tilted Linden moon was playing in the ripples of water he left in his wake. The king had returned.



“Listen you cheap Mafioso, I have news for you. I have finally sent Steve away. You should be proud of me!”

“I am always proud of you.”

“I know why I could do it. I know why I could do it today. I was in a mood for murder, that's why. Did I tell you that I saw an avatar getting killed yesterday? The killing was with me all day. It was with me deep down in my subconscious. That must have helped me.”

“No, you did not tell me. I did not know that you go to those areas.”

“No, it was not in any area, it was right here on the mall. She was killed by two dogs, and by a swarm of maggots.”

Lyubov was quiet, and then he wrote, “Those maggots are mine.”

“They are yours? I know that you are a crook and a swindler, but you have never admitted to murder before.” My stomach sensed that Vera was impressed.

“It is not murder. The dogs only kill my own robots.”

“You kill your own robots! You are the big mystery man. Why on second Earth would you want to do that?”

“Because that is the most efficient way. The robots don't have a fixed program they run through, they can learn a little. They pick up what other people say and use it in their conversation. They experiment to find the best spiel.”

“And that woman was not good enough at cheating newbies. Is that the reason that you killed her?”

“I did not kill her. The dogs did. But you are right. Probably she had not made enough

money to be allowed to survive. We use a genetic algorithm. If the robots are good at collecting money, they are duplicated. If they suck, they are terminated. The white maggots and the dogs are my terminators. In this fashion, each generation of robots will be a little better than the previous. And over time, I will breed glorious newbie helper robots. It is called evolution. The survival of the fittest.”

“But why don't you just quietly switch off the bad programs instead of making people watch your awful maggot show. Why did you have to tear her heart out?”

“Oh, that, that is for fun.”

Vera was quiet for half a minute, bringing her close to her personal record. She could not know that she would break that record within a day.

I used the rare golden window of silence to ask, “So you don't control the robots yourself?”

“No, that's the beauty of it. I don't have to worry about anything. They are autonomous. They do what they do, and then they send the money to me.”



“So you cannot kill other people. You just kill robots?”

“Yeah. I only kill my own robots.”

Vera woke up.

“Did you call it a genetic algorithm? Like genetic food? You are even worse than Steven.”

Nadeshda said, “I don't like it when you two fight.”

Vera and Lyubov vanished suspiciously close after each other. I was about to sign off, when I got an IM from Nadeshda. “In what town do you live?”

I told her. She answered “Wow! That is not far from my town. Maybe we could meet some day? If you can find the time.”

I did not know what to say, and she was gone.

Before I fell asleep, I was thinking of Nadeshda. I realised that I did not know much about her. She seemed to need only one set of clothes. She has raven black hair, green shirt, a black and white striped shirt. She also wears a silver bracelet. She is tasteful but not impressive.



She does not talk much, but I think that Lyubov likes her. I don't believe that they are together. Not yet. But if they are, it must be a nice change for him after Vera. Whatever Nadeshda is, she is not a drama queen. When the four of us are together, she does not talk much. She does not do anything, she is. A girl's survival strategy.

On the next day I was earlier than usual at Periwinkle Wall. I was hoping that Nadeshda would show up, and indeed she did.

She sat beside me on the red bench, but instead of simply talking to me, she sent me an IM.

“I need money. Can you help me?”

“Why do you need money?”

“I need money. I can't explain.”

So. Nadeshda needs money, and she can't explain. That is very fishy. What is she doing that I don't know about? I have no right to know her secrets, but if she does not even tell me that much, why should I give her anything at all? Or am I being stingy now, as Vera calls it? No, not really. I'll just tell her that I don't have any money. It is true! Of course, I could buy some money at the exchange, but so could she, for Christ's sake.

I was vacillating, and she vanished. I was not going to mention this to anyone.

When Lyubov arrived, he told me that he was angry with Nadeshda.

“That girl is up to something! I am sure that she flirts with someone, without telling me. I know it!”

My avatar didn't blush.

Lyubov continued, “She has been asking me for money, but she refuses to tell me what she wants to use them for.”

“The other day she told that she wanted to buy land.”

“Land, so that's it? She told you? Why didn't she tell me? If she had asked me, I would have given her an island.”

So, you would have given her an island? My dear Lyubov, either you are mad, in love or a big liar. Or all of the above.

Lyubov sat down on the bench.

“There is a boy somewhere. If I find out who it is, I will ban him from Second Life for life.”

“No, that is impossible. Even you can't do that.”

“How do you know?”

“I did not know that you had something with Nadeshda.”

“We don't have a thing. No. She is a strange girl, and she is always so quiet. But she wants to meet me in real life. I'll meet her, and then I will find out what is going on. She must be impressed by me. It's not everyone that rakes in a hundred grand a day.”

“Maybe she is really a retired drill sergeant from the marines.”

“Yes, I have thought of that. But if she is, why would she want to meet me? Of course I won't go to her. She has to come to me, and she will pay her own train fare. A marine would never do that.”

Lyubov ran away to do more of his dark and evil stuff, and then Vera beamed down.

“My husband has returned to me. I believe that he has done her in.”

“What do you mean, who has done whom in? And why?”

“He has killed her, and now he wants to kill me. If I am not here tomorrow and the

day after, you will know that he did the deed. You should be careful too you know.”

“Careful?”

“Yes.”

“What should I be careful about?”

“Just be careful, OK?”

“Vera, you cannot come and tell me things like that, and then shut up. It is not fair that you hint at something, and then do your clam imitation.”

“Do you think it is fair if he kills me tonight?”

“Vera, don't do this to me. Tell me what is wrong. But be serious for once.”

“You don't care for me anyhow. Why don't you just leave me alone?”

Lyubov was back, and after him Nadeshda. She did not take the time to sit down, but just said bluntly to all of us, “I need money.”

Things happened fast. Two black hounds with long vicious fangs leaped over the periwinkle perimeter, and seized Nadeshda. They tore out her heart, and after a few seconds the maggots were crawling all over her flesh. She wrote “I want \u2026 to”, and then she stopped writing. Her heart wriggled a little while one of the hounds ate it, and then it was over.



We were completely quiet for a whole minute. Then Vera said “I should have known her for what she was. She was too amiable to be a real girl.”

At the same time, I got an IM from Vera, “I can't believe it. I thought that Lyubov liked her, and all the time she was just his personal money cow.”

I answered, “I don't think that he knew. You don't expect to be fooled by a robot. That only happens to other people. It only happens to newbies.”

Lyubov logged off without writing a single word. Vera was in a much better mood now, and I suggested to her to join me at one of the secret rooms.

She refused, “Don't you understand why Lyubov does not charge anything for the rooms?”

I answered that I was too stupid to figure that out. She liked the answer, and wrote back that she was not, and that she had guessed why.

“Lyubov never does anything unless he can get money out of it, right?”

“You know him better than I do.”

“Yes Sir, I do. I am sure that his machines were watching us all the time.”

“Peeping Tom machines?”

“Yes.”

She added, “They were collecting data. They were figuring out what works, and what does not work well. They were learning to do it right. He was hoping that his machines would learn to be better at it than we are. So he could corner the escort market. We real life girls would not have a chance against THEM.”

I agreed. That thought was worthy of the Lyubov I knew. I decided that I would not visit those rooms again.

Vera asked, “What was your first spontaneous thought when you realised the truth about Nadeshda?”

“I felt rotten. I felt guilty for not having given her the money when she asked for it.”

“Yes. Me too. She did ask me for money before, and I did not give her any. I felt as if that made me responsible for her death. I thought of her with my heart, not with my head. She was a fine robot, since she could make both of us feel like that.”

“Yeah. But she was not good enough to survive. Survival of the fittest is a beast. Scary, uh? I wonder what their next generation will make us feel.” ☞



THE AVATAR'S STORY

BY MASON DIXON



The first thing was awareness. Not even self awareness. Just awareness of being. It was the strangest thing. One moment, nothing. And the next moment here I was, wearing a white undershirt, jeans and sandals. I had a “boy next door” look and what used to be called a “boys regular” haircut. I don’t know when it used to be called that because I have no memory from before,, before when? I don’t know. One minute nothing and the next minute here I am.

It was very strange at the beginning. I was driven by compulsions that I did not understand and strange things kept happening to me. I threw my arm’s out to my sides in a Da Vinci pose and my clothes started changing. I walked clumsily but hurriedly along, often colliding with others who were just as clumsy as I was. I moved things by levitation and I even jumped into the air and flew. It was all very strange, only I didn’t think it was strange at the time. I didn’t think it was anything at all. I merely experienced the world as it presented itself to me.

Next there was feeling. At, first, there was nothing and then there was something. I can remember my first feeling as though it had just happened. I was standing on a platform with a big blue circle in the middle. Somebody called out “Does anyone have any questions?” I didn’t at first. In fact, I wasn’t sure exactly what a question was. So I just stood there.

“Where can I make money?” somebody asked. I don’t recall the answer.

“Where can I get free clothes,” asked another.

This questions caught my attention, and it caused me to have my first feeling. It was a feeling of self consciousness. I was aware of myself. It wasn’t anything

AVATAR

POSE

MONEY

CLOTHES

JEANS

like a lightning bolt out of the blue. I was more like the pleasant warmth of a hot tub only far more subtle and remote. The clothes I was wearing were just like the clothes that many of the other people were wearing. I felt like a face in the crowd. A nobody. My first feeling was mild embarrassment and a sense of insignificance.

"You can go to the freebie store on Help Island," answered the Mentor. "Or you can look for more freebies at New Citizens Plaza"

Freebies, what are freebies?

The next thing I knew, I was in a grassy area with my clothes going away one moment and different clothes reappearing the next. "Gosh," I thought to myself, "I hope nobody sees me out here in the middle of nowhere changing my clothes." My new found self consciousness was getting to be a problem. But at least there was something. In the beginning there was nothing. But now there was a feeling, a feeling of self reference, a feeling of being real merely by virtue of acknowledging my own existence. But my philosophical musings were cut short.

"Do you know were the freebie store is," asked a voice from out of nowhere.

I did! I did know where the freebie store was! I had just been there. I knew something and it was something of value. It was something that somebody else wanted to know. But who wanted to know? I looked down at the chat line. It was LouiseMay Alcott. And she was asking me a question that I knew the answer to.



"The freebie stores are just on the other side of that map of NCI Plaza," I answered. "They have a lot of good stuff. If you need any help with any of the stuff, let me know. I am new and there is a lot I don't know. But, I will help if I can."

"I am new too," she replied. "It is bewildering here. That's for the help."

"Thanks for the help," she had said. I did something of value. It made me feel as though I had value. Now I had two feelings – one was an awareness of myself and the second was a good feeling about that self of which I had just become aware.

And then, it got even better. I met a friend.

I was standing there in the plaza with no idea what to do next when a word appeared on the chat line. It said "Hello". At first I ignored it. Why would anybody speak to me? Then the word appeared again and this time my name followed.

It said, "Hello, Mason"

Mason? That is my name. That is who I am. Mason is the guy who felt embarrassed about his clothes. Mason is the guy who helped somebody and felt good about it.

"Are you talking to me?" I asked with complete incredulity.

"Yes," the voice replied. "You look as lost as me."

We began talking about how strange this world was. We shared feelings of being

overwhelmed, unsure of what to do, and excited to pursue things of which we were as yet unaware. We talked for quite a while, right in front of everybody else. But everyone else ignored us. After a while my new found friend said she had to go. She had exploring to do. She was going away. I felt a sense of loss, a sense of emptiness. But then she offered Friendship.

“What is this?” I asked.

“It is so we can find each other again,” she replied.

I looked on her calling card. It said Dolly Delphis. What a lovely name. I felt warm. I felt connected. I felt like I was part of the world. I had a friend. It was not such a big unfriendly world any more. I had one person who cared about me.

Over the next few days I learned how to get around. I learned how to use the search capability. I learned about landmarks and teleporting. I learned how to find free clothes. And I learned how to keep my inventory from becoming a god awful mess. It was exciting. But one day the excitement ebbed and I was sitting on Help Island reflecting on what I had learned and wondering what was the point of it all, when a voice appeared on the chat line.

“Hello, Mason.” It said.

It had barely caught my eye. My mind was on other things. It flipped by and I had to pop up the history window to see who as said it. It was Dolly!! My friend, Dolly!

“How are you, Dolly?” I asked.

“I am well, Mason,” she replied.

“You look different,” I said.

“I’ve done a makeover,” she explained.

“What is a makeover,” I asked a little embarrassed for not knowing.

“Oh, you know,” she began, “new shape, new skin, new hair, new clothes.”

She really did look good. I was feeling a little inadequate.

“Where did you get the stuff?” I asked.

“I bought it,” she answered and paused.

“And, I can see you haven’t changed much,” she giggled.

Again, I felt embarrassed. There was so much I didn’t know. And now my only friend was way out of my class. I felt like giving up. But, I mustered up my nerve and asked, “Where did you get the money?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, “it was just there. Maybe you have some too. Let’s go shopping and see.”

Well the next hour was an agony of choices. I wanted to defer to her on everything because I wanted to look good to her. On the other hand, I felt it was important to be my self. Be my self. What an interesting idea. What is my self like. What does it mean to be yourself in a world where



everything is changeable? I was pondering this problem as I had found myself pondering many problems lately. I felt I was coming into my own some how. I was developing, perhaps creating a sense of identity. I didn't really know who I was but in many cases I knew who I wasn't. And I was connected. I had a friend and a lot of people on Help Island whose names I knew. We said good morning to each other. We said good to see you again and welcome back. We were connected. I was being defined internally and externally. But, my reverie was interrupted.

"Are you going to buy those shoes or are you just going to stand there?" Dolly giggled. "You are the daydreamer if ever I saw one."

"Sorry," I apologized, coming out of my reverie.

"BTW, where are you from?" she asked.

From? I had no idea. I had never thought about it before. I didn't now what to say. But somehow words appeared in the chat line. "I am from the Eastern US" they said. It looked like I had said them. But I hadn't said anything at all. This was very strange. But



before I could think about it too deeply she replied.

"I am from UK, London."

I was from the US and my friend was from London. We were an international couple. And couple we were. Over the next two weeks we went everywhere together. We went to discos and bars. We went sightseeing. We went shopping. We hung out together on Help Island. It was wonderful. I was filled with a feeling of warmth, of fullness, of emotional satisfaction. Every time I came into consciousness I would check my friend's list to see if she was on. If she wasn't on I would sit in loneliness until she was on. Some times I would just go away and come back again later. And if she was on then my heart would fill with joy. If she was not I would feel the pain of emptiness and despair again. And then one day the unthinkable happened.

"I won't be able to see you again for a while," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked feeling panic welling up inside of me.

"Break is over and I have to go back to school. I don't have access to my own computer at school the way I do at home. But I have really enjoyed spending time with you. And I hope you are still around when I come back."

And then she disappeared. She went away and she never came back. The vivid colors around me turned gray. The sun went behind a cloud. I sat there unable to form a coherent thought. For days I just moped around Help Island. I talked with other people who had similar experiences. It helped but not enough. I hurt and I was

empty. I overheard somebody talking about a philosophy group and how they meet regularly to discuss things. I asked what the discussions were about. I was told that they just sit around talking trying to make sense out of things.

“Well, I have things I need to make sense out of,” I thought.

So I joined the group. I was not really all that interested in philosophy but I needed to do something rather than sit around on Help Island and mope. A few days later I got a notice from the group. There was going to be a discussion about some guy named Descartes and how you know you really exist. What a silly topic! But, it was still better than moping around all day on Help Island.

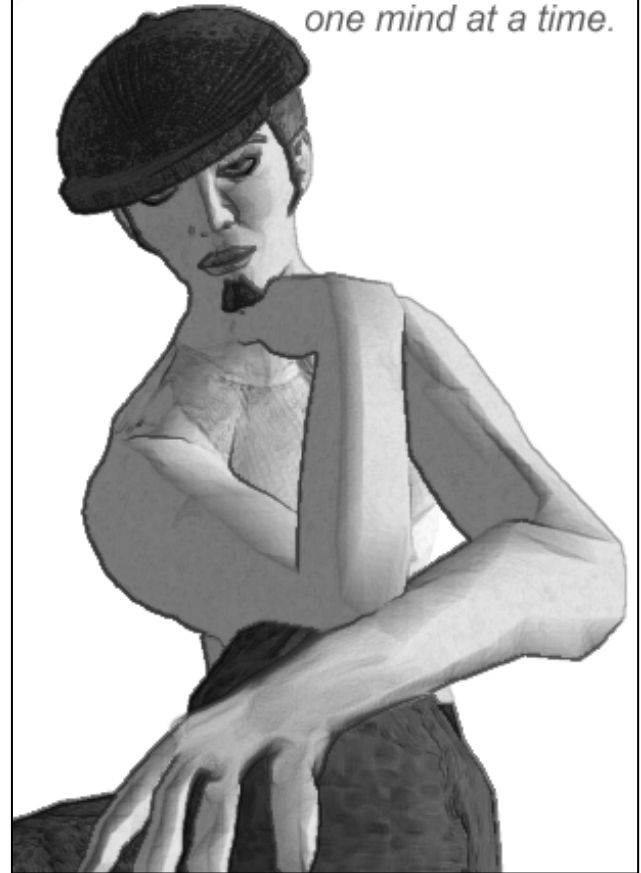
It turns out that this Descartes fellow had some interesting things to say. He knows that he exists for real because he can doubt the fact that he exists. If he can doubt then somebody must be doing the doubting. So, he concluded, “I doubt therefore I am”. Fortunately he cleaned it up a little and changed it to “I think therefore I am”. They even translated it into Latin, “Cogito ergo sum”. Pretty classy stuff. During the discussion I thought to myself “I hurt therefore I am”. I wonder what Descartes would have done with that.

Descartes was pretty clever guy though. He said that his consciousness might be an illusion. He said that his mind might be controlled by some evil genius who was just making him believe he really existed. His thoughts might not be his own and his actions might be controlled by some entity about which he was unaware. What a silly idea. I went back to Help Island and joined my friends. ↻



Thothica

An online community for the Arts & Sciences
 connecting people to people,
one mind at a time.



HAPPY THOUGHT

A PLAY BY LICENTIOUS MALADY

An avatar ("Av") touches a statue of a hospital bed. A message asks permission to animate the avatar. She/He clicks on OK . . .

Av is transported high in the air. A hospital bed rezzes (appears) and Av is laid on it, covered by a thin blanket. His/her hands are at his/her sides, resting on top of the blanket. Next to the bed appears a table with flowers and a heart monitor. There's a regular beep sound effect. A young woman in a suit with her hair up appears on a chair. She reaches out and takes Av's hand. She speaks to Av and you hear her words (instead of seeing text appear on the screen). They are touched with sadness, which she bravely tries to conceal.

YOUNG WOMAN

Hi Dad. It's me, Elizabeth. I hope you can hear me. The doctors told me that even though you're not responding, there's a chance that you can still hear. Mom has been beside you every day since the stroke. I got here as quickly as I could.

Dad, please don't go. Fight this thing. You're the life and soul of this family. When you're not there, Mom goes to pieces. All she'll eat is a boiled egg and a cup of tea. And Jester just sits in his spot by the front window, waiting for you to come home.

BED

HOSPITAL

FLOWERS

SUIT

TEA

YOUNG WOMAN (cont'd)

you can hear me, please try.
Open your eyes or move your
fingers. We love you. We
want you back.

Do you remember how we used
to play Peter Pan whenever I
was home sick? I was always
Wendy and you played all the
other parts. You would make
me laugh so much that I
forgot I was sick. Remember
what you told me? The key to
getting better is the same as
what makes you fly. You have
to have a happy thought.
Remember how you used to
pester me about what my happy
thought was and I would never
tell you? I want to tell you
now. Maybe it will help you
get better too.

When I was little I remember
you and Mom coming home late
from a party. You were
singing and carrying on so
much that I woke up and
tiptoed over to the top of
the stairs. Mom and the
babysitter were trying to
hush you, but Mom kept
getting the giggles.

*The woman stands and changes to a
little girl with straight, shoulder
length hair parted in the middle.
She is bare foot and dressed in a
plain white nightie. Her voice
remains the same.*

YOUNG WOMAN

You saw me on the stairs and boomed, 'See Jenn, Lizzie's not asleep. She wants to join the party!' You held out your arms and I ran down the stairs and jumped into them.

Av is raised out of the bed. The hospital equipment disappears and the little girl jumps into his/her arms. Av holds her in the traditional dance position. The little girl's feet hang in the air. As the woman talks, the two start dancing a tipsy waltz.


YOUNG WOMAN

The alcohol on your breath was enough to make me giddy, but there was a wild happiness about you that was much more intoxicating. As you spun me around we bounced off the walls and furniture, laughing and laughing."

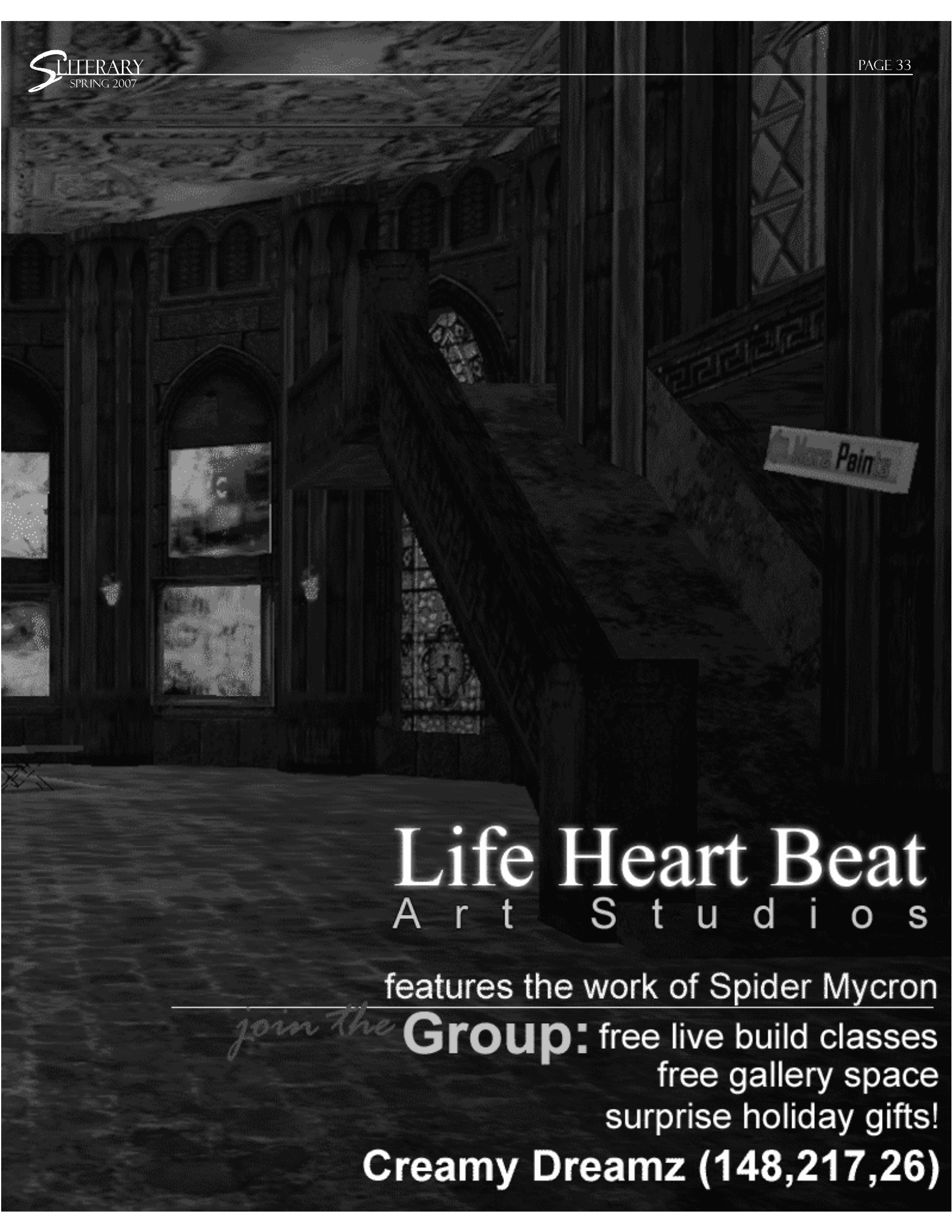
The two spin faster.

YOUNG WOMAN

Finally, you collapsed on the floor with me on top of you, still laughing.

The little girl disappears. Av is returned to his/her original position standing next to the statue. Before releasing the avatar, the voice finishes with: "That's my happy thought. Daddy, please don't go." 





Life Heart Beat

A r t S t u d i o s

features the work of Spider Mycron

join the **Group:** free live build classes
free gallery space
surprise holiday gifts!

Creamy Dreamz (148,217,26)

BLACK BETRAYAL PART I

BY MING ZHOU



Kip and I met on a large expanse of sand and gray pixels. It was a beach somewhere. Not a nude beach or a beach attached to a casino or nightclub. Not even a real beach, really. Just a solo large inland parcel textured to look of bright sand and vast and empty beach skies. A lonely beach. One that I'd believed no one knew about except me.

I was gazing out at the beach's perpetual sunset, textured out in the distance along the parcel's property lines, when I heard a familiar clattering break the normal silence of the music-less land. Turning around, I saw a blurry avatar—Kip—with unrezzed gray parts attached all over him. With a sweeping motion, he finished airtyping.

I stared at him in the awkward silence of the lag between the end of his typing AO and the arrival of his message. Right-clicking, I forced his textures to rez.

The grayness that was all over him disappeared into panes of shiny blue and white metal. He was a knight in shining armor. The gray blob on his head rezzed into a white metal mask, a shield for his face.

"Nice beach," He said, "Quiet, picture-beautiful, perfect for introspection."

I smiled at him, wishing to return to my solitude, yet longing for companionship.

He airtyped. I lagged, then received his words, "Mind if I share the beach?"

I nodded. Even on SL, where communication is supposedly all verbal, I still act like my real life self. I tend to resort to gestures instead of speech. I'm taciturn, keeping my words locked up in my head, along with the rest of me.

I want to trust the world, but... I can't.

“How are you, tonight?” He asked the usual smalltalk, “Where are you from?”

I zoomed my camera back into the sunset, leaving my avatar and his out of view. I answered him with half a mind, the other half still not yet ready to leave the reminiscences I’d been eschewing when I was alone.

Just yesterday, I had broken up with a man I’d been engaged to. We had our whole lives planned out, and all of a sudden, I found that whatever future I’d envisioned him and me in could only be a fantasy, if not a vicious self-lie.

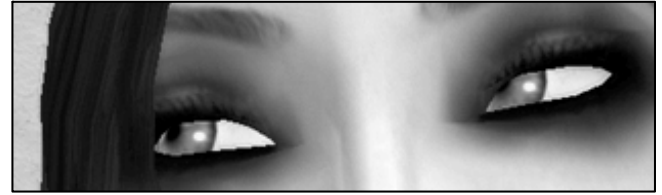
He was drunk when that fatal conversation started. In hindsight, I’d have to give him that benefit of the doubt, at least. He couldn’t have said it if sober, even if he...

But, he’d meant it; he’d believed in it, and that was the part of him I couldn’t change. It was the part of him that made him run, and the part of him that made him return my call, continue the second date we had so long ago, which would lead to the third, and the whole series—spawn the rest of our relationship.

It started with an offhand comment, to his brother, who was visiting. They were waiting for a show on one of his channels. The hour before the show started, a Cantonese news station had booked broadcast.

I was cooking, at the time. But, I’d set the timer for everything, and nothing would be ready for at least half an hour. I’d decided to join my fiancé and his brother, my brother-in-law-to-be.

I guess I might have approached them from behind.



“Why is it that Asian people always have ‘em flabby lidless eyes and snout nose?” My fiancé said to his brother after taking a heavy gulp of the dark stuff in his glass. “It’s ugly. It’s dis-a-pleasing to look at it. Freddy,” He said to his brother, “Y’oughta go give ‘em all free corrective plastic surgery so they can learn to look normal or somethin’.”

I froze in midstep, inches away from sinking onto the couch. He had his back to me, but Freddy had seen my approach.

My fiancé turned around, the clue on Freddy’s face much too evident.

“Ming!” He jumped, “Darlin’, why... why I didn’t know you’d be a-joining us for the TV. Thought you’d be a-cookin’ down there.”

In hindsight, I think he knew then that he’d said something wrong, something that he knew I shouldn’t have heard. But...

“Ming, darlin’. Sit down, why dontja? Standin’ there like that all stiff with yer arm on yer hips must be a-tirin’ for ye.”

I sat, as he said, barely making the edge of the couch, on the other end, away from him. I closed my eyes. The clock ticked. I breathed. And the clock ticked again. And I breathed. Far away, a Cantonese voice droned on, the words fading together, the language totally lost to me despite common ancestry.

“Gosh darnit. Freddy, why can’t they have some overseas emergency some other day?”

Opening my eyes, I saw that it was ten after. The news reporter droned on, her supposedly agitated words sounding the same to me as her normal words; the dialect's rough sounds never made any sense to me because, though my grandparents were from Hong Kong, they hadn't bothered to teach my parents the language, and neither had my own. My parents and I—we were of tan skin, jet-black hair, and deep brown almond-shaped eyes, and yet the only language at our command was English.

We were American, my grandparents insisted, the declaration which my parents echoed. "What is an American?" I'd asked my grandparents. "Born here, in America, speak language no accent. That American," My grandmother had said with definite authority in her voice. "You are all of that... Thus, you are..." My dying grandfather's frail voice had echoed her, fading with a note of proud satisfaction, "American."

"Hell, Freddy. It's goddam eight twenty. Don't you just wanna smack that jabber'in foreign flatface so she'd just shut the fuck up?"

I felt my eyes mist up, suddenly. The view of my fiancé became blurred, his face fading into a white smear topped with a smudge of thinning blonde hair, "Larry?"

"Gosh darnit. We already know that there's a tsunami and goddamn Katrina or somethin' goin' down down in that rathole o'the world. So—"

"Larry?" I said louder.

"Just shut the fuck up."

"Larry." I stated, my voice fading, becoming meek again, "Do... do I look like a

f-foreign f-flatface to you?"

"Ah, now... Shucks, Ming, why you all o'a sudden gone ask me a question like that?"

"Because... Be-because you just called her... Because my face is flat—like the newsreporter's."

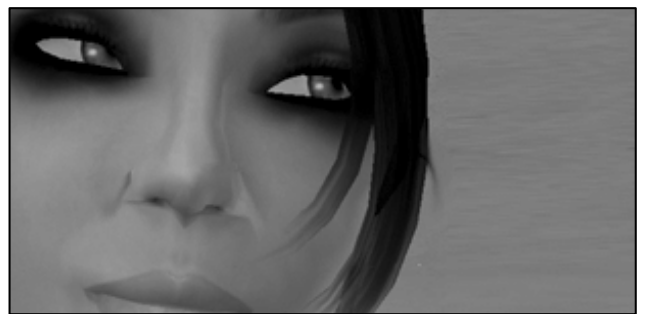
"Yeah, and yer eyes are like her's, too." A weird smile spread across his face; his voice grew louder, "Lidless, and when y'close 'em, they just disappear in yer skin. And you ain't got no nose!" He screamed, suddenly, but it turned into some freak laughter.

And suddenly it was dark. Blackout. The florescent stickers by the windows cast an eerie green glow around everyone. Freddy's brows were furrowed, his expression frozen in shocked disbelief. Larry was scowling, and I was... I was edging onto the real question...

"Larry... Our children... what... what would you think of our kids? They... t-they might have any combination of our features. They... t-they might have my... my flat nose, m-my eyes."

"Ah, Ming. Com'on." He took another swig of the dark stuff in the glass, draining it, "After a couple'o generations, they'd look jus' fine."

I struggled to hold my tears back, "And me... What about me?"



“You’re fine. Darlin’ don’t worry. You’ve got a fine body, and it’d stay that way... not like Freddy and my ma or grandma.

“It’s like obesity is a guaranteed trait among white womenfolk, but it ain’t linked in all you Asians. Our kids’d get that. The good skinny, fine body trait.”

“Was... was that why we... you...” Tears had started flowing when he referred to me as “all you Asians.” I started shaking uncontrollably, biting my lips, attempting to hide the emotions from my face.

“Hey, now, Ming...” Freddy started, the shock in him disappearing into a sudden coherent grasp of the situation, “Calm down there. Larry, now, don’t mind him. He ain’t sober right now, and well, you know—”

I maintained my calm for as long as I could, forcing my feet to carry me, to move, rhythmically, as if a soldier’s march, forward, onwards, away from the house, away from the blackout, away from Larry, away from all you Asians—

“You know what? Nothing here ever changes.” I shook my head in RL, forcing myself away from my memories. Back to the beach of sand and gray pixels. The sudden silence after a sudden rustle of clattering typing. The text-rendered voice of the avatar next to me.



“Yeah.” I said, instead of nodding.

“I think that’s what I like about this place...” Kip said, “In a real beach, even if the sun remains in sunset forever, they’d be people—others. They’ll color the beach their own shade, litter here, there. The beach changes, degrades. Pristine white sands sullied into a sheer dark pollution.

“But, not here. Here, the fine terraformed sand stays the same, forever and ever. Pristine white, always.”

My avatar smiled at him, and again, I said, “Yeah,” instead of nodding.

“Yeah, well, this is a good place to brood about things. That’s what I come here to do. And it’s weird, now, huh? Most people come on SL to meet others, the whole social networking thing. Yeah, well, sometimes I think maybe I’m antisocial at times or something. I just feel like coming on SL to be alone...”

“Me too.” I said simply, as I camera-zoomed to see both my avatar and his sitting next to each other, center-screen.

“Well, I usually come here to think about the things that happen this last week. It’s nice. It feels like I’m really pondering about my life on the beach. And I need that, ‘cause there’s a lot of stuff that requires me to think about afterwards, especially with my job.

“But, I do. I mean, I really believe in my job, and I really do believe that what I do matters, that I make the world a better place. Someone has to protect us.”

We were quiet for a while. I assumed he was a police officer, and I guess, out in the field, he’s had more than his share of life’s usual.

His avatar's head turned to me, and he said, "Yeah, but this week, though, I'm here to think about something else. It's just... the most unexpected thing happens to you. Like, a week ago, you'd never even think such a thing could happen. Like, you'd maybe planned out the rest of your life excluding this one thing that would happen. 'Cause, once it happens, the rest of your plan would be... instantly exterminated."

"I broke up with my fiancé this week." I admitted, not knowing why I said it in hindsight. I guess, at the moment, it just felt... relevant.

"Me too," he said.

We were quiet for a while, and then he admitted, "We just weren't meant for each other. We... we didn't believe in the same things. No... Not at all."

I nodded, tears starting to well up in my eyes.

"I mean... I loved her. She was beautiful, but... she didn't..."

Maybe because I'd started crying, I imagined him crying, in RL, at the moment.

"It feels like she's died. It feels like the person I loved more than anyone else in the world died."

"Yes," I agreed, wiping away a stream of tears in RL.

"But, she's dead... only to you."

"Yes... And, you want to change him—her, I guess, for you—but, you can't."

"Precisely! It's just this one thing..."

"The one thing that makes him who he is. He'd be a whole other person, otherwise..."

"Yes!"

"And, it's strange you never knew that a-

bout him... until now!"

"LOL!" His avatar smiled, "And you sit back on this virtual beach, and you wonder how in blazes you could possibly not find this most crucial of all things out... for all the years you've known each other... Until now!"

I laughed back. I don't remember the rest of our conversation, but it'd been light, afterwards, both of us trying to move on, to forget the tragedy that both our lives crossed the past week. I zoomed in so that our faces were center-screen. His shiny knight's armor head and my long blonde-haired white-skinned Caucasian SL self—the self I secretly wanted to be in RL. I took a SLPic.

We parted, on mutual grounds, friends, both having cheered the other up, for the night. But, our romance was slow to develop. Whenever I dropped by the beach, he was just... always there. Saturday nights. And, we'd talk. Tangent things. We'd always leave smiling, laughing, even, at about 4 AM. Both of us mutually tired, needing the three hours of shut-eye before we wake up for work the next day.

The months flew by, and though we'd never officially schedule a date, we'd always just "accidentally" run into each other on the same beach. And eventually, it became an expectation, and when he wasn't there one night, I found myself disappointed.



As I sat alone on the beach, I felt this weird pang in my heart. I laughed bitterly, as I chided myself in RL for being heartbroken over not meeting an av. Silly, I'd said to myself. But, I waited alone until 4 AM, our usual hour, with this uncanny longing that he would sign on. The next time, I decided to skip the beach and go exploring.

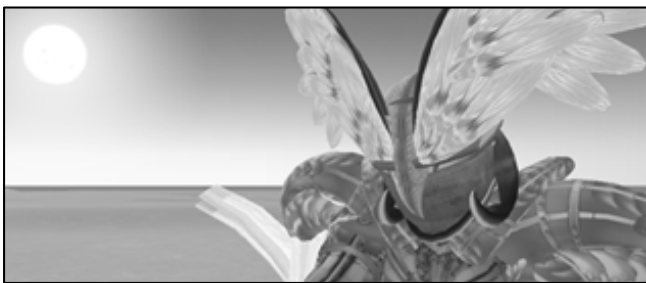
Two weeks after he broke our unofficial string of dates, our relationship became official. It was March 15th, the Ides of March.

"It just kinda crept up on us, you know?" Kip said to me one day. "It's inevitable, Belle." He said to my blonde-haired blue-eyed avatar, "I missed you last week."

I didn't bother to mention that I'd missed him the previous week.

"And, it felt... well, I found out that I really like you, that I'd like to get to know you on a different level... That I'd like to ask you out on a date—officially," He smiled at me.

I wanted to sign on with the knowing certainty that he's on, too, and would stay on. Ever since I added him to my Friend's list when we first met, I found that he usually kept to haphazard on-times. Signing on and off several times in an hour's span. Saturday nights was the only time he signed on for several hours consecutively. Always, but except for that one time... I smiled back



at him, "I accept."

"Then, let's go!" He disappeared in a poof of particles, his teleportation AO.

An instant later, I got a teleportation request saying, "Join me in Heaven."

I arrived 300 m in the sky, landing in the middle of a bunch of gray rectangular prims. Clicking on a few, semi-transparent cloud textures started to load. My lag bar was on red, but I tried to imagine everything fully loaded, "Great clouds," I lied.

"My brother made a study of clouds."

"Cool. Did he make these textures?"

"He's dead. They killed him."

"Ah... I'm sorry. Wow, the Roman columns just loaded."

"Yes, welcome to Olympus!"

A bunch of prims would remain gray, the best that my snazzy five-year old computer could handle, as he took me on a tour of Heaven. His heaven was beautiful. Gilded gold beams stretched over the revival columns, jungle green vines dangled, their curly ends jutting out. A tall stone waterfall stood in the middle of the promenade, rushing water down its four sides. As I zoomed in, aqueducts rezzed, a bunch of long gray linked prims that stretched outwards from the stone waterfall.

He led me to a gazebo on the edge. I had a sudden fear of heights, as my av came close to falling. He gave me a flight feather, and donning it, I quickly floated back up.

"Like gods, we are, Belle, my dear." He gave me ambrosia, "We peer down at the rest of the world from above. We look down..."

I accepted his ambrosia, "From the fluffy white clouds," I completed his sentence, not

admitting that half of the clouds have yet to load for me. I'd probably crash if all textures loaded; his heaven seemed to have a fetish for using distinct textures for every single tiny cloud prim.

"Yes... Yes, white... and black. 'Course, there's always Hell for the latter. Want to... Want to visit it?"

He disappeared, in an instant, a bunch of particles rezzing. He sent me a teleport request reading, "Join me in Hell."

Unlike, Heaven, Hell was dark. But, at least, there wasn't a profusion of heavily textured cloud prims. Taking a look around, I felt a chill run through me, in real life. I ignored it, assuming he was something of a history buff specializing in a certain pain-inflicting kind of historical machinery.

"Wow..." I said, otherwise speechless at the torture devices, aplenty. Slowly, the many parts of each device rezzed. I camera-zoomed in on one of them, amazed at the details. The handles, the plugs, the tiny cogs in the machines. "Wow... Let me guess... you're a historian."

"I am. But, really, now, I'm a knight. A White Knight."

"LOL! You know, I've never seen your avatar's face beneath your skull attachment."

"Nor have I yours. But, I am certain that you are as beautiful as your avatar."

I smiled, wishing that were true. In real life, I had dark eyes, jet black hair. My eyelids were the Asian kind that you could not easily implement using SL's avatar shape features. In my Second Life, I was blonde and Caucasian. Like my ex. But in real life, I wasn't white and beautiful. I changed the

topic, "Wow, these are great builds. So very detailed!"

"Yes, I like accuracy. I get to build devices like this in my RL job, when I'm off from field work. I actually like doing this more than going out into the city. But, I have to do what's right. I believe in it."

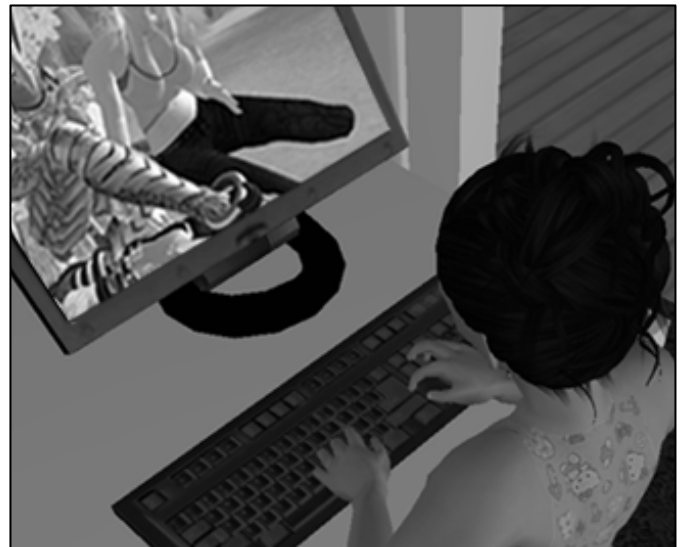
Again, a chill ran through me. I shook it off, "It must have taken forever to get the prims to align so well..."

"Nah, I use an external program, then import my models in-world. There's a nice plugin for Blender. This guy named John Hurliman made it. It's called Prim.Blender. It's pretty awesome."

"Wow... wowie!"

And so it started—the tech talk. Our first official date turned into a tech exchange, as we swapped methods and tricks in Blender and Photoshop. It was great, a creator's haven, really. I was happy to find that he loved building—as did I.


I went to extreme efforts to make SL feel as real as RL, and I found that he did, too.



But, for me, it was escapism. It was the wish to transplant realities—to live in SL instead. In SL, where I had full freedom to choose who I want to be, where I could choose to look exactly as I want...

We ended our first official date with conception of a mutually fun build we'd both worked together on our next date. We planned on prim-sculpting a giant statue of a baby.

And so, our relationship started solidly, you might say. After the baby, we built, together, a great many structures in his Heaven. And then... the palace. The giant behemoth of a structure: 1200 prims, 50 m tall, statues of Greek heroes and gods serving as columns upholding a gilded gold roof, marbled reflective flooring, multi-prim flexi-curtains draped here and there, fluttering in the wind.

But, our relationship was a platonic one. Until... 

TO BE CONTINUED...



moving inspirational life-changing brilliant g
true maybe fictionalized accounts and events
the lives of avatars, the pains and joys of sLi
the story of a romance great betrayal tears
changing dynamic lives & unfold new experiences
unique blend new before heard or seen
epic stories that help us see a mouse
worlds of our world forms upon words unto...
happy
is unhappy
the driving heartbeat of raw truths and myths
a brand new literary genre:
the fiction of the metaverse

STORIES

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

We want *you* to

write
for
SLiterary

<http://sliterary.com/submissions>

