



IDORU

‘Gibson's mixture of science fiction and soon-to-be-fact is as enthralling as ever, and his take on Tokyo reality – virtual and otherwise – is jaw-droppingly intimate. The master at work’

– *Maxim*

‘Gibson's inventiveness is a sublime amalgam of high-tech and kitsch... This novel confirms its author as a pioneering topographer of cyberspace... it would be hard to think of a writer who does more to test the value of the tangible’

– David Profumo in the *Daily Telegraph*

‘The poet of cyberspace... What Gerald Manley Hopkins did for the flight of the falcon, Turner for fog, Dali for the unconscious and William Burroughs for a brain deranged by junk, Gibson has done for the digital dimension. He has painted it for us so vividly and persuasively that those dreary keyboards and screens can never be the same again’

– Peter Popham in the *Independent*

‘Cleverly politicised, and as fast, witty and lovingly painted as ever... For all his futuristic wizardry, William Gibson's most prized tool is still the obsolescence-proof technology of words’

– Steven Poole in the *Guardian*

‘*Idoru* confirms Gibson as, virtually, a realist writer for the post-Net generation, offering a new mimesis that opens windows on our on-screen world’

– Paul Quinn in *The Times Literary Supplement*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Gibson is the award-winning author of *Neuromancer*; *Mona Lisa Overdrive*; *The Difference Engine*, with Bruce Sterling; *Virtual Light*; *Burning Chrome*, a collection of short stories; and *All Tomorrow's Parties*. He lives in Vancouver, Canada.

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WILLIAM GIBSON



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Thanks

Sogho Ishii, the Japanese director, introduced me to Kowloon Walled City via the photographs of Ryuji Miyamoto. It was Ishii-san's idea that we should make a science fiction movie there. We never did, but the Walled City continued to haunt me, though I knew no more about it than I could gather from Miyamoto's stunning images, which eventually provided most of the texture for the Bridge in my novel *Virtual Light*.

Architect Ken Vineberg drew my attention to an article about the Walled City in *Architectural Review*, where I first learned of *City of Darkness*, the splendid record assembled by Greg Girard and Ian Lambrot (Watermark, London, 1993). From London, John Jarrold very kindly arranged for me to receive a copy.

Anything I know of the toecutting business, I owe to the criminal memoirs of Mark Brandon “Chopper” Read (*Chopper from the Inside*, Sly Ink, Australia, 1991). Mr. Read is a great deal scarier than Blackwell, and has even fewer ears.

Karl Taro Greenfeld's *Speed Tribes* (HarperCollins, New York, 1994) richly fed my dreams of Laney's jet lag.

Stephen P. (“Plausibility”) Brown rode shotgun on the work in progress for many months, commenting daily, sometimes more often, and always with a fine forbearance, as I faxed him a bewildering flurry of disconnected fragments he was somehow expected to interpret as “progress.” His constant encouragement and seemingly endless patience were absolutely essential to this book's completion.

My publishers, on both sides of the Atlantic, also demonstrated great patience, and I thank them.

1. Death Cube K

After Slitscan, Laney heard about another job from Rydell, the night security man at the Chateau. Rydell was a big quiet Tennessean with a sad shy grin, cheap sunglasses, and a walkie-talkie screwed permanently into one ear.

“Paragon-Asia Dataflow,” Rydell said, around four in the morning, the two of them seated in a pair of huge old armchairs. Concrete beams overhead had been hand-painted to vaguely resemble blond oak. The chairs, like the rest of the furniture in the Chateau's lobby, were oversized to the extent that whoever sat in them seemed built to a smaller scale.

“Really?” Laney asked, keeping up the pretense that someone like Rydell would know where he could still find work.

“Tokyo, Japan,” Rydell said, and sucked iced latte through a plastic straw. “Guy I met in San Francisco last year. Yamazaki. He's working for 'em. Says they need a serious netrunner.

Netrunner. Laney, who liked to think of himself as a researcher, suppressed a sigh. “Contract job?”

“Guess so. Didn't say.”

“I don't think I'd want to live in Tokyo.”

Rydell used his straw to stir the foam and ice remaining at the bottom of his tall plastic cup, as though he were hoping to find a secret prize. “He didn't say you'd have to.” He looked up. “You ever been to Tokyo?”

“No.”

“Must be an interesting place, after that quake and all.” The walkie-talkie ticked and whispered. “I gotta go on out and check the gate by the bungalows now. Feel like coming?”

“No,” Laney said. “Thanks.”

Rydell stood, automatically straightening the creases in his khaki uniform trousers. He wore a black nylon web-belt hung with various holstered devices, all of them black, a short-sleeved white shirt, and a peculiarly immobile black tie. “I'll leave the number in your box,” he said.

Laney watched the security man cross the terra cotta and the various rugs, to vanish past the darkly polished panels of the registration desk. He'd had something going on cable once, Laney had gathered. Nice guy. Loser.

Laney sat there until dawn came edging in through the tall, arched windows, and Taiwanese stainless could be heard to rattle, but gently, from the darkened cave of the breakfast room. Immigrant voices, in some High Steppe dialect the Great Khans might well have understood. Echoes woke from the tiled floor, from the high beams surviving from an age that must once have seen the advent of Laney's kind or predecessors, their ecology of celebrity and the terrible and inviolable order of that food chain.

Rydell left a folded sheet of Chateau notepaper in Laney's box. A Tokyo number. Laney four

it there the next afternoon, along with an updated estimate of his final bill from the lawyers

He took them both up to the room he could no longer even pretend to afford.

A week later he was in Tokyo, his face reflected in an elevator's gold-veined mirror for this three-floor ascent of the aggressively nondescript O My Golly Building. To be admitted to Death Cube K, apparently a Franz Kafka theme bar.

Stepping from the elevator into a long space announced in acid-etched metal as The Metamorphosis. Where salarimen in white shirts had removed their suit jackets and loosened their dark ties, and sat at a bar of artfully corroded steel, drinking, the high backs of their chairs molded from some brown and chitinous resin. Insectoid mandibles curved above the drinkers' heads like scythes.

He moved forward into brown light, a low murmur of conversation. He understood no Japanese. The walls, unevenly transparent, repeated a motif of wing cases and bulbous abdomens, spikey brown limbs folded in at regular intervals. He increased his pace, aiming for a curving stairway molded to resemble glossy brown carapaces.

The eyes of Russian prostitutes followed him from tables opposite the bar, flat and doll-like in this roach-light. The Natashas were everywhere, working girls shipped in from Vladivostok by the Kombinat. Routine plastic surgery lent them a hard assembly-line beauty. Slavic Barbies. A simpler operation implanted a tracking device for the benefit of their handlers.

The stairway opened into The Penal Colony, a disco, deserted at this hour, pulses of silent red lightning marking Laney's steps across the dance floor. A machine of some kind was suspended from the ceiling. Each of its articulated arms, suggestive of antique dental equipment, was tipped with sharp steel. Pens, he thought, vaguely remembering Kafka's story. Sentence of guilt, graven in the flesh of the condemned man's back. Wincing at a memory of upturned eyes unseeing. Pushed it down. Moved on.

A second stairway, narrow, more steep, and he entered The Trial, low-ceilinged and dark. Walls the color of anthracite. Small flames shivered behind blue glass. He hesitated, nightblind and jet-lagged.

“Colin Laney, is it?”

Australian. Enormous. Who stood behind a little table, shoulders sloping bearlike. Something strange about the shape of his shaven head. And another, much smaller figure, seated there. Japanese, in a long-sleeved plaid shirt buttoned up to its oversized collar. Blinking up at Laney through circular lenses.

“Have a seat, Mr. Laney,” the big man said.

And Laney saw that this man's left ear was missing, sheared away, leaving only a convoluted stump.

When Laney had worked for Slitscan, his supervisor was named Kathy Torrance. Palest of pale blonds. A pallor bordering on translucence, certain angles of light suggesting not blood but some fluid the shade of summer straw. On her left thigh the absolute indigo imprint of something twisted and multibarbed, an expensively savage pictoglyph. Visible each Friday,

when she made it her habit to wear shorts to work.

She complained, always, that the nature of celebrity was much the worse for wear. Strip-mined, Laney gathered, by generations of her colleagues.

She propped her feet on the ledge of a hotdesk. She wore meticulous little reproductions of a lineman's boots, buckled across the instep and stoutly laced to the ankle. He looked at her legs, their taut sweep from wooly sock tops to the sandpapered fringe of cut-off jeans. The tattoo looked like something from another planet, a sign or message burned in from the depths of space, left there for mankind to interpret.

He asked her what she meant. She peeled a mint-flavored toothpick from its wrapper. Eyes he suspected were gray regarded him through mint-tinted contacts.

"Nobody's really famous anymore, Laney. Have you noticed that?"

"No."

"I mean *really* famous. There's not much fame left, not in the old sense. Not enough to go around."

"The old sense?"

"We're the media, Laney. We *make* these assholes celebrities. It's a push-me, pull-you routine. They come to us to be created." Vibram cleats kicked concisely off the hotdesk. She tucked her boots in, heels against denim haunches, white knees hiding her mouth. Balanced there on the pedestal of the hotdesk's articulated Swedish chair.

"Well," Laney said, going back to his screen, "that's still fame, isn't it?"

"But is it real?"

He looked back at her.

"We learned to print money off this stuff," she said. "Coin of our realm. Now we've printed too much; even the audience knows. It shows in the ratings."

Laney nodded, wishing she'd leave him to his work.

"Except," she said, parting her knees so he could see her say it, "when we decide to destroy one."

Behind her, past the anodyzed chainlink of the Cage, beyond a framing rectangle of glass that filtered out every tint of pollution, the sky over Burbank was perfectly blank, like a sky-blue paint chip submitted by the contractor of the universe.

The man's left ear was edged with pink tissue, smooth as wax. Laney wondered why there had been no attempt at reconstruction.

"So I'll remember," the man said, reading Laney's eyes.

"Remember what?"

"Not to forget. Sit down."

Laney sat on something only vaguely chairlike, an attenuated construction of black alloy rods and laminated Hexcel. The table was round and approximately the size of a steering wheel. A votive flame licked the air, behind blue glass. The Japanese man with the plaid shirt and metal-framed glasses blinked furiously. Laney watched the large man settle himself, another slender chair-thing lost alarmingly beneath a sumo-sized bulk that appeared to be

composed entirely of muscle.

“Done with the jet lag, are we?”

“I took pills.” Remembering the SST's silence, its lack of apparent motion.

“Pills,” the man said. “Hotel adequate?”

“Yes,” Laney said. “Ready for the interview.”

“Well then,” vigorously rubbing his face with heavily scarred hands. He lowered his hands and stared at Laney, as if seeing him for the first time. Laney, avoiding the gaze of those eyes, took in the man's outfit, some sort of nanopore exercise gear intended to fit loosely on a smaller but still very large man. Of no particular color in the darkness of the Trial. Open from collar to breastbone. Straining against abnormal mass. Exposed flesh tracked and crossed by an atlas of scars, baffling in their variety of shape and texture. “Well, then?”

Laney looked up from the scars. “I'm here for a job interview.”

“Are you?”

“Are you the interviewer?”

“Interviewer?” The ambiguous grimace revealing an obvious dental prosthesis.

Laney turned to the Japanese in the round glasses. “Colin Laney.”

“Shinya Yamazaki,” the man said, extending his hand. They shook. “We spoke on the telephone.”

“You're conducting the interview?”

A flurry of blinks. “I'm sorry, no,” the man said. And then, “I am a student of existential sociology.”

“I don't get it,” Laney said. The two opposite said nothing. Shinya Yamazaki looked embarrassed. The one-eared man glowered.

“You're Australian,” Laney said to the one-eared man.

“Tazzie,” the man corrected. “Sided with the South in the Troubles.”

“Let's start over,” Laney suggested. “‘Paragon-Asia Dataflow.’ You them?”

“Persistent bugger.”

“Goes with the territory,” Laney said. “Professionally, I mean.”

“Fair enough.” The man raised his eyebrows, one of which was bisected by a twisted pink cable of scar tissue. “Rez, then. What do you think of *him*?”

“You mean the rock star?” Laney asked, after struggling with a basic problem of context.

A nod. The man regarded Laney with utmost gravity.

“From Lo/Rez? The band?” Half Irish, half Chinese. A broken nose, never repaired. Long green eyes.

“What do I *think* of him?”

In Kathy Torrance's system of things, the singer had been reserved a special disdain. She had viewed him as a living fossil, an annoying survival from an earlier, less evolved era. He was at once massively and meaninglessly famous, she maintained, just as he was both massively and meaninglessly wealthy. Kathy thought of celebrity as a subtle fluid, a universal element, like the phlogiston of the ancients, something spread evenly at creation through all

the universe, but prone now to accrete, under specific conditions, around certain individuals and their careers. Rez, in Kathy's view, had simply lasted far too long. Monstrously long. He was affecting the unity of her theory. He was defying the proper order of the food chain. Perhaps there was nothing big enough to eat him, not even Slitscan. And while Lo/Rez, the band, still extruded product on an annoyingly regular basis, in a variety of media, their singer stubbornly refused to destroy himself, murder someone, become active in politics, admit to an interesting substance-abuse problem or an arcane sexual addiction—indeed to do anything at all worthy of an opening segment on Slitscan. He glimmered, dully perhaps, but steadily, just beyond Kathy Torrance's reach. Which was, Laney had always assumed, the real reason for her hating him so.

“Well,” Laney said, after some thought, and feeling a peculiar compulsion to attempt a truthful answer, “I remember buying their first album. When it came out.”

“Title?” The one-eared man grew graver still.

“Lo Rez Skyline,” Laney said, grateful for whatever minute synaptic event had allowed the recall. “But I couldn't tell you how many they've put out since.”

“Twenty-six, not counting compilations,” said Mr. Yamazaki, straightening his glasses.

Laney felt the pills he'd taken, the ones that were supposed to cushion the jet lag, drop out from under him like some kind of rotten pharmacological scaffolding. The walls of the Trial seemed to grow closer.

“If you aren't going to tell me what this is about,” he said to the one-eared man, “I'm going back to the hotel. I'm tired.”

“Keith Alan Blackwell,” extending his hand. Laney allowed his own to be taken and briefly shaken. The man's palm felt like a piece of athletic equipment. “‘Keithy.’ We'll have a few drinks and a little chat.”

“First you tell me whether or not you're from Paragon-Asia,” Laney suggested.

“Firm in question's a couple of lines of code in a machine in a backroom in Lygon Street,” Blackwell said. “A dummy, but you could say it's *our* dummy, if that makes you feel better.”

“I'm not sure it does,” Laney said. “You fly me over to interview for a job, now you're telling me the company I'm supposed to be interviewing for doesn't exist.”

“It *exists*,” said Keith Alan Blackwell. “It's on the machine in Lygon Street.”

A waitress arrived. She wore a shapeless gray cotton boilersuit and cosmetic bruises.

“Big draft. Kirin. Cold one. What's yours, Laney?”

“Iced coffee.”

“Coke Lite, please,” said the one who'd introduced himself as Yamazaki.

“Fine,” said the earless Blackwell, glumly, as the waitress vanished into the gloom.

“I'd appreciate it if you could explain to me what we're doing here,” Laney said. He saw that Yamazaki was scribbling frantically on the screen of a small notebook, the lightpen flashing faintly in the dark. “Are you taking this down?” Laney asked.

“Sorry, no. Making note of waitress' costume.”

“Why?” Laney asked.

“Sorry,” said Yamazaki, saving what he'd written and turning off the notebook. He tucked

the pen carefully into a recess on the side. “I am a student of such things. It is my habit to record ephemera of popular culture. Her costume raises the question: does it merely reflect the theme of this club, or does it represent some deeper response to trauma of earthquake and subsequent reconstruction?”

2. Lo Rez Skyline

They met in a jungle clearing.

Kelsey had done the vegetation: big bright Rousseau leaves, cartoon orchids flecked with her idea of tropical colors (which reminded Chia of that mall chain that sold “organic” cosmetic products in shades utterly unknown to nature). Zona, the only one telepresent who ever seen anything like a real jungle, had done the audio, providing birdcalls, invisible but realistically dopplering bugs, and the odd vegetational rustle artfully suggesting not snakes but some shy furry thing, soft-pawed and curious.

The light, such as there was, filtered down through high, green canopies, entirely too Disneyesque for Chia—though there was no real need for “light” in a place that consisted of nothing else.

Zona, her blue Aztec death's-head burning bodiless, ghosts of her blue hands flickering like strobe-lit doves: “Clearly, this dickless whore, the disembodied, has contrived to ensnare his soul.” Stylized lightning zig-zags rose around the crown of the neon skull in deliberate emphasis.

Chia wondered what she'd really said. Was “dickless whore” an artifact of instantaneous on-line translation, or was that really something you could or would say in Mexican?

“Waiting hard con-firm from Tokyo chapter,” Kelsey reminded them. Kelsey's father was a Houston tax lawyer, something of his particular species of biz-speak tending to enter his daughter around meeting time; also a certain ability to *wait* that Chia found irritating, particularly as manifested by a saucer-eyed nymph-figure out of some old *anime*. Which Chia was double damn sure Kelsey would *not* look like realtime, were they ever to meet that way (Chia herself was presenting currently as an only slightly tweaked, she felt, version of how the mirror told her she actually looked. Less nose, maybe. Lips a little fuller. But that was it. Almost.)

“Exactly,” Zona said, miniature stone calendars whirling angrily in her eye-holes. “We *wait* while *he* moves ever closer to his fate. We wait. If my girls and I were to wait like this, the Rats would sweep us from the avenues.” Zona was, she claimed, the leader of a knife-packing *chilanga* girl gang. Not the meanest in Mexico City, maybe, but serious enough about turf and tribute. Chia wasn't sure she believed it, but it made for some interesting attitude in meetings.

“Really?” Kelsey drew her nymph-self up with elvin dignity, batting *manga-doe* lashes in disbelief. “In *that* case, Zona Rosa, why don't you just get yourself over to *Tokyo* and find out what's really going *on*? I mean, did Rez *say* that, that he was going to marry her, or what? And while you're at it, find out whether she *exists* or not, okay?”

The calendars stopped on a dime.

The blue hands vanished.

The skull seemed to recede some infinite distance yet remain perfectly in focus, clear in every textural detail.

Old trick, Chia thought. Stalling.

“You know that I cannot do that,” Zona said. “I have responsibilities here. Maria Conchita the Rat warlord, has stated that—”

“As if *we* care, right?” Kelsey launched herself straight up, her nymphness a pale blur against the rising tangle of green, until she hovered just below the canopy, a beam of sunlight flatterer on one impossible cheekbone. “Zona Rosa's full of shit!” she bellowed, not at all nymphlike.

“Don't fight,” Chia said. “This is *important*. Please.”

Kelsey descended, instantly. “Then *you* go,” she said.

“Me?”

“You,” Kelsey said.

“I can't,” Chia said. “To Tokyo? How could I?”

“In an airplane.”

“We don't have your kind of money, Kelsey.”

“You've got a passport. We know you do. Your mother had to get one for you when she was doing the custody thing. And we know that you are, to put it delicately, ‘between schools,’ yes?”

“Yes—”

“Then what's the prob?”

“Your father's a big tax lawyer!”

“I know,” Kelsey said. “And he flies back and forth, all over the world, making money. But you know what else he earns, Chia?”

“What?”

“Frequent-flyer points. *Big-ass* frequent-flyer points. On Air Magellan.”

“Interesting,” said the Aztec skull.

“Tokyo,” said the mean nymph.

Shit, Chia thought.

The wall opposite Chia's bed was decorated with a six-by-six laser blowup of the cover of *Lo/Rez Skyline*, their first album. Not the one you got if you bought it today, but the original, the group shot they'd done for that crucial first release on the indie Dog Soup label. She'd pulled the file off the club's site the week she'd joined, found a place near the Market that could print it out that big. It was still her favorite, and not just, as her mother too frequently suggested, because they all still looked so young. Her mother didn't like that the members of Lo/Rez were nearly as old as she was. Why wasn't Chia into music by people her own age?

—Please, mother, who?

—That Chrome Koran, say.

—Gag, mother.

Chia suspected that her mother's perception of time differed from her own in radical and mysterious ways. Not just in the way that a month, to Chia's mother, was not a very long

time, but in the way that her mother's "now" was such a narrow and literal thing. News-governed, Chia believed. Cable-fed. A present honed to whatever very instant of a helicopter traffic report.

Chia's "now" was digital, effortlessly elastic, instant recall supported by global systems she'd never have to bother comprehending.

Lo Rez Skyline had been released, if you could call it that, a week (well, six days) before Chia had been born. She estimated that no hard copies would have reached Seattle in time for her nativity, but she liked to believe there had been listeners here even then, PacRim visionaries netting new sounds from indies as obscure, even, as East Teipei's Dog Soup. Surely the opening chords of "Positron Premonition" had shoved molecules of actual Seattle air, somewhere, in somebody's basement room, at the fateful moment of her birth. She knew that, somehow, just as she knew that "Stuck Pixel," barely even a song, just Lo noodling around on some pawnshop guitar, must have been playing *somewhere* when her mother, who'd spoken very little English at that point, chose Chia's name from something cycling past on the Shopping Channel, the phonetic caress of those syllables striking her there in Postnatal Recovery as some optimally gentle combination of sounds Italian and English; her baby, red-haired even then, subsequently christened Chia Pet McKenzie (somewhat, Chia later gathered, to the amazement of her absent Canadian father).

These thoughts arriving in the pre-alarm dark, just before the infrared winkie on her alarm clock stuttered silently to the halogen gallery-spot, telling it to illuminate Lo/Rez in all their Dog Soup glory. Rez with his shirt open (but entirely ironically) and Lo with his grin and a prototype mustache that hadn't quite grown in.

Hi, guys. Fumbling for her remote. Zapping infrared into the shadows. Zap: Espresso machine. Zap: cubic space heater.

Beneath her pillow the unfamiliar shape of her passport, like a vintage game cartridge, hard navy blue plastic, textured like leatherette, with its stamped gold seal and eagle. The A Magellan tickets in their limp beige plastic folder from the travel agent in the mall.

Going now.

She took a deep breath. Her mother's house seemed to take one as well, but more tentatively, its wooden bones creaking in the winter morning cold.

The cab arriving as scheduled, but magically nonetheless, and no, it didn't honk, exactly as requested. Kelsey having explained how these things were done. Just as Kelsey, briskly interviewing Chia on the circumstances of her life, had devised the cover for her impending absence: ten days in the San Juans with Hester Chen, whose well-heeled luddite mother so thoroughly feared electromagnetic radiation that she lived phoneless, in a sod-roofed castle of driftwood, no electricity allowed whatever. "Tell her you're doing a media fast, before your new school thing comes together," Kelsey had said. "She'll like that." And Chia's mother, who felt that Chia spent entirely too much time gloved and goggled, did.

Chia was actually fond of the gentle Hester, who seemed to get what Lo/Rez were about, though somehow without being quite as fundamentally moved as could have been expected, and Chia had in fact already tried the pleasures of Mrs. Chen's island retreat. But Hester's

mother had made them both wear special baseball caps, sewn from some EMR-proof fabric, so that their young brains might not be bathed quite so constantly in the invisible soup of bad media.

Chia had complained to Hester that the caps made them both look like meshbacks.

—Don't be racist, Chia.

—I'm not.

—Classist, then.

—It's a matter of *aesthetics*.

And now in the overheated cab, her one bag beside her on the seat, she felt guilt at this deception, her mother sleeping there behind those darkened windows matted with frost, under the weight of her thirty-five years and the flowered duvet Chia had bought at Nordstrom's. When Chia had been small, her mother had worn her hair in a long braid, its tips skewered with turquoise and abalone and carved bits of bone, like the magical tail of some mythical animal, swaying there for Chia to grab. And the house looked sad, too, as if it regretted her leaving, white paint peeling from the underlying gray of ninety-year-old cedar clapboards. Chia shivered. What if she never came back?

“Where to?” the driver said, a black man in a puffy nylon jacket and a flat plaid cap.

“Sea Tac,” Chia said, and pushed her shoulders back into the seat.

Pulling out past the old Lexus the neighbors kept up on concrete blocks in the driveway.

Airports were spooky places, early in the morning. There was a hollowness that could settle on you there, something sad and empty. Corridors and people moving away down them. Standing in line behind people she'd never seen before and would never see again. Her bag over her shoulder and her passport and ticket in her hand. She wanted another cup of coffee. There was one back in her room, in the *Espressomatic*. Which she should've emptied and cleaned, because now it would go moldy while she was away.

“Yes?” The man behind the counter wore a striped shirt, a tie with the Air Magellan logo repeated down it diagonally, and a green jade labret stud. Chia wondered what his lower lip looked like when he took it out. She never would, she decided, if she had one of those. She handed him her ticket. He sighed and removed them from the folder, letting her know that she should've done that herself.

She watched him run a scanner over her ticket.

“Air Magellan one-oh-five to Narita, economy return.”

“That's right,” Chia said, trying to be helpful. He didn't seem to appreciate that.

“Travel document.”

Chia handed him her passport. He looked at it as though he'd never seen one before, sighed, and plugged it into a slot in the top of his counter. The slot had beat-up aluminum lips, and someone had covered these with transparent tape, peeling now and dirty. The man was looking at a monitor Chia couldn't see. Maybe he was going to tell her she couldn't go. She thought about the coffee in her *Espressomatic*. It would still be warm.

“Twenty-three D,” he said, as a boarding-pass spooled from a different slot. He pulled her

passport out and handed it to her, along with her ticket and the boarding pass. "Gate fifty-two, blue concourse. Checking anything?"

"No."

"Passengers who've cleared security may be subject to noninvasive DNA sampling," he said, the words all run together because he was only saying it because it was the law that he had to.

She put her passport and ticket away in the special pocket inside her parka. She kept the boarding pass in her hand. She went looking for the blue concourse. She had to go downstairs to find it, and take one of those trains that was like an elevator that ran sideways. Half an hour later she was through security, looking at the seals they'd put on the zippers of her carry-on. They looked like rings of rubbery red candy. She hadn't expected them to do that; she'd thought she could find a pay-station in the departure lounge, link up, and give the club an update. They never sealed her carry-on when she went to Vancouver to stay with her uncle, but that wasn't really international, not since the Agreement.

She was riding a rubber sidewalk toward Gate 52 when she saw the blue light flashing, up ahead. Soldiers there, and a little barricade. The soldiers were lining people up as they came off the sidewalk. They wore fatigues and didn't seem to be much older than the guys at her last school.

"Shit," she heard the woman in front of her say, a big-haired blond with obvious extensions woven in. Big red lips, multilevel mascara, padded shoulders out to here, tiny little skirt, white cowboy boots. Like that country singer her mother liked, Ashleigh Modine Carter. Kind of a meshback thing, but with money.

Chia stepped off the end of the rubber sidewalk and took her place in line behind the woman who looked like Ashleigh Modine Carter.

The soldiers were taking hair samples and slotting people's passports. Chia assumed that was to prove you really were who you said you were, because your DNA was there in your passport, converted into a kind of bar code.

The sampler was a little silver wand that vacuumed the tips of a couple of strands in and clipped them off. They'd wind up with the world's biggest collection of split ends, Chia thought. Now it was the blond's turn. There were two boy-soldiers there, one to work the sampler and one to rattle off the line about how you'd already agreed to this by coming this far, and please produce your passport.

Chia watched as the woman handed over her passport, becoming somehow instantly and up-front sexy, like a lightbulb coming on, with a big smile for the soldier that made him blink and swallow and nearly drop the passport. Grinning, he stuck the passport into a little console attached to the barricade. The other soldier raised his wand. Chia saw the woman reach up and choose one of her hair-extensions, offering the end of this for sampling. The whole thing taking maybe eight seconds, including the return of her passport, and the first soldier was still smiling now that it was Chia's turn.

The woman moved on, having just committed what Chia felt fairly certain would be a federal offense. Should she tell the soldier?

But she didn't, and then they were handing back her passport and Chia was on her way to Gate 53. Where she looked for the woman but didn't see her.

She watched the ads cycle by on the walls, until they were called to board by rows.

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Seat 23E remained empty as Chia waited for takeoff, sucking on a peppermint the flight attendant had given her. The only empty seat on the plane, she figured. If nobody arrived to take it, she thought, she'd be able to fold the armrest away and curl up there. She tried putting out a negative mental field, a vibe that would keep anyone from getting on at the last minute and sitting there. Zona Rosa was into that, part of her whole girl-gang martial arts thing. Chia didn't see how you could seriously believe it would work.

And it didn't, because here came that blond down the aisle, and wasn't that an eye-click of recognition Chia saw there?

3. Almost a Civilian

It had been a weeknight, a Wednesday, when Laney had last seen Kathy Torrance, and her tattoo had not been visible. She'd stood there in the Cage, screaming as he cleaned out his locker. She was wearing an Armani blazer cut from gun-metal fustian, its matching skirt concealing the sign from outer space. A single strand of pearls was visible at the open throat of her white, man-tailored blouse. Her dress uniform. Called on the carpet for her subordinate's defection.

He knew that she was screaming because her mouth was open, but the syllables of her rage couldn't penetrate the seamless hissing surf of the white-noise generator provided by his lawyers. He'd been advised to wear the generator at all times, during this last visit to the Slitscan offices. He'd been instructed to make no statements. Certainly he would hear none.

And later he would sometimes wonder exactly how she might have framed her fury. Some restatement of her theory of celebrity and the nature of its price, of Slitscan's place in that, of Laney's inability to function there? Or would she have focused on his treason? But he hadn't heard; he'd only put these things he didn't really want into a corrugated plastic carton that still smelled faintly of Mexican oranges. The notebook, screen cracked now, useless, that he'd carried through college. Insulated mug with the Nissan County logo peeling away. Notes he'd made on paper, counter to office policy. A coffee-stained fax from a woman he'd slept with in Ixtapa, someone whose initials couldn't be deciphered now and whose name he'd forgotten. Pointless pieces of the self, destined for a cannister in the building's parking lot. But he'd leave nothing here, and Kathy kept on screaming.

Now, in Death Cube K, he imagined that she'd told him that he'd never work in that town again, and indeed it seemed he might not. Disloyalty to one's employers being a particularly difficult notch on anyone's ticket, and perhaps particularly so, in that town, when the act itself had sprung from what Laney recalled had once been called scruples.

The word itself striking him now as singularly ridiculous.

"You smiled." Blackwell staring at him from across the tiny table.

"Serotonin depletion."

"Food," said Blackwell.

"I'm not really hungry."

"Need to carbo-load," Blackwell said, standing. He took up a remarkable amount of space.

Laney and Yamazaki got to their feet and followed Blackwell down out of Death Cube K, to descend the O My Golly Building itself. Out of roach-light, into the chrome and neon gulch of Roppongi Dori. A reek of putrid fish and fruit even in this chill damp night, though muted somewhat by the baking-sugar sweetness of Chinese gasohol from the vehicles whirring past on the expressway. But there was comfort in the steady voice of traffic, and Laney found it better to be upright, moving.

If he kept moving, perhaps he could puzzle out the meaning of Keith Alan Blackwell and Shinya Yamazaki.

Blackwell leading the way across a pedestrian overpass. Laney's hand brushed an irregularity on the alloy rail. He saw that it was an accidental fold or pucker in a bright little sticker; a bare-breasted girl smiling up at him from a palm-sized silvery hologram. As his angle of vision changed, she seemed to gesture at the telephone number above her head. The railing, end to end, was dressed with these small ads, though there were precise gaps where a few had been peeled away for later perusal.

Blackwell's bulk parted the sidewalk crowd on the far side like a freighter through a bobbing stream of pleasure craft. "Carbohydrates," he said, over a mountainous shoulder. He steered them down an alley, a narrow maw of colored light, past an all-night veterinary clinic in whose window a pair of white-gowned surgeons were performing an operation on what Laney hoped was a cat. A relaxed little tableau of pedestrians paused here, observing from the pavement.

Blackwell eased himself edgewise into a bright cave, where steam rose from cookers behind a counter of reconstituted granite.

Laney and Yamazaki followed him in, the counterman already ladling out fragrant messes of broth-slick beige to the Australian's order.

Laney watched Blackwell raise the bowl to his mouth and apparently inhale the bulk of his noodles, severing them from the remainder with a neat snap of his bright plastic teeth. Muscles in the man's thick neck worked mightily as he swallowed.

Laney stared.

Blackwell wiped his mouth with the back of one vast and pinkly jigsawed hand. He belched. "Give us one of those baby tubes of Dry...." He downed the entire beer in a single swallow, absently crushing the sturdy steel can as though it were a paper cup. "Similar," he said, rattling his bowl for the counterman.

Laney, suddenly ravenous in spite or because of this gluttonous display, gave his attention to his own bowl, where dyed pink slices of mystery meat, thin as paper, basked atop a sargasso of noodles.

Laney ate in silence, as did Yamazaki, Blackwell downing another three beers to no apparent effect. As Laney drank off the remaining broth, and put his bowl down on the counter, he noticed an ad behind the counter for something called Apple Shires Authentic Fruit Beverage. Misreading it initially as Alison Shires, once the object of his scruples.

"Taste the wet warm life in Apple Shires," the ad advised.

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Alison Shires, glimpsed first as animated headshots, five months into his time at Slitscan, had been a rather ordinarily attractive girl murmuring her stats to imagined casting directors, agents, someone, anyone.

Kathy Torrance had watched his face, as he watched the screen. "'Babed out' yet, Laney? Allergic reaction to *cute*? First symptoms are a sort of underlying irritation, a resentment, a vague but persistent feeling that you're being gotten at, taken advantage of..."

"She isn't even as 'cute' as the last two."

“Exactly. She's almost normal-looking. Almost a civilian. Tag her.”

Laney looked up. “What for?”

“Tag her. He could get off pretending she's a waitress or some-thing.”

“You think she's the one?”

“You've got another three hundred in there easy, Laney. Picking probables is a start.”

“At random?”

“We call it ‘instinct.’ Tag her.”

Laney cursor-clicked, the pale blue arrow resting by chance in the shadowed orbit of the girl's lowered eye. Marking her for closer examination as the possible sometime partner of a very publicly married actor, famous in a way that Kathy Torrance understood and approved of. One who must obey the dictates of the food chain. Not too big for Slitscan to swallow. But he or his handlers had so far been very cautious. Or very lucky.

But no more. A rumor had reached Kathy, via one of those “back channels” she depended on, and now the food chain must have its way.

“Wake up,” Blackwell said. “You're falling asleep in your bowl. Time you tell us how you lost your last job, if we're going to offer you another.”

“Coffee,” Laney said.

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Laney was not, he was careful to point out, a voyeur. He had a peculiar knack with data-collection architectures, and a medically documented concentration-deficit that he could toggle, under certain conditions, into a state of pathological hyperfocus. This made him, he continued over lattes in a Roppongi branch of Amos ‘n’ Andes, an extremely good researcher (He made no mention of the Federal Orphanage in Gainesville, nor of any attempts that might have been made there to cure his concentration-deficit. The 5-SB trials or any of that.)

The relevant data, in terms of his current employability, was that he was an intuitive fisher of patterns of information: of the sort of signature a particular individual inadvertently created in the net as he or she went about the mundane yet endlessly multiplex business of life in a digital society. Laney's concentration-deficit, too slight to register on some scales, made him a natural channel-zapper, shifting from program to program, from database to database, from platform to platform, in a way that was, well, intuitive.

And that was the catch, really, when it came to finding employment: Laney was the equivalent of a dowser, a cybernetic water-witch. He couldn't explain how he did what he did. He just didn't know.

He'd come to Slitscan from DatAmerica, where he'd been a research assistant on a project code named TIDAL. It said something about the corporate culture of DatAmerica that Laney had never been able to discover whether or not TIDAL was an acronym, or (even remotely) what TIDAL was about. He'd spent his time skimming vast floes of undifferentiated data, looking for “nodal points” he'd been trained to recognize by a team of French scientists who were all keen tennis players, and none of whom had had any interest in explaining these nodal points to Laney, who came to feel that he served as a kind of native guide. Whatever

the Frenchmen were after, he was there to scare it up for them. And it beat Gainesville, no contest. Until TIDAL, whatever it was, had been cancelled, and there didn't seem to be anything else for Laney to do at DatAmerica. The Frenchmen were gone, and when Laney tried to talk to other researchers about what they'd been doing, they looked at him as though they thought he was crazy.

When he'd gone to interview for Slitscan, the interviewer had been Kathy Torrance. He'd had no way of knowing that she was a department head, or that she would soon be his boss. He told her the truth about himself. Most of it, anyway.

She was the palest woman Laney had ever seen. Pale to the point of translucence. (Later he'd learned this had a lot to do with cosmetics, and in particular a British line that boasted peculiar light-bending properties.)

“Do you always wear Malaysian imitations of Brooks Brothers blue oxford button-downs, Mr. Laney?”

Laney had looked down at his shirt, or tried to. “Malaysia?”

“The stitch-count's dead on, but they still haven't mastered the thread-tension.”

“Oh.”

“Never mind. A little prototypic nerd chic could actually lend a certain frisson, around here. You could lose the tie, though. Definitely lose the tie. And keep a collection of felt-tipped pens in your pocket. Unchewed, please. Plus one of those fat flat highliners, in a really nasty fluorescent shade.”

“Are you joking?”

“Probably, Mr. Laney. May I call you Colin?”

“Yes..”

She never did call him “Colin,” then or ever. “You'll find that humor is essential at Slitscan Laney. A necessary survival tool. You'll find the type that's most viable here is fairly oblique.”

“How do you mean, Ms. Torrance?”

“Kathy. I mean difficult to quote effectively in a memo. Or a court of law.”

• • •

Yamazaki was a good listener. He'd blink, swallow, nod, fiddle with the top button of his plaid shirt, whatever, all of it managing to somehow convey that he was getting it, the drift of Laney's story.

Keith Alan Blackwell was something else. He sat there inert as a bale of beef, utterly motionless except when he'd raise his left hand and squeeze and twiddle the lobe-stump that was all that remained of his left ear. He did this without hesitation or embarrassment, and Laney formed the impression that it was affording him some kind of relief. The scar tissue reddened slightly under Blackwell's ministrations.

Laney sat on an upholstered bench, his back to the wall. Yamazaki and Blackwell faced him across the narrow table. Behind them, over the uniformly black-haired heads of late-night Roppongi coffee-drinkers, the holographic features of the chain's namesake floated in front of

a lurid sunset vista of snow-capped Andean peaks. The lips of the 'toon-Amos were like inflated red rubber sausages, a racial parody that would've earned the place a firebombing anywhere in the L.A. basin. He was holding up a steaming coffee cup, white and smoothly iconic, in a big, white-gloved, three-fingered ur-Disney hand.

Yamazaki coughed, delicately. "You are telling us, please, about your experiences at Slitscan?"

Kathy Torrance began by offering Laney a chance to net-surf, Slitscan style.

She checked a pair of computers out of the Cage, shooed four employees from an SBU, invited Laney in, and closed the door. Chairs, a round table, a large softboard on the wall. He watched as she jacked the computers into dataports and called up identical images of a longhaired dirty-blond guy in his mid-twenties. Goatee and a gold earring. The face meant nothing to Laney. It might have been a face he'd passed on the street an hour before, the face of a minor player in daytime soap, or the face of someone whose freezer had recently been discovered to be packed with his victims' fingers.

"Clinton Hillman," Kathy Torrance said. "Hairdresser, sushi chef, music journalist, extra in mid-budget hardcore. This headshot's tweaked, of course." She tapped keys, detweaking it. Clint Hillman's eyes and chin, on her screen, grew several clicks smaller. "Probably did it himself. With a professional job, there'd be nothing to work back from."

"He acts in porno?" Laney felt obscurely sorry for Hillman, who looked lost and vulnerable without his chin.

"It isn't the size of his chin they're interested in," Kathy said. "It's mainly motion-capture, porno. Extreme close. They're all body-doubles. Map on better faces in post. But somebody's still gotta get down in the trenches and bump uglies, right?"

Laney shot her a sideways look. "If you say so."

She handed Laney an industrial-strength pair of rubberized Thomson eyephones. "Do him. Do?"

"Him. Go for those nodal points you've been telling me about. The headshot's a gateway to everything we've got on him. Whole gigs of sheer boredom. Data like a sea of tapioca, Laney. An endless vanilla plane. He's boring as the day is long, and the day is long. Do it. Make my day. Do it and you've got yourself a job."

Laney looked at the tweaked Hillman on his screen. "You haven't told me what I'm looking for."

"Anything that might be of interest to Slitscan. Which is to say, Laney, anything that might be of interest to Slitscan's audience. Which is best visualized as a vicious, lazy, profoundly ignorant, perpetually hungry organism craving the warm god-flesh of the anointed. Personal. I like to imagine something the size of a baby hippo, the color of a week-old boiled potato, that lives by itself, in the dark, in a double-wide on the outskirts of Topeka. It's covered with eyes and it sweats constantly. The sweat runs into those eyes and makes them sting. It has no mouth, Laney, no genitals, and can only express its mute extremes of murderous rage and infantile desire by changing the channels on a universal remote. Or by voting in presidential elections."

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