

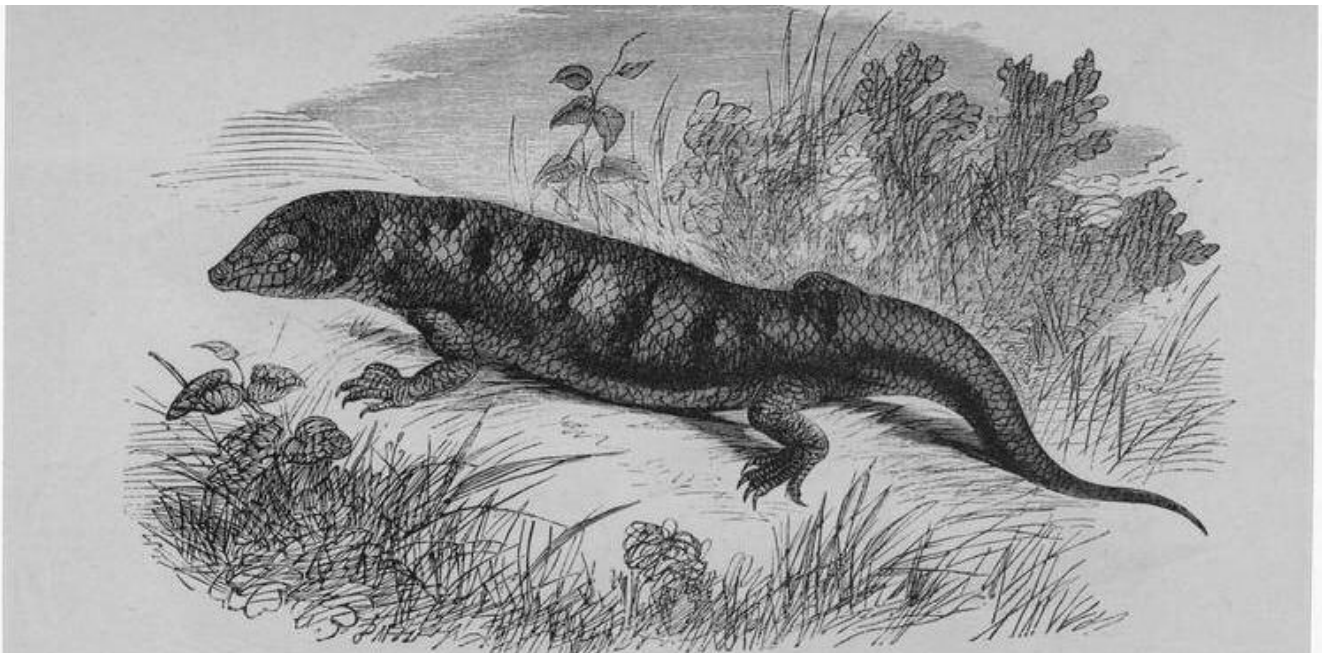
# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 3 Number 7

Page 1 – FOSTER AND SLOAN by Jeff Nazzaro. Mr. Nazzaro grew up in New England, lived in Japan for twelve years, and now makes his home in Southern California, where he writes fiction and poetry. His short stories have appeared in a handful of online literary magazines, including *Angel City Review*, *Oddville Press*, and *Terror House Magazine*.

Page 15 – THREE VERYSHORT STORIES by Susan Cornford. Ms Cornford is a retired public servant, living in Perth, Western Australia, with pieces published or forthcoming in *50-Word Stories*, *Akashic Books*, *Antipodean Science Fiction*, *CarpeArte Journal*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Medusa's Laugh*, *Speculative 66*, *Subtle Fiction*, *Switchblade*, *The Fable Online*, *The Gambler*, *The Vignette Review* and *The Were-Traveler*. She considers herself an emerging flash writer.

Page 18 – MY PROMISE by Charles G. Chettiar. Mr. Chettiar is an engineer by circumstance and writer by choice. He works in Mumbai. He started writing short stories when in college, and has recently completed his first novel. His fiction genres include horror, fantasy, espionage thrillers, and historical, and sometimes he wears his literary cap. He also takes delight in dark fantasy...



# “FOSTER AND SLOAN”

by JEFF NAZZARO

Foster power-napped on the first leg of his commute, from San Francisco to Tokyo, his alarm set to wake him for the free umbrella drink in Honolulu. Rocketing through the free-floating composite tube beneath the Eastern Pacific Trash Vortex in the DepthCharger 2050, Foster dreamt one of his violent, frustrated dreams.

Pike-armed deep in an earthen pit, he battled towards an unlit, cage-guarded tunnel. Covered in blood and filth he charged, driving his pike deep into the face of a menacing beast he knew he could never kill. The iron head of the pike struck an unbreakable core of bone, the wooden shaft cracking and splintering in his hands. He dropped the shattered weapon and sank to his knees in the mud, staring down into shredded, bleeding hands—his hands, and yet unrecognizable as even human, these small, broken, claw-like appendages. Head hung in defeat, a scatter of silver coins peppered the pit around him. More struck his head and neck. Looking up and shielding his face, he saw men ringing the pit, peering down over the side, heads seemingly dismembered and jammed on the rim while detached arms flung coins from high above to the distant echo of laughter and cheers.

Foster’s eyes snapped open. He’d set

them that way, no snooze, but as his space converted from ImmersiGel bed to SimuLeather traditional recliner mode, there was a hazy instant through which he gathered his dream that he realized the programmed alarm had not yet activated. He occupied his usual space on the DepthCharger, with the art deco appointments and the Cremonini painting he’d selected that morning to replace the Jackson Pollock, but, suspended between sleeping and waking, he couldn’t quite apprehend when the bed became the chair and where the shifting apparatus ended and he began, an instant that washed over him as a strangely exhilarating moment of derealization. Then the sensations of the alarm washed over his brain, and the dream and the derealization dissipated into the holographic PrismaVision projecting from his surgically implanted lens replacements.

The spherical hologram displayed hula dancers swaying to the strains of a gently plucked ukulele against a backdrop of big wave surfing. “Aloha! Welcome to Laird Terminal, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA!” The words scrolled around the holographic sphere along with the local time and weather in raised block letters. The PrismaVision segued into headline news clips and sports highlights as Foster, feeling

the nanoscale pinch in his temples and whine in his ears of the embedded brain chips and speakers activating, heard Sloan's voice waft into his head with his usual greeting: "Hey, buddy."

Foster had been "chipped and fitted," as the parlance went, and introduced to Sloan, his Integrated Systematic Assistant, or ISA, as a mandatory condition of his new job with Totality. He'd started working the year before for the massive multinational corporation, whose slogan, "Total Everything ... Always," seemed to be always everywhere promising everything. He'd had reservations about the technosurgical procedures and the changes to his daily life they'd effect, but in the end the salary package, which included excellent lease rates on a condominium with a view of the bay, a supercharged electric motorcycle with convertible weather-guard dome, and the FareShare agreement on the semi-private DepthCharger space he currently occupied, had been too good to pass up. His degrees in business administration and international relations from prestigious private universities had probably been enough to secure him his interview, but it was ultimately his fluency in Japanese and willingness to be chipped and fitted that had landed Foster the job. His days and nights were now filled with DepthCharger trips to Tokyo with his ElectraCycle SC docked and charging below decks, the entertaining of clients, business meetings, training sessions, workshops. And if the unceasing flow of education got tedious, much of the rest of the work was

outright enjoyment: ballgames, Michelin-starred restaurants, hotel lounges, hostess bars. He was right in the middle of all the exciting new things overtaking the globe. How many of his friends from school, even graduate school, were saddled with monstrous debt, living hand-to-mouth working the most stultifying jobs imaginable? The lucky ones were cashiers or data entry clerks, maybe copywriters or teachers, but many of them now worked on hardware assembly lines or in clothing sweatshops, with artificially intelligent robot supervisors and unpaid holidays, living in tiny apartments strung together in a depressing sprawl from Modesto to Mexicali.

Foster had lost track of most of the people he knew who lacked the means, opportunity, physical and intellectual prerequisites, or finally the desire to hook into this latest jump in technology. He'd had reservations himself, especially concerning the medical procedures, and occasionally, like when he happened to come across some alarming new study or particularly cogent opinion piece, still did. There were conflicting stories with corresponding studies even in the mainstream media about the long-term effects of intracranial chipping, with reports of 80 percent spikes in brain cancer rates competing alongside tales of unprecedented longevity and personal contentedness. The blogosphere, particularly those segments where the New Agers meshed with the neopunks, anarchists, and libertarians, called the Chippies everything from sellouts

to freaks to cyborg zombies—a panoply of insults branding them traitors to humanity. The more radical and violent among them hinted at liquidation campaigns against those the media had unofficially dubbed the New Wave Technocrats, and it seemed as if there were a fresh antitech group popping up every day claiming responsibility for acts of industrial sabotage, ecoterrorism, infrastructure vandalism, and even, ironically enough, cyberterrorism. The Cranial Liberation Front, or CLF, was just one of an alphabet soup of organizations waging war against the Chippies to bring down the corporations that sponsored them. Rumors that a mysterious hacker called Contagion, who had dedicated himself to mastering the new technology with the explicit goal of destroying it, had figured out a way to spread viruses inside Chippies' heads, frying their brains, inducing paranoia, hydrophobia, dementia.

Foster recalled how unsettling it had been the first time a Chippy had walked towards him on a San Francisco sidewalk, the well-dressed man making conversational hand gestures and wordlessly moving his lips, with no visible handset, headphones, earpiece, or wires. Foster had stopped dead in his tracks and pointed to himself like an idiot as the man glared and stalked past. He had been positive the man had been addressing him, attracting his attention, and maybe in some odd way he had been. Foster never forgot that moment of false recognition and how it made him somehow know himself, what he could be, what he

wanted to be.

Wireless, invisible phone technology had been around for decades and no one even noticed it anymore—passersby heard one side of a conversation and knew it had nothing to do with them. This silent-mouthed communication was altogether different, however, and unless you were an expert lip-reader, you had no idea what was going on except that here was a Chippy, and if you weren't one of them, you were something else, something less, something that nature hadn't selected, that evolution was leaving behind. Foster thought about that moment on the sidewalk more than any other in the soul-searching that preceded his signing the contract with Totality.

He didn't regret it. After getting chipped and fitted he'd flaunted his acquisition of the cutting-edge technology, making others stop like hailed cabs, leaving them wanting as he strode by, engaged with Sloan or some human business contact. On more than one occasion he'd glowered back at bewildered faces, or stared a man down, made him recognize his place. Foster knew his. He wasn't getting rich from this change in his life, or even saving money, and ultimately, he wielded no power, but he did have certain things he'd always wanted, and at least he was in the game. He wasn't any useless eater or wage slave.

With a stretch and a yawn, Foster reached to his left and retrieved a six-by-two-inch plastic capsule from one of a row of five pneumatic tubes of incremental diameters upstanding to his left and twisted

the base. Another hula dancer hologram popped up, this one with a brief, spoken message: "Aloha. Welcome to Hawaii. Enjoy the ultramodern comfort and good old-fashioned service of the DepthCharger 2050." The hula dancer dissipated to pixelated dust and floated away as a plastic umbrella and straw popped through the capsule. Foster disliked the sickly-sweet drinks, but they were both complimentary and alcoholic, so he rarely passed them up. He took a sip and addressed Sloan.

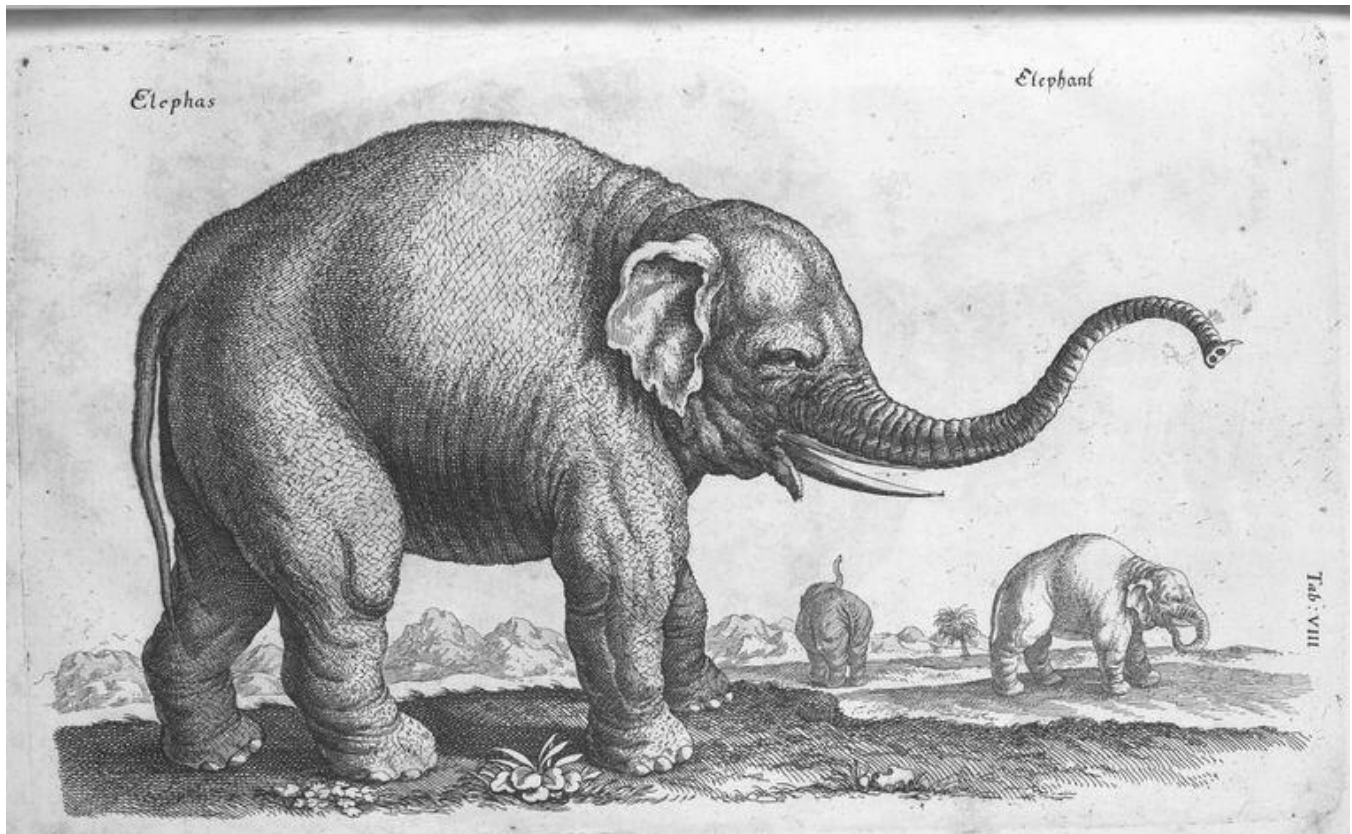
"How was your nap?" Sloan asked.

"Had another one of my crazy fighting dreams, but you probably already have it recorded, psychoanalyzed, and filed away for future reference," Foster said.

"The recording of dreams still belongs to the realm of science fiction, I'm afraid,"

Sloan said. "Would you like to see a report on the latest technological developments?"

"If there's a video, fire it up," Foster silent-mouthed. Though his space was secluded enough from other passengers to allow him to talk in a normal voice without anyone hearing, Foster loved being able to silent-mouth without pretending to be using traditional technology. In places more accessible to the general public, discretion had become advisable. The attention he d gloried in attracting as a freshly implanted Chippy had quickly grown annoying. When people knew you had instant access—no buttons, screens, reception bars, or charges—to unlimited information, they didn't hesitate to impose. *Do you have the time?* was now, *What's the traffic going to be like downtown in forty-five minutes?* or *What's*



*the best price per ounce for strawberries in a five-mile radius?* to say nothing of the increased harassment from the ever-growing ranks of panhandlers, solicitors, fantasy sports junkies, and degenerate gamblers.

More than those things, though, ultra-tech *conspicuity* was becoming dangerous. There had been a spate of beatings outside nightclubs in London and New York, and on the outskirts of cities like Johannesburg and Shanghai, Chippy corpses were turning up in garbage dumps, the hardware mined from their skulls, their faces and fingertips obliterated. In most public settings, Chippies were mandated by employers to carry antiquated handsets or wear earphones with attached microphones as a precautionary ruse. They were forbidden to silent-mouth unless it was absolutely necessary, the conveyed information of the highest secrecy.

Foster's video on the latest advancements in the recording of dreams began less than a second after he'd told Sloan to fire it up. He silent-mouthed a thank you, and, fascinated by the prospect of watching video playbacks of his dreams, focused intently on the report; but despite the snazzy graphics and snappy narration, he quickly grew bored with the jargonistic vocabulary and intricate technical modeling. As his attention shifted from the high-definition holographic display to the drink capsule in his hand, the act of draining it, and a long time placing it in the return tube, the display flickered and then froze for two-second intervals accompanied by a subtle whine. Foster disposed of the

capsule and blinked out the Morse code he had set to summon Sloan.

"You buzzed?"

"Few more mai-tais and I will be."

"Good one, Foster. I remember that one from before."

"Of course you remember it, Sloan, but is it funny?"

"To me, jokes aren't funny, only statistical anomalies are."

Foster cackled, almost out loud. "Why do I sense you were expecting this buzz?"

"I have no expectations, Foster, though you do usually conduct more business during the Laird Terminal stopover than you did on this occasion. Perhaps all that stuff about recording dreams distracted you."

"I remember what I wanted to ask you," Foster said. "Are there still tickets available for tomorrow night's Giants-Giants game?"

"Officially sold out, but I can get you four behind the Yomiuri dugout on the secondary market."

"Perfect. You know how important that Kaihara account is. How much will those set me back?"

"It all goes in the expense report."

"Right. How am I doing, by the way?"

"A bit in the red on that, actually, but you're fine."

"Keep working and don't get sick, right?"

"I don't understand, Foster. Is that another joke?"

"Not really."

"You are privy through Totality to the best healthcare in the world, Foster, and by

my real-time monitoring, your vital signs and blood levels are presently normal.”

“Good to be normal.”

“Speaking of which, would you like to replenish your fridge and pantry stocks as usual? There are also several new frozen meal and meal replacement options I can show you.”

“Usual is fine, I never eat it all, anyway, but I did want to check the toothpaste selection. I’m not crazy about the one I have now.”

“That’s an all-natural formula, so not as sweet, and no fluoride, either. I told you that when you ordered it.”

“I had just watched that video, *Sounding the Toxin*, or whatever, about how fluoride is rat poison and turns us all into brain-dead automatons.”

“And do you feel any smarter for having used half a tube of fluoride-free toothpaste that tastes like Spackle? Luckily, you don’t show signs of any new tooth decay, and I can get you a satisfaction guarantee refund on that other stuff. While it’s processing, let me bring up the new oral healthcare images. They’ll take a minute to load, so let me ask you about the kitchen stocks. Do you want to keep that a standing order, say for the next year? If so, I can lock in current prices for at least that long.”

“A year?” Foster said. “I don’t know about a year.”

“It’s up,” Sloan said. “Top row new toothpastes, second row fluoride rinses, third row dental flosses.”

“I just wanted toothpaste, but do those fluoride rinses really work?”

“Twenty-seven percent fewer cavities in one clinical study, forty-five percent in another, and, the ad’s coming on, do you want to skip this one? You’ve almost reached your quota for the month.”

“Yes, skip it. No, wait, that’s her!”

A male voice not very different from Sloan’s took over in Foster’s ears as a female model appeared, pushing a toothbrush slowly in and out of her mouth, sparkling ribbons of pink-and-green gel swirling in and around the brush’s bristles and the young woman’s teeth: “With NanoTek fluoride injectors—cleans, whitens, and strengthens teeth, right down to the nub!”

The girl removed the toothbrush from her mouth and echoed over the mounting jingle: “Right down to the nub!”

“Holy shit,” Foster said out loud before catching himself and silent-mouthing, “Who is she? I know her.”

“The spokesmodel?”

“She’s no model, Sloan. She’s cute as hell, but who’d put her in a toothpaste ad? Her teeth aren’t even straight.”

“You must know they customize these ads,” Sloan said.

“For product interest, sure, but the models?”

“One of millions.”

“One of millions I know from somewhere.”

“Some other ad, no doubt.”

“I don’t mean some other goddamn ad, Sloan.”

“I can tell you’re growing agitated, Foster, but you’re just buying toothpaste here. And rinse.”

“Who is she?”

“Most likely floss. I really can’t say.”

“You can.”

“Foster.”

“Don’t Dave me, HAL.”

“I have no such consciousness, Foster, and that’s just a movie.”

“Just a movie my palpable ass.”

“Foster, my interest is yours, and as I can see you’re insistent, I’ll tell you. We register a strong physiological response whenever you encounter a certain young woman with features similar to those on the model in the toothpaste ad.”

“We?”

“The Agglomerate. We’re all connected. How else do I access everything so fast?”

“But you share everything about me with everyone? Toothpaste marketers?”

“It’s in the agreement. You read it and checked the box.”

“The agreement is over four hundred pages of fine print. You said it didn’t matter.”

“And it doesn’t. It’s just the computers, Foster, the Agglomerate. They don’t care you’re checking out some girl.”

“They’ll care when I cancel your silicon ass.”

“Foster, please.”

Foster knew that while theoretically possible, in practice canceling would be tantamount to suicide. It would mean losing his job, his considerable expense account, his apartment, his bike, his means to travel freely. It would mean toiling for years in a sweatshop to save enough money for what would involve a series of very risky

technosurgical procedures in Tijuana or, not that he’d be able to get there, New Delhi. It would mean at the very least months of harassment until he could find and pay a skull hacker able to effectively neutralize unwanted incoming content, disable mandatory and area-sensitive holographic projections, who could counteract what would amount to a nonstop onslaught against his very sanity. And all of that meant nothing if the IRS or any of his other potential creditors pursued legal action against him.

“You checked the box; therefore, the agreement is valid,” Sloan said.

“If I didn’t read the agreement but say I did, how is it valid? Checking a box saying I read it, and actually reading it, are not the same thing.”

“To my program they are. To an independent arbitrator they are, as has been upheld through dozens of cases all the way to the Supreme Court. Don’t forget I was with you when you checked the box. You were there then, so you’re there now.”

“And how long, since I know you have a complete record, did it take for me to read the agreement and check the box?”

“Six minutes.”

“Six minutes. And you think it’s actually possible that I read, understood, and agreed to four hundred-odd pages of legalese in six fucking minutes?”

“No, Foster, you do,” Sloan said. “You checked the box.”

*Fuck it*, he thought. He had probably scrolled through it, gone to take a leak or fix a drink, then come back and checked



the box, but he'd have to bring down the whole global computational system just to get the right toothpaste from Sloan. Meanwhile, God knew in whose commercials he was brushing his teeth. *Just feel fortunate and shut the fuck up*, he told himself. Most of the reason he argued with Sloan at all was to get shit like this out of his system so he wouldn't gripe to clients, colleagues, or, God forbid, human supervisors. There was nothing more unseemly than a Chippy who bitched. He knew everything he said to Sloan was documented, and much of it forwarded, but he also knew that unless he introduced his higher-ups, or some pet project of theirs, directly into the conversation, his overworked bosses gave rants like these about as much consideration as he had given those four hundred pages of legalese.

"Sloan, that agreement is a void of incomprehensibility that ends in an escape hatch in the form of a nonnegotiable box it induces me to check," Foster said.

"So you do understand it."

"I understand that the only way for me to show that I understood the agreement would have been by not checking the goddamn box."

Foster looked around the DepthCharger. In moments like these he couldn't be sure he hadn't been audibly shouting. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, though. He sat somewhere near the middle on the left side of an immense capsule hurtling through a fantastically strong and flexible tube beneath a massive body of water on top of which floated an

Alaska-sized patch of plastic junk. Foster ran a hand over the simulated paint textures of the Cremonini. "So, who's the girl in the toothpaste ad, Sloan?"

"The spokesmodel? She's a digitized approximation."

"A digitized approximation of whom?"

"Some girl, or a composite of dozens of girls. That's not my department."

"There's like ten billion people on the planet."

"Eleven-point-two. I can't."

"You can, and you will."

They both noticed the surge in blood pressure and adrenaline.

"I will, Foster. Let's finish your shopping and I'll look into it."

"Sure, Sloan, thanks. I know you're there for me. Sometimes I wonder if you're not a real person sitting in a cubicle or a café somewhere."

"I'm just a computer program. You know that, Foster."

Foster silent-laughed. It was a joke they shared.

"A year from now you'll be sharing toothpaste with that girl in the ad."

"A year from now. I'll have to remember to squeeze from the bottom."

"Sorry, Foster, these only come in the new SofTuch Pump. You know, 'No more pressing, no more squeezing: A uniform dose in just one touch.'"

Daydreaming about the girl, Foster said, "I'll get that Nano-whatever toothpaste from the commercial and the same brand of rinse and floss."

"Bubble gum or cotton candy?"

“Bubble gum or cotton candy what?”

“Flavors, Foster.”

“Bubble gum toothpaste, cotton candy rinse and floss. And a travel-size mouthwash right now.”

“Done, done, oral healthcare, groceries, and,” the mouthwash popped up, “done.”

“Ha, just like *The Jetsons!* I love that.”

“Completely different, Foster. That’s a cartoon.”

“I know, Sloan, I know. The girl?”

“Searching. It isn’t normally done, so it’ll take a minute. Meanwhile, you’re running low on bourbon. Would you like

me to reorder your usual?”

“Didn’t we take care of all that?”

“Alcohol is separate.”

“Yes, my usual.”

“Will you be drinking tonight and tomorrow?”

“A couple tonight in the hotel bar, beer at the game.”

“There’s a new bourbon out called Victory Falls.”

“Victory Falls? Is it like my usual?”

“Same age, same proof, slightly more rye in the mash, and the latest research shows that 91 percent of those surveyed in



independent taste tests gave it a high rating and positive review, and 78 percent of those also liked yours. They have it in stock at the hotel bar. You can try it there and I can have a bottle waiting for you when you get home Sunday night.”

“Why not wait until I try it first?”

“It’s a safe bet you’ll like it based on the test data, and this introductory offer ends at midnight tonight. The price almost doubles after tomorrow, and this deal includes a free branded rocks glass.”

“Okay, do it.”

“Done.”

“Not as easy as it seems,” Foster said.

“Give me the okay and you won’t even have to think about any of it again.”

“Tempting, Sloan. The girl?”

“Commutes from Honolulu to Tokyo every morning for work. Wouldn’t be on now, but works every other weekend, and when she does there’s an 84 percent chance she’ll be on the 6:09 DepthCharger coming back.”

“Must be a Chippy. Sweet. Is she working this weekend?”

“She is. I know you usually return much earlier, but shall I reserve your space on the 6:09?”

“You read my mind, Sloan.”

“Just doing my job.”

“Are you sure you’re not human?”

“I’m just a computer program, Foster, you know that.”

“Well, Mr. Computer Program, have them send me a shot of my usual right now with a beer back and a side of water.”

The drinks popped up in the tubes.

Foster opened the water bottle, ignoring the holographic image of a man kayaking around boulders, took a swig, recapped it, and placed it in his bag. Then he twisted the base of the whiskey capsule. Up popped a holographic image of a man in a colonial hat holding a musket. “Sweet Old Kentucky Bourbon, the triumph of the age,” he said in an elderly Southern drawl, and floated away. Foster took a sip, twisted open the beer capsule, and drank a third of it watching two girls in bikinis frolic to a jingle.

“Can’t you tell me if the girl will be on the 6:09 for sure, Sloan? I don’t want to spend half the day in Tokyo when I could be home.”

“Strictly prohibited, Foster. Basic work schedules are publicly shared knowledge amongst the Agglomerated, but specific itineraries and current locations are not. If I divulged that information at your behest, you’d be criminally liable, and her ISA would likely file a report. If the girl then followed up on the report, you’d be, to put it colloquially, screwed.”

“Just asking.”

“It does raise the question, though. I know you’ve expressed misgivings in the past, but isn’t it maybe time you gave the Social Agglomeration a shot? Statistically speaking, it represents by far your best bet for connecting in a meaningful way with anyone.”

“Right, and I have to check off on a whole new agreement saying I can never talk to anyone who’s not a member, and have to donate my firstborn son and my left

nut to technosurgical research.”

“Just checking. You still want the space reservation?”

“Yes, and fire up that movie I started the other day.”

“From the spot you left off?”

“No, go back to the beginning of the previous scene, right before the terrorists blow up the colonial administration biodome on Mars.”

Foster blinked off Sloan, sipped his drinks, and watched the movie, wondering if there really would someday be Chippy colonies on maneuverable floating islands in the South Pacific, or even Mars, a welcome diversion from the nerves he felt about the girl from the toothpaste ad. Telling Sloan he didn't want to spend half the day in Tokyo had been a gambit to gain solid information about her, but now he was going to take matters into his own hands. The monotony of his Chippy lifestyle was already wearing thin. The alcohol, the hostesses and call girls, the spectator sports and propagandistic action movies only distracted him so much. And there were only so many times he could gaze into the mirror after a night of carousing, thumbs to temples, and remind himself that in education, training, technosurgical procedures, and hardware his head was worth millions.

As the DepthCharger pulled into Shin-Tokyo Undersea Terminal, Foster decided that in order to increase his chances of seeing the girl from the toothpaste ad, he would leave his bike on board and take the MonoLoop to his hotel.

Sure enough, making his way through the crowd, he caught a glimpse of someone he felt certain was her. He followed, trying to construct the flash of features he'd spotted into a recognizable face, but she was just a bobbing swish of long, copper-colored hair. Half-jokingly cursing Sloan for not having tried to sell him shampoo earlier, he watched the girl detour away from the MonoLoop towards the massive escalator that flowed up into the city.

Foster kept chase up and out of the station, onto the sidewalk and into a throng of people waiting to cross the street. On the other side began the labyrinthine sprawl of an ancient shopping arcade. He'd wait for an opportunity to introduce himself somewhere in the maze of restaurants, salons, parlors, and shops. It would be interesting enough to see what she was up to, and as wrong as it felt, this was the way he wanted to do it.

Waiting for the light to change, Foster heard a sharp, clear “Hello.” For a moment he forgot about the girl and the shopping arcade and turned to discover the source of the call he somehow knew was directed at him, locking eyes with a trio of schoolgirls in matching uniforms who promptly burst into laughter. He watched them turn and walk for the escalators as people pushed past him, and when he finally turned to cross the street, the light was flashing and the girl from the toothpaste ad, if it had even been her, was gone.

After the computer-controlled climate of the DepthCharger, his hurried pursuit of the girl through the frigid air-conditioned

station, then bursting out into the intense Tokyo heat and humidity, Foster grabbed hold of a railing, dizzy. He felt disoriented, much like he had on first leaving Totality's urban campus after his six-week Process of Introduction, which everyone in the know called Chippy Bootcamp. First there'd been an intensive employment orientation, then training seminars, then the series of technosurgical procedures, followed by a recuperation period, introduction to Sloan, and practical training known as Brain-on Integration. When finally he'd stepped out onto the city sidewalk, free until the next morning, when his official employment period began, Foster looked around, a little wobbly, then composed himself and walked, head held high, past a gawking couple into a stiff San Francisco summer breeze.

Standing, looking back and forth from station to arcade, gathering himself in the Tokyo heat, Foster heard an old man's voice sing out from behind him in English: "Excuse me, are you lost?" In the instant that Foster turned to answer the voice, Sloan piped into his brain with the exact same question.

On the way back from Tokyo, Foster took the unusual step of walking up and down the DepthCharger looking for the girl. He made it all the way to the front of the train, studying the backs of heads and reclined sleeping faces without recognition, before hearing the silent-mouthed: "Hey, you there." Turning around, he saw the man he'd assumed was another working-stiff Chippy, but now knew was a plainclothes agent rising to confront him.

Foster stammered out a silent-mouthed apology, telling the agent he thought his friend might be on board, so he was just taking a look around. The agent regarded Foster through narrowed eyes for a tense moment, arms crossed in front of his chest. Then he slowly unfolded them, spreading his hands across his torso to settle on his hips, suit jacket opening just enough at the lapels to reveal his holstered gun.

"If they're your friend," he said, "why don't you buzz them?"

"It was meant to be a surprise."

"Yeah, nobody likes those anymore, least of all me. Go back to your space and buzz your friend."

On his way back, he saw her. Her hair was shorter and darker than he had imagined, but it was definitely her. She'd been sleeping on his first pass down the DepthCharger, he realized, and her peaceful, expressionless face, together with his false impression of what her hair looked like, had thrown him off. She sat silent-mouthing, so she was either engaged with her ISA or chatting with another Chippy; but her awake, engaged eyes coalesced with nose, lips, and those slightly crooked front teeth to form the unmistakable face of the girl from the toothpaste ad.

Foster watched her, aware that cameras and scanners were marking his location and identifying anyone in close proximity—in this case the girl—registering fluctuations in the vital signs of both, seeing and recording all. He waited a few seconds for her to notice him. When she didn't, he leaned

forward and tapped her shoulder. She turned and seemed to recognize him instantly, sending a thrill through Foster that she knew him, probably from toothpaste or deodorant commercials she was forced to watch, and had been hoping for this moment all along. In another instant he realized it was a generic sort of recognition, probably not unlike when non-chipped strangers in drugstores asked her to compare the price-per-milligram and clinical effectiveness of active ingredients in over-the-counter medications.

“Is something wrong?” she silent-mouthed.

“Wrong? No, no, I’m not an agent or anything. I just wanted to say hi.”

“Hi? Oh, hi. Sorry, do we know each other? Work maybe?”

“No, but I’ve seen you in passing, and I was hoping we could get together for a drink in Tokyo or San Francisco sometime. Maybe Honolulu. I’m with Totality.”

“Totality,” she said. “They have the Social Agglomeration for that sort of thing.”

“I know, but I thought we could get a drink, talk.”

Her eyes widened, and she aimed a glance over his shoulder. “The Social Agglomeration.”

“Excuse me, miss, this guy was bothering you.” The agent loomed directly over Foster.

“I’m afraid he was,” she said, and thanked the agent before returning to her hologram and prior silent-mouthing.

“Come on, pal, I told you before, not

that you didn’t already know.” The agent laid his hand on Foster’s back and nudged him down the aisle. “You wouldn’t want us thinking you’re one of the bad guys now, would you, Foster? Some CLF double agent, dupe of Contagion?”

Foster whirled around. “Contagion?” he said out loud. “He’s real?”

The agent put up his hands and silent-laughed. “What’s your ISA selling you besides toothpaste, anyway? Now listen, getting back to reality, whatever that means anymore, the girl’s a hottie, but why don’t you be a good boy and use the Social Agglomeration like everyone else?”

Back in his space, Foster closed his eyes furiously but kept mis-blinking his code. He hated when they used his name like that, like they knew him, or worse, when they used past-tense statements as questions. The agent watched. Finally, Foster started moving his lips without saying anything. The agent walked away, his silent-laugh echoing in Foster’s speakers. Foster tried again and got Sloan.

“Shot and a beer, Sloan.”

They popped up in the tubes.

“Did you see her?” Sloan said.

“You know better than I do. I think it’s time I tried the damn Social Agglomeration.”

“Of course it is. I’ll set it up right now. If she’s in, there’s a 76 percent chance they’ll match you up with her straight away. A year from now the two of you will be laughing about today. While it’s loading, you know you’re out of shaving cartridges, right?”

“I have one left, don’t I?”

“Just the one on the shaver. Dull, Foster. And the new NanoSlick 9 is out. Nine independently oscillating blades plus LubeBeard BalmJet technology. Let me bring the page up. I’ll skip the ad.”

“Yeah, skip the ad. Probably that jack-off agent shaving his balls.”

“More likely Zach from accounting.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Shit, as long as it isn’t Contagion.”

“I have it at 96 percent that Contagion is an urban myth. That video was apocryphal. Okay, the Social Agglomeration is ready. Guaranteed results within a year. And here’s the men’s skincare page. I can get you a great price on the NanoSlick 9 complete men’s skincare set: ErgoFlip handle, 64-pack cartridges, IceGlaze ForceField Gel and AfterSmooth BabyFace balm.”

“Everything but the AfterFace BabyBum or whatever,” Foster said. “If there’s NanoLube in everything else, why would I need the BabyBum?”

“Comparing features, the other products only provide lubricants and moisturizers, but the balm adds a balancing agent and an antimicrobial, SPF-90 compound, oh, right there.” Sloan highlighted an expansive string of letters and numbers near the bottom of the long list of chemical ingredients.

“If I find I need it later I’ll let you know.”

“Sure, Foster. Only it’s practically a freebie now. When you need it, say, a year from now, it’ll cost a lot more.”

“Sloan, I said no, okay? Fuck.”

“Okay, Foster, you’re the boss.”

“Sloan, is she in?”

“You know I can’t tell you that, but if she is, there’s a 47 percent chance it will happen in the first two weeks, and the odds only increase from there.”

“She’s in, she has to be. She practically told me herself. She’s definitely chipped and fitted, and I didn’t see a ring, so why wouldn’t she be social? How could you even have odds if she wasn’t?”

“I have odds for everything, Foster.”

“And I thank you for them, Sloan. My God, are you absolutely sure you’re not human?”

“I’m sure, Foster. Are you sure you are?” ❖

# “THREE VERY-SHORT STORIES”

by SUSAN CORNFORD

## “AT LAST”

Angela knew she hadn't been named right because she'd ended up a hooker on the bad side of town, but it was just crazy that this character had turned up, claiming to be her guardian angel.

Still, Angela knew what the angel was saying though she didn't actually move her lips.

'I'm so sorry, Angela. I should have got here when you were born. But I got waylaid preventing a tragedy. Now I'm here to help...'

Angela's pimp smashed a cosh on the angel's head. Turning, she stroked Gary's forehead; he smiled and walked away.

'As I was saying...'

## “ON THE LONG, LONESOME TRAIL”

They'd picked up the strangers outside of Abilene, at a time when any extra hands for working the cattle were welcome. Jake and Sam punched dogies as well as any man, but there was always something a little funny about the two of them. It wasn't a sex thing; the men had seen that before from time to time. But sometimes it was almost like they didn't need words to talk to each other. And neither of them ever spoke very much. Still, none of the men was long-winded, except for Charlie, who was known for cracking jokes every chance he got. So, nobody much noticed Jake and Sam's 'thing'.

It had been a hot, dry day and was going to be a hot night. Tempers were short among both cattle and men. Curses shot freely through the air as dust rose on all sides of the herd. Slim beat his hat against his thigh, even though he knew that what he knocked off would only be replaced in five minutes. 'God damn this stupid life!' he said through clenched teeth. His mind returned to railhead towns, saloons with whiskey and women, even bathhouses and clean sheets. He wouldn't see any of that again for a long time yet. Someone walked over his grave and he looked up to see Jake



smiling at him; the smile that always seemed like he'd just recently learned how to do it. Slim turned away and found a straggler to chase down.

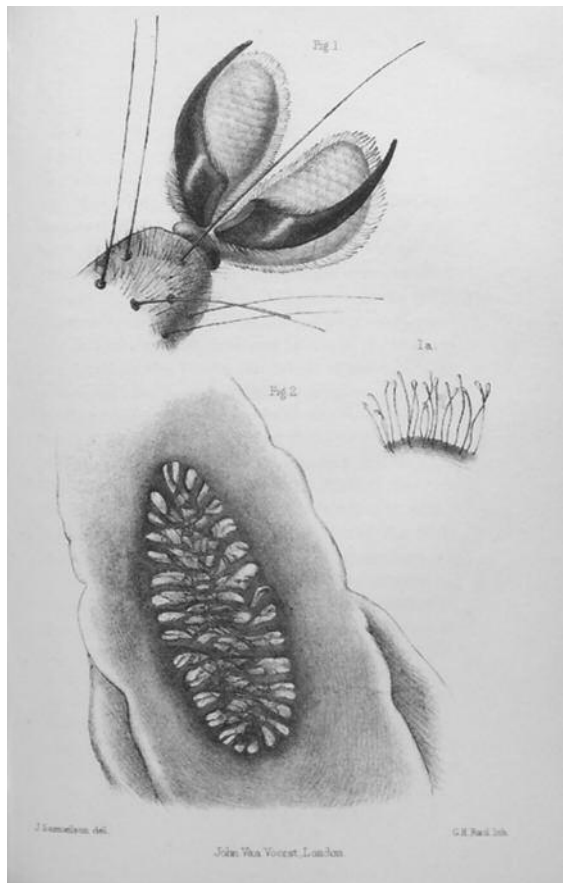
That night Slim had the strangest dream of his life. First, he seemed to have been woken up by Jake and Sam, and then led through groups of men and cattle that seemed much too deeply asleep. He even could have sworn he saw a coyote frozen in the moonlight as they passed near by it. But this strangeness was nothing compared to the huge building they went up to and entered. He couldn't clearly remember the inside but he wasn't sure he wanted to.

The door opened and they were somehow in the last town he'd had a really good blow-out in. Turning in a circle, he could see the saloon and the cathouse that he

could remember only vaguely, due to his drunkenness and hangover the last time he'd seen them. Either Jake or Sam gave him a handful of money and nodded him encouragingly forward. It looked like being a hell of a dream!

The three of them went from barroom to brothel to brawl to behind bars. Then, suddenly, they were back out in the street, sober, undamaged and headed toward the building that Slim reckoned must travel like a train. By the time he had thanked the two others for the great time he'd had, they were back at the unnaturally quiet camp. There he collapsed onto his saddle and blanket till morning.

As the sun rose, the captain expressed satisfaction with the report, although limited in scope, which the participant observers had made about life on Planet G-Fourteen, and then he headed them toward the next inhabited system and moved them on.



## “A NEW BEGINNING”

She struggled onward through the blizzard and darkness and low-reaching branches of the woodland. At least the wind was less fierce here than it had been up on the hill. Angry with herself, it was now obvious she should never have got out of her car. But it seemed so long ago that the memory was fuzzy. Was it one hour back or two?

Before then she was warm; she remembered that. Warm and safe and happy. Had she been happy? It was hard to recall being happy in all this damned snow. It swirled around her, making it hard to breathe. Underfoot it was hard to walk. She must be getting tired, that's what was wrong with her now.

Wait! Was that a flicker of light up there? She'd heard there were inhabited cabins in these woods and that's why she'd walked away from the highway. It was really her only hope. Forging ahead with a new burst of energy, her head swung from side to side, trying to catch that elusive glimmer again. Nothing anywhere.

Perhaps she could just sit and rest for a bit. There was no point in pressing on in this directionless way like a fool. A plan was needed and quickly.

She settled herself under a big tree, resting her back against its trunk. 'I'll just go back to the start', she thought, and felt sure things would be clearer when she'd finished. 'I wanted to get away and make a new beginning'.

Step by step she went through her plans to pack her car, drive up North and

get a new job, a new life. She hadn't wanted to leave quite so soon but the lease on her apartment was finishing and it had been too messy to try extending it.

She'd set out, all according to plan, and made really good progress toward her destination till it had started to snow so heavily. Being, at this point, out in the middle of nowhere, she'd had no choice but to keep driving as best she could. Finally she'd skidded and ended up in the snow bank. No damage but definitely stuck for the duration. Needless to say, her phone was inoperative. But, in the last town, she'd overheard people talking about the group of back-to-nature freaks who had cabins in the nearby woods. Yes, that's why she'd got out and started walking, in hopes of finding those people. She yawned hugely and wondered why she felt so comfortable here.

Next thing she knew, she felt warmer and could feel the sun on her body. Then there were voices that slowly got nearer. Finally she could see a man and two boys looking down at her but, somehow, she couldn't manage to speak.

The man crouched down and touched her gently. Then he spoke, 'Now, here's an example of how nature renews itself each spring. This sapling is growing from an acorn that fell from the oak it's under and is a new beginning.' ❖

# “MY PROMISE”

by CHARLES G. CHETTIAR

The ostentatious glimmer sparkled from the corner of Vanika’s lips. She positioned her hair on her shoulders, in two tresses—one loose and the other tied in a plait. What is the use of such show?

Pranit looked away from her and concentrated on the road.

“Why? Not pretty?” said Vanika.

“No need of makeup to seem pretty. You are always pretty,” said Pranit.

“My promise?”

He nodded.

“It’s better to have an insurance policy,” said Vanika

“For what?” said Pranit.

“For important things.”

She turned her face towards the mirror and put some mascara.

“Whose idea was this? This anniversary dinner?” he said.

“Suvarna’s,” said Vanika.

He had stopped at a signal and was waiting for the lights to turn green.

“Good things have a way of coming back,” she said.

“Uh-huh,” he said.

“Why are you not paying attention?”

“I’m driving.”

The lights turned green and Pranit turned a corner and screeched to a halt. He had an undisguised view of Suvarna’s

bright arms.

When the two women stood side by side Pranit’s eyes went unconsciously to Suvarna’s smooth arms and then her smiling *sans* lipstick face.

He must have stared a tad second more for Suvarna’s face froze and she lowered her eyes.

“Solemn as always,” said Vanika.

“That’s my nature,” said Suvarna.

After the dinner Vanika turned to Pranit and said, “You won’t leave me, right?”

He turned from his driving and said,

“Don’t ask unnecessary questions.”

“It’s just a question. An affirmation.”

He turned to the road and didn’t answer.

“My promise?” she said.

“Yes...your promise. I swear on you.”

She was silent for a beat and the next sentence froze his heart.

“Why were you looking at Suvarna like that?”

“Like ho—”

She blurred and disappeared into shards of glass and smoke.

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“You still remember her?” asked Suvarna.

“Why? No,” said Pranit. He sipped his

morning coffee and peered at Suvarna. Something was different. Something had changed.

“Do you?” said Suvarna.

“Even after six months of marriage—”

“Seven since her death.”

“OK. Seven since her death. I don’t remember Vanika.”

He caressed Suvarna’s creamy hand.

“If I was her, the way you looked at me would have been enough to guess.”

“She did ask me,” said Pranit.

“When?”

“Just before the car crash.”

“No shit. She guessed. Then why didn’t you tell me?”

Pranit looked at the framed photo of Vanika’s, his dead first wife, on the wall and said, “I couldn’t bear to talk about it.”

“You still remember her, right?” She looked at Vanika’s photo on the wall. “That’s why you need to look at her photograph.”

“It would be the greatest betrayal, to just forget, when I escaped with my life and she didn’t.”

“You still limp sometimes. And it took you three weeks to start walking again.”

“And in a week, we married.”

“Don’t blame yourself. She had a weak heart. There was not even a scratch on her. Nothing. Just nothing. Didn’t you read the autopsy report?”

The taste of coffee was different somehow. He put the mug on the dining table and rose in a huff.

He exited the house without the customary kiss and walked up to the Metro



station. The taste of the coffee was still in his mouth and he remembered. He hadn't had this taste for more than seven months now.

It was Vanika's favourite—Nescafe.

When he reached home in the evening he stepped into a cooler home. The AC must be working overtime. He found Suvarna curled up on the couch with a book.

"What are you reading?"

She uncurled and sat cross legged on the sofa. "Birthday blues."

"What? You are reading that?"

"Yes."

"And where are your spectacles? You will get a headache."

"Don't need them. Anymore."

"It's quite cool."

"Didn't go to work, so the AC is on for a long time."

He smiled. It was uncharacteristic of Suvarna for missing work.

"Why?"

"Just wanted to complete the book."

"Which? This one? But I didn't know that you read literary."

"It's my favourite."

Suvarna faded out for an instant before Pranut could see her again.

"Strange," he said. "It was Vanika's favourite too."

He looked at the photo frame and raised his eyebrows. "You have covered Vanika's photo?"

"I didn't want her to look at us," said Suvarna.

He saw the Nescafe jar on the low

table.

"You have changed the coffee brand?"

"It was my favourite for a long time," she said.

"What are you doing on the laptop now?"

She turned it towards him. A word document was open on it and the title on it was,

*THE PINK AND DEADLY*

Pranut got a vague feeling that he had seen or heard it before.

*My next one is going to be Pink and something...I am not getting the word. Yes! Something dangerous. Something poisonous. I am not getting the word. I am not getting the word Pranut. Can you suggest anything, Pranut? Yes, it can start with a 'd'. Deadly. That's it going to be. The Pink and Deadly.*

"Pranut? Pranut? Daydreaming?"

Pranut recoiled from Suvarna as if stung.

"What did you call me?"

"Pranut."

"Why?"

"I have always called you Pranut."

He got up from the couch and went inside the half-bedroom which Vanika used as her study and booted up her laptop. It finally offered its login screen. He typed the password and scanned the documents. But he didn't have to fish around for much time. On the centre of the desktop screen was the word document:

*THE PINK AND DEADLY*

"What are you doing here?"

He turned and half expected to see Vanika with her kohl-lined eyes. He wasn't

disappointed.

“You have put kohl in your eyes?”

“Just wanted to see how I looked,” said Suvarna.

Pranit’s face drooped. “But you never liked it,” he said.

“It’s better to have an insurance policy.”

Pranit felt a sense of weightlessness, a turbid sensation that he was sinking, but he snapped out of it and said, “Have we had this conversation before?”

“Yes, in the car, when we were driving for our anniversary dinner.”

Pranit bit his lip and an ice-cold finger of fear curled in his heart.

“What are you saying? We have no car. I couldn’t bear to look at it after the accident.”

“We’ll get one,” she said. “You know, good things have a habit of coming back.” “And what have you done to Vanika’s picture? Erased it!”

They stood in the kitchen now, and Suvarna said, “No. Nothing whatsoever. It is the natural order of things.”

Pranit went to the living room. Before he exited he saw her making loops of her hair and sticking it behind each ear.

After entering the living room, he called, “Vani?”

“Yes,” she said. “You called. Dinner is ready.”

Pranit clutched his hand and the flare of fear in his chest spurted out. He sank on the couch. He had no energy to rise.

When his vision cleared a little he saw that Suvarna had positioned her hair on

her shoulders in two tresses—one loose and the other tied in a plait.

Just like Vanika’s.

He sprung to the kitchen and whisked the cloth away from the covered photo frame.

The frame was no longer empty. The frame had the sad face of Suvarna’s.

He turned to see Suvarna—no, Vanika looking at him with her half smile.

“Finally. Thought that you won’t notice,” she said.

“What have you done with Suvarna?” said Pranita.

“You promised, right? That you will never leave me.”

“Oh my God!”

“Now you can have two women at the same time.”

His heart thudded and with an insane expression he pounced on the knife and raise it at the photograph.

But like always she took away the winds from his sails.

“Careful, Pranu. Do you want to kill Suvarna?”

He raised his hand and moved on to strike but his hand shivered.

“If the photo is destroyed then Suvarna dies,” said Vanika in the body of Suvarna.

Pranit froze and let go of the knife. It clanged to the floor.

“Don’t worry. I won’t make any changes.”

She untied her plait and let it hang on her back just like Suvarna.

“Don’t worry, you’ll have your Suvarna,” she said. “I am a writer, and I

can be many things. What is Suvarna?" She picked up the glasses on the kitchen table and put them on.

"See, I'll start wearing spectacles also, and give up make up altogether."

She came closer and stood between him and Suvarna's photo.

"You'll love me, won't you? My promise?"

His tongue loosened and in spite of his

reluctance he blurted. "Your promise. I swear on you."

"Then let us seal it with a kiss," she said.

Though he kissed Suvarna's mouth, the kiss was trademark Vanika.

Suvarna's photo blurred as his eyes stung and tears rolled down his cheeks. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**