

The Narcolept
by Ocean and John C. Benigno

Jabes woke in a warm mass of yellowish ooze, his thighs and arms and abdomen linked to clusters of slender brown fibers. Hands pulled him, cold hands, but the ooze clung on. As though trying to draw him back, into those last few moments: the cold flash of diodes behind Janice's gentle smile, the tug of wires along his scalp. Perforated ceiling and surgical steel paneling. Her hand slipping from his—then the plexi cover sliding over and the deep exhale, sour sedative gas flooding the cryostasis tank.

His first words came out croaked and crackling, "Where's the tank?"

A woman reached to push a wiggling ovoid into his throat. He waved her away. A nurse? She wore what looked like a slimy teal-green suit, skin-tight, like a wetsuit. "This is your tank, Jabes Fletcher. We've been working on you."

"How's that?"

"Fixing your organs. And muscles. They've been dormant a while."

"The Tiber. Was a vaccine developed? Have I been treated?"

"The Banks'll fill it all in for you."

His body didn't feel like it had been in cryo-sleep for—how long? The nurse helped him out of the tank. He craned his stiff neck back at it. "That's not what I went into."

The nurse explained that the entire batch had been relocated from the institute not long after he had been put under.

"When was that?"

"225 years ago."

There had been some threat to the cryostock, she said. He didn't pursue it. She led him to the nanoshowers. No nozzles or levers—Jabes just stood there and found himself instantly unslimed. She handed him a glistening unisuit. He pulled it on. It shimmered as though it were coated in slime, but proved undamp. The nurse started walking away; he followed. The jellytanks lined the long hall, membranous concavities open and empty like the mouths of sea-things. Other people in similar skin-tight wetsuits came and went, clusters of them near each other but not talking. The nurse led him to a row of tanks still lidded by their carapaces. He scanned the numerals above them. Ninety-six still sealed, and ninety-five—there it was, sterilized and gleaming, open like a jaw. "That was me, huh?"

"That was you."

"Is Janice still..."

"The Banks will straighten things out."

"You're waking us up sequentially."

"You'll stay in the Davies pods. Up primary tube and out seventeen east. All surviving cryostock are located in Davies cell. It's up from the Banks. Spend some time in the archives,

Jabes Fletcher. They'll help you reacquaint." She sent him out with a packet of dermal patches. A few strips of blue ones, for metabolic regulation, and one silver one which seemed to be some kind of communication/crediture device. Probably the people of this time have had them installed embryonically for decades, he thought. He slid them in a pocket of the suit and forgot them. Okay, the Banks then...

Jabes stopped various people in wetsuits along the way to ask directions. They pointed blindly and he followed a series of glowing jellytubes to an outgrowth of expansive organ-like bulbs which the wetsuits identified as the Jancks KnowBanks. He teetered, his center of gravity confused by the tunnels' arrhythmic swelling. Pliant tubules extended to support his still-recovering limbs. As Jabes entered the bulbs, a woman clothed in an ocher wetsuit approached him. "How can I help?" she asked. Her eyes, looking straight at him, seemed to be looking at something else. He asked to be directed to the 22nd century medical archives. She looked at him blankly. More people dressed in mustard-colored wetsuits guided him to a jellyport, but were little help after that. Rows of skull-sized nooks, other wetsuits in some of them, kneeling. He stuck his face in goo. Retinal stimulus flood. Almost before he was aware of his own train of thought he found himself probing files. Randomly, at first, but soon adapting his attention to the branching tunnelways and burrows of the holographic dataflow. His eye movements guided him through fractal congeries of sounds and images. He hunted for newsreels on the Tiber, but could find no mention of it. Nothing, no record of the worldwide infection. Had the history of the pandemic been erased? Jabes dove into an immersion in newsfeeds, music, movie clips, security camera compilations, visual data representations. No reference to the Tiber whatsoever. Confused, his attention began to drift. Coiled images reeling him backward through time to the 21st century. Some of the images seemed almost familiar... One file in particular caught his attention, a music video. A dark-haired woman twisting in a hurricane. Oklahoma farmhouses. Hyenas—double hyenas, symmetrical, as though viewing themselves in a mirror. Wisp-like women hunched on their toes, their mouths open. A single woman stepping through the storm—Janice! What was his wife doing in a 21st century music video? He pulled his face out of the goo, looked around, stuck his head back in. Janice. But her teeth...

Shudders of recognition. As far as Jabes could remember, he had lived a solid two-thirds of his life expectancy before the diagnosis came in. Strain Tiber, one of the new degeneratives. The medics had screened for the segment of the infected populace who could tolerate a deep sleep. He qualified, they offered it. Janice had said take it. Sleep for a couple years, until they could work out the gene splicing. It sounded better than the pictures leaking from the subcontinent. He preferred to keep his flesh on his body, where it belonged. The clinic seemed clean. They had to act fast, before Tiber went exponential. But...The Tiber, Janice, his whole career: synthetic. Every piece of that world synthetic. Even himself, the self he had known himself to be, had just been a fantasy character. The 22nd century had not held a life for him, other than a long, long sleep. A cold resentment began trembling in his marrows, a blooming sense of displacement. Jabes pushed it down, submerging himself in the swirl of 21st century stimulus. This was his time period. He knew it, though he could barely touch the anchors of his real life.

He leaned forward into the conductor and hunted through the filesphere for more of the videos. Rooms diverging onto rooms like the splitting of mitochondria. Faint tactility of his head

enclosed in jelly. And there she was. *The cryo-programmers: they modeled my wife after the videostar JaniceJanice!* The feeling of filling up with hot blood. Yeah, he'd been crazy about her; she had starred in a paranormal teen romance that he had been fixated on for months. In fact, his first masturbatory experiences had involved the pop star with her signature feature: the grinning hyena teeth implants. JaniceJanice, grinning, wearing scarcely anything. Just some sort of porcupine-looking getup over the crotch and across the breasts. He remembered thinking as an adolescent that JaniceJanice kept her chest covered because it was disfigured. All women's bras later held such trepidation for him—they might contain monstrosities. Those tricky, tricky programmers: of course she would have fiercely strong psychic foundations in him. With a slight suctioning release Jabes leaned back out of the face cradle. He wasn't infected—there was no Tiber. No wife named Janice—just an overworked corporate drudge. The bulbous formations of the room pressed in on him. He had discovered two lives. One that he could remember, that was a programmed hallucination, and one that he could barely recall, that was—it must have been—his own. The few recollections were a bitter dream: the flash of a mother's face, the clean apartment, the arrangement he'd made with OraCorp—but these memories seemed insignificant. How flimsy both lives seemed.

The viscous face cradle. A spherically symmetrical hall of mirrors like a kaleidoscope. JaniceJanice enters, blending and merging with her hyenas; they dissolve and reformulate themselves in hybrid shapes... He almost remembered it. The vertigo settled itself down on him, a not entirely unpleasant narcotic cloud. The hyenas laughed and their teeth were everywhere...JaniceJanice laughed...the heat inside Jabes drained away and Jabes couldn't help it—he laughed too, a laugh from long ago, a rootlet extending into the heart of a boy of over two centuries ago. His body hadn't laughed in—how long?—it felt marvelous. He laughed and the hyenas shook and JaniceJanice shook and around his face the transistor jelly jiggled. His cryo-life began to take on the aspect of a pleasant dream.

“Take the Squeeze out to lower precinct. Go past the Sellway. The sleep pods are up above the Rows.”

Jabes careered unsteadily through a chute whose inner surface gave under his footfalls. A pore dilated in a wall at the terminus of the chute. He ventured out.

It took some time for him to register what he saw. No ground. No automobiles. Tiers of soft-looking platforms, inset organic structures that looked like something he'd seen under a microscope in botany class. But there were people in various skinsuits, many with jellyfish-like globs enveloping their heads, moving in and out of translucent membranes. Some floating by way of what appeared to be inflated glands of subcutaneous gas. Clusters of them stood around, mesmerized, staring off into nothing. Patches under their skin glowed. One could make out catheters and colostomy bags on many. It seemed as though they were viewing gateways into other realms. The buildings were arranged in layered tessellations of capsules, like the pericarps of some gluey tropical fruit. Sphincters opened and closed in the buildings, discharging clusters of entranced wetsuit-people.

With some struggle and redirection Jabes managed to navigate the translucent walkways to Davies sector, and up into the array where the pods lay nested like eggs clustered by some amphibial architect. Modular, cramped quarters, reminiscent of the modern Japanese style

of his era. Most of them empty, their jaws open like bleached venus fly traps. A man in a half-unzipped wetsuit sitting upright in one. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You fresh out.”

It wasn’t a question. But Jabes said, “Yeah.”

“I’m Cole.”

“Jabes. These buildings are really something. Though I guess they probably shouldn’t be called that, they look more grown than built.”

“Oh they’re built all right. From the genes up. All the glea.”

“Glea?”

“The glunk you see everywhere. Mesoglea. Mesohyl. Jellyconduit.” Cole was half bald and looked to be somewhere in his fifth decade. “It’s like gettin born, innit? Into the afterlife.”

“Where is everyone?”

“Who?”

“There were ninety-four before me.”

“No kid, not ninety-four. Lots didn’t make it.”

“What’s that mean, ‘didn’t make it?’”

“Deliquesced. Not everyone survives subzero glycol bath for a century. Come out bone relish. And some revive so freezer-burned they’re stuck permanently down in Medical. There’s a couple dozen of us though. Only a few stay here. Folks move on. But you stay as long as you want.”

“I...don’t know what I want.”

“Yeah give it some time. They’ll mostly leave you alone. Oh we were a curiosity for a while, when they first started thawing us out. Not that they know why they’re thawing us, or why anything for that matter. Whatever happens, it all comes from up top. So why in God’s hell they’re thawing now your guess is as good as mine. They leave us to fend for ourselves. Zero attention span. Fourteen had financing from back when he was frozen—invested in trust by four generations of investors—and he banked it for all us Thaws before he went for the gene reconstruction, so we’re set for all the protein injections we can stand.”

“What gene reconstruction?”

“To handle the nonatmosphere up in the Torus.”

Jabes looked at him.

“This orbiting construction thing they’ve got going. Tesseloid. Gradually integrating terrestrial materials into itself for mass-transport to the Martian colony. They’ve already taken apart most of the lunar minerals. Not that we can see the moon anymore anyway. None of them need credits up there. There’s no economic system. It’s a wonder they’re not botching the engineering. They couldn’t build a goddamned fort out of Tinkertoys. It’s all scripted by AIs and assembled by nanodroids five atoms long.”

“How long you been out?”

“I was the third. First that made it.”

“I’m the ninety-fifth.”

“Congratulations. Welcome to limbo.” Cole settled back into his pod.

“Who was it came out before me?”

“Ninety-Four. She’s a historian. She’d be a good start for you. Hasn’t been out too long, but knows enough of the ropes.”

“What’s her name?”

“Just goes by Ninety-Four.”

“Where is she?”

“Usually up in the KnowBanks, daytime. Researcher. Medical. She doesn’t much come around here.” He started drawing closed the semi-solid hatch on his pod.

“Thanks.”

“Anytime. You get hungry, there’s only one eats. Anywhere down along the Rows. Sellway. Just show ‘em your silver. You got one, right?”

“Oh. Yeah. Jabes fumbled in the pocket for his tabs.

“Hey you gonna use those?”

“What?”

“Those blue ones.”

“No, I guess not.”

“Give ‘em here. I could vasodilate on a Sunday.”

Jabes passed over the patches. He climbed into his pod and slept in a sling of flexible collagen mesh.

She wasn’t in the Banks.

“At the lab,” the librarian said. “Down in the Catacombs.”

“How do I find her?”

“Get to the Science Institute. They’ll direct you.”

Navigating the definitionless ultracropolis took Jabes hours. Often when he asked for directions he couldn’t rouse people’s attention at all. They congregated in groupings, small droves of them shifting and relocating, only to stop again, unmoving, interminably. They seemed like some breed of insect, not like individuals at all. He wandered sterile pathways of bioluminescent fungus, arcing between surfaces of rounded, unspecifically-lit growths that blocked any horizon. There were sleep arrays and incubators, and a strand of protein injection bars called “Replenishers,” which he identified as Cole’s Rows, of whose services he partook reluctantly. He saw no birds, no plants, no sign of life whatsoever other than human.

The Science Institute proved not terribly far from Davies, or from the Banks, though he had barely identified it as a building when wandering his circuit. The Institute was housed in what appeared to be a configuration of translucent corms. Jabes entered through a membrane that gave way around him; he emerged unwet. A wetsuit in a jelly hood approached with a lightwand.

“Looking for number ninety-four.”

The wetsuit stuck the probe in the door membrane behind him. “Senscence Pod. Consciousness Studies. Ghost Floor.” He nodded his head toward a corridor.

Jabes descended tubes that angled downward through a series of cartilaginous ceilings. After losing his route multiple times, and being redirected by seemingly soulless wetsuits, a tube finally extruded him into a tall narrow chamber. Ganglia of fibrous tentacle-cable and ridged conduit arced overhead. Smooth table-height surfaces of congealed gelatin, crowded with fist-sized translucent gums. Behind one of the tables a man in a skinsuit with a lab coat thrown over.

Mediterranean features. Lanky. Gripping fistfuls of congealed jelly.

“I’m Jabes. Ninety-fifth out of the cryochamber.”

“Ah. I’m Kemper. Neurography.”

“I came looking for Ninety-Four.”

“The historian. Sure. I can take you to her.”

The man turned abruptly and started down a corridor. Jabes followed him through a series of pores.

“What kind of lab is this?”

“You look about—what—250 years old?”

“Something around there I think.”

“In your time it would be called a drug research lab. We’re nested in the Consciousness Studies department, but the whole thing’s ground to a halt for the most part.” Kemper fell back into stride alongside Jabes. “I’m really the only acting party left in Consciousness. Anyway we don’t study chemicals. Not exactly. We study the effects of direct neurochemical rearrangement by nanoinstillation. It’s basically a programmable drug. We all receive it osmotically now. Half the time I’m conducting my own tests and the other half I’m trying to decode the strategies the AIs have going for us. No one even communicates with them anymore. But you can half-track their snail-trails in the routes they run their nanos through our neurology, and pan back from there to try to decipher things.”

They squeezed down halls lined with massive glutinous cisterns chained by bound lattices of ridged cannulae. Jabes ran his finger along the snot-like paste that thickened to an impenetrable cartilaginous shell just beneath the surface. “What’re these?”

“Coelenterate lipid synthesis tanks. We use it for everything around here.”

“The jelly-gunk? Glea?”

“Yep. Primo-cnidarian. It’s been around forever. Didn’t discover its conductivity until a generation ago. Acellular proteoglycan. The stuff’s incredible.”

“It’s what, like, everything is made of?”

“Everything.”

Kemper held himself rigidly, like a proper scientist, and yet he possessed a certain fluidity to the way he spoke, the way he angled his limbs: he carried an air of preoccupied dignity about him.

“And why were you a sleeper, Jabes?”

“The corporation I work for intended a shorter sleep for me. I was to go forward to renew the patent on one of their 25-year investments. But according to the archives something happened. A revolution maybe or a change in powers, I haven’t got my finger on it yet. Something that resulted in more along the order of a 225-year sleep, it looks like. No sign of the company anymore. I rifled through the files at the KnowBanks, couldn’t find anything. What the hell I’m supposed to do now I do not know.”

They had come to a little bulb. Kemper had to enter first and hold the rim of the surface open for Jabes.

“Security,” Kemper said.

He climbed through, brushing against Kemper’s jacket, into a vestibule. “She came in because her nerves were shot. We ran a few tests. Started feeding her some stuff. She liked it a

bit too much, keeps volunteering for the induced wavering catatonia studies. But.” They pressed through another membrane and there she was, handling some variously-colored jellies.

“Hey ‘Four. This is Jabes.’

“Ninety-Five.”

“Ah! Welcome to the shitshow.”

Kemper leaned against a mush table, nodded, climbed on it, and fell instantly to sleep.

“What’s up with him?”

“Narcolept,” she said.

“Oh.”

“Why’d you come looking for me?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just woke up in gummyland and have nothing else to do.”

“Yeah.” She fiddled some globs against her wrists.

“What have you been doing here?”

“Trying to sleep.”

“Like, die?”

“Maybe. Maybe disappear. I don’t know.”

“I don’t mean right here, I mean, what are you doing now, in whatever year this is.”

“Oh. Right. I was a biogeneticist. Had my research stored in one of the digital Carnegie strongholds, when I...” She canted her head and rubbed the back of her neck. “Pulling them out of digital storage alone took weeks and an AI to assemble a reader. Every aspect of it is obsolete now. Totally inapplicable. So now I—correct history, I guess.” She held up a sheaf of jellies. “Cataloguing.”

“That’s why they call you the historian.”

She rolled her eyes. “The Jancks KnowBanks is insanely disorganized, and getting worse. Not that I should care. I guess I don’t, really. It’s not my field, but mine is defunct for the time being. You start sniffing in the current state of genetic affairs it smells of pure dogshit. So I’m some sort of a consultant I guess. Not that it matters now, but it might someday. The recordings are so utterly, royally, royally fucked up. A fleet of us working full-time couldn’t correct it all. They have such poor science now, Jabes, such poor medicine, poor history, poor everything. It looks advanced, I know, and it was, but ants can’t operate a supercomputer.”

“Yeah they’re not very—responsive.”

“They’re a waning people with a few lingering strands of genius implemented from the last couple centuries.”

Kemper was snoring.

Jabes looked at Kemper. Ninety-Four looked at Jabes.

“He got that way from his years in Oneirography,” She said. “He was the only one actively mapping. So aside from assembling case studies, he just sunk himself in these recomposition softwares. Real soft. Found his way into a corner called Indwelling Recombinant Reiteratives. Basically self-cloning chem factories, put ‘em in once and they’re in. No come-down. Keeps adapting, see, meets the receptors with whatever they need to keep firing, no matter how blown. Not many people would touch it, I’m told. Holds you in various states of consciousness. He did it for R.E.M. The programming is real tricky, I guess. I mean, interfaces are so obscure now. It’s like, you stick your hand in a wad of goo and somehow upload via

pheromone. Anyway, after some incidents he kinda backed out and got into the stuff he's into now. AI tracking. He's kinda—haunted now though.”

Kemper stirred, then righted himself and bounded off the table.

“Pardon my delinquency. Jabes, wasn't it? Right. So listen. Before you're fully tainted, I'd be most interested in running a quick cartography on you, if you don't mind.”

“Guess I don't.”

Ninety-Four had her hands sunk wrist-deep in a console of goo. Jabes looked at her.

“Updating my dosages, thank you very much.” She said.

He turned back to Kemper. “What else do they study down here?”

“In Consciousness Studies?” Kemper said. “Oh there are still a few functioning scientists with the Institute, but most of the people you'll see here are pawns. Let's see. Last season there was an intern who placed her consciousness into one of a handful of auto-operating clones of herself. It was a total mess. No one ever knew when her original consciousness was or was not inhabiting one of her plurality. She had all manner of encounter with her duplicates. Talk about existential dilemmas. Jesus. After one too many confrontations with herself she eventually had an identity crisis and we shipped the whole lot of them to one of the psych break wards. That's some of the child's play the interns are up to around here. You see why people call us the Ghost Floor.”

“Ghost Floor, eh?”

Ninety-Four rolled her eyes.

Kemper started fidgeting. “We have one who's been coming through the walls, I suppose you could say. She's a real terror. Sort of a psychic carnivore. No one seems to be bothered by her other than me, so they say I'm losing it.” He glared at Ninety-Four. “But I go sniffing in places nobody else does, or has in God knows how long.”

Ninety-Four let out a sigh.

“Now, how about we do that mapping? It doesn't hurt or anything.”

“Okay.” He turned to Ninety-Four. “Chat more at the Banks tomorrow?”

“Fine,” she said.

Kemper took him to an adjacent room, where Jabes submitted to some gelatinous diodes and slipped in and out of a dream where shadows drifted over surfaces that only on waking did he decide was a bird's-eye view of the urban blobscape he now inhabited.

That night Jabes slept in his pod in Davies sector. Cole's pod was closed, and in the morning it was open. He grabbed a quick bite at the Rows, flashing his silver patch, then headed to the Jancks KnowBanks.

Ninety-four was leaned in to one of the sensory nodes. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

They didn't talk, just stuck their heads in the wall and went. They broke for lunch. She seemed somewhat revitalized since the previous day, spoke animatedly about maybe being able to get to the bottom of it, whatever it was. All afternoon she researched; all afternoon he watched videos. Some flashes of it clicked for him, some fragments of popular scenes, a few locales, but mostly it felt like a dream he couldn't quite catch the hem of.

They walked out of the Banks together at the end of the day.

“Kemper’s a glitcher but he’s alright,” she said.

“He’s a narcolept.”

“Yeah.”

“They used to treat that with adderall.”

“They don’t use any of that shit any more. it’s all nanorestructuring now. This lab is rediscovering techniques they lost generations ago. The jelly isn’t everything, it’s just a conduit. Just glob without something instilled in it. Apparently the AIs reside in nanosurfaces now too. They’re everywhere, there would be no eradicating them.” She described surfaces treated with femtosecond lasers to create unthinkably vast microscopic zones, zones expanded into a labyrinthine, fractalline geography at submicroscopic levels.

When they parted ways, him toward Davies and her to the Institute, she held up both her hands in goodnight. She had dermal blobs on the insides of both her wrists.

The days slid by, and Ninety-Four would be at her panel while he was at his, and evening would come and he would pull back famished and realize he’d been watching JaniceJanice archives all day.

Sometimes he stopped by the lab. Kemper would tolerate him, often mentioning something about this woman who endlessly appeared in his dreams, blockading him from certain activities, access to certain knowledge. What Kemper studied, exactly, it was hard to tell; the “AI tracking” bit seemed peripheral. There were periodically test subjects, and dermal patches, and lots of time in a face cradle of slime. Kemper lived out of the place, probably because there were gooey surfaces everywhere to soften his narcoleptic falls.

Jabes could still remember very little of his real life, particularly the early parts. Little scenes would pop up, like a mother he thought was his. He was pretty sure about some of the later years with the company, and the incredible allure of JaniceJanice. But—might he have had a sister? Or at least a sibling? He would turn the images over and over again, polishing them smooth in his mind, hoping their surfaces would reflect back other, related images. And slowly, slowly, as the occlusion of his synthetic life faded, one by one the memories trickled back.

One morning a queue of children came into the KnowBanks and were led to a section Jabes hadn’t noticed before. He tapped Ninety-Four on the shoulder. “What’re they in for?”

“Children are synced here,” Ninety-Four said. “In the Collections. A sort of Proficiency Compendia. They learn everything they know in an afternoon via artificial learning nanoprograms instilled into the cerebrospinal stream. Learn how to be zombies, that is. How to use their implants, how to—I don’t know.”

“Yeah, no one even notices anything around them. It’s insane.”

“Best I can figure, humanity uploaded to a sort of hive-mind unity at some point in the past, but now they’re off-line, and this is why they’re so reduced, so sub-functioning. What do I know though, maybe they’re mostly somewhere else, and that somewhere else is just more important to them than here.”

She had the sleeves of her suit bunched up, and he could see the markings left behind from dermals on the insides of her elbows.

“How long were you out, before me, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Some months.”

“You don’t sleep in Davies.”

“I can barely bear this place, Jabes. I sleep in a pod down at the lab, and I beeline between there and here. There’s a protein distillery on the Institute’s campus. That’s about all I can take.”

“You ever think going by ‘Ninety-four’ doesn’t help?”

She glared.

Jabes slept in his pod, but he never saw Cole after that first time, or anyone else in Davies.

Not many others frequented the Jancksn KnowBanks. A handful of wetsuits, maybe students—they ignored him. But there was one woman who was often at the KnowBanks when he was there. Once, after she left, Jabes poked his head in the port she had been in. Sprawled all around him a chaos of her stimula remnant: physiology, old pornographics, romances... Then once on his walk from the KnowBanks she was standing outside against the uncolored sky, waiting for him. She stepped up to him in her pale skinsuit and said very matter-of-factly, “I’m lonely.” They talked, and she was simple, like a child, and openly flirtatious. After far too short of a time she nuzzled up to him, and Jabes held onto her. It felt good to hold someone, to actually touch—a relief. Someone tactile, not simulated via mirror neurons. He worked his hand into the neck of her suit. Everything was smooth and he couldn’t get a purchase on anything. She pulled his arm out. She took him to her flat in one of the jelly pods. He flopped her on the bed. He left the suit on for as long as he could justify; it was always a harrowing experience for him to reveal the breasts. They could so easily be an abomination. Would they turn out deflated sacs? Would the nipples have black hairs anemoneing around them? The areolae too huge or lumped or containing flattened or obscenely protruding nipples? Jabes squeezed his eyes and peeled down the top of the suit. They were perfect. Absolutely, obscenely in their own way, perfect. Jabes peeled down the rest of the suit, like opening a pat of butter, and she wriggled out of it. Smooth and hairless, no stubble or even down. It seemed that hair had never grown on her body. He looked closer. No holes below her head. She was like a doll.

“How do you...” he said. She showed a flap on her ankle.

“Flushing port. Gravity feed.” She was clear and perfect as Bunraku. Jabes squirmed ineptly by her side.

“You see why I’m lonely,” she said.

“You learned to be lonely.”

“You mean by watching. At the Banks.”

Jabes nodded.

“Yes.”

“This world is miserable,” he said.

He started sleeping in a cot at the lab.

When he claimed his cot Kemper said, “You’ll have to deal with my random sleeping habits.” Jabes studied him. Kemper hesitated but went on, “It happened after one of the sleep series. These chemical recursion stimulators set off replication sequences in the brain that we haven’t

been able to diminish.”

“I know. Ninety-Four told me. Your dream studies.”

Kemper looked at him, his long arms hanging. Jabes thought he might be about to have one of his episodes, and Jabes moved to brace him, but Kemper continued. “She has no idea, Jabes.” Kemper’s voice had dropped in pitch and speed to something slow and horribly grave. “What’s in there is—all of imagination. And it’s inhabited. Not just with dream characters. With meta-beings. I couldn’t stay there, it was ruining me, Jabes, ruining me. But I go many times a day still. It’s a place the AIs haven’t figured their way into yet, though they pretty well keep most of us out. The things in there, Jabes. They watch. They watch us.”

Kemper was very close, and they stood there, watching each other. Kemper’s tone returned to normal. “I sleep a lot. I just live with it, and you’ll have to too.”

Jabes would find him, at random, slumped in all manner of positions, on the floor or cradled in jelly. He usually just left him, unless it looked particularly uncomfortable. Only a few times did he observe Kemper in the act of falling asleep: the usual symptomatology. When Kemper slept, sometimes Jabes would too.

Kemper jolted awake from one of his daily torpors and leaped back into his jellies. Holding them up to his head, joining and separating them. A century ago he would have appeared the stereotypical madman. He exuded a manic, electric energy.

“You were asleep again,” Jabes said.

“She was in there.”

“In your dream?”

“They’re not just my dreams. I go places now that we all go. Or that take us to them.”

“You’re obsessed.”

“It’s not that. She’s not just in me. And she’s not just somewhere. She’s everywhere.”

Jabes didn’t know what to do with himself. He wandered the region. Bulb after bulb presented itself, and the dulled eyes of the populace. It all felt monotonously the same. He slept and dreamt of Janice. Janice his synthetic wife in their all-too-average life. Janice holds his hand, he lays down in the hard cryotank. Janice tears up with goodbye—but when she smiles she bares the jagged teeth of JaniceJanice.

Kemper was asleep. Ninety-four was nowhere to be found. Jabes roamed the medical facility, and the science institute; the skinsuits were engaged in activities utterly confounding to him, and they ignored his presence completely. When he returned Kemper was awake.

“Kemper. Some of these people don’t have navels, you know. Or, or—”

“Genitalia? Been doing some research?”

“Are they lab-grown? Like the gunk—the glea?”

“No no no. It’s a mutation. There was a gene recovery program attempted but they’re so unbelievably disorganized. You, friend,”—Kemper whacked him on the chest—“might in fact have been one of the gene banks they needed. But they’re like lemmings, they wouldn’t know how to begin to replenish the stock with your untainted genes anymore anyhow. They just let the flat-crotches come. It’s not like they’re gonna reproduce or anything.”

“Jesus this whole scene is so insane. Maybe I got more freezer-burned than they thought. Fuck maybe I’m still in the tank. Kemper. I’m remembering things. From before...”

“Yes. Yes—they chemically suppress the original so there’s no bleed-through into the virtuality. Psychotifying if they don’t. But it does come back. The long-term memory centers just need some time. A little stimulation helps too.”

“I want to remember.”

“It’s not always so great to remember.”

“My real life. I want it back.”

“Well, take this.” Kemper handed him a fleshpatch. “I’ll take one too.”

“What is it?”

“K-Tem-Niney. Empathy analeptic. Makes the blacks blacker.”

“What good’s that gonna do.”

“Wake you up a bit more. Bring you back to human.”

“Shit. Well. Shit.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

Jabes eased the patch onto his wrist; Kemper laughed and slapped his on his neck. It rushed in instantly. At first the warmth of alcohol, spilling through him like heated molasses. Then the feeling of something opening outward inside him, unfurling, like petals. He looked at Kemper. It hurt to look at Kemper. It hurt differently than anything he’d known. An open place, like a cave, had suddenly carved itself out inside him in a shape he hadn’t known the edges of before.

“Feel the hollow?”

“Yes—” Jabes stammered. He peeled off the empathy patch, but the nanos were already ripping through him. He wished he’d only taken a fraction.

“Yes, so hollow. Each person’s pain—it’s so unique.”

“Yours is—awful.” Jabes didn’t want to be anywhere near Kemper. He didn’t even want to be near himself. “Kemper, were you a cryotanker too?”

Rushes of pearl and metallic blue. Kemper responded with some garbled yammer about burrows beneath the hub of the quadrants in Jerusalem’s old city, some holdout against the gargantuan mining project underway for the Torus shipments. But the feelingscape burned through Jabes. He didn’t feel like himself—he couldn’t locate himself at all. He was shivering, needing to get away. He lurched up. The slime glea all around him throbbled with its prisonerhood. He managed to navigate to a lab stimulus cradle, plunged his face into it and shuttered open a JaniceJanice rerun. There were feelings there, old feelings, from an adolescence that was lifetimes ago now: arousal, intimidation, admiration. Everything torqued to a heightened, metallic pitch. Kemper came in—Jabes could feel him coming even before he entered the room—and took a splitter and joined the viewing.

“What’re you—” and JaniceJanice appeared and Jabes was flooded with Kemper’s lust and terror and Kemper cried out and dropped the splitter and dashed away.

The K-Tem-whatever wore thin, leaving behind a dull throb in Jabes’ brain. Blacks blacker indeed—his own shadows had congealed back to their rightful places, and any others had

emigrated. He could think for himself again. *JaniceJanice, my wife's model in my pseudo-life: she's the one who's been haunting Kemper.*

Kemper was gone for days. Ninety-Four was doused in patches; Jabes didn't much like her company anymore. Jabes sometimes stood outside among the clusters of entranced humans for extended periods of time. They didn't acknowledge him, but it felt almost like company. At other times he laid out beneath the dun-colored sky and worked over the puzzle pieces of his memories. They kept shifting, laying over each other.

One afternoon he returned to the lab to find that Kemper had returned. He was pacing back and forth and glaring at the ground.

"Jabes!" his eyes wide and horribly dilated.

"Kemper. Who is Janice?"

"You have to come with me. You've known her in two lives. That's a lot of time. A. Lot. Of. Time."

Kemper took him by the hand like a child and they marched down gluey angling tunnelways and traversed a sort of empty underground plaza. The rounded walls burned with a greenish light.

"Jabes. Take this. These nanos will help you see her when she comes around."

"Right."

There was no feeling whatsoever from the nanopatch.

They arrived at another underground cryochamber, smaller than the one Jabes had been interred in, but still containing several tanks. That same green silkworm light, struggling through crowded layers of tubing. Work surfaces cluttered with uncleaned tools of fibrous gelatin.

"What is this place?"

"This is a private study chamber."

"It's kinda dark in here."

"Too much light can be disturbing for subjects who're roused without the neuron packs they instill up top".

"Did I have—"

"Of course. Eases things."

His limbs were feeling a bit loose, but other than that, nothing noticeable. "Kemper, is the virtual program accessible? I mean, can it be accessed by med techs?"

"Sure can. Whenever they want." Kemper approached a jellyport mounted on the wall next to a tank and stuck his head in.

"Who's in there?"

"A woman."

He pulled his head out. "Go on."

Jabes leaned in to the port. A gentle suction drew his head into position.

A strange sensation in the jaw, a fullness. A woman's body: he knew it instantly. The strain of fabric across heavy breasts. He had entered directly into her sensorium. He saw the swish of a long white coat. A technician of some sort, maybe from a few hundred years back. Beakers, clamps. Something medical. Pliers, sharps. Blood. A man...

"Is this her synth life?" Jabes asked through a muffle of shifting slime. "The woman in

the tank?” No answer. Jabes pulled back out of the port. Kemper was gone. The room hung with steaming piping, and the wall diodes flashed. He peered into the tank’s viewport: through the jelly, the faintest features of a woman.

#

Jabes felt tired often now. He slept at all hours. He didn’t bother to leave the lab.

An arm shaking him awake.

“Jabes!”

Ninety-four.

“Jabes wake the fuck up!”

“What, what, what.”

“This place! Don’t you see? This place, this whole society—they’re senile! They neglect everything, it’s barely stabilized by the soft tech that they barely know how to use anymore!”

“Yes, yes—”

She was raving. “They’re idiots. Idiots! They’re reliant on a technology they’ve forgotten how to create! We have to get out of here! No one really knows what’s going on. Incompetents! Nobody here can even think! Back in our day we had plans, we had reason. Here they don’t even have themselves. You could shake one of them all day and it wouldn’t even fight back. Their genetics have degraded—”

“I know! I know.”

“We have to go back into cryostasis, Jabes.”

“Yes. Yes of course we do.” It all appeared crystal clear and laid out before him, as if preordained. “We’ll await the development of a technology that can make use of our genetics. Unlock the sequences and reproduce them. We’ll save the human race. We need to re-freeze. We need to go under...”

“Let’s fucking go!” She took his hand.

A whimper escaped him, “But where’s Kemper—?”

“I don’t know where Kemper is! He’s probably fucking asleep somewhere!”

“He’s sleeping? Maybe I should—”

“What the fuck, are you fucking nuts? Kemper’s as corrupted as the rest of them! We’ll set the cryochambers to auto. We have to hurry!” She was sweating. She let go of his hand and gathered random gels in her arms, spilling them again, reaching out to grab them, spilling others. She was half-running now. Jabes followed. Jellies spilled from her arms as they pressed through a membrane into a corridor that led down into lower, darker regions of the medical facility. Hallways. A bulbous, green expanse. Another room, poorly lit. By now she had spilled most of what she was carrying.

“What’s that row of tanks?”

“They’re the permanents.”

“Permanents?”

“They’re sent by corporations to secure patents in the future.”

“But that’s...ludicrous.”

“They’re idiots now, remember?”

Jabes looked in the viewport of one of the tanks. All he could see was ooze.

She fiddled with some controls, said, “You take that one, just activate it with your hand on that panel.” Then she lay down in one, clutching in her arms a handful of jellies and stim archives. She was panting and looking straight up at the ceiling. She reached out a hand and pressed it to her panel. A slimy hatch closed over her.

Jabes peeled off his skinsuit and dropped it on the floor. He climbed up and eased himself into the tank. He sunk down into it, a smooth warmth washing over him. He reached out and laid his hand on the gauge to commence the sleep sequence. The liquid shell curved over him like a wave. He could see up through the green-tinted viewport into the room. He felt heavy, so heavy, like he was being pulled into the ground. Just as his eyes were closing, perhaps even through closed eyes, through the shell he saw a shadow move over the control panel. Kemper? No—a lab technician—a woman, with teeth like those of a wild animal.