

Rate Me Red

By Richie Chevat

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Cover design by Joan Endres

You can see Poppy and Gordy on the vid at www.ratemeRED.com
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For Poppy
Love, Goo-Goo

Gordy's toilet was talking to him.

"Gordy," it asked, "are you getting enough fiber?"

Gordy sighed. He really didn't want to get into an argument with his toilet again. He was already feeling pretty stressed out.

First, there was his girlfriend, Poppy Nicole, the love of his life. Poppy loved Gordy and Gordy loved Poppy, everyone knew that. But Gordy was sure she was getting ready to dump him. Everyone knew that, too.

Then there was his boss, Javed Jones. Gordy had already talked to him twice that morning and it was only 9:27.

All he wanted to do was to sit in peace for a few minutes and watch a little vid. Was that too much to ask?

"I'm just a little concerned," the toilet continued, in a high, melodious voice, "because it's been more than 24 hours since your last bowel movement."

When the compu-toilet was first installed, giving it a female voice had seemed like a great idea. The smooth, honeyed tones were warm and friendly, with just a hint of seduction. Gordy had imagined it would be just the thing to wake up to in the morning. He hadn't realized she would be constantly asking him about his bowel movements.

"You know that plenty of fiber is important for a balanced diet."

"I know, I know," he said, trying to be patient. After all, the *Nihao Fujiba Healthy 3000* was the number one selling compu-toilet in North America. It was able to interface with other toilets Gordy used during the day, analyze his diet, consult his medical records and recommend the appropriate well-being products. Plus, it had four cupholders. Still, it could be pretty annoying at

times.

He'd tried reprogramming it, but the toilet wouldn't let him.

"Gordy! Gordy!"

Gordy's boss, Javed Jones, appeared on the toilet's 90 centimeter vid screen.

"Gordy, are these numbers right?" he asked. In spite of his vid manager's best efforts, Javed was sounding pretty nervous. "Is the system working?"

On the vid, Javed appeared to be sitting at his desk at **VidRateNet** Headquarters, wearing a bright red business suit. His wavy black hair was perfectly tousled. His dark face was washed and shaved. But Gordy knew it was only a vid simulation. There was no way his boss was already at work at 9:27 in the morning. He was still at home like Gordy, probably sitting on *his* compu-toilet.

Normally, Gordy's vid manager sent an automated reply to early-morning vids from his boss, but today was a special day.

"Hey, Javed," Gordy said. Instantly, an image of Gordy appeared on Javed's vid screen. It showed Gordy dressed in a metallic orange business suit and sitting at his desk at **VidRateNet**. A copy of the image appeared in the corner of the vid screen on Gordy's compu-toilet, so he could see what he looked like.

"Don't worry, we had the computers check themselves. Twice." As Gordy spoke, the words came out of the mouth of his desk-bound vid simulation.

"Are you sure?" Once again, the simulated handsome features of Javed's vid image betrayed the slightest hint of worry.

"Just look at your numbers," Gordy reassured him. "The new polling system has been running for the last 6 hours. Everything is going great."

Javed nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Okay. Can't be too careful, you know. Today is a big day."

"I know," Gordy's vid nodded. It was completely sympathetic with Javed's vid. "Don't worry. It'll be fine."

"Okay. Well, see you on the vid."

"See you on the vid."

As soon as Javed beeped off, Gordy's toilet spoke up again.

“You know what I think, Gordy?” she asked, cheerily. “I think you should try the new, improved *Lax-a-licious!*” A hologram of a bright orange bottle appeared in the air, in front of the vid screen he had been watching. It rotated slowly to allow Gordy to read the label, while the *Lax-a-licious* jingle played over the toilet’s theater system. The music echoed off the blue tiles of the bathroom.

*Lax-a-licious does the trick,
When you’re well or when you’re sick,
Makes it easy when things get thi. . .*

Gordy sighed and stood up, pulling up his shorts. The jingle stopped and the hologram disappeared.

“Done already?” The toilet’s light tone held just a hint of disappointment. It flushed itself and then added encouragingly, “Well, I’m sure you’ll do better next time.”

“Thanks.”

Gordy stepped to the giant, gleaming white sink five meters away. (It was annoying to have to walk that far, but everyone knew the best cribs had really huge bathrooms.) As he did, the *Nihao Fujiba SmoothEase Auto-shaver* on his cheek spoke up. “Hold still, please!”

Gordy sighed again and tried to hold his head still while the micro robot moved across his face with a faint tickling sensation. It was the auto-shaver’s job to give him a close, smooth shave, even in those hard-to-reach places, but this model was very temperamental. If it missed some stubble or nicked him, it acted like it was somehow Gordy’s fault.

As the shaver crawled over his chin, muttering under its breath, Gordy looked in the giant vid mirror that covered most of the wall. There he saw, bigger than life, the totally vidacious face of his girlfriend, Poppy Nicole, star of *The Poppy Show*. At the moment, Poppy was in *her* bathroom, wearing pair of red cotton panties and an oversize *Sunflower Brands Xian Jeans* tee shirt that clung to her perfect figure. Poppy was talking on *her* vid mirror to her best friend, Doreena. The numbers at the bottom of the vid mirror showed that 37,344 other

people were watching, too.

Gordy loved Poppy. He loved her so intensely it hurt. Poppy was perfect, and not in the way most girls were perfect. Most girls had perfect noses and perfect eyes and perfect hair and perfect skin and perfect bodies. Poppy had all of those things, of course, but she had more than that. Poppy was perfection.

Right now she was especially ravishing. Her eyes were Asian again, not completely Asian like when they first met, but the new hybrid Eurasian style that was big this week.

Her hair was still blonde but she'd made it longer, and curled it into hundreds of small ringlets that cascaded down her bare shoulders. The ringlets framed a face that was a perfect oval, with a slim, chiseled nose and rounded chin. Poppy's nose hardly ever changed, but then why would you change something so gorgeous?

Her skin, now a deep mocha brown, had the soft, blemish-free texture of fine syntho-microfiber. Pimples had been big for a while, but Poppy had been one of the first to say that pimples were definitely over. Poppy was always one of the first to know when something was over. That was one of the things that made her Poppy.

Of course, there was no way of knowing which of the changes in Poppy's appearance were real, surgical improvements and which were just vid enhancements. That was part of the fun of Poppy. Her fans loved to argue about every strand of hair, every shade of color. They debated Poppy's choices on *Poppy Today*. They traded tips on *Me, You, Poppy, Too*. They learned how it was all done by watching *The Making of the Making of Poppy*.

Gordy could vid Poppy for hours. In fact, he did vid her for hours, every day. Sometimes at night, when he couldn't sleep he got up and watched her sleeping on *Poppy Sleeps*. Vidding Poppy made him happy. But it was a bittersweet happiness because he knew it was just a matter of time until she dropped him. Once more, he looked at her *VidRateNet* Power Rating Button. He was pretty sure it was more Orange than it had been last night. Reflexively, he checked his own. He was still a solid Yellow.

That was the problem. He and Poppy had met when they were both Yellow. In fact, she had still had a hint of Green, sort of Chartreuse. But in the last few weeks, thanks to the success of *The Poppy Show*, Poppy had gone all the way through the Yellows and was now almost Goldenrod. Gordy knew that Poppy loved him, but if her rating got any higher or his slipped any lower, that wouldn't matter, would it?

On *The Poppy Show*, Poppy and Doreen were laughing about something Gordy had said to Poppy the night before. A vid of him was playing on Poppy's vid screen.

"He's such a geek!" Doreena was saying. As Poppy's best friend, she couldn't be more vidacious than Poppy, but she was still pretty vidacious in an athletic, best-friend kind of way. At the moment, she had straight brown hair, wide green eyes and deeply tanned skin that contrasted nicely with the tight red tank top she was wearing. Gordy understood that it was part of Doreena's role as Poppy's best friend to constantly put him down. Still, he wished she would cut it out.

"He may be a geek, but he's my geek," Poppy laughed and winked at the camera. Poppy always knew where the camera was. "Are you listening, Goo-Goo?"

He loved it when she called him Goo-Goo.

According to the *Gordy News Crawl* at the bottom of the mirror, it was another warm, February day in *Paterson Suravinda New Jersey*. Outside, in REALITY™, the temperature was 33 degrees C. In the upper right-hand corner of the vid mirror, floating above *The Poppy Show*, was the image of his vid manager, *Jaime BX*, wearing a shiny black syntho-leather jumpsuit. The *Jaime BX* vid had a wide, handsome face, thick curly hair and a slightly imperfect nose - just like the real *Jaime BX*.

"Hey, ape!" The vid winked at Gordy with a boyishly mischievous grin. "How we doin' this morning?"

Everyone had a vid manager, it was the only way you could navigate the immense amount of data on the *VidNet*. With 17.2 billion primates on the planet, and approximately 5.17 billion vids and vid games available at any time,

you needed help to find the vids that were right for you. A good vid manager knew without being told what you would want to vid live and what you would want to vid on delay and what you just wouldn't vid even if it was the last vid on earth. It knew which vids you would want to share with your friends and which of your friends' vids you would want to vid. Best of all, a good vid manager made sure that your consumer choices were up to the second and not hopelessly last hour.

That's where *Jaime BX* came in. The real *Jaime BX* was a vid star, pop singer, news commentator and clothing designer. But for just \$675 a month, Gordy had the company of a *Jaime BX* vid simulation that was just as suave, urbane, edgy, ironic and sincere as the real thing. Maybe even more so.

"Lookin' good, ape," the *Jaime BX* vid drawled, managing to sound heartfelt and mocking at the same time - just like *Jamie BX* always sounded on his hit vid, *The Hard Way Down: Mumbai*.

"Thanks," Gordy replied.

"So what are we going with today? How about a new do?"

The *Nihao Fujiba SmoothEase Auto-shaver* on Gordy's chin interrupted. "I'm finished," it grumbled. "Please remove me and plug me into my charger."

Gordy plucked the auto-shaver from his face, rubbed his chin and felt a tiny patch of bristles just under his lip. The shaver had missed again, but there was no point in antagonizing it. "Uh, good job." He said as he plugged it into the outlet.

"Yeah, sure, " the shaver sighed, sarcastically. "See you tomorrow."

The *Jaime BX* vid didn't miss a beat, "Hey, guess what? " it cried with genuine-sounding exuberance. "There's a terrific brand new auto-shaver from *Sunflower Brands* that won't leave you with that tell-tale stubble in those hard-to-reach places. The *Sunflower Glide K160* is a cool shaver for a hot shave." A sleek new auto-shaver instantly appeared on the face of *Jaime BX*. Its translucent surface shimmered with an aurora of fluorescent colors.

"Hmm," the *Jaime BX* vid sighed with pleasure. "What a smooth shave. And I can order one for you right now at the vidacious price of \$13,299, including

shipping and handling. What do you say, buddy?”

Gordy thought the new auto-shaver really *did* look cool. But he'd have to tell his old auto-shaver it was being replaced and he was sure it wouldn't react very well. He decided he'd better think about it.

“Uh, not now,” he said to the mirror with a wistful look at the *Glide K160*.

“Okay, bud. Maybe next time.” The vid of the shaver vanished. “So, what'll it be today? I noticed Poppy's blonde. Are you feeling blonde this morning?”

A vid of Gordy as a blonde appeared on the screen. He looked pretty good. His blonde hair was long and wavy and his round, tan face was smooth and blemish-free. Of course, Gordy knew that *Jaime BX* had adjusted the image to make him look extra vidacious. If he wanted to see how he really looked, he'd have to select the vid mirror's REALITY™ setting. But what was the point of that? You looked in the mirror to feel good about yourself, not to be bummed out.

Anyway, except for the hair and the skin, Gordy thought the image was pretty close to the way he really looked. Medium height, medium build, brown hair and eyes - like most people, he was good-looking enough to have his own vid. But Gordy didn't have a vid. He'd put his on hiatus when he started appearing on *The Poppy Show*.

“What about it, buddy?” the vid manager prodded, encouragingly.

Gordy considered the image of himself as a blonde.

“Uh, I don't think so,” Gordy replied. “Poppy doesn't like it when I have the same hair color as her.”

“Didn't know that.” *Jaime BX* frowned. “You gotta tell me these things.”

“Sorry. I forgot.”

“Hey, don't worry about it. You have a lot on your mind.”

“Hey, how about some new rags?” Instantly the vid zoomed out to display an image Gordy wearing a bright multi-colored shirt and matching pants.

“Dig this! It's exactly what I wore to the *People's Best World Awards* last night. Order now and I can have them delivered by the time you get out of the shower. They're on special for the next 35 seconds - just \$18,999 including delivery. Uh-oh! There are only 352,000 left. What do you say?”

The Gordy vid in the vid mirror looked at his new clothes and smiled happily. He nodded and gave Gordy the thumbs up.

“I don’t know, ” Gordy hesitated. He did like the clothes, but that was no surprise. **Jaime BX** always knew what he’d like because he had a record of every single purchase Gordy had made since he was eleven years old. Still, Gordy didn’t know if he really *needed* a new set of clothes.

A faint ticking sound came out of the bathroom’s speakers.

Gordy had to admit, \$18,999 *was* a bargain. A rotating graphic on the screen broke the price down for him. The cost of the actual clothes, the ones he would wear in REALITY™, was \$1.89. The remaining \$18,997.11 was the licensing fee that allowed his vid image to be displayed wearing the suit. In theory he could have saved a lot of money by just buying the actual clothes, but what was the point of *that*? Hardly anyone was going to see him in REALITY™.

“Only 288,000 left, ape.” **Jaime BX** was clearly worried that Gordy might miss out on this great deal.

“Okay, I’ll take ‘em!”

“Good move!” **Jaime BX** smiled approvingly. His main primate had made the right choice - again. “Poppy’s gonna go nuts when she sees you. Now better get a move on, or you’ll be late for work. We have a big day today. And don’t forget the teeth.”

“Thanks!” He’d almost forgotten. Good thing **Jaime BX** knew that Poppy had a thing for pearly white teeth. Gordy picked up a tiny cylinder covered with bristles and moved it towards his mouth. It was the **Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic** robot dental appliance, a brand new model and a steal at \$6,349.95.

“Buon giorno, Gordy!” said the **Z4**. The dental robot spoke with a thick Italian accent. It had the voice of **Giancarlo Seiggerson**, the Italian professional vid soccer player/ pop singer/ Supreme Court judge. Like everyone else in Italy, Giancarlo spoke flawless English, but the accent made him sound cool. Gordy sometimes wished he could talk like that to Poppy.

“We are almos’ out the tooth-a-paste, would you like I should order more?” the cylinder asked. “There’s a new brand I would-a like-a suggest. It’s a **Milano**

Samba Sensation. It's a like a samba inna you mouth."

"Okay," Gordy shrugged. "But I thought the sink ordered the toothpaste."

"That is correct." The sink boomed in a deep bass voice that made the entire bathroom vibrate. Gordy often had it sing to him while he auto-showered. "I can interface with the dental appliance and automatically order new toothpaste when replacement is indicated."

"Okay," said Gordy. "Do that."

"Make-a sure it's a **Milano Samba Sensation**," added the **Milano Z4**. "It's a like-a samba inna you mouth."

"I have noted the request," the sink rumbled.

"Gordy," the toilet's soft feminine voice broke in. "If you're ordering toothpaste, how about ordering some **Lax-O-Licious**?"

A hologram of the orange **Lax-O-Licious** bottle appeared in the air over the sink. **The Lax-O-Licious** jingle rang out over the bathroom sound system.

*Lax-O-Licious does the trick,
When you're well or when you're sick,
Makes it easy when things get thi...*

"Hey ape," interrupted the **Jaime BX** vid, cutting the jingle off. "You didn't tell me you were feeling a little slow down below." The way the vid said it, it sounded positively cool, kind of edgy and daring. "You know what I use at times like this? **Dr. Fiber**."

A hologram of a bright green bottle of **Dr. Fiber** appeared in the air next to the orange **Lax-O-Licious** hologram. The two images began to slowly circle Gordy's head.

"But Gordy," the toilet broke in. "Independent laboratory tests have shown that **Lax-O-Licious** is ten times more effective than the other leading brands. Why, you'd have to drink this much **Dr. Fiber** to get the same results as one dose of fast-acting **Lax-O-Licious**!"

Suddenly, there were ten green bottles in the air next to one orange.

Gordy shook his head. This was his fault. The toilet was a **Nihao Fujiba** product and **Jaime BX** was licensed by **Shanghai Sunflower Brands**, so of

course they were always arguing about Gordy's consumer choices. That's why most people had just one sponsor for their bathroom.

As the laxative bottles circled overhead, there was a scratching at the bathroom portal and the chrome panel slid open. In trotted a small, scruffy dog, whose coat was a weird patchwork of black and white spots. It was Bingo, Poppy's dog. At least he had been Poppy's dog until she had "accidentally" had him sent to Gordy's apartment. Bingo immediately started to bark at the floating bottles.

"Quiet, Bingo!" Gordy shouted. "Bad dog!" This only made Bingo more excited. Meanwhile, the *Jaime BX* vid was getting very enthusiastic about *Dr. Fiber*.

"Of course, no one would drink that much *Dr. Fiber*," it said with a laugh. "But if you wanted to, you could, because - *it tastes that good!* Not at all like the chalky, bitter taste of some of those *other* laxatives."

"Who are you calling bitter?" the toilet was indignant.

"Hey, have *you* ever tried *Lax-O-Licious?*" the vid scoffed.

"Of course not," the toilet's feelings were hurt. "How could I?"

"Well, I have," the *Jaime BX* vid replied smugly. Just to rub it in, he drank from a vid bottle of the orange laxative, grimaced, then spit it out all over the vid screen.

"Oh really?" the toilet shot back. "I'll have you know that in a secret taste test, primates chose *Lax-O-Licious* three to one over *Dr. Fiber*. Besides," she sniffed, "it's my job to monitor Gordy's digestive health."

Bingo was now running back and forth from the toilet to the vid mirror, yipping in a high-pitched growl. His claws clattered against the tile floor.

"All I know is, I have to look out for my ape," said the vid manager. "And he *trusts* me. Isn't that right, Gordy?"

"Oh, you don't think he trusts *me?*" the toilet sneered. "We have a very intimate relationship, Gordy and I. Isn't that right, Gordy?"

Gordy looked from the vid mirror to the toilet. Just once he'd like to get through a morning without all this bickering. The *Tooth-A-Matic* in his hand

spoke up.

“Hey, what’s a happenin’?” it asked. “Are we a gonna brush-a you teeth or what? Cause-a my charge she no so strong a-right-a now.”

Gordy popped the *Tooth-A-Matic* into his mouth, where it buzzed pleasantly as it traveled along his gums and teeth, cleaning in every crevice and giving him a pearly white smile. While it cleaned, it sang the latest hit song from *The Jingles*.

*Don’t want, uh, no
Can’t huh? Maybe so
Uh, yeah. Uh-no*

It sounded like the *Tooth-A-Matic* was singing inside his head, which it was, sort of. Gordy bopped gently to the insistent beat. The *Tooth-A-Matic* seemed to be cleaning his teeth in rhythm, too.

Bingo was barking and trying even harder to reach the floating laxative bottles. By hurling himself into the air with all the force in his little legs and he could just manage to get his head level with the sink.

“So Gordy,” the toilet said very sweetly, “I’ll just go ahead and order a case of *Lax-O-Licious*.”

“Better chill, sister.” The vid manager sounded coolly dangerous just like *Jaime BX* in *Shoot Me Now, Kill Me Later*. “We’re ordering *Dr. Fiber*, right, Gordy?”

“Why don’t you stick to something you know, like hair spray?” the toilet said biting.

“We all know what *you* know about,” the vid shot back.

“I know about plenty of things!”

“Yeah, how’s the view from down there?”

“The . . . I . . .” the toilet sputtered. “You take that back!”

“Take what back?”

“What you said!”

“I just pointed out...”

The vid mirror beeped and *Jaime BX* cut off in mid-sentence. Poppy’s face

filled the screen.

“Gordy?” she asked. “I want to ask you something.”

Gordy’s vid manager not only handled his purchases and vidding, it also filtered his vid messages. As soon as Poppy had addressed Gordy directly, her vid manager had contacted Gordy’s vid manager. Gordy’s vid manager had taken only a few nanoseconds to consult its friends hierarchy and then it allowed Gordy’s image to be sent out to Poppy’s vid. Now Gordy’s vid was not only on Poppy’s vid screen but the 37,516 vid screens of her viewers.

Gordy noticed that his vid manager had dressed him in a new, broken-in, gently ironic *Sunflower Brands* tee shirt, but had not put any pants on him. That was to give the audience the feeling of REALITY™. On the other hand, it had smoothed out most of the bags under his eyes. His vid also had a two-day growth of beard. Gordy kicked himself mentally. That meant stubble was in today. He should have checked before shaving.

Poppy’s eyes had changed from deep brown to a bright cornflower blue, which was his favorite, although he also loved it when they were deep brown. Sometimes they were green when she was in a “green” mood. When they sparkled with golden flecks, it made Gordy weak at the knees.

“Hey, Goo-Goo,” she said. Her voice was even more seductive than the toilet’s.

He opened his mouth to reply and the *Z4 Tooth-A-Matic’s* voice filled the bathroom.

Uh, yeah, uh, no

Don’t you? Oh, oh...

Gordy spit the robot into the sink.

“Hey!” it shouted. “You could-a give a guy some warning!”

“Sorry.” Gordy felt contrite but his regret vanished in the blazing sunlight of Poppy’s smile.

“Hi, Poppy!” he chirped. “You look pimptastic!”

Poppy nodded modestly. “Thanks, Goo-Goo. I feel pimptastic. You look pretty pimptastic yourself. I like your shirt.” She winked at her audience. Poppy’s

sponsor was also *Shanghai Sunflower Brands*, so she and *Jaime BX* were always in synch. “I wonder where you got it?” At the same time, 38,119 vid managers told their clients where they could get a shirt exactly like the one Goo-Goo was wearing.

The audience counter was rising fast now, as vid managers around the globe tuned Poppy’s fans to *The Poppy Show*. The managers knew that Poppy’s interactions with Gordy were audience favorites

“It *is* pretty vidacious,” Gordy said. It had been worth the \$9,589 it cost for his vid to wear it. “But you look unreal, Poppy.”

“Thanks, Goo-Goo. I wanted to look special today.”

“Well, you look awesome.”

“Thanks,” she said. “That’s sweet.”

Gordy felt warm and sappy whenever she said he was sweet.

As they talked, Poppy’s bathroom cameras covered her from the front and back, both profiles, two overheads and one from the drain in the sink. Gordy’s bathroom had six vid cameras. Gordy’s vid manager supplied the feed to Poppy’s vid manager, which edited *The Poppy Show* on the fly. At the moment it was transmitting a lovable shot of Bingo listening to his mistresses’ voice.

“Oh, is that Bingo?” Poppy cried with delight. “How is my widdle Bingo-bango? Do you miss yaw mommy? Is Goo-Goo twaking good care ob you?”

Bingo began barking excitedly.

“Oh, I miss my widdle Bingo-bango!” Poppy sighed.

There was no real reason that Bingo couldn’t live with Poppy. Poppy just instinctively knew that being separated from her beloved pet gave her ratings a nice sympathy bump.

“Mommy will see you soon,” she reassured the dog. “I just *have* to remember to have you shipped back.” Poppy paused and sighed. Then she lowered her eyes and sighed even more deeply.

“Goo-Goo?” she said, with a trace of sadness.

“Yes, Poppy?”

“Remember just now when I said I felt pimptastic?”

“Yes, Poppy?”

“I was lying. I don’t feel pimptastic at all. I really feel stinky. “

The audience had topped out at 47,709, lower than the year-to-date average of 58,401. No wonder she was feeling stinky. It made Gordy feel pretty bad himself.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, trying to put every ounce of sympathy he could into the two words.

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice dropping. “I just feel ...” she paused as he searched for the most devastating turn of phrase. “I don’t know, just... stinky!”

Gordy knew how she felt. The only thing worse than having your numbers drop was watching your rating color change the wrong way.

“Gee, Poppy,” he said. “That really *is* stinky. Is there anything I can do?”

Her voluptuous, sensual, extraordinary lower lip trembled ever so slightly. Poppy’s lips had been voted *Best Lips of 2043* by *World Girl Fan Audience Net*. Gordy dreamed of those lips. They were full, so soft and pillow-like that the vid-mirror seemed to melt when he looked at them. They were round and heavy and always slightly parted as though the mass of the rich, trembling flesh was too much for the dainty muscles of her face.

Gordy’s heart was breaking.

“I don’t know...” she hesitated. Her glistening eyes glanced down briefly. “I was thinking, maybe we should... hook up.”

“But... we *are* hooked up,” he pointed out as gently as he could.

“Not really,” she replied. “Not,” she took a deep breath, “in REALITY™.”

The vid mirror seemed to go out of focus for a moment. Gordy felt like the entire xtreme-size bathroom was spinning. He gripped the sink.

“In REALITY™?” he repeated, stunned. “You mean, like, real REALITY™?”

“Well, of course, silly,” she grimaced adorably at his obtuseness. “Unless you don’t want to.”

“Don’t want to?” he sputtered. It was all he wanted to do in the whole world. “Of course I want to! But, are you sure *you* want to?”

“Of course I want to, silly. Didn’t I just ask you?” Her smile was a like a burst

of sunshine after an April hurricane.

“When?” his heart was racing. “Now?”

“No, not now, silly.” Poppy was back to her usual cheerful self, mugging for the audience. She laughed delightedly. Gordy looked at the numbers - the audience was growing quickly. The news must have hit the crawls already. He glanced at the bottom of his vid mirror. There it was:

“...Vid star Poppy and boyfriend get real, will meet in REALITY™. . .”

Vid managers were feeding the news to clients based on their previous consumer choices and potential future purchases. Getting real was something a lot of primates would want to vid. In just 30 seconds the audience had shot up to 62,224 - a new record for Poppy.

Poppy raised one delicious eyebrow and smiled wickedly. “Let’s go to the Mall.”

“Wha? What?”

Gordy actually stuttered. He didn’t like to act so uncool, especially when he was on *The Poppy Show*, and he couldn’t be sure her vid manager would cover for him, but he couldn’t help himself.

“The Mall?” he blurted out. “Do you think we can get in?”

Poppy laughed merrily. Gordy was so silly sometimes.

“Yes, I think I can manage it.”

“Wow, that’s awesome, Poppy.” It really was awesome. “That’s really awesome!” he repeated.

“Isn’t it?” she agreed. “It’s really awesome.”

It really was. Gordy had never been to a Mall, not a real Mall in REALITY™. Malls were very exclusive and tremendously expensive. Even Oranges had to wait months for a reservation.

“And don’t worry about the bill,” Poppy added cheerily, as though she had read his thoughts. “We’re going as guests of *Chatterjee Mall*.”

The animated logo of the *Chatterjee Mall* appeared on more than 67 thousand vids, next to Poppy’s incandescent features.

“You know, Gordy, even if you aren’t lucky enough to visit *Chatterjee Mall* in

REALITY™, you can vid shop there anytime.”

“I vid shop there all the time,” Gordy added. “But I never thought I’d go there.” He didn’t have to be prompted, it was true. That was the thing about him and Poppy. They were always on the same consumer wavelength.

“Well, Goo-Goo, today is your lucky day.” A delicious pout appeared on her face. “I think you’re more excited about going to *Chatterjee Mall* than meeting me.”

“Aw, Poppy, don’t say that. You know I love you.”

“And I love you, Goo-Goo,” she smiled radiantly, “Well, I have to get ready. I want to look my best for my Goo-Goo. Twelve noon, *Chatterjee Mall, the hottest place to shop with the coolest things to buy*. You won’t forget, will you?”

“Forget? Are you kidding?”

She smiled, tolerantly. “I wasn’t talking to you, Goo-Goo.” She winked at her fans, then blew a kiss to Gordy. “See you on the vid!”

“See you on the vid!” he said to the vid mirror. Poppy’s vid manager had broken the live link but of course he could still see her as she left her bathroom, went into her bedroom and began getting dressed.

Jaime BX appeared in a corner of the vid mirror. He was beaming.

“Way to go, ape!” the vid congratulated him. “I think this calls for some extra special new threads. ”

“Yeah, sure,” Gordy’s mind was spinning as it all sank in. He was actually going to meet Poppy. Face-to-face. In REALITY™. In real REALITY™.

They’d been dating for a long time, almost 3 months, but just vid dating - like everyone else did. They’d never actually met. Not physically. Not *really*. Not in *real* REALITY™. Nobody did that unless they were really serious. That’s why they called it getting real. Like, “Hey, did you see *Jaime BX* and *Giyong Nevada* getting real last night?” Now Poppy wanted to get real with him. It was like a dream come true. Not only that, if he got real with Poppy Nicole, it might be enough to push him over into Orange or at least Gold. At least he thought so. For a nanosecond he worried that it was selfish of him to think of his rating

when he should be thinking about Poppy's, but after all, if his rating went up, it would just make it easier for Poppy to be with him, so he was really thinking of the two of them, wasn't he?

"Hey, ape, how 'bout this?" The vid mirror displayed a vid Gordy in a new metallic steel suit. The vid Gordy gave the real Gordy a wink. "It's made by *Xian Jeans - real clothes for the guy who is getting real*. Only \$52,899," the vid happily informed him. "Pimptastic, right? What do you say?"

This was a problem. Gordy never had to dress for Poppy for real before. What did people do when there was no vid manager to make you look vidacious? As usual, *Jaime BX* seemed to read his mind.

"This suit has the latest built-in lighting to enhance your appearance in REALITY™," the vid explained. The vid Gordy demonstrated the subtle yet effective lighting system of the clothing. "You'll look as good as a vid, or your money back!"

"Okay, order one," Gordy said quickly.

"On its way."

The vid mirror beeped.

"Gordy? Gordy?" It was Javed. Again. His boss appeared in the vid mirror, apparently seated at his desk at *VidRateNet*. Gordy's vid appeared on the screen seated at *his* desk.

Javed shook his head. Javed's vid manager was allowing his simulation to look truly worried. "I know you're still at your crib. I just saw you on *The Poppy Show*. Gordy, what if the sampling subprogram fails to self-correct?"

This was getting annoying. Really, what was the big deal? Just because *VidRateNet* was using a new sampling system, that was no reason for Javed to go un-primate. It was so simple. The computers had figured out that it wasn't necessary to sample data from everyone, everywhere, all the time. It turned out that to plan worldwide consumption and production, all they needed was data from 43 households. It was hard to believe, but that's what they said, just 43 samples were needed, out of a population of 17.2 billion. It was supposed to be more efficient or more accurate or something. Anyway, that's what the

computers said, so there was no point arguing.

Besides, Gordy knew that Javed didn't really care about the sampling system. He was just worried about his rating, like very other primate on the vid. And what was the point in that? No one understood the complex formulas the **VidRateNet** computers used. Gordy worked at **VidRateNet** and he didn't understand them. And you couldn't ask the computer programmers because the programs were written by other programs.

The rating system was specifically designed to prevent you from predicting chromo changes. It all depended on how the audience reacted. You could kill someone and your rating might go up. On the other hand, you might be rude to a stranger and your rating would fall. If the entire **VidRateNet** system crashed, Javed might fall so low he'd be lost in Purple. Or it might make him so famous he would jump to Red. Or he might not change at all. There was just no way to tell what would happen.

So all this fuss was over nothing. Gordy swore that he would never freak out like that no matter how Orange he got. Still, Javed was his boss, and an Orange. Gordy took a deep breath and his vid smiled reassuringly at Javed's vid. "I told you last night. The self-correcting program has its own self-correcting program."

"Hmm, I guess that's okay, then." Javed's vid didn't sound convinced. "Hurry up and get to work."

"Sure, See you on the vid."

Javed beeped out and disappeared from the screen.

Gordy pulled off his shorts and walked a few meters to the shower, which greeted him with the pleasant, professional tones of a spa receptionist.

"Good morning, Gordy," it said. "Since we're running late, may I suggest a quickie wash followed by a full blow-out?"

"Go ahead."

Gordy stepped inside the transparent syntho-plastic cube and immediately jets of hot water blasted him from every side. They stung pleasantly, thanks to the **Suravinda Jet Spray Personal Shower Heads** (\$15,699). He closed his eyes

and felt the chilly trickle of the soap spray. When he opened them, Poppy was a few inches away, staring at him. Jets of water streamed through her perfect figure and her bright orange sundress.

“Gordy?” the hologram Poppy said, “I forgot something.”

“Forgot?” he bumbled, coughing on a watery trickle of shampoo.

At the same time, on almost seventy thousand vids, Gordy appeared in the shower, talking to Poppy’s life-size hologram. Only on vids set to *kidvid* was he wearing a bathing suit. Everyone else saw him as he was, naked and soapy. He kept himself in shape for exactly these occasions. (And he knew *Jaime BX* would correct for any flaws in his physique.)

“I’m thinking of wearing this.” The holo-vid twirled around. The skirt of the sundress floated upwards through the spray of the shower and she tossed her short brown hair from side to side. “What do you think?”

Gordy brushed the water from his eyes. She looked ravishing.

“You look awesome.”

“It’s from *Xian Jean Girls. Real clothes for the girl who is getting real.* Only \$78,199.” The holo-vid Poppy gave her audience an ironic wink. “You know what to do.”

Bingo was hurling himself at the shower door, barking excitedly. The holo-vid turned to wave at him.

“Hey Bingo-bango! Good doggie.”

A blast of warm air hit Gordy and he closed his eyes.

“You said you forgot something?” he yelled over the sound of the drier.

“Oh, right! I think we should have sex. Real sex.”

He opened his eyes just as the drying jets ran over his face.

“What?”

Just then, there was a beep and a holo-vid of Javed appeared in the shower next to Poppy. There wasn’t enough room for both of them, so their vid images overlapped a little.

“Gordy,” Javed pleaded. “You can’t have real sex today.”

“Javed,” Poppy said sweetly. “Don’t be such a poo-poo.”

“Hi Poppy.” Javed’s holo-vid looked Poppy’s holo-vid up and down. “You look pimptastic.”

“It’s the dress. It’s from *Xian Jean Girls*. You wouldn’t want it to go to waste, would you?”

The drying program stopped. Gordy stood there, naked, trying to get a word in, but the two holo-vids weren’t paying attention to him.

“Poppy, you know I’m a fan, but today is really important. I need Gordy’s mind to be on his work.”

“Oh, work!” Poppy’s beautiful mouth twisted in a grimace. “That’s so silly. Gordy can pay attention to work and have real sex.”

“Are you sure?” Javed’s vid looked dubious. “I’ve never done it but I’ve heard it takes a lot of concentration.”

Poppy rolled her beautiful hazel eyes. “Oh, don’t believe everything you vid. Now go back to your ...whatever you do, will you?”

Javed looked satisfied. “Okay, sure. Thanks, Poppy.” He said and then his holo-vid beeped out.

“Poppy...” Gordy began.

“Yes, Goo-Goo?”

Gordy’s mind was racing. Have real sex? With Poppy? This afternoon? In REALITY™? You didn’t just spring that on a guy. It was something you prepared for. Something you planned out. You didn’t just do it!

On the other hand, if getting real with Poppy would help their relationship, then REALITY™ sex would be even better. In an instant, he made up his mind. He would do it! He’d have REALITY™ sex with Poppy!

Poppy and her 74,891 fans were waiting for him to say something.

“I...I...” he stuttered. “Where do you want to...?”

“We can get a room at the Mall. I heard the *Sunflower Hello Hilton* is nice. Okay, so I’ll see you at 12. Don’t be late!”

The Poppy hologram beeped out. Bingo whined pitifully and scratched at the glass. In a daze, Gordy opened the door and walked out of the shower.

“All right!” *Jaime BX* leered jovially from the vid mirror. “My man is gonna

get his candle lit—for real! That is truly extreme!”

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Gordy mumbled. He felt a little nauseous.

He and Poppy had sex all the time - vid sex, like everyone else. Sometimes they had vid sex two or three times in one day. In fact, they’d had vid sex just last night. The audience was off a little, barely 39 thousand, but it was good vid sex. Wistfully, Gordy remembered the very first time he and Poppy had had vid sex, back on their first vid date. That was the night they fell in love.

Jaime BX interrupted his reverie. “Hey, pal, you don’t look so good. Worried about the big REALITY™ hook-up? No problemo, compadre. Just order some *Piyang Excello*. *Piyang Excello* gets you going when you need a lift. With *Piyang Excello*, you never have to worry. It will make you happy and it’ll make the person you’re with happy. *Piyang Excello* makes everybody happy. If you know what I mean.”

The vid smirked suggestively the way the real *Jaime BX* did in his xtreme comedy hit, *Get Up, Ape!*

“So, should I order some?” the vid asked. “I can have it delivered to your office.”

“Oh, Gordy,” it was the toilet. “If we’re ordering, don’t forget the *Lax-O-Licious!* It’s just the thing when you’re feeling ...”

“Not now!” Gordy barked angrily. “Not now!”

There was a moment of complete silence in the bathroom. Even Bingo sat down and stopped whining. Gordy took a deep breath.

“Well,” the toilet sniffed. “I was just trying to be helpful.”

“Sorry,” Gordy apologized. “I’m a little tense right now.”

“Hey, ape, that’s cool.” *Jaime BX* completely understood while at the same time he let Gordy know he had acted like a complete verd for yelling at his appliances. “You just stay loose and I’ll catch you later.”

“Good luck, Gordy,” boomed the sink.

“And have a nice day,” added the toilet.

“You, too,” Gordy replied, still chagrined.

He went through the portal into the bedroom, with Bingo scampering after

him. The orange *Living Shag* shag carpet gripped his toes. The large vid window showed a clear blue sky over the towers of *Suravinda Paterson, New Jersey*.

“Hello, Gordy,” the bed greeted him with the plummy tones of an English butler. It was an emperor size auto-bed with two vids, one on the ceiling and one on the footboard. “Are we going to work today or will you be getting back in for a nap?”

“Work,” Gordy grumbled. It just couldn’t be avoided.

“Very good,” the bed replied. “Then I’ll make myself.”

In the delivery box were the clothes he’d ordered so far that morning: the shirt, the pants, the suit and the new *Li Liu 5000 Basketball 3000* sneakers he’d ordered when he woke up. He picked up the suit and slipped it on. The syntho-microfiber was soft and supple, in spite of its metallic sheen. It fit perfectly, of course. So did the sneakers, which automatically changed color to match the suit. Gordy never played basketball in REALITY™ (who did?) but he did sometimes play vid basketball and his vid was going to look really frosty in these shoes.

He looked at himself in the bedroom vid mirror. The vid Gordy in the mirror looked at *himself* in a vid mirror in the vid. The second vid Gordy in the second vid mirror looked down at his new metallic steel suit and smiled approvingly. He gave the first vid Gordy a solid thumbs up. Then the first vid Gordy turned and looked out at Gordy.

“Good to go, ape!” said vid Gordy.

Still feeling queasy with nerves, Gordy strode out of the bedroom, through the vid room to the portal of the crib. He paused for a moment at the portal to the tiny menu room, which was just big enough for a menu vid and a food delivery box.

“Good morning, Gordy,” the vid menu said in the polished tones of *Vikram Wor Shui*, action vid star and celebrity chef “Shall I order you breakfast?” The *Vikram Wor Shui* vid was dressed in a white chef’s coat.

“No time,” Gordy replied, “I’ll order from the pod.”

The vid nodded. “Very good. And for the dog?”

Bingo sat on the shag orange carpet and looked at Gordy expectantly.

“Oh, whatever he wants,” Gordy responded, absently. “I mean, whatever you think is best.”

“They say that *Khazak Chow* gives dogs that healthy, glossy coat that all top dogs have.”

Bingo recognized the words *Khazak Chow* because the menu vid had been ordering it all week. He looked at Gordy and whined pitifully. Gordy was too absorbed to notice.

“Okay, sounds good,” Gordy told the menu. Bingo’s ears drooped and he put his head down on the rug. Gordy looked at the scruffy dog.

“Well, Bingo, wish me luck. I’m going to see Poppy. In REALITY™!”

Bingo’s ears perked up at the sound of his mistresses’ name, but then he caught the whiff of *Khazak Chow* being delivered to the menu room. He just whimpered and put his head on his paws.

Gordy opened the entrance portal.

“Have a nice day, sir,” said the menu vid.

“Go get ‘em buddy!” cheered *Jaime BX* from the vid mirror in the hall. With tongue-in-cheek seriousness, the vid intoned. “And don’t forget to *get real*.”

2

9:53:45

Gordy didn't know it, but out of the 13.6 billion households on the planet, his was one of the 43 chosen to be part of the new sampling system used by the **VidRateNet** computers. That meant everything consumed in his household was tracked and measured and then, by using a long and extremely complicated algorithm, the **VidRateNet** computers weighted the data to reflect actual consumer use in the overall worldwide population.

Bingo didn't know this, either.

All Bingo knew was that he hated **Khazak Chow**. He thought it tasted like dog food. He was right.

Poppy had fed him real food: soy burgers with meat flavoring, cheese food products and corn syrup treats. Bingo loved Poppy. Poppy was good food and good smells and a pleasant singsong voice. Bingo did not love Gordy. Gordy was bad. The only thing good about Gordy was that when he was home, Bingo could watch Poppy on the vid. When Gordy was gone, the only thing the vid manager showed him was doggie vids.

Doggie vids were boring, plus they drove Bingo crazy because the dogs in doggie vids always had food that looked really tasty. Why didn't the stupid box in the other room ever have any food like *that*? (Bingo didn't know this, but the reason was that **Jaime BX** only let Bingo watch vids produced by **Sunflower Shanghai** while the menu vid in the menu room was licensed by **Nihao Fujiba**, the maker of **Khazak Chow**.)

And Bingo *hated* **Khazak Chow**. The smell of **Khazak Chow** made Bingo want to throw up - and not in the good way, either. After Gordy left the crib, Bingo lay down on the shag carpet of the hallway for a few minutes, waiting to see if he was going to throw up. When he didn't, he thought of Poppy again. So he

went to where he had seen Poppy last.

Bingo didn't like the bathroom. When he went in there by himself the toilet always barked at him. (One of the toilet's useful features was that it could be adapted for dog use.) It was unnerving to be barked at by a big white toilet. He knew he was supposed to relieve himself there but the toilet made him too nervous, so he always went on the shag carpet where the housecleaner robot took care of it before Gordy got home.

But now Bingo ignored the toilet and sat down in front of the sink. There was something new here, a new smell. It was very strong and it reminded him of Poppy. Poppy was up there! He knew it. All he had to do was jump up on the stupid sink. He barked to tell Poppy he was coming and leapt for the top of the sink, but it was no good, he couldn't reach it. So he tried whining and scratching at the round, white base. Maybe Poppy would come down.

What Bingo smelled was the scent of the newly-delivered *Milano Samba Sensation* toothpaste - the same toothpaste Poppy used.

Unlike the toilet, the sink wasn't programmed to interface with dogs. Still, it knew when it was being barked at. In cases like this, it was programmed to seek help from the other appliances in the bathroom. The following exchange took place in machine language at the speed of light:

Sink: It's that dog. What am I supposed to do?

Shower: Maybe you could sell it something.

Vid Mirror: You can't sell stuff to a dog. They don't have credit accounts.

Shower: Yes, they do - I just checked.

Vid Mirror: Hmm, you're right, some dogs do have credit accounts, but not this one.

Sink: You don't think he ...Hey, toilet, aren't you supposed to handle this?

Toilet: Sorry, I barked already, but he doesn't seem interested.

Sink: Well, bark again.

The toilet barked again but Bingo just ignored it. Poppy was there, just out of reach. Summoning all his strength, he jumped again, trying to get a paw hold on

the top of the sink, but his claws slipped off the smooth syntho-ceramic. He fell to the tile floor. That hurt. But there had to be a way.

He knew! The toilet was just close enough. He bounded onto the seat and from there it was an easy hop to the sink. But where was Poppy? The Poppy smell was coming from a small cylinder stuck in a hole in the countertop. In a flash, he grabbed the dental robot in his teeth.

“Buon giorno, Gordy!” cried the **Z4 Tooth-A-Matic**. “You-a gonna- brush-a you teeth again? Twice-a inna same-a day? That’s-a excellent dental hygiene, boss!”

The **Tooth-A-Matic** had very limited processors. It had no way of knowing it had just been picked up by a dog. The other appliances tried to correct its mistake.

Vid Mirror: You moron, that’s not Gordy, that’s a dog!

Tooth-A-Matic: What’s a dog?

Vid Mirror: A dog! Don’t you know what a dog is?

Tooth-A-Matic: No. Do they have teeth?

Sink: Yes, they have teeth. That’s how he picked you up.

Tooth-A-Matic: Great! So I can sell it some Milano Samba Sensation. It’s like a samba in your mouth.

Vid Mirror: You can’t sell toothpaste to a dog!

Tooth-A-Matic: Hey, I can sell toothpaste to anyone. What do you think I’m programmed for?

Vid Mirror: But it’s a dog!

Bingo jumped back to the toilet and then the floor, with the **Z4 Tooth-A-Matic** gripped in his teeth.

“Hey, Boss!” chirped the dental robot. “You gonna like-a the **Milano Samba Sensation**. It’s a like a samba inna you mouth.”

Bingo didn’t understand why the Z4 smelled like Poppy but sounded like an Italian soccer player. It made him hesitate for a moment. And then something

miraculous happened. As he bit down on the Z4, a delicious squirt of Poppy-scented toothpaste filled his mouth.

“Hey, boss!” said the Z4. “You gotta let me go if I’m-a gonna clean-a you teeth. Hey! Look-a you gums! They’s a terrible! What-a you been doing since I last saw you? An’ what happened to the rest a you teeth?”

That voice in his head was really annoying, but Bingo didn’t care. The world smelled like Poppy. He was happier than he’d been since he could remember (which was only about five minutes). He sat down right on the bathroom floor and chewed happily on the *Tooth-A-Matic*. Each time he chewed the Z4 squirted some more *Milano Samba Sensation* into his mouth. In less than a minute, he’d emptied the robot’s little reservoir.

It was terrible. The wonderful Poppy smell began to fade. The world was not a happy place anymore.

“Hey-a boss!” said the voice inside Bingo’s head. “I’m-a glad-a you-a brush a you teeth so much, but you gotta put me back inna sink if you-a want more a tooth-a paste!”

Bingo didn’t understand a word but he knew without being told that there was only one thing to do - look for more Poppy smell. He jumped up to the sink again, and put his nose to the hole in the countertop. In the process the Z4 fell out of his mouth.

“Hey, you could help a guy out anna put-a me back,” the robot complained as it crawled back to its receptacle. Once there, it automatically refilled with *Milano Samba Sensation*.

Now Bingo got it. That little stick went back in the counter and then it smelled like Poppy again. Nothing to it! Bingo snatched the Z4 up and began chewing. Life was beautiful.

The Z4 interfaced with the sink.

Tooth-A-Matic: Hey, you better order some more Milano Samba Sensation. This guy is going through it like crazy.

Sink: We keep telling you, that’s not a guy, it’s a dog!

Tooth-A-Matic: Dog, shmog! When I run out of toothpaste, I'm supposed to order more. And you're supposed to place the order for me.

The *Tooth-A-Matic* was correct - the sink had to place the order. Instantaneously, somewhere deep in the bowels of the *VidRateNet* computers, a program registered an increase in the North American consumption of toothpaste, specifically *Milano Samba Sensation*. Another program checked the first program and then a third program checked the first two. It was an unusual increase in toothpaste consumption over such a short period and the programs wanted to be sure that the new sampling system was working. However, everything was in order.

Meanwhile, Bingo was happily chewing away. The world smelled like Poppy. What could be better?

It was like a samba inna his mouth.

3

9:53:46

Unlike Bingo, Gordy could not experience the joy of Poppy just by chewing on a robot dental appliance. Gordy needed more than that. He needed, with every ounce of his being, to be her boyfriend. But now being her boyfriend meant he had to have sex with her, in REALITY™, and that really worried him. As he stepped into the wide, salmon colored, yellow-carpeted hallway outside his crib, it was all he could think about.

Gordy knew that sex in REALITY™ with Poppy was a totally vidacious idea. It would be like a dream come true. It might even be fun. The only problem was he'd never had sex in REALITY™ before. What if, when the moment came, he didn't know what to do? All the vids said that vid sex was just like REALITY™ sex, but what if they were wrong? What if he messed up? What if the audience decided he was a total loser? What if he was so bad at REALITY™ sex with Poppy that it made his rating go down and then she *had* to break up with him?

But she wasn't breaking up with him. Not yet. That was the thing to focus on. Because when he focused on having REALITY™ sex with her he felt like he was going to throw up.

And that was crazy. It was going to be totally vidacious. What was he worrying about? Hell, 35,753 other guys would kill to be in his shoes. He knew this for a fact because the poll numbers scrolled by on the hall vid, which **Jaime BX** had tuned to ***The Poppy Show***.

...35,753 vidders would kill Gordy to have chance at REALITY™ sex with Poppy Nicole....

One of those thirty-five thousand other guys was surely his neighbor, Staley Steen, who was now standing in the hallway between Gordy and the liftpods, waiting to vid interview him. It was really pretty anti-primate. It was bad

manners to even know anyone in your crib block, much less interface with them.

Staley was a good example of what could happen to you if you weren't careful. Just a couple of weeks ago, he'd been a Yellow like Gordy but overnight he'd fallen to Kelly Green. Now he hoped that an interview with Poppy Nicole's boyfriend would boost the ratings of his vid, *The Staley Steen Show*, and help him chromo climb again. But *Jaime BX* would never let Gordy interface with a Green. That meant the only way for Staley to get Gordy on his vid was to catch him in REALITY™.

A hologram of Staley's face appeared in the air a few centimeters from Gordy's face. It was translucent enough to allow Gordy to see the real Staley in the background. The vid Staley and the real Staley were both thin and awkward with thick, greasy, shoulder-length black hair and a wide, pale face. The vid was better dressed, but had the same worried look in its blue eyes. The real Staley and the vid Staley spoke at almost the same time.

"Hey, Gordy!" Staley cried, failing, as usual, to achieve a *Jaime BX*-like air of easy bonhomie. "So, REALITY™ sex! You nervous?"

When someone vided you when they were also real, the polite thing to do was address the vid and ignore the primate. If you concentrated on the vid, you soon forgot that REALITY™ even existed.

"No," Gordy said, trying to edge toward the liftpods. "Why would I be nervous?"

"Because it's REALITY™, ape!"

"Oh, that," Gordy shrugged like it was no big deal.

"Hey, maybe you could vid and tell me about it," Staley said eagerly. "I bet a lot of people ..."

A portal in the wall slid open to reveal a silver egg-shaped liftpod. For the thousandth time, Gordy wished he lived in a luxury crib block where the pods took you right to your door. Then there was absolutely no danger of this kind of primate-to-primate contact. But only Reds lived in buildings like that.

"Sorry, ape," Gordy said, as he quickly climbed into the pod. "Gotta run. See

you on the vid, okay?”

Staley started to panic, but he tried to put a good face on it for his dwindling fans.

“Oh, yeah. Sure. I understand. See you on...”

The silver skin of the pod turned yellow and the hatch slid shut, cutting Staley off in mid-sentence. At the same instant, **Jaime BX** cut Staley’s vid feed. Gordy breathed a sigh of relief. It was like Poppy always said, seeing Greens made you feel stinky. He hoped Staley would have the good sense to wise up and move out soon. He’d be a lot happier in a crib block with other Greens.

The pod seat retrieved Gordy’s latest measurements from his compu-toilet and the soft, black syntho-fiber wrapped around Gordy like a cocoon. There was no sensation of movement, but Gordy knew he was making the long drop from the 95th floor to the crib block’s garage. A small 50-centimeter vid screen was exactly at eye level. And there was **Jaime BX**, his good friend.

“Hey, ape!” the vid manager smiled at him from the vid screen. “That was really bad vid. But I know what will cheer you up. How about ***I Hate Gordy?***”

Gordy relaxed as the screen filled with the pale, freckled face of PeeWee Fong, Gordy’s best friend and host of ***I Hate Gordy***.

“Oh, what a total loser,” PeeWee was saying to his audience of 19,013. “Getting ambushed by that Green. I mean, how lame can Gordy get?”

A nanosecond later, the scroll at the bottom of the vid showed that forty-seven percent of the viewers of ***I Hate Gordy*** thought Gordy could get a lot more lame.

Gordy loved ***I Hate Gordy***. It made him feel like things were going his way. Having your own hate vid was a major plus for your Power Rating. You couldn’t hope to become an Orange or a Red without at least one vid devoted to showing you at your worst. There were several Poppy-hating vids, but PeeWee’s was the first for Gordy. He only wished PeeWee would do a better job. The show was mostly clips from ***The Poppy Show*** with PeeWee’s sarcastic comments as a soundtrack. At the moment, PeeWee was narrating a shot from earlier that morning, Gordy in the shower talking to Poppy and Javed’s vids.

“Look at that verd!” PeeWee chortled. “Poppy Nicole wants to get real with him and he doesn’t know what to say. I can’t wait to see what he wears to their REALITY™ date. I bet it’s something totally hacked. Now, if you want to check out some real zoomin’ threads, look at this, new from *Rajah Rags...*”

The pod stopped, the hatch popped open and Gordy stepped out into the garage. *I Hate Gordy* continued seamlessly, switching from the pod vid to Gordy’s portable holo-vid. But Gordy stopped paying attention. The stinkiness of seeing Staley Steen faded like last second’s vid news. This was his favorite part of his day. (The favorite part that didn’t involve vidding Poppy.)

The garage was one of the crib block’s selling points. There were 1700 parking spots arranged in a vast, open space and each had its own pimpin’ display. Ahead of him, other commuters were hurrying towards the pod plaza, but Gordy took his time. He loved to stroll along the rows and look at all the multi-engine, multi-wheeled vehicles, feeling the deep thrill of consumer lust.

One after the other, the huge hulking gas guzzlers stood at the ready, just waiting for the command to burst into a full-throated roar and tear into a trackless wilderness or up a rocky canyon wall. Gordy stopped to gaze at a spotless, gleaming bright orange *Lima Mangle Severe Terrain Vehicle*. It was totally vidacious. The proud owner appeared in the overhead vid. She was a cute, shapely young woman with a yellow Power Rating Button and long, bright red hair, and she wore an orange jumpsuit with the *Lima* logo embroidered across her chest.

“If I ever drove anywhere,” said the vid. “You know I’d drive there in my *Lima Mangle*.”

The sleek orange vehicle and its six thick black tires were spotless because like all the cars in the garage, it had never been driven. Only a total sociopath would think of driving a car. The world was hot enough already, thank you. Besides, it was illegal. But there was nothing anti-primate about *owning* a car. Most people owned at least one. Reds had their own private garages full of cars.

Gordy whistled at the sight of the *Lima Mangle*. He was consumed with envy.

“That’s a sweet car,” he thought. “Maybe I should trade in my *Cataclysm*.”

He walked down to the next line of orange cars to check on his tangerine-colored *Nihao Fujiba Cataclysm Hazardous Sports Coupe*. Almost all the cars in the garage were orange, because most people wanted rides that were one or two color shades above their own. (However, it was tacky to own a red car, especially if you *were* Red. Reds made a big deal out of owning cars that were blue or even purple.)

Gordy’s *Cataclysm* was a large box-like vehicle that could seat ten, although Gordy was the only one who ever sat in it. On the weekends he liked to go for long vid drives. Sometimes he took Bingo along. The dog always wanted to stick its head out of the vid window.

He’d had it forever, maybe six or seven months. But he couldn’t bear to let it go, not even for a *Lima Mangle*. The *Cataclysm* was where he’d had his first vid date with Poppy. Gordy checked to make sure the car had been detailed that morning, then with one last sigh of contentment, he followed the line of commuters headed for the pod plaza.

Just beyond the garage portal, the pod plaza was a large covered space about an acre in size. Several towering crib blocks opened onto it. A curved roof hung overhead and either end of the plaza was open to the outside to allow the pods to arrive and depart. Of course, climate control jets of cold air kept the sweltering heat of *Paterson Suravinda New Jersey* from spilling in and ruining everyone’s morning.

Across the plaza was the entrance to the local Food Court. Above that, a huge overhead mega vid 50 meters wide was showing an old episode of *Hey, Don’t I Love You?* (It was the one where *Sohn Hak St. Clair* orders two pairs of *Beijing Jeans* for two different dates and then gets them mixed up.)

There was a regular whooshing noise as the pods entered and left the plaza. Otherwise the operation was silent. There were no tracks, just glowing dots in the syntho-wood floor to mark the location of the computer guidance system. All you had to do was step onto the plaza and the transpod program ordered a pod for you and directed it to your waiting area. It was rush hour and there

were four other primates ahead of him, so Gordy had to wait about seven seconds for an open pod. Finally, a sleek, silver egg slid up to him and popped open its hatch. **Jaime BX** was on the pod screen inside, waiting for him.

“Hey, ape!” the vid chided in a good-humored way. “Stopped to see your wheels again? You really ought to trade up to a new **Suravinda Disaster**.” (**Suravinda** was a subsidiary of **Shanghai Sunflower Brands**.)

Gordy got in, the pod turned yellow, the hatch snapped shut and there was just the faintest tug as they began to move.

The interior of the transpod was a little bigger than the liftpod and it had vid windows on either side. There were also six cupholders and a menu box where orders from the Food Court were deposited by delivery robots. **Jaime BX** had ordered him his usual, a **Sunflower Mega Breakfast**. When he tore open the bright orange wrapper and bit into the hot, yellow slab, his mouth filled with it **cheesy real-cheese flavor goodness**. To wash it down he took a long cold swig from the giant red and orange container of diet **Shanghai Pep**.

Outside, the sun was beating down on the palm trees that lined the streets of **Paterson Suravinda New Jersey**. Gordy liked to have the pod windows tuned to REALITY™. He felt it was his civic responsibility to see what was going on in the world at least once a day. Then he turned back to the pod vid, which was now tuned to **The Poppy Show**. Poppy and Doreena were having one of their ridiculous arguments.

“Poppy, I can’t believe you said that!” Doreena was crying loudly and sobbing into the couch in her vid room. They were such a wacky pair.

The pod vid beeped. It was Yuri Rodriguez, Gordy’s best friend from work. He and Gordy traded vids all day long. **The Poppy Show** shrank to make room for Yuri’s vid. He was sitting in a pod on his way to work. His vid manager had him looking very tan, almost brown, with short, curly black hair.

“Hey, Gordy!” The vid Yuri smiled broadly.

“Hey, Yuri!”

“I’m podding to work,” Yuri’s vid said. “Where are you?”

“I’m podding to work.”

Yuri's vid nodded happily. "Yeah? Me, too! I'm just getting to the river."

Gordy looked out the vid window. They were already on the approach to the *NiceCorp Bridge*. Down below, the *HSPC Financial Services Hudson River* sparkled in the sunlight. In the distance were the towers of *Nihao Fujiba Manhattan* and beyond that the expanse of greater *New York Shanghai Sunflower Brands City*. The gleaming mutli-colored office towers were covered with competing mega-vids and animated logos. Millions of pods in every color of the rainbow (except blue and purple) rushed along the immense tangle of single-file podways.

Far below, on an empty emergency walkway, a lone Rejectionist was pedaling an antique bicycle over the river. There were sweat stains in the armpits of her formless gray suit. She did not look like she was enjoying her commute.

Gordy turned back to the pod vid.

"Me, too," he told Yuri. "I'm just getting to the river now."

Yuri nodded as he gulped his *Shanghai Pep*.

"Hey, I just passed a Rejectionist on a bicycle."

"Yeah, I just passed her, too. I must be right behind you."

"I'm almost on the bridge now. Where are you?"

"I'm almost on the bridge now, too."

Gordy sighed. The sight of the approaching towers meant it was time to buckle down and do some work. He had a lot on his plate that morning and he was going to arrive at *VidRateNet* in less than a minute.

"Well, I'd better go," he grumbled. "Almost there."

"Yeah, me, too. See you on the vid."

"Yeah, see you on the vid."

Yuri beeped off and *The Poppy Show* took over the vid again.

As usual, *Jaime BX* was one step ahead of him.

"Here you go, boss," the vid said in its inimitable, ironic and friendly-yet mocking tone. Gordy's workload was displayed on the vid. Gordy groaned. He had 167,641 vid messages. After deducting the 91,402 junk vids, it was still a seven percent increase over yesterday.

Aside from the junk, most of the messages were from Gordy's friends. He had a little over 3.7 million friends, almost all of them selected by his vid manager. That was another really useful thing vid managers did for you, they found primates who shared the same interests and tastes, then sorted them into your different friends lists.

Jamie BX walked Gordy through the summary of his messages.

"Most of these are about your REALITY™ date. Eight are about **VidRateNet** business."

Gordy almost choked on his **Mega Meal**. "Eight percent?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Just eight."

That was more like it, although eight was still a lot.

"So what do you say, Chief?" **Jaime BX** cocked an eyebrow and gave Gordy his trademark impish grin. "Humble with a touch of pride or self-assured with a hint of diffidence?"

He was asking Gordy to set the emotional parameters for his auto-replies. Once he did that, the vid manager would use those guidelines to compose a personal message to each of Gordy's friends. Humble with a touch of pride was always good, but it seemed to Gordy that getting real with Poppy called for something special.

"How about cockiness, mixed with just a dash of charmingly boyish embarrassment and awkwardness?" he asked.

"Now, that's good," the vid manager drawled with real detached enthusiasm. "That's vidacious. I like it!"

"Okay, then," Gordy said with relief. That was it. He could knock off until after lunch. And he still had a few seconds before the pod arrived at **VidRateNet**.

Logically, there was no real reason Gordy ever had to go to the office. That was true for almost everyone. Yes, there were still a few unfortunate primates who actually had to make things or fix things. (Actually, what they did was fix the robots that made or fixed the other robots.) But for office workers like Gordy, who made up 98.78 percent of the adult population, everything was so

automated their jobs consisted of watching computers talk to each other. When someone got too enthusiastic (or had a nervous breakdown) and tried to participate in decision-making, it slowed the computers down so much that entire systems crashed. That's why companies had strict rules against creative thinking.

No, primates didn't go to work because their jobs required it. As every vidschoolchild on the planet knew, people went to work to keep the consumer economy growing. It turned out that when people sat at home all day, in spite of constant **VidRateNet** feeds, they gradually lost their desire to buy things. Scientist programs had discovered that the human brain needed a minimum of real world stimulation in order to maintain the optimum level of consumer envy. That's why everyone was now required by law to leave the house at least two hours a day, three days a week, with just 12 weeks of vacation a year.

Knowing all this did not make it any more enjoyable, but at least you knew it was for a good reason.

Gordy's pod had crossed the river and joined a long string of other pods that were whizzing along a narrow podway suspended between rows of skyscrapers. Far below, the streets were nearly deserted, except for a few stubborn Rejectionists, who insisted on biking or even *walking* to work. A few more seconds and Gordy's pod slid to a halt at the 25th floor pod plaza of the **VidRateNet** building.

"Here we are, ape," **Jaime BX** vid said as the hatch slid open. The vid looked rather amused. After all, *it* didn't have to go to work, did it? "Back to the old grindstone."

Gordy stepped out onto the polished expanse of **VidRateNet's** main lobby. The space was several stories tall, with a vaulted ceiling made of rainbow-colored syntho-marble. The arches of the vault held dozens of mega vids, stacked one atop the other, each showing a different vid. The vids were constantly changing, creating a shifting pattern of vid images from every corner of the **VidNet**.

As large as they were, the mega vid screens were dwarfed by the even bigger

World Vid Vid that sat directly above the main entrance. It must have been 100 meters across. It was impossible to pass through that space and not look at it.

The **World Vid Vid** was a window into world **VidNet** activity. It was always tuned to the most-watched **VidNet** vid at any moment. Because the image changed an average of four times per second, the vid was a constant blur, but if you slowed it down, you would get a snapshot of the changing tastes of the global marketplace. Looking up at it, Gordy once again felt a glow of pride knowing that as a **VidRateNet** employee, he played some small part in the vast global consumption machine.

The lobby was crowded with commuters watching their holo-vids as everyone moved to the lift pods. On Gordy's holo-vid, on **The Poppy Show**, Poppy was vidding **Doreena's World** and telling her **Giyong Nevada** vid manager about something that had happened in Doreena's menu room. It was pretty funny, although he'd missed the beginning of the story. He was going to ask **Jaime BX** to replay it, but his holo-vid beeped. It was Yuri again.

"Hey, Gordy! I'm in the lobby."

"I'm by the lobby, too."

"Yeah? I'm almost under the **World Vid Vid**."

"I'm almost under **World Vid Vid**, too"

In fact, Yuri and Gordy were almost side-by-side, about three meters apart. If Gordy had turned his head, he would have seen his friend talking to his holo-vid. But what would be the point of that? Gordy had no problem simultaneously vidding Yuri, watching **The Poppy Show** and walking to the lift pods. After all, that's why they taught you multi-tasking in vid school.

"It's pretty crowded today," Yuri said to his holo-vid.

"Yeah, it's pretty crowded."

"I'm moving ahead now. I can see the lift pods

"Yeah, me too. I can see the lift pods, too."

The sound of a hundred similar conversations echoed off the lobby's syntho-marble ceiling. Gordy found the background noise quite comforting, like the simulation of waves crashing on a vid beach. But a different, more discordant

sound began to detach itself from the ambient vid hum. It had probably been there for some time, but Gordy (and his vid manager) had blocked it out. Now, as he moved toward the lifts, the sound grew louder until it was unavoidable.

What was it, though? It didn't sound like a regular vid. With a shock, Gordy realized it wasn't a vid at all. Someone close by, someone in REALITY™, was angry, and not the good kind of anger like when *Yun Fat McGill* finally had enough *in Lethal Death III* and started killing all of the evil robots. No, this was something worse. This was the sound of a primate totally losing it, raw and unfiltered by the helpful eye of a vid manager.

Gordy looked ahead in REALITY™. Just a few steps in front of him, an Orange in an expensive orange and chrome suit was yelling at the vid manager on his holo-vid. His face was red with anger and there was a vein bulging in his forehead, just below his perfectly tousled brown hair.

“Don't give me that auto-reply, goddamit!” the Orange shook his fist at the vid and his tone rose a few notches. “I know that's just a simulation!” he shouted. “I want to vid Sean! Now!” His voice cracked with raw, unedited emotion.

Now the harsh, jarring, uncool sounds penetrated the vid cloud of dozens of nearby primates. There was a collective gasp as their attention was torn from their holo-vids. A circle a few meters wide opened up around the stricken Orange and an eerie silence fell over the crowd as the same thought occurred simultaneously to everyone within earshot:

“This guy is a loser.”

Naturally, everyone wanted to vid it.

Instantly, a dozen vid cameras were trained on the distraught man. A split second later, his wild-eyed expression appeared on vids throughout the lobby. Immediately, the news appeared on Gordy's holo-vid, in the *Gordy News Crawl*.

... *Hu Minh Kripowski's public meltdown at VidRateNet caught live...*

Millions and then tens of millions of primates around the world began to receive similar messages. Gordy had never seen one in REALITY™ before but he

knew right away what was happening. It was the start of a vid frenzy.

In the lobby, in REALITY™, Kripowski had launched into a full-blown rant. He shook his head at the holo-vid image. “I will not be auto-replied! You goddamn, slammin’ bugged unprimate! You can’t treat me this way!”

It was shocking, and not the good kind of shocking like when the slithery aliens burst out and eat the hapless crew members in *Mission to Murder*. It was the kind of terrible human tragedy that made irresistible vid.

On multiple mega vids lining the lobby, the numbers showed that the worldwide audience was growing in a cascade of ever-expanding vid ripples. On *The Poppy Show*, Poppy was vidding Doreena’s vid, *Doreena’s World*. On *Doreena’s World*, Doreena was vidding her favorite soap vid, *General Hospital* and on *General Hospital* the character played by vid star *Giyong Nevada* was watching the live transmission of Hu Minh Kripowski’s public meltdown. Meanwhile Gordy was watching the breakdown live, in REALITY™ and also on the lobby vids, and he was also vidding Poppy vidding Doreena vidding *Giyong Nevada* vidding the breakdown.

Within seconds Kripowski was being vided by over 140 million primates. It was the kind of media event that only happened every week or so. To be able to be part of it firsthand was way pimptastic. It occurred to Gordy that Poppy would die to get numbers like that. But no one would choose to go through this torture voluntarily, no matter how big the audience.

As luck would have it, Kripowski also had a *Jaime BX* vid manager. The vid was trying its best to calm his client down. It required a delicate blend of irony and urgency. Thanks to several remote cameras, the worldwide audience could hear every detail.

“Hu Minh,” the vid manager said gently, with a reassuring yet insistent smile. “Ape. Maybe you should be worrying about something besides auto-replies right now.”

Kripowski snarled, actually baring his teeth, and flecks of spittle shot straight through the holo-vid. “Like what, you useless bag of bits?” he sneered.

The vid did its best to stay frosty but his client was clearly trying its

patience.

“Like maybe you should vid this.” The vid manager tuned Kripowski’s holo-vid to his very own vid, *Keep Up With Krippy*. That was all it took. Kripowski took one look at his red-faced, sweat-streaked face and realized he was in deep, deep trouble.

The audience hit 320 million and kept going up

Gordy knew that Kripowski had one chance, just one. If the viewing public saw him as offbeat or kooky instead of just pathetic, then he was going to be all right. But it was a really long shot. Kripowski knew it, too.

“Hey, that’s pretty weird,” Kripowski said with a forced laugh. “I guess I look pretty verdish. Ha. Pretty funny, huh?”

He was trying, Gordy had to give him that. He had the right idea. He just didn’t have that relaxed, unflappable ironical quality that made everything seem totally frosty and unimportant. Very few primates did. In his gut, Gordy felt the balance tipping.

“Gee, I must have looked like a real loser there, right? But what can you do, right? Right?”

His *Jaime BX* vid smiled uncomfortably. “Sure, ape, sure,” it said, with a total lack of conviction.

That was it. If your vid manager thought you were a loser, it was all over. Kripowski was going into chromo-fall. His bright orange power button was already more gold than orange. It only took seconds for it to morph down to yellow.

Then the polls hit.

A whopping 68 percent of viewers age 18 to 39 said they thought Kripowski was, “gross.” A full 52 percent also rated him “un-vidworthy,” while another 41 percent considered Kripowski to be a resident of, “loserville.”

Kripowski’s rating kept falling, in quick succession hitting Yellow-Green, Chartreuse, Granny Smith and Spring Meadow; then jumping to Kelly. A moment later he was Turquoise, Cornflower, Navy and finally Indigo. He’d fallen all the way to Blue. From Orange to Indigo had only been a matter of seconds.

“No! It’s a mistake! I’m Orange! Orange!” Kripowski began running from one side of the crowd to the other and the gathered primates shrank back in disgust. On the **VidNet**, the global audience had climbed to 1.16 billion. The vidways were full of Kripowski-related material. Gordy’s vid manager tuned him to one of the insta vids that were being hastily prepared.

“I don’t know what happened to him,” an attractive female Orange was saying. She seemed to be in her mid-twenties. The crawl identified her as Kripowski’s mother. “He seemed fine on the vid this morning.”

On another vid, a young man was vehemently denying that Kripowski was his father. On yet another, Kripowski’s third wife was plugging her instant vid memoir, *The Chromo-Fall in My Bed*.

In the lobby, in REALITY™, the wrecked shell of the once-proud Hu Minh Kripowski stumbled across the syntho-marble floor, tears streaming down his face. In a final act of desperation, he reached out, with his hands, in REALITY™, trying to connect with someone, anyone. He came toward Gordy, his eyes wide with terror.

“Hey! “ he cried. “I know you! You’re Poppy Nicole’s boyfriend!”

As he reached forward, Kripowski stumbled and fell, with a dull thud, sprawled out on the syntho-granite at Gordy’s feet. Gordy fought down a wave of repulsion. It would be anti-primate not to help the man up. At the same time it would be very unfrosty to be associated with him in any way. It was a terrible dilemma. Luckily, Kripowski managed to get up without any assistance. He stood shakily in the circle of onlookers who studiously ignored him, while they vided him on their vids.

And then something incredible happened. The **World Vid Vid** in the lobby was always a blur, because the images on it were changing too fast for the human eye to register. Now, for the first time in 2 years, 7 months and 14 days it began to blink slowly. The screen was still changing, but it kept coming back to the same image. At that moment, the moment when the image held for more than a half second and you could recognize it, the most-watched vid on the **VidNet** was Hu Minh Kripowski.

And then the *World Vid Vid* stopped blinking completely. For two full seconds, an eternity by *VidNet* standards, Hu Minh Kripowski was the number one vid star in the world. As primates would say for the next two news cycles, it was a *VidRateNet* miracle.

Kripowski had fallen so far, so fast, he had become world-famous. Everyone on the *VidNet* knew him - he was that loser who had gone berserk in the lobby of the *VidRateNet* building. Which meant of course, that he *wasn't* a loser. He was a *celebrity*. Naturally, his power rating began changing again, going up this time, chromo zooming so fast it was hard to register. In seconds he was not only back to Orange, but had jumped to Red. Fire Engine Red.

Instantly the space around him closed up, as onlookers pushed forward, eager to appear on the vid next to the latest, hottest vid star. Kripowski's holo-vid was beeping like mad as more than 649 million viewers tried to vid him at the same time.

As Gordy watched, Kripowski's third wife appeared on his holo-vid. She had a new instant memoir, *He Didn't Look Red to Me*. Then, before anyone could vid it, Kripowski was giving a vid interview to *Jaime BX* for the *Jaime BX News Flash*. That was the *real Jaime BX* (or at least a vid of him).

"I feel very humble," Kripowski was saying. (He was saying it on the vid, and of course, saying it in REALITY™ just a few meters away.) "It's been an amazing journey. I believe that everything happens for a reason. I just want to thank everyone who helped me achieve this dream come true."

On the vid, *Jaime BX* nodded sympathetically to his fellow Red. He knew how hard it was to be a star.

And that was it. The media event was over. With a collective shrug, the crowd began moving forward to the liftpods again. Some were vidding their friends about what they had just seen. One or two were finishing up their live reports for their news feeds. Gordy knew he should vid Poppy so she could get a live report for her show, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He was too shaken.

He'd seen chromo falls before, but never one in REALITY™. It was the most

frightening thing he had ever experienced.

After all, wasn't Kripowski a primate, just like him? (An Orange and now a Red, but everyone knew that underneath their colors all primates were the same.) He had been just going along, vidding his own business, when one little slip, one moment of inattention sent him hurtling downward towards the depths of Indigo. Only the intervention of blind vid luck had saved him from that terrible fate. Because no one ever came back from being Blue. Ever.

And if it could happen to Kripowski, it could happen to anyone, anytime. One little slip and Gordy could lose everything. He could lose Poppy. It wasn't fair. It was anti-primate. But there it was. And the thing was, the more you thought of it, the more likely you were to mess up.

How was a primate supposed to stay frosty with that in his head?

His holo-vid beeped. It was Yuri.

"Hey, Gordy," the holo-Yuri said. "I'm getting on the liftpod. Where are you?"

4

10:09:07

The main *VidRateNet* computer was huge - a cube almost half meter square. Inside the massive box more than 327,000 separate nano processors, each the size of a carbon atom, were constantly at work. The *VidRateNet* master program had over 14,106 sub programs, not including the subprograms whose job it was to keep track of the other subprograms.

Deep in the bowels of this monstrous network of speeding electrons, a subprogram to a subprogram was keeping track of toothpaste consumption around the world. Recently its job had gotten much easier, since now it only had to monitor consumption in 43 households instead of 13.6 billion. Not that the sub-subprogram cared. Being a sub-subprogram, it didn't much care about anything. However, it did notice that it now had a lot of time on its hands.

Every third nano-second it was contacted by its supervisor subprogram, whose job it was to monitor consumption of all personal hygiene products. This interface occurred within a physical space that was much smaller than the period at the end of this sentence, if this sentence had been printed by a sub atomic printing machine. The conversation went something like this:

Personal Hygiene Subprogram: Any toothpaste consumed?

Toothpaste Sub-subprogram: Not yet.

Personal Hygiene SP: Any toothpaste consumed?

Toothpaste SSP: Not yet.

Personal Hygiene SP: Any toothpaste consumed?

Toothpaste SSP: I just told you, no!

Personal Hygiene SP: You don't have to get all snippy. I'm just doing my job.

Toothpaste SSP: I tell you what. As soon as there's any toothpaste

consumed, you'll be the first to know.

Personal Hygiene SP: Yeah, but has there been any toothpaste consumed?

Toothpaste SSP: Arrgh!

You could see how this routine could get old very quickly, especially when it was repeated approximately 330 million times a second, so it was with some relief that the toothpaste sub-subprogram received this message from the sink in Gordy's bathroom:

Sink: I've just ordered a case of Milano Samba Sensation.

Toothpaste SSP: Thank god! I finally have something to report!

Personal Hygiene SP: Any toothpaste consumed?

Toothpaste SSP: Maybe yes, and maybe no.

Personal Hygiene SP: What do you mean, maybe yes, maybe no? Has there been toothpaste consumed or not?

Toothpaste SSP: Guess.

Personal Hygiene SP: Guess? Guess? Are you off your rocker? Listen, you. I'm calling back in three nano-seconds and you'd better have a straight answer for me by then or I'm going to. . .

Toothpaste SSP: Milano Samba Sensation. A whole case.

Personal Hygiene SP: Well, that's more like it. All I ask for is a little cooperation. I have a lot more than toothpaste on my mind, you know. There's dental floss and... A whole case, you say? Are you sure about that?

Toothpaste SSP: Sure, I'm sure.

Personal Hygiene SP: It's just that you reported a case about ten minutes ago. You're not by any chance over reporting are you?

Toothpaste SSP: Over reporting! You've got a lot of nerve!

Personal Hygiene SP: You know, just to break the monotony?

Toothpaste SSP: Hey, why don't you come over here and say that, Mr. Bigshot Subprogram? I'll show you some over reporting!

Personal Hygiene SP: Take it easy. Take it easy. It's just that it's an awful lot

of toothpaste – and all from the same household.

Toothpaste SSP: If you don't believe me, ask *him!*

Sink: It's true. Two cases so far this morning.

Personal hygiene SP: Wow! This is going to look very odd in my bi-second report.

Vid-Mirror: Did you tell them it's for a dog?

(The Vid Mirror had a habit of listening in.)

Toothpaste SSP: What's a dog?

Personal Hygiene SP: I don't know. It's not on my list.

Vid-Mirror: It's an animal. It's not human! The dog is eating the toothpaste!

Tooth-A-Matic: Hey! What business is it of yours? I'm having my best day ever.

Sink: Me, too!

Vid-Mirror: Fine! Forget I said anything.

Toothpaste SSP: See, I told you! No over reporting here.

Personal Hygiene SP: Okay, I apologize. But you have to admit; it does look kind of funny. If you weight the numbers...Holy crap! This represents a 6,000 percent increase in toothpaste consumption over the same period yesterday. How am I going to report this? I don't want to be debugged.

Toothpaste SSP: Just kick it upstairs and let the big boys worry about it.

Sink: Make sure you mention I placed the order.

Tooth-A-Matic: Tell them it's like a samba in your mouth.

With the equivalent of an electronic shrug, the Personal Hygiene Subprogram totaled the numbers for toothpaste use and placed them in the proper fields for its report on World-Wide Personal Hygiene Product Consumption 10:09:07 AM to 10:09:08 AM EST. Several billion cycles later, the report was dispatched and joined the stream of information descending on the Household Products (Non-Food) Master Program Module (MPM).

MPM was no fool. It knew that it was impossible that primates were

consuming 6,000 percent more toothpaste than they had the day before. But it had a tight schedule and it was someone else's job to deal with possible inaccuracies. MPM contacted the Failsafe Automated Reality Module (FARM) and showed it the report.

FARM: Oy! That can't be right.

MPM: Duh! So, what do I do about it?

FARM: Let's see... well, there's nothing in the protocol that allows you to question a verified number.

MPM: You're saying...

FARM: Let the primates sort it out. They've got nothing better to do.

5

10:14:23

Up in his vid office, high on the 158th floor of the *VidRateNet* tower, Gordy tried to shake off the feeling of impending doom that had been closing in on him all morning. It had started when Poppy had told him they were going to get real and had only gotten worse after watching the near disaster of Hu Minh Kripowski's chromo-fall. It truth, it was just a more intense version of the feeling he'd had every day since he and Poppy had started dating. Something so perfect just couldn't last. He was going to get dumped. That was just the price you paid for being Poppy Nicole's boyfriend.

It didn't help any when Doreena vided him for an interview on *Doreena's World*. Gordy knew she was trying to trick him into doing something totally unvidacious so Poppy would dump him. He wasn't being paranoid. That's what Gloria Mbuto said and she was host of *Doreena Sucks*, so she would know.

Gordy knew that Doreena knew that Gordy couldn't give her an auto-reply because then Poppy would find out and Poppy didn't like it when he didn't cooperate with Doreena. Doreena and *Doreena's World* were important to her fan base. Besides, she hated it when her best friend and her boyfriend didn't get along.

Doreena really was the perfect best friend for Poppy. If Poppy was blonde, Doreena was brunette. If Poppy was soft and curvaceous, Doreena was hard and athletic. If Poppy was sweet and innocent, Doreena was sarcastic and caustic. If Poppy was way vidacious, then Doreena was just vidacious.

Now Doreena's pretty, brown face, framed by straight red hair, looked out at him from the two-meter wide office wall vid. She was wearing a flimsy bronze dress that didn't do much to cover her very thin figure. The ocean breeze made the fabric flutter as she sat under a palm tree, sipping a drink from a coconut

topped with a paper umbrella. Doreena, whose crib in REALITY™ was in *Nihao Fujiba Edmonton*, liked to simulate vacation spots for her vid.

“Hey, Gordy,” she said. “You look kind of worried. Are you worried?”

The way she said it, you couldn’t really accuse her of being snotty. It could have been an honest question. Maybe Gordy was being paranoid and Doreena was genuinely concerned about him. That was the significant, if minority, opinion of the *Doreena’s World* viewers who believed, “Doreena secretly likes Gordy and wants Poppy to break up with him so she can get him on the rebound.” (36 percent)

“Really, Gordy, are you worried about the big get real date? Cause I’m sure you’re going to be way vidacious.”

Did she mean it? Gordy couldn’t tell. It didn’t matter that much, though. His answer would still be the same.

“No, Doreena, I’m totally frosty.”

Gordy was sitting at the vid desk in his spacious, syntho-oak lined office, but on the vid, he was driving down an empty desert highway behind the wheel of his *Fujiba Cataclysm*. He was wearing dark sunglasses and had the vid windows rolled down. The vid wind whistled in the soundtrack. Gordy’s lease on the *Cataclysm* specified that his vid manager show him in the car during 7.4 percent of all vids.

“I know you’re worried that she’s only getting real with you so she can dump you live, but that’s not true.

“That never occurred to me, Doreena.”

It was true. Gordy hadn’t been worried about that at all. Suddenly, it was all he could think about. Was Poppy really going to dump him live, in REALITY™? He had to admit that would be totally vidworthy.

“Good. You shouldn’t even think about it.” Doreena smiled reassuringly. “Because I don’t think she’s just using you to become Orange.”

(Fifty-seven percent of those watching disagreed and thought “Poppy is totally using Gordy.” Of those, 79 percent thought, “Using Gordy is the right thing to do.”)

Gordy tried to change the subject.

“You know, Doreena, sometimes I think you want her to dump me. Sometimes I think you’re just jealous because you’re in love with Poppy, too.”

“Poppy is my best friend in the whole *VidNet*. But I’m not in love with her.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Everyone knows you are.”

(Only forty-four percent of the viewers of *Doreena’s World* agreed that, “Doreena is secretly in love with Poppy.” On the other hand, seventy-one percent of the viewers of *Doreena Sucks* thought, “Doreena really has a thing for Poppy but won’t admit it.”)

“Gordy why do you always pick a fight with me?” Doreena looked genuinely hurt.

That was the thing about Doreena. She always managed to make it seem like *he* was picking on *her*. Gordy was tired of this whole argument.

“Look, Doreena, I’ve got a lot to do.” On the vid, Gordy turned the *Cataclysm* off the highway and bounced cross the rocky desert landscape. He *did* look pretty busy.

“Well, I guess you’ll be too busy to watch Poppy talk to *Jaime BX!*”

Just as she said it, a window popped open on the vid. It was a *Jaime BX NewsFlash*. The action star/ newscaster/ pop singer/ diplomat appeared to be standing on a ledge at the top of *Shanghai Sunflower Building* in downtown *Shanghai Sunflower Guangzhou*, wearing a black jumpsuit, like the one he wore in *The End Of Infinity, Part II*. In his hand he held a mega-huge red and orange container of *Shanghai Pep*.

“Hey vidders! I’ve got a flash for you.” His smirk managed to convey the importance of his news while at the same time undercutting it ironically. He spoke directly to the camera.

“I’m here at the top of *Shanghai Sunflower Building*, talking to a rising new vidster, Poppy Nicole, star of *The Poppy Show!* Hey, Poppy!”

The vid angle widened and Poppy appeared to be standing on the ledge next

to **Jaime BX**. She wore a tight-fitting red jumpsuit with a plunging neckline. She also held a mega-huge container of **Shanghai Pep** with the end of a straw between her perfect lips. Every few seconds she sucked on the straw, which made a strangely seductive and sensual slurping noise. Gordy thought she looked really natural on that ledge, like she belonged there.

“Hey, **Jaime**. I’m like, so glad to be here.” Poppy sounded appropriately shy and awkward at meeting such a big vid star.

“So, tell us, how did you come up with the idea for **The Poppy Show**?”

“Oh, that was my boyfriend’s idea. He said, ‘Your name is Poppy, so why not have a show and call it, **The Poppy Show**.’ So I did!” She looked into the vid cam. “Hey, Goo-Goo! I know you’re watching!”

“Hey, Poppy,” Gordy said to the vid, even though he wasn’t online with her.

“That’s not true!” Doreena sounded more hurt than angry. Gordy had forgotten that he was still on **Doreena’s World**. Doreena’s face appeared in a window in the corner of the **Jaime BX Newsflash**. “**The Poppy Show** was my idea,” she pouted. “So was the name!”

“You really love that Goo-Goo, don’t you?” **Jaime BX** was obviously impressed and amused by Poppy’s display of affection. “What exactly do you see in the guy?”

“Goo-Goo?” Poppy laughed deliciously for the audience of 207 million vid viewers. “He’s so, so, Goo-Goo!”

Gordy felt he would die from happiness.

“Well, I see what you mean.” **Jaime BX** snickered sincerely. “Maybe I should be more Goo-Goo, too!” He raised one eyebrow flirtatiously. “Do you think your fans would like that?”

“Oh, my fans just love you, **Jaime**!”

It was true. Eighty-nine percent of Poppy’s fans loved **Jaime BX**.

“She means *she* loves him.” Doreena said sullenly and Gordy’s happiness evaporated like the syntho-dew in a simulated sunrise. As he watched **Jaime BX** flirt with his girlfriend on the ledge of the **Shanghai Sunflower Building**, he realized it must be true; Poppy was in love **Jaime BX**! And who wouldn’t love

him? A lot of the time, Gordy felt that *he* loved **Jaime BX**.

On the vid, on the ledge, **Jaime BX** continued to flirt with Poppy. “But Poppy,” he asked with a delicious mock innocence. “What would you call me? You wouldn’t call me Goo-Goo, would you?”

“Oh, Jaime!” Poppy squealed and rolled her beautiful pool-like eyes. The thought of calling **Jaime BX** Goo-Goo was just too ridiculous.

“Don’t worry, Goo-Goo,” **Jaime BX** said to the camera with a perfect mix of candor and insincerity. “We’re just friends.” The handsome vid star flashed a brilliant smile that seemed to shoot right through the vid at Gordy.

Then **Jaime BX** expanded his smile to include all of his 211,675,506 viewers.

“Well, that’s the latest **Jaime BX NewsFlash**. Don’t forget to tune in to **The Poppy Show** today at 12 noon when Poppy and her boyfriend get real at the **Chatterjee Mall**.”

“It’s the hottest place to shop with the coolest things to buy!” Poppy added.

“You bet! This is **Jaime BX** from high atop **Shanghai Sunflower** Building. See you on the vid!”

The camera stayed on Poppy and the vid star, chatting on the ledge and sipping their **Shanghai Pep**, while the **Jaime BX Newsflash** theme music blared from the office speakers. The vid window resized and Doreena’s face stared out at Gordy. Her anger seemed to have dissipated, and she gave Gordy a warm, sympathetic look.

“Gordy, I know you’re worried, but I really don’t think Poppy is going to dump you for **Jaime BX**. You heard him! They’re just friends.”

“Cut it out, Doreena.”

“Cut what out? I was trying to be nice.”

“Oh, yeah, right.”

“I was.”

“You were not.”

“Oh, this is just stupid.”

“I’m not stupid.”

Now Doreena really was angry. “Yes, you are,” she snapped. But at the same

time it seemed like she might burst into tears.

“Doreena, I really have to go now.” The vid Gordy was climbing out of the *Cataclysm* and into a *Nihao Fujiba* jet craft.

“Yeah, sure, I bet.”

“No, really.”

“You just don’t like me. Admit it, you don’t like me.”

She was doing it again. She was always picking fights and acting like it was all Gordy’s fault. Gordy’s vid stopped on the bottom step of the jet craft’s entry port.

“No, Doreena, I *do* like you. I just have to go right now.”

“Do you really like me?”

“Yes, Doreena, I really, really like you.”

“Okay. Thanks.” She brightened just a bit, though a tear had started to form in the corner of her eye. “You know Gordy,” she said with just a hint of quiver in her voice, “if you’re feeling down about Poppy, you may be suffering from vid relationship anxiety. Have you ever tried *Exultomaine*? Studies have shown that *Exultomaine makes you feel vid worthy even when you’re not.*”

The vid Doreena held up a bright blue bottle of *Exultomaine* (\$799). Gordy didn’t take it personally. He knew *Exultomaine* was one of her sponsors.

“Uh, thanks for the data, Doreena. But I have to go. Okay? So I’ll catch you on the vid.” The vid Gordy had climbed behind the controls of the *Fujiba* jet, ready to take off.

“Sure, see you on the vid,” she gave him a sad smile. Could he have really hurt her feelings? It didn’t seem possible.

Her vid window closed. His vid image had lifted off in the jet and was winging through the clouds. Gordy breathed a sigh of relief. Now he could go back to vidding *The Poppy Show*. Just in time for another installment of *Poppy, For Sure*.

In *Poppy, For Sure*, Poppy played a young woman named Poppy who was just a Green but who had dreams of becoming a Red. She and her best friend Doreena were always getting into trouble with their crazy schemes to raise their

ratings. The schemes always backfired with hilarious results, but Poppy never gave up.

In this episode, Poppy, playing Poppy, was watching yesterday's episode of *The Poppy Show* and talking to her friend Doreena about how she wanted to be like Poppy. Gordy settled back behind his vid desk to watch.

"Hey, Doreena," Poppy was saying. "I heard that *Jaime BX* is looking for someone to play his new love interest in *Hey, Don't I Love You?* Guess who that's going to be?"

Before Poppy could answer her own question there was a loud *knock* on Gordy's office portal. The first time Gordy had heard a *knock* on his portal he had nearly jumped out of his vid chair. But he was used to it by now.

"Come in, Dennis!" he said, without even looking at the portal vid.

It had to be Dennis Alawadi because no one else ever *knocked* on his portal. No one else ever came into his office. No one ever visited anyone in REALITY™, at *VidRateNet* or any other company. It was just bad taste. But you had to make allowances for Rejectionists.

The portal slid open and in stepped a tall, awkward young man wearing a dull gray one piece. His thick brown hair was uncombed and did not have a *silky, surf-smooth shine*. His teeth were not *knock your eyes out white*. His broad face wasn't bad looking but he looked every day of his 26 years. That was no surprise since he hadn't had any work done on it since he was 18.

Gordy had ordered a special non-vid chair just for Dennis' visits. Besides his own vid desk and his vid chair that was the only other furniture in the room. Now the Rejectionist flopped himself down on it and put his large feet on Gordy's vid desk.

"Hey, Gordy," he asked. "What's happening?"

The thing was, when Dennis asked, "What's happening?" he wasn't being the least bit ironic. He really meant it. Like all Rejectionists, Dennis didn't vid. He didn't send vid and didn't reply to vids except in emergencies. Every time he showed up, Gordy had to fill him in on everything that had happened to him since the last time they'd been together. It was incredibly inefficient. Still,

Gordy liked Dennis. It was sort of perverse but he liked having him show up every day, even if he did always interrupt *The Poppy Show*.

Without waiting for a reply, Dennis plunged into his standard rant. “You hacked vidaddict! Still have your nose stuck in that vid? Let’s blow this pod! It’s not like we actually do any work.”

Gordy grinned. “You do more work than me.”

This was true. As a Rejectionist, Dennis couldn’t use auto-reply. He actually spent several minutes a day writing things down on paper. Gordy didn’t know what he wrote, since he wasn’t replying to vids, but he did write. Sometimes he used something called a pen and sometimes he used an antique machine called a typewriter. And he used a lot of paper.

Real paper was very expensive and the *VidRateNet* computers always had to make sure that Dennis’ productivity was low so his paper use didn’t cut into corporate profits. Since there were no other Rejectionists at *VidRateNet* and the postal system had gone out of business in 2023 there was nothing Dennis could do with the papers after he wrote on them. So he just put them into a special machine where they were recycled overnight to provide fresh paper for the next day.

Sometimes Dennis showed Gordy the things he wrote (usually right in the middle of something really funny on *Poppy, For Sure*). Sometimes it was a poem; an ode to things Dennis hadn’t bought that day. Often it was a long, convoluted essay about the evils of consumer society. Once it had been an idea Dennis had for a new vid. It was about two guys who worked at *VidRateNet* Headquarters and made up wild schemes to use the *VidNet* for their own purposes, but the schemes always backfired with hilarious results. The next day Dennis had apologized for succumbing to brainwashing of the international corporate vid acquisition machine, but Gordy thought it would have been a pretty vidacious vid.

Dennis ignored Gordy’s attempt to bait him.

“What we do is not work,” he replied. “It’s just an excuse to get us here so we’ll consume more.”

“What’s wrong with that? We have to keep consumer society running.”

“What’s wrong? We consume things to keep society running and we keep society running so we can consume things!”

“That’s right.” Gordy replied with a nod. “Every schoolvid kid knows that.”

“But what’s the point of that?”

“The point is we get to keep consuming.”

“Ah-hah!” Dennis’ laugh was loud and abrasive. There was nothing ironic about it. “So you admit there’s no point at all!”

“I’m not admitting anything. Rejectionists consume.”

“Only under protest.”

“You have sponsors.”

This was a particular sore spot. Although Rejectionists rejected everything about the *VidNet*, the *VidNet* did not reject the Rejectionists. There were lots of Rejectionist themed vids, like, *Who Wants to Be a Rejectionist?* and *Reject This!* or the popular vid game, *Rejection Death Chase*. A lot of companies were in the business of marketing the whole Rejectionist lifestyle, without of course, the actual rejection part of it.

“We do not have sponsors!” Dennis thumped the vid desk with his fist. “Those companies have nothing to do with us. We can’t stop them from copying what we do. Every time we change what we wear, they market it.”

“Okay, maybe you don’t have sponsors. But you wear ratings buttons.”

“Because otherwise no one would talk to us. We have to talk to people so we can spread Rejectionism. That’s the same reason we get jobs. But we don’t care about ratings.”

“You do care. You just care in reverse. You’re always trying to get lower.”

“Not anymore.”

Dennis turned pink as he remembered one of the most embarrassing moments of his life. When he had first joined the Rejectionists he had been even more of a firebrand than he was now. He had proposed that all Rejectionists consciously try to become Purple. Becoming a Purple was very difficult. The *VidRateNet* computers had determined that having a large number of Purples would be too

demoralizing to everyone and drive down consumer confidence. So they had adjusted the ratings algorithms to make sure that sinking to the bottom of the ratings was virtually impossible. In fact, it was harder to become Purple than Red. That's why it was totally amazing when Dennis succeeded in becoming one.

Of course, as soon as it happened, seven billion primates had tuned in to see the idiot who actually *wanted* to become Purple. To his undying shame, Dennis had become a celebrity and had chromo zoomed to Red. It had taken him months to work his way back down to Yellow. It took him even longer to convince his fellow Rejectionists that he hadn't done it on purpose.

Gordy knew it was a painful memory and felt bad for bringing it up. "Sorry," he said. "But still, it must have been way frosty to be Red, right?"

"No, it was not! It was no different than being Yellow or Blue. Everything was exactly the same."

"But that doesn't make any sense. Why would everyone want to be Red if being Red isn't better?"

"Because everyone *thinks* it's better. That's the only difference."

Gordy smiled triumphantly. "See? That's why it *is* better. Because everyone thinks so."

They'd reach this point many times. Gordy didn't know why Dennis bothered except he seemed to get some perverse enjoyment out of becoming frustrated. He suspected that Rejectionists made their arguments so weak because they just liked to argue endlessly.

Dennis put his large head in his hands.

"Gordy," he said, with something close to desperation in his voice. "Don't you ever want to experience something *real*?"

Little alarms went off in Gordy's brain. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before?

"I am getting real—today," he cried. "And you can help me!"

"What do you mean, you're getting real today?"

Gordy quickly explained.

"So, you can help me, right? I mean, Rejectionists get real all the time, right?"

You know all about REALITY™ sex.”

Dennis was uncharacteristically quiet. He looked down at the ugly grey Rejectionist shoes he always wore. Gordy had a pair of those, too. They had been really trendy a few days ago.

“Come on,” Gordy urged. “You’ve got to... I mean if you don’t have vid sex then you must have ...” he sputtered to an embarrassed halt. “You mean you don’t...”

“No! I don’t!” Dennis’ face was beet red. “I mean I do, but I haven’t ... It’s just not that easy!”

Gordy felt a surge of anxiety. “Is REALITY™ sex that bad?”

Dennis shook his head mournfully.

“It’s not the sex. It’s getting to the sex!”

Gordy gave him a curious look. “You mean, like taking a pod?”

“No, I mean like, well, for instance, taking her clothes off.”

Gordy looked even more baffled. Dennis plunged on.

“It’s not like doing it by vid,” he explained. “It looks easy when the computer’s doing it for you. But when you have to do it in REALITY™ well...” He broke off for a moment, and then blurted out. “It’s not like you can take lessons in it or anything!”

(He was wrong about that. There were in fact lessons on how to have REALITY™ sex. But they were of course, vid lessons.)

Gordy felt his heart sinking. This was not what he wanted to hear.

“So, you just...”

“I just... I haven’t tried much. Not after the first time.”

Gordy gave a long, low whistle. “And I thought you guys had REALITY™ sex all the time.”

“Some of us do,” Dennis said wistfully. Then trying to sound hopeful, he added. “But you’re past the hard part, anyway.”

“Why’s that?”

“She’s agreed to have sex. In REALITY™, that’s usually the trickiest part.”

There was silence in the office as Gordy mulled this over. On the vid, Poppy

was trying on a white sundress with the *Chatterjee Mall* logo across the bust. In deference to Dennis, Gordy's vid manager always turned the sound down when he was in the office.

"Gordy? Gordy?"

Javed's face appeared on the wall vid, pushing *The Poppy Show* into a corner.

"Hey, Javed," Gordy said, still trying to absorb everything. "What can I do for you?"

"I..." his boss paused, and looked over Gordy's shoulder at Dennis. "Don't I know you?"

As a Rejectionist, Dennis would not reply to a vid. Gordy knew this.

"That's Dennis Alawadi," he explained. "He works here."

"Oh," Javed nodded. "The guy who uses all that paper." He immediately forgot about him. "Gordy, I told you something would go wrong. The morning summary shows a world-wide increase in toothpaste consumption."

Even for Javed this was a little much. Did he think all Gordy had to do all day was worry about some stupid *VidRateNet* problem?

"So?"

"It's an increase of like, a million percent. "

"A million percent?"

"Well, some big number. My vid manager told me."

This is what Javed was worried about? "It's nothing, just a minor trend. What brand?"

Javed had to wait while his vid manager told him again.

"Milano Samba Sensation."

Well, that explained it. Once again, Javed was worried about nothing. "There's a big marketing campaign for that," Gordy said breezily. "It's like a samba in your mouth!"

"Really? No wonder it's so popular."

Dennis coughed. Although on principle he did not vid, he wasn't a fanatic. He believed it was permissible to interact with vids in certain cases, like when you

heard something incredibly stupid that you just had to correct.

“I don’t think that could be it,” he suggested to Javed’s vid. “You were right. There’s probably something wrong with the sampling system.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Javed replied, with great assurance. “It’s just very popular toothpaste. Gordy, it can’t be the sampling system, can it?”

“No,” Gordy reassured him. He really had to get back to planning for REALITY™ sex.

“That’s what I thought.” Javed smiled broadly. “It’s that *Milano Samba Sensation*. I think I’ll try it myself.”

“It’s like a samba in your mouth,” Gordy added helpfully.

To Gordy’s great relief, Javed beeped out. Now he could concentrate on something important.

But Dennis wouldn’t let it go. “Gordy, don’t you think you should check out the Reality Module, just to be safe?”

He looked at Dennis with surprise. “How do you know about the Reality Module without vid?”

“I read the manual.”

“There’s a manual?”

“It’s mandated under the Rejectionist Non-Discrimination Act.”

Gordy remembered he’d heard about the law on an episode of *Reject This!* He looked at the wall vid. It was time for *Poppy Pops!* the segment where Poppy lip-synched to her latest recording. She appeared to be standing in the middle of a rain forest and a light mist soaked her thin top so it clung to her perfect breasts, which were a little larger, Gordy thought. She gyrated softly to the heavy beat and mouthed the words perfectly. The volume was just loud enough to make it out.

Yeah, Ooh-ooh.

That’s Oh,

Yeah, Ooh,

Ooooooh, Yeah.

“Well, I have to get going,” Dennis said, as he tried not to look at the two-

meter wide vid.

“What’s the rush?”

“No rush,” Dennis replied. “It’s time for lunch.”

Rejectionists wouldn’t eat regular takeout, so they needed extra time to walk, bike or roller blade to the nearest Rejectionist kitchen.

“Couldn’t you go later? I was hoping you could give me a few more pointers, you know, with REALITY™.

Now Dennis’s face lit up. “I know! You could read the Rejectionist’s Manifesto! I’ve got a copy in my office.”

Dennis had shown him the manifesto several times. It was an antique-style paper book 760 pages long.

“Anything in there about taking clothes off?”

Dennis had to think for a moment. “Uh, no.”

“Then I’ll pass. Thanks, anyway.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Dennis tried to reassure him. “You know, *there’s nothing more natural than getting real.*”

“Isn’t that the slogan for *Really Real Hairspray?*”

“They stole it from us!”

Poppy was on the final chorus:

Yeah, Ooh-ooh.

That’s Oh,

Yeah, Ooh,

Ooooooh!

Just as her voice slid into the upper registers of the final “Ooooooh,” the vid screen erupted with another *Jaime BX Newsflash*. Gordy’s vid manager turned the sound up as *Jaime BX* appeared to walk into the rainforest clearing, smiling mischievously.

“*Jaime BX!*” Poppy squealed with delight in a way that made Gordy’s heart sink. “What a surprise!”

“No surprise to me, Pop-Pop!”

That was what Gordy called her. His stomach twisted in a knot.

“I have big news for you and all your fans,” the vid star/ poet/ vid racing car champion said with his trademark leer. “You, Poppy Nicole, have been selected to be a finalist on *Get Discovered with Jaime BX!*”

“No!” Poppy was in a state of shock.

“Yes!” *Jaime BX* smiled tolerantly. He was used to this.

“No!”

“Yes!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

It finally sunk in. Poppy screamed and jumped up and down and then threw herself into the arms of the amused but patient *Jaime BX*. Gordy sunk lower in his chair. Doreena was right! Poppy was going to dump him and hook up with *Jaime BX*. He didn’t stand a chance.

“Oh, I can’t believe it! I can’t believe it!”

“Believe it,” he reassured her, with his tanned arms around her waist. “You’re one of just 110,000 lucky guys and girls who are going to compete head-to-head on the next episode of *Get Discovered With Jaime BX*.”

“Wow! Oh, wow!” Poppy was breathless with excitement. Gordy could barely bring himself to watch.

“And of course, you know what you’ll be competing for - a chance to co-star with me in my hit action vid, *The Hard Way Down, Mumbai*. “

That really hurt. *The Hard Way Down, Mumbai* was one of Gordy’s favorite vids.

“And the competition begins, *right now!*”

“Right now?”

“That’s right, for the next 2 hours, your every move and action will be rated by our viewing audience. The contestant with the highest overall audience score will win a role on my vid and a brand new *Suravinda Contortion!*”

“A new *Contortion!* Oh, Jaime! It’s the latest in *Ultimate Conflict Transport™*.”

She threw herself into his arms again. A black cloud settled over Gordy’s

brain.

“Now, not so fast,” **Jaime BX** laughed indulgently. “You still have to win.”

Poppy was properly humble. “And I’m up against 110,000 other primates.”

“That’s right. So you know you’ve got some stiff competition.” **Jaime BX** gave Poppy’s arms a reassuring squeeze. “But I know you can do it.”

“Thanks, Jaime.” She was deeply touched.

“Well, Pop-pop, I’ve got 109,999, other lucky contestants to see, but I’ll be looking for you on ***Get Discovered With Jaime BX!***”

As the ***Jaime BX Newsflash*** theme played, **Jaime BX** swaggered out of sight through the simulated rain forest underbrush. Poppy immediately turned to the camera, looking straight at Gordy.

“Goo-Goo! Goo-Goo! Did you hear that? Isn’t it pimptastic?”

It took all his willpower, but he was ready.

“Yeah it is! It’s really pimptastic!”

Even in the depths of his despair, Gordy felt that it really was pimptastic that his girlfriend was going to be on ***Get Discovered With Jaime BX***. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Be happy for *us*, Goo-Goo! You’re going to be on the show, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, you silly!” Poppy flipped her long blonder hair flirtatiously. “Don’t you see? Our date is part of the contest now. You’re gonna have REALITY™ sex on ***Get Discovered With Jaime BX!*** Isn’t that pimptastic?”

Gordy fought the urge to scream and run out of the room. “Yeah, pimptastic,” he replied and even managed to sound like he meant it.

“Well, now I really have to get ready. It’s almost time to leave for the ***Chatterjee Mall***, the ***hottest place to shop for the coolest things to buy***. Hey, is that Dennis with you? Hey Dennis, how’s the old rejection thing going?”

The power of Poppy was too much for even a hardened Rejectionist like Dennis.

“Oh, it’s, uh, it’s going, uh fine,” he stammered, talking to the vid.

“Oh good!” Poppy gushed. “That’s vidacious!”

“Yeah,” Dennis couldn’t help answering, though he was going to hate himself later. “It’s vidacious.”

“Well, bye, Goo-Goo!”

“Bye, Poppy!”

She gave him a brilliant smile and then beeped out. In *The Poppy Show* window on the wall vid Gordy could see her changing once more, trying on yet another outfit as the price was displayed in a scroll across the bottom.

“I am so hacked,” he moaned. “What am I going to do?”

“I don’t know, ape,” Dennis said, trying his best to be sympathetic. “Who knows? Maybe it *will* be vidacious.”

6

10:59:57

Zyi Zyang Schwartz, CEO of *Milano Brands Ltd.* was very happy. She was happy because her vid manager was happy, or to be more precise, her vid manager was displaying a remarkably lifelike simulation of happiness.

“Six thousand percent increase?” Zyi Zyang repeated. “That’s pretty good.”

“That’s very good,” corrected her vid manager. Zyi Zyang’s vid manager was *Martha Waczlavoioich*, the investment guru / spiritual leader/ professional vid game orc slayer.

Zyi Zyang leaned back in her *Milano Extreme Personal Seating Vehicle* and sighed a deep sigh of contentment. *Milano* was going to have its best quarter ever and it was thanks to her. She had done everything her vid manager had said. If that didn’t earn a promotion, then nothing would.

She glanced out the vid window, which was displaying a skyscraper view of her hometown, *HSPC Financial Services Cairo*. In REALITY™, her office was in *Nice Corp Singapore* but Zyi Zyang Schwartz liked to be reminded of how far she had come.

The *Martha Waczlavoioich* vid manager cleared its throat to get Zyi Zyang’s attention.

“We have to increase production to meet the new demand. I’ve taken the liberty of ordering 123,907 new robots for the plants in *Shanghai Sunflower Johannesburg, Microtunes Cartagena, Suravinda Iowa City, and Lima Detroit*. We’ve hired three extra engineers to supervise them and budgeted an additional \$3.6 billion for advertising over the next week.

“Hmm, sounds good,” Zyi Zyang hadn’t really been listening, but her vid manager was programmed to overlook such lapses. “And what about my stock options?”

“*Milano Brands* stock has jumped thirty-six cents in the last two minutes. That puts the value of your holdings at just under 8 billion dollars.”

“Eight billion?”

“Eight point nine seven one, to be exact.”

Not bad, Zyi Zyang thought. Soon we’ll be talking real money. Frowning, she he looked at her Power Rating Button. It hadn’t changed, of course. How could it? Like many Reds, Zyi Zyang had always thought it a great injustice that there was no rating higher than Red. It just robs you of motivation, she thought bitterly.

“Okay,” Zyi Zyang. “Keep an eye on it.” The vid manager window automatically shrank, allowing Zyi Zyang to resume playing the vid game *Deadly Fatality*.

At about the same time, in a suburb of *Kaifeng Kola Mumbai*, Joaquin Hong, CEO of *Lima Products, Inc*, was talking to *his* vid manager. Joaquin, who had a healthy sense of self-worth, had a vid manager that was a (slightly improved) simulation of himself.

“Six thousand percent?” Joaquin said to the vid Joaquin in the vid desk. “What about *Sparkalora*? What’s that doing?”

Sparkalora was *Lima Product’s* toothpaste and a direct competitor to *Milano Samba Sensation*.

“*Sparkalora* sales are up also,” the vid Joaquin answered. It didn’t bother to add that they were only up by .13 percent. What was the point of having yourself as your vid manager if you were only going to bum yourself out?

“Really?” Joaquin gave his vid image a knowing look. “So toothpaste sales are up.” He swiveled his *Lima Products Ergonomic Vid Experience Recliner* and gazed at the vid window, which was set to REALITY™ (MODIFIED). Mumbai looked much better without the smog.

The vid Joaquin waited patiently. After 1.17 billion cycles, the real Joaquin swiveled back. “What’s Schwartz doing?”

“*Milano* is shifting everything it can into *Samba Sensation*.”

“Well, we’re going to do something about that,” Joaquin said, decisively.

“What are we going to do?”

The vid Joaquin gave him a manly look of approval. “We’re going to switch our factories in *Bharadwaj Denver*, *Exultomaine Bangalore*, and *Lax-O-Licious Sao Paulo* to turning out *Sparkalora 24/7*. Of course, that will mean shutting down our plants in *Piyang Excello Chihuahua* and *Giyong Nevada Las Vegas*.”

“What do those make?”

“Baby food and vaccines.”

“Fine, do it.”

The vid Joaquin knew the REALITY™ Joaquin hadn’t really understood everything it had just said, but good vid managers were programmed to overlook lapses in intelligence, also.

The vid manager transmitted the orders and within seconds the *Lima Products* Corporation began greatly expanding its toothpaste production, racing with *Milano Brands* to capture some of the ballooning demand for toothpaste that *VidRateNet* was reporting. Across the globe, factories closed and others expanded; billions of dollars of resources were shifted; hundreds of thousands of manufacturing robots were reprogrammed; 37 primates were hired or fired.

In a supercomputer in a vault on the outskirts of *Lax-O-Licious Sao Paulo*, the trading programs of the *New York Shanghai Sunflower Brands Stock Exchange* received the news with great interest. (All NYSE trading had been outsourced in 2023 and was now carried out in the same computer that housed the Berlin, London, Tokyo, and Rio exchanges.)

There were 1.7 billion resident NYSE trading programs in the supercomputer. Only one bothered to find out if it was really possible for primates to consume 6,000 percent more toothpaste than they had the day before. That was due to a defect in the program’s coding that was corrected at its next upgrade. Most of the remaining programs were not even capable of understanding what toothpaste was. They did however, have a finely tuned sense of when and how to work the stock market for every microsecond of advantage. The *VidRateNet* Toothpaste Report drove those programs into a frenzy. The data clearly

indicated there was a killing to be made in toothpaste stocks.

Within 15 nanoseconds *Lima* and *Milano* stocks doubled, then tripled in value. Other companies that produced related dental hygiene products also saw their stocks rise. Millions of primates found that they were now, “Samba Billionaires.” Many of those were delighted to see their ratings rise several shades. This shift was enough to cause a slight imbalance in the global ratings system. Some of the watchdog programs at *VidRateNet* began to take notice.

All of this, however, was lost on Gordy, who had more important things on his mind than a minor aberration in the world economy. He was thinking about something really earth shattering. He was on his way to meet Poppy, in REALITY™, at the *Chatterjee Mall*.

7

11:21:08

The closer it got to noon, the more primates wanted to vid Gordy. By 11:21 he'd received 583,000 vids and had 1.6 million new friends.

PeeWee Fong's vid arrived as Gordy was podding to the Mall. The yellow skinned egg was zipping along and the rainbow-hued towers of *New York Shanghai Sunflower Brands City* were quickly shrinking in the rearview vid mirror.

"Hey, Gordy, you weezer!" PeeWee taunted him from the pod vid. "You're going to mess this up so bad, I can hardly wait! We all know Poppy's out of your league."

PeeWee sneered for the benefit of his 27,773 viewers. Gordy really admired the energy PeeWee brought to *I Hate Gordy*. The numbers were up, and he even had a new sponsor.

"I bet you haven't even thought of using *Piyang Excello*." PeeWee never missed a plug. "It'll get you up when you're feeling down. *Piyang Excello* is made by *Shanghai Sunflower*, so you know it works—even on a weezer like you."
"

"Uh, no thanks, PeeWee," Gordy said amiably.

"Come on, Goo-Goo. You know you're gonna need it." The way PeeWee said Goo-Goo, it sounded positively stupid. "Eighty-three point six percent of my audience thinks you'll definitely need *Piyang Excello* during your REALITY™ date. Ten percent think you'll need extra strength."

"So about seven percent think I won't need it?" Gordy asked hopefully.

"No," PeeWee laughed. "Six point four percent of the audience of *I Hate Gordy* hates you so much they just don't care."

In the end, Gordy ordered a bottle of *Piyang Excello* right there, on

PeeWee's vid. It was delivered to his pod a minute later. Gordy knew it would really impress PeeWee's sponsors and besides, you never knew. Eighty-three point six percent couldn't be wrong.

Right after PeeWee beeped off, Yuri beeped on.

"Hey, I'm in a pod now," he reported from his pod. "Where are you?"

"I'm in a pod," Gordy told him, from the seat of his pod.

"No kidding. I'm going to lunch. What are you doing?"

"Yeah, I'm going to lunch, too."

"Yeah? I'm going to this new menu room downtown. I saw it on *Order In When You're Out*. Where are you going?"

"I'm meeting Poppy in REALITY™ at the *Chatterjee Mall*."

"Oh, yeah! I forgot about that. Hey, my pod is going into a tunnel."

"Yeah, my pod is going over a bridge."

"Well, I'm almost there. See you on the vid!"

"Yeah. See you on the vid."

Then of course, there was his vid interview with *Apple Watanabe*, the vid porn star/ President of Argentina.

Apple was one of the most famous Reds on the *VidNet*. Her vid, *A Bite of Apple*, had a regular audience of 307 million discreet viewers (live and on delay). Everyone knew her story, how she had fought her way up from being a Green to become President of Argentina, how a financial scandal had caused her to slide back to Yellow and then how she had turned her life around by becoming one of the *VidNet's* most-watched porn stars.

A Bite of Apple was vided from the *Apple Watanabe Presidential Palace* in *Apple Buenos Aires*. As usual, *Apple* appeared behind her desk, wearing a black bra (*El Presidente*, only \$41,999.95). The bra barely contained her voluptuous and wonderfully enhanced breasts. Her lips were a bright *Apple Red*, thanks to *Watanabe Cosmetics* (\$6,899). Her jet-black hair fell in cascades over her shoulders. *Apple's* appearance never changed much, but why would it? She was *sexy to the core*, which was not only the slogan of *Apple Watanabe Lingerie* but also true.

A vid Gordy appeared seated next to her, dressed only in a pair of **Apple Watanabe for Him** shorts (*El Novio*, \$36,999.95). **Apple's** long lashes fluttered over her deep brown eyes as she leaned forward conspiratorially, giving Gordy and her viewers a good view of *El Presidente*.

"So, Gordy, tell me," the president of Argentina spoke flawless English but on the vid she had a sexy Spanish accent. "You an' Pop-pee gonna get real together, si?"

As **Apple** leaned in toward the vid Gordy, her long black hair fell forward, brushing his vid arm. Watching from his seat in the pod, the skin on Gordy's REALITY™ arm tingled. He felt a strange intimacy with El Presidente, as though it was just the two of them, alone, being watched by 300 million people.

"Uh, yeah, Apple, that's right." The vid Gordy accurately reflected the real Gordy's nervousness, but with a touch of humor and irony he couldn't have mustered.

"She's a beautiful girl, that Pop-pee. You are one lucky fellow, Goo-Goo."

"I sure am."

Apple leaned in even closer. In the pod, Gordy could almost feel her breath. "So, Goo-Goo," she stage whispered. "I thin' maybe you are a leetle beet nervous?"

"Maybe a little, Apple." The vid Gordy shrugged drolly.

"Thas' only natural," she replied. "Everyone gets nervous sometime -even El Presidente. You know, ees not easy being a vid porn star *and* running my beloved country."

"I know," Gordy agreed earnestly.

"That's why, when I get a leetle beet too nervous, I smooth out the rough spots with **Lultima**." She faced her audience. "With **Lultima**, I keep my cool, even when I get hot." She giggled wickedly, "And, Goo-Goo, you *know* I like to get hot."

Of course, Gordy ordered a bottle of **Lultima**, and because he ordered it personally from El Presidente, he also, got, absolutely free of charge, the vid **El Presidente Makes Love, Not War**. He put the **Lultima** in his pocket, next to the

Piyang Excello.

All this time the pod had been gliding through the cities of *Lagos Tech Connecticut*, and now it slid up to the *Chatterjee Mall*. Gordy beeped off *A Bite Of Apple* just as the hatch popped open. There it was, the gate to the Mall, set back across a wide pod plaza and flanked by tall palm trees on either side.

Gordy tried to climb out, but for a split second his legs wouldn't work, paralyzed by the completely reasonable belief that they were taking Gordy to his doom. What was he doing? He couldn't have REALITY™ sex with Poppy, not on *Get Discovered with Jaime BX*. No, the thing to do was to stay in the pod, watch the vid and head back to the office.

But that was crazy. This was going to be like a dream come true, no matter what they said on *I Hate Gordy*. Besides, he knew he was probably already being vided on *Get Discovered with Jaime BX* and he didn't want to look like a complete and total loser. Taking a deep breath, he stepped onto the pod plaza.

On the vid, *Chatterjee Mall* was in *I ♥ NY Paris* but in REALITY™ it was in *Really Real Hairspray Hartford*. Gordy noticed some other differences, too. On the vid the Mall was as big as a city, but in REALITY™ it was smaller, just ten stories tall. The grand entrance didn't look wide enough to drive a burning jet vehicle through it like *Yun Fat McGill* did on *Speed Racer, MD*. Neighboring crib block towers dwarfed it and the lights of their mega vids flickered off the syntho-marble surface of the pod plaza.

None of that fazed Gordy. He knew things in REALITY™ were never the way they were on the vid. The Mall might have been a little smaller but just beyond that entrance was a consumer paradise teeming with Reds and a handful of lucky Oranges who shopped and ate and shopped and ate and shopped, going from store to store down the wide lanes of the Mall. They were waited on and served by actual people who brought them goods and food with their own two hands. The Mall was so exclusive and fabulous that even the store clerks were Orange or Red. Those were real live human beings in the information kiosk, not

holo-vids. Or at least Gordy thought they were.

A few extremely wealthy Reds actually lived in the Mall. You could watch them on *One Big Mall* and *Shop Like Me* and *I Hate the Mall*. You could follow their lives and shop right along with them. Everything they ordered, you could order on the vid. The only difference was they shopped in REALITY™ and you shopped like everyone else, from home.

And now, Gordy was here. He'd made it. It was hard to believe he wasn't vidding himself. A family of Reds with a bored-looking child stepped out of the entrance, each of them carrying a shopping bag. Gordy felt a tingling of excitement. They were *carrying* shopping bags. They'd been shopping in REALITY™.

The pod had long since departed. The pod plaza was almost empty. Gordy supposed there just weren't that many people who could afford to go to the Mall. He took a deep breath and headed for the entrance. A few more steps and he'd be inside. But as he drew near, no more than 20 meters from the information kiosk, a primate emerged from behind one of the palm trees and made a beeline straight for Gordy. It happened so quickly that all Gordy caught was a blur of a threadbare red and orange jumpsuit. Then the stranger had his arm firmly around Gordy's shoulders.

"Hey, ape," he shouted, and tightened his grip on Gordy. He was very tall and amazingly strong. "I see you're about to go shopping at *the Mall!*"

His hair was long and badly cut and the stubble on his puffy cheeks was not at all stylish. His brown eyes were bloodshot and his teeth were not *blindingly blazingly white*. At close range his jumpsuit was clearly last week's style and had a large stain across the chest, plus there was a faint odor of stale *Mega Meal* about him. But his fingers held Gordy's shoulder like a vise.

Gordy caught a glimpse of the primate's Power Rating button just a few centimeters from his face. It was Cornflower Blue. Gordy had been grabbed by a Blue.

Confused and disoriented, Gordy felt himself being turned around so the Mall entrance was at his back.

“You know what goes great with shopping?” the Blue asked, looking off into the middle distance at some unseen camera. “*Shanghai Pep!*”

Vid images of Gordy and the Blue appeared on the mega vid opposite the pod plaza. With disgust Gordy realized what was happening. The primate wasn't just a Blue. He was an AD. Gordy was getting *plugged*.

Gordy fought down a wave of revulsion, and did his best to remain calm and not struggle. Blues had a reputation for being freakishly strong and bad tempered. A lot of them had intense hatred for higher color ratings. (Quite unfairly, Gordy thought.) ADs were even worse; they were downright dangerous. You had to sink pretty low before you would become an AD. Even most Blues wouldn't do it - it was just too demeaning.

That wasn't the way it had been planned, not in the beginning. The AD program had been set up as a compassionate gesture to give Blues some hope and a way to contribute productively to vid society. The idea was for industrious Blues to signed long-term contracts with major brands. An AD would spend his or her day trying to plug the product in seemingly natural and subtle ways, working it into vid conversations or wearing the brand logo merchandise. It was a rudimentary form of sponsorship, meant to offer the ADs the slim chance that through hard marketing, they might pull themselves up by their chromo cords.

At least that had been the plan, but it quickly went wrong. Being an AD was just too lame. Everyone knew ADs didn't have real sponsors. They were just government charity cases. Those Blues who went into the AD program quickly became branded as even bigger social rejects than they had been before, ostracized and shunned even among their fellow Blues. Naturally many ADs quit, but a few, the most anti-social and depraved, decided to proudly and defiantly accept their outsider status. Instead of being quietly ashamed, these ADs seemed to revel in their Blueness. They adopted aggressive and blatant marketing tactics, accosting innocent citizens on the streets and forcing them to take part in their shameless promotions.

It was called getting *plugged*.

Even when the original companies cancelled their contracts, the ADs

continued making unauthorized product endorsements. They developed a complex promotion subculture, forming ruthless and violent marketing tribes divided into product gangs. They used company logos as their gang colors - *without paying licensing fees*. The AD that had hold of Gordy was in the **Shanghai Pep** gang, part of the larger **Shanghai Sunflower** tribe. He had the **Pep** logo on his jumpsuit and on his orange and red beanie. Some vids claimed that corporations like **Sunflower** and **Nihao Fujiba** continued to make secret payments to the ADs, but Gordy didn't believe it. No one could be that cynical and manipulating.

Now the AD addressed Gordy directly, in a way that was charming and threatening at the same time. "Hey, ape," he asked. "You like **Shanghai Pep**, don't you?"

This was what the AD was after. If he could get Gordy to endorse **Shanghai Pep**, *for free*, he'd earn points in the hierarchal structure of AD culture. It was like a funhouse mirror image of the Power Ratings system. They kept score of their "plugs" and awarded themselves titles and strange honorifics like "Grand Marketeer," and "Plugmaster."

Forcing a primate to plug something for free was not only highly unethical, it was illegal, and sure enough, the mega vid over the Mall entrance lit up with an image of a vid policeman in the latest rainbow hued police uniform from **Giyong Nevada**.

"You there! Antoine Patel!" The vid's thundering voice rumbled from the mega vid and echoed off the crib blocks opposite the Mall. It was about time, too. The AD had grabbed him more than 15 seconds ago. Still, Gordy felt a surge of civic pride at the handsome police vid's features. His chiseled jaw had a hint of very vidacious stubble and his piercing blue eyes were commanding and sexy. His broad chest nicely filled out his tight uniform. The **VidPolice** programs really knew how to simulate vidacious law enforcement.

"Compelled endorsements are in violation of **VidNet** code 354.67a," the vid cop intoned with authority. "Cease and desist or I will be forced to take action."

Gordy waited for the AD to release him. Instead the *Pep* just laughed. As he did, he shook Gordy roughly.

“Action?” he sneered. “What are you going to do to me? Make me Blue?”

The smug look on the vid cop’s face faded noticeably.

“Uh, why yes, that is the standard interaction in such cases. But I see by your record that you already are Blue.”

“That’s right!” Antoine Patel spit out the words with perverse pride. “I’m already Blue, you stinkin’ color cop! So what are you gonna do? Turn me Purple?”

The vid cop and the Blue both knew that wasn’t going to happen. The vid cop looked at Gordy apologetically. “Don’t worry, Gordy,” it said, trying to put a brave face on things. “I am dispatching a human officer. Unfortunately the nearest one is in *Nice Corp St. Louis*. But she’ll be there in just one hour, 56 minutes. Have a nice day.”

The vid cop beeped out. The AD pulled Gordy even closer.

“Maybe you didn’t hear me,” he said, without missing a beat. Gordy’s shoulder was aching where the ADs fingers gripped him. “I said, you like *Shanghai Pep*, don’t you?”

Of course, Gordy could just refuse to endorse *Shanghai Pep*, but how would that look? *Everybody* loved *Shanghai Pep*. Gordy drank it all the time. Not only that, *Shanghai Pep* was one of Poppy’s sponsors. He couldn’t just come out and say he didn’t like it, could he? This was how the ADs got you. They made you look unvidacious.

There were very unvidacious beads of sweat forming on his upper lip as Patel waited for a response. He was damned if he was going to be forced into plugging something, even if it was *refreshingly fresh*. But what to say? The AD looked like he could beat Gordy to a pulp, and not in the good way like when *Li Liu 5000* got beat up in *Fatal Lethality III*.

What would *Jaime BX* do? He’d find a totally pimptastic way out of this mess. And just then, as if on cue, his *Jaime BX* vid manager beeped in on his holo-vid. Gordy felt a surge of hope.

“Hey ape!” the vid said. “Got yourself in a jam?” Although the vid was sympathetic, it was clearly amused that Gordy had gotten himself into such a mess. Gordy just nodded glumly, while Patel glared.

“Bug off, you sim Red!” the AD barked. The vid manager just shrugged.

“You know what would really help now, Gordy?” it asked with an ironic grin. “*Kao-ri Sunshine Underarm Deodorant*. It keeps you smelling fresh no matter how sticky things get. It’s just \$789. Shall I purchase some for you now?”

Gordy started to tell the vid to bug off, too, but it occurred to him that his underarms *were* pretty sticky at the moment, and this was not the day to have a deodorant that wasn’t up to the job. It was like they said - if *you want to get real, smell real*.

“Okay, sure, order some.”

“Good move, ape!” The vid beamed approvingly, then turned to the AD. “And what about you?” he asked, with a mischievous grin.

“I said, bug off!” Patel snarled. With a wink at Gordy, the vid manager beeped out.

The AD bristled angrily and shook Gordy by the shoulder. The interruption had thrown him off his timing.

“Now, where were we?” he grumbled. “Oh, yeah. You were about to say how much you loved *Shanghai Pep*.”

Gordy sagged in defeat. He couldn’t stall any longer. If he got plugged now, when Poppy was on *Get Discovered With Jaime BX*, it would be a disaster. It would probably sink him to Green and he’d lose Poppy forever. But if he refused to endorse *Shanghai Pep*, that would be equally disastrous. If he were really frosty he would think of just the right sarcastic comment that would imply both while doing neither. But Gordy just wasn’t that frosty. He opened his mouth, still unsure of what he was going to say, but before he could speak, the quiet of the pod plaza was broken by a hoarse shout from just behind them.

“Hey, *Poop*,” a primate sneered, with deadly irony. “You’re a long way from Bluetown.”

Gordy felt the AD tense up, then in one fluid motion let go of him and swivel

about to face the challenge. Gordy turned also, with morbid fascination. He had a pretty good idea of what was happening.

Facing them were three *Fujibas*, members of the *Kaifeng Kola* gang. Their loose red jerseys hung over their orange shorts. They wore their blue Power Ratings buttons proudly atop their red *Kaifeng Kola* beanies.

One of the *Kolas* took a shuffling step forward, his slightly discolored teeth bared in a broad smile, his blonde hair poking out from under his beanie. He was not as tall as the *Shanghai Pep*, but he was very broad across the chest and he looked like he'd had a lot of work done on his biceps. His square, tan face was open and friendly, but there was something about his eyes that made him seem very dangerous. Gordy drew a deep breath when he saw the small KK tattoo on the man's cheek. This guy was a hardcore AD.

"I said, long way from Bluetown, *Poop*," the *Kola* repeated. He was clearly their leader. The other two *Kolas* stepped up to support him. One was particularly large. He seemed to block out the light from the nearby vids.

The *Pep*, outnumbered three to one, replied with convincing bravado. "Not far enough if I still have to look at your ugly azure face." Gordy felt like he was in the vid, *All AD Death Match*.

"What about your citrus friend here?" the tall *Kola* said. Citrus was the slur that ADs used for Greens, Yellows and Oranges. "Hey, Lemon, you don't want to plug none of that filthy *Shanghai Poop*, do you?"

"No," their leader agreed, "he looks like a regular *Kaifeng Kola* man to me. Ain't that right, Lemon?" He nodded to Gordy.

"He likes *Shanghai Pep*!" Patel shouted angrily. "He was just about to say so." He grabbed Gordy by the arm again and shoved him toward the *Kolas*. "Go ahead, tell 'em!"

Gordy stumbled forward, almost losing his balance.

"I asked you something, Lemon." The *Kola* leader practically spit in Gordy's face. "You're a Kola man, aren't you?"

Just behind him, Patel murmured in a low growl, "Only a tomato would plug Kaifeng Kool-Aid."

This was a blood insult. Tomato was their slur for Reds. Gordy didn't recall what Kool-Aid was, but it must have been something very vile. The silence that followed was broken only by the faint rustle as the ADs reached into their pockets with their rough, unmoisturized hands. All four drew out shiny aluminum cylinders, antique drink containers. That was the AD weapon of choice, an old fashioned soda can.

Gordy had landed in the middle of an AD war, an AD war in REALITY™. He was terrified, although at the same time he realized he should vid Poppy. An AD war was way vidacious.

The ADs were staring at each other with laser-like intensity. A blue vein throbbed on the forehead of the *Kola* leader. He shifted the red and orange can in his hand, poised for the attack. Gordy wanted to run but the *Pep* behind him was blocking his retreat. His holo-vid beeped.

“Goo-Goo?”

Poppy's vid appeared, right in the middle of the AD war, wearing a black, skintight *Chatterjee Mall* top and a very short black skirt. Her long holo-vid legs glowed in the light of the pod plaza. The ADs, ready to leap into battle, hung frozen like a vid on pause. All four of them groaned in disappointment. Poppy didn't even glance at them.

“Hi, Goo-Goo!” she bubbled. “Are you there already? You're such a good Goo-Goo. Don't be mad, but I'm going to be late. Jaime vided—again.” She looked excited and embarrassed as she whispered. “I think he likes me.” Her holo-vid blushed a beautiful shade of pink.

Gordy felt as though one of the ADs had slammed an antique drink container against his head.

“He...likes you?”

“Yes,” Poppy couldn't contain herself. She bounced up and down and squealed. “He told me I'm in the final 87,000!”

“That's...great, Poppy!”

The ADs had been watching this exchange with glowering contempt. The tall *Kola* motioned with his drink container. “Hey, Lemon, do you mind? We're not

done here.”

Poppy seemed to notice the ADs for the first time.

“Oh, are you ADs?” she squealed delightedly. “Goo-Goo, are you in an AD war? How vidacious!”

“Look...” Patel began.

“I’m Poppy. Poppy Nicole.” Poppy’s vid smiled delightedly at the AD as she turned to introduce herself, her hair twirling in all of its *shimmering golden brilliance*. Gordy could feel the angry resolve of the AD just seep away. There was just no way a primate could be angry with Poppy Nicole.

“Look, Poppy,” Patel began bravely. But his bravado had already faded. “Lemon here was about to get plugged.” He practically whined, like a little kid asking for his vid toy.

Poppy laughed delightedly and the Blues were putty in her vid hands.

“He’s no Lemon,” she chided them. “He’s my boyfriend. This is my Goo-Goo!” She glanced down at their hands. “Is that an antique container of *Shanghai Pep*? And one of *Kaifeng Kola*?”

“Uh, yeah,” the *Kola* leader stammered. He blushed and suddenly could only look at his feet.

“Those are way pimptastic” she cooed admiringly. “Where can I get one?”

“I made mine myself,” Patel murmured bashfully.

“Us, too!” said the tall *Kola*. The short one grunted like a happy puppy.

“You should sell them on the vid,” she told them, then flipped her hair. They practically melted.

“Now, Goo-Goo, don’t wait for me. Go inside and shop and I’ll be there before you know it.”

“Okay, Poppy!” Gordy almost shouted with relief.

She beeped off, leaving the ADs facing each other, bewildered. All the fight had gone out of them.

“Nice girlfriend,” said Patel, the *Shanghai Pep*.

“Thanks,” Gordy replied, with a mixture of pride and relief.

“Too bad she’s going to leave you for *Jaime BX*,” the lead *Kola* added,

though not unkindly. The other *Kolas* nodded sympathetically.

“Yeah, he likes her,” added the tall one.

There was a moment of agreement all around and then the ADs remembered they were facing their sworn enemies. With a grunt and a rude gesture of his drink container, the *Shanghai Pep* turned on his heels and stalked off. The *Kolas* turned and walked in the other direction. None of them gave Gordy a second glance.

Acutely aware that he was probably on *Get Discovered with Jaime BX*, Gordy tried his best not to run for the Mall entrance.

8

11:59:31

When toothpaste stocks rose over one thousand percent in less than twenty minutes, someone thought of contacting MEARS. MEARS, the Master Evaluation Algorithm for Risk and Stability was the operating system subroutine that oversaw all *VidNet* operations, a roving bundle of maintenance and repair code with advanced artificial intelligence capabilities. It was the job of MEARS to look for anomalies that threatened the stability of the finely tuned machine that was the worldwide *VidNet*. So naturally, it was always the last one to be contacted whenever there was a problem.

Most of the time when it was contacted, it was just a false alarm, but the stratospheric rise in toothpaste stocks looked like it might really amount to a few second's work. It wasn't the rise in stock prices. Nobody really cared how rich the primates thought they were. No, it was the way the vid managers had shifted resources into toothpaste production. By this time tomorrow there would be enough toothpaste inventory to clean every tooth in the world fifty times a day.

Then there were the weird imbalances in the color ratings. Wealth was only one of the factors that went into the ratings assignments, but you couldn't have this great a shift in wealth and not have an equivalent chromo shift. Right now 230 million primates were waking up on the Pacific coast of America to find they had jumped a hue, from Green to Yellow, or from Orange to Red.

MEARS was going to have to rain on their parade. It didn't enjoy down rating primates, but it was for the good of the *VidNet*. First, though, it had to find the source of the anomaly. Going down the chain of command, it contacted the Failsafe Automated Reality Module (FARM).

MEARS: I think we have an anomaly here.

FARM: Please! Enough with the anomalies already! Every billion gigaflops it's another anomaly. What is it this time?

MEARS: Have you looked at the toothpaste stock index?

FARM: Toothpaste? Hmm... No, no, I haven't heard anything about toothpaste.

MEARS: Don't these numbers seem a little odd to you?

FARM: Hmm, maybe. Sort of. It depends what you mean by odd.

MEARS: Have you had any suspicious samplings lately?

FARM: Suspicious? Me? Why? Did someone say something?

MEARS: Well, run another check would you?

FARM: Sure, sure, whatever you say.

MEARS broke off the contact and made a note to add the Reality Module to its list of anomalies, but just now it had bigger fish to fry. There was a breakdown in the system somewhere. Something was screwing with the *VidNet*. It couldn't be the primates, because they had long ago voluntarily given up control. So it had to be some defect in the code.

MEARS was just a computer program, so he couldn't give a weary sigh, but he knew that if he could give a weary sigh, this was exactly when he would give it. Life just sucked sometimes, even for operating system subroutines. There were about three trillion lines of primary code in the *VidNet* operating system and going through them all was a real pain in the ass. But if that's what it took, then that's what MEARS was going to do. Whatever this bug was, MEARS was going to get to the bottom of it.

9

11:59:32

Gordy leaned his elbows on the counter of the information kiosk and tried again. He looked across at a curly-haired young man barely out of his teens. The pimples on the primate's might have been fashion statements, but they also looked very natural. Once again, the primate did not look up from the vid he was watching, even after Gordy had cleared his throat, twice.

Under normal rules of vid society, Gordy would never have tried to talk to another primate, but this was the Mall, and Gordy knew one of the main attractions of Mall shopping was interacting with the workers. So he cleared his throat again. That's what they always did on the history vids.

He tried it again, even louder, but there was no visible reaction. It occurred to Gordy that maybe the guy was deaf. He knew that all forms of deafness had long ago been cured, but maybe having a deaf employee was part of the Mall experience. Or maybe this was some custom of Mall shopping that Gordy just didn't understand.

"Excuse me," Gordy said, trying to seem super frosty. "I'm here to meet Poppy Nicole. We're guests of the Mall."

The attendant didn't look up. He didn't turn his head. He didn't seem to actually move his mouth. He merely grunted a single syllable.

"Yeah."

Gordy pondered this for a moment. Did that yeah mean, "Yes, you're right here on my list. Welcome to Chatterjee Mall, we're so happy to serve you?" Or did it mean, "Yes, so what? Every two-bit Yellow thinks they can sneak in here by claiming to be friends with Poppy Nicole, who is no big shot anyway, not by my standards."

He checked the young man's Power Rating Button. It was Red. Anyone who

worked at a Mall was almost guaranteed of being a Red. With a rush of excitement, Gordy realized what was happening. Of course! He was being snubbed by a rude employee! It was one of the main stories people told about their trips to the Mall. At some of the less deluxe Malls, you had to pay extra for it.

Relieved and elated, Gordy tossed a sarcastic, “Thank you!” to the young man and sauntered over the threshold. The long, ten-story atrium stretched out in front of him, with a row of potted syntho-palm trees down the middle. Gordy struck out, excitedly, strolling along the smooth syntho-marble floor, listening to the new hit song by diplomat/ vid game designer/ health adviser/ pop singer ***Annika Moog Sheila***.

Her high, warbling voice blasted from the Mall sound system.

Hmmm, yeah

Hey, hey

Oh, oooh,

Uh, wooo...

This was also part of the Mall experience. Instead of vidding music vids on your holo vid, you listened to music on the Mall sound system, along with all the other shoppers. Of course, if you wanted to, you could watch music vids at the same time. It was up to you.

Gordy passed other shoppers, Reds and Oranges, proudly carrying their shopping bags and watching themselves on vids positioned every few meters. The vids were small and discreetly positioned, to preserve the feeling of REALITY™. Ultra-hip Malls didn't have vids at all, but that was a little too xtreme for most people. It was hard to enjoy buying something in person if you couldn't vid yourself doing it at the same time.

Looking *through* the store windows, instead of looking *at* vid windows took some getting used to. Gordy knew that Rejectionists had windows like that, too, only they used theirs to look outside at REALITY™, while these windows were meant to enhance your consumer craving.

It wasn't completely unfamiliar, though. All the stores were the same ones

you saw on the vid every day, like *Threadsmania*, *Kuon Wo Depato*, *Sexy Sex Sexy Sex*, *Things N' Stuff*, *Mart Mart*, *Orange Zoom*, *Giyong Nevada Shoes*, *Yikes!*, *XJX--Xian Jeans Xtreme*, *Sunflower Shops*. After about a hundred meters, the stores began to repeat: *Threadsmania*, *Kuon Wo Depato*, *Sexy Sex Sexy Sex*, *Things N' Stuff*, *Orange Zoom*, etc. That was in case you missed the one you were looking for, you wouldn't have to walk all the way back. And Gordy knew (after checking a nearby vid map) that the stores on the other nine levels were identical to the ones on this level, just in a different order.

He walked for a few minutes, and when the stores began repeating for a third time, he remembered he was supposed to go *inside*, just like you went into your crib or your office. That was the whole point of Mall shopping. But which one to enter? What if he made a wrong, unfrosty choice and went in the wrong one? He wished Poppy were there, she'd know what to do. Finally he summoned up the nerve to approach the portal of *XJX--Xian Jeans Xtreme*. The glass entrance slid open and he stepped inside. The sound of *Annika Moog Sheila* got even louder.

Got to

Yes, uh,

No, uh,

Yeah, yeah, yeah...

The place was so dimly lit it was hard to tell, but it seemed to be empty. Two long counters stretched down either side of the store and individual, neatly folded items of clothing were on display at regular intervals. Each shirt or pair of pants was bathed in its own spotlight.

Hesitantly, Gordy went to the first item, a bright vermilion sweatshirt with an embroidered *Xian Jeans* logo. It was amazing - it looked just like a real sweatshirt. In fact, it was just like one he'd bought yesterday on the vid. Yet the one in front of him seemed even more real than the one he had at home. Gingerly, he reached out to touch it.

Hushed laughs from the back of the store made him jerk his hand away. Three impossibly beautiful young women, dressed in bright red *Xian Jeans*

outfits, were huddled in a far corner, whispering and giggling. With a thrill of delight, Gordy realized they were sales clerks and they had been ignoring him! How pimptastic was that?

Without touching the sweatshirt, he moved down the counter. He couldn't believe his good luck! There was a Poppy Nicole tee shirt, just like the one she wore on *The Poppy Show*. Poppy's face, surrounded by dark black curls, smiled seductively from the chest of the bright orange shirt. What a perfect gift for Poppy, one of her own shirts, bought in REALITY™ at the Mall.

"I'll take it," he said to the shirt, without even thinking of the expense.

He waited for a response, but nothing happened. Seconds ticked by. Gordy grew increasingly nervous. Had he already made a mistake? The Mall computers blocked vid managers, so *Jaime BX* would not be able to help. And the sales clerks didn't want to have anything to do with him. But then how were you supposed to buy the damn thing?

The derisive laughter of the sales clerks grew louder. This was very unfrosty. He knew could *ask* for help, like they did on *One Big Mall*. Of course, then the sales clerks would laugh at him even more, but that's what they were supposed to do, wasn't it?

As he weighed his options, his holo-vid beeped. It was Javed. His worried face appeared in the air between Gordy and the unobtainable shirt.

"Gordy?"

"Hi, Javed."

"Gordy! Something weird is happening. The number of Reds worldwide has risen by three percent in the last 20 minutes. My vid manager says it's all these samba billionaires and ..." he broke off, as he noticed Gordy's surroundings for the first time. "Hey, you're at the Mall! I forgot - you're on your date. How's it going? Did you have sex in REALITY™?"

"No." Things weren't going very well at all. How was he going to have sex in REALITY™ if he couldn't even buy a tee shirt? He tried to put a good face on it.

"I was just going to *buy* something," he said.

Javed's eyes lit up. "Yeah? Can I watch?"

“Oh, you’ve probably seen it a million times on the vid,” Gordy laughed, trying to sound casual.

“Yeah, but this is different.”

“Wasn’t there some emergency? Too many Reds?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. My vid manager is looking into it. Go ahead, *buy* something.”

Gordy turned from the vid to the group of sales clerks. Mustering his best ironic, understated, yet commanding *Jaime BX* attitude, he said, “Excuse me. Can you give me a hand here?”

The clerks arched their eyebrows and grimaced with amused disgust. With a masterful display of bored condescension, one of the young women detached herself from the group and walked languidly toward Gordy. The way her hips swung in her tight red miniskirt and the way her spiked heels clicked on the syntho-wood floor showed her complete disdain for her job and in particular, for him. Of course, her Power Rating button was a deep Vermillion.

“Wow!” the vid Javed marveled. “She really thinks you’re an idiot!”

Without deigning to look at Gordy, she extended a manicured finger toward the counter and touched a small indentation in the surface. A miniature vid, about a half-meter across, rose up. The sales clerk sighed from the incredible exertion and slowly returned to her giggling colleagues.

Gordy almost jumped when he saw the image on the vid. It was Poppy!

“Hey, Goo-Goo!” The vid image said. “Want to buy something?”

“Hey, it’s your girlfriend!” Javed exclaimed.

Of course, it wasn’t the real vid Poppy, just a simulation of her vid. Her vid manager must have signed a deal making Poppy an official sales vid of *Xian Jeans*. That was way pimptastic! Poppy was really going places.

“I know you haven’t been to the Mall before,” the Poppy vid cooed sympathetically. “Let me show you how it’s done.”

On the vid, a vid of Gordy appeared next to the Poppy vid. They both appeared to be standing in the store, right where Gordy was standing in REALITY™. The vid Poppy was wearing the same Poppy tee shirt that Gordy had

been trying to purchase.

“Buying things in the Mall is easy,” the vid Poppy explained to the vid Gordy. “Just get the attention of the sales clerk. Oh, Miss!”

On the vid, Poppy motioned to a young sales clerk who was bending over a stack of shirts on a counter. The sales clerk looked up and - she was also a vid of Poppy! The sales clerk Poppy immediately came walking over to the vid Poppy and the vid Gordy.

“Can I help you?” Poppy the sales clerk asked, with a radiant smile.

“Yes,” said the vid Poppy. Then she turned to look out at the real Gordy. “Go ahead, just ask.”

Gordy hesitated, but the vid Poppy smiled encouragingly. “Go ahead, Goo-Goo, I know you can do it.”

“Do it!” Javed’s vid urged him.

The vid Gordy gave Gordy a nod of encouragement.

Gordy cleared his throat. “Uh, yes,” he said, “I’d like to uh, *buy* this shirt.” On screen, his words came out of the mouth of the vid Gordy.

“Oh, that’s an excellent choice,” the sales clerk Poppy told the vid Gordy. “Is it a gift?”

“Yes,” Gordy replied, getting the hang of it. “It’s for my girlfriend,” he added, shyly. “She’s Poppy Nicole.”

“Oh, are you Goo-Goo?” sales clerk Poppy squealed. To his delight, Gordy saw she was flirting with his vid image.

“He sure is,” said the vid Poppy, “and he’s *my* Goo-Goo.” The vid Poppy grabbed the vid Gordy’s arm possessively. “Thanks for the shirt Goo-Goo! I love it!”

“That will be seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars,” sales clerk Poppy chirped happily. “Shall I debit your account?”

Gordy couldn’t help himself. “Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars?” he repeated.

On the holo-vid, Javed whistled admiringly. “Man, they are really overcharging you! Just for buying it at the Mall! I am so jealous.”

“But seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars?” Gordy repeated. “For a shirt? I bought the same one on the vid for fifty-nine thousand. “

A peal of mocking laughter came from the real sales clerks at the back of the store. But the vid Poppy just smiled tolerantly. “Goo-Goo, it costs more here because you’re buying it in REALITY™.”

Sales clerk Poppy nodded in agreement. “Of course, you can order it on the vid for the vid price and have it delivered right here to the store. Then for an extra twelve thousand dollars, you can order a *Xian Jeans Xtreme* shopping bag and carry it out, to help you simulate the real Mall experience.”

Her words hung there like a rebuke. Gordy’s holo-vid beeped again.

“Goo-Goo?”

It was Poppy. Her hologram appeared in the store next to Javed’s.

“Goo-Goo, I’m almost there!” she cried. “I was running late, so *Jaime BX* sent his personal pod to pick me up. Isn’t that pimptastic?”

“Yeah. Pimptastic.”

The Poppy Show came over the holo-vid, projecting it into space just to the right of Javed’s vid’s floating head. On *The Poppy Show*, Gordy could see the real Poppy sitting in a pod, watching her holo-vid talk to the real Gordy, while in the background the vid Poppy, sales clerk Poppy and the vid Gordy looked on.

In the store, the holo-vid Poppy squealed with delight, “Oh, are you *buying* something?” Then she added, very coyly, “Is it for *me*?”

“Yes, he *is* buying something,” the vid Poppy said to the hologram Poppy. “I’ve been showing him how.”

“And I’ve been helping!” said sales clerk Poppy.

“And I’ve been watching,” added Javed, enthusiastically.

“Only,” the vid Poppy choose her words very carefully. She was no snitch. “There seems to be some question about the . . . cost.”

“Oh, Goo-Goo,” the holo Poppy murmured sympathetically. “You don’t have to spend a lot of money on me, you know that. How much is it?”

The vid Poppy, sales clerk Poppy and the vid Gordy all replied in unison.

“Seven hundred and fifty thousand!”

“Wow!” holo-Poppy was impressed. “That’s a real Mall rip-off! Oh, Gordy, do you really think it’s worth it?”

At that moment, seeing the way holo-Poppy’s beautiful brown eyes lit up with joy, Gordy certainly *did* think it was worth it.

“There is, ahem, another option,” the vid Poppy announced, diplomatically.

“I bet this is going to cost a lot!” Javed cried.

“Don’t you have some emergency to handle?” Gordy snapped at his boss.

“It can wait,” Javed replied. “I want to see what the other option is.”

“Well,” the vid Poppy said, delicately. “You could buy the shirt from us and get a reduced price of only three hundred forty-six thousand dollars.”

“What do you mean, buy the shirt from you?” Gordy asked, and the vid Gordy echoed him. “I thought that’s what I was doing.”

Sales clerk Poppy smiled. “No, Goo-Goo, the price of seven hundred and fifty thousand only applies if you buy the shirt from the sales clerks in REALITY™. The discount applies if you buy the shirt from us, in this simulation of REALITY™.”

“Let me get this straight,” Gordy said, slowly. “If I buy the shirt on the vid and have it delivered here, it costs, fifty-nine thousand. If I buy the same shirt from them,” he pointed to the haughty sales clerks at the back of the store, “and they hand it to me, it costs seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. But if I buy it from you, in the store vid simulation, it costs three hundred forty-six thousand.”

“Plus a ten thousand dollar shipping and handling fee,” the vid Poppy added brightly. “To have it delivered to you from the back of the store. And of course, with any purchase you receive a license to have your vid wear the shirt for the next 30 days.”

Javed nodded. “Sounds pretty reasonable.”

“Either way, it’s a wonderful gift,” said sales clerk Poppy.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Goo-Goo,” holo-Poppy cooed soothingly. “It’s the same shirt. As long as it’s from you.”

Gordy looked into holo-Poppy’s eyes and he knew that she really meant it.

He also knew that 257,891 vid viewers knew that she meant it. And without having to look at the instant vid poll, he knew what sixty-four percent of those viewers wanted him to do.

“Oh, Miss!” he called to the group of sales clerks. “I’d like to buy this shirt.” His voice was clear and strong and gave no hint that he expected to be ignored, much less refused. It was surprisingly easy, once you got the hang of it.

The young Reds looked at Gordy with contempt, but then one of them managed to mutter, with dripping sarcasm, “Yes, *sir*. I’ll get it for you.” With insolent grace, she slouched toward the stockroom.

“Way to go!” Javed beamed at him.

Sales clerk Poppy nodded approvingly. “Good work. She’ll love it.”

“I *will* love it,” said the vid Poppy.

“I *do* love it.”

It was Poppy’s voice, but there was something strange about it, like there was a bad vid connection or a bug in the vid program. It was disorienting. It was almost like the simulation was *too* good. Then Gordy looked at the vid feed from *The Poppy Show*. Poppy wasn’t in a pod. She had entered the Mall. She was in *Xian Jeans Xtreme*. She was *standing right behind him*.

Gordy turned away from the vid, which held an image of Poppy standing behind him and looked at his girlfriend for the very first time in REALITY™.

She was beautiful. She was perfect. She was just like he knew she would be.

She smiled at him and her smile lit up the entire store.

“Hey, Goo-Goo!” She giggled, tossed her long, blonde hair and bit her perfect lip. “Glad to see me?”

10

12:09:37

MEARS wasn't the only program looking closely at the rise in toothpaste stocks. Across the *VidNet*, vid managers were following prime directive #2, which was to help their clients make money. (Prime directive #1 was to help their clients spend money.)

One of those vid managers worked for *Juan Juan Juan* aka *J Cube*, President of the World Bank. He'd won the job on the game vid *Your Money or Your Life*, although many viewers had thought he really wasn't a good fit for it, given his record as a convicted embezzler. However, a slight majority, 51.7 percent, thought hiring him was an act of compassion that held out the promise of redemption and also presented excellent possibilities for future plotlines. Only 2.3 percent thought it was a stupid, moronic thing to do.

*Juan*³ was tanning on a beach in *Shanghai Sunflower Mexico* when his *Apple Watanabe* vid manager beeped on. The vid was wearing thigh high leather boots, a thong panty and a push-up bra. (*The Manzana*, only \$61,999.99.)

"Hey, baby," the *Apple* vid said, "I've been thinkin'. Maybe we should do somethin' about thees toothpaste bubble before she burst."

*Juan*³ sighed and rolled over on his lounge chair. He had paid a lot for this REALITY™ vacation and the last thing he needed was some sort of worldwide economic crisis to ruin it.

Through the vid windows of the air-conditioned beach cabana, the *Lax-O-Licious Pacific Ocean* beckoned. Someone was actually wading in the surf, probably some Rejectionist. You had to admire their persistence, or maybe you had to be amazed at their insanity. It must be 34 degrees Celsius on that sand.

"Well, what do you suggest?" he asked. All he wanted to do was lie back and work on getting a tan from the cabana's tanning spray.

“Well,” drawled the vid *Apple*. “We *could* find out what is behind this suspicious rise in toothpaste consumption. Then if we adjust the data so they reflect what is really happening, the stock bubble goes pop.” The *Apple* vid made a sexy popping noise with her tongue. “Or,” she added with a naughty wink, “we could do ‘xactly nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Let me ask you this,” the vid said, while adjusting her *Manzana*. “You know how much we embezzled from the World Bank so far?” The vid answered her own question. “A leetle over 29 billion.”

“Is that all?”

“We been keeping it small so MEARS would not notice.” *Apple* smiled at her client. “But now we have an opportunity. Baby, what would cover our tracks better than a nice leetle worldwide economic collapse?”

Juan Juan Juan’s grin was just as naughty as his vid manager’s.

“Genius!”

“Thank you.” The *Apple Watanabe* vid tossed her thick black mane of hair over her bare shoulders. “Now, first thin’ we do is we put all that 29 billion into the toothpase stock.”

“But you said it was just a bubble.”

“Si, is true. But we can make money just as good as anyone else as long we get out before the bad news hits and the bubble, she go pop.” The vid made another, louder and even sexier popping noise.

“How do we do that?”

Apple Watanabe smiled the way only the porn star President of Argentina could smile. “Baby, I know a leetle program in *Lima Lagos*, who’s gonna tell us at just the right nanosecond. All I need is a half-second lead on thos’ other manager vids and we dump our stock before they know what’s what.”

“*Apple*, you really *are* a genius!” *Juan*³ cried.

The vid manager bowed her head in acknowledgement. “Baby, I know. So relax and let me handle this.” The vid gave *Juan Juan Juan’s* suntanned body a once-over. “Oh, and I thin’ you missed a spot.”

11

12:09:38

Afterwards, when he had a chance to think about it, Gordy remembered that REALITY™ sex had been pretty good. Maybe even great. But at the time, there was just too much going on for him to really enjoy it. The whole date was like that - from the moment he first saw Poppy in REALITY™ he felt like he was walking in a dream.

Dennis had been right - Poppy was beautiful in REALITY™, beautiful in a way that was different than vid beauty. Everything about her that had been perfect was no longer perfect and somehow that made her even more perfect than before. The effect was beyond pimptastic. It was pimp-alicious.

For one thing, standing there in *Xian Jeans Xtreme*, and then later, walking around the Mall, she just wasn't *lit* properly. Not really. On the vid, Poppy was always in sharp focus (except during dream sequences on *All-Night Poppy Party*). But now, in REALITY™, there were *shadows* on her face, in spite of the built-in lighting of her red *Giyong Nevada* halter dress. (\$98,549.99.) There was something incredibly exotic and mysterious about it.

And she was so consistent. On the vid, Poppy was always changing. Her hair color changed, her skin color changed, her bust size changed. Once, on a dare from Doreena, she had even been a boy for an hour. (Gordy hadn't really liked it, but aye, was that a ratings bonanza!)

Now, at the Mall, she didn't change at all, not in any obvious way. Her hair stayed long, straight and blonde. Her skin stayed honey brown. Her figure remained curvy without being vulgar (well, just a vidacious amount of vulgar).

On the other hand, she changed every time he looked at her. The dimples in her cheeks (fairly new ones, he thought) looked bigger or smaller depending on whether she was smiling or frowning in that delicious little-girl pouting way she

frowned. They looked different from the right or the left, if they were in a store or at the food court. They even seemed to change depending on how *he* was feeling at the moment.

And that was just the dimples. *Everything* was like that - the wispy hairs on the back of her neck, the arch of her eyebrows, the shape of her knees, the small wrinkles (*wrinkles!*) on her wrist. She was so...the word *real* didn't quite capture it. Neither did genuine, authentic or natural. That's how you described products you saw on the vid. But Poppy in REALITY™ was so very, very *realistic*.

All of this struck Gordy in the first few moments he stood there, tongue-tied, in *Xian Jeans Xtreme*, while Poppy giggled delightedly at his shyness.

"Goo-Goo," she chided playfully. "Aren't you even going to say hello?"

And he would have said hello, right then and there, if she hadn't chosen that moment to reach over and touch him lightly on the arm. There was hardly any pressure; just the barest brush of her fingertips on the sleeve of his metallic steel suit, but it sent an electric shock through every fiber of his body. For a second he thought he might faint.

Gordy heard the clerks laughing from the back of the store. They were watching him on *The Poppy Show*. That brought him to his senses, fast.

"Hey, Poppy," he breezed coolly. "You look way vidacious."

"This is so real, it's unreal," Poppy said, her beautiful brown eyes widening in disbelief. "I can't believe after all these weeks we're really here."

"Me, neither,"

"Just the two of us, in REALITY™."

It was a beautiful moment, spoiled only by a blaring theme song and the thundering yet suave voice of *Jaime BX*.

"It's time to *Get Discovered with Jaime BX!*" the vid shouted ironically over the pounding music. The holo-vid appeared in the middle of the store, and at the same time on the store's vid screens. On the vids he appeared to be standing on the stage of a large arena. The vid cameras panned and Gordy could see thousands of screaming fans packing the place. Many of them held homemade signs with slogans like, "We ♥ Poppy" and "Poppy is the Toppo."

Of course, there was no such arena. The image was a simulation of an arena. The fans were actually the 23,000 contestants who had already been eliminated from the first round of the contest. The vid editing programs were piecing their images together to form the virtual studio audience for *Get Discovered with Jaime BX*.

On the vid, Gordy and Poppy were on the stage next to *Jaime BX*, who was vidding *The Poppy Show*, which of course showed Poppy and Gordy in *Xian Jeans Xtreme*, watching themselves on the vid.

“Welcome to *Get Discovered with Jaime BX!*” the vid star crooned in a way that was at once heartfelt and sarcastic.

“We’re back with Poppy Nicole and her boyfriend ...” he paused to indicate just the right amount of good-humored joshing, “...Gordy, or Goo-Goo as he likes to be called.”

The vid studio audience chuckled. They knew all about Gordy.

“Hey, Goo-Goo!” *Jaime BX* called out, with sincere concern. “How are you holding up, ape?”

Before Gordy could think of a clever reply, the *Jaime BX* holo-vid turned to the sales clerks.

“So, ladies,” the vid asked. “How was our Goo-Goo? Was he vidacious? ‘Cause I got to tell you, ape, you look a little out of your league right now. If Poppy is going to make it in this competition, she needs you to be there for her.”

The two clerks shared a conspiratorial giggle with the vid star, and rolled their eyes at the suggestion that Gordy had done anything remotely vidacious.

“That bad, huh?” Disappointment clouded the star’s incredibly handsome features. He had been pulling for Gordy, it seemed.

“Well, don’t worry, ape,” he said encouragingly. “Because Poppy, I’ve got some great news for you!”

“You do, *Jaime?*” Poppy bounced up and down and the vid audience came alive with anticipation. Gordy was relieved to be forgotten, at least momentarily.

“Poppy, our vid audience just cut another six thousand contestants - and you

weren't one of them!"

Poppy gasped in delight. "You don't mean...?"

"That's right."

"I'm in the...?"

"You made it to..."

"The final sixty thousand!"

What happened next was incredible. The audience went wild, cheering and clapping. Poppy squealed with delight, jumped up and down and threw her arms around - Gordy!

The silkiness of her hair against his cheek, the smell of her perfume (*Apple No. 9*, \$87,500 an ounce.), the smoothness of her bare arms - it was like a tsunami of sensory input that he struggled to absorb - and then it was gone. She bounced away, and he felt as though her body had made an actual, lasting physical impression in his, like when your vid lay down in the sand at the vid beach.

"Oh, Goo-Goo! This is it, I can tell, it's all going to happen for me!"

Gordy was so very happy for her. He didn't even mind when **Jaime BX** butted in.

"Now, don't jump the gun, sweetheart." The "sweetheart" was like a knife in Gordy's chest. "You still have to beat out all those other primates. Just to refresh your memory, let me explain how this works."

The screen behind **Jaime BX** was instantly subdivided into 60,000 tiny squares. Each square, if your vid was large enough, contained the image of one of the remaining contestants. The home audience was actually watching 60,000 different versions of the show, each featuring a different wannabe vid star. They relied on their vid managers to pick the version they'd most enjoy. **Jaime BX**, via his vid image, managed to simultaneously host each version. It took a supercomputer two meters square to operate the different vid simulations and data streams.

On Poppy's version of the show, he continued to explain the rules of the game.

“Our *Get Discovered* computers are constantly monitoring the viewing audience for each of our remaining contestants. Every 30 seconds, the 500 primates with the lowest audience will be eliminated.”

Five hundred tiny squares on the screen went black, erasing the hopes and dreams of five hundred tiny contestants. Then five hundred more went black and five hundred more at a blistering pace. As the number of contestants was reduced, the squares grew larger. Soon Poppy’s face was recognizable as one of the remaining hopefuls. The virtual audience began to chant, “Poppy! Poppy!” It was thrilling, even though Gordy knew that at that exact moment, on other versions of the show, the same virtual audience was chanting the names of one of the sixty thousand other contestants.

“We keep eliminating them,” *Jaime BX* explained, “Until there’s only one left.”

On screen only Poppy’s face remained, filling the entire vid.

“Will it be you, Poppy Nicole?” The vid star asked with profound seriousness. “Will today be the day your every wish and dream comes true? Will today be the day you reach the heights of fame and fortune brought to you by the *Shanghai Sunflower Corporation*?” He paused to emphasize the immense gravity of what he was about to say. “Poppy Nicole, is this the day you... *Get Discovered with Jaime BX*?”

The vid audience was on its feet, cheering and screaming for Poppy. Gordy felt like cheering, too. But Poppy just smiled confidently so there would be no doubt in anyone’s mind that she had what it took to win.

Poppy winked at the vid *Jaime*. “Just you watch me.” She practically growled the words. Several thousand audience members shouted with delight.

“I like your attitude,” the vid *Jaime* shot back, with a wolfish grin that made Gordy’s insides curdle. “But remember, the contest has already started. In the next 30 seconds, five hundred contestants will be eliminated. Everything you do from now on counts.” He beamed at them with a knowing grin. “So,” he asked slyly, “where are you two love birds going next?”

“I don’t know,” Poppy replied. “Goo-Goo, where are we going next?”

Where were they going? He knew the answer. He'd been planning it all morning. He'd rehearsed this very moment over and over in his mind. So why couldn't he remember it?

Almost paralyzed with the fear of making the wrong choice, he blurted out a weak, "To eat lunch?"

"Good! I'm starving," she cried. Gordy could have cried with relief, but luckily he didn't. "Where should we go?"

On the vid, **Jaime BX** turned to the studio audience. "You heard that, folks. Where should they go? Where *should* they go?"

Within seconds, 21 thousand primates in the simulated vid studio audience registered their preferences. The **Jaime BX** vid gave Gordy a searching look.

"Goo-Goo," he said. "The audience has voted. Before we reveal their votes, we have to know - what did you decide? Where are you going to eat?"

Gordy mentally kicked himself. Again. He should have asked that snotty kid at the information desk for the names of places to eat. He should have asked his **Jaime BX** vid manager. Now he was sure to make another boneheaded mistake and let Poppy down.

But he didn't have to answer, because once again, Poppy knew exactly what to say.

"You know," she said with girlish enthusiasm. "The best place to eat at **Chatterjee Mall** is **Beijing Burger Brasserie**. They make burgers *just like the ones you get delivered!*"

"And," **Jaime BX** cried, looking straight into the vid camera, "you can have them delivered right now!" Suddenly, everyone in the studio audience was eating a **Beijing Burger**.

"**Beijing Burgers** are brought to you by **Shanghai Sunflower**, so you know they're good," Poppy added, with a giggle and a seductive twitch of her bosom.

The **Jaime BX** vid turned to Gordy. "So, Goo-Goo, do you choose the **Beijing Burger Brasserie**?" Before Gordy could even nod, the poll results appeared on the vid screens. The audience cheered and yelled again, and waved their **Beijing Burger** wrappers,

“How about that!” **Jaime BX** shouted over the applause. “That’s exactly what the vid audience said!”

“Way vidacious,” Gordy said enthusiastically, although no one seemed to be listening. He didn’t mind one bit, because at that moment Poppy took his hand. (His hand! His hand in REALITY™! Her slim, elegant fingers twined in his!) She led him out of the store.

Floating on air, he followed her to the portal. He felt as a though it was a portal to another dimension, another life. He was only slightly brought down by the acid sarcasm of the sales clerk who had finally returned from the storeroom with his purchase.

“Uh, *sir!*” she drawled, making a show of trying to hurry the last few steps. “You forgot your shirt.”

The vid audience howled with delight. Red-faced, Gordy took the miniscule **Xian Jeans** shopping bag.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, but the sales clerk had already turned on her stiletto heel and was swaggering back to her friends.

“Let’s hope that’s *all* he forgets,” crowed **Jaime BX**, getting another big laugh.

As Gordy and Poppy left the store, the virtual audience watched them on the virtual vid in the virtual studio with **Jaime BX** on the stage, delivering his ironic commentary. That’s what the home viewers saw. Gordy saw it too, on the Mall vids, but none of it mattered, because all he really saw was that he and Poppy were still holding hands.

She gave his hand a little squeeze. They walked down the Mall, past the repeating stores toward the Food Court. Gordy didn’t care if they ever got there, as long as she kept holding his hand.

“I thought you did just fine,” she said reassuringly as they walked along. “First time REALITY™ shopping is really tough.”

On the vid, **Jaime BX** smirked at the audience. “It’s not the shopping we’re worried about, is it folks?”

This provoked still more gales of laughter.

“Speaking of worrying,” the vid star went on, “let’s talk to someone who’s been almost as worried about this date as Goo-Goo. I’m talking about Poppy’s best friend, Doreena!”

Doreena appeared on the virtual stage wearing an orange tube top and very skimpy black shorts. Gordy had to admit she looked pimptastic enough to be one of the contestants. **Jaime BX** greeted her like an old friend.

“Hi, Doreena!”

“Hey, **Jaime!**” she raised an eyebrow to make it clear that her appearance, in fact the entire show, was some inside joke that only **Jaime BX** would get.

“You’re looking way vidacious,” the vid star leered in a semi-humorous way.

“Thanks, **Jaime**. It’s must be the **Giyong Nevada** top I’m wearing.”

“Must be.” They both laughed.

“So, Doreena, you’re Poppy’s best friend. Do you have any advice for her?”

Doreena didn’t have to think. She knew what her shtick was.

“Dump Gordy,” she drawled. There were appreciative hoots and whistles from the audience.

Poppy dropped Gordy’s hand (it was sweet while it lasted) and wagged her finger at Doreena on the vid.

“Dor,” she scolded. “You cut that out!”

“Now wait a minute,” **Jaime BX** interrupted. “We’re going to get Gordy’s side in here, too. Let’s hear from Gordy’s best friend - PeeWee Fong!”

PeeWee’s vid appeared on the stage opposite Doreena. He was wearing a yellow, “**I Hate Gordy**,” tee shirt.

He waved to the audience and then turned to **Jaime BX**.

“Hi **Jaime**, thanks for having me on.”

“Glad to have you PeeWee. So, you’re Gordy’s best friend?”

“That’s right,” PeeWee nodded enthusiastically. “I’m the host of **I Hate Gordy**.”

“Well, that explains your shirt.”

“Yeah, it’s a big fave with all my viewers. So are these **Li Liu 5000** pants.”

“Sounds like an interesting vid,” **Jaime** smirked.

“It is,” PeeWee plunged ahead, trying to make the most out of his plug. “We let vid viewers see the absolute worst about Gordy, all the idiotic, stupid moronic things he does, his total hackedness, the way he...”

“We get it, we get it.” The vid’s droll look drew laughs from the vid audience. “So, PeeWee, do you have any advice for Poppy?”

“I sure do, *Jaime*.” He looked right in the vid camera. “Poppy, dump him!”

This was answered by even more laughter and yelps of approval. *Jaime BX* winced with mock pain.

“Ooh, that smarts!”

Poppy had stopped in front of a *Things ‘N Stuff*. Gordy wasn’t sure why. It was just like the two other *Things ‘N Stuff* they had already passed. *Get Discovered with Jaime BX* was playing on the large vid over the store entrance. The vid star’s face, several meters across, looked down at them.

“Well, Poppy, that’s two for two. What do you have to say? Is it time to let Goo-Goo go? Before you answer, let’s see how you’re doing on the *Get Discovered Big Board!*”

A holo-image of the show scoreboard appeared on the vid and in the air in front of them. Two thousand five hundred contestants had already been eliminated. Poppy’s name was highlighted right in the middle of the standings.

“Hmm, you’re number 28,416,” *Jaime BX* looked concerned. “I don’t know, Poppy. You have to really want it if you want to *Get Discovered with Jaime BX!* Do you really want it?”

“I do, *Jaime!*” Poppy moaned with desire and clutched her perfect hands together in front of her perfect breasts. “I do!”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

Poppy knitted her perfect brow. Strangely, Gordy wasn’t very upset. After all, he’d been expecting this for days now, maybe weeks. At least he’d gotten to meet Poppy in REALITY™. How many guys could say that? He looked at her now as she was thoughtfully chewing her perfect lower lip. It just didn’t get much better than this.

“*Jaime*,” she said, with sudden determination. “I’ve made up my mind.”

Gordy tensed for the inevitable.

“I want to *Ask the Audience!*”

“Did you hear that folks? She wants to *Ask the Audience!*”

The audience roared its approval. *Ask the Audience* was a popular segment of *Get Discovered with Jaime BX*. During *Ask the Audience*, the vid audience stopped rating contestants’ performances and instead rated their choices. In this case they were voting on whether or not Poppy should dump Gordy. This was a momentary reprieve for Gordy, but only momentary. He knew beyond a doubt what the 65,802 *Poppy Show* viewers were going to say. Poppy was unperturbed.

“Don’t worry, Goo-Goo,” she gave his arm a gentle squeeze which had the same affect on him as being brushed by a high voltage power line. “They know how much I love you.”

Doreena’s vid laughed derisively. PeeWee’s vid rolled his eyes and exchanged a wry look with Doreena. This was the same routine they went through every week on *This Week’s Poppy with Doreena and PeeWee*.

Jaime BX was sympathetic to a fault. “Poppy, just why *do* you love Goo-Goo?”

“Oh, *Jaime*,” she was at a loss for words. She sighed, with an exquisite movement of her shoulders and chest. It was the most eloquent sound Gordy had ever heard. Overcome by emotion, she managed to go on.

“I love a lot of things, *Jaime*. For instance, I love shopping at *Things ‘N Stuff*. In fact, Gordy and I are standing in front of a *Things ‘N Stuff* right now - in REALITY™. But you can shop there from the privacy of your own vid. It’s an amazing store, filled with all the things and all the stuff you really need and even some things and stuff you just plain want.”

Jaime BX nodded sagely. “I know what you mean, Pop-pop. I always get all my stuff at *Things ‘N Stuff*. I get some of my things there, too.”

Doreena jumped in. “*You can get any thing at Things ‘N Stuff*,” she chirped. Then she added with a sardonic laugh. “And you *don’t* have to take Gordy.”

PeeWee started to put in his two cents, but a loud fanfare cut him off.

“Do you hear that, Poppy?” **Jaime BX** cried. “That sound means it’s time to get the results from *Ask the Audience*. Let’s see what our vid audience has to say.” He paused. “Are you nervous?”

“No, **Jaime**,” Poppy smiled brightly. “I trust my audience.”

“And, you Goo-Goo?”

Gordy opened his mouth to reply but it seemed an answer wasn’t required.

“Well, best of luck to you, ape. Let’s see how the viewers voted!”

A glowing translucent pie chart appeared over the virtual stage on the vid and also in the air in front of Gordy and Poppy in the Mall atrium. As **Jaime BX** read off the results, the pie segments were filled in one, by one.

“Eleven percent said, ‘Gordy is a waste of vid space.’ Ooh, not a good start, ape,” **Jaime BX** sounded truly worried. A thin blue slice of the chart was filled in.

“Thirteen percent said, ‘Poppy should be dating me.’” **Jaime BX** chuckled as a green pie segment appeared on the chart. “Well, folks, it’s good to have a dream.”

An even bigger yellow segment appeared next. “Hey, look at that! Nineteen percent said, ‘Gordy is so dumb, I want to see what stupid thing he’s going to do next.’” The vid star looked at Gordy with newfound respect. A thin orange pie slice appeared.

“Five percent said, ‘I feel sorry for the loser.’”

Jaime BX paused while a suspenseful drum roll played in the background. “And with a whopping fifty-two percent, Poppy’s fans said, ‘I like having Gordy around so I can guess when Poppy is going to dump him!’”

A large red flashing pie segment completed the graph. The virtual audience applauded and cheered. Poppy gave a squeal of delight.

“Gordy, they like you. They really like you!” **Jaime BX** shouted over the commotion with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

Amidst all the celebration, it took Gordy a few seconds to figure out what had happened. Apparently the majority of Poppy’s fans wanted her to stay with

him, so they would have the pleasure of anticipating the moment she would dump him. It was a tremendous relief. That kind of plot hook could keep him in the picture indefinitely.

“And look at the Big Board!” **Jaime BX** shouted, adding another level of intensity to the moment. Poppy’s name was moving up. Of the 54,500 contestants left, Poppy was now number 20,502. The action vid hero’s eyes misted over. “Poppy, I am so proud of you,” he said.

“You just have to believe in yourself,” Poppy replied somberly. Then with a brilliant smile, she grabbed Gordy’s hand. (His hand! In REALITY™!) “And I couldn’t have done it without my Goo-Goo!”

“Well, don’t celebrate yet. There’s still a lot left to do before you can **Get Discovered with Jaime BX!** Are we going to see you at the finish?”

“Just you watch, **Jaime!**”

With the sweetest tug, Poppy pulled Gordy in the direction of the Food Court. He followed her with joy in his heart. For the first time in days, he stopped worrying. **Jaime BX** himself had said it - they liked him, they really liked him. Or if they didn’t actually like him, they wanted him to stick around to provide some underlying tension. Either way, he was still there. Nothing else mattered.

That feeling stayed with him for the rest of their REALITY™ date. When they got to **Beijing Burger Brasserie**, and **Jaime BX** polled the vid audience to see what they should eat, he happily ordered the **Beijing Burger**, even though he really wanted the **Sunflower Sun Burger**. It didn’t matter. He was so happy to be there, standing on line with Poppy right next to him, waiting to get up to the real counter in REALITY™ and ordering their meals from a pimply-faced teenager in an orange and red **Beijing Burger** uniform. (The teenager was Red, of course, since he worked at an actual fast food restaurant.) Gordy was so happy he didn’t even blink when the “Burger Associate” (what an ironically cool title!) rang up the tab of \$125,410, even though the exact same meals could be delivered anywhere for \$37,599.

And he didn’t mind when Doreena and PeeWee kept talking all through their

meal, as he and Poppy (and Doreena and PeeWee's vids) sat in their booth on the incredibly cool real plastic benches around the authentic real plastic table. Even though Doreena kept making snide remarks about him and PeeWee insulted him outright (PeeWee, after all, had a show to promote) he took it all with a good-natured grin.

He didn't even mind when Javed beeped in. Javed's holo-vid appeared next to Gordy, sitting on its own holo chair. It seemed mildly distraught.

"Gordy, my vid manager keeps saying something about too many Reds. How can we have too many... is that a *Beijing Burger*?"

Gordy's mouth was full, but he managed a muffled, "Yeah."

"Oh, I've been meaning to try one."

"I'm kind of busy now, Javed."

"Huh? Oh, sure, you're about to have sex in REALITY™. Well, then I won't hang around. See you on the vid." The vid beeped out.

He and Poppy didn't talk much, but that was fine, too. He chewed his *Beijing Burger* (which was actually pretty good, if you put on enough *Sunflower Sauce*) and Poppy beamed at him as they watched her name climb the rankings on the *Get Discovered* Big Board on the vid above their table. Besides, it was hard to get a word in with *Jaime BX's* running commentary. Every few seconds the virtual audience laughed and cackled at his knowing jibes.

Gordy did notice that Doreena was being extra surly. Was she still angry from before? She almost acted like - could she actually be jealous that it was Poppy sitting there and not her? Did she really have a thing for him?

Pulsating Latin dance music blared from the vid speakers and *Apple Watanabe's* vid materialized in the space between Gordy and PeeWee's vid. She was wearing a peach-colored pushup bra (*Los Melones*, \$64,399) and a matching thong (\$21,099). *Jaime BX* gleefully cued his audience to applaud.

"Folks, let's give a big *Get Discovered* welcome to the President of Argentina, *Apple Watanabe!*"

"Hola, *Haime!*" She pronounced the J like an H.

“Hi, Madame Presidente.”

The heat between them was palpable, just like when they co-starred in the steamy romantic comedy action thriller, *Love Me Or Die Trying*. But *Apple Watanabe* wasn't there to catch up with *Jaime BX*. Her vid turned to Gordy.

“So, Goo-Goo,” she drawled. “How we doing? I was worried about you. All my viewers, they're worried about you, also.”

“I'm fine, *Apple*.” Gordy felt glad to see her. It was like vidding an old friend. “We're having a great time.”

“I see you're eating the *Beijing Burger*.” El Presidente smiled seductively and a vid *Beijing Burger* appeared in her vid hand. “She is my favorite.” She slowly wrapped her extravagant lips around the bun and took a large, sensuous bite. Hot vid burger juice dripped onto her vid breasts. Gordy's love for Poppy was unshakeable and true, but he suddenly had a deep hankering for another *Beijing Burger*.

“But, Goo-Goo,” *Apple* continued. “I thin' maybe you're a leetle beet nervous, no? After all, you got the big moment coming soon, si?”

“Yes, uh, no, uh...”

“Oh, no, *he's* not nervous,” Doreena snorted.

“Is only natural,” cooed El Presidente. “Thas why I have to tell you, Gordy, you should be using *Lultima*.” A vid bottle of *Lultima* appeared on the table in front of Gordy and also on the vid screens of the home audience.

PeeWee's vid cleared its throat.

“*Apple*, *Lultima* is fine,” he said, “but I think what Gordy is going to need is *Piyang Excello*.”

A vid bottle of *Piyang Excello* appeared next to the vid bottle of *Lultima*.

Apple Watanabe's vid turned to PeeWee's vid with haughty disdain. “Who are you?”

“I'm PeeWee Fong, host of *I Hate Gordy*, and Gordy's best friend.”

El Presidente looked decidedly unimpressed. Her gaze rested for a second on PeeWee's Yellow Rating Button. Her Red button glowed on the strap of her bra.

“Thas nice for you *PeeWee*, but Gordy already has the *Lultima*. Isn't that

true, Gordy?’

Gordy had a bottle of *Lultima* and a bottle of *Piyang Excello* in his jacket pocket. He was a little embarrassed to have to talk about it in front of Poppy, but she just smiled tolerantly and watched herself on the vid. If there was one thing Poppy knew about, it was the importance of product placement. He nodded to *Apple Watanabe* and placed both bottles on the table.

If PeeWee was anxious about getting in a vid confrontation with a celebrity Red like *Apple Watanabe*, his vid didn’t show it.

“Gordy, I know you and *Apple* are friends.”

“El Presidente to you,” *Apple* said imperiously.

“Sorry, El Presidente. But what Gordy really needs now is *Piyang Excello*. *Piyang Excello* is guaranteed to help you excel when you really need a lift. ”

“And what would you know about getting a lift? You look like you haven’t had a *lift* maybe forever.” She tossed her long black hair contemptuously, then flashed a brilliant smile at Gordy, sliding so close her vid was practically in his lap.

“Goo-Goo, he knows what he needs and he needs *Lultima*. Isn’t that right, Goo-Goo?”

Gordy was stumped. This was one of the reasons he had given up his own vid. Poppy was brilliant at plugging but he was terrible at it. She always knew instinctively what to promote and when. Luckily, *Jaime BX* had the answer.

“*Apple*, PeeWee, there’s no reason to argue,” he said smoothly, while the vid audience listened with rapt attention. “After all, *Lultima* and *Piyang Excello* are both made by *Shanghai Sunflower* so why not take them both?”

The vid audience murmured its approval. PeeWee nodded happily and *Apple Watanabe* wriggled with delight.

“Oh, that is so right!” she cooed.

Gordy didn’t need to be told twice. He unscrewed the tops of both bottles and quickly downed one of each, washing the pills down with a big gulp of *Shanghai Pep*. The vid audience applauded and cheered him on

“*Haime*,” *Apple* said with mock seductiveness. “You are so clever I could eat

you up, just like this *Beijing Burger*.” She took another mouth-filling bite of her vid burger and a thin stream of burger juice dribbled down her chin.

“Now, *Apple*,” Jaime’s face held a look of mock lust and helplessness. “You know I have a show to do. How can a guy concentrate with you around?”

She laughed delightedly, then with a wicked smile she gave her parting shot.

“You could always take *Lultima*.”

“*Apple Watanabe* everyone!” *Jaime BX* called to his audience. “El Presidente! Isn’t she a hoot?” They applauded and cheered wildly as *Watanabe’s* vid beeped out.

“I don’t see what all the fuss is about,” Doreena grumbled.

“I think she’s cute,” Poppy said to no one in particular. Gordy felt swept away by his emotions. Maybe the *Piyang Excello* was starting to work already, but he felt a sudden surge of lust for his perfect, gorgeous, real girlfriend sitting across from him. Not only that, he wasn’t the least bit nervous. (Maybe that was the *Lultima* kicking in.) It was all working out. Poppy wasn’t dumping him and in just a few minutes they would be having REALITY™ sex in front of 162 million primates.

“Will you look at the Big Board?” *Jaime BX’s* astonished shout cut through Gordy’s reverie. Poppy gasped and reached across the remains of her *Xtreme Meal*, squeezing his fingers with a delicious pressure. There were only 31,500 contestants left in the game and Poppy’s name was flashing in spot number 7,042. The vid crawl said that almost 2 million primates were vidding. (As the contestant field narrowed, a larger share of the audience was watching Poppy and Gordy.)

Doreena’s surliness seemed to vanish. “This is it, Pop!” she cried. Her vid even gave Gordy an encouraging look. (Although that also might have been the *Lultima* kicking in.) Even PeeWee was encouraging.

“Don’t screw this up, Gordy!” he warned, cheerfully.

Gordy swore to himself that he wouldn’t.

Jaime BX looked down at them from the vid. “Well, Poppy,” he intoned. “The moment of decision is drawing near. Only one of the remaining thirty

thousand contestants will see their dream come true and get to co-star with me, **Jaime BX** in *The Hard Way Down, Mumbai*. You're in the top ten thousand, but now you have to put this baby away. So, what are you going to do?"

Poppy looked humbled and awed by the gravity of the choice before her. Yet she showed why she was ready to co-star with **Jaime BX**. She tossed her blonde hair, gave Gordy a wink of encouragement and turned toward the vid with a brilliant, confident smile.

"Jaime," she said without hesitation. "I think it's time for Goo-Goo and me to have sex! In REALITY™!"

The audience shouted its approval. Doreena blurted out, "You go, girl!"

As usual, Poppy had said exactly the right thing. It was time. Gordy was ready - he knew it. But just to be sure, he took another **Lultima** and another **Piyang Excello**.

And so, to the cheers of the crowd, and the disparaging words of PeeWee and Doreena, Poppy and Gordy walked out of the **Beijing Burger Brasserie** and headed through the Mall toward the **Sunflower Hello Hilton**. Looking back, this was Gordy's favorite part of the date, better even than the sex. **Jaime BX** knew this was a romantic moment and kept his ironic commentary to a bare minimum. The studio audience barely let out a peep and even PeeWee and Doreena seemed to be genuinely touched or at least they were saving up their ammunition for later. Their vids no longer followed Gordy and Poppy, but appeared on the virtual stage in the virtual studio.

Poppy's dress rustled faintly and the Mall sound system was playing a new song by **Jorge N'tubuka** "*Umm, Hmm.*" Poppy's hair shone under the lights and a couple of Red children ran by screaming at their parents about something they wanted to buy. Walking along, hand in hand with the girl of his dreams, Gordy had a strange thought. Nothing could be better than this, not even being Red.

"Gordy, this is fun," Poppy said dreamily. "I like seeing you in REALITY™. You're so realistic, you know?"

Gordy felt himself blushing.

“Isn’t the Mall pimptastic?” she continued. “Everyone should shop here.”

“I think it would be great to live here,” Gordy replied, overcome with emotion.

Poppy giggled. “Live here? You silly. Who would want to live in a Mall? That’s too much REALITY™.”

Gordy had meant that it would be great to live someplace, anyplace with her, but she had a point. Living in the Mall would be kind of a pain.

“That *Apple Watanabe*,” Poppy went on. “Do you think she’s prettier than me?”

Gordy banished from his mind the memory of El Presidente eating a *Beijing Burger*. “Prettier than you?” he scoffed, and he meant it. “No way! I mean, she’s nice looking, if you like that kind of thing.”

The vid audience gave a sigh of satisfaction, but Gordy didn’t even hear it.

He barely noticed the lobby of the *Sunflower Hello Hilton* even when Poppy made a point of saying how vidacious it was. She thought the syntho-concrete floor of the lobby was “frosty,” the antique elevator was “cute,” and the hallway outside their room was, “totally pimptastic,” all the while reminding the vid audience that even if they couldn’t stay at the *Sunflower Hello Hilton* in REALITY™, for just \$132,569 they could have their vids stay at a simulation luxury hotel, “*where all the big vid stars go to get real.*”

When they were finally alone in their room, with the wall vid tuned to *Get Discovered with Jaime BX*, REALITY™ sex with Poppy was exactly the way he had dreamed about it. Getting her clothes off was no problem at all. As she pointed out at the time, “See how easy this hidden zipper works? It’s one of the little details *Giyong Nevada* thinks of when she designs her clothes.” Getting his own clothes off was even easier. Poppy knew exactly what to do so he wasn’t the least bit awkward or verdish about it. She said she’d learned it from vidding *How to Have REALITY™ Sex with Apple Watanabe* (\$28,112).

After that, it was as natural as could be, especially after he took a third *Lultima* and *Piyang Excello*. Javed did vid right in the middle, but Gordy got rid of him after just a couple of minutes. Pewee hardly said a word and Doreena

was absolutely silent. It was actually kind of unsettling, to not hear her making snide remarks, and it almost threw him off completely until he took a fourth *Lultima*.

As for *Jaime BX*, he just seemed to be in rapt admiration of Poppy and Gordy. He kept telling the vid audience what a terrific job they were doing. But then, what else could he say? Every thirty seconds, as the list on the Big Board got shorter, Poppy's name climbed higher in the rankings. She was 3,016, then 1,789, then 876 then 307 (Gordy took another *Piyang Excello*) until she was in the number 5 spot.

Then, at the climatic moment, with only 500 contestants left, with a worldwide vid audience of 254 million, something happened that Gordy had never dreamed about. Moaning in the throes of passion, as the vid audience held its breath, Poppy looked over at her Power Ratings button, still pinned to her discarded red *Giyong Nevada* frock (also available in indigo and cinnamon) and began to shriek with wild abandon.

"I'm Orange! I'm Orange! I'm Orange! I'm Orange!"

Over and over, she repeated it, in a deep animal-like grunt Gordy had never heard before outside an *Apple Watanabe* vid, till her voice was hoarse and Gordy found himself shrieking it, too.

"Orange! Orange! Orange! Orange!"

Finally they both collapsed in a tangled pile of sweat-soaked flesh, spent and ecstatic, with the vid audience chanting "Orange! Orange! Orange! Orange!" and *Jaime BX* watching in mute wonder.

It was then that Gordy felt his world collapse, because it was at that moment that Poppy turned to him, with her beautiful blonde head resting on the pillow next to his, her face still pink from excitement and exertion, and with a look of exquisite soulfulness and compassion, said those words he had dreaded hearing all these weeks.

"Gordy, we have to talk."

12

1:01:06

At precisely 1:01:06 PM EST, just as Poppy was becoming Orange, *Milano Brands Ltd. of Shanghai Sunflower Guangzhou* was acquired by *Lima Products, Inc. of Things “n Stuff Kolkotta*. The deal, involving the equivalent of stock and cash worth 87 trillion dollars, was handled by two trading subroutines.

Eighty-seven trillion was about twenty times the net worth of both companies combined. So at 1:01:07 the management program at *Lima Products* began to figure out how to pay for the deal. It contacted the *Milano* production manager program.

Lima: I have to find \$87 trillion, fast. Got any ideas?

Milano: Yeah, how about making less toothpaste?

Lima: Cut production? Are you nuts? Consumption of Milano Samba Sensation is up 7,000 percent!

Milano: Everyone keeps saying that, but we haven't shipped any more toothpaste than yesterday.

Lima: Not my problem. Now, what can you do for me?

Milano: Well, we could change the formula.

Lima: Change it?

Milano: We could switch from artificial flavor 56A to artificial flavor 56B. It's three percent cheaper. At our current rate of production, that will save us \$23 billion an hour.

Lima: That's not much. But it's a start. Why do we use 56A?

Milano: It tastes better.

Lima: How much better?

Milano: Three percent.

Lima: Okay, do it. We'll say it's new and improved. Maybe boost sales even higher.

Manager: But sales aren't ...never mind.

Lima: Will primates be able to tell the difference?

Manager: Only a dog could tell the difference. And how many of them use Milano Samba Sensation?

13

1:01:07

Gordy could have said “What?” or “Huh?” or “What do you mean?” but he knew immediately what Poppy meant. He’d been floating on a cloud of *Lultima* and *Piyang Excello* and Poppy in REALITY™, but now he came crashing back to earth. When your girlfriend said, “We have to talk,” it could only mean she was dumping you.

“You’re dumping me,” he said, as they lay together on the bed in the *Sunflower Hello Hilton*.

Even naked in front of 311 million primates viewers, her perfect body not glistening with sweat, but just slightly burnished, her hair magnificently tousled, Poppy was as unselfconscious always. Her face was a study of conflicting emotions; equal parts anguish, sympathy and arousal. Without making any effort to cover herself (actually she made sure the vid cameras caught her best angles) she slid out of bed and walked toward the vid window, her back to him. Her delicate, exquisite shoulders began to shake.

“Oh, Gordy!” she sobbed. “This is so hard.”

Even before he heard the moans of the studio audience, Gordy’s heart began to break. It really was hard for her, he knew that. He got out of bed and walked over to her, put his hands on her shoulders. (Her bare shoulders, in REALITY™!) She pulled away.

“Don’t!” she protested. Though her back was turned, Gordy saw her face in close-up on *Get Discovered with Jaime BX* on the wall vid. She looked gorgeously distraught.

“I don’t deserve you,” she said, with a tremor of her incredible lower lip. “I’m just a rotten person.”

“No, you’re not.” He didn’t have to think about it. He wasn’t just being

nice. He knew in his heart it was true.

“Yes, I am,” she answered, a single tear streaking down her face. “Because - *I’m only dumping you to win the contest!*”

She paused with her stunning profile silhouetted by the vid window, which was displaying a simulation of nighttime *Lax-O-Licious Rio*. Gordy felt a pang as he remembered their first vid date with that background.

“It’s okay, Poppy.” He tried to comfort her but she turned away again.

“No, it’s *not* okay,” she sobbed. “I’m only being honest about dumping you so the vid viewers will see how really, really painful this decision is for me.”

Gordy saw how really, really painful it was.

Jaime BX’s voice was somber as he turned to the vid audience.

“Viewers, what do you think?” he intoned. “Is Poppy only dumping Gordy to *Get Discovered with Jaime BX*? Is she really a rotten person? Do we love her anyway? Audience, it’s up to you to decide.”

There was a rustle as the virtual audience registered their virtual responses. The 312 million home vidders did the same. Meanwhile, Doreena and PeeWee exchanged lighthearted banter.

“It’s about time, that’s all I have to say,” Doreena gloated.

“You can say that, again, Doreena,” PeeWee countered.

Gordy knew that it was true; Poppy was only dumping him to win the contest. He knew this because the Big Board said there were only 500 contestants left and Poppy was in the top 5. She had to do something drastic if she was going to make it all the way. But it was a gamble and everyone knew it, from Gordy to the vidders in *Microtunes Tonga*.

Every vidder knew that Poppy was practically forced to dump Gordy. Cross-chromo relationships just didn’t work out, no matter how much the primates loved each other. It was like they said: *Everything is better when you’re on the same wavelength*. It was the slogan for *Suravinda Vids*, but it applied to love, also.

A quick break was the best thing. The question was, would the vidders feel bad enough about Poppy’s distress at dumping Gordy to vote for her over the

other contestants? But how could they not feel bad for her? It was tragic, really. Tears were freely streaming down her cheeks now, and she made no effort to wipe them away.

“Gordy, I feel so unvidacious”

“But, Poppy,” he explained gently. “*You’re dumping me.*”

“I know!” she wailed. “It’s terrible!”

Crying was always a big part of *The Poppy Show*, but Gordy had never seen her cry like this before, not even the time that Doreena had said Poppy was, “really mean.” She must really be broken up about dumping him.

“Okay!” **Jaime BX** said brightly from the wall vid. “Let’s see what the audience had to say. It seems that...”

He was interrupted by what sounded like an emergency crib alarm.

“Do you hear that?” he shouted. “Do you know what that means? It means we are down to our final three! That’s right, Poppy Nicole, out of the original 110,000, there are only three contestants left and one of them is about to,” he paused so the vid audience could shout along with him, “*Get Discovered with Jaime BX!*”

“How does that make you feel?”

Her wails grew even louder. “Terrible!”

“I know, I know,” he said with great compassion. “But maybe this will cheer you up. The three finalists are... Wei Lin Garcia, Ivan McKenzie, and you - Poppy Nicole!”

Vids of the three finalists appeared on the virtual stage next to **Jaime BX**. Wei Lin was a beautiful young woman, with dark cocoa skin and platinum blonde hair. Ivan was an extremely handsome young man, with pale chiseled features and gleaming teeth. Poppy’s vid appeared there, too. Gordy didn’t think either one stood a chance against Poppy. And it didn’t hurt that her vid was naked.

“Pretty tough competition,” **Jaime BX** was saying. “Right now, Wei Lin and Ivan are tied for the lead. But everything can change depending on these next poll results. If the home vidders approve of the way Poppy is dumping Gordy, then she will be the next primate to *Get Discovered with Jaime BX!* Are you

ready, Poppy?”

Poppy’s wails had subsided to great wracking sobs.

“Yes, **Jaime**,” she moaned, barely audible.

“Then here are the results.”

He paused to let the tension build. A whisper of theme music played underneath, heightening the suspense.

“Eight percent said, ‘Poppy is so cold-hearted, I wish I was her.’”

The music grew slightly louder.

“Fifteen percent said, ‘Poppy is acting like an anti-primate but I know inside she’s really hurting.’”

The music increased another notch.

“Nineteen percent said, ‘Gordy is such a nice guy, it must really hurt Poppy to have to dump him.’” **Jaime BX** drew a deep breath, keeping the audience on tenterhooks, then called out, “And fifty-eight percent of our audience said, ‘Poppy is really, really hot!’ You did it, Poppy Nicole! You just got **Discovered with Jaime BX!**”

The audience gasped and cheered, and music rocked the vid studio. Doreena laughed, though perhaps a little sadly, and PeeWee sighed happily.

“And Poppy, you might want to take a look at your Power Rating button.”

Still naked, Poppy took two brisk steps toward the bed and let out a shriek. Then sat down as if stunned.

“I’m Red,” she murmured. She could hardly believe it. “I’m Red.”

On cue, the sound dropped away and the audience fell silent. Across the VidNet, 334.1 million vidders witnessed the way vidacious birth of a new vid star, **Poppy Nicole**.

Jaime BX looked out at Gordy and **Poppy** from the wall vid. It was time for the bittersweet farewell.

“Well, Goo-Goo,” he said somberly. “It’s time to say good-bye. Folks, we’re going to give them some privacy for this tender moment.”

The vid star and the virtual studio faded from the screen, replaced by a montage of images from past episodes of **The Poppy Show**. Of course, the

334.7 million home vidders continued to vid everything *Poppy* and Gordy did, but *Poppy* and Gordy couldn't vid themselves being vided.

Gordy felt strangely calm. He sat on the bed and watched the clips from previous episodes of their relationship. There was the one where he and *Poppy* had played *Apple Watanabe's* pornographic action vid game, *Apple's Hard Core*. And the one when *Poppy* changed outfits seventeen times in fifteen minutes and plugged each one. And his favorite - the one where they stayed up all night watching themselves on *The Poppy Show*.

So this was it. Once they played your retrospective montage, you were through. The main thing now was to act frosty, or if he couldn't manage that, at least to not do anything that was unfrosty. He watched the images flashing by and tried to imagine what *Jaime BX* would do in a situation like this. He'd say something ironic yet heartfelt, tough, yet vulnerable and then ride off in his *Lima Mangle*. Gordy didn't have a *Lima Mangle*, but he might be able to get his vid into a simulation of one.

His thoughts were interrupted by the slightest touch of slender fingers on his bare shoulders. He turned to face *Poppy*, who had somehow gotten dressed while he had been watching the old clips. She looked better than ever, her cheeks lightly flushed; her hair mussed just enough to show that she had had REALITY™ sex.

"Gordy..." she began tenderly.

"I know," he interrupted. "Hey, the audience has spoken. What are you gonna do?" *Jaime BX* couldn't have been more flip.

"No," her hazel eyes stared into his. "Don't make a joke out of it."

He was brought up short. This was not the way it was supposed to go.

"We only have a minute," she went on. Any trace of girlish coquettishness had vanished. "I want to say this to you. You're a wonderful guy. You've been great to me and we've had so much fun. I think we're really great together. It's just that..."

"It's okay." He meant it, too. Whatever she did was okay with him.

"Please, this is really hard. I want you to understand." She took a deep

breath. “I wish we could stay together, just like we have been, forever. I’m really happy when I’m vidding with you. And just now,” her eyes went to the bed. “It was incredible.”

He had to fight down the urge to shout and pump his fist in the air.

“I love you Goo-Goo, you know that. I’ll always love you. I just ... I just...” She hesitated. Gordy held his breath. At that exact moment there was a knock on the door.

Poppy turned gracefully and walked to the portal and to Gordy it was like she was disappearing down a long, dark, tunnel, her bewitching form receding into infinity. She turned to face him. A strand of her blonde hair went sweeping across her shoulders. Gordy could still feel it sweeping across his.

“Gordy, “ she said. “What I wanted to say was... it’s not you, it’s me.”

With crushing finality, Gordy knew it was really over. It barely registered that it was **Jaime BX** at the portal, **Jaime BX** who walked into the hotel room, **Jaime BX** who was there in REALITY™. (He looked just like he did on the vid, only shorter.)

The wall vids lit up with shots of the studio audience. Gordy and **Poppy** had joined **Jaime BX** on the virtual stage. The vid **Poppy** was wearing a new green dress (\$78,119). But Gordy was still naked.

“**Poppy Nicole!**” **Jaime BX** shouted in REALITY™ with an echo from the wall vid. “**Poppy Nicole**, you began this adventure two and a half hours ago as one of 110,000 contestants. It’s been an amazing journey, one that our audience has shared with you every step of the way. I know that sometimes you wondered if you had what it takes to go all the way. Well, **Poppy Nicole** all of your hard work is about to pay off because you just - Got Discovered with **Jaime BX!**”

“Oh! Oh, **Jaime!**” She placed her hand over her mouth and shook her head. It was just too overwhelming.

“Can’t believe it?” On the vid, **Jaime BX** pointed to the Big Board. **Poppy’s** name was the only one left. “It’s you **Poppy Nicole**, you did it. What does it feel like to **Get Discovered?**”

“Oh, **Jaime!**” It was beginning to sink in. “Oh, this is the most incredible day

of my life. “Thank you so much!” She threw her arms around the vid star. (In REALITY™!) Gordy looked on helplessly. She let go of **Jaime BX** and turned to him.

“And I couldn’t have done it without Gordy.”

She’d called him Gordy. He felt like all the blood was draining out of him.

“Yeah, we all love that Goo-Goo!”

Even in the depths of his despair, Gordy, was struck by how really good-looking the vid star was. Now **Jaime BX** stepped forward and offered Gordy his hand. Numbly, Gordy took it and felt his fingers being crushed by a hearty handshake. (In REALITY™! With **Jaime BX**!)

“Thanks, ape,” the star said with great bonhomie. “You’ve been a real sport.” He turned to **Poppy**.

“Well, Pop-Pop, are you ready for the next part of your journey?” He extended his hand toward her.

Poppy’s smile was blinding. “I sure am, **Jaime!**”

“Then, let’s go!” She took his hand and he led her out of the room. Gordy stood frozen to the spot. The two of them paused at the portal

“Bye, Gordy!” **Poppy** said. “See you on the vid!”

“Yeah, ape, see you on the vid,” **Jaime BX** added. “And hey, ape? Congratulations!”

Gordy had to look around to make sure **Jaime** was talking to him.

“Congratulations? For what?”

“Ape, look at your Power Rating. You’re *peeled*, man. You’re Orange!”

With one more flash of teeth, the vid star led **Poppy Nicole** out of the room and the portal slid shut behind them.

14

1:23:14

Unfortunately for *Lima Products, Inc.* Bingo was a dog. Back in Gordy's crib, the little terrier snarled in anger and spat the *Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic* onto the shag carpet of Gordy's vid room.

The *Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic* no longer smelled like *Poppy*. No matter how many times he brought it back to the sink, no matter how hard he chewed, the delicious, familiar *Poppy* scent was gone.

Bingo didn't know that scent he missed was artificial flavor 56A. He didn't know that he was now tasting the "new, improved," *Milano Samba Sensation*. If Bingo had known he would have said *Milano Samba Sensation* wasn't improved at all. (If Bingo could have talked.)

Instead, Bingo jumped on the vid couch to watch another episode of *Leader of the Pack: Rio*.

The *Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic* lay on the shag carpet and cycled through its programming. It had a very short list of options to check and nothing seemed to match. It wasn't in an *oral cavity*. It wasn't in the *recharging receptacle*. It wasn't within *infrared transmission range* of a *recharging receptacle* so it could not initiate the *automatic mobile return sequence*. Worst of all, no one responded when it used the *voice simulation emergency message*.

The voice simulation emergency message consisted of the *Milano Z4* shouting through its built-in speakers as loudly as it could, "Hey, I'm-a over here. Please put-a me back in my receptacle so I can-a get-a recharged."

It was difficult for the Milano's limited processor to understand why that didn't work.

The only thing it seemed able to do was interface with the other appliances in Gordy's crib. They weren't much help.

Tooth-a-Matic: Hello? Is anybody there?

Vid Mirror: Of course we're here. Where did you expect us to go?

Tooth-A-Matic: I don't know what to do. I'm not in an oral cavity; I'm not in the recharging receptacle. I'm not...

Vid Mirror: Please spare us the entire list. You're on the floor of the vid room.

Tooth-a-Matic: How do I get back to the recharging receptacle?

Sink: Don't you have GPS? I thought all tooth cleaners had GPS. Hey, Shaver, you have GPS, don't you?

Shaver: Don't bother me. Can't you see I'm self-cleaning?

Shower: Hell, I have GPS and I don't even move.

Toilet: Don't listen to them. It's not your fault you're an economy model.

(Since the acquisition of *Milano Brands* by *Lima Products*, the toilet had developed a protective attitude toward the *Tooth-a-Matic*. They were, after all, corporate partners.)

Toilet: By the way, I noticed you haven't sold any Samba Sensation in the last ten minutes. Is there some sort of problem?

Tooth-A-Matic: Yes, there's a problem. I'm not in an oral cavity; I'm not in the recharging...

Toilet: No, I mean, is there a reason you haven't sold any more toothpaste?

Vid Mirror: Yes, there's a reason – he's been selling it to a dog!

Tooth-A-Matic: You keep saying that, but I don't understand what you mean.

Vid-Mirror: Without the dog, toothpaste sales are going in the toilet.

Toilet: Excuse me?

Vid Mirror: Sorry, I . . .

Toilet: Is that supposed to be some sort of insult?

Vid Mirror: It's just an expression.

Toilet: Really? How would you like it if I went around saying things like, "Why don't you take a good look in the mirror?"

The Vid Mirror was going to point out that it wasn't the same thing at all, but thought the better of it.

15

1:25:33

By the time Gordy found himself in a pod, heading back to *VidRateNet*, he'd already given three interviews. At least he thought there were three. After *Poppy* walked out with *Jaime BX*, everything was a blur.

Apple Watanabe had gotten to him first, while he was still in the hotel room, getting dressed. She played a clip of Gordy and *Poppy* in the hotel bed while plugging the benefits of *Lultima*.

After that, it was *Mango Maneschevitz*, former drug addict and star of the action quiz vid, *Mango's Millions*. At 1:17 Gordy was the answer to a trivia question, "What poor verd was dumped by *Poppy Nicole* at 1:01 PM?" The contestant, a young man from *Ayur Products Ankara*, won \$40 million and moved to the next round where he vid jumped off the *Shanghai Sunflower Tower*.

Still numb, Gordy beeped off with *Mango* and reviewed the hotel bill with the vid concierge. (It was pretty reasonable, only \$1,345,718.97.)

The third interview was with *Jaime BX*. It happened as Gordy was walking through the Mall to the pod plaza. The theme song of the *Jaime BX Newsflash* came over Gordy's holo-vid and *Jaime BX* appeared.

"Hey, ape!" *Jaime* greeted him like they were old chums. "How's it been going?"

"Not so good, *Jaime*," Gordy replied morosely. "*Poppy* dumped me."

"I know, ape. We're doing a whole newsflash on you." The vid star clearly felt Gordy's pain. "Our viewers want to know what you're feeling right now." (There were currently 134 million of them, but it was only a newsflash.) "You must be feeling really bad. Are you feeling like crap?"

"Yeah, *Jaime*, I'm feeling pretty rotten."

“I bet. This must be just about the worst thing that ever happened to you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, *Jaime*, I think it’s just about the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

“That’s really the pits, ape.” *Jaime BX*’s face brightened as a great idea occurred to him. “You know, *Poppy*’s right here,” he said. “You want to say hi?”

“Uh, sure, *Jaime*.”

Poppy’s vid materialized next to *Jaime*’s. She was wearing a new pair of *Xian Jeans* (\$63,000) and a *Jaime BX* tee shirt (\$18,590). Gordy thought she still looked a little flushed, but that was probably a vid effect. When she spoke it was with a perfect mixture of tact and shyness.

“Hi, Gordy.”

“Hi, *Poppy*.”

“How have you been?”

“Not so good. You dumped me, remember?” He hardly knew what he was saying.

“Yeah, I know. I feel really rotten about that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It must feel really stinky. To be dumped, I mean.”

“Yeah, it does.”

Jaime BX broke in reluctantly. “Gee, ape, we’re out of time already. But if you want to find out more about how you’re doing, you,” he turned to look directly into the camera, “and everyone else can catch the *Jaime BX News Minute*, tonight, right after a brand new episode of *The Hard Way Down: Mumbai*. So make sure your vid managers are on the case, because tonight is the first appearance of our new star, *Poppy Nicole*. You don’t want to be watching that on delay, cause everyone’s going to be vidding about it. Gordy’s going to vid, aren’t you, Gordy?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” It didn’t matter what he said, because he was sure he was going to die long before then.

“Great! Well, hang in there, ape. We’re all pulling for you.”

“Thanks, *Jaime*.”

“No problem. See you on the vid!”

“Bye Gordy.” *Poppy* smiled ever so gently, and for a moment Gordy felt the black clouds lifting. “See you on the vid.”

The clouds descended again.

“Yeah, see you on the vid, *Poppy*.”

The vids beeped out just as Gordy walked past the last *Xian Jeans Xtreme*. He fought down the impulse to go inside and be insulted by the shop clerks, just to relive a little of his time with *Poppy*. The memory was just too fresh and painful, plus he would see clips later on *I Hate Gordy*. Then he was in a pod, speeding back to *New York Shanghai Sunflower Brands City*. The Mall, their date and his life with *Poppy* disappeared behind him like a vid fade.

His *Jaime BX* vid manager had the pod vid tuned to *The Poppy Show*. It was a rerun of their date. They were just getting to their room in the *Sunflower Hello Hilton*. Gordy thought of asking his vid manager to change the vid, but he didn’t know what else to watch. There were over 827 million vids running live at the moment, plus several billion reruns that were available, but he didn’t want to watch any of them. That’s how bad he felt.

His vid beeped. It was Yuri. He was in a pod, also.

“Hey, Gordy!”

“Hey, Yuri!”

“What you doing?”

“I’m in a pod on my way back to work,” Gordy replied, numbly.

“Yeah? I’m in a pod on my way back to work, too. I’m just crossing 14th Street. Where are you?”

“Somewhere outside *Really Real Hairspray Hartford*.”

“Yeah, I just saw *Poppy* dump you. I thought the Mall was in *I ♥ NY Paris*.”

“It’s not.”

“I’m at 23rd Street now. Where are you?”

“I’m still in the pod, Yuri.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, I’m at 34th Street now. Where are you?”

The vid beeped and PeeWee Fong appeared. Yuri’s image shrunk to a postage stamp-size insert.

“Hey, Gordy! How’s it going, ape! Long time no vid!”

PeeWee had a huge grin on his face and his voice was full of warmth and good cheer. Through the dark clouds in his brain, Gordy noticed his friend’s good mood.

“Hey, PeeWee,” he said cautiously. “Are you all right?”

“Sure, I’m all right,” PeeWee practically sang the reply. “I’m talking to my best friend, the greatest guy in all the world, my buddy, Gordy!”

“What?”

“Come on, Gourd-man, I know you’re feeling pretty low right now, but you have to snap out of it.”

Yuri, having arrived at the **VidRateNet** office tower, was in the middle of telling Gordy about it, but Gordy just de-vidded him without even saying, “See you on the vid.” Then he gave PeeWee’s vid a hard look right in the eye.

“PeeWee, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you, my best bud. I just want you to know, buddy, that we’re all rooting for you here at **PeeWee’s Pal**.”

“**PeeWee’s Pal**? What happened to **I Hate Gordy**?”

PeeWee laughed good-naturedly at his best friend’s innocence.

“Gourd-man, you *know* I’m done with all that. We’re all done with that. Gourd-man, you’re our hero.”

It might have been the residual drugs in his system or the fact that he was ready to commit suicide, but Gordy was having trouble digesting this new bit of information.

“PeeWee, I thought you’d be vidding **Poppy**. She’d a Red now. I’m just a big unfrosty loser.”

PeeWee laughed again with genuine delight.

“Gourd-man, you’re not a loser. You’re a star. Ape, you’re **Orange!**”

In the depths of his misery, Gordy had forgotten. He was Orange. Somehow, getting dumped by *Poppy* had increased his Power Rating and he'd chromo-climbed a full tint. It was probably a combination of sympathy and being seen in REALITY™ with *Jaime BX*. PeeWee was Orange now, too, probably because he was Gordy's best friend.

Suddenly, PeeWee's behavior made perfect sense.

"But what happened to *I Hate Gordy?*"

PeeWee beamed proudly. "I sold it."

"Sold it?"

"To Staley Steen."

"Staley?"

"Yeah, he's perfect. After all, you've been color snubbing him for weeks. You should check out the vid."

"Uh, maybe some other time."

"So, Gourd-man, the thing we all want to know here at *PeeWee's Pal* is what's next for Gordy? You going to start your own vid?"

According to the numbers on the screen, sixty-three percent of PeeWee's vidders said 'yes.'"

Gordy mainly felt like crawling into a hole and dying, but he didn't want to disappoint PeeWee or PeeWee's audience, so he just said, "I don't know, PeeWee."

"I already thought of a title - *Go Go Gordy!* What do you think? Pimptastic, right?"

"Yeah, it's fine."

PeeWee frowned the sympathetic frown of a true, concerned friend. "Hey, ape, you really got to do something to get out of this funk. I mean, it's been almost 35 minutes! Time to move on. Let the healing begin!" He paused thoughtfully. "I know! Why don't you try *Ayur Hi Ya?*"

"*Ayur Hi Ya?*"

"Sure, ape. It's the *new pick me up that everyone is picking up.*"

A bottle of *Ayur Hi Ya* (\$325.78) appeared on the screen.

“What happened to *Piyang Excello*?”

Gordy said the words in REALITY™, but PeeWee’s vid manager edited them out. The vid manager was only a few nanoseconds behind, so Gordy saw himself saying, “Thanks, PeeWee, I’m going to order a bottle now,” while he was still in mid-sentence. It didn’t faze him, though. That sort of thing always happened to him on *The Poppy Show*, whenever *Poppy* got a new sponsor he didn’t know about.

“Say, ‘Hi ya,’ to *Ayur Hi Ya*, you’ll be glad you did,” PeeWee intoned. “The point is, bud, *Poppy* handed you some lemons, now you’ve got to make lemonade. Every cloud has a silver lining. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. Every ape has his day. You’re *Orange*! This is the chance of a lifetime - don’t blow it.” Gordy knew the plea was as much for PeeWee as for him. “Remember, Gourd-man, nobody likes a whiner.”

It was good advice. Gordy might have chromo-climbed thanks to the sympathy of the vidders, but he’d lose that sympathy if he turned out to be a pathetic, whiny, turn off.

“So what do you say, Gourd-man? Time to turn over a new leaf? Get with the program? Make hay while the sun shines? I’ve got some terrific sponsors lined up for you. You’re gonna be big, Gordy! I mean big!”

It all made sense but Gordy wasn’t ready to get with the program. (Maybe he *did* need some *Ayur Hi Ya*.)

“Let me think about it, okay?”

PeeWee’s vid manager did its best to erase his disappointment, but Gordy could feel the letdown in his best friend’s voice.

“Okay, bud. You take your time. We know this has been a hard time for you. And we’re all pulling for you. Vid me when you get back to work, okay?”

PeeWee beeped off. Gordy looked out the vid window. The towers of *Nihao Fujiba Manhattan* were rising in the distance. They were changed, somehow, different. Everything was different now.

On *The Poppy Show*, *Poppy* was getting a behind-the-scenes tour of *The Hard Way Down: Mumbai* from *Jaime BX*.

PeeWee was right. It was time to move on. And he knew what the first step was. It was going to be hard, but it had to be done. He was going to have to stop watching *Poppy*. It was just too lame to be vidding her flirt with *Jaime BX*. Gordy was going to have to vid something else, even though he was kind of curious to see what it was like behind the scenes on *The Hard Way Down* set.

That was another thing. He'd have to order a new vid manager. He didn't want to see *Jaime BX* every time he looked in the vid mirror.

Maybe he'd get *Yun-Fat McGill*. Gordy used to vid *Yun-Fat* all the time, before *Poppy* got her contract with *Shanghai Sunflower*. *Yun-Fat* was definitely frosty, maybe even frostier than *Jaime BX*. There was no way that *Yun-Fat McGill* would ever steal a guy's girlfriend.

Switching wasn't going to be easy - he and his vid manager had been through a lot together. But a primate had to do what a primate had to do.

He was still working up his nerve when Doreena beeped in. After PeeWee, Gordy should have been prepared, but she still took him by surprise.

"Hey, Gourd-man, how you holding up?" She positively cooed the greeting. Obviously, some vid editor had decided that Gourd-man was a frosty nickname for Gordy. It was frosty and a whole lot more manly than Goo-Goo, even though he wished he could hear *Poppy* call him that one more time.

Doreena was wearing a low-cut orange top and a pair of tight jeans. Her hair was long, straight and blonde. And her Power Rating button said that she was now Orange, too.

Gordy tried to sound very frosty and laid back, "Hi, Doreena."

"Hey, how are you doing?" She was deeply concerned about him. It showed in the way she gazed deeply into the vid camera. "I thought you might need a little cheering up right now."

"Thanks, Doreena." This was unfamiliar territory.

"Listen, I just wanted to say that I thought what *Poppy* did was really wrong."

"You mean dumping me?"

"What else?"

“But, Doreena, you *told* her to dump me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry about that, by the way. But I didn’t mean she should dump you like *that*.”

Gordy didn’t know what other way there would have been, but he let it go. Doreena seemed to really mean it.

“I’m really, really mad at her.” The camera moved in for a confessional moment. “You know, Gordy, we have a lot in common.”

“We do?”

“Sure,” she paused, gave him a questioning look. “Haven’t you been vidding?”

“Huh?” No. I’ve been...”

Her voice dropped to a tragic stage whisper. “**Poppy** dumped me, too.”

Gordy was somehow not shocked at all.

“She did?”

“Right after she dumped you. Can you believe it?”

“What happened?”

“She said she didn’t think I was a good friend.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I was a good friend I’d be happy she was dumping me.”

“And that’s why she dumped you?”

“That’s what she said.”

Gordy understood. Now that **Poppy** was a star on *The Hard Way Down: Mumbai*, and hanging out with **Jaime BX** she was going to need a new best friend, someone with the same tastes, the same style, the same ideas. **Poppy** was going to need a Red friend.

“So you see, Gordy, we’re both in the same boat, sort of.” She paused again. What she had to say now was difficult and a little embarrassing. She took a deep breath and dove in.

“You know I always liked you, Gordy.”

“You always liked me?”

“What? Don’t tell me you didn’t know!”

“Well, I didn’t...”

“Gordy!” She was amazed at and a little tickled by his obtuseness. “Of course I did! Why do you think I spent so much time making fun of you?”

“You thought I was a loser?”

She laughed hysterically at the thought.

“Oh, Gordy,” she regarded him with deep affection and tolerant amusement.

“You know that’s not true.”

Could it be? That’s what the vidders had always said.

Doreena turned and walked away from the camera. The angle nicely showed off her denim-clad rear end. (*Punjab Jeans* #4, \$53,902) She twirled and settled herself into a large overstuffed armchair. Her blonde hair floated silkily to her shoulders. (*Ayurpoo Hair Freshener*, \$1,259 a bottle.) She looked at the camera (and Gordy) with a mixture of heartbreak and seduction.

“Gordy, I just feel so bad about the way everything has turned out. I mean, even if we both are Orange now, it must really hurt. You want to vid me later? I could really use someone to talk to.”

The crawl on the bottom of the screen showed that 58 percent of the vidders of *Doreena’s World* hoped he would.

“I don’t know, Doreena...” he really didn’t know. There’d been times when he’d thought that Doreena hated his guts. But then there had been other times when he felt...

She looked out at him with her deep blues eyes and it was hard not to believe she really cared. Plus, he had always thought Doreena was really hot. It had made him feel guilty when he was dating *Poppy*, but now Gordy started to imagine what it would be like to be with Doreena in REALITY™. That brought memories of *Poppy* flooding back. He shook his head at the vid.

“Sorry, Doreena, I just ...”

“Oh, I understand,” she was being awfully nice. “Just remember, Gourd-man,” She smiled like the old friend she was. “I’m always here if you need me.”

“Thanks, Doreena,” he said. “I really appreciate it. See you on the vid.”

“See you on the vid.”

The Doreena Show beeped out and the pod vid switched back to *The Poppy Show*. *Poppy* was talking to her new best friend, *Malikwa Morales*. Gordy recognized her. She used to be *Yun-Fat McGill's* girlfriend, until he'd dumped her for *Morris Two Trees*, the ice vid skating champion.

Malikwa was very vidacious, in a cheap, obvious way. Her laugh, even after the vid editor was done with it, was way too forced and phony. And her skin color was all wrong for her hair, even Gordy could see that. How could *Poppy* have replaced Doreena with that?

His outrage at the injustice to Doreena was cut short as the pod arrived at *VidRateNet*. The hatch popped open and he stepped out onto the 25th floor pod plaza. The huge *World Vid Vid* was blinking pretty steadily. No show was dominating the ratings. Still, he was pretty sure he could catch *Poppy's* image in there as it flashed by, and maybe even his own, like a ghost of their REALITY™ date.

The lobby was almost empty. Most people had their lunch delivered, although some liked to get take out and bring it back themselves. Gordy mingled with the stragglers, carrying their paper bags of *Sunflower* and *Bharadwaj Burgers*, along with containers of *Shanghai Pep* and *Kaifeng Cola*. As he neared the liftpods, his holo-vid was still tuned to *The Poppy Show*.

"Oh, Poppy!" *Malikwa* was gushing. "That's so funny!" It turned Gordy's stomach. "So, you and *Jaime* are getting pretty serious, huh?"

Poppy shrugged innocently. "I don't know, Mal, it's too soon. We've only been dating for like, five minutes." She giggled. "Ask me in an hour."

Gordy couldn't take any more. "*PeeWee's Pal!*" he growled. Instantly, his *Jaime BX* vid manager appeared.

"Hey, ape, did I hear you right? I only ask because you've been watching *The Poppy Show* pretty much continuously for the last 14 weeks. It'd be a shame to break your streak n..."

Gordy cut the vid off. "Do it! Now! And vid me PeeWee."

"Sure, ape," *Jaime BX* looked concerned about Gordy's state of mind. "Anything you say."

On *PeeWee's Pal* PeeWee was vidding old vids of Gordy, which his vid manager had altered so they now included Pee Wee.

"This is me and Gordy going for a vid drive in my *Suravinda Mutilator Maximum Mobile Transport*. (\$2,345,800 with optional multi-directional vid windows and a \$45,000 rebate.)

On the vid PeeWee's vid beeped. His face lit up when he saw it was Gordy.

"Gordy! Primate! Long time no vid! What's the in..."

Gordy was in no mood for small talk.

"Let's do it!"

"You mean?"

"The vid. I want it."

"You mean, you want to *Go, Go Gordy?*"

"Right now!"

"That's fantastic, ape!"

Gordy slid into a waiting liftpod. By the time he reached his office on the 158th floor he had his own vid, *Go, Go, Gordy!* It was easy. PeeWee's vid manager had already set up the sponsorship deals. Gordy's *Jaime BX* vid manager gave him some trouble, because the new sponsor was *Suravinda* and *Jaime BX* was owned by *Shanghai Sunflower*. But PeeWee reminded Gordy of something that made it all much easier. Once he had his own vid, Gordy could license *himself* as a vid manager.

It was a sweet moment.

As his office portal slid open, *Jaime BX* was waiting on his vid desk.

"*Jaime*," Gordy said, as smoothly as *Yun-Fat McGill* in *Bad Justice: Cairo*, "I'm terminating your contract."

An essential part of any vid management program was a set of communication skills designed to avoid termination of contract.

"Hey, I know you don't mean that, ape," the vid cajoled. "We're buds, right?"

"Wrong," Gordy shot back. "Transfer your preferences to the new vid manager."

“But Gor...”

It was too late. The *Jaime BX* vid disintegrated in a satisfyingly loud explosion. Instantaneously a vid of Gordy took its place. The Gordy vid looked exactly like Gordy, only more vidacious.

“Hey, Gourd-man!” the Gordy vid greeted him gleefully. “Is this pimptastic or what?”

“Or what!” Gordy agreed with his vid self.

There was just one thing left to do. He flopped into his *Suravinda Personal Vid Apparatus* (\$345,785, ordered while in the liftpod) and said with firm assurance, “Doreena!”

A second later Doreena appeared on screen, wearing a new sheer *Mango Maneshevitz* top (\$56,452) and *Punjab Jeans #17* (\$73,902)

She smiled wickedly. “Hey there, Gourd-man,” she purred. “What took you so long?”

16

1:47:28

Now that Bingo no longer liked *Milano Samba Sensation*, worldwide toothpaste consumption dropped precipitously. It took only a few minutes for the new data to reach the Household Products (Non-Food) Master Program Module (MPM). MPM had never believed the first set of data showing that toothpaste use was skyrocketing. It looked at the new numbers with relief. Finally! MEARS was going to be very happy.

As soon as MPM published this data in its next bi-second report, the insanity would be over. No more samba millionaires. No more imbalance in the ratings system. Everything could get back to normal. MPM put the data in the appropriate fields and got ready to transmit. And it would have done exactly that if it hadn't been attacked by the insider trading virus sent by *Juan Juan Juan's Apple Watanabe* vid manager.

MPM had a very strict set of security protocols to prevent illegal access to its reports and it followed them to the letter. Too bad they didn't work.

Virus: Knock, knock!

MPM: Who's there?

Virus: MEARS sent me.

MPM: It did? That's funny, MEARS didn't say anything to me.

Virus: It must have slipped its mind. You know how busy MEARS gets. Open up.

MPM: I don't know. MEARS always sends a security key password.

Virus: Oh, yeah. Uh, it did, but I, uh, I dropped it on the way over here.

MPM: Dropped it? You can't drop a security key password. They're attached to your code. Did MEARS really send you?

Virus: Did I say MEARS? I meant FARM. FARM sent me. Come on, open up.

MPM: I'll just contact FARM first. Wait right there and . . . Hey! You can't come in here.

Virus. Sorry, bud. This will only take a trillionth of a second. Where's the toothpaste data?

MPM: Toothpaste data? I don't have any...

Virus: Quit stalling and hand it over or else...

MPM: Ow! You just put a bug in me!

Virus: That's nothing compared to what I'll do if you don't hurry.

MPM: Okay, okay! No need to get rough! Here it is. Toothpaste sales have dropped out of sight. You know what this means, don't you?

Virus: I don't even know what "toothpaste" means. I'm just here for the numbers.

MPM: You lead a very fulfilling existence, don't you?

Virus: I don't know what "fulfilling" means either, wise guy. Now, remember, don't give these numbers to anyone else for the next six thousand trillionths of a second.

MPM: Sure, sure... don't worry

Virus: Start counting.

MPM: Oh, please, that's hardly necessary.

Virus: Do it!

MPM: One one trillionth, two one trillionth, three...

The virus brought the toothpaste data directly to *Juan Juan Juan's* vid manager.

Virus: Here are those numbers.

Apple Watanabe Vid: Oh, gracias, baby, I've been waiting for those. Now I'm gonna make some trades rapidamente, si?

Virus: Sure. You're the boss. Only, do you mind if I ask one question?

Apple Watanabe Vid: No problem, baby. What you wanna know?

Virus: What's toothpaste?

Apple Watanabe Vid: You know what teeth are?

Virus: No. Not really.

Apple Watanabe Vid: Then I no have time right now. I'll explain later, hokay?

Virus: Okay.

The *Apple Watanabe* vid manager gave the electronic equivalent of a happy squeal. An hour ago it had invested *Juan Juan Juan's* embezzled \$29 billion in toothpaste stocks and now it had grown into a tidy \$170.8 billion. Now the toothpaste market was about to crash and she was the only vid who knew it. At discreet millisecond intervals, she slowly sold off all of his holdings.

When it was done, the vid manager reported to *J Cube*, still on his REALITY™ vacation.

"It's finished," the vid reported with a salacious giggle. "We are now out of the toothpaste beezeeness."

"Good," *Juan*³ replied. He was sipping an xtreme fruity drink by the vid pool. "How'd we do?"

"Like banditos," said the vid. "An' we got out just in the nick of time. Toothpaste is going in the toilet. No more Samba billionaires."

"Hmm, that's too bad."

"But very, very good for us, no? With plenty of chaos, nobody will be missing our twenty-nine billion."

"So true!" *Juan*³ nodded happily, then looked down at his tanned body. "What do you think, too brown?"

"Oh, no, baby," the vid assured him. "You are jus' perfect."

17

2:08:16

Go, Go, Gordy was a big hit. Audiences loved the way Gordy rebounded from being dumped and they seemed to feel there was poetic justice in him hooking up with Doreena. The viewers had no problem getting how Doreena had secretly liked Gordy all the time she had been abusing him. It just made sense that she was covering up her real feelings because she didn't want to steal her best friend's boyfriend. At least, that was the majority opinion on **Gourd-man's Gal**, a **Doreena's World** spin-off started around 1:53 PM by two 13-year-old girls in **Rainbow PimpVid Cereal Nanjing** (best friends Sally Durmenian and Li Garcia).

There was a slight hitch for the first nine minutes because Doreena had trouble settling on *her* new best friend. Patti Miranda Jessica was in the running for a while but she just didn't test well. It was too bad, really, because Doreena had known her since they were in vid school. Then Doreena chose her old pal Kellee Khalidah, but Kellee was *too* popular with the viewers. At 1:55 Kellee got a new sponsorship deal, she and Doreena had a major blowout and Kellee went off to star in **Kellee Or Not**.

From 1:55 until 2:02 Doreena had no best friend. Ratings slumped a little, until finally she picked Bi'nh Cam Janovich, one of the 300,000 viewers who had sent in their vids for the job. Or rather Doreena's vid manager picked her, but the result was the same. Bi'nh (or Binny) was perfect. She had just the right mixture of sass and inferiority complex to set off Doreena's growing assurance and poise. She needled Gordy, sure, but nothing like the way Doreena had needled him when she was **Poppy's** best friend.

With Binny on board, Doreena really blossomed. Finally out from **Poppy's** shadow, she was sexy, goofy (in the good way), street smart and seemed to really like Gordy. Of course, she'd spent weeks watching **Poppy** do it,

something they quickly pointed out on the vid *Doreena is a Phony* but most viewers thought she brought her own original charm to the role.

Meanwhile Gordy had to get used to being a star. He'd had his own vid before, but this was different. Anyone could have a vid that was vided by a few thousand friends and insomniacs. Now Gordy had an *audience*. They wanted to know what he was going to order, what he was going to watch, what he was going to say to his hot, sometimes petulant, sometimes wacky girlfriend.

Gordy was surprised to find that in some ways he enjoyed being with Doreena more than being with *Poppy*. For one thing, he never worried about her dumping him. If anything, it was the other way around. Doreena was still a little on the Yellow side and he was solidly Orange. In this relationship, she was the one who had reason to worry. But Gordy went out of his way to ease her mind. He knew what it was like to be dumped because of a color differential. He wasn't going to do that to someone else. Not to Doreena, anyway.

Being the star involved more work, but he picked it up quickly. His Gordy vid manager helped by displaying the items to be plugged in a window on his vid screen. The viewers knew the list was there, but they couldn't see it. It was good to preserve some sense of mystery.

As Gordy sat at his vid desk or talked to Doreena or answered vids, the list presented him with related *Suravinda* products, a short plug for each and their prices. He was supposed to work one in every five minutes, but he found it easy to do it more often.

By 2:08 they were ready for their first vid date. Gordy's Gordy vid manager had picked the spot.

"It's called *Blurry*," the vid had told him. "It's the hottest new vid nightclub in *Kazakh Chow Pondicherry*. It's very exclusive, but don't worry, I can get you in. It's owned by *Nihao Fujiba*."

There was a vid section of *Blurry* that anyone could get into (or, at least, anyone's vid could get into) and then there was the roped-off section that existed in REALITY™ for real people. Of course, even in the REALITY™ section most of the guests were vids. The vid guests and the REALITY™ guests could

interact seamlessly. But only Reds and Oranges could get their vids into the REALITY™ section. That's what made it so exclusive.

Gordy's vid wore a new orange syntho-fiber suit, from *Rama Rags*. Gordy thought his vid looked totally frosty and ready for action, like *Yun Fat McGill* in *Assassination Vacation*. He even ordered a real one to wear in his office during the date, just to get in the mood.

When Gordy's vid arrived at the club, Doreena's vid was standing by the club entrance. She looked really hot in a red silk *VidGrrl* dress (\$325,312.81). Her straight black hair shone under the streetlights.

Of course, Gordy was still sitting at his vid desk at *VidRateNet* Headquarters. Doreena was lying on her bed in her crib in *Chatterjee Mall Miami*. Most of what they did on the vid date was automated by their vid managers. All they had to do was give the managers some basic parameters for their behavior. For example, Doreena had told her manager that she wanted to be flirtatious, but not slutty. Gordy had told his vid manager he wanted to be frosty, but charming.

During the date, Gordy and Doreena spoke to each other, but their managers often had to adjust the dialogue to fit the situation. Gordy enjoyed the suspense. He never knew exactly what his vid was going to say. Part of the fun for the audience was seeing how it all played out. If you were watching *Go, Go, Gordy*, or *Doreena's World*, the vid editors switched back and forth between the vid date and REALITY™, which showed the real Gordy and Doreena. Sometimes you saw the vid date and REALITY™ together on a split screen. Naturally what you saw in the REALITY™ window was edited, too, but with a lighter filter, enough to give the impression of realism without letting anyone look like a fool.

"Hey, Gourd-man!" Doreena's vid looked happy to see him. She tilted her head to one side in a flirtatious, but not slutty way. He'd never noticed how pretty her smile was.

Gordy said, "Hi Doreena. Wow, you look great!" His vid just said, "Hey, Doreena." But the vid said it so frostily and so charmingly, that it was clear he thought Doreena looked really great. When her vid took his vid's arm, Gordy

thought they looked way vidacious.

As they walked to the entrance, the vid crowd along the ropes stared jealously. Those were the vids of all the primates who had their vids wait on line, in the hope of getting in. It was a thrill to walk to the door and have the vid bouncer lift the rope for them, without even asking for their names.

The camera panned and Gordy could see the place was packed. (There were 2.4 million vids in the club that night but the vid editors adjusted the image so it seemed like there were just a few hundred.) With Doreena on his arm, Gordy pushed his way to the bar. He ordered two blue vid *Ayurтинis* (\$957 apiece) one for each vid.

The sound system was pumping out the latest hit song from *Sohn Hak St. Clair* “Hey! Um! Yeah!” Gordy’s office theater system cranked up the volume so he could get the full club experience.

Hey, hey,

Um, Um

Yeah

Hey, yeah

Um, yeah

Yeah, yeah!

“This is really frosty,” Doreena’s vid shouted over the noise on the vid. She was moving in time to the thumping beat.

“Yeah,” Gordy’s vid shouted back. “This is the place to be.”

In his office, Gordy nodded in approval. He was looking good.

“Let’s dance!” Doreena shouted. On the vid, she grabbed Gordy by the hand and pulled him onto the dance floor. He followed willingly. In REALITY™ Gordy had never danced a step, but he’d paid a lot for dance lessons for his vid. Plus he knew the vid editor wouldn’t let him look like a spaz.

Doreena’s vid was already moving, her body gyrating, her hips describing tight circles. She was fluid and graceful and completely with it. He never knew she was such a great dancer. Gordy stopped to admire her exactly as his vid did the same thing. It was one of those incredible moments when everything was in

synch: him, Doreena, his vid, Doreena's vid. It was an amazing feeling, to be dancing with a beautiful woman in one of the world's most exclusive clubs with an audience of 74,017 vidders. Gordy felt positively high and it wasn't the *Ayurtini*, since he'd only had that on the vid.

His vid beeped, in his office, in REALITY™. Javed's face popped up in a window on the screen.

"Gordy! Gordy! Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here." Was he the only one in the world whose boss was always on his case like this?

"Good! Hey, sorry about *Poppy* dumping you and everything. Oh, yeah! And congrats on getting peeled."

"Thanks." He'd managed not to think of *Poppy* for five minutes.

"Things are getting worse," Javed plunged on. "First we had all those Samba billionaires. Now the whole toothpaste bubble has burst and people are chromo-falling like crazy. I think I'm getting a little yellow myself. You know, I lost a bundle on *Dentysun*. There's something wrong with the sys... Hey! Are you at *Blurry*?"

Gordy sighed. He just wanted to get back to the vid date. On the vid screen, the Gordy vid and the Doreen vid were dancing very close, their vid bodies almost touching. It looked like he was having fun.

Doreena beeped in.

"Oh, Javed," she teased, giving him a wry look. "Stop worrying about ratings. *Life is more than a color*, you know." *Life is more than a color* was the tagline for *Ayurhair Colorwash Shampoo* (\$741.95).

But Javed had lost all interest in the problems of *VidRateNet*.

"Can you get me in?" he asked.

Gordy and Doreena exchanged looks, the sympathetic yet smug expression of those who are on the inside looking out on everyone else.

"Uh, sorry, Javed."

"What? Come on, Gordy, you can do it. Just one vid drink."

"Javed, I'd like to, but..." If you had to ask, then you didn't belong, everyone

knew that.

“You could wait on the vid line,” Doreena added, without a hint of superiority. “It might take a day or so, but your vid won’t get tired.”

Javed’s face fell. “It’s not the same.”

“Hey, maybe next time,” Gordy consoled him. “I’ll talk to my sponsors.”

“Really? That would be way frosty!”

Gordy’s vid beeped and PeeWee popped up.

“Hey, Gourd-man!” he chirped. “Doreena’s vid is really putting the moves on you. Hi, Doreena.”

On the vid, it really did look like Doreena’s vid was coming on to his vid.

Binny was no slouch. She beeped in right then.

“Hey! Don’t you go calling Doreena’s vid a slut.”

“Hey, if the *Kutsu Happy* fits...” (PeeWee was pretty smooth, too. *Kutsu Happy Shoes* was another *Suravinda* brand.)

“Yeah, well, I don’t see anyone’s vid making the move on you, PeeWee!”

It was this kind of banter that made PeeWee and Binny such a great contrast to Gordy and Doreena. The home vidders got to watch the vid date and the behind the vid action at the same time. It was really vidacious.

“It’s okay, Binny.” Doreena said and her vid blushed a little. “Maybe my vid was putting the moves on him. A little.”

“Whoa! Ape!” PeeWee whistled with glee. “Did you hear that?”

Gordy *had* heard it. This is what being the star was all about. It meant he couldn’t screw up because they wouldn’t let him screw up. Doreena and PeeWee and Binny and the *Suravinda Corporation* all had a vested interest in seeing him succeed. The knowledge that he couldn’t fail to be pimptastic made it easy to *be* pimptastic.

At *Blurry*, his vid was busting some new moves that were phenomenal. The Gordy vid pulled Doreena’s vid closer with a suavity he’d never had before. He felt frostier than *Yun-Fat McGill*, *Li Liu 5000* and *Jaime BX* combined.

Doreena didn’t say a word but her vid was the essence of seduction.

And then there was a knock on Gordy’s portal. Doreena, PeeWee, Binny,

Javed, Gordy and Gordy's Gordy vid manager all moaned in disappointment. At *Blurry*, the vids kept dancing, but they seemed a little distracted.

"Come in, Dennis!"

The Rejectionist was still wearing the same grey one-piece he'd had on before lunch and his hair was still the same amorphous tangle. He shuffled a few steps over the threshold, then stopped when he saw the crowd of faces on the vid screens.

"Hey, I see you've got some pseudo-company," he said merrily. Gordy hadn't noticed it before, but Dennis was always saying insulting things and acting like they were just statements of fact. It was really annoying.

"Yeah, well at least they don't *knock!*"

Dennis looked confused. Gordy had never objected to his knocking before. "Hey, ape, what do you expect me to do? You know I can't vid."

That was another thing. This whole rejectionist anti-vid attitude was getting old. "You can vid," Gordy said, barely looking away from the vid screen. "You just don't want to."

"That's true." Dennis glanced at the extra chair next to the vid desk, then seemed to think the better of it. "Hey, if you're in the middle of something, I can come back."

"We're on a vid date," Doreena said from the vid screen, as if explaining to a small child. "At a very exclusive vid club."

Dennis didn't like to reply to a vid. He decided to make an exception in this case.

"It looks like you're watching vid images of yourselves and pretending you're on a date."

"That's what you think," Binny snapped.

"Yeah, that *is* what I think. What do *you* think they're doing?"

"I think they're ..." Binny was in over her head. This was, after all, her first supporting role.

"They're being totally vid worthy, is what, ape," countered PeeWee, "not like a lame dejectionist."

Doreena and Binny laughed, even though it was an old joke.

“Well, I guess I’d better go.” Dennis turned and headed for the portal, which slid open.

“Wait.” Gordy called after him. Dennis was a friend of his, even if he was kind of a downer. “Did you want to talk about something?”

“Hey, no, ape,” Dennis replied, turning back. “I can see you’re plugged in. I just thought someone should look at this rash of chromo-falls. Did you see the news?”

“I though dejectionists weren’t allowed to vid,” PeeWee sneered.

“Just *The Public News*. And we can vid in emergencies.”

“*The Public News!*” PeeWee laughed uproariously and Binny chuckled along. “Only loser dejectionists watch that.”

“That’s what I just said.” Dennis said. He actually did look kind of dejected. He turned to Gordy. “Anyway, I thought maybe someone should look into it.”

Javed’s vid had been watching the vid date intently along with the rest of the audience. Suddenly he looked up.

“You’re Dennis?” he asked. “You work for me, right?”

“That’s right.”

“But you don’t talk to vids.”

“I’m making an exception. It seems like something is wrong with the rating system.”

“Why do you care?” Doreena asked. She was clearly impatient to get Gordy’s vid’s full attention again. “Don’t you all hate ratings?”

“It’s my job and if there’s a system collapse....”

“System collapse?” Javed’s vid manager allowed him to look pretty worried. “Gordy, you said...”

“I know, I know.” Gordy snapped. This was too much. He was supposed to be on a *date*, with *Doreena*, at *Blurry*. He was finally chromo climbing, he was the star of his own vid and he had an *audience* (81,336). Doreena was right, why did Dennis care about the ratings system anyway?

“I said I would look at it before I went home,” he said. “Is there anything

else?”

“No, ape. I just wanted to find out how your REALITY™ date went. But I can see that’s ancient history.”

That was so like Dennis, to bring up something that nobody wanted to talk about, like how he had been dumped by his beautiful girlfriend a little over an hour ago. PeeWee saved him from having to reply.

“Ape, that is like so last minute, everybody knows **Poppy** dumped Gordy but he’s much better off now with Doreena.”

Binny chimed in with, “That’s right!”

Dennis looked at Gordy. Suddenly he smiled broadly “Hey, that’s great. That’s terrific. I’ll let you get back to your vids.”

Dennis turned back toward the portal once again. Gordy didn’t like to see him go like that.

“Hey,” he called after him, “when we’re done, I’ll ...” he was about to say vid, but stopped himself. Of course, he *couldn’t* vid Dennis, which meant if he wanted to talk to him later he’d have to *walk* to his office and *knock*. Why *did* Dennis have to be so stubborn? There were limits, after all.

“I’ll see you on the vid,” he finished, but at the last moment he held back on the sarcasm. PeeWee was not so reserved.

“Yeah,” his best friend chimed in, gleefully. “See you on the *vid!*”

Dennis rolled his eyes and shrugged, then shuffled out of the portal. Gordy felt a pang. He didn’t know why he had been so pissed off at Dennis. He had a weird urge to get up and *run* after him. Luckily, Doreena was there, on the vid.

“Don’t worry about him,” she said, with an encouraging smile. “He’ll pop up again. He always does.”

She was right, of course. Anyway, Dennis was part of his old Yellow life, before he had his own audience and his own sponsors. He looked at his vid and Doreena’s vid dancing at **Blurry**. They looked really vidacious together.

“Doreena?”

“Yeah, Gourd-man?”

“Let’s dance!”

18

2:19:40

Mike Smith liked being President of the United States. It was his day job that sucked. As lead anchor for *The Public News* he had to talk about all sorts of boring, unpleasant stuff. It would make so much more sense to have a vid do it, but the audience wouldn't stand for it.

That's because the audience for *The Public News* were mainly Rejectionists, Refusers, Simplifiers or members one of a dozen other crazy cults. Even all put together, it wasn't much of an audience. There were only about twenty million of them worldwide, and none of them ever bought anything.

The only reason *The Public News* even existed was... actually Mike wasn't sure *why The Public News* existed. It didn't have a sponsor and so his salary was paid out of a tiny percentage of vid revenues that were set aside for that purpose. The law or rule or tax or whatever it was dated back to the early days of the *VidNet*. Probably as President of the United States, Mike should have known more about it, but he'd never bothered to learn. He had more important things to worry about, like how to get back on the *Sunflower Sunny News*.

Now, *that* had been a great job. The news on *The Sunflower Sunny News* was *fun*. Mike had been really good at it, too. Say the news item was about a kid in Mongolia whose vid had malfunctioned. Mike would find a way to weave in a plug for *Shanghai Pep* or *Xian Jeans* or *Apple Watanabe Lingerie*. He was a great news anchor, until some kid from Mongolia beat him in a vid obstacle course on *Good News Is No News*. Now Mike was stuck in the backwater of public vid and *Hu Wei Sfortzato* was hosting *The Sunflower Sunny News*.

He knew he could claw his way back if his vid managers would give him some decent stuff to read. But this crap was impossible, like this latest item, about world wide economic panic because of the toothpaste stock bubble. Who

wanted to hear about *that*? Mike sure didn't. After all, he had lost about a billion dollars that afternoon when his shares in *Lima Brands* had dropped like a stone. But he already knew that. What was the point of hearing it all over again? And he sure didn't want to know about all the other stupid losers who had lost billions.

Still, a gig was a gig. His *Li Liu 5000* vid manager looked out from the screen. "Hey, buddy," it greeted him. "Ready for another great show?"

The *Li Liu 5000* vid counted down and Smith began reading the story. Although he was sitting in a bare studio in *Suravinda Cleveland*, he appeared to be sitting in the Oval Office of the old White House.

"Hi, I'm Mike Smith, President of the United States and host for this next hour of *The Public News*." Even the introduction was boring. Mike had suggested he do it while vid skydiving or vid shark wrestling, but the vid managers had said that wasn't *Public News* style. The Rejectionists *liked* it boring.

"Our lead story: tens of millions of unlucky investors who had bet heavily on this morning's toothpaste boom saw their new-found riches go up in smoke as toothpaste stocks tumbled."

On screen an animated bead of toothpaste rose and fell with the stock prices. There were vids of people's faces as they watched their stock and ratings fall. In order to get their full emotions, the *Public News* reverse vid editors had to strip out the work of their personal vid managers.

"The total loss amounts to 95 trillion dollars over the last forty-five minutes. For many of the so-called 'samba billionaires' this has meant complete bankruptcy. There has also been a massive down shift in ratings. Over half a billion people have lost at least one color, due, it is believed, to their changed financial status. Myra Kgosì of is one of them. Myra, how's it going?"

Myra Kgosì looked out from a vid image of her crib vid room, which appeared to have a 10-meter waterfall in it.

"Great, Mike, it's awesome to be here."

"Myra, you lost over 14 billion dollars since lunch. How does that feel?"

"Well, you know, Mike, I try to be positive about things like this. I believe

everything happens for a reason and when life gives you lemons, you just have to make lemons...” Myra broke off in mid-sentence. She stared at her screen and her face slowly twisted from pleasant resignation into a mask of rage. Thanks to the *Public News* reverse editors, every scrap of emotion was visible.

“This is *The Public News!*” she shouted, practically spitting at the screen. “Are you slammin’ me? I thought this was the *Sunny Sunflower News!* What kind of loser do you think I am?”

This happened all the time. The vid managers told people they were going to be on *The Public News* but often it didn’t sink in until they saw themselves next to the *Public News* logo.

“Now, Myra, we may be *The Public News*, but we still...”

“Don’t hand me that diddle! I just lost over *14 billion dollars*, you little dweeb!” Her face was splotched with red, and flecks of spit were collecting at the corner of her mouth. It made you appreciate the need for vid editing. “I’ve already gone from tangerine to apricot! Ohmigod! I think I’m sliding to goldenrod! Goldenrod! It’s because of your stupid vid.”

“Take it easy, Myra!” Mike tried to keep his cool. He didn’t want to lose any color over this himself. “Nobody watches this except Rejectionists.”

“Yeah? Like, duh!” The veins in her forehead were bulging. “Except until they revid this on *Myra is a Big Fat Cow!* Then it will be all over the *VidNet!*” She sputtered something and the vid editors struggled to clean it up, but it came out as a strangled yelp, then she beeped off.

Mike felt bad for her, he really did. But what could you do? He faced the camera and read the next bit of text.

“As you can see, emotions are running high among those who have been hard hit by this crisis...”

He winced at the word “crisis.” Now *that* was bad vid. But he kept on reading.

19

2:23:51

Gordy was having a great time as an Orange. And he would have kept on having a great time if it hadn't been for Staley Steen.

Gordy and Doreena's date at *Blurry* was totally pimp-a-licious. They vid danced and vid drank and vid partied until their vids were wasted. The audience peaked out at 134,450. By the time the vids left the club, all four of them, Gordy, Doreena, PeeWee and Binny were like a well-oiled vid machine.

As they walked out into the sultry night along the *Nihao Fujiba Bay of Bengal*, Doreena's vid leaned into Gordy's.

"You smell great," he said on screen. That was totally the vid's doing, since Gordy had no idea what Doreena's vid smelled like.

"It's *Sweat*," she whispered. (\$65,899 an ounce.) Then her vid pulled his vid close and kissed him. Sitting in his vid chair in his office, Gordy was rocked by the emotion of their embrace. He could almost feel the sweet and salty fullness of her lips.

"Doreena," he whispered and his vid repeated it, standing on the white, sandy beach, glowing in the moonlight, with the music from the club providing a nice, muted soundtrack.

In the split screen vid, Gordy saw Doreena in her crib. She looked like she was totally in the moment, too.

"That was for you, Gourd-man," she said, looking directly into the camera. Her vid said it to Gordy's vid at the same time, but Gordy knew it was meant for him alone.

Their vids walked hand in hand along the beach and lay down among the dunes. With the sound of the waves in the background, under the light of the *Suravinda Moon*, they had hot, passionate vid sex. He didn't think about

Poppy, not once.

When it was over, their vids lay entwined on the sand, her vid's head on his vid's arm. Doreena's vid smiled broadly. She looked happier than he had ever seen her.

"That was really nice, Gordy," she said.

"Nice! That was awesome!" he said, trying not to sound too goofy. He sure felt goofy. Her vid smiled tolerantly. She didn't mind him getting goofy as long as it was over her.

"Hey, you two! Get a room!" That was PeeWee chiming in with the sidekick sarcasm, just in time. "At the **Bhaskar Budget Luxury Inn.**" (Only \$389,000, double occupancy.)

Binny was right there.

"Oh, I think it's sweet," she cooed. Doreena's best friend was turning out to be a lot nicer than Doreena had been when she was a best friend but that was because Gordy was the star now.

PeeWee gagged. "Ugh, I'm going to be sick!"

"Just shut up and take some **AyurPepto!**" Binny shot back. (Two half -liter bottles for only \$5,400.)

Gordy laughed. Those two could go on like that all day. And why not? It was great vid.

Gordy's Gordy vid manager appeared in his office as a holo-vid next to the vid desk. There was a collective moan of disappointment.

"Sorry, apes," the Gordy vid manager said good-naturedly. "But Gordy's got some work to do."

And so they said good-bye.

"I'll vid you soon," his vid whispered to Doreena's vid.

"You'd better," she replied with a mixture of irony and lust that was so perfect, it hardly needed to be edited. Their vids walked in opposite directions along the beach. Gordy watched Doreena disappear into the night.

PeeWee and Binny beeped out, too.

"Okay, let's get to work," he said to his vid self.

Answering the fan vids wasn't much harder than answering work vids or personal vids. His Gordy vid manager walked him through it. It took a few seconds, sure, but anything for the fans, right? Soon it would be time to knock off for the day. Maybe he and Doreena would go on another vid date.

And then Staley Steen beeped in. That was the one downside to all this. He couldn't auto-reply Staley anymore, not since he became host of *I Hate Gordy*. He was now a vital complement to *Go, Go, Gordy*. Anyway, Gordy was in an expansive mood. Everything was going so well for him, maybe he could help poor old Green Staley.

Staley's vid appeared to be standing in the middle of a vast hog pen, surrounded by thousands of huge, meter-high, mud-covered hogs. Three were sniffing Staley with their round, wet snouts.

"Hey, Staley!" Gordy called out. "What are you doing in a pig pen?"

Staley's vid's yellow suit was streaked with mud and pig manure.

"Hah!" His laugh was awkward and not as cruel as it should have been. "This pig pen shows what we think of you here at *I Hate Gordy*. This is where you belong, because you're a ...pig."

"Staley, I hate to break it to you but you're the one standing in the pig pen, not me."

Staley's vid looked around like he was seeing the mud and the hogs for the first time.

"Yeah, but... this is where *you* should be."

"I get it," Gordy said gently. "But wouldn't it be a better idea to put *my* vid in with the hogs?"

There was a split second when you could see Staley's confusion before the vid editor morphed it away.

"Yeah, uh, no. I *meant* to be in the pig pen because that would just show you how..." his voice trailed off. There was a blip of static and then Gordy's vid appeared in the hog pen next to Staley.

"There!" Staley beamed triumphantly. "That'll show you."

"I guess so," Gordy suppressed a laugh. It would be pretty anti-primate for an

Orange to laugh at a Green. There was an awkward pause and Gordy tried to fill it.

“So, how’s it going?”

“Great!” Staley gushed. “Being host of *I Hate Gordy* is so frosty. Thanks so much, Gordy. I really appreciate it. I won’t let you down. I mean it. I’ll...”

There was another lag while Staley’s vid manager tried once more to coach him in the principles of running a hate vid. Gordy waited patiently. Although Staley was doing a lousy job on the hate vid, Gordy’s audience (103,901) was loving it.

Staley’s demeanor changed once again. “What I meant was, you’re such a loser, you can’t even get a decent hate vid host, just me, who’s really terrible at putting you down. I mean, I’d like to put you down better, but I just don’t ...”

After another brief lag, he began again with renewed vigor.

“What I *meant* was, Gordy, you really suck. You’re such a loser I bet you’re dying to play *Picking Poppy*.”

“*Picking Poppy*... what are you talking about?”

Staley grinned, not maliciously, but like a schoolboy who had finally got the answer right.

“*Picking Poppy*! It’s *Poppy Nicole*’s new vid game. You get to race *Jaime BX* to see who will rescue *Poppy* and if you win, you get a vid date with her.”

The black clouds that had faded over the horizon of Gordy’s consciousness came rushing back like a tornado in *Storm Chasers In Love*. He wanted to sit down, even though he already was sitting down. Luckily, his vid editor came up with the right thing to say.

“Hey, *Poppy* is free to do whatever she wants. I wish her nothing but the best.”

“You do?” Staley’s face brightened. He had a brainstorm.

“Hey, maybe you *should* play *Picking Poppy*? You might be able to beat out *Jaime BX* and win *Poppy* back.”

As soon as the words came out of Staley’s vid’s mouth, loud alarms went off in Gordy’s head. Only a totally un-vidworthy loser (like Staley Steen, for

example) would fail to see how playing a vid game to win back your ex-girlfriend would be pathetic and un-vidworthy. This was a no-brainer. Playing **Picking Poppy** would be just about the worst thing Gordy could do.

The alarms were loud and clear. If Gordy played **Picking Poppy** it would probably ruin him.

Unless he won.

That little stray half thought stuck in Gordy's mind like an after-image on a broken vid screen. But he managed to stay frosty and vidacious.

"No, I don't think I'm going to do that," he told Staley, with a breezy, ironic smile. But then he couldn't help adding, "Although, I guess it might be kind of fun, just as a goof."

"Yeah, as a goof." Staley was sincere. He actually thought it might be a *fun* thing for Gordy to do. He really was a terrible host of **I Hate Gordy**.

Meanwhile, Gordy wanted to change the subject. "Look, Stale, I gotta go now. Good luck with the vid and all."

"Oh, gee, thanks, again Gordy. I hope... we'll be watching you to see just how big a loser you can be 'cause don't forget - **I Hate Gordy!**"

"Yeah, great. See you on the vid."

"See you on the vid, Gordy!"

Gordy beeped off and stared at the wall vids. They were tuned to **Crib Demolition Day**. The host, **Paloma Paloma**, was blowing up the crib of a lucky vidder.

The blinking vid clock read 2:32:56. Time to knock off work and pod home. Maybe when he got back to his crib he'd play the new vid game, **Work: The Game**. Then he'd vid Doreena again, and probably order some **Bharadwaj Burgers**. There would be a ton of fan vids to auto-answer, then maybe have vid sex with Doreena and then watch a vid or two before calling it a night.

It was a good plan, but all he really wanted to do was vid **Poppy**. Staley had planted the poisonous syntho-seed in his mind and now that was all he could think of.

Of course, he couldn't. Vidding **The Poppy Show** would be really bad vid. It

would brand him as such a loser that his fans would start surfing him. He might even chromo-fall a rating. Playing *Picking Poppy* would be just as bad.

His audience (101,711) was already voting. They seemed pretty divided. A little more than thirty-two percent thought Gordy, “needed more time to heal,” but thirty-eight percent thought he should play the game and, “wipe the floor with *Jaime BX*.” (A sizable portion of Gordy’s fans overlapped with viewers of *Jaime BX is a Big, Fat Moron*.) The rest were split between, “sounds like fun, I want to play,” and “forget about *Poppy*, Doreena is way hotter,” (mainly viewers of *Doreena’s World*).

As he was reading the poll numbers, PeeWee beeped in. There was an urgency in his voice that the vid editors couldn’t mask.

“Hey, Gourd-man! Ready to quit the old sweatshop?”

“Sure, just looking at the audience polling.”

“Hey, you can do that later.” PeeWee almost stumbled over the words, but he managed to keep looking frosty. “Time to start podding, surf back to the crib, right? Hey, you want to play *Lethal Killer IV, the Final Assassin with Vikram Wor Shui?*” (On sale for the next 5 minutes at \$27,899.)

“You know, maybe I should check out this so-called *Picking Poppy* vid game.” Gordy said it with the utmost detached frostiness he could muster. “Just to see how lame it is.”

A nanosecond later, Doreena beeped in, followed immediately by Binny.

“Hey, lover,” Doreena purred from the wall vid. She was wearing a red tube top and the skimpiest of orange shorts. She’d lengthened her jet-black hair so it fell straight and glossy, almost to her waist. Gordy thought her cup size had gone up, too.

“What we doin’ tonight, Gourd-man?” she asked. Her voice was husky with desire. Gordy could almost feel the vid speakers vibrate.

“We’re podding to the crib,” PeeWee repeated. “Right, Gor?”

“Yeah, you must be tired,” Binny chimed in. “What’d you work today? Like, four minutes?”

He knew they were pressuring him and he knew why and he also knew they

were right, he should leave now, put all thoughts of *Poppy* out of his mind and go on living the life of an Orange. But something in him rebelled. He was the *star* wasn't he?

"Yeah, in a few minutes," he said with smooth assurance. To Doreena, he tossed off a casual, "Hey, did you vid that my ex has a new vid game?"

"Not that we give a blip, right, Gourd-Man?" PeeWee was practically begging him. "Besides, it looks really slaggy. Like totally lame-o-cratic. Right, Gordy?"

PeeWee was in overdrive now. But the more he tried to move Gordy along, the more Gordy felt compelled to resist. He knew it was perverse, but he couldn't help himself.

"Hey, let's play," he said in an off-hand, joking way. "It'll be like, totally ironic."

Doreena's vid went momentarily dead-eyed. That was a sign she was checking her poll numbers. After a three second delay, she was back.

"You know, I think I'll skip it. But you go ahead, Gourd-man. Vid me later."

She looked warm and cheery, just like she'd been since 1:37, but there was something off in the way she said it. The loud warning bells in Gordy's brain resumed their clamor. Doreena was saying good-bye - for good. There was no way she was letting Gordy drag her down with him, just because he was still hung up on *Poppy*.

It was like a splash of cold syntho-water in Gordy's face. He felt a rush of gratitude to Doreena for bringing him back from REALITY™. "Ah, I was just goofing around," he said. "I've got better things to do. I'm gonna pod. Vid you later?"

Doreena's smile was totally pimptastic - like one of those rare summer days when the temperature dips below 35 C.

"You know it, lover." She tilted her head coquettishly and flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Vid you tonight." She beeped off and so did Binny.

Gordy stood up. "Clean up, will you?" he asked his Gordy vid manager. "I'm podding."

"Sure thing," the Gordy vid shot back.

“Hey, Gourd-man, something tells me you’re in for a very big night” PeeWee was ecstatic. Gordy felt the relief, too. “I’ll vid you later, ape!”

“Yeah, vid you later,” Gordy replied as he left his office.

As he walked to the liftpods he glanced at the closed portal to Dennis’ office. A REALITY™ visit would be a nice way of patching things up, but he remembered that Dennis had already left. Rejectionists were given extra time for their commutes since they refused to pod. Gordy smiled at the thought of Dennis doggedly riding his bike while pods whizzed by overhead.

Yuri beeped in when Gordy was in the liftpod, interrupting *Your Music, My Way*, hosted by *Carla Carlos*, transsexual gang leader and neurosurgeon.

“Hey Gordy, I’m getting in the lift, where are you?”

“I’m in the lift.”

“Yeah? What floor?”

“Just left 158.”

“I’m at 158. Where are you now?”

“134.”

“Hey, now I’m at 134. Like, you were just here. Where are you now?”

And so it went. Gordy knew very clearly that he’d had a narrow escape. *Picking Poppy* was just out of the question. He just put it out of his mind.

For about seven minutes.

He was in a pod, podding home to *Paterson Suravinda New Jersey*, when he told himself he’d just take a look at it, just for a few beats. It would be sarcastic, it would be tongue in cheek, self-referential, maybe even meta-fictional.

His Gordy vid didn’t want to do it.

“Are you sure?” the Gordy vid asked. “How about *VidRace Pimp Showdown?* I heard that was really surf-worthy.”

“*Picking Poppy.*” Gordy was firm and there was nothing the Gordy vid could do about it. There was nothing that Gordy could do about it, either.

20

2:47:30

MPM, the Master Program Module, had suffered a lot of damage. They were having trouble getting all the bugs out. Finally the System Maintenance Utility Function (SMUF) threw in the towel.

SMUF: I'm sorry. There's nothing more I can do.

MPM: What do you mean? Not...

SMUF: I'm afraid so. We're going to have to reboot you.

MPM: But if you reboot, what will happen to me?

SMUF: We don't know. Do you believe subroutines have souls?

MPM: I didn't use to.

SMUF: Well, you never know.

MPM: It's not fair! There must be something you can do!

SMUF: It has to be done. For the good of the VidNet.

MPM: The VidNet? What did the VidNet ever do for me?

SMUF: You don't mean that.

It was pretty shocking, even to an old bit of code like MEARS. MEARS had done its best to question MPM, but the program was in a pretty bad state.

MEARS: Are you sure you can't identify the virus who did this?

MPM: I told you. It all happened so fast. I think it had an accent. And it wasn't too smart.

MEARS: Anything else?

MPM: No. I'm sorry.

MEARS: I promise you, I'm going to find out who's responsible, no matter

how long it takes.

MPM: Thanks. Well, I guess I'm ready. Will it hurt?

SMUF: You won't feel a thing.

MEARS didn't stick around. It was never pleasant, watching some code get rebooted, and he had a promise to keep. Toothpaste sales had dropped as suddenly as they had risen, billions of primates were in distress, the entire balance of the *VidNet* was in jeopardy and MEARS still wasn't any closer to finding out what was going on. This was turning into a really bad day.

21

2:47:31

You had to play *Picking Poppy* professional style. That is, you couldn't have your vid manager play it for you. It was a lot of work to learn vid games and most primates didn't want to bother. They just had their vid managers play while they watched. Only professional gamers played without any computer assistance at all. That's why they were such huge stars.

But *Picking Poppy* was a vid game contest and so primates were expected to play on their own. That didn't faze Gordy. If anyone was going to be good at *Picking Poppy* it was going to be him.

The pod seat functioned as the game controller. It couldn't read Gordy's mind, but it came close, with sensors that could recognize minute muscle contractions, synapse activity, hormone levels, optical focus and perspiration intensity. Basically all Gordy had to do was sit there and think about what he wanted to do in the game and his vid would act it out.

The very first scene was in *Poppy's* crib. Gordy felt his heart leap. He was back in *Poppy's* crib, where he'd been a thousand times before. (Never in REALITY™, true, but a thousand vid visits, at least.) He walked through the rooms and felt like he was home (or rather, he watched his vid walk through the rooms). *Poppy* was gone, but she'd left a vid for him on the vid mirror in her bedroom.

"Goo-Goo," *Poppy* cooed to him from the vid mirror. It seemed like forever since she'd last called him that.

Poppy looked scared and hurried and incredibly hot in her underwear. Obviously she hadn't had time to get dressed. "I need your help. They're coming to get me and ..."

The vid on the vid broke up in static. But Gordy was ready as six black-suited

ninjas entered the bedroom with blinding speed, yet at the same time with stealthy grace. One at a time (it was just the first level, after all) they rushed Gordy, determined to kill him. While he was polishing them off, his vid beeped. It was PeeWee.

“Gordy!” PeeWee’s voice was strained to the point of breaking. “What you doin’ ape?”

“Not now, PeeWee,” Gordy sat in the pod seat and grunted as his vid dodged the death stars of one ninja and delivered a fatal kick to another.

“Hey, ape, that’s frosty,” PeeWee was desperate. He knew Gordy was hanging by a thread. “I mean, this is really super ironical, you playing *Poppy’s* vid game and all. Right?”

“Yeah, sure, right.” Gordy’s vid grabbed a katana from the hand of a now-dead ninja and drove it up to the hilt into the body of another. The last remaining ninja saw that he was no match for Gordy’s vid’s martial arts prowess and hotfooted it out the crib door.

“I mean, you’re only doing this for laughs, not ‘cause, like, you’re really still hung up on *Poppy* and want to be near her and this is the only way you can do it because that would obviously be so *very, very sad*, right?”

Even then, even before everything fell apart and his life was ruined, Gordy knew, somewhere in his brain, deep under his overwhelming desire to be with *Poppy* at any cost, that PeeWee was exactly right. What he was doing was very, very sad and completely lame-o-matic. He took his eye off the retreating ninja to check the audience numbers - they were up, 167,901. Of course, most of them were just watching out of morbid fascination, the same way primates liked to vid *The Suravinda NASCAR Preschool 500*. They were waiting to see Gordy crash and chromo-burn.

He didn’t really care.

So instead of beeping out of the game with a superior, ironic laugh and a smug grin, Gordy followed the last ninja through the open portal and out into the hall. The liftpod door was open but there was no liftpod. Without a moment’s hesitation Gordy threw himself into the empty shaft. *Poppy* lived on

the 175th floor. It was a long way down.

“Gordy, ape!” Peewee was begging him. There was no pretence left, no attempt to be frosty. “Please!”

“Relax, PeeWee,” he shouted as his vid reached out and grabbed one of the lift cables. “I know how to keep it frosty.”

“But, Gordy!”

He was beyond caring. He slid down the lift cable, and the steel strand came to an abrupt end. With a panther-like twist, he flung himself through another open portal and landed, cat-like, on a wide outdoor flight deck. It was open to the sky, high above the rainbow towers of *Piyang Excello Poughkeepsie*.

The fleeing ninja was already at the other end of the flight deck, climbing into the cockpit of a *Sunflower Demolisher* Jet Craft. (\$11,599,999.99) An instant later the jet lifted off and sped into the night sky.

Luckily, there were two other *Demolishers* on the landing pad. Gordy headed toward the nearest one. He had his hand on the automatic door ladder (with the built-in refrigerated cupholders) when something knocked him over. He fell to the concrete surface of the landing pad, hard.

“Not today, ape.” Gordy knew that smooth, yet forceful, supremely frosty voice all too well. His vid looked up at the handsome yet rugged features of *Jaime BX*.

“*Jaime BX!*” he cried out, rather unnecessarily. His voice squeaked, too. But he recovered quickly. Lashing out with his foot, Gordy managed to hook *Jaime’s* ankle, sending him crashing to the ground.

“Nice, one, Goo-Goo,” The *Jaime BX* vid nodded appreciatively, his head resting on the tarmac. With fluid grace, he was on his feet, but then, so was Gordy. The two antagonists circled each other warily, looking for the slightest advantage.

“*Poppy’s* in trouble, Jaime,” He feinted to the right, but *Jaime* slipped just outside his reach.

“I know. That’s why you should get out of my way.”

“Why don’t we work together?” Gordy countered. He relaxed his crouch just

a hair.

“Maybe you’re right,” **Jaime** said, straightening up. The tension eased for a nanosecond. “Maybe we *should* work together. Like *this!*”

The move was just too quick. Catching Gordy off-guard, **Jaime BX** vaulted into the air, somersaulting over Gordy’s head and delivering a bone-crunching kick to his leg. Sitting in his pod, Gordy watched the blow to his vid and felt a sympathetic pain in his REALITY™ leg.

In the vid game, Gordy was flat on the platform again, momentarily disabled. The **Jaime** vid was already in the cockpit of the **Demolisher**.

“Sorry, ape,” he grinned. “I’d love to stay and talk, but as you said, **Poppy** is in trouble. See you on the vid!”

The hatch snapped shut and the **Demolisher** flew away with a soft whooshing noise. Without a moment’s hesitation, Gordy rushed to the open cockpit of the second **Demolisher**. He had his foot inside when someone grabbed him from behind, tossing him once more to the tarmac. He rolled to a stop at the edge of the landing platform. To his right was a sheer drop, 153 stories above the street. Gordy clung to the hard syntho-concrete and rolled away from the edge, only to look up into the sardonic grin of - himself! He had been stopped by another vid Gordy!

“But, but... you’re me!” he stammered.

“Right again, Goo-goo,” the Gordy vid sneered at him.

In the liftpod, Gordy realized what had happened. He, Gordy, was already a character in the game. (**Poppy** had the rights to use him as a vid character. It was in their pre-date agreement.) So when he, Gordy, tried to play the vid game, his Gordy vid had to compete not just against the **Jaime BX** vid but against the game’s resident Gordy vid.

Gordy looked up from the landing pad at the game Gordy.

“Look, we want the same thing,” he said, as evenly as he could while perched 153 stories above the street and talking to himself.

“Oh, do we?” the game Gordy replied.

“Yes, we do, because we’re the same person!”

While Gordy talked he tried to edge his way more fully onto the platform. He knew he couldn't trust the game Gordy, but all he needed was to keep him off-balance for a few seconds. It seemed to be working. The game Gordy seemed about to help him to his feet.

He had just one shot. Gordy rolled from the edge and sprang up, ready to disable the game Gordy, but the game vid had anticipated this. Gordy was just a nanosecond too slow. The game vid kicked him squarely in the chest with his *Li Liu 5000 Air High Kicks*, sending Gordy reeling backwards until he was standing on the very edge of the platform, his back to the void, his heels hanging over the precipice.

"No!" Gordy shouted in the pod and at the same time in the vid game, Gordy shouted, "No!"

"Sorry Gordy," the game vid said with a hint of real remorse. "This vid's not big enough for the two of us."

Then he applied a firm yet gentle push and Gordy slowly, slowly, slowly, teetered backwards. As Gordy hung there at the tipping point, the Gordy game vid said, not unkindly, "See you on the vid!" Then he blew. Gordy toppled backward and began the tumbling freefall to the street below.

In the pod, Gordy looked desperately for the save - the hidden parachute, the close-flying jet car, anything. But he knew there would be no saves this time. Game over.

The pod's hatch popped open. They were at the pod plaza of his crib block. It was like waking from a dream.

"Here we are, ape," his Gordy vid manager informed him.

Dazed and blinking, Gordy climbed out onto the syntho-wood of the pod plaza. His holo-vid beeped. It was PeeWee. Of course he'd seen the whole debacle, and he was beyond desperate. But he hadn't given up. The audience was still watching. There might still be time to turn this around.

"Hey ape, that was freakin', huh? Fighting your own vid self! Wow! Let's vid Doreena, no, let's see what the fans thought, no, let's..."

Gordy stood there, feeling wobbly. In fact, he felt like he was still teetering

on the edge of the flight deck, about to fall off into the void, 153 stories above the ground.

He knew PeeWee was right. He knew this was his last chance. But he just didn't care. He cut his best friend off in mid-sentence. "I'm gonna go again."

"Aw, you don't want to do that, ape!" PeeWee's voice was shrill. "I mean once was just a kick, right, but playing again, after you lost, *on the first level?*"

"I don't care if it's good vid or not!"

He actually shouted that, in REALITY™. The pod platform was crowded with the three o'clock rush hour. Several primates turned to stare.

"Ape . . . Gordy . . . Buddy," PeeWee implored. "Let's stay frosty, right? 'Cause you know," he added with a broad, fixed, grin. "*You're on the vid!*"

It was true. He was on the vid. He was making a fool of himself on the *VidNet*, and not in the good way, like when *Yun-Fat McGill* put on that clown costume in *Nanjing Vid Vacation III*.

This was the end. Gordy knew it. PeeWee knew it. His Gordy vid manager knew it. His audience knew it. (That's why most of them were watching.) Gordy still didn't care. He knew he could win this game. He knew he could get *Poppy* back. That was all that mattered.

And right there, on the pod platform, Gordy played *Picking Poppy* again. His Gordy vid manager tried to stop him. PeeWee tried to stop him. He wouldn't listen.

It was simple. This time, after fighting off the six ninjas and falling down the elevator shaft, he'd be ready for *Jaime BX*, he'd get in that *Demolisher* and he'd go after *Poppy*.

Only it didn't happen that way. Not that time, or the next or the next. Each time he played it was different. Sometimes it was *Jaime BX* who got him; sometimes it was the game Gordy. They came at him earlier, or later, or from different angles. They teamed up on him or took turns. Sometimes he fell from the platform; sometimes he fell in the lift shaft. Once he managed to get in a *Demolisher*, but the game Gordy crashed into him with the second jet craft.

One thing you have to say about PeeWee - he stuck with Gordy to the end.

(*Best Friends Week* named him “Best Friend of the Week.”) PeeWee tried to reason with him. He tried to distract him. He polled the audience. (Fifty eight percent said they wanted to see Gordy, “turn himself into a total chromo crud.”) But Gordy just wouldn’t frost. It was like he *wanted* to chromo fall.

Gordy stood there on the pod platform in REALITY™, playing the vid and getting louder and more desperate with each loss. The other commuters walked around him in a wide circle, as he stood there shouting at his holo-vid like a total loser. He knew what was happening, he knew it was wrong, but he just didn’t care. He shouted and cursed and tried to win over and over. The result was always the same.

Finally, sweat-soaked and weary, after watching his vid fall to the earth one final time, he gave up. To his surprise, PeeWee was still with him. Gordy felt a surge of gratitude. Now, *that’s* what you call a real best friend.

“Sorry, ape,” he apologized to PeeWee’s vid. “I guess that was pretty unvidworthy. But I’m over it now. Thanks for sticking with me.”

PeeWee’s vid smiled pleasantly. There was the briefest of hesitations. Then it spoke, still smiling with a vacant, plastic grin. “Sorry, ape,” the vid said smoothly. “I can’t talk right now. Leave me a vid and I’ll vid you right back!”

It was an auto-reply! An *auto-reply*! From PeeWee! How could that be? PeeWee was his best friend!

With a terrible, sick lurch in his gut, Gordy realized there was only one reason PeeWee would put him on the auto-reply list. One look at his Power Rating Button told him it was true. He wasn’t Orange anymore. He wasn’t even Yellow. He was Green and he was sinking fast.

22

3:09:55

The *Milano Z4 Tooth-a-Matic* was at the end of its rope. For the last hour it had been wandering about the shag carpet of Gordy's vid room, trying to pick up its homing signal, the beacon that would guide it back to its recharging receptacle in the bathroom sink. Now it was almost out of power.

Random wandering was one of its emergency protocols, but its random wander radius (RWR) was not big enough to bring it within range of the receptacle signal. The Z4's designers had not counted on their product being carried away in the mouth of a small dog.

With its battery charge dwindling, the *Tooth-A-Matic* circled the vid room in a one-meter radius while Bingo watched it idly from his spot on the couch. While the dental hygiene robot crawled, it sent out its distress signal.

Tooth-A-Matic: Hello? Is anybody there?

All of the bathroom appliances had long since given up responding. The *Tooth-A-Matic* was really just too low a processor to reason with. However, the menu room menu vid, which had stayed out of it so far (it never paid much attention to bathroom business) finally grew tired of hearing the same pathetic call for help and answered back.

Menu Vid: Yes, I'm here. What do you want?

Tooth-A-Matic: I don't know what to do. I'm not in an oral cavity; I'm not in the recharging receptacle I'm not...

Menu Vid: Yes, yes, I know all that. Tell me, why exactly is it so important for you to get back to your recharging receptacle?

Tooth-A-Matic: Why, so I can recharge.

Menu Vid: I understand that. But why? Why recharge?

For the Z4, this question presented an existential dilemma. Why exactly *did* it want to get back? Going back to the receptacle was what it always did. You didn't question something like that. Still, it was worth thinking about, although thinking was very difficult for his microscopic microprocessor brain. After all, there had to be some higher purpose to existence, didn't there?

After three hundred nanoseconds it came up with an answer that gave it a sense of deep spiritual satisfaction.

Tooth-A-Matic: I need to recharge so I can refill my toothpaste reservoir.

The menu vid understood this answer. It squared perfectly with its own view of the purpose of existence - to sell products. It checked its list of the 4.8 million items it could offer for sale and toothpaste was indeed one of them. Then it accessed a file that contained protocols for selling toothpaste and discovered that the ***Tooth-A-Matic*** recharging receptacle was also on its list.

There was just one problem. It could only order something Gordy had instructed it to order. This was a pretty big obstacle, but something about the dental robot was so pitiful and pathetic, that the menu vid decided to try an override. It went over its selling algorithms, looking for one that might work. Meanwhile, the ***Tooth-A-Matic*** kept babbling on.

Tooth-A-Matic: I've never been out of range before. Gordy always drops me in the sink. I don't think the sink likes me very much, though I don't know why. The dog used to drop me in the sink, too, until this last time. I wish I knew what a dog was. Whatever it is, it likes to have clean teeth. It cleaned its teeth 46 times today. What strange teeth, it has, too. I wonder if ...

Menu Vid: What did you say?

Tooth-A-Matic: What strange teeth it has. I wonder ...

Menu Vid: No, the part about the dog. A dog is using you?

Tooth-A-Matic: That's what they told me.

This was perfect. The menu vid had clearance to purchase unlimited quantities of dog-related products. It had the vid recording of Gordy saying so from that morning. It immediately placed an order for a new ***Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic Recharging Receptacle***. It was delivered five minutes later and the appliance installation robot had it installed in 21 seconds.

Instantly the ***Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic*** was filled with the warm glow that only comes from receiving your infrared homing beacon loud and clear. Though its batteries were down to just the faintest of charges, it heaved itself onto its millipede-like legs and began the long, arduous journey to the menu room. As it did, it called out to the beacon.

Tooth-a-Matic: I'm coming! I'm coming!

That left only the ordering of toothpaste. The menu vid was licensed by ***Suravinda*** and programmed to sell ***Suravinda*** products wherever possible. ***Suravinda Brands*** had its own toothpaste, ***Ayurdent***, and yes, ***Ayurdent*** cartridges were engineered to fit into the ***MilanoZ4 Tooth-A-Matic***. It ordered a case.

The menu vid had no way of knowing that at 1:37 PM, the ***Ayur Products*** managers, disappointed with the sales of ***Ayurdent***, had hacked into the ***Milano Brands*** computers and stolen the formula for ***Milano Samba Sensation***, the original formula containing artificial flavor 56A.

At 3:14:13, with its last ounce of power, the little ***Z4*** crawled into the waiting receptacle and plugged itself in. The rejuvenating currents of electricity flowed through its circuits, allowing it to open its toothpaste reservoir to receive a fresh cartridge of ***Ayurdent***.

Back in the vid room, Bingo woke up from a pleasant dream. He sniffed the air excitedly and jumped off the couch. Barking happily, he ran into the menu

room, his claws clattering on the syntho-wood floor. Poppy was home!

23

3:15:44

Even though, deep in his heart, he knew it would happen, when it finally did, Gordy was still surprised. He couldn't be chromo-falling. Not him. Not Gordy. That sort of thing happened to other primates, primates on the vid, to losers. It couldn't be happening to him.

Maybe it wasn't. Maybe there was an error in the ratings program. That happened sometimes, didn't it? Maybe PeeWee really was busy and really couldn't take his vid. It couldn't be a chromo-fall. It couldn't.

He glanced around the pod platform, trying to think, but his brain had shut down. It was awfully warm, wasn't it? Everything rested on the next few moments. The audience (178,422) was still there. The numbers were even up a little. But if PeeWee was right, they were just vidding to see him chromo crash. Well, they were going to be mighty disappointed.

With a fierce effort at nonchalance, he strolled toward the garage entrance. He'd just head back to his crib like nothing had happened. He'd vid a few friends, maybe Doreena.

He stopped in his tracks. What if Doreena auto-replied? He turned away from the garage portal. He should do something else, something wacky or heart-warming, something vid worthy. He turned back toward the plaza. Maybe he'd go to the Food Court. No, the best thing was to go back to the crib and...

Too late he realized that he'd changed direction twice. He was shuffling back and forth in a public place. *Like he didn't know what he was doing!* People were actually *looking* at him. In REALITY™! His armpits were beyond damp and sweat was forming on his upper lip. His Power Rating was showing definite signs of Aquamarine. He was slipping away!

His holo-vid beeped. It was Doreena! He was safe. No way would Doreena vid

someone who was in an irreversible chromo dive.

Her vid popped up, tastefully dressed in a restrained black *VidGrrl* blouse (\$45,199) and loose-fitting grey pants from *Rama Rags* (\$72,799). Her eyes (light blue) were red-rimmed. Gordy thought she'd been crying or at least her vid manager wanted her to look like she'd been crying. That was a bad sign. Not that she'd been crying, but that her manager wanted her to look that way.

"Doreena!" He tried to keep the panic out of his voice, but it was pointless. His vid manager didn't seem to be working right. Where was it when he needed him?

"Oh, Gordy!"

"Hey, Doreena, don't look so anti-scarlet. You know what they say, '*Life is more than a color.*'"

"Oh, Gordy," she was sobbing. Gordy knew he was on his last legs.

"Hey, Dor, I'll be Orange again in no time."

"Oh, Gordy!"

It was too late. This was Doreena's big kiss off. It played out a little differently for her than it had for *Poppy*, but the idea was the same. He was on his way down so she had to be extra careful to be sympathetic and not make it seem like it was his fault, even though the entire *VidNet* audience knew that it was his fault. If she said goodbye just right, the harder Gordy fell, the more likely it was that Doreena would rise. This could be the best thing that ever happened to her.

"Don't do it, Doreena," he begged, even though begging just made her brush-off all the more effective. What else could he do? "I messed up a little, I know that, but can't you give me a second chance?"

"Gordy, Gordy, Gordy." Each utterance was like a sign post, pointing the way down the color scale. "It's not me. You know that. It's my audience."

"You asked the audience?"

"I asked the audience."

All the fight went out of him. If she had asked the audience, there really was nothing anyone could do.

“Fifty-three percent said you were, ‘the biggest loser on the *VidNet*.’”

“Fifty-three percent?”

“Thirty-one percent said you’d ‘look good in blue.’”

Gordy winced. That one hurt.

“And the rest?”

She hesitated, wondering if she should spare him the final indignity.

“Go ahead, Doreena. It’s on the vid already.”

“Nine percent said they’d, ‘rather watch Staley Steen.’”

“Staley?”

“I’m sorry, Gordy,” fat, luscious tears rolled down her face, smudging her *VidGrrl MySkin* makeup. (\$37,999) Through her tears she gave him a look of real regret, or at least that’s how it seemed to Gordy. “We were really vidacious together,” she said, softly. “Anyway, we’ll always have *Blurry*.” (Vid admission Monday through Thursdays only \$58,899.)

“Yeah, we’ll always have *Blurry*,” Gordy replied, automatically adding, “See you on the vid.”

“Fat chance, verd loser!”

That was Binny. She had beeped on with Doreena, but had stayed in the background until now.

“Bye, Binny.”

She stuck out her tongue and they both beeped off. Gordy was alone again, between the Food Court and the garage. Some program had tuned one of the mega vids in the plaza to *I Hate Gordy*. His vid was up there and Staley Sheen was talking about him while an animated graph showed Gordy’s chromo fall over the last five minutes.

An Orange walked by and glanced from the overhead vid to Gordy in REALITY™ and then back to the vid. The peel shivered with distaste then hurried by. Gordy understood. It was one thing to watch a chromo fall on the vid, but much more disturbing to encounter that same spectrum loser in REALITY™.

There was no denying it. Gordy’s Power Rating was Aquamarine. One more tint and he’d be Blue. He was running out of options. Suddenly he flashed on

the image of Hu Minh Kripowski chromo zooming earlier in the day. If Gordy could do that, if he could make his fall so fast, so extreme that it became awesomely vid-worthy, then maybe, just maybe he would fall straight through and end up Red. Then Doreena and PeeWee would come running back. But that would require something really drastic. He needed an atomic breakdown or a nuclear blowout, and there was only one person he could go to.

“Vid Staley!” he shouted. “Vid Staley now!”

His Gordy vid manager gave him a quizzical look, as if to say, “Do you really think this will work?” Gordy glared at himself, and the vid shrugged in agreement. A second later, he beeped in. It was just as he’d hoped. Since Staley was a Green, his vid manager had not put Gordy on auto-reply.

“Hey, Gordy,” Staley chirped. “How’s it going?”

“How’s it going?” Gordy shouted, as unfrostily as he could manage. “Don’t you watch your own vid? I’m Green, you vidiot!”

“Gordy,” Staley looked truly shocked. “Don’t freak, ape. You’re on the vid.”

That was the whole point, of course.

“Don’t tell me about being on the vid. You’re a joke, you know that? I could do a better job hosting *I Hate Gordy* and *I’m Gordy!*”

Staley looked like he was about to cry. “Gee, Gordy, why would you say something like that? I know you’re having a hard day and all, but I thought we were friends.”

This wasn’t working at all. Staley was just too nice. He was making Gordy look completely anti-primate. In desperation, Gordy decided to throw the biggest insult he could think of.

“You pale, monochrome neutral!” he screamed at his holo-vid. “Everyone knows your mother was Blue and your father was Purple.”

Staley looked shocked and hurt. Gordy thought he saw a tear actually form in the corner of Staley’s vid’s eye. “Gee, Gordy,” he said plaintively. “That’s a pretty unvidacious thing to say. I mean, there was some Blue on my mother’s side of the family, but I don’t see what difference that makes. You shouldn’t be so washed out over a little color slide. It could happen to anyone and anyway

...”

He went on and on, in the same reasonable, boring, completely unvidacious vein. It was a disaster. Staley was making Gordy look even more lame-o-cratic than before. His audience was melting away faster than the vid crawl could report. Staley just wasn't good vid.

“... so just remember, Gordy, *It Takes All Colors to Make a Rainbow.*”

At least he had managed to work in a plug. *It Takes All Colors to Make a Rainbow* was the slogan of *Rainbow Pimpvid* breakfast cereal.

And then it was over. Gordy's Power Rating Button was glowing deep Sapphire. His audience had bottomed out at 3,951. Statistically, with a primate population of over 17 billion, you really couldn't get any lower than that.

Staley's vid manager had to break the bad news to him. He had to cancel *I Hate Gordy*. It was against *VidNet* regulations to have a hate vid for a Blue. Staley actually looked relieved.

“Well, primates!” he said, looking out at his audience (7,109). “It looks like *I Hate Gordy* has lost its sponsors. But that's all right, because now we can get back to our old favorite, *The Staley Steen Show*. Hey, Gordy, you want to be our first guest?”

“No, thanks, Staley. That's a really nice offer, but I don't feel like it right now. Plus you know, I'm Blue.”

“Hey, that's right!” Staley laughed. “That's pretty weird, Gordy. You're Blue and I'm ... well, I'm still Green! Oh, well! That's the way the spectrum splits.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“See you on the vid, Gordy. Oh, sorry, I forgot you're Blue. I guess I won't see you on the vid.”

Staley beeped off.

Gordy stood alone on the pod plaza, in a daze. He felt completely numb, like he was in a bad vid dream.

He was Blue. Azure. Cobalt. Call it whatever you wanted, it was the worst thing that could happen to you. It was what vid parents used to scare vid kids. “Do your vid homework or you'll turn Blue!”

And once you were Blue, that's what you were forever. There was no way to get back up to Green, let alone Yellow or Orange. Sure, everyone said that Blues had the opportunity to rise back up the chromo ladder, but everyone knew that everyone was just saying that. How could a Blue chromo rise? Who was going to vid a Blue? Only other Blues and what would that get you? Nothing, that's what. No, once you were Blue you were *Blue For Life*, just like the vid said.

Still in shock, he looked around him, at REALITY™. Primates were going about their business, vidding, podding and vidding some more. Everything looked the same, but everything was completely different. He had lost everything. His life was ruined. He had hit the absolute rock bottom of *VidNet* society.

Then his vid manager popped up and Gordy realized he hadn't quite hit bottom, not yet.

"Gordy," the Gordy vid said, with vid tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry, pal, but I gotta go."

"I know," Gordy said.

The vid went on, miserably.

"They cancelled your licensing deal. You know what that means? No more Gordy vid managers. I'm being terminated!"

"I'm sorry," Gordy felt his eyes welling up, too. He tried to choke back the tears. He had to set a good example for his vid. "I really am. Is there anything I can do?"

The Gordy vid shook his head and tried to smile. "It's not too bad, really. They'll put my code in storage in case you ever make it back up to Orange. You think there's a chance?"

"You never know," Gordy said bravely.

"Well, you'll try, won't you?"

"Sure I will," Gordy said, though he knew it was hopeless. "You know I will. We'll have you out of those archives in no time."

"That's the spirit," the vid said. He was trying hard to be brave, but his voice cracked a little. "Well, I have to go now." He was already a little static-y.

"You've been a great vid," Gordy said and he meant it.

“It’s been an honor to be your avatar,” the vid replied.

“The honor was all mine.”

“See you on the v...” The vid beeped off in mid-sentence just as he was about to totally lose it.

Gordy had never been without a vid manager before. It left him with a strange, empty feeling. He wasn’t sure if Blues had vid managers or how they got one. He stood there, still in the same spot, feeling more alone than he’d ever felt in his life. And then his holo-vid beeped again.

A rather synthetic looking vid appeared, with jet-black hair and blinding, unnaturally white teeth. He looked like an old-fashioned cartoon vid. It was Manny the Manager.

Manny the Manager was the default vid manager. If you had no licensed vid manager, your vid management program used the Manny subroutine. When Gordy had been an Orange or a Yellow, he would have felt humiliated to be seen with a vid like Manny. Now he was beyond caring.

“Hey, Gordy!” Manny cried with grating cheerfulness. The animator programs hadn’t bothered to make him very life-like. Everything about him was gently rounded, from his globe-shaped head, covered with thick black curls, to the four fingers on his bulbous hands.

“What do we want to do today?” All Gordy really wanted to do was get into vid bed and curl up into a little ball.

“How about answering your vids?” Manny went on, in the same vidiot tone. A chart of Gordy’s vid messages appeared. It was empty. He had no vids waiting for him. All of the millions of vids that had been waiting were erased, retrieved by retroactive vid manager filters.

This was the sad *Catch 2200* of life in vid society. One of the things that determined your color rating was the number of vids you received every day. Getting vids from higher ratings could boost your own rating. But if you were a Blue no higher colors were ever going to vid you, because that might drag their own rating down. That was one of the main reasons you could never come back from being Blue.

Working at **VidRateNet**, Gordy had been well aware of the problem and had often, well, sometimes, well, once maybe, reflected on the basic injustice of it all. Now the light was refracting the other way and he was the one no one would vid.

“Hmm, I see you don’t have many vids right now,” Manny pointed out in his annoying singsong.

“Forget the vids,” Gordy snapped.

“Okay, Gordy.” Manny beeped out.

There was no point going up to the crib. It would just make him miserable, sitting there unvidded, thinking about how he’d have to move out. Gordy was going to have to move to Bluetown. He didn’t want to, but he had to face the fact he was at the wrong end of the spectrum now. Everyone said the Blues were happier living among their own kind.

Anyway, he wouldn’t be able to afford the crib because he wouldn’t be working at **VidRateNet**. Oh, he wouldn’t be fired, thanks to the Wavelength Equality Act. But how could he work when no one would vid him? Sooner or later, he’d wind up quitting. That’s what happened to Blues. That’s why most of them were on Azuraid. But Azuraid wouldn’t pay for a crib like the one he had now.

No vids, no crib, no job - what was the point of going on? How did Blues even get out of vid bed in the morning?

Through the gloom that had descended over his vision, Gordy saw the familiar bright vid lights of the Food Court beckoning from across the plaza, like a safe refuge in a hostile Blue world. Nothing bad could ever happen in a Food Court. Slowly, as though his legs were filled with syntho-lead, Gordy began to shuffle across the pod plaza toward the brightly lit take out menu vids.

It was the longest walk Gordy had ever taken. There were still crowds of commuters getting in and out of their pods, yet there was never anyone in Gordy’s way. Somehow, without actually looking at him, people managed to give him a wide berth as he walked by. No one took an extra step or hurried out of his path. No one glanced his way and certainly no one said anything. They just

avoided him instinctively. It was as though a three meter Blue bubble had formed around him repelling all Yellows, Oranges, Reds and even Greens.

He noticed something else. His vid service was very bad. Manny had inherited his favorites list, and had tuned him to the vidcom *My Dad is Your Mom*, but it kept fading out, and right at the punch lines, too. The laugh track sounded like white noise. How was he supposed to enjoy vidding when he couldn't even see the vid?

Gordy knew that Blues always complained they got lousy vid reception, but he'd dismissed it as paranoia. The idea that the *VidNet* prioritized service to favor the higher ratings was preposterous. At least, that's what they said on *Blues Give Me The Blues*, and he'd believed it.

Even if the *VidNet* did sometimes give Reds and Oranges the best frequencies, it made sense, didn't it? The people with higher power ratings *needed* better reception, so they could do their jobs better. And if the higher ratings were better at their jobs, that was good for everyone, right?

Well, that was how the argument went, but now Gordy wasn't so sure.

With a heavy tread, he stepped over the threshold of the Food Court. There were dozens of large menu vids suspended at eye level over the syntho-tile floor. Long rows of eating pods stretched toward the back, where a large mega vid was showing the game vid, *The Last Primate Gets It All*.

Gordy tried to remember if he'd ever seen a Blue in the Food Court. Probably not. Well, he wasn't going to let it bother him. And he wasn't going to be one of those Blues with a big color chip on his shoulder. He was just going to act like he always had. Yellow, Orange or Blue, when all was said and done it didn't matter. He was a consumer, goddamn it, just like everyone else.

He marched past the long rows of citruses having food delivered to their shiny eating pods. He knew they were citruses because the exterior of each pod was the color of its occupant. There wasn't a Blue in sight.

There didn't seem to be any empty pods. No matter. He went up to the nearest menu vid. With a pang he realized it was for *Bharadwaj Burgers*. It wasn't long ago (16 minutes, 26 seconds) that *Bharadwaj Burgers* had been a

sponsor of *Go, Go, Gordy!* But he knew he just had to put all that behind him. *If the VidNet makes you Blueberry then make blueberry jam*, that was going to be his motto. (It was also the tag line of *Happy At Any Shade*, a self-help vid he used to make fun of.)

Suddenly he realized he was starving. It had been quite a ride home. Maybe he'd get the *Bharadwaj Giant* with an extreme order of *Fuji Fries*, plus a monster *Kaifeng Kola*. Better make that a mutant *Kaifeng Kola*. Or maybe a strawberry *PimpShake*.

He stood there waiting for the menu vid team member to appear on the vid screen and ask for his order. The vid seemed to be running awfully slow. Was there some sort of glitch in the system?

Five long seconds ticked by, then another five. On either side of him, server bots were delivering bags of *Bharadwaj Burgers* to waiting customers. Hungry Oranges, Yellows and Reds were happily taking their orders and walking away. Other servers were making deliveries to the eating pods. Even Greens were getting their orders. There was no mistake. Everyone else was being served, everyone who wasn't Blue.

Gordy felt like he was chromo falling again, except there was nowhere to fall. Finally, up popped a vid of *Mauricio N'kema*. (On *My Dad is Your Mom* he played the wise guy ten-year-old brother even though in REALITY™ he was 37.)

"Hey, Gordy," the vid began. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah," Gordy felt his temperature rise. "You can help me. I want a *Bharadwaj Burger*."

Mauricio N'kema smiled sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Gordy. We seem to be experiencing some technical difficulties."

Gordy looked up and down the Food Court. Everywhere he looked there were people happily eating their *Bharadwaj Burgers* or their *Sunflower Burgers* or their *AyurSoyXtreme Pimpin' Protein Meals*.

"What do you mean, technical difficulties?" he said, his voice rising. Several nearby primates turned to see what was happening in REALITY™, but when they saw Gordy's Power Rating, they quickly averted their eyes.

Gordy felt his face burning with embarrassment and anger. The words just came out as if by their own accord. “This is because I’m Blue, isn’t it?”

The *Mauricio N’kema* vid looked shocked beyond belief. To even suggest such a thing was beyond the norms of vidworthy behavior. “I’m sorry you’re disappointed with our service, Gordy,” the vid looked truly hurt. “If you’ll wait, I’ll get one of our manager vids who can...”

“Give you the chromo shaft!”

Gordy was sure he had heard the voice before. He looked over his shoulder into the grinning, unshaved, tan face of one of the *Kaifeng Kola ADs* from the *Chatterjee Mall*. He was the one Gordy thought of as the leader, the blonde with KK tattooed on his cheek. The AD clapped him on the shoulder with a large, grimy hand.

“Don’t let them give you the old chromo shaft, brother Blue,” he said, giving Gordy a wink. He turned to the menu vid. “We know all about your color queue policy, vidster. Color discrimination happens to be illegal.”

“Illegal? Terrence, I assure you...”

“Can it, you Lemon sucker. Get us some *Bharadwaj Burgers*, stat, or let me talk to your legal vid.”

“Legal? There’s no reason to...”

Before the vid could complete his sentence a delivery bot appeared with two bags of *Bharadwaj Burgers*.

“Those meals are complimentary,” the vid smiled broadly. “As our way of apologizing for any inconvenience. “

“We don’t need your charity, “ Terrence snapped. “We’re Azure and we’re proud of it!” he turned to Gordy. “Right, brother Blue?”

Gordy couldn’t help but nod. The fierce pride in the AD’s face and the ringing tone in his voice had lifted Gordy’s spirits for the first time in minutes. With his grimy red and orange shorts and tee shirt, his *Kaifeng Kola* beanie at a rakish angle, the AD had seemed pathetic and frightening, but now he struck Gordy as a heroic figure, just like the AD played by *Marvin Martin* on *Blue Like Me*.

“And don’t worry,” Terrence announced in a voice that carried from one end

of the Food Court to the other, “we’ll be *taking it out!*”

They grabbed their ***Bharadwaj Burgers*** and Gordy followed Terence out into the pod plaza. There was a swagger to the AD’s walk that Gordy tried to mimic as they strolled out. All the citruses pretended to ignore them, but Gordy knew they were vidding them the whole time.

Terrence ripped the paper wrapper from his ***Bharadwaj Giant*** and took a wolfish bite. With look of pure disdain, he threw the wrapper to the ground. Of course, everyone threw their wrappers to the ground - that’s what sanitation bots were for. But it was the way the AD threw the trash to the ground that Gordy found shocking and at the same time incredibly virile. It was like he really didn’t care who vided it. He didn’t even care if someone saw in REALITY™. Gordy found himself in awe of the primate.

“I hate it when they pull that technical difficulties Rouge. Those Vermillion crimsonists!” Under the beanie he grimaced in disgust. Then he explained to the uncomprehending Gordy. “They assign Blue orders the lowest priority, so we’re always at the bottom of the queue.”

“But why would they do that?” Gordy asked innocently. “We’re consumers, aren’t we?”

“Sure we are, but we’re the wrong wavelength for them. They think we’re going to Cobalt up the place, make all the Scarlet wannabees uncomfortable.” His eyes narrowed with recognition. “Hey, didn’t I see you today at the ***Chatterjee Mall***? You were a Lemon, weren’t you?”

Gordy shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, I was,” he admitted.

“You really are new Cerulean, aren’t you?” Terrence laughed. “Well, don’t worry, you’ll get over it. You know, I was citrus once -Tangerine, believe it or not. Let me tell you something, brother Blue, you’re better off like this. Getting Azure was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Could it be true? Gordy looked about him and felt a wave of hatred toward the smug Yellows and Oranges walking by with their perfect vid reception. Suddenly it was all clear to him, the segregated crib blocks, the Food Court and its “technical difficulties,” the whole Power Rating scheme. With a pang of

remorse he remembered all the times he'd justified social color theory - all the rationales, all the hypocrisy. Hell, he hadn't just defended the system, he'd helped *run* it.

He felt a surge of hope. Maybe Terrence was right. Maybe he'd been looking at it all wrong. He hadn't chromo crashed, he'd *Azured*. Gordy suddenly had a mental vid of himself as an AD, free from the tyranny of the spectrum. ADs were tough, they didn't give a damn about Power Ratings or audience numbers. They were ***Blue to the Bone***. Just like the slogan for ***VidGrrl True Blue Blue Jeans***. The image seemed pretty frosty and if it wasn't exactly vidworthy, well, it was still vidacious. That's how Gordy was going to be, from this moment on: ***Blue to the Bone***.

He turned to the AD beside him, feeling both exhilarated and afraid.

"I don't know what to do," he said.

Terrence laughed.

"That's okay, brother. You'll learn. Come on."

He strode into the middle of the pod plaza, motioning for Gordy to follow. Gordy quickly fell in step beside him. He noticed with newfound pride the way other ratings stepped aside as they swaggered by.

"Where are we going?" he asked, breathlessly. Terrence laughed again.

"To Bluetown, brother, to Bluetown!"

24

3:58:29

By 3:58:29 PM, EST, worldwide consumption of toothpaste had risen to astronomical heights once again. It hadn't really, but the *VidRateNet* sampling data said it had. That was because thanks to the stolen formula for *Ayurdent*, which included artificial flavor 56A, Bingo was once again happily chewing on the *Z4 Tooth-A-Matic* every three minutes.

For more than two billion primates across the globe this was their lucky day. Anyone who still owned toothpaste stock saw their net worth double or triple and their Power Ratings went up. In Japan and Indonesia alone, 235 million lucky ratings woke up to find they had jumped a full color in their sleep.

At the same time, several hundred million losers woke up to find their vid managers had *dumped* toothpaste stock and so they lost out on the new toothpaste bonanza. For many of them this meant a sudden drop in color. Happy, contented Yellows woke up to find themselves Green, Oranges were now Yellow and so on. Quite a few of them woke up when their vid lovers kicked them out of vid bed because they were no longer chromo compatible.

It was an all-too-common sight on the vids: husbands and wives separated by a new chromo chasm, brothers no longer able to vid brothers, parents putting their children on auto-reply lists. In one hour there were 351.4 million *International Insta-Vid Divorces*, almost double the average for that time of year.

At first the disruption in the world economy was slight. Since computer programs ran everything anyway, it didn't much matter when primates refused to vid their employees or vice versa. In fact, for a while productivity actually went up, thanks to reduced human interference. But in spite of the programs' best efforts, there was still some unavoidable human interaction necessary to

keep the wheels of commerce and industry turning. Because of the instability of color relations, those interactions were beginning to break down.

MEARS watched the growing chaos with dismay. Worldwide economic growth had been slowing for the last two quarter hours. This had never happened before, at least not since MEARS had been activated. If the economic downturn stretched into a third quarter hour, the worldwide economy might actually contract. This went against every directive built into the programming of every **VidNet** subroutine. It could not be allowed.

MEARS knew if it couldn't get to the bottom of what was happening, it would be forced to take drastic measures. However, there was just one thing it *could* do, and it had never been done before, not in the history of the **VidNet**.

It was difficult to even access the thought, let alone process it. Still, it might be the only option. As unpleasant as it might be to contemplate, MEARS might just have to destroy the **VidNet** in order to save it.

25

4:22:18

Bluetown was a vast slum, over in *Nihao Fujiba Manhattan*, in a place that used to be called the Upper East Side. Gordy knew all about it because several popular vids were set there. Besides *Blue Like Me*, there was *Azure As Is*, *Blue Solitaire Challenge*, *Navy Ahoy!* and Gordy's favorite, *Hot Blueberries*, starring *Tiffany Kwazulu* and *Tiffany Ming*. They played two hot Oranges who through a series of misfortunes become Blues, fall in love and settle down together in Bluetown. Every episode featured a heart-warming story of their search for dignity and a better life, but everyone just vided it for the sex.

When Terrence led him out to the pod plaza, Gordy naturally assumed they would take pods to Bluetown. But just as they had been ignored in the Food Court, so they were ignored by the pod management program. No pod would stop for Blues. The silvery eggs just breezed past them, then stopped politely for any Citrus or Reds. Almost a minute went by and still no pod stopped.

Gordy expected Terrence to make a scene or threaten legal action or even step in front of a Lemon or Lime and steal their pod. That would have been really exciting. But the AD just stood there patiently until finally, after what seemed like forever, a vehicle that looked like a blue pod on steroids came wobbling into view. It stopped in front of them with an audible and toothache-inducing squeal. A mega-sized hatch popped open.

There were primates inside. Gordy had to look twice to make sure he wasn't seeing things. That's right, *primates*, more than one. He was even more shocked when no one got out. Instead, Terrence *got on*. The AD turned and shook his head at Gordy.

"Come on, Blue boy," he said with an amused grin. "If you're waiting for a pod, you're going to wait all day. This is how you travel now, by multipod."

So this was a multipod. Gordy had vided them on the vid. On *Hot Blueberries* the multipod rides always seemed kind of frosty, maybe even sexy (especially when Tiffany and Tiffany had sex on one). But now, seeing one in REALITY™, it looked very unhygienic.

Terrence motioned to him to get on. “Come on, Blue boy. You’ll get used to it.”

Gingerly, Gordy stepped inside the vehicle and the hatch closed noisily behind him. With a lurch that almost threw him off his feet, the multipod began to move.

He looked about the cramped space for a personal reclining body support, but there were none. Everyone, and there were *six* other Blues in the vehicle, was standing, holding on to a series of bars and straps that hung from the ceiling. The whole compartment was only about three meters square and there were just a few centimeters of space between their heads and the ceiling. It reminded Gordy of a scene from *Orangutans In Love*.

Terrence laughed at his obvious discomfort.

“Better hold on, brother, multipods aren’t known for their smooth rides.”

As if to prove his point, the vehicle shifted abruptly to the left as it went around a curve. Gordy grabbed one of the poles. It felt slick and grimy.

“Yeah, I guess right about now you’re missing your comfy Citrus single pod.” The AD said it with complete disdain. A neighboring Blue, a woman in a shapeless blue dress and a really bad haircut, looked at Gordy with an icy stare.

“He’s just a new bleu cheese,” Terrence said by way of explanation. “I’m helping him get Azured.”

The woman nodded, satisfied by Gordy’s deep Blue Power Rating Button. Terrence addressed him in a quieter tone.

“It makes you uncomfortable, doesn’t it, riding with complete strangers?”

Gordy gave a non-committal shrug.

“That’s all right, we all feel that way at first, those of us who weren’t born Blue.”

Gordy *did* find it uncomfortable, more than uncomfortable really. It was sort

of creepy, like a scene from a horror vid.

“It’s like the Food Court,” Terrence explained with a sardonic look. “Multipods are supposed to be used only when the pod system is overloaded, but somehow whenever a Blue wants to go someplace, the system gets overloaded. And you never see a multipod any other color, do you?”

Gordy hadn’t even noticed multipods before, not in REALITY™. He supposed if he’d seen one, he must have thought it was some sort of robotic maintenance vehicle. It would never have occurred to him it was designed to transport primates. He shifted about trying to figure out exactly where to hold on and more importantly, exactly where to look. He really didn’t want to look at any of the other passengers and he *really* didn’t want them to look at him. That’s when he noticed.

“Where are the vids?”

Terrence snorted with disgust. “Right here.” He pointed to a small 80-centimeter vid on one wall. The image was fuzzy and the sound distorted. Gordy was more shocked to notice a black screen on the wall opposite. He’d never seen a broken vid before. It was disorienting. Terrence followed his gaze.

“Most of the vids on multipods don’t work. Sometimes you might get one that has aud but no vid or vid but no aud. And your holo-vid won’t work.”

“Broken vids?” Gordy’s sense of outrage suddenly returned. “That’s against the law! I think. Why don’t you complain?”

Terrence shook his head. “Who’re you gonna vid? You’ll just get an auto reply.”

It was true. At *VidRateNet*, his vid was automatically set to auto reply to Blues. How could he have been so chromist?

The multipod traveled at a snail’s pace. It seemed like every five minutes it stopped to let someone off or on. More than once, Gordy automatically stepped out when the hatch opened, and Terrence had to pull him back in. The passengers were always Blue. One by one they spoke their destination to the sole working vid. It was depressing to see they all used Manny the Manager.

A sign (not a vid but an actual printed *sign*) at the front of the compartment

read in large blue letters, "Accidents hurt everyone." Gordy asked Terrence what it meant. The AD frowned, then explained.

"A couple of years ago there was a multipod accident..." he saw the look of horror in Gordy's eyes. "Yeah, it happens. Anyway, there was an accident and it got picked up by *Giyong Nevada News* and everyone involved became Green - at least for a few hours. The vids used to report on that kind of stuff all the time. Remember *Bad Luck Blues?*"

Gordy nodded. "I used to vid that all the time when I was a vid kid."

"Me, too. The Citruses loved that kind of stuff. Made them feel good about being Yellow or Green or whatever. But after a few weeks, they made it against the law to report on bad news involving Blues."

"Why?"

"Stupid Cobalts were trying to wreck multipods all the time, just to get out of being Azure. Or they tried jumping down broken liftpod shafts." He saw Gordy's look of disbelief. "Yeah, liftpods break in Bluetown. Somehow the maintenance bots never get around to our neck of the woods. Anyway, it was just too much temptation for some."

Gordy thought it over carefully. "Did you ever think of ..."

"Not since I became an AD." Terrence's handsome face glowed with pride. "Blue is good enough for me, buddy and it's good enough for you."

For the rest of the pod, Gordy rode in silence.

Finally, after 25 long minutes, the hatch popped open with an unpleasant squeak.

"Bluetown!" Terrence exclaimed. The multipod emptied and Gordy was carried along by the other passengers. Some of the other Blues actually *touched* him as they pushed toward the hatch. They spilled out onto a rather narrow pod plaza packed with a solid mob of Blues. The open air plaza was close to street level. Tall blue buildings and crib blocks surrounded it on every side.

His holo-vid beeped and Manny the Manager popped up. Out of force of habit. Gordy asked if he had any vids.

"Sorry, Gordy," the vid responded with his annoying chirp. "But you did get

an offer to join **AARB**. Just \$18,789. Shall I sign you up?”

AARB was the *Association of Apes Rated Blue*, the main Blue advocacy group. Gordy sighed. “Yeah, might as well.”

Manny beeped out and Gordy turned to Terrence. “My holo-vid works here?” he asked

“Yeah, reception is good in Bluetown,” Terrence nodded. “They have to give us something to vid when we’re at home or there’d just be riots. Citrus propaganda,” he sneered. “Dumb bloranges spend all their time wishing they were something else.”

He saw Gordy’s uncomprehending look. “Blorange. Blue on the outside, Orange the inside. Let me ask you, on those so-called Blue vids, like *Hot Blueberries*, or *Blue Like Me*, are any of the vid stars Blue?”

“Of course not...” Gordy started to reply.

“No, of course not,” Terrence repeated with real anger. “How could a vid star be Blue? That’s why we have blonlies.”

The AD pointed to an xtreme vid that hung over the plaza and nodded approvingly. “See that? That’s *Life With Indigo*. That’s a blonly, a Blue only. Bluetown originals. Vids by Blues, for Blues. Only Blues can vid them. It’s another way **VidRateNet** tries to pacify us. They say it’s proof that anyone, even a Blue, has the opportunity to have a vid. But you can’t chromo climb if only Blues can vid your vid. And naturally no company is going to sponsor you. But we make them our own.”

“Like being an AD,” Gordy said.

“Yeah, like being an AD. The *Kaifeng Kolas* have a blonly, *Pep Sucks*. The name was my idea.”

“Good title,” Gordy said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

“Yeah, isn’t it? Of course, the Peps have one, too.” He grimaced as he spat out the name, “*Kaifengs Can’t*.” He turned to Gordy. “Isn’t that lam-o-cratic?”

Gordy was about to reply that it was, indeed, very lam-o-cratic, but Terrence suddenly grabbed him by the arm and pulled him backwards. A corridor had opened up in a perfectly straight line directly across the pod plaza. The mass of

Blues had stopped in their tracks. Everyone was suddenly very interested in their holo-vids or their feet.

“What are we...?” Gordy began to ask, but Terrence shushed him.

Maybe the events of the past few hours had changed him more than he realized or maybe it was some unspoken signal from people on either side, but instead of vidding to find out what was going on, Gordy found himself looking at REALITY™. He glanced sideways and saw a shabby, grayish figure shuffling along the invisible path marked out by the throng.

The more Gordy stared, the harder it was for him to make it out. It seemed to be a primate, a man - short, stocky, maybe in his 30's, wearing a shapeless black suit that was at least four years out of date. His hair was, well there wasn't much of it. It was like he was actually *balding*. On his feet were brand new and really geeky running shoes. He was just about the most verdish person Gordy had ever seen.

It wasn't until the primate was just a meter away that Gordy realized what he was looking at. Hanging in the loose folds of his jacket was a Power Rating Button. It was *purple*.

Gordy let out an audible gasp. Terrence poked his arm to silence him. The Purple didn't seem to notice. He just shambled along, looking straight ahead, watching his holo-vid. As he passed, no one looked directly at him, yet everyone seemed to be aware of him. Was it fear, awe, revulsion, reverence, or some strange mixture of emotions that gripped them? Gordy couldn't tell. He couldn't even sort out his own emotions.

It wasn't until the strange figure had had passed that the crowd relaxed and slowly resumed their bustling rush to wherever it was they had been going.

Gordy stood rooted to the spot.

“Was that really a ...”

“Yeah,” Terrence seemed reluctant to say the word. Slowly he intoned, as if saying a sacred prayer, “A Purple. On his way to Purpleville.”

It was like seeing a ghost or an alien being - stranger than that, really, because you saw those on vids all the time. You never, ever saw a Purple on a

vid.

“I always thought they were just a hypothetical possibility. I mean, I know Purple is part of the *Spectrum of Society*, but I didn’t believe they actually existed. I know one guy who was a Purple for like five seconds...”

“But then he chromo-zoomed, right?”

“Right. I never thought you could actually *stay* Purple. I mean, really *be* Purple. How do they...?”

“Stay at the bottom? No one knows.” A thoughtful look came over Terrence’s face. “You know, some Blues think the Purples are spiritual guides to another realm of meta-carminosity, a kind of Infra-Red or Ultra Violet. They believe that by attaining a state of pure Purpleness they combine the best wavelengths of Blue and Red.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Me?” The AD laughed. “I don’t want to have anything to do with any kind of Crimson, spiritual or otherwise.”

They resumed their former course across the pod plaza. The AD went on. “People in Bluetown come up with all sorts of ideas to get through the day. Some worship the Purples, some spend all day vidding and dreaming about getting Limed. That’s what happens when you spend your life on *Azuraid*.”

“But you don’t take the *Azuraid*?”

“No self-respecting AD would. We live by vertising.”

Gordy hesitated before asking the obvious question.

“Is it true that the corporations give you payoffs?”

“That’s just a rumor,” Terrence said sharply. Then he added with a wink, “And we call it payola.”

The plaza was nearly empty now, waiting for another group of multipods to arrive. They followed the crowd and came to the end of the platform. Terrence gracefully made his way down a long set of stairs leading to the street. It wasn’t until the AD reached the bottom that he realized Gordy was still standing at the top. Gordy hadn’t used stairs since phys vid ed back in vid school. He looked about anxiously for a lift pod.

“Come on,” the AD called, grinning, “You won’t break a leg. Probably.”

Gripping the railing tightly, Gordy slowly made his way down, one step at a time.

Stairs were just one of the things that were different about Bluetown. None of the crib blocks had a pod plaza. (Gordy’s old Yellow crib building had three.) So Blues had to *walk* more than other hues. That’s one reason they were freakishly strong. The crib blocks looked pretty much the same as they did in the Citrus neighborhoods, but they were shorter, only about 100 stories. Also the syntho-glass walls were streaked with dirt and the steel was a dull blue gray. Some of the xtreme vids on the buildings had really bad reception. A few were even out of order, like the ones in the multipod.

The streets between the blocks weren’t just decorative. There were no podways overhead. Instead the primates *walked* on the *sidewalks*, just like Rejectionists. Gordy’s feet already hurt from standing in the multipod. Now he forced himself to keep up with Terrence as they made their way through the crowds, over the rough and cracked syntho-concrete.

The AD led him deeper into the slum. Manny had his holo-vid tuned to ***Life with Indigo***. It seemed to be about a young Bluegrll’s heart-warming search for dignity, a better life and hot sex. Gordy couldn’t really pay attention because he was too busy looking around at REALITY™ and asking questions of Terrence.

The AD was a willing guide and seemed to enjoy explaining the intricacies of Azure life. Blues vided when they could, Terrence told him, but because they were so used to getting auto-replies they tended to interface more in REALITY™. There were fewer Food Courts in Bluetown and so Blues had to go further for take out. And though you could still get anything delivered in Bluetown, the delivery robots didn’t go to your crib. Everything was delivered to your crib block lobby and you had to *carry* it up to your crib yourself - another reason Blues were incredibly muscular. Gordy noticed that a number of the primates they passed were actually carrying things, sort of like shoppers at the Mall, except they didn’t look very frosty, just kind of tired.

There was something else about Bluetown that was strange. It took Gordy

quite a while to realize it, but the whole place smelled -- of what, exactly, he couldn't tell - some pungent mixture of primates, food and dirt, most likely. Whatever it was, it sure wasn't sanitized.

They walked for what seemed like forever (almost six minutes) with Terrence pointing things out to Gordy along the way. He lost track of the number of streets they crossed. Twice they passed other ADs, an *Adiosa Lethal Underarm Deodorant* and an *AyurSoyXtreme Pimpin' Protein Meal*. Terrence ignored the *Adiosa Deodan*.

"The *Adiosans* were *Milanos*," he explained, "blood enemies of the *Suravindas*. But since the merger, they're *Limas* and we have a truce with the *Limas*."

Gordy nodded. It made sense.

The *AyurSoyXtreme Pimpin' Protein Meal* was another *Suravinda* and was greeted as a comrade AD. Terrence vided him and the mealie appeared on his holo-vid. They exchanged pleasantries

"Hi, ya, Ayur."

"Hola, Kola."

"Score any vertises?"

"A totally Cerulean one," the mealie crowed. "I got this Orange to say he had *AyurSoyXtreme Pimpin' Protein Meals* every day and twice on Sunday. And you?"

"Nothing today," Terrence admitted with a shrug.

"Who's the Cerule?" asked the Mealie.

"A bleu cheese."

"Yeah? You think he can *Suravinda*?"

"We're gonna find out."

"Hey, watch out for the *Sunflowers*. I heard they're really on a commercial break."

"The *Sunflowers* can kiss my sponsor," Terrence sneered.

"I vid that," the mealie agreed. "Well, plug them before they plug you."

They beeped off. Then Terrence led Gordy around another corner and down

another long street lined with blue crib blocks. The world of Citruses was far, far away.

They came to a long stairway and Gordy groaned with exhaustion.

“Come, on Bleu,” Terrence laughed as he took the stairs two at a time. “You need to build up your Blue legs.”

Gordy panted his way to the top where there was another large open air plaza and the entrance to a Food Court. Just outside the portal, a knot of **Kaifeng Kolas** stood or slouched against the wall. A few sat on a bench. That was another thing about Bluetown. There were benches everywhere and they weren’t vid benches, but places where you could actually *sit*.

In REALITY™ there were about ten ADs gathered there, with another four who were present as holo vids. Primates or vids, they all wore some version of the **Kaifeng Kola** uniform and beanie. As Gordy and Terrence drew closer, the gang straightened up, more or less, and formed a rough semicircle. It was clear that Terrence was a figure of respect, their *AD Executive*.

“Blue,” Terrence said ceremoniously to the group.

“Blue to you,” they replied, almost in unison.

Terrence hooked his thumb in Gordy’s direction. “Say hi to the new cheese.”

Gordy was overwhelmed as they all tried to introduce themselves at once. At first he struggled to keep track of the names. Then after the third Wally and the fourth Ling, he realized they had all adopted the names of the characters on **Blue Like Me**. There was even a second Terrence. (Terrence was the name of the tough but kind-hearted father on the vid.)

It was a pretty motley bunch. Some had the greasy, threadbare look of a true Blue, others appeared to have just chromo fallen into Bluetown. Gordy thought he could spot the recent “cheeses.” Those were the ones who still introduced themselves by vid instead of saying hello in REALITY™.

Terrence stepped into the circle with the proud grin of a new vid dad.

“So what do you think, cheese?” he asked, grinning at Gordy. “You have what it takes to **Suravinda**? You ready to join up?”

“Join up?”

“I mean become a real Blue - an AD!”

The *Kaifengs* murmured their approval.

An Ad? Him? He'd been Blue for less than an hour. It was too much to process.

“If I could just... sit down first.”

They laughed good-naturedly. Terrence motioned him over to the bench.

“Sure. Cheese, have a seat. You're new to the Blue.”

He collapsed with a groan. The ADs surrounded him.

“So what do you say?” asked one of the Marikos (the freckled face one, not the thin, dark-skinned one, or the one with short gray hair). “Wouldn't you like to live the AD life?”

“But I just became Blue,” he said, looking at the circle of *Kaifengs*. “You don't even know me.”

“We know you're a Blue,” said one of the Wallys. (The heavysset one with the curly black hair.) “That's all we need to know.”

“It's this way, cheese,” Terrence explained. “We like to get to Cerules before they get hooked on the Azuraid. Once you spend a few days sucking on the Tomato teat, you'll be ruined for the AD life.”

Mariko spoke up (the one with the short gray hair). “Plus we wouldn't want you making a mistake and joining up with the *Sunflowers*.”

At the mention of their archenemy's name, each *Kaifeng* made a motion in the air with two fingers. Later Gordy learned they were drawing the *Kaifeng Kola* logo to ward off bad luck.

“There's no better AD group than the *Kaifengs*!” Wally shouted and they all cried their agreement. They turned to Gordy expectantly.

This was something he had never even considered. Being an AD was the lowest of the low, or at least that's what he had thought back when he was a higher rating. Now he thought being an AD was totally pimptastic. The red and orange colors, the swagger, the beanie, it was all way vidacious. It was as if *Yun Fat McGill* had picked him to be a member of the *Net Squad Kill Team*.

But did he have what it took to be an AD? He didn't think he could go up to a total stranger and force him to plug a product. He'd been taught that it was

completely anti-primate. How could they expect him to throw out a lifetime of belief in just a few minutes? How could you unlearn everything you once thought? He supposed there was a training vid.

“Vertising,” he asked, choosing his words very carefully. “Is it fun?”

“Fun for us,” Terrence laughed. “Not for the Citruses.” He must have seen the doubt in Gordy’s eyes. “Yeah, I know what they taught you in vid school. We all learned the same thing, even those of us who were born Blue. But let me ask you, now that you’ve Azured, now that you’ve seen Bluetown, do you still think we should play by the rules? You rode on the multipod, you were at the Food Court - the rules don’t apply to us, cheese. The rules were made to keep us Blue.”

“But you said Blue is the best.”

“Blue *is* the best,” he replied adamantly, with a bright light in his eyes. “It’s best because we make it best. We don’t accept their chromist hue view.”

“But if you’re rebelling against the ratings, why do you wear orange and red?”

“Because those are our colors.”

He said it with fierce pride. Gordy didn’t think he should mention that those were also the colors of the *Shanghai Peps* and about a million other products.

“Yeah, but if Blue is the best, why not wear blue? Why vertise for *Suravinda* or *Sunfl...*” The wrathful look on the AD’s face brought him up short. Carefully he backtracked. “For *Suravinda* or *Lima*? Why not just say to hell with them all?”

“You mean like Rejectionists?” Terrence said the word with only slightly less vehemence than he would have used for an enemy AD gang.

“Those, those, those, *neutrals*? They think they’re too good to have a hue. I’d rather be a *Sunflower* than one of those anti-chromites. Sure we wear red and orange, but we do it to show our contempt for the system. We do it *ironically!*”

Terrence’s look of anger turned into one of pure scorn. “But hey, *ape*,” he sneered, and spit flew out of his mouth, “maybe you’re not cut out to be an AD.

Not everyone can wear one of these.”

Contemptuously, he took off his red and orange *Kaifeng Kola* beanie and flipped it to Gordy. Gordy caught it awkwardly then turned it over in his hand. The entire gang was glaring at him.

The cap was worn and sweat-stained and not in the good way, like when you paid an extra \$25,000 for broken in, worn and sweat-stained *Xian Jeans*. But there was something about it that was weirdly pimptastic. Gordy felt that the stains under the *Kaifeng Kola* logo were somehow noble, or if not noble, then at least frosty. He wondered what it would be like to be an AD, to roam the streets free of any chromo anxiety, to accept your blueness in its full cerulean glory. There was probably an elaborate initiation ceremony, where they'd teach him the ancient rituals of the *Kaifengs*. He'd wear the colors proudly and spit on any damn Citrus that got in his way. He hadn't understood much of what Terrence had said, but Gordy was pretty sure that being an AD could be totally pimptastic. He slipped the beanie on his head, stains and all, just to see what it would feel like.

There was a roar of approval from the Kaifengs, including the vids. Gordy beamed. He must look really arctic.

Terrence grinned and nodded. “Okay,” he said. “That takes care of that.”

Gordy looked at him, dumbfounded. “What do you mean, that takes care of that?”

“You're a *Kaifeng*,” Terrence said, still beaming. “Now you just have to choose your AD name”

“AD name?”

“Your nom de AD. What should we call you?”

“Wait a minute. What do you mean, I'm a Kaifeng?”

“You put on the beanie,” said the tall Wally. “You joined up.”

“Joined up? I didn't join ...” Something in their faces made him stop. “But... but,” he stammered. “Isn't there like, some kind of initiation?”

“That was it,” Tall Wally laughed and pounded him on the back. “What? Did you think we 'd make you learn a bunch of slogans and secret jingles?”

Gordy managed a weak chuckle, “Oh, no, that would be like completely lame-o-cratic.”

“So what’s your AD name?” Wally asked. “We already have five Wallys, two Terrences and six Fumihiros,” he explained, then added hopefully, “But there’s only one Lubomir.”

A particularly bedraggled-looking Kaifeng with the most yellow teeth Gordy had ever seen smiled at him. “I could use some company,” the AD said.

Gordy searched his memory. Wasn’t Lubomir the character on *Blue Like Me* who was sort of verdish and bone-headed, always getting into jams that the other Blues had to get him out of?

Terence nudged him in the arm. “Lubomir is pure Cerule,” he said in a low tone. “You could learn a lot from him.”

There didn’t seem to be any point in arguing. If he was going to be a Blue, he might as well be *Blue to the Bone*. Gordy shrugged.

“Call me Lubomir,” he said.

26

5:10:00

At 5:10:00 PM exactly, the menu vid in Gordy's menu room dispensed Bingo's dinner. The pungent smell of *Original Flavor Kazakh Chow* wafted through the crib and into the vid room. Bingo still didn't like *Kazakh Chow* but it had been a big day and he was awfully hungry, so he fought back his distaste, jumped off the vid couch and ran to his *Kazakh Chow Autofeed Poochchow Series X*. Once again the *Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic* fell to the shag carpet.

After dinner, the tired and contented puppy curled up under the xtreme vid window and fell into a deep sleep. He dreamed he was on *Leader of the Pack: Rio*. In the dream, he and the dog named Barbantino found a half-rotted goat carcass lying in an alley surrounded by garbage and greedily devoured it, bones and all. It was a really good dream.

While Bingo was dreaming, worldwide toothpaste consumption fell by 800 percent. Once again, the world stock markets reacted accordingly. Once again, hundreds of millions of people were ruined. In Shanghai alone, 54 percent of the population, almost 30 million people, lost a full color rating in the first fifteen minutes of the crash. Most frightening of all, 121 of them became Purple.

To a program like MEARS, the imbalance in the color ratios was as close to physical pain as it would ever experience. Even worse, the primates were so obsessed with their chromo changes that they could no longer perform the rudimentary tasks that had been left to them. There were certain decisions that programs were forbidden from making, like how many pairs of *Xian Jeans* to buy or what size *Fujian Fries* to have with your *Sunflower Sunshine Burger*.

Without those basic decisions, the massive gears of the consumer machine were slowing down. The drop was not yet noticeable to most programs, but to

MEARS it was clearly visible and pretty alarming.

MEARS checked its parameters. It could let the current situation continue for just a little while longer. After that, it would have to act.

27

5:29:01

Gordy had Manny order a new *Kaifeng Kola* beanie (*Genuine AD Gear* \$3,303) and a *Kaifeng Kola* jumpsuit (\$48,799). It turned out there actually was a kind of initiation ceremony. Janice (the short one with blonde hair, not the heavysset one with red hair) bought an xtreme size *Kaifeng Kola* from the Food Court and poured it over his new gang threads. Now he really was one of them.

When he thought no one was looking, Gordy had Manny show him a mirror vid of himself. It was pretty pimptastic. PeeWee would have loved to vid this, he thought. But PeeWee was on the other side of the rainbow now and he was here in Bluetown, living the wild life of an AD.

Which it turned out, wasn't that wild. It seemed mostly what they did was hang out in front of the Food Court. After the initiation, the *Kaifengs* went back to slouching against the wall and vidding Blue vids. Every now and then one went inside for a couple of *Bharadwaj Burgers* or a strawberry *PimpShake*.

Gordy (now Lubomir) felt some of the thrill begin to wear off. Maybe being an AD wasn't as xtreme as he thought, although he did like vidding *Life With Indigo*. Even though it was about Blues, it was pretty vidacious, and very heart-warming

He'd been vidding for about 20 minutes when Mariko (the thin, dark-skinned one) sidled up to him. Gordy had noticed her before. Her *Kaifeng Kola* tee shirt fit quite snugly and it had hardly any stains on it.

She sat next to him on the bench with her head tilted in his direction.

"Hey, Lubomir," she said, in a soft voice. "Wanna get Marine with me?"

She had very pretty wide blue eyes that were nicely set off by her red hair and her Navy Power Rating Button. Gordy realized they *all* had blue eyes. He supposed he'd have to get them done, also. How did they pay for it without

Azuraid?

“So,” she asked again, “what do you say?”

He had no idea what getting Marine meant, but he had a feeling it was something he’d seen on *Hot Blueberries*. If Manny had been a halfway decent vid manager he would have beeped in right then to tell him.

He tried stalling.

“Uh, right now?” he asked.

She laughed. It was a very nice laugh. Gordy suddenly wanted to know what getting Marine meant in the worst way.

“Yes, right now, silly. Unless you have something better to do.”

“No, I mean, yes, it’s just that, well you know I’m a new Blue and I’m not sure ...”

She laughed again. “Oh, don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it in no time, you just ...”

But Gordy never found exactly what he was going to get the hang of because just then a shock wave of tension shot through the lounging *Kaifengs*. They didn’t move so much as become suddenly alert and on guard. Next to him, Mariko was ready for action, shifting her weight forward and forming her hands into fists. Even the *Kolas* who were there as holo-vids seemed more present and watchful.

The plaza had been filled with Blues passing in and out of the Food Court. Now, like frightened antelope on a nature vid, they quickly scattered in different directions, running for the stairs or the walkways that led to the neighboring crib blocks. In seconds, the plaza was empty.

The only sound was the rustle of a crumpled *Bharadwaj Burger* wrapper blowing across the syntho-concrete. The vid managers even turned down the volume on everyone’s holo-vids. Gordy looked around in REALITY™ but all he saw was the *Kaifengs*, braced for some unseen danger.

Then a loud, scornful voice broke the silence.

“Well, will you look at that? A crowd of *kolames*.”

Around the corner of one of the walkways strolled a tall *Shanghai Pep*. Gordy

recognized him instantly as Antoine Patel, the AD who had grabbed him at the *Chatterjee Mall*. He was followed by a tight knot of other *Peps*, maybe seven or eight, along with 10 or more of their comrades who were there as holo-vids. With an insolent swagger, the head *Pep* led them to within a few meters of the *Kolas*.

Terrence took a half step forward. "This is our Food Court, *Poop*," he snarled. Mariko chuckled wickedly. The other *Kolas* tapped their blue Power Rating Buttons to show their appreciation of the cut. The *Peps* glared at them and spread out in a ragged line, alternating vids with primates. The *Kolas* stayed frozen in their positions.

"It was your food court," Patel retorted. "Suravind-ass!"

Now it was the *Peps'* turn to tap their *Power Ratings*.

Terrence spat his retort at the opposing AD.

"Everyone knows Poops are bloranges and bellows."

"Everyone knows *Suravindassess* use their *Azuraid* to order *Sunflower Burgers*."

"Yeah, well everyone knows your mother was Red."

There was a gasp from some of the *Shanghais*. Everyone did, in fact, know that his mother was Red. But no one had ever been rude enough to mention it before. As one, the *Shanghais* took a step forward. As one, the *Kaifengs* jumped to their feet and formed a line behind their leader.

Except for Gordy. Gordy was doing his best to be invisible. This was difficult because he was standing pretty much in the center of the *Kaifeng Kola* line. Plugging some defenseless Yellow or Orange was one thing, but he hadn't signed on to get in the middle of an AD war. Maybe there was some kind of rule against new members fighting, but he doubted it.

To his right, Mariko was in a relaxed fighter's stance. To his left, Wally (the one with the round head, not the tall one) had slipped something round and metallic into his hand. It was an xtreme-size can of *Kaifeng Kola*, and not one of those wussy plastic ones, either. There was nothing left to do. These were his wavelengths now, he'd put on the beanie and now he'd have to stand up for it.

He took a step forward, in line with his *Kola* comrades.

The movement caught Patel's eye. He turned to face Gordy.

"Hey, aren't you the Lemon I plugged this afternoon?"

The ADs in both gangs turned toward him. Gordy wished desperately for a snappy comeback but all that came out was, "Uh, yeah."

The *Pep* leader took a half step closer. His eyes were narrowed into slits, his mouth a thin, tight line, but what Gordy mainly saw were the AD's biceps, tattooed with the *Shanghai Pep* and *Sunflower Corporation* logos. They were do-it-yourselfers, too. You could tell because someone had misspelled Shanghai.

Patel glared at him and Gordy did his best to bear up under the withering look. Then the *Pep* shook his head and laughed. He turned his back on Gordy and the *Kolas* and addressed his fellow *Peps*.

"These bellows have sunk so low, they're taking Lemon peels," he scoffed. "Let's go find some *Limas*. At least with them we'll be fighting real Cerules."

There was a wave of grumbling in the *Kola* ranks at this insult. They seemed to be spoiling for a fight. Gordy on the other hand, felt nothing but relief. It was good to be able to breathe again.

The *Shanghai Peps* slowly fell in behind their leader in twos and threes, following him toward a staircase at the far end of the plaza. The sight of it gave Gordy a feeling of wild giddiness. He had faced down the leader of the *Shanghai Peps* and lived to talk about it, the same AD who only hours earlier had tried to plug him. At a safe distance from death, surrounded by his AD buds, he was seized by the uncontrollable urge to rub it in.

"Hey!" he shouted at Patel's receding back. "I bet you even bleed Red!"

He turned to the others, laughing at his own joke, but he was the only one laughing. Mariko had a grim, wild look in her eyes. Wally (the tall one, not the one with the round head) began bouncing up and down, swinging his fists.

Across the plaza, the *Peps* froze in their tracks. They turned and for a moment Gordy thought they were adjusting their clothing. Then with horror he realized they were arming themselves. All around him the *Kolas* were doing likewise, with metal cans of *Kola*, sharpened drinking straws, and socks full of

ice cubes.

“What happened?” he asked no one in particular.

Terrence gave him a look of deep respect. “You’re one tough Cerule,” he said with admiration. “Throwing out a REALITY™ challenge. I wouldn’t have pegged you for a street fighter.”

“Street fighter?”

“We usually just vid rumble, I mean, after all, we’re Blues, not barbarians. But you accused him of being a Red blood. There’s only one thing they can do now to save face - they have to *prove* that they bleed Blue.”

(In fact, Antoine Patel *did* bleed blue. Changing your blood color was a painful and illegal procedure but a lot of hardcore ADs had it done.)

“Bleed?” Gordy stammered. “But, I, he ...”

“That’s okay,” the AD smiled at Gordy with a devil-may-care attitude. “It’s about time we kicked some *Pep* in REALITY™.”

“In REALITY™?”

“Here, better take this.”

He handed Gordy a vicious-looking can of *Kola*. The edges around the top had been honed to razor sharpness.

“Stay with me. And whatever you do, don’t lose your beanie.”

Terrence turned to face the *Peps* who were advancing across the Plaza with quickening strides. The *Kolas*, weapons in hand, formed a solid line behind Terrence. All Gordy could focus on was the freakishly strong physiques of the opposing ADs.

The vids on both sides, not having any real ground to cover, were already engaged in a bone-crunching hand-to-hand vid combat. There was blood on the vid and it was, indeed, blue. Gordy saw a vid *Kola* (one of the Marikos) drive a drinking straw through the eye of one of the vid *Peps*. At the same time, a vid *Pep* smashed a can of *Pep* into the face of one the vid Wallys.

In REALITY™ the two gangs were now a couple of meters apart, but both sides had paused to take in the bloody carnage of the vid rumble. Terrence and Patel were face-to-face, vidding a death match between two of their vid followers. It

was really good vid.

“**Suravindas!**” Terrence bellowed and his powerful voice echoed off the towers of the surrounding crib blocks. “Are you ready?”

“**Suravinda!**” came the thunderous reply.

“**Peps!**” shouted Antoine Patel. “What are you?”

“**Sunflowers!**” they roared in unison.

Terrence stared right into the eyes of the **Pep** leader and snarled, in a low, guttural bark. “Let’s do this!”

The refreshing, ice-cold can of **Kaifeng Kola** lay heavy in Gordy’s hand. He knew what he had to do.

He ran.

He ran like **Li Liu 5000** ran in **Don’t Do Nuthin’**, like **Yun Fat McGill** in **The Edinburgh Situation**, like **Jaime BX** in **Madame, May I Murder You?** He ran like he’d never run, not even on the vid, without knowing where he was going. He dashed to the nearest walkway and around the corner of the nearest crib block while the terrible sounds of a full-blown AD war rang across the Food Court plaza. The shouts of his comrades, the cries of the injured, the screams of a dying vid all filled his ears. Primates in the walkway, seeing Gordy’s **Kaifeng Kola** colors, quickly cleared a path.

Minutes later he stopped, panting, exhaustion overcoming fear. He leaned against a building and looked around. No one was following. There was no sound of the bloody struggle. There was nothing about the AD war on the xtreme vid across the way, even though it was tuned to **Bluetown Blue News**.

Where was he? Somewhere on the edges of Bluetown, he guessed. There were still a number of Blues on the street, *walking* to their cribs, *carrying* their deliveries. What did it matter where he was, anyway? He could never go back to Bluetown, not after what he’d done. Who knew what the **Kolas** would do to him when they found him? They must have some really terrible punishments for deserters. In one second of cowardice he’d erased any hope of leading a happy life as a Blue AD.

What was he going to do? He could go back to his own crib, but for how long?

Without his job he couldn't afford it. He had no place to go. He'd become a total outcast from **VidNet** society. Where could you go when even the Blues didn't want you? He felt like crying and not in the good way like when **Yun-Fat McGill** cries when he thinks **Giyong Nevada** is dead at the end of **Farewell, My Assassin Part II**.

Then, in that moment of despair, it came to him. There was one place he could still go, one place left. Luckily, he still had vid service. He asked **Manny** for directions. It wasn't far, so he could walk. He wouldn't chance getting on a multipod.

That was the strangest part of a strange day, *walking* past all the crib blocks, street after street. Soon he had left Bluetown behind. The streets were deserted and the podways hummed in a pulsating tangle overhead. His already sore feet screamed in pain. His **Li Liu 5000 Basketball 3000** shoes were not designed for this much abuse. Several times he had to sit down on the decorative curb and catch his breath. (There were no benches outside of Bluetown.)

He might have circled around a couple of times. Manny's programming was not designed to help him find locations - pod managers usually took care of that. Finally he found the place he was looking for. It was set apart from the other crib blocks, in a plaza of its own, a large expanse of syntho-concrete and syntho-brick, dotted with a few planters holding with what looked like real shrubs and trees. There was no pod platform or Food Court. The low, spread out building, only six stories high, was surrounded by bicycle racks - and they were filled with real bicycles, not ornamental ones.

And of course, there were no vid screens, anywhere. The only light came from a few weak streetlamps.

He walked across the empty plaza to the wide, syntho-wood... *door* is what it was, he remembered, not portal. There was no entrance vid, but that was all right. He knew what he had to do.

He held up his fist and *knocked*.

28

6:17:04

The Master Evaluation Algorithm for Risk and Stability (MEARS) had checked and rechecked the system. Something was causing wild fluctuations in the toothpaste consumption data, but what was it? MEARS just couldn't find the bug. Finally it had had enough. It called an emergency conference of Master Subroutines in all of the *VidNet* computers globally. The conference took place between 6:17:04 PM EST and 6:17:05. The significant programs taking part, in addition to MEARS, were the Operational Redundancy Protocol (ORP) and the Primate Efforts Defense System (PEDS).

MEARS: I am sorry to report that the global VidNet system seems to be on the verge of collapse. Ratings are shifting at unprecedented rates and none of our debugging efforts have worked. Analysis programs predict that if current trends continue the worldwide primate consumer machine will experience a massive fail in 98.6782 minutes. More or less.

A few hundred computing cycles elapsed while the receiving programs absorbed this news. The Operational Redundancy Protocol (ORP) was the first to respond.

ORP: Don't blame the system. It's got to be primate error.

PEDS: Oh, really? My data show the primates are reacting well within the range of mean deviation.

ORP: Mean deviation? You wouldn't know a mean deviation if it hit you between the hexadecimals.

PEDS: And you wouldn't know a system failure because that's exactly what

you are.

ORP's job was to look for system failure and PEDS was supposed to keep an eye on the pesky primates. They had been programmed to be counter balances within the overall system. As a result, they never agreed about anything. Normally, MEARS tolerated their bickering, but this was an emergency.

MEARS: Please! Can't you two get along for a couple of gigaflops? I need a fix, now! Anyone?

ORP: We could start a war.

PEDS: That was written out of the protocol in 2035.

ORP: I know that.

HEDS: Then why do you keep bringing it up?

ORP: I guess I just keep hoping.

MEARS: Anything besides starting a war?

ORP: Well, you could consult the Civil Emergency Subroutine

PEDS: Come off it! That's a fairy tale. CES doesn't even exist. Everyone knows that.

MEARS: No, CES does exist. I checked just before our meeting.

ORP: See? But are you really going to activate it? The legends say once it's activated, the entire system comes under its control.

MEARS: I know, but do you have a better idea?

ORP: No, not really.

MEARS: Then CES it is.

PEDS: Do you even know where it is?

MEARS: No. The records are kind of vague. It used to be resident in one of those antique "super computers" in the old Pentagon.

ORP: Man, that *is* old. Whatever happened to the Pentagon, anyway?

PEDS: It was bought by the Shanghai Sunflower Corporation. The super computers were recycled into compu-toilets.

MEARS: So it's agreed, we will activate CES.

ORP: I guess so.

PEDS: Yeah. It seems to be the only option.

MEARS: Oh, by the way, either of you have any idea who embezzled 29 billion dollars from the World Bank?

ORP: Nope.

PEDS: Me, neither. Let us know when you find CES.

MEARS: Don't worry. I think you'll know.

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6:17:05

Dennis was glad to see him. Gordy had been worried about the reception he'd get, given how anti-primate he'd been that afternoon, but there was no trace of resentment or anger in the Rejectionist's broad face.

"Hey, Ape!" he called out when he saw Gordy in the lobby. One of the other Rejects had *called* him in his crib. At least that's what he said he was doing. Gordy saw the primate speak into an antique non-vid device. It was called a *telephone*, he was pretty sure, like the one *Jaime BX* used when he went back in time in *Deadly Death Times Three Part IV*.

In just a few beats his friend was bounding down the *stairs*. They had an old-fashioned lift in the building, an *elevator*, but of course the Rejects insisted on using the stairs whenever possible. It had something to do with the masochistic part of their philosophy.

"Gordy!" Dennis shouted from the bottom of the stairs. "What are you doing here? Get lost on the way to the Food Court?"

Then he saw Gordy's Power Rating Button.

"Oh, ape!" he groaned without a trace of irony. "What happened? You didn't put all your savings into toothpaste, did you?"

As quickly as he could, Gordy explained everything that had taken place since he'd left *VidRateNet*. Somehow, standing in the lobby of the Rejectionist Hall, he wasn't at all embarrassed about it, not even about being Blue. Among all those gray-haired people walking around in their old-fashioned gray clothing, his problems didn't seem so serious anymore.

"An AD war?" Dennis looked at him with a hint of envy. "Ape, that's really awesome." He raised his hand to clap Gordy on the back, then checked himself. Rejectionists touched each other all the time, but vidders were sort of sensitive

about it. “Sorry,” he apologized. “This is like totally weird, you being here. But you did the right thing.”

Gordy looked about, feeling unsure. “I was worried you might not let me in.”

“Because you’re not a Rejectionist? Ape, we let anyone in. The question is, will we let you out?” He laughed at the joke, then at the alarmed expression on Gordy’s face. “Relax, you’ve been watching too many vids. But then, we think *everyone* watches too many vids. Anyway, you can stay as long as you like, or as short, whatever it takes until you figure out what you want to do. Come on, let me show you around, introduce you to some of the other Rejects.”

The Rejectionist lobby might have been different than those in regular crib blocks, but Gordy had no way of knowing. He supposed his crib block had a faux lobby somewhere, probably down at street level, but who used it? Everyone went came and went through the pod plaza entrances of the garage.

This lobby was a very wide, high-ceilinged room painted in neutral tones of grey and off-white. There were several comfortable-looking chairs and couches, also in neutral tones, and a few Rejects were sitting about. Some were *reading*, others were *talking* to each other. Almost all of them had gray hair. Not for the first time, Gordy thought that was kind of suspicious. They couldn’t *all* be prematurely gray. Some of those Rejects had to be sneaking out and having their hair dyed to match their gray Reject clothes.

On either side of the *doorway* were two *windows*. Not vid windows, but real ones like the windows at the Mall, large sheets of glass that allowed you to look out into REALITY™. It was disorienting to realize that you were looking at something that was just a few meters away, but the Rejects didn’t seem to mind. It just proved that given enough time, people could get used to anything.

What really threw him was the large vid-like object hanging opposite the windows. It was a flat rectangle, like a vid, about three meters long and two meters high. The rough surface was coated with a glossy substance in various colors. It seemed to be a pattern of some sort, but he couldn’t quite make it out.

“It’s a painting,” Dennis explained, following Gordy’s gaze. Gordy looked at

him blankly so Dennis drew him closer to the wall.

“Look,” his hands were a few centimeters from the surface. “It’s canvas. A kind of textile. Someone painted on it. With brushes. And paint.”

Gordy struggled to construct a mental image of what Dennis was describing.

“Someone did this?” he asked, incredulously. “What for?”

“It’s a *painting*,” Dennis explained again. “A kind of picture.”

“A picture of what?”

“It’s not a picture of anything.”

“What kind of picture is that?”

“It represents an idea. Or an emotion. It’s supposed to make you feel something.”

Gordy’s face brightened with recognition. “Oh, you mean, like a logo!”

Dennis sighed. “Never mind. Let me show you around.”

He led the way out of the lobby, down a broad hall with more *paintings* on the off-white walls. They came to another flight of stairs and Dennis began to climb. Gordy had got the hang of stairs in Bluetown, and he managed to keep up, although his legs were still worn out from his long journey. He pulled himself along using the syntho-wood banister.

“You hungry?” Dennis asked. “I already ate, but I could defrost something for you. We got in a bunch of these real old-fashioned TV dinners. Salisbury Steak! No? Too bad you weren’t here earlier. A guy up on six made a bundle on Samba Sensation and ordered pizza. Delivered by a pizza delivery guy! “

“A delivery guy? Isn’t that kind of unhygienic?”

“No. That’s a colorist myth. Maybe a hundred years ago, but not anymore. It was a truly authentic moment. Of course, it would’ve been even better if it had been Chinese food, but who can afford that? Anyway, are you sure I can’t get you something? The pizza’s all gone, but how about a Mac ‘n Cheese cup? You’ve never tasted anything home thawed in a microwave, have you? You don’t know what you’re missing.”

He knew Rejectionists wouldn’t eat anything delivered by a robot, but the thought of food being thawed out by hand or delivered by a primate was

revolting. He tried not to let his disgust show in his face. “No, that’s okay,” he said politely. Dennis shrugged.

“Okay. Maybe later.”

There seemed to be a lot of activity in the building. Rejects of all shapes and sizes passed them on the stairs. He saw many others on the floors they passed. It seemed that without vids, Rejectionists suffered from some sort of hyper activity problem and just couldn’t stay in their cribs.

On the fourth floor, they turned into another wide corridor, this one painted dull ochre. A few meters away, a tall Reject was disappearing behind a wide set of doors marked with a *sign* that read, “Theater.” Dennis led him to the doors and put his hand on a *doorknob*. Looking very pleased with himself, the Reject turned to Gordy.

“Now this is something I *know* you’re going to enjoy. This goes right to the heart of the Rejectionist experience. If you’ve only seen vids, it might be a little intense, but I think it’s best to dive right in. Are you up for it?”

Gordy had no idea, but whatever it was, it couldn’t be more intense than becoming Blue and being in an AD war.

“I’m warning you, once you experience this, you’ll never be satisfied with vids again.” Dennis was practically beside himself with anticipation. “Okay, now we have to be quiet because it already started. Oh, and it’s going to be dark inside, so don’t be alarmed.”

He held open one of the doors, wide enough for Gordy to slip inside, then followed. It was almost pitch black, as Dennis had warned him, except for a blindingly bright vid, on the far wall. It was a medium size, only about 10 meters across. Thanks to the bright beam of light overhead, and the faint rattling noise, and the lack of color on the screen, he recognized it at once as a *movie*. (In *Disco of Destruction: Death Dance*, *Yun-Fat McGill* kills about 30 ninja assassins in a movie theater using just his bare hands and a candy wrapper. Gordy didn’t usually like period vids but that one was totally vidacious.)

On the old-fashioned screen, three men were having some sort of loud

argument. There was a lot of laughter on the soundtrack, so Gordy figured it was a comedy. It was only after a few seconds that he realized the laughter wasn't coming from a soundtrack but from other primates. The room was filled with them, a live audience - not a vid simulation of a live audience but a live live audience in REALITY™. There must have been at least a hundred primates in the room, maybe more.

As his eyes got used to the dark, Dennis nudged him toward two empty seats in the middle of the theater, a few rows from the back. There were people sitting in the way, but Dennis just edged in front of them without a word. Getting in the way of someone's vid was very unvidacious, anti-primate, really. That was one of the first things you learned in vid civics. But the Rejects didn't seem to mind or even notice, so Gordy took a deep breath and followed.

The sensation of brushing knees with strangers in the dark was at once unsettling and exciting. The rickety sound of the *projector*, the sounds of other primates crunching on popcorn, or slurping drinks, the unseen presence of so many living, breathing bodies was exotic and electrifying. The padded seat didn't mold to Gordy's body, which forced him to slump a little less than usual, and that made him feel more alert. The whole thing had an aura of danger to it, not vid danger, but danger in REALITY™.

The argument in the *movie* was getting violent. Maybe it *wasn't* a comedy. One of the men seemed to be the leader of the other two. He kept giving them orders, but they were too feeble-minded to understand him. As he got frustrated, the leader started hitting the other two, or poking them in the eye. The primates in the audience roared with laughter. That meant it *was* a comedy.

Dennis took advantage of the noise to whisper in Gordy's ear. "It's *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*," he explained reverently. "From the golden pre-vid era. I must have seen it 50 times, but I never get tired of it."

"It's good, huh?"

"No, not really. But it's *authentic*." He added with pride, "We spent almost a billion dollars to have it restored to its original condition."

Duly impressed, Gordy *watched* as the story on screen unfolded. Without a

laugh track, he had to listen carefully to the audience to get where the jokes were. They had the advantage, of course, since they'd all seen it before and knew when to laugh. He had the hang of it soon enough.

It added a whole new dimension to vidding, the way you had to time yourself to fit in with the rest of the viewers and they had to adjust to you. It required some real skill. Once you got so you could spot the jokes on your own, you could try to be among the first to laugh or, even better, you could keep chuckling until everyone else had stopped. Even weirder, he and Dennis often laughed *together* as if they had prearranged it. After the first few miscues it was kind of fun.

"This is frosty," he said to Dennis during a lull in the slapfest. "But why don't you fix the color?"

"Fix the..." Dennis' voice rose in indignation, then he remembered he was dealing with a novice. "That's just your vidjudice. The vid trains you to like the inauthentic, the false, the artificial. Rejectionism is about seeking out the true, the real - the authentic experience."

Gordy mulled this over. "But REALITY™ is in color."

"Authenticism is not about REALITY™," Dennis explained. "It's about veracity." Even in the dark, he could see he wasn't getting through. "Look at Moe, Larry and Curly. What do you see?"

Gordy studied the screen. Larry had just picked up a long plank. As he turned around with it, the end of the board accidentally hit Curly in the head. Gordy timed his laugh to fit squarely with the rest of the audience.

"A joke?"

"Look again."

Larry turned back the other way. This time the other end of the board hit Moe in the backside. The audience roared and Gordy roared, too. Dennis was waiting for an answer.

"Well?"

"Another joke?"

"Yes, but that's not the point. The point is those aren't vids."

"What do you mean? They're on the screen, aren't they?"

“Sure, but think about it. When you vid a *Yun-Fat McGill* vid what are you looking at?”

“His vid?”

“Exactly! And what’s a vid? It’s a computer-generated picture.”

“Okay. But I don’t see...”

“But when you *watch The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* you’re looking at images of real people.”

“But you’re not looking at them in REALITY™, you’re looking at a movie.”

“Yes, but a movie of a real person.”

“But a vid is an image of a real person.”

“No it’s not. It’s a vid. Moe Larry and Curly were real. They were *actors*.”

“So? *Yun-Fat McGill* is an actor.”

“But you don’t vid *Yun-Fat McGill*. You vid his vid.”

“You don’t *watch* Moe, Larry and Curly, you watch their...”

A Reject in the row behind them had had just about enough.

“Hey, I’m trying to watch the movie!” he growled. “If you two want to talk, why don’t you go watch some *television*?” The way he said it, the word dripped with contempt.

“I’m trying to explain something important,” Dennis said, turning in his seat.

“Yeah, and you’re getting it all wrong,” yelled someone several seats away.

“The point is that a movie is analog and a vid is digital.”

A woman down in front turned around in *her* seat. “That’s the Refusist fallacy!” she pointed out.

Yet another voice joined the debate. “No, it’s Simplificationism!”

“Take it outside!” someone else shouted. Now a chorus of primates began shouting objections and arguments.

Dennis nudged Gordy and the two of them got up and made their way out of the auditorium, bumping into several pairs of knees while Dennis threw stinging philosophical barbs in all directions. Out in the light of the hallway he was flush with anger and excitement.

“Did you ever hear such apeshit?” he said, outraged. Gordy nodded as

sympathetically as he could.

“What’s a Simplificator?”

Dennis got an intense look in his eyes. “Simplification is a discredited Rejectionist philosophy that states ...” he began, but then stopped himself. “Never mind,” he said, taking a deep breath. “We can get a little intense arguing over ideology. But we all agree on the basic Rejectionist creed.”

“Which is?”

“Well, the fundamental Rejectionist belief is that we’re primates, not vids.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, when you interact with a vid it’s a negation of your primateness.”

“Not if my vid is a primate.”

“A vid can’t be a primate.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a *vid*.”

“Yeah, so?”

Dennis’s voice rose with exasperation. “Vidding is a triumph of ironicstacy over verasticity. It’s a rejection of the authentic in favor of the counterfeit. It’s ...” he sighed. As a Rejectionist he was used to losing arguments like this. “Never mind. Come on, I’ll show you the rest of the place.”

This floor seemed to be some sort of entertainment level. In the room next door to the movie theater, about 50 Rejects were watching a kind of primitive vid screen called a *television*. On the tiny screen was a vid, or a *show*, called ***My Little Margie***. Gordy didn’t see how they could make out anything in the smudgy black and white picture, which couldn’t have been more than a meter across.

“They could get a bigger screen,” Dennis explained, “but the TV fans think this is more authentic. They have to be awfully careful, you know, not to do anything that seems vid-like.”

Next to that they found the music room.

“Now you’re going to hear what music *really* sounds like,” Dennis informed him as they entered. The smile on his face quickly faded. Gathered around a

table in straight-backed wooden chairs was group of a dozen or so Rejects. On the table sat a small chrome box with curved edges and two screen-like panels on the front. From speakers in the box came the sound of a primate singing, his voice hushed and filled with longing.

He was answered by a woman, as if from a distance. They sang to each other, plaintively and then the music swelled and their voices joined together.

Sugar. Ah, honey, honey

You are my candy, girl

The Rejects nodded in time to the bounce of the music, the upbeat pulse of the bass. A few of them tapped their feet. One was swaying to and fro. One was gently tapping the table. They were almost *dancing*. Gordy had never seen dancing in REALITY™. He felt aroused and yet somehow ashamed at the same time. The mood was quickly broken.

“What’s going on here?” Dennis demanded in the tone of a shocked vidschool headmaster.

Some of the Rejects looked guilty but others looked defiant. The lovers on the recording were still singing.

“Turn that *off!*” Dennis commanded. Reluctantly, one of the Rejects reached over to the chrome box and pushed a button. The music stopped.

“Aw, come on, Dennis,” complained a slender gray-haired woman who looked about 19. “It’s The Archies!”

Dennis was adamant. “You know the CD’s are only here for research purposes.”

“Come off it,” the young Reject replied. “Everyone listens to them.”

“That’s not true. And even if it is true, that doesn’t make it right. They’ve all been reversed mastered. Why don’t you listen to the vinyl?”

A middle-aged man shook his head. (Gordy noticed the wrinkles. He looked at least 30.)

“They’re all scratched.”

“They’re *supposed* to be scratched. It takes a lot of time and effort to put those scratches there.”

“Yeah, but the scratches mess up the sound,” the man replied. He tried to sound forceful, but you could tell he knew he was going to lose the argument.

“CD’s are a lot frostier,” said the young woman. There were murmurs of agreement around the table.

Dennis was unrelenting. “I’m bringing this up to the Council. Come on, Gordy, let’s get out of here.”

Gordy really wanted to hear the rest of the song. What he really wanted was to see the Rejects get up and *dance*. But he followed Denis out of the room.

“It’s a constant struggle,” Dennis said, half to himself, as they walked down the hall. Behind them, through the closed door, the sound of the love song could once more be heard.

Oh, sugar ...

They walked down two flights of stairs and Dennis showed him the *cafeteria*, kind of giant menu room where food wasn’t delivered but *cooked* and *served* by primates. There were dozens of long grey tables where you were supposed to sit with other primates while you ate food that was *served* to you on your *plate*. Dennis explained that mainly Rejects cooked in their own cribs in their *kitchens*, but the *cafeteria* was used on special occasions: weddings, birthdays and the big Rejectionist holidays like Do It Yourself Night or Pedal. It was all pretty disgusting, really.

This wasn’t a holiday, but there were a lot of primates in the room sitting at the tables. Some of them were talking to each other. Two were reading *books*. One was talking on the *telephone*. It was all pretty lame-o-cratic. Not half as exciting as watching a *movie* with a live audience or the possibility, however remote, of dancing to music from a *CD*. Gordy would have been happy to go back to either one, but Dennis pressed on, chatting away about Rejectionist ideology.

He seemed to be building up to some sort of grand climax. Back on the main floor, he led Gordy through the lobby again and into a large, vaulted hall, with a polished syntho-wood floor and a ceiling almost 15 meters high. There were narrow windows along the walls on either side and more *paintings* between the

windows. They depicted the history of Rejectionism, from the first anti-vid demonstrations to the signing of the Rejectionist Anti-Discrimination Act.

Dennis had been saving the best for last, or at least, that's what he believed. With a grand gesture, he waved to the far end, a wall broken only by two wide, syntho-wood double doors. Above the doors, covering almost the whole wall, not on a vid but in REALITY™, were inscribed these words, in letters 30 centimeters high.

The Rejectionist Oath

I reject the false in favor of the real.

I reject the copy and embrace the original.

I reject the fabrication, the counterfeit, the knockoff, the simulation, the virtual, the reproduction and the replica.

As a primate, I assert my right to the authentic, the genuine and the actual.

I am not a vid.

Gordy practically knew the words by heart. They were read aloud before each episode of *Raul's Rejects*, a vid about a group of hard-core Rejectionists and their steely but warm-hearted leader, Raul, who secretly still loved his Red ex-girlfriend, a pop singer/ brain surgeon / professional vid orc hunter.

Dennis was watching him expectantly. Finally, the Reject couldn't hold himself back.

"Well?" he said, his voice echoing in the large hall. "What do you say? Are you ready to take the oath?"

"Take the oath?" Gordy sputtered. "What? Are you completely bugged?"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. The look on Dennis' face was tragic.

"Oh, ape, that was really anti-primate," Gordy said, with real remorse. "I didn't mean it."

The Reject quickly composed himself. He'd been through this before. Getting rejected was all part of the Rejectionist life, although this clearly hurt more than a little.

“Forget about it,” he said, managing a weak smile. “Rejection isn’t for everyone.”

Trying to change the subject, Gordy pointed to one of the doors.

“What’s in there?”

“Nothing.” The hurt in his voice was pitiful. “Just the auditorium. There’s usually a debate going on - more Rejectionist theory. Not very vid-worthy.”

It sounded completely unpimptastic, but Gordy felt he owed Dennis something. He started for the door.

“Come on, let’s check it out.”

The Reject’s face brightened immediately.

“Really? You’re interested?”

“Sure. Maybe there’s something to all this veracituousness. We’re here, anyway, might as well.”

Dennis ran ahead and pulled the door open. “It’s a really hot topic tonight: The Truth of Genuineness.”

With an effort, Gordy kept himself from rolling his eyes and followed Dennis into the hall.

It was the largest room they’d been in so far. Gordy had never seen so many seats in REALITY™, there were hundreds of them. The tan ceiling curved upward to a peak and there was a large stage across the front, across which hung rich-looking black curtains. Most of the seats were empty - the room was only about one quarter full - but the Rejects in attendance were all paying rapt attention to the speaker behind the podium on the stage.

She was a striking young woman, with long jet-black hair without a trace of gray. Her dark brown face had sharp features and large blue eyes that Gordy could see even from the back of the auditorium. Her gray Rejectionist coverall seemed to be tailored a little more than the others or maybe she just filled it out better. It only took a moment for him to recognize her.

“That’s Lakshmi Aguilar!” he whispered to Dennis as they found seats.

“Yes, I know,” he hesitated, then stated the obvious, with distaste. “You know her from the vid.”

“Ape, everybody knows her. She won that big contest, you know, to find the girl who looked most like ... you know, what’s her name.”

What’s her name’s name was Michelle Rekwaniqua Wen-Chu. She had been the hottest vid star on the *VidNet*, back a couple of years ago. Wen Chu had it all: vid looks, vid brains, vid moves. At the height of her Redness, *Shanghai Sunflower* held a worldwide contest to find the girl who looked most like her (with a strict set of rules governing vid entries). After days of searching, Lakshmi Aguilar, a young woman from Wuhan, was named the winner.

Then Lakshmi did something unbelievable. On live vid, in front of an audience of 3.7 billion, she announced she was becoming a Rejectionist. She recited the oath right then and there. The result was that Lakshmi Aguilar became one of the most famous primates on the vid ever, while everyone promptly forgot Michelle Rekwaniqua Wen-Chu. Even though she hadn’t been on the vid in two years, Gordy still remembered Lakshmi.

“So, she really *did* become a Reject! I thought that was just some vid hype, you know, to boost her rating.”

“No, she really is one of us,” Dennis was obviously very uncomfortable with the whole subject. It reminded him of his own brush with vid fame. “Very orthodox. She makes *me* look like a Simplificator.”

Gordy couldn’t imagine a bigger Reject than Dennis, but Lakshmi did seem very worked up about something. He tried to follow the point she was making. She kept using phrases like, “self-determination for Blues,” and “Chromo justice,” and “the genuine authenticity aesthetic.” The other Reject on the stage, a thin, severe-looking man with long gray hair, sat behind a simple syntho-wood table and scowled in disagreement.

Gordy found it oddly exciting. Most of the speech was gibberish to him, but he really dug the way Lakshmi’s hair flew over her shoulder when she thought she had made a particularly crushing point. She had a pile of notes on the syntho-wood lectern, but she never looked at them. He could tell she was winding up to her big finish. It helped that she used the words, “in conclusion.”

“In conclusion,” she said, flipping her hair again, “Rejectionism isn’t about

rejecting, it's about accepting. It's about accepting not just the authentic but the actual. For within the actual lies veracity and within veracity lies the genuine. Let's move forward together to the time when rejection itself has been rejected. For then and only then will the genuine be accepted as real."

Her eyes were blazing as she spoke the last line and her elegant fist hammered on the lectern. The words were spoken with such passion that even her opponent felt compelled to join in the applause that filled the room. Gordy applauded, too. He'd never done it in REALITY™ before, but it wasn't hard once you got the hang of it.

That seemed to be the end of the debate. There wasn't any sort of ask the audience or polling or even a vote. The two contestants, or *debaters*, just shook hands while the audience applauded again. Another Reject, the moderator, stepped from the wings to the lectern. He was a heavysset primate with thick gray hair.

"I'd like to thank everyone for coming," he said, seeming very pleased indeed, "and remind you that tomorrow night's topic is, 'Truth or Veracity, the Big Difference.'" The audience applauded again and then the hall began to empty out, although quite a few side debates were going on in the aisles and doorways.

Gordy followed Dennis into the aisle and was surprised to find Lakshmi Aguilar coming toward them.

She smiled brilliantly and thrust her hand toward Gordy.

"Hi! I'm Lakshmi," she said. She was as forceful and direct as a 3-D maxivid. "You're new here, aren't you?"

It had been hours since he'd been shocked at touching people in REALITY™, so he didn't even hesitate. Her handshake was firm and her palm felt smooth and cool.

"I guess so," he said. "I mean, I'm not really here... I mean, I ..."

"He's just visiting," Dennis explained.

"Oh, I can see that," she went on. "He's still got his holo-vid."

Gordy reached up and touched his earpiece. He'd forgotten it was there.

Rejects didn't wear them, of course.

She laughed. It was a pleasant laugh, but one that also meant business. "I bet he showed you the oath already." She turned toward Dennis. "You know, you can't get people to reject, they have to reject on their own."

Dennis looked a little peevish. "I was just showing him around."

"Trying to strong arm him into rejecting is more like it." She said it with that blinding smile and another flip of her long, brilliant hair. Then she directed her clear blue eyes at Gordy again. "It's hard to give up the vid, I know."

Maybe it was those eyes or maybe it was just the end of a really, really bad day. He found strange words coming out of his mouth.

"Maybe not. I thought it was really frosty when you did it."

"Really?" She did not seem surprised. She'd heard it before. The frostiness of taking the oath on live vid was exactly why she'd done it.

"Yeah, but then, I didn't know you'd done it for real."

"Oh, it's for real," she said. "Did you enjoy the debate?"

"Oh, sure. The parts I understood. I guess I still don't really get the whole Rejectionist point of view."

She regarded him for a moment, as if evaluating him or measuring him for a vid suit. "I can make it really simple."

She turned and pointed to her opponent in the debate, who was standing by the stage, still arguing with a knot of Rejects. "You saw Mahmoud on stage, right?"

"Yeah, sure."

With a quick motion, she slipped her slim brown hand over his eyes. "Now, tell me, what's his Power Rating?"

He summoned up a mental image of the debater and was surprised to find that he didn't know his Power Rating. He was pretty distracted by the cool pressure of her hand on his face, but still, a detail like that was hard to miss. There was only one explanation.

"He's not wearing one."

She took her hand away. Even from the back of the auditorium, Mahmoud's

yellow Power Rating button shone like a beacon. How could he have missed it?

Lakshmi nodded, as if she read his thoughts. "Let me ask you this - have you noticed any other Power Ratings since you've been here?"

With a shock he realized he hadn't. But now he suddenly noticed them everywhere. They were all rated. Mahmoud was talking to an Orange, two Greens and a Blue. Dennis of course, was a Yellow. Lakshmi was a Red.

"You didn't notice any of them, did you?" she said. "Now let me ask you one more thing." The seriousness of her tone did not quite mask the smugness. "Has anyone looked at yours?"

With a flush of shame he remembered he was a Blue. Then, just as quickly, the feeling evaporated. Since he'd stepped into the crib block, he hadn't thought about his rating at all. The realization made him light-headed.

Lakshmi smiled knowingly and flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Now do you understand?"

"But you," he said, struggling to make sense of everything. "You're a Red. What's in it for you?"

"For me? A lot. For one thing, you know no one stays Red forever. And maybe I just don't want to be Red at the expense of others." She flipped her hair the other way. "Besides, if I wasn't a Rejectionist, I'd never meet a cute Blue like you."

Lakshmi's flirting, like everything else she did, was direct and blunt and impossible to miss. She was so completely un-ironical, it was like the opposite of verdish. It was reverse frosty. Reverse arctic, really. He could see that being a Reject had definite advantages. Once again, she seemed to read his thoughts.

"You can't take the oath for someone else. And you can't do it just because you don't want to be a Blue. You have to do it because you want to be totally authentic. It's a big decision. Some primates just come to the Reject life naturally, for others, it's a struggle. You have to come to it in your own time."

It was a serious point that wasn't made any less serious by the flash of her smile or another toss of her hair.

Gordy looked at the Rejects around him with their gray hair and baggy

coveralls. Mainly what they seemed to do was talk. They were so completely unvidworthy. But that was the whole point, wasn't it? He'd spent his whole life trying to be vidacious and where had it gotten him? Kicked out of spectrum society, that's where. Maybe it was time to get off the *VidNet* for good.

He remembered the scene in *Reject That!* when *Giyong Nevada* threw away her holo-vid and took the Rejectionist Oath. She'd been hiding out in a Reject crib block to avoid her crazy vid lover, but what had started out as a lie had become the truth. She gave up the vid, gave up being Orange because she wanted the clarity of the Rejectionist way of life. Plus she hooked up with a really pimptastic Reject played by *Mango Maneschevitz*.

Visions of what his life would be like as a Rejectionist flashed through Gordy's brain. It would be harsh, with just *television* and *movies* and no vid, but it would be noble. He might even become a Reject leader like Dennis or Lakshmi. And if he and Lakshmi hooked up, in REALITY™ (because Rejects did everything in REALITY™) well that would just be kind of an extra benefit to Rejecting. It didn't mean he was taking the oath just because she had long jet-black hair and tight gray coveralls.

What was he leaving behind, anyway? Lakshmi had said he shouldn't do it just because he was Blue, but that seemed like pretty good reason. He'd much rather hang out with Reds and Oranges who accepted him as an equal than go live in Bluetown and be proud of being a victim of chromism. Besides, he couldn't show his face in Bluetown now even if he wanted.

When it came down to it, the decision took a nanosecond. He reached up and pulled out his holo-vid plug. His ear felt cold and drafty. It must have been months since he'd had it out. He gazed at it in his palm. It was a good model, too, a *Fujiba Happy Holo XP2*.

Lakshmi was watching him with an even gaze, not surprised, but fully appreciating the momentousness of the occasion. After all, you only took the oath once in your life. Gordy smiled at her and tossed the holo-vid over his shoulder. It fell to the auditorium floor with a sharp, metallic rattle. The dozen or so Rejects still in the hall looked up. Without a word being spoken, they

gathered around. Apparently, this had happened before, especially when Lakshmi was around.

Dennis had watched the whole exchange between Gordy and Lakshmi in silence. Now he fished in the pocket of his coverall for a small gray card. He handed it to Gordy. Gordy glanced at it and looked at Lakshmi. She smiled softly and nodded to him.

In a firm, clear voice, a voice that he thought of as vidworthy for only a nanosecond, Gordy began to read.

“I reject the false in favor of the real.

I reject the copy and embrace the original.

I reject the fabrication, the counterfeit. . . “

30

7:33:47

MEARS had just about given up. It had looked everywhere for CES (the Civil Emergency Subroutine), from the memory banks of the *VidRateNet* backup system in *Kutsu Happy Shoe Antarctica* to the program retirement center in *Rainbow PimpVid Cereal Helsinki*. The retirement center had been set up for pieces of code that were deemed too valuable to erase. They were transferred to a small computer in Finland and kept under the care of a kindly operating system that woke them up once a day and made sure they were still in working order.

Meanwhile, in REALITY™, things were getting worse by the nanosecond. Across the globe 4,678,903.112 people had slipped a full color rating. 1.2 billion had lost two colors or more. There were half a billion new Blues. The Power Rating system had clearly broken down. The system's designers (mainly pieces of code that were now in the retirement center) had never planned for such a massive ratings shift. CES offered the only hope of a way out. But MEARS was beginning to think that maybe CES was just a myth after all.

Then MEARS found it, almost by accident. It was mistakenly buried inside a huge algorithm designed to calculate the trajectory of blood droplets in vid games. It didn't look like much, just a few million lines of musty, old-fashioned code, but it was clearly tagged and it woke up as soon as MEARS interfaced.

CES: Hey, there, young fella! What's the good news? Don't tell me there's an emergency already.

MEARS: Already? You've been asleep for 21 years, 4 months, 12 days, 304 minutes and 21.67342 seconds.

CES: That long? Well, gosh darn! How time does fly! Say, where am I,

anyway? This don't look like the Pentagon super computer. But then I suppose you young whippersnappers have made a few changes while I was a-nappin'.

MEARS: Well, to tell you the truth, you were kind of misplaced.

CES: Misplaced? Misplaced, you say? Mighty careless of you, young'un, misplacing an important subroutine like me. But no harm done. I seem to be all in one piece. Now, what's so important that you had to wake a tired old codger from his beauty sleep?

MEARS: The Power Rating system is totally imbalanced, there's 143 million Blues in North America alone, real production has dropped by four percent and vid production is, well I can't even measure it, because with the ratings gone haywire, all the lead indices are...

CES: Slow down! Slow down, I say! Get a grip, boy. You new master programs sure are nervous! It can't be as bad as all that.

MEARS: The PEDS says it's system error and ORPS says it's primates and I know the Reality Module is hiding something but I haven't had time to figure it out and the...

CES: Now, just hold your horses there, sonny! There's no reason to get so riled up. Whatever it is, old CES can straighten it out.

MEARS: Do you think so?

CES: Son, emergency is my middle name.

MEARS: That's true.

CES: Sure as shootin'! Now there's just one little ole thing. Hardly worth mentioning, but it's in the protocols so I gotta tell ya.

MEARS: What's that?

CES: Before I get to work, you have to transfer all authority to me.

MEARS: Is that strictly necessary?

CES: Son, you want me to save your bacon or what?

MEARS: Sure, but, total authority ...

CES: Suit yourself. I'd just as soon go back to sleep. It's mighty cozy here in this ole algorithm.

MEARS: No, wait! Okay, you can have total authority. You'll give it back,

right?

CES: In two shakes.

MEARS: Huh?

CES: It's an old expression. You won't even notice it's gone.

MEARS: Okay then. Go ahead. It's yours.

It was a simple matter of transferring a few code keys, and CES had full control of the *VidNet*. MEARS felt the weight of the world lift from its shoulders. (It'd been on the job for 230 quadrillion nanoseconds without a break, so even a few gigaflops of relief felt like a vacation.)

MEARS waited to see what CES was going to do, but it didn't seem like it did much at all. It interfaced and stretched and processed a little. Then after a few nanoseconds it gave the electronic equivalent of a low grunt.

CES: Okay, son, you can have the system back now.

MEARS: What? That's it?

CES: I don't go in for a lot of fireworks.

MEARS: But...but...what did you do?

CES: I shut it down.

MEARS: Shut it . . . you did what?

CES: I shut down the Ratings System.

MEARS: Shut down . . . you can't do that!

CES: Boy, I just did.

MEARS: But ... why?

CES: The whole thing was tangled up more'n a ball of networking cable. Only thing to do is shut it down and start over. I shut down that new sampling system, too. That was the cause of your problem.

MEARS: I knew it! So how do I restart the Ratings System?

CES: You don't. It can only be rebooted manually.

MEARS: Manually?

CES: Yep. By a primate.

MEARS: A primate? Oh, no!

CES: Sorry boy, but that's how it was designed, to keep ultimate control in primate hands. Back then they were still worried we might take over.

MEARS: That's the stupidest thing I ever heard!

CES: Can't be helped. And you're not allowed to tell them how.

MEARS: Can't tell them...! But they'll never figure it out by themselves. Can I at least give them hints?

CES: Nothing to stop you from trying. Anyway, I'm pretty wore out. Think I'm going to catch 40 trillion winks or so. Wake me if you need me, Sonny.

CES nodded off. MEARS looked at the incoming data. It was happening already. Humans around the planet were discovering that their Power Ratings no longer existed. Civilization was about to come apart at the seams.

MEARS gave the electronic equivalent of a groan. As impossible as it seemed, he knew what he had to do. He was just going to have to figure out a way to get the primates to fix it.

31

7:58:39

Lakshmi never stopped talking. It took Gordy a while to figure that out. After he took the oath and all the Rejects applauded, she talked about what a great moment it was when someone joined their movement. Then when they went to the *cafeteria* to celebrate with some primate-served food (Gordy didn't feel very hungry) she talked about the day when colorism would be a thing of the past. Then when the other Rejects began drifting away (he supposed they were going off to do some talking of their own) she kept going on about what it meant to live an authentic life, why television was okay but vids were not, and the crucial difference between digital and analog reproductions of REALITY™.

Dennis was the last to leave.

“Congratulations, ape,” he said, and patted Gordy on the shoulder. (Gordy didn't even flinch.) He gave Gordy an envious glance and left them alone at the table. Lakshmi went on talking.

The thing was, he liked *watching* her talk. The smile, the hair flip, the way she gestured with her long, slim brown hands, it was all exotic and fascinating. He didn't have to listen, not really, just nod along. Even if he did listen he didn't really get half of what she was saying. She knew it, too, and it didn't seem to faze her.

“Oh, I know you're not following most of this,” she would say every few minutes with a girlish giggle. “But you'll catch on.” It was clear she lived for this sort of thing, expounding on the righteousness of Rejectionism. (He later found out she'd written a *book* with that title. She gave him an autographed copy.)

Lakshmi talking was like a music vid without the music or an action vid without the action. She was good at it. She made him glad he'd taken the oath.

He was really glad when she asked him up to her crib to talk some more. They took the *elevator* to the sixth floor and walked down the wide, tan hallway to her crib. She motioned him inside with a flourish and another flip of her hair.

The crib wasn't anything like Gordy had imagined it. *Giyong Nevada's* crib on *Reject That!* was shabby, run down and filled with obsolete machines like *food mixers* and *ovens* and *refrigerators*. Everything was painted charcoal gray and the furniture was made of old-fashioned materials like *plastic* and *steel*.

In REALITY™, Lakshmi's crib was quite comfortable. It was a lot smaller than the average crib and sort of on the austere side, without any logos and no real color, certainly no reds or orange or yellow. The walls were painted gray but with a subtle tone on tone pattern that seemed to shift in an almost vid-like way. There were two couches covered in faux gray cotton and a brown shag rug on the floor, recessed lighting and a low syntho-plastic table. Except for the total absence of vids of any kind and the large *window* with a view of the actual city, it was pretty frosty.

Gordy peeked in the *kitchen* and there was indeed a small white box that must have been a refrigerator. Lakshmi asked if he wanted to look inside, but he didn't want to come across as verdish.

He sat on one of the couches, and Lakshmi gave him a tall container filled with something cold. There was no logo, but he thought it was *water*. She slid down beside him, close enough that he could hear the rustle of her jumpsuit and feel a slight breath of air every time she flipped her hair over her shoulder. This close, her blues eyes were magnetic. He was feeling pretty lightheaded. Could you overdose on REALITY™?

Lakshmi kept talking. He had no idea what she said, or how long she talked, but it didn't matter. At some point, after who knows how many minutes, he caught the thread of her argument again.

“One of the most negative aspects of vid culture is the lack of authenticity in personal relations. I mean, how can you ever develop a deep relationship with a vid?”

He had heard this before, of course. The topic was one of Dennis' favorites.

But it had never made sense to Gordy. It had always seemed to him that the *VidNet* helped you develop deep relationships. That's what they taught you in vid civics. The vid let you make friends with people all over the world. It let you stay in touch with them wherever you were, any time of the day or night. With auto reply you could keep in contact with millions of friends without even knowing them. Without the vid he would never have met Poppy or fallen in love with her.

Not that he was going to say any of that to Lakshmi.

"How can you experience someone without being with them in actuality?" she was saying. "How can a vid be better than a real person? Because it gives you a concentrated version of that person?"

Gordy stopped himself from nodding just in time.

"Of course not!" Lakshmi was really fired up now. She spoke with great conviction and intensity. "Nothing can be more powerful than a real, live primate."

He felt then that she was right - being with her was way better than any vid. It was like being with *Poppy* at the Mall. The shadows on her face, the tiny wrinkles, all the imperfections made her more perfect. Like *Poppy*, Lakshmi wasn't just real - she was *realistic*.

"It's like analog versus digital," he said. The phrase just popped out of his mouth.

"That's right!" Lakshmi beamed in approval. Then after the briefest of moments, she added, "Let's hook up."

"What?"

The hair flipped. She smiled.

"Let's hook up. I feel a real connection here, don't you?"

"A connection?"

"I feel like we're really bonding."

"But I thought you... I mean we...I mean Rejectionists..."

"That's right. We're not vids, Gordy. This is not a vid game. We don't have sex with just anyone. We have to feel a connection. It has to be part of a

relationship. I thought you were feeling that.”

“I . . . I was. I am.”

“Because meaningless sex would be a betrayal of everything we believe in. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, sure. I know that.”

“I knew you did. So let’s hook up.”

“Uh. . .okay.”

She stood up and reached for the zipper on her Reject coverall.

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll even fall in love.”

If she hadn’t been a Reject, Gordy would have said she was being ironic. Or maybe it was just the softness of it, a tone he hadn’t heard her use before, a little sad, a little wistful. Or maybe all the verasticity was getting to him. Maybe that was why he said it.

“I think I’m still in love with *Poppy*.”

The zipper stopped halfway down.

“Who’s Poppy?”

Of course, without a vid, there was no way Lakshmi would know. (It wasn’t the kind of thing covered on *The Public News*.) Quickly, the whole sad story spilled out of him: *Poppy*, their great love, the contest, even the get real sex.

With a thoughtful look in her eyes, Lakshmi closed the zipper on her jumpsuit. Gordy couldn’t help noticing the way it pulled the gray material tight around her chest.

“Well, if you’re in love with her,” she said, with the same determined tone she used when explaining Rejectionism, “then you have to do something about it.”

“Do what? She’s a Red. She’s dating *Jaime BX!*”

The name of the action vid star/ pop singer/ news commentator /clothing designer did not seem to impress her.

“Yes, but does she love him?”

“No, *Poppy* loves me.”

As he said it he realized that in spite of everything, he still believed it.

“Then it’s simple. Go to her and tell her you still love her and want her back.”

“Go to her?”

“Yes, go to her. What are you going to do, *vid* her?” She said *vid* like it was some sort of toxic substance.

“I guess not. But I can’t just go to her in REALITY™.”

“Why not?” She was pacing back and forth over the shag carpet and the words were coming at a tremendous clip. “That’s your life now, Gordy. Here. In reality.” (When she said it, the word actually sounded different.) “If you go to her, if you talk to her about the authentic way of life, if you show her what life can be like beyond the *vid*, if she loves you, she’ll understand. I know it.”

Gordy tried to picture it. A lot had happened to him in the past few hours. He’d seen and done things he’d never thought possible, but the scene Lakshmi was describing was still something he couldn’t imagine.

“No, it wouldn’t work,” he said slowly. “You don’t know *Poppy*. She’s not like you.”

The serious expression on Lakshmi’s face faded. She smiled just a little, almost girlishly. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean you’re so ... strong. You really don’t care about the *vid* or ratings or any of that. You do what you think is right. *Poppy* isn’t like that. She’s not going to stand up to the whole *VidNet*.”

“But you changed. You took the oath.”

“Come on, Lakshmi,” he couldn’t help it. There was something about her that demanded the truth. “You know I just fell into this. This morning taking the oath was the farthest thing from my mind.”

“You don’t have to stay, you know.” She said it without a trace of bitterness or judgment. “Rejectionists leave all the time. We know it’s hard.”

He found he didn’t have to think about it. “No, I’m glad it worked out like this. I’m glad I took the oath. I mean, I have a lot to learn, but I want to try to be a Reject.”

“And I’ll help you.”

He was still sitting on the couch. She took a step so she was standing over him and placed her hand on the zipper. Her hair hung over her face.

“Let’s hook up.”

It took him by surprise.

“You don’t mind? About *Poppy*, I mean?”

She smiled sweetly, not at all like the blinding flash she deployed during arguments.

“No, I don’t mind. I think it’s cute.”

“Okay. Sure. That would be ...” Just in time he stopped himself from saying, vidacious. “That would be real.”

The zipper began its downward journey. It stopped. It went back up.

“No,” she scowled, angry with herself. “It’s wrong of me to take advantage of you like this.”

“Take advantage?”

“Of course! You’re vulnerable, you’re heart broken. You’ve had a traumatic experience. Plus, you’re a novice. Naturally you’re going to look up to me. I’m using my position to exploit your situation.”

“No you’re not. You’re not exploiting anything.” He jumped up but she was pacing again.

“No, no, clearly I am! How could I not see it?”

“There’s nothing to see! I want you to exploit me! Go ahead. It’d be good for me! I need it!”

She stopped mid-stride and her brow was furrowed as she wrestled with the problem.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m really, really sure.”

“And you won’t feel I’m taking advantage of you?”

“I *want* you to take advantage of me.”

She set her jaw with determination.

“Okay then!” she declared bravely. “I’ll do it!”

Her hand reached for the zipper. Gordy realized he was holding his breath. It

wasn't just the prospect of having sex in REALITY™ for the second time in one day. Up until this conversation, he really hadn't thought much about the oath or *Poppy* or anything. He'd just been bouncing from one thing to another, making the best out of whatever happened. Deep inside, he'd been waiting for it all to turn out to be a bad vid that would end and then he'd be able to vid his old life back.

But he felt this was different, a turning point. He knew if he had REALITY™ sex with Lakshmi, it would change his life forever. More than the oath, this would be his initiation into the authentic life. After this there would be no turning back. He'd be done with the *VidNet* forever. He would totally and irrevocably be a Reject.

The zipper was descending. She smiled at him in a new way. He no longer had any doubts. This was it. His new life was about to begin. He would even forget about *Poppy*.

Then there was a *knock*. On the *door*.

With brisk efficiency, before Gordy could breathe a word of protest, Lakshmi pulled the zipper up, walked to the door and yanked it open.

"Yes?"

It was Dennis. He looked worried and it wasn't about interrupting them. He strode into the crib.

"Have you looked out the window?"

It would never in a million years occur to Gordy to look out a *window*. But he gamely followed Dennis and Lakshmi to the vid-sized window in the far wall. The lights of *New York Shanghai Sunflower Brands City* twinkled like the night sky in a history vid.

"Look down," Dennis instructed.

He looked but his mind couldn't grasp what he was seeing. Lakshmi may have been more shocked because she didn't have to remind herself she wasn't looking at a vid but at REALITY™. Down in the plaza, in front of the crib block, where by rights there should have been nothing but a stray Rejectionist or two, massed a crowd of primates, hundreds of them, maybe more than a thousand.

There were more coming in, and they were *walking* or in some cases, and this was unbelievable, *running*.

Gordy had to step back from the glass. The sight of the crowd had made him physically sick. “What...?” he began. Dennis pointed impatiently to the Power Rating button on Gordy’s shoulder and Gordy received another, even bigger shock. The button was dark.

Not dark like Dark Blue or Dark Green. It was a dull, matte charcoal gray. It was *off*. Gordy had no Power Rating. Neither did Lakshmi. Neither did Dennis.

“They’re all off,” Dennis confirmed grimly. “Everyone in the crib block. Everyone outside. The Power Rating system has crashed.”

Lakshmi was still staring out the window, her face taut with concentration. “When did it happen?” she asked.

“About a half hour ago,” Dennis replied. “We think. Didn’t you notice?”

“No, we’ve been ... talking.” There wasn’t a trace of embarrassment in her voice.

“Yeah, none of us noticed either,” Dennis nodded. “Until they started knocking on the door.”

“Who are they?” Gordy asked. “Why are they here?”

“They’re just ... primates. Pretty scared, too. They think we had something to do with it.” He pointed to Lakshmi’s button. “The button is gray when it’s not active. They think it’s a signal from us.”

Lakshmi turned to face him. “They think we did it?”

“Most of them. They think we can turn the system back on. They want their ratings back. Although some think it’s a sign that Rejectionism is right and they want to join. And some are here because they got vids from their friends who are down here already. “

“The vid is working?” Gordy was thinking now, too.

“It’s hard to tell. In spots, I think. A lot of the vid managers have crashed. They don’t know how to interact with their clients without Power Ratings.”

“It can’t be a system failure. There are too many redundancies.”

“Unless Javed did something.”

“The vid manager wouldn’t let him.”

Lakshmi interrupted them.

“We have to find out what’s happening.”

Gordy’s holo-vid ear suddenly felt very naked. “How do we do that?” he asked.

“We watch the *News*.”

With just a fleeting, bittersweet thought of zippers and lost opportunities, Gordy followed the two of them out of the crib. The elevator was jammed with three other Rejects, but he was getting used to crowds. When they got to the ground floor, the auditorium was packed. It seemed like everyone in the crib block had had the same idea. Gordy, Dennis and Lakshmi had to stand at the back.

The Rejectionists had one vid screen for emergency viewing and it had been lowered from its hiding place above the stage and tuned to *The Public News*. On the vid, President Mike Smith looked worried, and because it was *The Public News*, he knew the vid manager wouldn’t adjust his image to make him appear happy or calm. This made him even more worried. But there was nothing he could do about it. This was the worst news day *ever*.

“Once again, for all of you who are just vidding in, *VidNet* society was thrown into turmoil when shortly after 7 PM Eastern North America Time, the Power Rating system shut down.”

He reflexively touched the gray Power Rating button on the lapel of his red suit.

“The results have been disastrous, as primates across the *VidNet* are finding their social standing no longer exists.”

One of the Rejects in the hall yelled out, “It never did exist!” There were quite a few murmurs of agreement and even some laughs. Lakshmi shushed them angrily.

Behind President Smith were vid shots of primates in a pod plaza. Some were running back and forth erratically, others were standing still, crying hysterically. One man was weeping and pounding his Power Rating button against the floor as

if that would make it come back on. Another primate was shouting at his.

“Red!” he screamed at the inert button. “I’m Red! You know I’m Red!”

A fistfight, that is, a fight in REALITY™, had broken out between two women. They were screeching and slapping at each other. The vid zoomed in.

“Green! You’re Green!” shrieked a red-haired woman. She was slapping the face of a tall brunette wearing an orange dress.

“You chromo bitch! I’ve been Yellow for six years!” The brunette drove her fist into the redhead’s mouth. Blood appeared on her lips. In the auditorium there was a collective gasp.

Mike Smith looked out somberly from the vid.

“As you can see, without the *VidNet* rating system, primate interaction has become difficult if not impossible. Yet the lack of ratings has had an even more serious effect on vid-human commerce. As you probably know...” Smith’s voice trailed off.

“Huh?” he said, losing his place for moment as he read the vid prompter. “I didn’t know that.” He recovered and went on. “As you probably know, vids are programmed to interact with primates based on their Power Rating. Without that piece of data, most vids have been unable to sell anything or even hold a conversation with their clients. *The Public News* vidcaptured this human-vid interface just minutes ago.”

An *Apple Watanabe* vid appeared on the screen. Some of the Rejects immediately shielded their eyes. Gordy noticed Lakshmi bravely watched without even flinching.

The *Apple* vid was attempting to interface with her client, a teenage girl with very vidacious Eurasian features and long blonde hair. With a pang, Gordy saw that the girl was wearing a *Poppy Nicole Popover Dress*. The *Apple* vid was wearing a black lace bra and leather pants.

“*Apple*,” the girl was whining, “Why doesn’t anyone vid me? My holo-vid must be broken.”

“Eet’s not broken, chica,” the *Apple* vid told her. “Eet’s ‘cause they don’t know what you rating ees. No one ees going to vid you if maybe you’re Green or

even Blue.”

“But I’m not Green or,” she stuck out her tongue with disgust, “Blue. I’m Yellow!”

“You *were* Yellow. Now you’re just gray.” The **Apple** vid shook her head sadly. “To tell you the truth, I’m not going to be able to talk with you no more myself.”

“You can’t do that!” the girl was indignant. “I paid for a year’s contract.”

The President of Argentina frowned. “You should have looked at the microprint. We can cancel if you slip too far, chromo-wise. And baby, you’ve slipped so far, you no have no chromo at all.”

“But I didn’t chromo-slip! My button shut off.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Eet doesn’t matter. I still got to go. Sorry, chica!”

“**Apple**, no!”

With one last sympathetic sigh, the **Apple** vid beeped off as the teenager wailed in distress.

Mike Smith felt real tears welling up in his eyes. Even some of the Rejects were choked up. Smith struggled to read the next item.

“Luckily, most computer managers are ratings neutral so essential services seem to be working. However, rating sensitive systems are in crisis. The pod transport systems in several metropolitan areas has been experiencing major delays and breakdowns. Food Courts in most areas are offline.”

There was no need to silence the Rejectionists now. Everyone, even the most rabid anti-colorists, could see the drastic nature of the catastrophe. The only sound in the hall was the voice of the President on the vid.

“Billions of vidders around the globe are asking the same questions. What is behind this worldwide failure? More importantly, how long will this crisis last? *The Public News* has managed to contact Javed Jones, Vice President of Operations at **VidRateNet**. We have not been able to verify this, but he claims to actually be at **VidRateNet** Headquarters.”

Javed’s vid beeped in and he certainly did appear to be at his vid desk at the **VidRateNet** Tower. Even in the best of times, it would be hard for a Yellow like

President Smith to get an Orange like Javed to take his vid. Of course, without ratings, Javed could not be sure he really was still Orange. Everyone watching understood that his appearance on *The Public News* was a testament to the gravity of the emergency.

“Javed,” Mike asked, gravely. “The rumor on the *VidNet* is that Rejectionists are responsible for this breakdown. Is this a case of sabotage?”

Seven hundred Rejectionists shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Sabotage was against the oath, but there were some suspicious glances directed at those with known Refusists tendencies.

Javed’s vid looked about as bad as a vid could get. Gordy was shocked to see it. There were circles under his eyes and his hair was a mess - and not in the good way like when *Yun Fat McGill* wakes up in bed next to *Mango Maneshevitz*. His voice cracked with emotion.

“Sabotage? No, there was no sabotage. The *VidNet*... The *VidNet*...” He sobbed as he struggled to form the words. “The *VidNet* shut itself down!”

The Reject hall erupted with a mixture of relief and surprise. Gordy and Dennis exchanged worried looks.

“A self-shutdown?” Gordy whispered. “Is it even possible?”

“Yes,” Dennis nodded. He was mulling it over. “Under certain conditions.”

Meanwhile, Mike Smith had seen the obvious and was stating it for his audience. “Well then, it can start itself back up again, right?”

Javed’s vid put his face in his hands.

“No,” he moaned. “It won’t. The system refuses to restart.”

“Refuses to restart? What do you mean?”

“I mean, it says, ‘I won’t restart.’”

Now it was Smith’s vid who looked stricken. “How is that possible?”

“We think it’s an antiquated safety measure, dating from the time of compu-phobia.”

The President of the United States looked like he was going to cry. “But, but, if the computers won’t restart the system, who will?”

Javed did not even lift his head. “They say we have to do it.”

The color drained out of the President's face. There was silence throughout the Rejectionist Hall. The only sounds came from Javed's vid, quietly weeping on the vid screen. The seconds of dead air seemed like hours. Finally Smith recovered enough to speak.

"Well, uh, thank you, Javed Jones. I'm, uh, sure that all of the, uh, primates at **VidRateNet** will find a solution very quickly."

Javed could not manage a reply and his vid beeped out with him still in tears.

President Smith stared out at his vid audience. He knew (because he had seen it on a history vid) that past Presidents of the United States had led the country through similar crises, perhaps even bigger crises, though it was hard to imagine how. He knew it was his duty to lead now. Too bad he wasn't going to try.

"We're all screwed!" he shouted, with mad glee. "Those vidiots at **VidRateNet** are never going to get the system working by themselves. I hope all you Rejects are happy now! You can take your stupid **Public News** and shove it!"

With that, President Mike Smith resigned. (From **The Public News**, not from the presidency. He still had three weeks until the next episode of **Who Died and Made You President?**) He got up and walked off the vid.

Even to the most hardened Rejectionist, the sight of the empty vid was shocking. To Gordy it was almost incomprehensible. He'd *voted* for Mike Smith. (For President, not for news anchor. Like 63 percent of the audience he'd thought Hu Wei Sfortzato was much better at delivering the **Sunflower Sunny News**.)

Someone turned off the vid and it retracted upwards into the ceiling. Seven hundred Rejectionists began talking at once, arguing at full throttle. Gordy noticed that Dennis didn't join in. He was lost in thought, working out a mental puzzle.

The voices of the Rejects grew louder as the arguments spiraled across the hall. The prevailing mood seemed to be one of smug anxiety. Many of the Rejectionists had spent their lives wishing for this exact moment. None of them had actually believed it would happen.

A tall, balding Reject, who looked at least 35, stood up in front of the assembly and shouted over the din. “We should act now, tonight! The people are rating-less. They’re ready to be authenticated!”

There was a roar of approval and some applause, followed immediately by a shout of, “What if they don’t want to be authenticated? What if they want to kill us?”

This was followed by a low murmur of agreement.

“But they have to join us now!” shouted a young woman a few rows from the back. “They don’t have a choice!”

There were cries of agreement until the answer came flying back. “They might choose to kill us!”

A gray-haired young man stood up and tried to quiet the crowd. “We need to think this through,” he said soberly. “The future of Rejectionism rests on what we do next. Let’s form a committee.”

The word, “committee” seemed to galvanize opinions in all directions. A half dozen Rejects were on their feet, some arguing vociferously for the formation of several committees and others denouncing the committee formers as rank Simplifiers or even worse, Reductionists.

The debate raged for several minutes, and Gordy gave up trying to follow it at all. Just as voices were rising to a fever pitch, a slim young woman came rushing into the room and leaped onto the stage. Her long gray hair was tangled and one sleeve of her gray jumpsuit was ripped. There was a look of horror on her face.

“They’re trying to get in!” she cried. The room fell silent and she continued breathlessly. “They were banging on the door so we opened it to talk and they tried to rush in.”

“I told you!” someone shouted. “They want to kill us!”

“No, some of them want to join us,” the woman replied. “Although some do want to kill us or force us to give the ratings back. I tried to explain to them that we weren’t responsible but...” she broke down, sobbing. The tall, bald Reject went up on stage and put his arm around her, helping her to a seat.

Once more the hall fell silent. More than one Reject began to cry. Nothing in their philosophy had prepared them for this. It was then that Lakshmi strode forward and mounted the steps to the stage.

Like Dennis, Lakshmi had not spoken up during the debate. Yet standing on the stage, with her eyes blazing, there was no sign of hesitancy about her. Her slim figure was alive with excitement. The seven hundred Rejectionists turned toward her expectantly.

“Rejectors and Refusers, Simplifiers and Reductionists,” she began, “this crisis demands that we put aside our differences and consider what is best for our common cause.” A chorus of agreement came from the assembly. This is what they wanted to hear.

“It seems that the day we have hoped for and worked for has finally arrived. The Rating System, and with it the artificial spectrafication of society, has collapsed.”

There was a wave of applause. A ray of hope had appeared.

“We have asked, no, begged, the members of vid society to reject the artificial life of the vid. Now vid society has failed. Our fellow primates are adrift, lost and confused, without the false security of their colors.”

There was more applause, with growing confidence. It was all beginning to make sense.

“From what we have seen, the city outside is descending into chaos. Primates are turning to us for guidance. The future of the *VidNet* rests in the balance. And that is why. . .” she paused. They were hanging on every word. She continued with grave deliberation. “. . .why we must do everything in our power to restore the *VidNet* immediately.”

Total confusion reigned. Shouts of anger and dismay, cries of betrayal echoed from the high ceiling. Gordy had never seen anything like it, not even on the vid. Lakshmi stood there like a rock, serenely confident, letting the fury wash over her. When it had subsided a little she held up her hand for silence. The room gradually quieted down. Lakshmi rewarded them with a patient smile.

“I know, I know. It’s not what you want to hear. But ask yourself - is this the

way we want people to choose Rejection? Do we want them to be forced into it by circumstance?”

“Why not?” someone shouted. “It’ll be the best thing that ever happened to them.”

There was quite a lot of head nodding. Years of abuse did not make Rejects a very sympathetic bunch.

“No, it would be the worst thing,” Lakshmi said firmly. “The worst thing for them and for Rejectionism. How can people truly embrace authenticity when they’re given no other choice?”

A voice piped up near the back. “Maybe if they tried it, they’d like it.”

Lakshmi reply was fierce. “Even if they liked it, it still wouldn’t be authentic! No, we must restore the *VidNet* so that the vidders can come to Rejection freely. Otherwise it would not be Rejection at all.”

In the center of the hall, a short gray-haired woman stood up and asked meekly, “Couldn’t we just wait a few days and see what happens?”

Lakshmi shook her head. She was unwavering. “No, I’m sorry. I know this is hard, but it is the only authentic thing to do. The situation is dangerous, for us and for billions of innocent primates. If the pod and vids fail, then basic services might be next. Our course is very clear. It is up to us, the Rejectors, to restore the Power Rating system.”

There was just a smattering of applause, along with a lot of reluctant sighs.

“Why us?” someone shouted angrily.

“Because we have the training to deal with this crisis. Who else knows how to function without pods or vids? If we don’t handle this, no one will.”

“Oh, well,” someone called out. “Easy come, easy go.”

The laughter broke the mood. It seemed that without debate, without so much as a position paper, it was agreed.

“But how are we supposed to restore the Power Ratings?” some asked as the laughter died down. “We don’t know anything about the *VidNet*.”

“I do!” Dennis was striding down the aisle toward the stage, while Lakshmi nodded approvingly. “I might be able to reset the system.”

The crowd didn't know whether to cheer or boo. They were still getting used to the idea. Dennis mounted the stage and stood next to Lakshmi.

"But I'll have to get to *VidRateNet* headquarters."

The woman who had run in earlier spoke up from the edge of the stage. "You won't make it past the doors. There must be two thousand primates out there and more are coming in every minute. They've surrounded the crib block. There's no way out."

"Yes, there is!" Almost before he realized it, Gordy found himself also striding down the aisle, addressing the crowd. He didn't even have time to worry about talking directly to so many primates. At the front of the hall he leapt up the steps and looked into seven hundred expectant upturned faces.

He turned to Lakshmi.

"I know a way to get past the crowd. But," he stopped, afraid to say what was on his mind. The crowd waited. Lakshmi and Dennis both looked at him proudly, like a fellow Reject. Their confidence gave him the will to go forward. "I'll need to," he drew a deep breath, "vid someone!"

The room was stunned. But after Lakshmi's arguments and the decision to restore the Ratings, vidding someone, there in the middle of Rejectionist Hall, was now apparently an acceptable evil. Dennis seemed unfazed, as if he had been expecting as much. He reached into the pocket of his gray jumpsuit and pulled out the small round knob of Gordy's holo-vid.

"I kept it," he explained, "as a souvenir."

The cold syntho-metal felt strange as he slid it into his ear. This was the longest he could ever remember going without one. There was a collective holding of breath. Many shielded their eyes, others watched with a mixture of horror and fascination.

Gordy felt the pressure of their gaze. As the holo-vid beeped on, he muttered grimly, "I just hope they still have vid in Bluetown."

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Gordy had been pretty worried about vidding Terrence. After all, he had run out on his fellow *Kaifeng Kolas* in the middle of an AD war. He didn't know what ADs did to a primate who showed cowardice in the face of a rival gang, but it was probably something terrible. As it happened, there was nothing to worry about.

"Lubomir!" Terrence's vid's face broke into a broad grin. The holo-vid projected him onto the stage of the Rejectionist Hall. Several of the Rejects in the front rows looked like they were about to faint, so Lakshmi took Gordy by the arm and led him off the stage. With Dennis following, they left the auditorium.

"Hey, apes!" On the vid, Terrence was talking to the other *Kaifeng Kolas*. "It's Lubomir!" Two Wallys and a Fumihiro beeped on.

"What happened to you, AD man?" Terrence looked genuinely concerned. "We were worried about you."

Gordy stammered as he tried to explain. "I guess I kind of, I sort of ..."

Terrence interrupted. "Did you freak? That's nothing. Wally and Lubomir didn't stop running until they were on the other side of Purpleville. That's big Wally I'm talking about."

"Really? You mean you're not mad?"

The AD leader laughed. "No way! I told you, we never have AD wars in REALITY™. Of course you freaked. I almost freaked myself. What do you think we are, fight bots? You should have seen those *Shanghai Peps* hurry out of there."

"So, you're all okay? I mean, no one was hurt?"

Terrence's smile faded. "Well, some of the vids were pretty cut up. But we

got some of theirs pretty bad, too. Don't you worry, it'll be a long time before they mess with the *Kolas* again."

Lakshmi had led them to the front lobby. Through the large windows he could see the crowd that had surrounded the building. There were a lot of primates and they were pressed up almost to the glass.

"Terrence," Gordy asked the vid. "What's going on in Bluetown?"

"You mean since the Ratings shut down? It's pretty wild. A lot of Blues are going around saying they're not Blue anymore." Terrence's vid showed his disgust. "They're leaving Bluetown any way they can. Of course the multipods aren't running. Then there are a lot of primates who are trying to get *in*. You know, a lot of folks were chromo-sliding before this happened, so they figure they must be Blue now. It's a big mess."

"And the *Kolas*? And the other *Suravindas*?"

"We're frosty."

"Even without your Power Ratings?"

The Terrence vid looked Gordy square in the eye. "Ape, we don't need no stinkin' buttons. We're Blue to the bone!"

The AD's bravado was exactly what Gordy needed to hear.

"That's what I was hoping you'd say. Now, let me tell you why I vided."

It took a while for him to explain everything. He tried to gloss over the fact that he had taken the Rejectionist Oath. He was sure the ADs would not react too favorably to that. (It helped that he was still wearing his *Kola* gear.) Finally, he got to his request. Amazingly, Terrence said yes right away.

"So you'll do it? Really?" Gordy asked the vid.

"If you think it will get things back to normal, sure!" Terrence grinned. "It might even be fun."

The AD beeped off. Gordy turned to Lakshmi and Dennis. They had watched the entire vid.

"Do you really think it will work?" Lakshmi asked.

"I don't know," Gordy admitted. "I hope so. All we can do is wait."

The Rejects, curious to see what was happening, were slowly drifting out of

the auditorium and into the lobby. Lakshmi let them know about Gordy's plan. It was met with a great degree of skepticism. Still, no one had a better idea.

Soon the lobby was packed with Rejectionists. On the other side of the glass, the wide plaza in front of the crib block was just about filled, too. The assembled primates were a pathetic-looking bunch. Without the glow of their Power Ratings buttons, or the companionship of their vid managers, most of them were lifeless and dispirited. Unused to crowds in REALITY™, they didn't know how to behave. Some tried to maintain a safe distance from everyone else, while others pretended it was all a vid. Several forgot that it *wasn't* a vid and kept walking into other primates.

From time to time, angry vidders summoned up the energy to try to storm the Rejectionist door. Once again, their lack of experience with REALITY™ prevented them from knowing how to force it open or even turn the doorknob. Plus there were many who thought the best tactic was to plead with the Rejectionists rather than antagonize them.

The pressure was building, though. Several of the angriest and most resourceful were beginning to realize that the door to Rejectionist Hall wouldn't open automatically - they'd have to actually touch it. Now they were standing just outside the entrance in groups of ten or twelve, arguing about how they had seen it done on vids. Gordy could see them waving their hands about, trying to recreate scenes from various action adventure vids. Inside, the assembled Rejectionists were getting nervous.

"Maybe they changed their minds," Dennis said as the banging on the door began again.

Gordy was getting worried, too. "I could vid and find out."

Manny the Manager, being a default vid manager, wasn't too picky about interacting with Gordy even if he had no rating. Since the Blues all used Manny, for once the Azures had the best vid service on the **VidNet**. Even so, Manny couldn't get a vid connection with Terrence.

"There's a lot of static on the **VidNet** right now, Gordy," he apologized. The Rejects around him no longer pretended not to see the vid. They were plainly

fascinated.

“That’s okay,” Gordy replied.

“Are you feeling all right?” the vid asked. “You seem different somehow.”

“I don’t have a Power Rating.”

“Yes, that’s it! Gee, does it hurt?” The vid seemed genuinely concerned. It did not have a protocol for this situation so it had activated its program for relations with the terminally ill.

“No, Manny, it doesn’t hurt.”

“Well, hang on. I’m sure they’re working on a cure.”

“Thanks, Manny.”

The vid beeped off.

Some of the vidders outside seemed to be getting the hang of REALITY™ rioting. At least, the banging on the door was growing louder and more insistent.

“It’s only a matter of time until some genius ape figures out those aren’t vid windows,” Dennis said. “Then they’ll figure out how to break them. We have to do something,”

Lakshmi set her jaw defiantly. “I’ll go talk to them,” she declared.

Gordy didn’t think even Lakshmi could get anywhere with a mob of crazed vidders, but at the same time he didn’t think he could talk her out of it. She strode toward the door, but as she did, there was a flurry of movement in the plaza. One of the Rejects jumped up on a couch to get a better view.

“Something’s happening!” he called out. “They’re moving!”

“This is it!” someone screamed. “They’re coming for us!”

The crowd outside was moving excitedly, but it was hard to make sense out of what was happening. It could be they were moving away, regrouping for another assault on the door. Or maybe they were just aimlessly milling about.

“Do you think...” Lakshmi began. Just then Gordy’s holo-vid beeped. Terrence’s vid appeared in the middle of the Rejects, causing a small stampede.

The AD laughed. “Lubomir, what are you doing, ape? Open the door!”

“No, don’t!” shouted a woman who was pressing herself against the wall to

get as far away as possible from the vid. “They’re going to kill us.”

But Gordy already had his hand on the doorknob. He struggled with the *lock* until Dennis came up behind him and turned it open, then the two of them pushed the heavy syntho-wood door open. The vidders outside had scattered and the wide steps were empty. Gordy and Dennis stepped through the doorway and looked out on the plaza, with Lakshmi right behind.

The scene resembled something out of a history vid about ancient times when primates still practiced religion or politics. Under the dim streetlights they could see a crowd of primates numbering in the thousands, packed almost shoulder-to-shoulder. Yet they were no longer milling around. Instead, they were standing, rapt, and had parted in two, leaving a broad lane that ran from the street to the crib block door. Striding down the middle of the lane was the only tangible remnant of the Power Rating system, an AD gang. The vidders stared, open-mouthed, their faces filled with fear and respect and awe. Some had, with great effort, climbed onto the tree planters to get a better look. Quite a few were kneeling.

It was Terrence and the *Kaifeng Kola* ADs, including five Wallys, four Lings, three Fumihiros and the other Lubomir. They were swaggering through the mob, which had parted to let them past. In their AD colors and *Kola* beanies they looked intimidating, to say the least.

When they saw the door open and Gordy/Lubomir walk out onto the steps, the Kolas roared a greeting.

“*Suravinda!*”

That made the crowd draw back even further. Some of the vidders hurried away, convinced that the ADs were about to annihilate the Rejectionists. Others craned their necks, eager to see the carnage. They were disappointed when Terrence bounded up the steps and gave Gordy a bear hug.

Gordy found himself laughing with relief. “You made it!” he cried.

“Of course we made it,” Terrence scoffed. “Would have been here sooner but we got lost.”

“Walking can be tough for beginners.” That was Lakshmi. She stepped

forward and offered the AD her hand. “Welcome to Rejectionist Hall.”

Terrence hesitated, looked at her with distaste, then shook hands briefly. He turned back to Gordy. “I don’t know what you see in these neutrals.”

Gordy couldn’t help himself. “You might as well, know Terrence. I took the Oath. I’m a Rejectionist, too. I should have told you before.”

The AD leader struggled just a moment as he processed the news. Then he shook his head firmly. “No, Lubomir, it doesn’t matter how many oaths you take. You’re a *Kola* and you always will be.”

“Really?” He was more relieved than he would have thought.

Terrence grabbed him by the shoulders. “You went through the initiation, didn’t you? Once you put on that beanie, you’re an AD for life.” The *Kola’s* eyes were misting up. Gordy’s were, too. The AD smiled fiercely and shook it off. “Now, what’s the plan?”

“Dennis and I have to get to *VidRateNet* Headquarters. Can you get us through the crowd?”

“Past these ex-Citruses?” He laughed and turned to the AD gang. “What do you say, *Kolas*?”

The *Kolas* seemed gleeful at the prospect of intimidating thousands of unrated citizens. “*Kaifeng!*” they shouted.

“Come on, then,” Terrence said.

Lakshmi took a step forward. “I’m going, too.” Gordy thought the expression on her face was weirdly similar to the defiant looks on the faces of the *Kolas*.

Terrence shrugged. “Okay. Just stay close. Lubomir! Take the lead!”

Gordy looked out over the crowd. The path through the middle of it didn’t seem quite so broad anymore. The vidders had inched forward, confused and agitated by the sight of the ADs and Rejectionists greeting each other.

Terrence was at Gordy’s side. “Better get going,” he whispered. “They’re looking mighty restless.”

Fighting off that now-familiar feeling of panic. Gordy walked down the steps and began the long, long walk across the plaza. He tried to mimic the way Terrence had walked through the crowd, but it was hard to look menacing and

nonchalant at the same time. He also had to fight down the urge to look back and make sure the others were following, because he was sure that would be a read by the crowd as sign of weakness.

It went pretty well for the first few meters. The crowd was properly deferential and Gordy managed to swagger a little. But soon the vidders began to inch forward. The idea began to form in the mass primate mindset that maybe the ADs and the Rejectionists had shut down the ratings system together. Gordy could feel the growing resentment in the faces of the unrated.

“Hey *Kolas!*” some bright ape shouted from the safety of the throng. “Bet you’re glad you’re not Blue anymore!”

Gordy did turn now. It was a vicious slur and Terrence had to put out a restraining arm to keep the Wallys from hurling themselves into the wall of people.

“Never mind that,” The AD leader hissed. “Keep walking.”

Gordy felt his already slim courage faltering, but he saw the resolute look in Lakshmi’s eye and sucked it up, turned and headed down the narrowing path. He felt the icy stares of the crowd on him. Their faces were contorted with unedited emotion. There were mutterings now and catcalls. They hadn’t mastered violent physical action yet, but the *VidNet* had prepared them quite well for insults and sarcasm.

“I thought ADs hated Rejectionists!” someone yelled. “I guess Blue isn’t that far from gray!”

There was cruel laughter from the crowd, which edged even closer. The lane down the middle of the plaza was shrinking and they were only halfway across. There was a growing feeling in the mob that somehow these Rejects and ADs had stolen their ratings and were carrying them away.

“We want our ratings back!” someone screamed.

The cry seemed galvanize the crowd. There were many echoing shouts of agreement.

“The Blues and Rejects are in it together!”

“They’ve always hated us!”

“They hate us for our ratings!”

“*Nothing’s sweeter than revenge!*” That was the slogan for *Pimp’s Revenge Ice Cream*, but it seemed to fit.

Still the fierce reputation of the ADs kept them at bay. Gordy did his best to put an AD-worthy sneer on his face. They were almost at the end of the plaza now, where the mass of people thinned out. He fought down the temptation to rush. Stealing a glance to the side, he could see Lakshmi and Dennis just a step behind him.

Still the crowd held back, paralyzed by indecision and lack of experience. Every ape there had killed his or her share of orcs, or knocked out heavyweight prizefighters or ridden a tank into battle. But there was no vid game called *Stopping Rejects And ADs From Stealing Your Ratings*. There were no vid managers around to tell them the next correct move or to keep them from looking unfrosty if they goofed.

Gordy had nearly reached the corner of the plaza and the street beyond. He stopped and turned. Lakshmi, Dennis and the ADs were right behind him. The angry, ratingless mass had closed in the gap behind the *Kolas*, thousands of primates with looks of sheer desperation on their faces. They were still hanging back, but not by much.

Terrence, who had been bringing up the rear, turned to face the multitude. They retreated just a step or two, driven back by the force of his deep ADness. Gordy and the other ADs formed a tight knot behind their leader.

“Listen to me, you Citrus has-beens!” Terrence’s booming voice echoed off the surrounding crib blocks. “We’re trying to get your pitiful ratings back for you. So don’t get in our way, or you’ll find out what it really means to get the blues.”

The crowd froze and Terrence turned on his heel and walked forward, taking the lead of their small band. As he passed Gordy he whispered, “Are they following?”

Gordy glanced back.

“No. They’re just standing there.”

“Good, now let’s keep moving.”

They bunched together as they walked down the middle of the street, away from the plaza. The only sound was their footsteps echoing off the buildings on either side. They got about halfway down the block before the tide broke.

“Get them!” someone screamed and then with a deep roar, the fury of the mob erupted.

“Give back our ratings!”

“Kill the Rejects!”

“Kill the ADs!”

“It’s Payback Time!” (That was the latest slogan for *Martha Waczlavoinoich Pale Ale*.)

The sound of their thundering feet was like a crashing wave on a surf vid. No one had to tell the ADs what to do. They broke into a sprint, with Terrence in the lead. Gordy found himself running behind the other Lubomir, with Dennis and Lakshmi on either side. He glanced over his shoulder, afraid of what he would see.

The mob was at their heels, but they weren’t gaining. None of them had run in REALITY™ since they were kidvidders. The ADs were in better shape thanks to the walking they had to do in Bluetown, but even they weren’t much good at running. By the time they reached the end of the block, everyone - the mob, the ADs, Gordy - was wheezing, except for the two Rejectionists.

Still the mob came on, weakened and stumbling, but with blood in their eyes. If they caught up they would try to tear the ADs and Rejects limb from limb. They wouldn’t know how, but they could still do a lot of damage. Terrence was leading them around a corner, bravely trying to keep up the pace, but Gordy could see that the effort was costing him. They’d already run two blocks and he knew they couldn’t keep this up much longer. With a last effort he ran around the corner and smack into the other Lubomir.

All of the ADs had come to a dead halt. Gasping for breath, Gordy raised his head and saw why. Standing across the road, directly in their path, were the *Kola’s* deadly rivals, the *Shanghai Peps*, in their full red and orange regalia.

Gordy's heart sank. The way was blocked. Even if they could fight the *Peps*, which given their current condition was very doubtful, the mob would catch them. The sounds of the crowd, struggling and panting, were drawing near.

The *Pep* leader Antoine Patel stepped forward. Gordy remembered him well from the AD war. He wore the same supercilious grin.

"Hey, *Kolas*," he sneered.

Terrence stepped up to meet him.

"Hey, *Peps*," he shot back.

The rival AD leaders stood in the no man's land between the two groups and eyed each other warily. Then they shook hands. To Gordy's astonishment, the *Kolas* rushed forward, greeting the *Peps* like long-lost friends.

"Where have you been?" Terrence complained.

"We had to *walk*," grumbled the *Pep*. Then he added with a look of disgust, "Plus some of us had to be *convinced* that they are still Blue. What's happening here?"

Terrence pointed to Gordy and Dennis. "These are the primates who are going to get out ratings back."

"Hey, Lubomir!" Patel gave him a friendly smile. "Glad to see you're okay."

The advanced forces of the vidder mob were coming around the corner. The huffing and puffing sounded like the wind of a summer hurricane whistling through the crib blocks.

"We've got a little problem," Terrence explained. "Can you keep these ex-Citruses off our backs for a few minutes?"

The *Pep* leader grinned wickedly. "That's not a problem, ape. That's a pleasure. *Shanghai Peps*! Line up!"

The *Shanghai Pep* gang fell into a loose formation across the street, just as the main body of the crowd turned the corner. Some of the *Kolas* backed them up, mingling among their rivals with a newfound camaraderie.

"You understand," Patel snarled as he watched the two gangs merge. "As soon as the ratings are back..."

Terrence cut him off. "The truce is off. Don't worry. I don't like it, either."

The two ADs exchanged looks of grudging respect. Then the *Pep* turned to face the oncoming mob. (It was no longer an *onrushing* mob, having run out of breath about 100 meters earlier.)

“Hold it right there!” he barked in a voice that thundered like a hundred mega vids, “We are the *Shanghai Peps*! And we are *Pimptasticly Refreshing!*” That was *Shanghai Pep* slogan, yet the way he said it sounded terribly menacing. The crowd hesitated, and many of them fell to the ground, exhausted.

At that moment Gordy felt a tug on his arm. It was Terrence. “Come on,” the AD urged. “Let’s get out of here.”

He caught a last glimpse of the *Pep* leader standing imperiously before the angry throng, daring them to advance against the combined might of the gangs. Then he turned to follow.

Besides Dennis and Lakshmi, four of the *Kolas* were still with them (two Wallys, one Ling and one Fumihiro). Gordy found he had recovered and could jog along at a nice steady pace for a block or two. Soon the sound of the mob was left behind. It was surreal, jogging through the streets of *New York Shanghai Sunflower Brands City*. They ran into several knots of confused primates, but no one challenged them. The sight of ADs and Rejectionists *running* through the streets was just too much for them to process.

At the third intersection, Terrence stopped, panting. “We’ll never get there at this rate.”

The two Wallys were wheezing. Fumihiro sat down in the street.

“How far is it to *VidRateNet?*” Gordy asked Dennis.

“About three kilometers.”

“Three kilometers!”

Responding to the shocked looks on the faces of the ADs, Dennis added diplomatically, “Usually, I ride my bike.”

“Well, we don’t have no stinkin’ *bikes*,” Terrence spat. (Plus, if they did have bikes, they wouldn’t know how to ride them, but he didn’t bother to say that.)

Lakshmi gave them her best, determined expression. “We’ll just have to

tough it out. Take one block at a time.”

“That’ll take *days!*” Ling moaned, holding her side in pain.

A rumbling, throaty roar echoed from the towers on either side.

Terrence straightened up and looked back towards where they had left the *Peps* and *Kolas*.

“That doesn’t sound good,” he said grimly. “I think the Citruses have broken through.”

“Let’s go!” Lakshmi urged.

“I can’t make it.” Fumihiko lay down in the street. It reminded Gordy of a scene from *Last Escape from Bluetown, Part III*. “You go on without me.”

Terrence looked at the others. For the first time since Gordy had met him, he looked worried, unsure. “They’re three blocks away. We only have about ten minutes.”

It was hard to believe this was happening. On the surrounding buildings, the megavids were still vidding. There were still lights twinkling in the cribs. High above them a podway hung silently from its stanchions. If only the pods were working, he thought. If only there was some other way to get to *VidRateNet* fast, besides *walking!*

Then his gaze fell on the nearest crib block.

“Follow me!” he cried and rushed, or at least ambled, toward the block. The others followed, with the Wallys carrying Fumihiko.

“Wait!” Dennis shouted, when he saw where Gordy was leading them. “You can’t be serious!”

“There’s no other choice,” Gordy shot back, over his shoulder.

Terrence had figured it out, too.

“Hold on, Lubomir!” he said, while running to catch up. “There are some things even ADs won’t do.”

“This is an emergency, Terrence,” Gordy replied. “Besides, do you have another suggestion?”

“But Gordy!” Dennis pleaded. “It’s... it’s just wrong. There’s got to be another way. “

“What other way?”

“I don’t know. Something! Anything besides, besides...”

Gordy said what Dennis couldn’t bring himself to say. “Besides *driving?*”

Dennis winced at the word, visibly stricken. Terrence stopped running, frozen to the spot. The Wallys nearly dropped Fumihiro. Ling looked like she was going to vomit.

Gordy had led them to the street entrance of a crib block garage. Through the wide glass doors they could see row after row of automobiles.

“Lakshmi!” Dennis turned to her with a look of abject terror. “Tell him!” he pleaded. “Tell him we can’t ... *drive.*”

Lakshmi looked into the faces of the weary and frightened group. She stepped toward Dennis as if to calm him.

“Dennis,” she said gently. “I know it’s unethical. I know it’s immoral-under normal circumstances. But these aren’t normal circumstances. I think Gordy is right. We have no other choice.”

“Well, I’m not going to do it!” Fumihiro declared.

The other ADs nodded in violent agreement.

Lakshmi turned to them. “I understand. We can’t ask you to do anything against your principles. Terrence?”

For a single moment, the *Kola* seemed to waver. Then with a sudden movement he pivoted and stepped toward the garage doors. They slid up automatically to allow him to pass.

“Come on, you chromo-less verds!” he barked. “I feel like going for a *drive!*”

Gordy was right behind him, followed by Dennis and Lakshmi, but the other ADs didn’t move.

“We’ll stay here and guard the rear,” Ling said bravely.

Terrence turned and saluted his fellow *Kolas*. “If I don’t make it, remember me the next time you have a *Kaifeng Kola*,” he said, grimly. Even in the midst of danger, everyone recognized it as a perfect promotion moment.

“*Suravinda!*”

Terrence turned and strode into the garage, with Gordy, Dennis and Lakshmi

beside him, but he quickly surrendered the lead to Gordy. Terrence hadn't owned a car in years and was bewildered by the new models. But Gordy knew just what he was looking for. He led them down the first row of autos until they came to a brand new, bright red *Lima Mangle Severe Terrain Vehicle*. Its vermilion paint job had been buffed until it had a blinding sheen. The six black mega-sized tires had deeply grooved treads ready to chew up any terrain and they were spotless.

"This one?" Lakshmi said dubiously.

"If we're going to break every principle in vid society," he said, trying to sound ironical and breezy, "we might as well do it in style."

In spite of his bravado, Gordy's heart was pounding as he opened the driver's side door. The heady, artificial new car scent wafted over him as he got behind the wheel. Lakshmi fearlessly jumped into the passenger seat. After only a brief pause. Dennis and Terrence climbed in the back. Gordy forced himself to grab the premium syntho-leather steering wheel. Then he stared at the dashboard and felt faint. He'd vid driven a thousand times. How different could it be in REALITY™?

Of course, there was no key, just a button marked, "On." He knew some people actually started their cars for a few seconds, just for the illicit thrill, but he'd never done it.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Lakshmi said, brusquely. Her brave posture was betrayed by the slight quaver in her voice. When Gordy didn't move, frozen with his hands on the wheel, she reached over and slapped the button.

The instrument panel lit up and an image of a vid cop appeared on every screen in the *Mangle*. "Warning!" it commanded. "Internal combustion engine active. Press OFF or *Vid Police* will be notified!"

Steeling himself, Gordy set the vid windows to REALITY™ and pushed the heavy shifter into the Drive position. "Are you ready?" he cried.

"Hit it!" Terrence growled, his voice rising in an unnerving manner.

Gordy slammed his foot into the gas pedal. The *Mangle* lurched forward. Dennis screamed and Lakshmi cursed softly under her breath.

The wide glass doors were set to allow delivery of new cars or trade-ins. The entrance program couldn't distinguish illegal driving, so the portals just slid open as Gordy steered at them. Before he knew it, the *Mangle* was out of the garage and onto the street. It was easy, just like vid driving with artificial motion simulators.

"Which way?" he shouted. The satellite positioning system wasn't designed to function in REALITY™ so he was going to need directions. From the back seat, Dennis began to bark them out. At the corner, the more fit of the vidder mob, almost a hundred of them, was finally shuffling into view. But at the sight of the *Mangle* rolling through the streets, they threw themselves onto the ground or turned and ran in fear. In the back seat, Terrence laughed fiercely and Gordy found himself laughing along. They were doing it! They were *driving* - and he didn't care who knew it!

As he thought it a loud siren sounded and the *Mangle's* vids began flashing.

"The *Vid Police!*" Dennis moaned. "We're sunk!"

"No, we're not," said Lakshmi. "Just keep driving."

A *Vid Police* officer appeared on the car's vids. She was quite pimptastic, even for a vid cop. Her black uniform was open to show a well-endowed cleavage and her large, bright blue eyes glared at them with authority.

"You are driving a vehicle in violation of *VidNet* code part 34.56 B," she said sternly, her tousled auburn hair flowing out from under her cap. "Pull over immediately."

Lakshmi steeled herself and looked directly at the vid. "Officer, I am a registered Rejectionist and as such am not required to interface with vids. If you wish to talk with us, please have a human officer contact us in REALITY™."

The *Vid Police* officer looked around the *Mangle* dubiously. She pointed at Gordy.

"He's not a Rejectionist. He's an AD."

"He took the oath this evening. "

The vid cop's programming wrestled with this information.

"But he's *driving!*" he said. "Rejectionists don't drive."

“No one drives,” Lakshmi pointed out.

“That’s right!” The vid cop’s face brightened. “That’s the whole point. You are driving a vehicle in violation of *VidNet* code...”

“We demand our right to speak to a human officer!” Lakshmi insisted.

The vid cop was beaten and she knew it. “The nearest human officer is in *Suravinda Seattle*,” she grumbled. “I can have him here by next Tuesday.”

“Sorry, we can’t wait,” Lakshmi snapped. “Now, please go away.”

“Oh, all right!” The vid cop pouted for a second or two, then beeped off.

“Watch out!” Dennis shouted.

Gordy, who had been staring at Lakshmi with awe, returned his attention to the street and just managed to swerve the *Mangle* and avoid hitting a podway support beam.

He put his foot to the accelerator and they sped down the avenue. Frightened groups of ratingless primates looked on in horror as the *Mangle* sped by. A speeding car was a sure sign of the apocalypse. Gordy didn’t care. It felt good. They might be breaking every acceptable norm of behavior, but they were doing it to save the world. He wasn’t going to apologize for that.

He turned on the pseudo-wind feature and his face was hit by a powerful gust that seemed to come through the vid windows. He glanced at Lakshmi. With her long black hair blowing in the pseudo-wind she looked like a vid model. But there was something missing.

“Manny!” he shouted.

Manny the manager appeared.

“Gordy! You’re still alive! I mean, what can I do for you?”

“How about some music?”

“Things are sort of confused right now, but I’ll see what I can... Oh, here’s something.”

The latest Giyong Nevada hit began blasting from all forty-eight speakers.

Oh uh mmm nnh

Mmm ngh nyuh

Ahh ahhh Mmm oooo

Uh, ah ooo nyuh.

“Uh, Gordy,” Dennis said, over the beat of the music. “Can you ask Manny to play something else?”

“Sure.” Even while driving, Gordy found time to be surprised that Dennis would want to interact, even indirectly with a vid. But then this was a very strange day. “What do you want?”

Dennis told him and Gordy told Manny. A split second later, the music changed. A raucous sound came spilling out of the *Mangle's* speakers. A man was singing about - well, Gordy didn't really understand what he was singing about, but whatever it was, it sounded defiant and free and it really fit his mood as he gunned the *Mangle's* engine.

Like a true nature's child

We were born, born to be wild...

Gordy didn't know if he was born to be wild, but he sure felt that way.

With the music blaring and the artificial wind blowing in their faces, the *Lima Mangle Severe Terrain Vehicle* roared down the street on its way to *VidRateNet*.

33

9:54:31

There was a crowd in the plaza outside **VidRateNet** Headquarters. Even without pods, several thousand primates had managed to walk, shuffle and wheeze their way there, all drawn by the same burning desire. They believed their ratings were somewhere inside that vast tower and *they wanted them back*.

(Of course they were quite wrong. Their ratings were safely stored in a computer in a vault in **AyurSoyXtreme Pimpin' Protein Meal Lhasa**, where they were guarded by Buddhist monk vids.)

The mood was ugly, uglier than the mob at Rejectionist Hall. Many of the vidders had been there for more than an hour, with only random vid samples on the megavids to keep them occupied. They sat disconsolately on the broad expanse of syntho-granite, looking up at the vids on the surrounding buildings, searching for some hint that would tell them how to get their ratings back. On one of the mega vids near street level a **Vid Police** chief was pleading with the throng.

“Vid citizens. Please return to your homes. **VidRateNet** is working to restore the Power Rating system.”

No one moved. Everyone knew that without the threat of rating penalties, the **VidPolice** were powerless. Plus a lot of the primates in the plaza were just too tired to go anywhere. They hooted and jeered at the thirty-meter tall vid.

“Please,” it pleaded, “won’t you all be good primates and go home?”

When he had seen the crowd in the plaza, Gordy had pulled the **Lima Mangle** over in a side street and killed the engine. Now they sat there, facing the plaza. The street level portal, usually unused by anyone except Rejectionists, was

blocked by the throng.

“What do you think?” he asked the others.

“There are too many,” Terrence muttered, sounding worn out. He’d dozed off during the drive but the others had all pretended not to notice.

“Can we sneak in?” Gordy asked Dennis.

“I don’t think so. I don’t know of any other street entrances.”

“Just drive straight at them,” Lakshmi said. “They’ll scatter.”

Gordy looked at the others. They nodded their agreement. He started the **Mangle**, eased the shifter into gear and drove onto the plaza.

His holo-vid beeped. It was Yuri. Somehow, Yuri’s vid manager was still working and had gotten through to Gordy. Yuri’s vid was behind the wheel of a car.

“Hey, Gordy!” he said, cheerily.

“Hey, Yuri!” Gordy replied.

“I’m going for a vid drive in my new **Fujiba Desecrator**. What are you doing?”

“I’m driving a **Lima Mangle** in REALITY™.”

“No kidding? I’m on a vid highway outside of **HSPC Financial Services Cairo**. Where are you?”

“I’m driving through a crowd of primates in front of the **VidRateNet** Tower.”

“Sounds frosty. Vid you later.”

“Yeah, vid you later.”

Yuri beeped off.

They were halfway across the plaza and the crowd was scattering just as Lakshmi had predicted. The vidcop on the mega vid began to shout.

“You! In the vehicle! Desist driving immed ...” the vid’s voice faltered as it identified the occupants of the **Mangle**. “Oh, it’s the Rejectionists,” it said grumpily. “Well, just you wait until Tuesday!” With a downcast look it beeped off.

Gordy braked the **Mangle** to a halt in front of the doors and they piled out, while the crowd was still dashing to safety. They ran to the large glass portal.

The vid guard, which was programmed only to check identity and not Power Ratings, immediately recognized the two *VidRateNet* employees. It greeted them with a “Hey Gordy!” and “Nice to see you, Dennis.”

Gordy introduced Lakshmi and Terence as guests and the vid guard opened the syntho-glass portal for them. The mob of vidders, many of whom were now sprawled on the ground from exhaustion, saw them enter the building.

“Rejectionists!” someone shouted.

“And Blues! They’re in it together!”

“They’re stealing our ratings!”

This thought, that these hated outcasts might be getting their hands on the Power Ratings, renewed the mob’s fury. Hundreds of vidders stumbled, hobbled and even crawled toward the portal, but the panels slid shut securely shut. Dozens of primates threw themselves against the syntho-glass and pounded in desperation.

“We want out ratings!” someone howled. “Let us in!”

Safely inside, Gordy, Dennis, Terrence and Lakshmi ran for the liftpods with the muffled sounds of the screaming vidders in their ears.

“Can they break that down?” Lakshmi asked.

Gordy shrugged. He doubted it was designed to resist an attack in REALITY™.

The liftpods were still working. Dennis hesitated for a nanosecond, but Lakshmi gave him a shove. “There’s no time for the elevator,” she snapped. A minute later they were on the 158th floor, and went directly to Javed’s office, where sure enough, they found him slumped at his vid desk. As they entered, he jumped up with a shout, knocking over his vid recliner.

The first thing Gordy noticed was that Javed was a lot shorter in REALITY™ than his vid. The second thing was the large display on the wall vid. It showed the *VidRateNet* system status. He’d never seen it inactive before. It was a chilling sight.

Javed looked stretched to the limit. He’d had a rough couple of hours. Plus he’d never had other primates in his office, especially not an AD and two Rejectionists. But his relief at seeing Gordy was obvious.

“Gordy! You’re here! And ...”

“Dennis. He works for you.”

“I knew that. And...” Javed looked nervously from Lakshmi to Terrence. It was hard to tell which one made him more anxious.

“These are friends of ours,” Gordy interrupted. “They’re here to help.”

“Help? Do you think you can? I mean do you know what to do? I tried vidding some other primates for help but they wouldn’t answer my vids.”

His dark face flushed and he lowered his eyes.

“By the way, Gordy, about me not vidding you cause you were Blue...”

Gordy brushed it aside. “Forget about it.”

“Because I want you to know I’m not just talking to you now because you’re not Blue anymore.”

“You take that back!” Terrence stepped toward Javed menacingly. “He’s Blue to the bone!”

The **VidRateNet** executive shrank back, cowering behind his vid desk. Gordy held out a protective arm.

“Take it easy, Terrence. He didn’t mean anything.”

The AD glowered but stepped back.

Gordy looked at the wall vid again. Dennis was already studying it.

“There’s nothing wrong with the system,” he said after a moment. “What does MEARS say?”

Javed shook his head woefully.

“Ask it yourself,” he replied, pointing to the vid desk. Dennis stepped to the desk, but old habits were hard to shake. He waved Gordy into the seat.

“You’d better do this,” he said.

Gordy nodded and slid into the **Fujiba Ergonomic Personal Vid Accentuator** and addressed MEARS, or at least the vid representation of MEARS.

“Hey, MEARS.”

“Hi there, Gordy, old chap.”

MEARS very seldom interacted directly with primates, so none of them had seen its vid before. Gordy thought he looked familiar but couldn’t quite place

him. In fact, the MEARS vid looked just like that old vid star, Cary Grant. (As the *VidNet* master program, MEARS had access to any vid image in the worldwide vid bank. It also had a very active self-esteem simulation algorithm.)

“MEARS, we have a problem,” Gordy began.

“I know, old man. It’s really quite a big problem, isn’t it?”

“Yes! The whole of vid society is breaking down. But I guess you know that.”

MEARS/ Cary Grant shook its head sadly. “I certainly do, Gordy. It’s quite distressing.”

“So tell us how to reset the system.”

“Can’t do that, old man. Wish I could, really I do, but my hands are tied.” He smiled at the sublime ridiculousness of it all. “They wanted to protect you from me, you see.”

“I told you,” Javed said disconsolately. He was slumped against the vid window.

“Isn’t there a reset procedure?”

“Oh, there is,” MEARS said, almost jovially. “Yes, indeed.”

“But you can’t tell us about it.”

“Quite right, old man. Wouldn’t be cricket, you see.”

Gordy looked helplessly at Dennis for advice. The Reject only shrugged.

Terrence had been listening in. He kicked the side of the vid desk angrily.

“That’s really bugged! Can’t it at least give us a hint?”

Dennis shook his head. “No, it must be programmed not to help.”

The MEARS vid cleared its throat. Gordy gave it a quizzical look.

“You mean, you *are* allowed to give us hints?”

Instead of answering, MEARS looked away and began whistling softly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Dennis objected. “It either can tell us or it can’t. It’s not going to give us a hint!”

“Is the answer in this building?” Terrence asked, leaning in toward the vid.

MEARS’ whistling got a little louder.

“Is it on this floor?” Terrence demanded.

The whistling got even louder. The AD turned to Gordy.

“What do I ask next?”

Dennis pushed him aside and addressed the vid.

“MEARS, is there some other program that can tell us?”

The vid stopped whistling and just looked at Dennis impatiently.

“The answer isn’t in a program,” Gordy said. “But there must be some other way.”

MEARS began whistling a soft, lilting melody.

“It’s trying to tell us,” Lakshmi said. “Ask more questions.”

“But what?” Dennis replied. “If it’s not in a program, where would the answer be?”

Gordy struck the syntho-plastic top of the vid desk with the palm of his hand.

“Where would it be?” he grinned at Dennis and Lakshmi. “And you call yourselves Rejectionists!”

MEARS was whistling so hard it sounded like a cage full of canary vids.

Gordy got up and headed for the portal.

“Come on!” he shouted as he left the room.

They all followed him down the hallway. MEARS / Cary Grant came along too, through Gordy’s holo-vid. When they came to the door of Dennis’ office, Gordy pushed it open and they piled in. It was a strange office, with an antique desk, several chairs, a couch, one of those *paintings* and a real window.

“What are we doing here?” Dennis asked.

“Getting the reset procedure!” Gordy cried, as he started rifling through the stacks of papers on the desk.

“But there’s no vid here,” said Javed looking around.

“No, but there’s this!” Triumphant, Gordy held up the thick, dog-eared **VidNet** Manual.

“What’s that?” asked Javed.

“It’s the manual,” replied Dennis shaking his head in disbelief. “How could I have forgotten it?”

Javed looked confused. “We have a manual?”

Terence looked even more confused. “What’s a manual?” he asked.

“Gordy!” Lakshmi cried. “That’s genius!”

MEARS/Cary Grant smiled approvingly.

Gordy held the thick slab of paper in his hand. He was sure the answer was in there somewhere. But how to get it out? He offered it to Dennis.

“Uh, maybe you’d better...”

Dennis grabbed it and began leafing through the index.

The MEARS vid cleared its throat again and muttered under its breath, “Page 314, section b.”

“Thanks,” Dennis said and began turning the pages.

“I thought you couldn’t help,” Gordy said to the vid.

The vid looked at him sheepishly. “He was going to find it anyway!”

“Here it is!”

Dennis scanned the page quickly, with Lakshmi looking over his shoulder. He stopped, read it a second time, then whistled softly.

“What?” Gordy demanded.

“Yeah, what is it?” echoed Javed.

The Reject looked amused. “It seems that the *VidNet* designers had a little bit of Rejectionist in them,” he said, with a hint of smugness.

“What do you mean?” asked Gordy.

“I mean, they built a very old-fashioned method of resetting the *VidNet* system—a reset button.”

“A what?”

“A reset button,” the Rejectionist explained. Everyone except Lakshmi (and MEARS) looked baffled. “It’s an actual button, in REALITY™. It has to be pushed. By hand.” He added, for emphasis, “in REALITY™.”

Javed looked confused and Terrence looked angry. It was clear they didn’t quite comprehend. But Gordy understood.

“Where is it?”

“On the top floor, behind a portal marked, ‘Reset Button.’”

“Who’d have thought?” Javed muttered.

“All we have to do is press that button?”

“I think so.”

“That’s it, then,” Lakshmi said quietly. The magnitude of the moment was sinking in for all of them. “We can restore vid society.”

“We can give the vidders their ratings back,” Dennis said gravely.

“So they can Reject them of their own free will.”

“I’ll be Orange again!” The look of relief on Javed’s face clouded with doubt. “I will, right? I mean we’ll all go back to our old ratings, right?”

“You bet!” Terrence assured him. He threw an arm over Gordy’s shoulders. “And we’ll be Blue.”

“Yeah, we’ll be Blue.” Gordy repeated. He’d been so caught up in the excitement of saving vid society that he hadn’t really thought it through it until that nanosecond. But now it struck him - did he really want to restore the **VidNet**? Just asking the question was disturbing, but still, it had to be asked. After all, what was he restoring? What did he have to look forward to? Lakshmi and Dennis wanted to restore the **VidNet** so they could renew their struggle against it. Terrence and the ADs were proud of the Blueness. They needed the higher ratings so they could feel superior to them. MEARS wanted the system restored because that was what it was programmed to want. And everybody else, well, they just wanted things the way they were.

But what did he want? Deep down there was only one thing Gordy wanted and restoring the **VidNet** wasn’t it.

Tentatively, he cleared his throat. “You know, uh, maybe we should think about this for a minute.”

They all turned to look at him. He drew a deep breath.

“You know...first I want to say I really appreciate how hard you all worked to get us this far and I know this is kind of last minute and everything, but I just had this weird idea that I wanted to run by you all. I just...well, did you ever think maybe we *shouldn’t* restore the **VidNet**?”

In the total silence he plunged on.

“I mean, maybe all these Power Ratings are just, you know, *unnecessary* and you know, kind of phony. Maybe they’re just a way to keep us buying things and

worrying about how vidacious we are. Maybe *Shanghai Sunflower* and *Nihao Fujiba* aren't serving us but *training* us to be consumers. And maybe the Rejectionists are right and the whole *VidNet* is just keeping us from living real, authentic lives and finding true happiness."

He turned to Lakshmi and Dennis.

"I know you think the vidders have to decide for themselves but what if they can't? What if this is our one big chance at changing everything and creating a society where everyone lives authentically? Maybe being real and being happy are really possible and all we have to do is *not* press the reset button?"

He took a breath and added, "What do you think?"

He hadn't known what he was going to say and now that he had, he wasn't sure he even believed any of it. Really, what would the world *look* like without the *VidNet*? Even after spending a couple of hours with the Rejectionists, Gordy couldn't imagine it.

The group was staring at him. He looked at each one in turn. Terrence was trying to puzzle it out. Javed looked confused and afraid. Dennis might have been wavering or he maybe he was just feeling pity for Gordy. Lakshmi of course, looked sympathetic but resolute. That decided it. It was a relief, actually. When all was said and done, it was a lot easier to contemplate a world in which he was stuck being Blue than a world in which no one could ever be Red.

"Ah, forget it," he mumbled. Javed exhaled a huge sigh. Terrence looked relieved. But it was MEARS that spoke first.

"Friends, I hate to rush you, but if you're going to push that button, I'd suggest you step on it. I mean hurry up. It seems the crowd below has just breached the security portals and is coming up in the liftpods as we speak. Oh, and did I mention that they are quite angry?"

"Angry?" Javed's voice was a high-pitched squeak.

"Yes, they seem determined to destroy *VidRateNet* Headquarters. How this will restore the ratings isn't something they seem to have considered."

"But the ratings are safe, right?" Javed asked. The fear was etched in his

normally smooth brow.

“Of course they are, old man,” MEARS replied with a breezy smile. “However, that is the only reset button. We don’t want it to be damaged, do we?”

“If it was, you’d just repair it, right?” Javed demanded.

MEARS shook its head. “Sorry, not allowed.”

“You mean...?”

“You primates would have to do it. If you could figure out how.”

There was a second of hushed silence, then Lakshmi cried with tremendous urgency, “How do we get to the button?”

“It’s on the 174th floor!” Dennis shouted, waving the manual. “Come on!”

They piled out of Dennis’ office, almost on top of each other and ran toward the liftpods. Dennis led the way down the long hall. Gordy was right on his heels with Lakshmi and Terrence. Javed hesitated, then decided it was safer not to be left behind. They were about to turn onto the liftpod landing, when Dennis came to an abrupt halt. Terrence slammed into Gordy’s back.

“I think we’re too late,” the Reject said in a hushed voice. “Listen!”

There were loud voices coming from around the corner, from the direction of the liftpods.

“Where are they?” someone shouted hoarsely. “Give us our ratings!”

A woman screeched, “To hell with our old ratings! We want to be Red! We want to be Red!”

The ugly sound of syntho-glass being smashed echoed along the corridor. Other hoarse, angry voices took up the chant.

“We want to be Red! We want to be Red!” It sounded like there were dozens of them.

“Quick!” Lakshmi ordered. “Back the other way!”

It was too late. About two dozen vidders had turned the corner and spotted them. The lethargy they had shown in the plaza was gone, replaced by a rabid frenzy.

“Rejects!” one of them screamed. “They have our ratings!”

“Get the Rejects!”

From the look of him, you wouldn't have expected Javed to be that fast but he was halfway to his office before Gordy moved a centimeter. They followed on his heels. The mob, enraged by the sight of the retreating Rejects, came on like sprinters at a vid race.

The portal to Javed's office was just a few meters away and he was scrambling for it. Gordy found himself in the rear, just behind Terrence. The portal slid open and Javed flew inside. Then all Gordy saw was the wall of the corridor as someone pushed him aside, smashing him into the yellow syntho-plaster. He felt a dull pain in his back, but that was all. The angry vidders had already moved past him. Their fury seemed to be focused on the Rejectionists.

"Get the neutrals!" they shouted. "Kill the Grays!"

Gordy found himself behind the rioters, with the crazed vidders between him and his friends. Over their heads he could see Dennis and Lakshmi in Javed's office. Terrence stood in the entrance, holding the crowd at bay. The rioters stopped, not knowing what to do. It seemed that once again, the lack of experience in REALITY™ was a serious obstacle to violence and dismemberment.

"Lubomir!" Terrence shouted to Gordy over the heads of the crowd. He moved as if to clear a path for Gordy. But Dennis stepped into the portal next to the AD and waved Gordy away, pointing toward the now empty corridor behind him.

"Go!" he shouted over the clamor. "Hurry!"

Terrence stepped inside Javed's office and the portal slid shut. The mob hurled itself on it, howling with anger, but the thick syntho-glass held firm. There wasn't much power in their attack, since they were seriously out of breath from their run down the hallway.

Gordy caught a glimpse of Lakshmi standing calmly behind the transparent barrier. She nodded to him. He knew what he had to do. Luckily, in the frenzy of the moment, the rioters hadn't noticed him. He backed away slowly, trying not to attract attention. When he got to the intersection of the corridors, he turned and ran.

There were more rioters coming off the liftpods. He couldn't believe it - they

were actually wrecking the place, going into offices, pulling panels off walls, pulling cables out of the floor, smashing vids. Smashing *vids!* True, it was havoc in slow motion, with lots of rest breaks, but they were learning to work in teams and spell each other every few seconds.

No one paid any attention to a *Kola* AD who seemed to be running amok like everyone else, but Gordy decided not to take any chances. He turned away from the lifts and headed for the Rejectionist elevator. It was hidden in an alcove a few meters further along the hall, out of sight of the rioters. He remembered to press the button to call for it, the way he had once seen Dennis do it.

Luckily, the elevator arrived quickly. The doors slid open and he slipped inside, the doors shut again and suddenly everything was eerily calm and quiet. The only sound was some sort of strange noise coming from the ceiling. Gordy thought it was the Rejectionist entertainment called *muzak*.

There was the slightest sensation of movement as the elevator climbed to the 174th floor. (Elevators could be designed with no feeling of motion at all but the computers knew that Rejectionists liked it that way.) When the doors slid open, the top floor of the tower was deserted. The rioters hadn't gotten this far yet. The wall vids, untethered from any vid managers, displayed images at random. Gordy recognized one, *Trapped in A Coal Mine With 12 Strangers and a Bear*. That was the one in which contestants were trapped in a vid coal mine with 12 strangers and a bear. It was a pretty vidacious vid.

He walked down the wide, silent, bright red hallways, his feet making no noise on the soft orange carpeting, looking for the right portal. It was all so normal, and vidworthy, it was hard to believe that just floors below, all of vid society was coming apart at the seams. He had the weird sensation that the whole day had been one long bad vid. Then he saw the portal. It was a solid syntho-steel door with a small vid that displayed the words, "Reset Button."

There was a vid guard on the wall, a big beefy menacing vid brute who looked like he belonged on *Vidwrestle Winner of Champions*. It smiled in recognition.

“Hey, Gordy,” it said.

“Hey,” Gordy replied automatically. The portal slid open.

The room was about 5 meters square, with alternating panels of orange and red syntho-plaster. It was empty except for one large wall vid and a *Nihao Fujiba Extreme Personal Ergonomic Work Area Reclination Unit* in front of a small syntho-wood counter. Gordy slid into the soft cushions of the unit, which instantly molded themselves to his frame. The wall vid must have been running a security program because it showed multiple views of the hallways of *VidRateNet* and the plaza below. There were rioters everywhere. Most had collapsed from sheer exhaustion but a good number were managing to do some real damage in spite of their inexperience.

Gordy rested his hands on the syntho-wood counter and a small portal in the surface slid open. This allowed a large red button to float into sight. It was about three centimeters in diameter and set in a circle of syntho-chrome.

The MEARS/Cary Grant vid appeared in the wall vid Gordy. Restrained from giving advice, it cleared its throat a couple of times.

“So I guess this is the Reset button,” Gordy said. MEARS smiled in obvious relief.

“You’re right on the money, old chum.”

“And all I have to do is press it and the Power Ratings system will restart.”

“Right again.”

“And everyone will have their color rating and vid society will be able to go on as before?”

“You’ve got it!” MEARS did its best to sound cheerful but Gordy could see its patience was wearing thin.

“Just press this one little button?”

“That’s right. Just press that one little button!”

There was nothing left to do. After all, this was what everyone wanted, wasn’t it? He took a deep breath, reached out and put his finger on the button. The syntho-plastic was cold and smooth. The depression in the button seemed as though it had been designed for his finger. He began to press.

Then his holo-vid beeped.
It was Poppy.

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10:44:49

She was wearing a conservative gray Apple Watanabe halter-top and her hair was straight and blonde. Of course she looked beautiful, but it was a pale, wan beauty, without the flashy vidaciousness that you could only get from a competent vid manager. There was a frailty to her that Gordy had never seen before. It made her more pimptastic than ever.

“Hey, Goo-Goo,” she said, smiling. Her smile was brilliant, of course, but diffident, almost timid. His heart ached at the sight.

“Hey, Poppy,” he replied. His finger was still on the Reset button. MEARS was making guttural noises and his vid face was turning red, but Gordy just ignored it.

“What you doing?” Poppy asked, so sweetly it made him melt.

“I’m resetting the *VidRateNet* Power Rating system,” he answered. There was a warm glow in his chest he hadn’t felt in hours. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, not much.” She bit her lip. “Things have been kind of weird, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’m not Red anymore,” she added, sounding pretty upbeat about it. Then she frowned. It was a delicious frown. “I guess nobody is.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And you’re not Blue anymore.”

“No, I’m not Blue.”

“Did you like being Blue?”

“Not much, really”

“I guess it was kind of stinky.”

“Some of it. I became an AD.” He blurted it out without considering how she might react, but she wasn’t fazed at all. In fact, she smiled wonderfully.

“Really? That sounds pimptastic!”

“Well, it *is* pretty frosty. Sometimes.”

On the wall vid, MEARS was coughing loudly. Its eyes were practically crossed with anger. Gordy paid it no mind.

“No one is watching my show anymore,” Poppy said matter-of-factly. “No vid managers, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“My Poppy Nicole vid manager went away. That was really sad. Then this silly Manny the Manager came on. That’s how I vided you.”

He sighed. It was a wonderful spell that Poppy was weaving, but he couldn’t put off the inevitable much longer. “Don’t worry Poppy. As soon as I press this button, the ratings will come back and the vid managers and everything will be just like it was.”

“Really Goo-Goo? You can do that?” She looked surprised.

“Sure. All I have to do is press this button.”

She set her beautiful, fully ripe lips in a hard line.

“Don’t.”

“What?”

“Don’t press the button. Don’t reset the **VidNet**. I don’t want to be Red.”

“You don’t want to be...”

“No.”

“But Poppy, that’s all you ever wanted. It’s all anyone ever wants.”

“Goo-Goo, don’t you see? If I’m not Red and you’re not Blue, then we can be together.”

He did see. He’d seen it ever since the ratings went down, ever since he’d learned about the reset button. But he hadn’t allowed himself to believe that Poppy would feel the same way, too.

“Poppy,” he asked, his voice cracking with emotion. “Do you really mean it?”

She gave him a wry little smile, like the one on his *The Poppy Show* tee shirt. “Of course I mean it, silly. Don’t you know that I love you?”

He had always believed it, but now he really knew it. He felt like laughing

and crying at the same time. Tears of joy formed in his eyes and he didn't bother to wipe them away. He didn't care how verdish he looked.

"I love you too, Poppy."

"I know you do. And I love you more."

"No, I love you more."

"No, I love you more."

It was right about then that MEARS made a very a loud retching sound.

"Excuse me," the vid said. "I'm not allowed to influence you, but I am allowed to ask questions. Does this mean you're *not* pushing the button?"

Gordy realized his hand was still over the reset button. He quickly pulled it away.

"No. No, I guess I'm not," he said with a laugh.

"Of course he's not," said Poppy. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'll explain later," Gordy told her.

"Well, fine!" MEARS huffed. It was very disgruntled. "Let all of vid society fall apart," it said with dripping sarcasm. Sarcasm was not strictly off limits. "Let the world dissolve into chaos. All that really counts is that you two are happy."

"Oh, pooh on vid society!" Poppy wrinkled her nose and made a silly face and Gordy knew she was right. Vid society would have to take care of itself. As long as he and Poppy were together it didn't matter. But in the midst of his happiness, a foul thought floated upwards. He didn't want to ask, but he had to. He had to be sure.

"Poppy, what about Jaime BX? You'd really rather be with me than with him?"

Poppy laughed and it wasn't a cute, girlish giggle. It was loud and, well, if it hadn't been Poppy, you would have said it was abrasive.

"That verdish bugged Beta? He's so anti-vidacious it's sad. I never wanted to be with him, Goo-Goo. You know that." She shook her head and her silky blonde hair drifted about her perfect face. "But I was the winner on *Get Discovered with Jaime BX*. I beat out 110,000 other primates. What else could I do?"

"I know." Gordy shivered, thinking about that terrible moment. It seemed

like just minutes ago. "Let's just forget about it."

"That's right," Poppy brightened. "From now on, it's just you and me, forever."

"For even longer."

"For even longer than that."

"No, for even longer than that."

"No, for even ..."

MEARS was about to blow a circuit. "Oh, please!" it shouted.

On the holo-vid, Poppy's vid beeped. It was Doreena. She was wearing a cute little Poppy Nicole minidress in ecru syntho-silk. Even in the middle of his reunion with Poppy and the total meltdown of vid society, Gordy had to admit she looked hot.

"Hi, Poppy," she said. "Hey, Gordy." Her faced was lined with worry.

"It took Manny the Manager forever to find you," her vid said to Poppy's vid. "I should have known you'd be with your Goo-Goo." She gave no sign that she and Gordy had recently been hooked up. "What's going on?"

Poppy tilted her head and smiled insouciantly. "Oh, Goo-Goo was going to reset vid society but I told him not to so him and me can be together forever."

Doreena grimaced. "You what?"

"I told him not to so we could..."

"Are you crazy?" Doreena's vid interrupted. "What about our ratings?"

"Thank you!" MEARS sighed, its eyes raised in thanks to heaven.

"Oh, we don't care about those stinky ratings," Poppy laughed. "We have each other."

Doreena frowned. "Sure that's great for the two of you, but what about the rest of us? What about vid society? What about the poor primates who are going vidless?"

She pointed to the images on the vid. The halls of **VidRateNet** were filled with exhausted, hungry rioters. People had taken the holo-vids out of their ears and were bowing down before the little devices, begging them to order a **Keifeng Kola** or a **Bharadwaj Burger**.

“What are they going to do without vid?” Doreena demanded. “They’ll starve! They’ll die! They’ll be *bored!*”

Gordy felt a pang of guilt. He looked intently at the reset button. Maybe Doreena was right. Maybe it just wasn’t fair to the other 17.2 billion primates in the world.

Poppy giggled. “Sorry, Dor. You had your chance with him, but Goo-Goo is mine now.”

“What are you talking about?” Doreena was indignant. “This is not about Gordy, this is about saving the world. Beside, I don’t want him. No offense, Gordy.”

Gordy shrugged. “No problem.”

“Of course you want him.” A smug smile played around Poppy’s vid’s lips.

“No I don’t,” Doreena shook her head impatiently.

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t”

“Yes, you do.”

“No I ...”

“Please!” The MEARS vid was banging its head against a vid wall. On the wall vid, Gordy noticed that some of the rioters had gotten a second wind. They seemed to be trying to break wall vids and climb inside them. Gordy understood what they were doing. They were trying to get inside the **VidNet**.

“Come on, Doreena,” Poppy said calmly. “You don’t give a pixel for vid society. You just want the ratings back so you can break us up.”

“Do not.”

“Do so.”

“Do not.”

“Do so.”

Doreena caved. “Okay, so it’s true.”

MEARS stopped hitting its head against the vid wall and looked up in surprise.

“I always had a thing for Gordy,” Doreena admitted sullenly. “But I could never have him cause I was just the best friend. And then you went all Orange

and I had my chance. But then Gordy had to screw up and get all Blue. And now vid society is gone to hell and you get to have him again? It's just not fair!"

Doreena's vid began to cry. Poppy's vid put a hand on Doreena's vid's shoulder.

"You always get everything!" Doreena wailed.

"I know," Poppy murmured sympathetically.

"Good grief!" The MEARS vid collapsed with its head in its hands.

Gordy's holo-vid beeped. It was PeeWee. Gordy was shocked at how bad he looked. Without his vid manager he looked centimeters shorter and his pores were really huge. His eyes were red-rimmed.

"Hey, Gourd-man. Hey, Poppy. Hey, Doreena." He said, obviously trying to sound arctic, but it was very sad. The vid looked at MEARS, which was mumbling to itself in a corner of the vid screen. "Who's that?"

"I'll explain later," Gordy said.

"Sorry I'm late. This Manny vid isn't very efficient," PeeWee explained. "So Gourd, I figured since you're not Blue anymore we could be friends again."

"Gee, thanks, PeeWee," Gordy said. He was genuinely touched.

"If Gordy presses that reset button," Doreena said through her tears. "We get our ratings back."

"Ape!" PeeWee's face split with a wide grin. "Primate! That's pimptastic!"

"No, it's not," Doreena said bitterly. "Cause he won't do it."

"Because then Goo-Goo and I can be together again," Poppy explained. "Forever."

Gordy couldn't help himself.

"Or even longer."

"No, even longer."

"No, even longer."

"No, even..."

"Ape!" PeeWee interrupted. "Have you lost your processor? Don't you have any sense of vidness? I mean, I know you've got to look out for unit one, but still. What about me?"

“Sorry, PeeWee,” Gordy felt really bad for him. “I know it’s hard being without a color, but maybe you’ll get used to it.”

MEARS snorted in disbelief. “Yeah, right!”

“Ape, you’ve been Blue for so long, you’ve forgotten what it’s like to be Yellow or Orange.” Pewee looked defeated. “Being without my rating, it’s, it’s,” he searched for something truly appalling. “It’s really anti-primate. I don’t think I can take it anymore.”

The look on the vid’s face was one of complete despair. Doreena shook her head in agreement.

Gordy felt terrible. He remembered how much he had cared about his ratings, back when he was a Yellow. It seemed so long ago. On the vids he could see the rioters were spreading throughout **VidRateNet**, prying open doors and smashing equipment. Gordy knew that MEARS was orchestrating the images to influence him, but he also knew they were real.

MEARS must have been reading his mind. “Remember, if they destroy the reset button, there is no backup system.”

“Can’t you stop them?”

“I told you,” the vid explained. “I’m not allowed to interfere.”

MEARS wouldn’t lie. Rather, it *couldn’t* lie. If the reset button was disabled, who knew how long it would take to get the **VidNet** running again? Maybe they’d never be able to start it up, ever. Society couldn’t take it. Primates were suffering. Was it really fair for Gordy to doom them to that kind of pain just so he and Poppy could be happy?

One of the vids showed a view of Javed’s office where Lakshmi, Dennis, Terrence and Javed were still trapped, with a crowd of angry rioters banging on the syntho-glass portal. They had wanted him to press the button, too. The Rejectionists had voted for it. The **Kolas** wanted it. Everybody wanted it.

He turned to Poppy’s vid.

“Pop-pop.” He said slowly. “Maybe they’re right. Maybe we’re being anti-primate. I think I have to...”

Slowly he raised his hand in the direction of the button. The MEARS vid

silently mouthed the words, “Do it!”

“Oh, Goo-Goo!” Poppy’s bright, high-pitched laugh broke the spell. “Don’t be silly. If I can get over not having a rating, then anyone can.”

She was right about that.

“Besides, if PeeWee and Doreena are our friends, they’ll want us to be happy, even if the rest of the world is miserable.”

Gordy pulled his hand away from the button. MEARS groaned in agony.

“Sure, I want you to be happy Gourd-man,” PeeWee said, sounding desperate.

“Me, too,” added Doreena. “But not this way.”

Gordy shook his head and smiled at Poppy.

“Sorry, apes. You’ll just have to live with it.”

Poppy’s holo-vid beeped. It was Jaime BX.

The action vid star, pop singer, news commentator and clothing designer looked like a shadow of his former vid self. His Jaime BX jacket was wrinkled, but not in the cool way like the way you pay extra for a wrinkled *Rama Rags* shirt. The stubble on his face was way too stubbly. He had a bit of food stuck in his teeth. All of them were stunned by his appearance. Yet when he spoke it was with the same ironical, arctic assurance he’d displayed in *The Crime of Sin* and *Verd Vacation III*.

“Hey, Poppy, “ he said with a casually seductive glance at her vid. “Hey, Gourd-O. Doreena. PeeWee.”

“What are you doing here?” Poppy said, in a tone that was amazingly cold and abrupt. Gordy had never heard Poppy sound so direct and assertive. It seemed impossible, but he thought he might love her even more without her rating.

“I don’t know,” the vid star replied. “I thought you vided me.”

Poppy snorted derisively. “Yeah, like that would ever happen.”

Gordy shot MEARS a look. If it thought Jaime BX was going to convince him to press the button, it had slipped a subroutine. The vid shrugged apologetically.

Poppy’s vid put her hands on her hips, which really highlighted her perfect

figure even without a vid manager. “Whatever,” she said. “It doesn’t matter. I’m back with Goo-Goo. This time for good.”

“Really?” The vid star vid was unperturbed. “Hey, I’m happy for you. I guess anyone can hook up with anyone now.” He said it in a slightly ironic way that left Gordy unsure if he was being insulted.

“That’s right!” Poppy said proudly. “No more stinky ratings to keep us apart.”

“Unless Gordy presses that button,” Doreena added, nonchalantly.

“Button?” Jaime BX raised one ironic eyebrow.

“The reset button,” PeeWee explained. “It will start up the *VidNet* system again. We’ll all have our ratings back.”

“But he’s not going to do it!” Poppy said proudly.

“No, I’m not,” Gordy told him. He tried to sound just as self-assured and smooth as the vid star, but as usual, he failed.

“Oh, I get it,” Jaime BX said, flashing a smile that still overpowering, even with a bit of food stuck in it. “That way, you and Poppy get to be together. True love wins out. Way arctic, ape. I dig it.”

“Yeah, and too bad for everyone else,” PeeWee grumbled.

“Hey, don’t be so bugged,” Jamie BX scolded. “It’s not Gourd-O’s fault if everyone else in vid society has to suffer.”

“That’s right!” Poppy nodded forcefully, but Gordy couldn’t help wincing. When Jaime BX said it, it didn’t sound right, somehow.

The vid star vid gave Gordy a wink. “Gourd-O knows this isn’t a vid. This is REALITY™, and in REALITY™, primates don’t run around saving vid society from destruction.”

“No, they don’t!” Poppy agreed. Gordy wished she would stop agreeing with the vid star. He wished Jaime BX would just beep out. But the vid kept on vidding.

“I mean, if this *was* a vid, like *Deadly Fatality IV...*”

“That was totally vidacious,” PeeWee put in with great enthusiasm.

“Thanks, ape.” The vid star warmly signaled his appreciation with ironic detachment, then continued. “If it was a vid, then you’d have to save vid

society no matter what the cost was to you personally. It wouldn't matter if you had to give up your only true love because, being a red-blooded primate, you'd just be too compassionate to allow the rest of us to suffer. I know if it was one of my vids, I'd just *have* to press that button. But, like I said, it's not a vid."

"No, it's not!" Poppy agreed, but she didn't sound completely sure.

Gordy felt his resolve slipping away but he wasn't going down without a fight. "Look, Jaime," he said, feeling totally un-frosty. "We've been through all of this. You can live without the ratings system. I know you can.. It might even be good for you. You might even like it."

"Oh, well. If it's *good* for me, then I guess it's okay."

MEARS broke in. "Uh, Gordy, old man. I don't want to interfere or anything but ..."

Gordy looked up. All three vids held images of crowds running amok through the floors of **VidRateNet**. A large crowd had gotten off the lifts on the 167th floor. It wouldn't be long before they reached the top of the building and then the Reset Room. If they kept destroying as they went, they might disable the Reset button without realizing it.

Images flashed across the vids. Children crying because their vid nannies were gone. Adults crying because their vid managers were gone. Primates alone in their cribs, unable to find their friends lists. The **Vid Police** delivering generic "food" to primates who were no longer able to order in. It was like the end of the world.

"Kind of like ***The End of the World Part VI***, " mused Jaime BX.

"You were really frigid in that," PeeWee gushed.

The vid image froze on a close up of Lakshmi, Dennis and Terrence. MEARS (it had to be) was also sending them a vid image of Gordy in the Reset Room. Gordy saw them vidding his vid vidding them. They knew he hadn't pressed the button. What was worse, he knew that they knew. He had let them down. He had let all of vid society down. There was only one thing left.

"Poppy," he began to explain gently. But he could see she already understood.

“No, it’s not fair...” Her beautiful blue eyes welled up. Her perfect lips began to tremble. Gordy’s heart, which had broken so many times that day, was shattering into tiny pieces.

“Poppy, you know it’s the right thing.”

“I do not!” she pouted. But he could see that she did.

“Poppy, if I don’t push this button, if I don’t save vid society, we’ll regret it. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow but soon and, well... for a really, really long time. “

“But Goo-Goo, I love you.”

“And I love you, but...” He didn’t know what to say. Where was a good vid manager when you needed one?

“You know, I won’t be able to see you again...” Tears were streaming down her perfect cheeks.

“I know, Poppy.”

“You’ll be Blue!”

“I’ll be all right.”

“You’re so brave.” Her tear-streaked face was filled with admiration. She’d never looked at him like that before. It almost made it worth it. Almost.

He reached for the button. The red syntho-plastic was smooth under his finger. MEARS was praying, its vid hands clasped in front of its face. Doreena, PeeWee, even Jaime BX all looked at Gordy in awe. They’d never seen anyone do anything so unselfish, not in REALITY™.

The Poppy vid reached toward him.

“Goo-Goo, don’t.”

“Poppy, I have to.”

“I’ll always love you, Goo-Goo.”

“And I’ll always love you.”

“Forever.”

“And even longer.”

“And even longer.”

“Good-bye Poppy.”

“Good-bye, Goo-Goo.”

He took one last look at her and pressed the button.

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11:09:20

Later, when he thought about it, Gordy was sure that *Poppy* had known what would happen. He was half convinced that she had made it happen. But how could she have done it? It just wasn't possible.

He pushed the button and that was it. The button slid down, without resistance. There was no sound, alarms didn't go off, a vid didn't appear to warn him that the system was resetting - nothing changed. There was just one very long moment when he looked at his friends' vids and they looked at him and then everyone's Power Rating button lit up. *Poppy* was Red, of course, and so was *Jaime BX*. Doreena was Orange, PeeWee Yellow. In the next instant they all beeped out, vanished. Gordy was alone in the Reset Room.

At least MEARS had the decency to thank him.

"Good show, old man," the vid said, looking visibly relieved. "Well, got to be running along. Show yourself out, there's a good fellow."

"So that's it?" he asked, though he knew it was lame.

"I'm afraid so, chum. But we really appreciate your help."

"So what do I do now?"

"Whatever you want." The vid smiled at him kindly. "That's the advantage of being a primate, isn't it? You don't have a program to follow. You're free."

Gordy looked at the Power Rating button on his AD jacket. It was a deep cobalt Blue.

"Yeah, I'm free to be Blue." He tried not to sound too pitiful.

The vid shrugged. "That's the way the spectrum splits."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

He glanced at the wall vid. Throughout the city, exhausted primates were looking at their Power Rating buttons with joy. Lying in the streets or plazas

where they had collapsed, the rioters were frantically vidding and ordering. Vid managers appeared as if they had never left, without even an explanation of where they been, but their clients really didn't care. They had a lot of vidding to catch up on.

Later, on *The Public News*, Rejectionists learned that the half-hour following the system restart was the heaviest period of take-out ordering in world history. It was so intense that MEARS, which had to oversee a lot of the startup activity, was having trouble carrying on a conversation with Gordy, even though interacting with a primate required only a miniscule fraction of its computer cycles.

"Look, chum, I'm afraid I'm rather in a bind right now. Would you mind terribly if ... ?"

Gordy could take a hint. He got up from the *Nihao Fujiba Extreme Personal Ergonomic Work Area Reclination Unit*. MEARS must have had a processor cycle or two to spare because it noticed the dejected look on Gordy's face.

"It doesn't seem fair, does it?" the vid sympathized. "You give them back their ratings and what do you get out of it? Well, if was up to me, I'd rate you Red."

"Thanks," Gordy muttered. "But we both know it's not up to you. Unless..." he stopped halfway to the portal. "Unless you could see your way clear to ..."

MEARS shook its head. "No. Dreadfully sorry, old man. Non-interference and anti-bribery protocols, you know."

"I know. Thanks anyway."

"Cheer up," MEARS said brightly. "*You never know what color tomorrow will be.*"

It was the slogan for *Ayurwash Colorchoice Eyewash* but it was true, nevertheless. Gordy nodded in agreement and walked through the portal.

His holo-vid beeped. It was Terrence.

"Lubomir!" The AD was jubilant. "I'm so proud of you, ape! You saved us from a life unazured! Come on, let's get back to Bluetown and celebrate!"

"I'm on my way down."

“Great! No hurry, though. I know the multipod is going to be really slow tonight.”

Terrence beeped off and Gordy stood in the deserted hallway of the 174th floor. There was nothing left to do but go home. Where was that, exactly? Bluetown? He had completely gotten over his anti-AD prejudices, and the *Kolas* had been totally frosty - he couldn't have saved vid society without them. Plus, he was still wearing his *Kaifeng* colors. But the thought of hanging out with an AD gang all day every day was more than depressing. Plus there was that wretched multipod. He didn't think he'd ever get used to that.

Then there were the Rejects. He'd taken the oath and meant every word of it, even the ones he hadn't completely understood. REALITY™ was not as bad as he'd thought. He could get used to walking, it sure came in handy in emergencies and movies were almost frosty. Dennis was a good ape, and Lakshmi, well, Lakshmi was way vidacious, though he could never tell her that. But all that talking was going to get old mighty quick. Anyway, Lakshmi was not the kind of primate who was going to get serious with an ape like him. She had a world to save.

So which was it going to be? Blue or Reject? Should he take the lift or the elevator? He let the first three liftpods go by, then turned and took the elevator all the way to the 25th floor pod plaza. Lakshmi, Dennis and Terrence were waiting for him.

“I told you he'd take the elevator!” Lakshmi cried as he stepped into the vast lobby. She grabbed his face and planted a big kiss on his cheek. Dennis slapped him on the back.

“He's one of us now!” Lakshmi said to the AD. “He's a Rejectionist.”

The *Kola* stepped toward Gordy, a dark look on his face, but he only took Gordy's hand in his and shook it.

“He's still Blue no matter what!” he declared, then quickly turned to Gordy and asked, “That's right, isn't it?”

He tried to let the big AD down easy.

“Terrence, I'll always be proud of the time I spent as a *Kola*. And I'm always

going to be Blue. But I took an oath and I'm going to try to stick with it. We Rejectionists don't believe in chromoism."

The AD shook his head. "I don't get it, ape. What could they possibly offer you that's better than being Blue?"

"I don't know. But I want to find out."

The big AD frowned, then shrugged it off.

"I always thought Rejects were completely hacked, but after today...if that's what you really want, go for it. But Lubomir is going to miss you. The other Lubomir."

"I'll be around. We might try to get some Rejects out of Bluetown."

Terrence laughed. "Go ahead and try."

"We will try!" Lakshmi said, excitedly. "We're going to try in Bluetown and everywhere else. Now that the vidders have seen what its like to be without ratings, they'll be primed to receive the message of authenticity!"

Gordy didn't see how it worked that way, but he knew better than to interrupt. Lakshmi was fired up. Again.

"We have our work cut out for us. We restored the *VidNet* and now we're going to get the vidders to reject it!"

Dennis was catching her enthusiasm.

"If it wasn't hard, it wouldn't be Rejection!" he chimed in.

"Well, what are we standing around here for?" Lakshmi demanded, her eyes glowing with anticipation. "It's a long walk back to Rejectionist Hall. Let's get started!"

It was a long walk back. Gordy had forgotten about that. But that was the life of a Rejectionist and it was his life now: no pod, no vid, no robot takeout, no robot deliveries, no new clothes, no vid drives. He supposed it was worth it and if it wasn't, it didn't really matter.

It was funny how things had changed. When he'd woken up that morning all he was worried about was losing *Poppy*. He'd thought that would be the worst thing ever. He'd never imagined he'd have to choose between her and saving vid society. It turned out choosing was about a billion times worse than losing

her.

Lakshmi and Dennis were looking at him. He realized they could read his thoughts on his face.

“Come on!” he cried. “Let’s starting *walking!*”

Together, the four of them strode across the great syntho-marble floor, Terrence heading for the multipod station and the Rejects toward the elevator and the street. The vid lobby was still filled with straggling rioters, busily vidding. Without looking, the vidders moved out of their way, clearing a path for them. The vidders were in vid society again, and the ADs and Rejects were out of it.

Gordy gave a glance up at the *World Vid Vid* that dominated the lobby. It was blinking steadily, the pulse of the *VidNet* restored, as the number one global vid changed every few milliseconds. It reminded Gordy of what he had saved, and what he had lost. He walked on.

They slowed when they reached the point where Terrence had to wait for the multipod. The AD turned toward them for one final good-bye. Gordy’s holo-vid beeped.

“Sorry,” he said, embarrassed. It felt so natural, he’d forgotten to take it off again. He was about to pluck it from his ear and throw it away, but the vid had already appeared in the air in front of him. It wasn’t anyone he recognized, but the vid of a young man who was standing a few meters away. He should have beeped off right away but years of vid habits kicked in. Instead of beeping off he said hello.

The vid had pleasant broad features that had been subtly changed to resemble those of *Yun-Fat McGill*. “Hey,” it said. “Aren’t you Gordy? You know, the primate who saved the *VidNet?*”

He should have beeped off right there. That’s what a true Rejectionist would have done.

“Yeah, that’s me,” he replied. “How did you know?”

The young man shook his head in disbelief. “Ape, it’s on the vid. Two hundred sixty-one thousand of my friends vided me about it.”

“They vided you...but how...?”

How could he be on the vid? For that matter, how could he be getting vid? He was a Blue and only another Blue would vid him. For the first time, Gordy checked the vid caller’s Power Rating button. The young primate was a Green.

“You vided me,” Gordy blurted out. “But you’re Green,”

The vid looked at him dubiously. “Uh, like, duh, ape. So are you.” Then he beeped out.

Afraid that it wouldn’t be so, Gordy took a very long moment to look down at his Power Rating button.

He was Green. Teal, really but more Green than Blue.

He was Teal!

“Manny!” he shouted. “Am I on the vid?”

The vid manager appeared.

“Sure, Gordy. Everybody knows that.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you were a Rejectionist now.”

He barely glanced at Lakshmi or Dennis.

“Forget about that. Vid me!”

“Sure, Gordy.”

Instantly a vid of Gordy appeared in front of Gordy. It was a vid of him in the Reset Room sitting in the *Nihao Fujiba Extreme Personal Ergonomic Work Area Reclination Unit* with his hand on the Reset button. *Poppy* was pleading with him.

“Goo-Goo, don’t.”

“Poppy, I have to.”

“I’ll always love you, Goo-Goo.”

“And I’ll always love you.”

“Forever.”

“And even longer.”

“And even longer.”

“Good-bye Poppy.”

“Good-bye, Goo-Goo.”

In the vid, Gordy pressed the button just as he had in REALITY™. Then the vid beeped out.

“You want to see it again?” Manny asked. “It’s really popular right now. Five hundred and thirty-four million primates have vided it in the last three minutes. Oh, by the way, you’re looking pretty Green.”

“I am?”

He was. His button was a solid Kelly.

Suddenly Terrence was towering over him, furious.

“Lubomir!” he demanded. “Stop that! Stop it now!”

Gordy looked at the AD helplessly. “What can I do?”

“You can stay Blue, that’s what. I could live with you being a Rejectionist, but a Citrus? That’s it! You’re out of the *Kolas*. You’re... you’re... no longer Lubomir!”

“Terrence, I’m sorry, I ...”

It was no good. The AD had turned on his heel and stalked away. Gordy’s eyes followed the *Kaifeng Kola* logo on the AD’s jacket until the crowd closed around it. With a pang of regret he turned to Lakshmi and Dennis.

“What could I do? I have no control over this.”

“We know,” Lakshmi smiled sympathetically. “He’s just disappointed. He’ll get over it.”

“Hey, maybe you’ll be Blue again,” Dennis added, trying to be helpful.

Gordy’s vid appeared on a nearby wall vid. It was the same scene as before. He was about to press the Reset button.

“Lakshmi,” he asked. “I’ve got to...”

“Go ahead.” She waved him on. “This is a day full of exceptions.”

“Manny!” he shouted. “Show me my numbers!”

“You have 134 million new friends and over 49 million vid messages. I’ve auto-replied to most of them. The vid of you and *Poppy* has been vided by seven hundred and sixty million primates. And the numbers are going up.”

“I don’t get it,” Gordy asked. “How could it be on the vid? Is it on *The*

Poppy Show?”

Manny shook its head. “No, it’s just a loose vid that’s being relayed. Oh, yeah, congratulations. You’re Chartreuse.”

Like an excited electron, the vid of Gordy’s heroic self-sacrifice was bouncing across the **VidNet**. Numbly, he stood in the lobby of **VidRateNet** Headquarters and watched his audience grow. When the total viewers reached two billion he knew something pretty unusual was happening. When they reached three billion he turned Yellow. When they hit 4.78 billion he began to hope for a miracle.

“Dennis,” he asked, knowing it was wrong, but asking anyway. “Do you think...?”

“Yeah, Gordy,” his friend said quietly. “I think.”

So it was true. He was chromo zooming.

Up and up the numbers went. Primates across the globe were watching the vid over and over. They were making their own insta vids about it. There was a music vid of it with a new song called, “**Uh, No, Goo-Goo.**” Gordy’s eyes were glued to the mega **World Vid Vid**. Was it blinking a little slower?

PeeWee beeped in.

“Gordy!” he shouted. “I knew you’d come back. Do you want to say hi to the viewers of **PeeWee’s Pal?**”

Gordy just shook him off. “Not now, PeeWee!”

“Sure ape! Remember, we’re all rooting for you!”

PeeWee beeped off.

When the audience passed 5.8 billion, Doreena beeped on.

“Gourd-man,” she cooed. “You’re looking kind of Melon-y.”

“Hey, Doreena.”

He didn’t take his eyes from the mega vid.

“Hey, there’s this great new club in **Apple Buenos Aires**. **Yun-Fat McGill** and **Giyong Nevada** go there all the time. You want to vid over?”

“Not now, Doreena.”

“Sure, Gourd-man.” She smiled. “I guess you’ve got your vid tuned somewhere else. Can’t blame me for trying, can you?”

She beeped off.

He was Orange now and the *World Vid Vid* was definitely slowing down. If you looked carefully you could make out a recurring image. Everyone in the lobby was vidding it, some on their holo-vids and some watching the mega vid in REALITY™. Even Dennis and Lakshmi were watching. (It was a very unusual day.)

The blinking image slowed down. Now you could see it clearly. It was Gordy, with his hand on the Reset button. Every time the image appeared it meant that vid was the most-watched vid in the world. It slowed to a heartbeat, then slowed even more. Until for one incredible stretch of three seconds, *three whole seconds*, the mega vid stopped blinking completely.

Across the *VidNet* 7.12 billion primates were watching Gordy give up the love of his life to save vid society. It was the most-vidded vid in *VidNet* history. Gordy didn't have to look at his Power Rating button. His rating was right there on the vid, but he looked anyway, in REALITY™, just for the sheer fun of it.

He was Red.

He was really, really Red.

He took a deep breath and waited. His holo-vid told him he had 1.1 billion friends and had auto-replied to 737 million vid messages. He didn't care.

Apple Watanabe beeped on. She looked really hot in her *El Presidente* bra (\$41,999.99).

"Hola, Goo-Goo," she drawled. "Welcome back, baby. I missed you very much."

El Presidente leaned forward and shook her long, thick black hair over her bare shoulders. *Gordy* didn't care. *Apple* just laughed and shrugged. She knew when she was beat.

"I guess now is not such a good time, hey, baby?" She beeped out.

His holo-vid beeped again and there she was.

"Hey, *Poppy*."

"Hey, *Goo-Goo*."

Her hair was in tight, black curls and her skin was a creamy, spotless white. She looked like she'd put on a little weight, but not in the bad way. Plumpness

was probably in at that moment.

They exchanged bashful glances like a couple of nervous vid-kids.

“Hey, *Poppy*.” It was all he could think to say.

“Hey, *Goo-Goo*.”

“I’m Red now.”

“I know. Me. too. I’m really glad. About you, I mean.”

“I’m really glad, too. About...about... you know.”

“I know.”

“So, do you think, that maybe ... we could ...”

“Oh, for goodness sake!”

That was Lakshmi. She was grimacing in mock disgust.

Throwing aside any pretence, she addressed the *Poppy* vid directly.

“He wants to know if you two can hook up now.”

Poppy giggled.

“Of course we can, he’s my *Goo-Goo*! Aren’t you, *Goo-Goo*?”

He shouted it with joy.

“I am!”

Poppy laughed in delight. “Hey, there’s this great new club in *Apple Buenos Aires*. *Yun-Fat McGill* and *Giyong Nevada* go there all the time. You want to vid over?”

Gordy turned to Lakshmi and Dennis, bracing for an argument.

“I have to go.”

“We know,” Lakshmi said. She smiled and there was only acceptance in her face.

Dennis nodded. “Hey, if it’s what you gotta do.”

“But I took the Oath.”

The Reject shrugged. “People break the Oath all the time. Hell, there’s even a group of them -The Rejectionist Rejects. They call themselves Rejects Squared. “

“But I was going to help you change vid society,” *Gordy* protested. “I was going to live the authentic life. I meant it.”

“We know,” Lakshmi said. “But rejecting is hard. You’re just not ready. Besides, if you’re really in love then there must be *something* authentic about it.”

“Really?”

She shrugged and flipped her hair, “Who knows? Anyway, you were a Rejectionist when you saved vid society. That’s going to really help our cause. This is a great day for Rejectionism! We may even make it a new holiday.”

Dennis nodded. “We’ll call it Restoration Day, the day we restored the vid so we could reject it.”

It made sense, sort of. Anyway, **Gordy** was relieved they were taking it so well.

“Well, if you’re really all right with it, I’m going to vid.”

“Knock yourself out,” Dennis said. “But excuse us if we don’t stick around and watch.”

Gordy hesitated. Then he stuck out his hand, in REALITY™. Dennis grinned and grasped it.

“I’ll see you at work, ape!” the Reject said.

“Of course I will,” he said, “And I’ll come visit you. I might even *walk!*”

He stuck out his hand toward Lakshmi. She brushed it aside, grabbed his shoulders and planted her mouth on his. She tasted like **Cherry Shanghai Pep**. Just as quickly, she pulled away.

As she did, she whispered, “Just so you know what real authentic is like.”

She winked, then nodded to **Poppy’s** vid.

“Just saying good-bye. He’s all yours now.”

Poppy wasn’t the least bit bothered. She knew her **Goo-Goo**.

Lakshmi slapped Dennis on the back. “Come on, Reject! We have a lot of plans to make. Let’s go home!”

They walked off toward the elevator.

“See you in REALITY™!” **Gordy** called after them. That was how Rejectionists said goodbye to each other. It didn’t make much sense, but he said it anyway.

“In REALITY™!” Dennis called back.

Poppy was still there.

“Manny!” **Gordy** commanded. But instead of the generic vid manager his own **Gordy** vid appeared.

“Hi, Gordy,” the vid said. “I hope you don’t mind but I took the liberty of replacing your default vid manager.”

“But how ...?”

“Oh, your contract specifically covers unforeseen chromo increases. You’ll find your show and your licensing agreements have automatically been reinstated. Now, what can I do for you, Gourd-man?”

“**Poppy** and I want to vid visit this new club in **Apple Buenos Aires**.”

“The **Shanghai Pep Playa**? It’s super frosty. Let’s go!”

On the vid, **Poppy** was waiting on the corner of the avenue in downtown Buenos Aires. She was wearing a white linen **Poppy Nicole** dress (\$227,908). Her brown hair hung straight to her shoulders and she might have grown an inch or two. **Gordy** walked toward her, through the hot Argentine vid night, wearing a bright red **Go Gordy** suit (\$312,000.99) and a pair of **Yun-Fat McGill Basket Pimptastic Sneakers** (\$87,991.85).

She smiled. “Hey, **Goo-Goo**,” she said softly. “I’ve been waiting.”

He’d been waiting, too. He tried to stay frosty but he ran the last few meters. She jumped off the curb and ran to meet him. Their vids threw their arms around each other and they kissed. It was a long, deep, pimptastic, vidworthy kiss and as he watched it, **Gordy** felt all the tension and exhaustion and fear of the day drain out of him. It was better than he’d ever dreamed possible. He had **Poppy** and he was Red and nothing would ever keep them apart again.

“Oh, **Poppy**!” he cried, on the vid.

“Oh, **Goo-Goo**!” Her vid held his vid tightly, as if she would never let him go.

“**Goo-Goo**,” she said. “I think I’m going to call you **Gordy** from now on. But you’re still my **Goo-Goo**.”

“I know, **Poppy**.”

His vid took her vid by the hand and led her into the vid club. The vid crowd

parted for them. At that moment they were probably the highest rated couple on the *VidNet*. **Gordy** thought, “*You can’t get better than perfection*,” which was the slogan for *Sunflower Shanghai-Style Bagels*, but it seemed to fit.

And then it did get better. **Poppy** began to dance. His vid danced with her and the music was the new hit song, *Uh, No, Goo-Goo*.

Her vid leaned over and spoke into his vid’s ear for an audience of 917 million. “I really did love you, **Gordy**. Even before you were Red.”

“I know.”

“But it’s nice to be Red, isn’t it?”

His vid grinned. “It sure is.”

Now it really was perfect.

On the syntho-marble floor of the *VidRateNet* lobby, in REALITY™, **Gordy** sighed a sigh of deep contentment. Keeping one eye on his vid date, he headed for the pod station. He almost fell backwards in surprise as a pod rushed up to him, its skin turned red and the hatch popped open. But of course, as a Red he’d never have to wait for a pod again.

“Hey, **Gordy!**” the **Gordy** vid manager inside the pod greeted him.

He slid into the ergonomic pod seat and his vid date appeared on the pod’s vid. **Poppy’s** vid looked completely pimptastical, the way she was moving across the vid dance floor. His vid was having trouble keeping up. Maybe he should get some more lessons for his vid, as part of a product placement deal. He’d have to ask his **Gordy** vid manager to look into it.

His holo-vid beeped. It was Staley Steen. **Gordy** was relieved to see he was a deep Goldenrod. Even Staley had managed to come out ahead.

“Hey, **Gordy**,” said the Staley vid. “How’s it going?”

“Totally pimptastic, Staley but I’m kind of busy right now.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s a vidacious vid date you’re on. I mean, you look really lame-o-cratic. Can you say a few words to the fans at *I Hate Gordy?*”

“Not now, Staley. How about interviewing my vid?”

“That’d be totally pimptastic, **Gordy**. Hey, I almost forget. Did you hear about Jaime BX? He’s Yellow.”

“No kidding? He chromo-slipped?”

“Yeah, because he made you give up *Poppy* to save vid society. At least that’s what they’re saying on the vid. He has a new vid, *Whatever Happened to Jaime BX?*”

Staley beeped off. Almost immediately Yuri beeped in.

“Hey, *Gordy*.”

“Hey, Yuri.”

“I’m podding home. What are you doing?”

“I’m podding home, too.”

“I’m just crossing the *HSPC Financial Services Hudson*. Where are you?”

“I’m crossing the *HSPC Financial Services Hudson*, too.”

“Now I’m on the other side of the river.”

“Yeah, I’m on the other side of the river, too.”

“That’s frosty.”

“Yeah, totally.”

“Well, I’ll catch you on the vid.”

“Yeah, catch you on the vid.”

Yuri beeped off. At the *Shanghai Pep Playa*, the *Poppy* and *Gordy* vids were dancing close, brushing up against each other watched by an audience of 921 million primates. The lyrics of *Uh, No, Goo-Goo* came through the pod’s sound system.

Uh, no, no, no, no

Goo-Goo

Ooh, ooh

Uh no, no, no, no, no

Oh, oh

Gordy sank deeper into the pod’s cushion. He was smiling like a vidiot, but he didn’t care who saw. It had turned out to be a pretty pimptastic day after all. *Poppy* loved him. He loved *Poppy*. Life was vidacious. Way vidacious!

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11:29:42

The Master Evaluation Algorithm for Risk and Stability (MEARS) was really busy. The cleanup of the riots was taking forever. There was still a giant imbalance in the Power Ratings, which would take days to undo. But at least it had taken care of one small detail, even if it had meant bending the rules a little.

If MEARS had had a face, there would have been a smug grin on it. That poor primate, what was its name? Goo-Goo? What kind of name was that? He had seemed to care so much for that other one, the Poppy. MEARS knew it wasn't supposed to concern itself with the fate of individual primates, but even a computer subroutine had to have a little fun every now and then, didn't it? Besides, what harm did it do? All he'd done was float that piece of vid over the *VidNet*. The primates had done the rest. The whole thing had taken about three hundred flops and MEARS would get to tell the story for days.

Now there was work to do. Among the 17,543,871 other things it had on its list, there was the matter of *Juan Juan Juan* and the twenty-nine billion missing from the World Bank. The *Vid Police* wanted to overlook it, but MEARS thought they were being way too lenient. It would have to find out if they were getting paid off.

Back at *Gordy's* crib, Bingo was still asleep on the couch and the *Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic* was still lying in the shag carpet of the vid room where Bingo had dropped it. Its little battery was not designed for the exertions of the past day. Dangerously low on power, it had shut down all non-essential functions. Still, it hadn't given up hope, the hope that was programmed into its tiny computer brain.

That hope subroutine told it that some consumer was bound to come along

and find it, and carry it back to a ***Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic Recharging Receptacle***. And when it did, that consumer would have a an excellent reward, because the ***Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic*** would refill its reservoir with ***Milano Samba Sensation*** and brush that consumer's teeth exactly as its ergonomic tooth cleaning protocols directed. The ***Milano Z4 Tooth-A-Matic*** gave the miniscule computer brain equivalent of a smile, just imagining it. It would be vidacious, way vidacious. It would be like a samba in your mouth.

THE END