



The Robot and the One You Love

by Tom Maddox

Ê

This story originally appeared in OmniMagazine, March 1988.

Black polycarbon tentacles hissing across concrete, the diener robot continued along M Street, warmed by the July sun. Its shell was made of porcelain the color of a blue sky, the color of dreams. Sitting in the controller egg at home, Jerome squirmed, feeling as if someone were scraping his skin from the inside. The clear path along the sidewalk turned into cratered moonscape, street sounds to electric charivari. The fragile interlink between him and the diener robot was breaking up in a burst of neurological static. "You pulling anything interesting?" Jerome asked, fighting to stay oriented. His perceptions shifted from room to street and back again, like a TV monitor flashing aimlessly from camera to camera.

"No," the diener robot said, its voice coming from Jerome's back teeth through conduction speakers vibrating behind his ears. The diener carried unobtrusive optical and acoustical recorders for the passing scene, electronics to capture data from surveillance cameras and filch transmissions from police, private security firms, corporate spies, Peeping Toms.

"I need to quit," Jerome said. "I'm getting crazy."

"I am sorry you are troubled," the diener said. "I will return."

That night Jerome sat next to the controller, viewing CROME disk records of the day's take. Around him freeform shapes in pale rose flowed from ceiling to wall and floor. They changed, and dark mauve outlines shifted with them, as the decorating program displayed its abstractions. Between the viewing console and the

controller--a dark padded chair with a chrome sphere forming its upper half--the diener robot stood motionless.

"This was not a good day," the diener said in a voice that over the past two years had acquired some of Jerome's characteristic inflections.

'A horseshit day," Jerome said. "But I've gotta look."

Jerome was a freelance information broker. He moved lightly across the web of information that the city generated, stopping from time to time to pull at a few among the millions of threads. He had sold to congressional aides, lobbyists, policemen, and pimps. Sifting through the city's chaos, he looked for a treasure trove...whispered word of a deal going down, evidence of felonies old and new, rumors of sicknesses, love affairs, changes of allegiance. Even the smallest of indiscretions could be worth something in a city where information was practically an autonomous currency. On a whim he would trail people selected at random for a week, a month, or more--would create dossiers more complete than the National Data Bank's or the FBI's. Jerome was obsessed by characteristic details...a man's liking for eating hot dogs from Sabra street vendors while sitting in the sun next to the Dupont Circle fountain, then drinking small cups of Turkish coffee at a sidewalk cafe before entering a hotel room where he would lie nude--prone and helpless, weeping and fulfilled--beneath black clad legs and spike heels.

Compared with Jerome, voyeurs were casual, uninterested. Compared with his needs, theirs were direct and uncomplicated. What he was trying to learn even he did not know, but he kept at it, capturing what most people never looked for and so didn't see... In a shadowed alley near P Street, an old man in a long green coat blackened with dirt pissed steadily against sooty brick and then collapsed into the puddle. A cat with grease-smeared yellow fur stopped to sniff the puddle, then the man, looked around as though aware it was being watched, moved on.

At the corner of Wisconsin and M stood a man and woman in their early twenties. They were almost identical--hair dyed black, flowing yellow silk scarves, soft blue leather boots. Locked together in a moment of pain--carefully groomed faces, red and tear streaked--they were oblivious to dense crowds surging around them. At this point the diener lost interest.

Jerome froze the frame, ran a sound isolation program on the couple, wanting to understand the passion that isolated and transformed them, but they stood there speechless and so beyond his ability to probe. At the edge of the picture a woman was caught in mid-stride, holding a cold bag of crumpled white foam. Near the cream plastic U of the handle, black numerals against a silver ground read thirty degrees F.

He closed in on her face.

In profile she had a strong nose, an overbite, a hint of a coming double chin. Her eyes were brown, liquid. Her clothes--black blouse, tan straight skirt with dark, blotchy stains--seemed thrown on her, not worn. She looked like nothing special, but... He scanned her image from pale streaked hair to black spike shoes. If you spend most of your life watching and listening, perhaps it's inevitable--this helpless, feckless thing--that you'll find the key to the code written so deep that it might be in your genes; in the tattered phrase, you'll find the one you love.

He painted her face into Search Chip Memory. It began its routines, matching her face against local hotels' register tapes, district police updates to the National Data Bank, composite travel records compiled from trains, buses, airplanes. And there, on the passenger list of a United flight that had come in three days earlier from Miami, she turned up. But Jerome was asleep when that happened. Only the diener was awake to hear the bell ring, and it moved with a ripple of black tentacles across rose and watched her face begin to expand across the paintscreen, color and shape flowing as if someone were dropping pigment into invisible set forms.

The diener extruded a black cable and plugged into the Search Chip interface, which gave all it had on Connie Stone.

From atop the Riggs Bank at the corner of M and Wisconsin, a flat, black camera sat on the golden dome and watched for any of eight "Sons of Bright Water"--descendants of Hiroshima survivors rumored heading for the base of the Washington Monument with two-kiloton suitcase bombs. This was a CIA search program, and Jerome had piggybacked it to look for Connie Stone. It was not, however, the CIA's camera but a Safeway's "sidewalk sentry"--a blue aluminum box surrounded by fine wire mesh--that spotted her getting into a Yellow Cab on Wisconsin Avenue near the National Cathedral. She still carried the cold bag, and in close-up her eyes were red shot, tired, and wary.

Jerome's search programs had a fix. They sounded the alarm to tell Jeremy she had been found.

Jerome sat at his console and watched the cab's coordinates trace a path along Connecticut Avenue toward downtown. Now he had her. What should he do?

When the cab dropped her on K Street in front of the New Millennium Hotel, eighteen stories of silvered glass, he was watching through the hotel's entrance monitor, and he thought, First, Connie Stone, I've got to find out who you are.

Until three years ago, she had been just another medical lab assistant. Then, according to the National Data Bank, her employment history went off record and stayed that way. She did not marry or otherwise change her name and did not appear on unemployment compensation, welfare, or disability rolls. More peculiar yet, she had disappeared from credit records as well. The state of California might forget her, Jerome thought, but Masterchip, VisaBanque, Amex? No way.

He had to dig in forbidden ground to find her. A quick raid, very quick--their reprisals were vicious--on the IRS records indicated a complex arrangement with a company named American Bioforms, which somehow was not her real employer. The IRS knew this but didn't mind; it was getting its cut of her salary.

The Dow Jones computer coughed up a string of parent companies and blinds terminating in a Caribbean bank. Home Free: The bank's computer told him she was working for I G Biochemie in the Dominican Republic. Finally the CEO Intel Digest told him that the I G Biochemie compound was located on the Dominican Republic's northern coast near a little town called Sosua, a place with a strange history. In 1940 Rafael Trujillo, an almost forgotten twentieth-century dictator, had invited German Jews to come to the Dominican Republic and promised them sanctuary and their own town, Sosua. A few Jews had come, but over the years their numbers dwindled, so that by the end of the twentieth century there were none left.

A few decades later, in came I.G. Biochemie and a horde of Germans, very few of them Jews. And a few years later, in came Connie Stone.

Looking at life as a secret sharer had put some very strong torque on Jerome's already strange worldview. He walked a path signposted with paranoid conceits and occult symbols some real, some at least arguably real, others purely delusional. Connie Stone's blind employment history; associations with genocide, old dictators, German cartels it all reeked of geoconspiracy, multicorporate plot. Jerome lit up like yellow phosphorus in sunlight.

"Locate I.G. Biochemie Sosua data processing station," he said, beginning the instructions to his computer. "Call and institute mole programs. Compile user data establish operating-system codes. Load virus and execute. Terminate on unforeseen interrupt, and restart only on verbal authorization." It might take days to penetrate the corporation's security shells, but he was betting the I G. Biochemie computer would fall.

Connie Stone sat beneath a green, white, and red umbrella. Blown in summer breeze, her hair was tangled around a red plastic barrette above her left ear. She wore a tropical print dress red and blue and green flowers on a white background that rode to her thighs as she sat with her foot touching the white bag of crumpled foam beneath her table. Her skin was pale white, lightly freckled; her look was vague.

Speaking out of bright sunshine, Jerome said, "Hello." The diener robot stood beside him. "My name is David Jerome. You have a problem."

Perhaps she thought of running--her knees clattered against metal struts beneath the table. "Go away," she said, hostile but still sitting, presumably concluding that he was no threat nor was his robot.

"I don't know what's in the bag," Jerome said, "but it must be perishable, so you can't carry it around much longer."

"What are you talking about?"

"I.G. Biochemie." He had leaned over the table to whisper the name to her. "Whatever that is, I guess you stole it from them. If you play around, they'll find you--"

The diener watched. She was half up from the table now, the muscles of her face taut with something that could be either fear or outrage. Jerome still leaned over her, and in that moment the diner's tentacles moved beneath it in agitation: Something it didn't understand was going on here.

They sat in Jerome's living room. White light from the walls was shaded to purple in translucent polycarbonate couch, chair, and settees. Red speaker film framed in chrome stood next to a clear rack of AV equipment in matching red and a silver two-meter screen. Purple holographic letters dangled in space over sliding glass doors, asking ARE WE NOT MEN?

"You want in on the money," Connie said.

"Sure, but look what I'm worth to you," Jerome said. "You've been hung up, stuck with whatever you've got there...maybe some help you were expecting, somebody you were expecting, didn't show." He waved away her attempt to answer. "That doesn't matter. I can arrange things so that I.G. Biochemie won't find you, and I can put the money anywhere in the world you want it. You won't be sorry."

"There's one thing you have to tell me," Connie said. "It's too creepy otherwise. How did you find me?"

"I saw you on the street...I saw you, and I wondered why you were carrying that thing, who you were...it's hard to explain. Come here, and let me show you." In the hallway the decorating program was restrained--it merely placed a rose tint over white walls, a dark purple border along the wallboards. Jerome said, "Let me in," and the door opened. "In here," he said. "Here's where I found you."

Jerome set Connie's two black, hard-shell suitcases on his living room floor and said, "I'll take them in the spare bedroom later." The cold bag lay across the living room couch. Connie ran her finger along the bag's seam, and it split, the sheets of crumpled white foam opening like petals of a giant flower. Inside lay a black plastic cube the size of a fist, the compressor that forced cold air into the bag's foam cells. Next to it was a small sheet of white foam folded around something smaller and tied off in gray tape. On it in faint red marker was written a single numeral: 6. The package frosted as she held it out to him. "Do you want to look?" she asked.

"Is there anything to see?" he said.

"Not really. And you might contaminate it. So here--" She pulled a small silver disk from a fold in the crumpled white. "Here's all you'll need Transmit this, and they'll know what you're selling. It's encoded, of course, but that's all right. Maybe the less you know, the better."

Silver whipspring coils snapped out of section joints in blue porcelain, and shining steel blades on the coils' tips flashed under fluorescent kitchen light, slicing away yellow skin and fat, cutting to the bone.

"That's a real floor show," Connie said. She walked out of the kitchen to find Jerome looking out the window onto R Street ten floors below. "Probably pretty good for self-defense, too." She sat on the purple tinged couch.

"Sure," Jerome said, "if I want to stand trial for assault or involuntary manslaughter. If the diener hurts anyone, I'm responsible, just like I was driving a car."

The knife blades kept moving, but the diener was having trouble--inexplicable vertigo of robot visions. Half an ounce of flesh was sheared away with breastbone.

A new kind of awareness had been growing these past few months, out of the controller bond between the diener and Jerome, and it thought, You are responsible, you say, but are you?

Steel clanged against ceramic, blade against countertop.

Jerome called, "You got a problem, diener?"

"No," it said. "There is no problem. I was going too fast."

"Work within your limits, pal," Jerome said, then turned to Connie and said, "What did you say?"

"How long?" she asked again. "How long before you can finish this?"

"Hard to say. Could go a week if their security shells are really good, and they might be, especially now. But more likely we'll get in within the next thirty hours. No special reason for them to look for a computer burn on top of--"

"A theft," Connie said. "I'm a biolab technician specializing in cold-spot asepsis, and I'm a goddamn thief." Her voice was speeding up like a disk player with a faulty power supply, and Jerome knew it was all going to come out of her now. She said, "I took their six."

Jerome lay on the padded floor in the workroom. The diener was plugged in again for recharging and from time to time twitched like a dreaming dog. Opposite them both, a two-meter wallscreen ran mixed windows. From the news window came the voice and face of Lato Bernie, one of the more popular computer-constructs. Below red wolf eyes, pale lips moved, and Lato Bernie's voice said, "The Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in London reported today the theft of the brain of Charles Babbage, nineteenth-century pioneer in computer science. He was the man who first envisioned an all purpose computer, which he called the Analytical Engine "

Babbage, Jerome thought, the man with the gears and cams and pulleys, inventor of, call it the zeroth computer generation, the one that never happened. Start counting generations, and you get to five by the beginning of the twenty-first century--systems like the diener robot. It walked, it talked, it performed a fair number of tasks with enormous skill... But fifth-generation machines came up short in important ways--within limits they were hell, but they still weren't worth a damn at a Turing test.

Here an impish voice whispered inside him, Oh, yeah, then what about the diener? Because Jerome had stopped thinking of the diener as a machine long ago, never mind its limitations.

The way most people saw it, however, you were unlikely to mistake a fifth-generation machine for an intelligent being under any but the most restricted conditions. So for anyone with a professional stake in the matter, the magic number had become six. Information-dense transfer states, many-mind theory--researchers were working at the edge of things, where reality's fuzziest states connected to nature's complex systems, and there was a feeling that soon something would have to tumble.

If Connie was right, something had: I.G. Biochemie had hit the jackpot, an organic artificial intelligence. Then it died, this little bit of flesh, poisoned by a series of metabolic irregularities that IGB desperately wanted to examine. And they would have if Connie hadn't stolen the remains.

"Signing off, babies," Lato Bernie said. "Let's hear it for Charley, eh? So bring back the brain, whoever you are." Lato Bernie giggled.

'Christ!' Jerome said. "All off." Wallscreen windows faded to rose.

"David," Connie said. "What are you doing?" She stood backlit in the doorway, wearing baggy pants and a blouse of crushed white cotton.

"Come on in," he said. She sat next to him on the padded floor and leaned back against the wall.

"I've been thinking," she said. "Now that you understand what's going on maybe you want out."

And to himself Jerome said What I want no longer matters; you're what I need.

"We'll see" he said. "If things get too strange I'll tell you. But for the moment no problem. I said I'd do it; I'll do it."

"That's very nice of you."

She gave a kind of sigh as he put his hands on her shoulders.

The events of the next few hours were as inevitable as the path of a freely falling object. As they took place, the diener remained motionless and apparently oblivious to what went on. But perhaps it was aware.... There, as Jerome was bent between her thighs, and she cried out, was the diener moving, did it make a sound?

Jerome walked along Q Street near Dupont Circle. An old woman selling flowers out of white crockery vases arranged in a line along the sidewalk called to him, her tongue a blotch of dark red behind toothless gums. She said, "Come on, roses for your lady, mister." As if she knew.

In the middle of the next block, a tall, thin man in a green plastic jacket was bouncing plasma balls against cement steps. Flashes of electric gold exploded under sick amber streetlights. Jerome stopped and yelled, "Hey, 2-Ace!" The man gestured for him to come on. 2-Ace was shirtless under the jacket. Bones of chest and rib cage stood in clear outline, and chrome stars set into the meager flesh of his left pectoral gleamed in the streetlight. His eyes were bright, and even standing still, he seemed in motion--his left hand jerked back and forth in quick, unconscious arcs. 2-Ace did a fair amount of speed.

"Man," he said. "Jerome." A small maroon velveteen bag dangled from his waist, and he shook it gently. "Good shit," he said.

"I hope so," Jerome said. 2-Ace was selling credit chip blanks and recent codes--the necessary ingredients to cook up instant credit in whatever name he might choose and so have untraceable means. Jerome, Connie, and the diener might have to move in a hurry, and in an almost pure credit economy, cash in any significant amount would attract unwanted attention.

Jerome wanted to buy a rose from the old woman, but she had gone.

Nighttime is usually when the deal goes down, so Jerome wasn't surprised when he heard the message relay chirping around three A M Coming in through electronic dead drops in Europe, switched through the West Coast, it was I.G. Biochemie's reply. Then came an unexpected series of nonsense syllables. Jerome was wondering what they would have encrypted and why, when the system alarm went off--beeps and screams laced with urgent subsonics, the kind of message your central nervous system knows it never wants to hear.

Then there was FATAL ERROR on every screen, words that died even as he looked, as the machines were burned down to the ROM level, "eaten by the weasel" it was called, and Jerome had never seen it done--had not believed really that it could be done. But there it was: a whole system trashed, chips fried, CROME disks and WORM memories wiped.

The diener's bulbous front poked through the door with Connie just behind. "What's up?" she said. "What's wrong?"

"Grab what you've got," Jerome said. "But make it quick."

The door slid sideways as the elevator sighed to a stop at the first floor, and the stocky, sallow-faced man in a dark suit who waited just outside pulled his coat back and took a Colt Magnamatic from an upside-down shoulder holster.

There was an electric crackle, and the man collapsed. A small silver dart high on his left cheek led along a nearly invisible wire to a port in the diener's nose.

"Nice work," Connie said.

Jerome said, "A man's got a right to defend his property." Flip, cool, false: more shock than anything. Jerome was already much deeper into bad shit than he'd ever dreamed of being. Connie was on her knees by the prone man, taking the gun from his hand. She put the dark Kevlar barrel to the man's mouth and whispered, "I ought to just kill you." Paralyzed, he looked at her through hatred and pain. "What's going on?" Jerome asked. Connie looked at him, something crazy in her eyes. "No!" the diener said, its small-voiced cry punctuated by one subsonic pop as she fired. Back spatter put red lacework on her white sleeve. Blood and fluid leaked across black-and-white tile.

"Come on," she said. "Don't just stand there, come on!"

Carrying emerald-green methamphetamines and a handful of bogus credit chips in more names than either of them could remember, they were ready to run. The rented Pontiac sat in bright morning sunshine, silver clamshell doors sprung open, ceramic engine clattering as it came up to operating temperature. Dust motes danced in the light, and Jerome stood looking at the white plastic bag emitting its soft hum. He pressed down on the trunk lid, and it hissed shut.

Somewhere in Pennsylvania, where the sky was a dull gray that filtered the light and leached the color out of rolling farmland, Jerome said, "You've got to explain that... what you did."

Connie lay with her seat back, reclining almost on top of the diener, which filled most of the rear. Her face

was toward the car's ceiling, her eyes closed. "David," she said, "I had to kill him. Christ, he knew what we look like, what we were wearing... he even saw the robot, which by the way is going to be a big liability."

"Never mind that. Him or us, right?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you."

The diener burned with a new set of perceptions. Over and over, it saw itself freezing the man with a taser dart, dropping him to the ground, and Connie Stone killing him over and over. Who is responsible, and what could I have done? it wanted to know.

They bypassed Chicago, where the black Sears Tower sat in a foul petrochemical haze, looking like home base,se for the Evil Empire. Interstate 80 had become a hot magnetic tube that sucked them along. The pilot was off, and red numbers on the dash flickered in the nineties--hopes for invisibility not forgotten exactly, just mislaid in the moment's burn.

By the next day the Midwest had been chewed up, and so had they, as the miles rolled under the Pontiac, and the chemicals they were eating fired a million tiny darts up and down their spines and dumped huge glass vats of acid into their stomachs. Jerome figured they had to stop sometime. So in Wyoming, in a shitty little town that was half neon fast-food strip and half lunar landscape, they pulled in under a clear sky that was rapidly fading into twilight and stopped at the 80 Autotel.

The diener followed Jerome and Connie into the motel room, where they took a Demerol each and slept ten straight hours, falling out of the amphetamine haze and into a dark sleep like death. The diener stood in its own darkness, possessed by the memory of that one event, working through what in a human would have to be called the trauma of it, the pain.

The next afternoon, clouds hanging on the surrounding mountains laid down a chill drizzle as they dropped into Salt Lake City. Half an hour later Jerome had gone to manual and was driving the Pontiac along the edge of the overflowing Salt Lake, where dikes of rock and dirt had cut the road to two slow-moving lanes wet with seepage from the overflow. Robot cranes--giant mantises ringed with camera eyes worked the tops of the dikes while flagmen in yellow plastic suits urged the bottlenecked traffic onward. Farther west the road drew a straight line across the flooded salt flats, where gray sky and clouds and brown mountains were reflected in a giant watery mirror, two orders of being intersecting seamlessly, nature's excess flowing free into an unexpected beauty.

Jerome chewed a green capsule, gagged as it went down, then choked and spit into his hand. "I think I know what we're going to do," he said, then licked fragments of bitter amphetamine from his palm. "The diener here can send these assholes a phone message: Fuck with us one more time, and we leave the rotting carcass of your six on the roadside for the coyotes to eat. So pay now. Do it fast and safe--encrypt, squeeze, and squirt. I made a bad mistake the last time; I went after them like they were into some kind of ordinary security routine; but I forgot how much they might have to protect."

"And I forgot how quick they are," Connie said. "And how mean."

"Yeah. Anyway, I think we've run about far enough."

Jerome had always had apocalyptic associations with Nevada. Words like test range, underground explosion, and dead sheep came to mind. But that's where they ended up, in a small town just over the border, burning under the day's fading sun, where signs promised investors cheap entry into the "Next Las Vegas." All were faded to near illegibility.

Their room had steel furnishings, eggshell-blue walls. The lobby of the Flowing Sands had been late-twentieth-century pseudo-luxe: white ceramic and red Naugahyde, chrome, multicolored lasers running mindlessly through their programs.

Jerome lay on the bed, feeling strange.

Old blues, half remembered... songs about guns and knives and women--She's got a thirty-eight special, and hey momma, please stop breakin' down--he thought one of them might be somehow appropriate.

She stepped out of the bathroom wearing a light pink towel, crystal beads of water from the shower on her skin--

The one I love--

And she opened a black drawer and lifted a dark blue silky gown from it and put the towel aside--

put a pistol in a man's mouth--

She slid the gown over her head--

and pulled the trigger--

When her hot, damp skin pushed against him it erased an infinity of doubts--

(some special kind of blues).

The diener reached inside itself and pulled out a blue plastic lead with a silver plug on its end. Spring-loaded, the lead pulled taut as the diener stretched it and snapped it into the base of the phone. "You wish me to transmit now?" it asked.

"Sure," Jerome said.

And in the moment of the relays' closing, as circuits began to come together from Nevada to the Dominican Republic, it knew what it must say, now, and to whom.

A few seconds later, Jerome said, "That's it. It's all over. Let's get a drink." And to the diener he said, "You should recharge."

"I will do so," it said. It had further material to ponder: In light of its recent experience of irreversible change irreversible choice--it considered what likely would happen next.

Quick and mean, she had said.

Connie and Jerome were sitting over room-service breakfast the next morning when the door opened and two men in hotel uniforms--maroon jumpsuits with gold trim stepped inside. The tall one held a small black automatic pistol like the Colt in Connie's handbag. The short one went to the closet and pushed the button, and the mirrored door slid aside. He reached into the white-lit interior and pulled the cold bag from behind stacked black suitcases. He laid the cold bag on the double bed, split the opening seam, and took out the package. He unwrapped the package and with a small scalpel carved away a sliver of the lump of pink flesh inside and placed the sliver in a small black tube.

Connie looked at the diener, which was plugged into a wall socket. "I'm sorry," Jerome said, but she ignored

him; she was looking wildly about as if for something that was not there.

The short one nodded his head and began to repack the cold bag. The tall one fired a shot that hit Connie in the middle of the forehead. The impact slammed her against the wall, and the shooter walked over to where she sprawled with her legs and arms flung wide, and put another shot into the inside curve of her left breast, into the heart.

"Go home," he said to Jerome in the flat voice of a poker player asking the dealer for two cards. "Someone will be along to take care of things--the woman, the car. Don't say anything to anybody, and don't ever bother us again. Understand?"

With her blood on him and the smell of her death in his nostrils, Jerome understood. The two men didn't wait for him to say so. They were gone.

The shuttle to Reno lifted straight up from a pad of cracked cement on the edge of the almost-town. Inside the old swing-wing jet, the stink of sweat came off tattered green upholstery. Over the mountains the plane swayed and bucked in rough air that penetrated Jerome's stunned grief and guilt and made him white with nausea.

In Reno the airport was bright blue cement, red steel, and a forest of mirrors, and Jerome and the diener were insignificant among thousands returning east, most having blown sensible amounts, a few telling stories of big casino wins, a few more nursing the gut ache that comes with big-time loss, the one you can't afford.

"You're sure the compartment is pressurized," Jerome said to the woman behind the United counter. The diener had already been checked through, but Jerome was anxious.

"Hey, Jackie," the woman said. "This guy's shipping a robot. You wanna talk to him? I'm busy." She was in her early twenties with bright, sexy eyes, and obviously did not give a shit.

"Fuck you," Jerome said. And walked away.

"Next," the woman said.

On the flight to Washington, the cabin was dark, and Jerome sat sleepless in the gloom, confronting the blank recognition that he had known little about Connie Stone, and he wondered who she was, and more... wondered about them... what were the odds that their passion would have endured past the moment's hot radioactive burn? At Dulles there was rain and fog and crowds dispersing quickly off two incoming flights.

The diener rolled up a ramp into the rear compartment of an airport limo; Jerome sat among the half-dozen glum people inside. As the limo moved along the Dulles Parkway, no one said a word, which was fine with Jerome. He could barely imagine trying to talk to anyone about anything.

Late afternoon the following day, Jerome sat on the minute terrace outside his bedroom. Through open glass doors he could hear the quiet swish of the diener as it moved through the room.

Jerome's voyeurism was gone, its energies extinct. He thought that maybe his curiosity had gone with it, though he did wonder about one thing.

"Diener," he called, and the robot came onto the terrace. "How do you think I.G. Biochemie found us?" Jerome asked. He breathed in the burned hydrocarbons from the street ten stories below. The diener stayed silent. "I used to think I was pretty good at this game," Jerome went on, "but they burned me down, they caught us."

"No," the diener said. "Not your fault."

"Of course it is."

"No. I told them."

Coming out of the chair, Jerome put his hands under the edge of the diener's porcelain shell . He thought, Of course you did, in a moment more of recognition than of discovery. He grunted as he levered the diener's body sideways so that it rested against the white-painted terrace railing. The diener's tentacles quivered like agitated black worms.

"To save your life," the diener said. "I made a deal with them. They would never have forgotten you, they would have killed you. Why do you worry about that woman? She was a thief, a murderer"

"You little shit."

Under the diener's weight and Jerome's push, the rail came free, and the diener tumbled in bright sunlight. Smashing through a sculpture of black wrought iron, it plunged through rippling water, and its body shattered on the fountain's concrete and sandstone bottom.

Over the chatter of people gathering around the fountain, Jerome's wail could be heard coming from high above.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd-nc/1.0/>

2 RTEXTTR*ch

A free ebook from <http://manybooks.net/>