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Dear Distance



I meet Jenn5 for the first time in New Makati, at a club called Distance. I'm there to check out the place for a new buy-blast campaign. If nothing else, it's appropriately named: low-level perception distorters make random objects and people appear closer or farther away than they really are. Borderline annoying, really, but at least it's something new. Further sensory bombardment is provided by wall-sized projections of so-called art-flix: the night Jenn5 and I meet, it's playing some derivative cyborg softporn. Chrome and skin. Tears and oil. The slink and jerk, smack and crash of half-robot bodies. Distance also utilizes a set of repurposed sonicScream emitters—ostensibly a pest control invention for keeping small vermin away, it has been calibrated to keep larger, bipedal undesirables out of the club. A century and a half after the Spaniards colonized us Filipinos, and class distinctions are alive and well in New Makati.

I attune my hearing modifications to the special frequencies. Anyone without the latest mods would only hear a high-pitched, thoroughly irritating whine. As my apparatus homes in on the proper wavelengths, a world of soundwash and breakbeat opens up inside my head: glorious amped-up samples from forgotten songs, melded with body-moving rhythms. I already had a brain-buzz going from

a vasopressin cocktail I downed earlier; the music just pushes everything up another notch. I start to sway slightly, almost imperceptibly: my limbs ache to try out their new enhancements but my mind murmurs, *be cool*, be cool. Time enough to show off later.

I work my way deeper into the club, somewhat uncertainly at first, as my optics try to compensate for the illusory distances cast by the distorters. Some gentle bumping into strangers is unavoidable; thankfully, the only consequences are good-natured apologies, and some insincere laughter. The disorientation is all part of the cover charge, after all.

I see a vision standing near the bar. She looks fragile and invulnerable at the same time. Little-girl face, with a perfect white-toothed little smile and a little comma of a nose. Bright sparky Fil-Chi eyes. Her petite body, toned and perfectly shaped, is free of any obvious enhancements and modifications, as far as I can tell. I do a quickscan and her public profile reveals no more than her nom: Jenn5. She looks so young. They'd never let a high schooler in here, I assure myself. She's got to be at least 20.

Or—I remind myself—she could be 30, or 40, or even in her 50s, like me. It's almost impossible to tell, body 'ments and mods have gotten so seamless and sophisticated. And then, of course, there's the DNA revisions—basically, anyone could end up kissing a crone or a geezer like myself without knowing it, these days.

Was it only two decades or so ago that obvious enhancements were the in-thing? When teenagers and youthseekers alike got grafted with microprocessor-saturated ridges, talons, horns, second spines (or, as sarcastic tongues would wag, first spines), and exoskeletons? I myself had helpful bioelectric tendrils installed along both forearms, that heightened both my capacity for pleasure and my defensive capabilities in case I was ever attacked. Many was the time I actually hoped someone would try and mug me, as I staggered home from an all-nighter at Big Sky. I wondered how frying someone's synapses with a jillion volts would feel.

And then of course, five or six years ago, smartcells became all the rage. To be more accurate, it's really smart bacteria—but as anyone in advertising can tell you, it's sheer hell to market bacteria. Smartcells made perfection easy, changing people from the inside out, allowing everyone to enjoy the previously-uncommon benefits of supermodel DNA. Slogans like "Back to Beautiful" became commonplace and notions of attractiveness swung back to 20th century standards. Obvious enhancements went out of style; all the neosurgeons who made a fortune grafting all that stuff on made another fortune removing it again. I kept my tendrils—luckily, they can retract fully into my arms, leaving just the slightest of bumps on my skin's surface. Good thing too; these days, most people agree that the best thing to have is a hybrid of both—the perfection afforded by the DNA-revising bacteria, and the obvious mods of a decade ago. Still, I touch my tendril-bumps somewhat self-consciously as I walk up to the bar.

Jenn5 is sipping at a neon-green drink. She's either very close to me—maybe one or two feet away—or on the other side of the bar, close to the washroom entrances. It's hard to tell, as my optics are still haywiring, and the uncertainty is thrilling and a little frustrating, as most uncertainty is. She has a short black dress on, made of some new miracle of materials science that seems to shimmer darkly. I can't help staring. "Youthseeker Central," someone behind me chuckles, apparently to his companion. Was that my imagination? Are my motivations and true age so easily perceived?

I force a smirk. Who gives a shit.

My optics adjust. As far as I can tell, she's maybe two, three steps away from me. I move towards her. Accusations of youthseeking be damned.

I thought I would grow older gracefully. As a teenager, I remember hating my youth, the way it limited my opportunities, prejudiced people against me. I wanted to be 30, or 40, or better still 50: established, respected, hopefully feared, in whatever profession I had chosen. But as my twenties faded away I felt a quiet but growing panic within me: I remember 25 as the turning point, the exact year when I realized media was no longer selling to me. Ads and movie trailers and billboards and buy-blasts zoomed over my head: I felt excluded, out of the loop. I became determined to chase down and wrestle the elusive and mutable pop-culture beast that was running away from me. My mechanical body modifications were just the beginning. When the first legal smartcell injections became available, I wasn't exactly first in line, but I wasn't far behind.

I was living with a girl named Kami when I got my tendrils. She hated them. She wouldn't let me touch her after I got them.

As I take that first step towards Jenn5, a sharp memory floats up from somewhere deep in my brain. The grinning denizens and art-flix walls of Distance seem to fade away for a second, as I remember the morning after the last time Kami and I made love. We were staying on the second floor of an old house in San Juan; the aging widow who owned the place was renting rooms just to make ends meet. I remember the segmented sunlight that made its way into the room, through the dusty jealousies, across the wood-tiled floor, to describe a pattern of light and dark on our bodies. Kami, being a typically underpaid schoolteacher, didn't even have a bed at the time; we made do with a secondhand mattress on the floor. I was sitting up, with my back resting against one of her room's dingy yellow walls. Kami was lying beside me, still asleep, one arm flung out as if in welcome, the other resting peacefully on her belly. Her dream-fuelled tossing and turning had worked the blanket down to her waist, exposing her naked torso.

I was staring at her with a mixture of reverence and lust, a slightly disconcerting mixture, like being turned on by the roof of the Sistine Chapel. The deep rich brownness of her skin seemed so right, somehow, as if God had set aside an extra day at the beginning of Creation, just to make sure He got that exact shade. I remember imagining myself shrunk down to the size of a pinky finger, the world's luckiest explorer, roaming across the expanse of her skin,

climbing up the swell of a breast, to plant a kiss on its dark nipple. I smiled at the silliness of the image. The smile quickly faded as I thought about our argument of the night before. She couldn't understand my need to "mutilate myself", as she put it. It wasn't mutilation, I tried to explain. It was transformation. We have to transform or we'll get left behind.

"Left behind by *what*?" she wanted to know. She couldn't understand. Our lovemaking that night had been fierce, unbridled; I know she was trying to get me to see that things couldn't be any better than what we already had. I got myself modified the next day anyway, and she left me soon after. It was just as well. Kami was a natural girl to the bone. You knew that just by seeing her on the street: innumerable pieces of ethnic jewelry hanging from her neck and on her wrists. Dark shirt, long skirt with a wild tribal pattern, scuffed and well-traveled leather sandals on her apparently well-traveled feet. She would never get mods, or smartcell injections, or anything of the sort. And eventually, I probably would have broken up with her anyway, embarrassed by her obsolescence.

As I stare at Jenn5, she seems to me to be a girl who would never go out of style. She seems impossibly new. I take another step in her direction.

And another memory rises to the surface. So vivid. It must be the nootropic cocktail I guzzled before coming here—goes straight to the brain, it does. Or maybe it's just nostalgia, engulfing an old fool.

Something about Jenn5's eyes and lips reminds me of Noi, my last long-term girlfriend. Sometimes I think she's the one I was closest to, which is funny in a way because she was also the one I never actually touched. A girl of Thai descent who was based in the States, she was someone who shared my penchant for bodymods and keeping up with the ever-accelerating times. (She would eventually get little data-spines installed in her long, delicate fingers: functional *and* fashionable.) We met online, exchanged URLs and addys, and ended up spending an obscene amount of our hours instant-messaging and e-mailing each other, sharing links and sites, strolling through virtuWorlds together.

I discovered Noi through a site for digital artists. In her online photo, her unruly hair was held back by a wide elastic headband, and she was wearing a ratty Decoder Ring T-shirt. A pair of thick black plastic-framed eyeglasses covered half her face; on a set of lesser features, those glasses would have engulfed the whole face, devoured it and left the observer with no impressions save a memory of heavy black frames. On her, though, it was the glasses that suffered transformation; they seemed little more than minor obstructions to an observer's enjoyment of her eyes, her subtly shaped cheeks, her slightly parted lips. On anybody else, those glasses would have been unflattering, I thought. That was the beginning of my falling for her: this belief in her as an exception to a rule.

Noi was against contact lenses and—surprisingly, considering her open-mindedness about self-alteration—laser eye surgery. Although she was up to date on all the legal and illegal methods of body modification, she also liked the idea of "modifying" yourself by wearing something as simple, as *primitive*, as eyeglasses. She even liked the idea of imperfect vision. "Nearsighted people have

to invent at least thirty percent of their worlds," Noi once messaged me. "Life is a haze, a guessing game of recognition."

We fell in love online, had arguments and made up and made love online. We were overjoyed when the ThoughtComm technology emerged; though it was essentially just instant messaging with the middleman removed (no typing, just words emerging onscreen thanks to electrodes interpreting neural activity), it was the closest thing to telepathy and we were early adopters. Most other people were wary of such unrestrained intimacy—these days, it seems no one even subscribes to it anymore—but we thrived on it, at least until our relationship ended. We lasted for three years and I doubt that I was ever that happy with anyone I had been with face to face. It ended, predictably enough, when she met someone else, in a coffee shop in Portland. Score one for the real world.

I snap back to the present. Though the sensory swirl makes distance hard to judge, I'm about 80 percent sure I am well within an arm's-reach of Jenn5.

And—*contact*. Turns out she's only about two feet away. My fingers touch lightly upon her shoulder. She glances up from her drink, not startled, not apprehensive, as if she had been waiting for me. She gives me a look, expectant, maybe even a little mischievous. I say something, I'm not sure what—something casual, something about her drink maybe, or the art-flix cyborgs. It must have been something at least mildly amusing, because now she's smiling. A smile that begins modestly enough, but that soon spreads across her face in a fantastically charming arc, as I follow joke with wry observation with compliment.

We talk about her favorite books, films; she doesn't name anything that's more than three or four years old. She liked the latest quark junior flick, the newest Rashel Rxn starrer. She downloaded that 1-Tamad series last week, and thinks it's hilarious. I can't get over how young she seems, and it fills me with guilt and excitement.

I think: she must be about as young as Trina was when we got together. And just like that, a fresh school of memories starts to swim upwards. I protest inwardly—*No, not now*, I tell them—but they will not be denied or delayed.

Trina, the first girlfriend I ever had. Trina, who effortlessly combined literary aspirations with corporate ambitions; cream-skinned, laugh-eyed, lovely Trina, who for all her cutting wit possessed a body that while fairly slim seemed to have no edges, no bones that jutted ungraciously, not even a sharp chin. This was in the days before quickscans, before virtuWorld and ThoughtComm, before friend-networks, hell, this was even before cellphones and text messaging. In those days, love depended mostly on circumstance, coincidence and geography. Trina was a classmate of mine, and we both lived on the sprawling University campus—she stayed in the freshman dorm while I rented a house with some other students. We got to know each other when we were grouped together and had to do a report on Jose Rizal's love life; I'm not kidding.

It seems almost bizarre now to think of our courtship. We always met face to face because there was no other way *to* meet or talk; our house didn't even have a landline yet. I would visit her at the dorm, sometimes bringing small gifts.

We'd sit in the front lobby, and talk about what the future might possibly hold. Not much had changed from Rizal's time up 'til then, it seemed. We never even had sex—we felt too young for it, unready.

With all the hand-holding, the pleasant sigh-strewn silences, the tentative kisses and romantic pronouncements, it took us months before we realized that we didn't have all that much in common and that we would probably eventually get sick of each other, that in fact, we were *already* getting somewhat sick of each other. Being a pair of idiot romantics, these were not facts we dealt with easily.

I remember arguments, I remember raised voices and tears, God, I remember *letters*—we used to write letters to each other all the time, even though we only lived a short walk away from each other.

The vasopressin in my system squeezes Trina's last letter to me out of my memory, word for word. The letter she delivered weeks after we had decided not to see each other any more.

I still dream about you, she had written. Sometimes it's a good dream—you're back with me and we're hanging out and enjoying ourselves—and sometimes it's a bad dream, where we're arguing and shouting at each other. And when I start thinking of us, it seems that everything in my life stops and I can't study and I can't do anything except get into nasty pointless arguments with friends who don't even know what my problem is.

It's strange to think about when we first started going out. Remember that? When we were so happy? I felt then that in some strange way, we'd always known each other. I loved you so much that you became part of my whole life: present and past. When I would think about my childhood, about growing up, about my teen years, it's weird; I'd see you there, with me. Like being in love had given me memories of times we never had, retroactive memories.

Trina had ended the letter with: *So sad to think of how close I felt to you then, and how far apart we are now.*

"Hey," Jenn5 says. "Mission control, requesting update." She can tell that I'm not entirely there, that part of me is lost, wandering. "Sorry," I smile, and she smiles back, warmly. She's perfect, I think—but then again, they're all perfect, aren't they? They're perfect at the beginning and they're perfect after the end. As soon as I have that thought, something like despair threatens to engulf me, so I take Jenn5's hand, and ask her to dance with me. She's a little surprised, a little hesitant at first, but she goes with it. As we walk to the raised platform by the far wall of Distance, I observe my perfect Jenn5 some more, and I can't help questions from drifting into my mind. How old are you really, Jenn5? And who are you, really?

That last question, I know I may never find an answer to. Have I ever really known anyone?

Jenn5 and I have reached the other side of Distance. At first, we just stand there, facing each other, a handspan apart. Then she closes her eyes, begins swaying slightly from side to side, letting her aural mods thrum the music through her entire body. I do the same, feeling the song as it fills me.

Jenn5 sways her head to and fro, and the movement seems to ripple downward: her shoulders rock, her hips grind, her feet shift back and forth in time to the beats. I echo her motions, and as we dance, the music seems to get more intense, more frenzied. Soon we're jumping up and down, wide smiles on our faces, thoroughly possessed by the rhythms, our limbs like eloquent whips, our bodies describing the concept of elation in the air. *Now, I think, now!*

I activate my new enhancements: I concentrate, still moving with the music, and—

My skin grows a city.

Streets and stairways snake and stretch across my back, and buildings and bridges burst and burn their way through neofiber and warpweave. The tiniest towers and skyscrapers nudge their way upwards through my arms. It's the newest thing: temporary nano-engines can construct an entire metropolis on your body. It doesn't hurt at all; I'm still dancing, my movements allowing for the new structures that are sprouting all over me, none of them more than a fraction of a millimeter tall. My old tendrils extend, as if they were monsters about to devastate the capital, and they spark and sway with me. The patterns of my city are beautiful, electric, and one by one, the lights come on in every streetlamp and building: my skin-city is a dazzling 3-dimensional tattoo and I am incandescent.

Gasps of admiration fill the club. Jenn5 is grinning, lovelier than ever.

She turns her back to me, and I notice three pairs of metallic ridges slowly rising through slits in her shimmery dress. They push up and out, and grow. They begin as shards, then shape themselves further until they resemble swords, then expand, downwards, outwards, row upon overlapping row of shiny leaf-like protuberances, and I realize that what they are is wings. Glorious steel wings sprouting from little Jenn5's back. More sounds of admiration from the other clubgoers. I am ecstatic. Some people seem to crowd in closer, some seem to be moving away, and in this place, it's hard to tell which is which, really, and after a while, hard to care.

Jenn5 spreads her wings, turns to face me again, and we continue dancing, our movements unusual and mesmerizing, a city and a seraph engaged in the oldest of rituals in this newest of places.

We dance and laugh and little else matters for now.

We will never really know each other, Jenn5, though eventually—and briefly—we may imagine we do. Whether you are too young and I am inexcusably elderly or vice versa, there will always be things we have in common, and things we will never understand about each other. In the end, distances and surfaces are all we can ever be sure of, and this is no sad thing. In a world that has accelerated almost beyond recognition, it may be the only comforting thought of which I am still capable.

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