

THE BOY WHO WASN'T
AND THE GIRL WHO
COULDN'T BE

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CHAPTER 1

“You coming down the pub tonight?”

It was a pretty stupid question really. Jerome went to the pub every night, as did his friends. But, without fail, Eddie always asked the same question at exactly the same time, 6.15 pm. And Jerome’s response would always be the same.

“I think I may be able to force myself to partake of a beverage or two. Are Martin and Terry going? And the girls?”

Followed by Eddie’s scripted reply.

“I haven’t asked them yet, but I’m sure they will. They usually do.”

Indeed they did. You could set your watch by the ritualistic activity of this small group of friends. They would ‘arrive’ at the pub at 7 pm and be drinking by 7:05 pm. Eddie would have a pint of Guinness, Martin and Terry would have a Heineken and Jerome would have a bottle of Foster’s Ice. The girls, Emily and Katrice, would both have a large glass of Chardonnay.

Jerome turned away from the computer monitor, strolled into the kitchen, and tapped a couple of icons on the food dispenser. Thirty

seconds later he was greeted with a generous portion of beans on toast with an equally generous portion of grated cheddar cheese spread on top, steam rising from the succulent snack. He took the plate from the dispenser and went back to the living room where he placed it on the occasional table whilst making sure that none of the sauce slopped off the plate. There were plenty of other snacks he could have chosen from, but beans-on-toast-with-cheese-on-top was his favourite. Besides, it was Tuesday, and Tuesday was beans on toast day.

After eating his snack (he didn't bother with a drink as he'd be drinking soon enough) he took his empty plate over to the dish receptor and placed it inside. There was no need to wash up; the kitchen appliance would take care of everything for him.

He still had thirty minutes before his friends would be expecting him. Thirty minutes was plenty of time to shower and get ready. He went into his bedroom and pressed two icons on the clothes dispenser. A freshly ironed shirt and a pair of stone-washed denim jeans slid out of the adjoining wardrobe, along with a clean pair of underpants – boxer shorts, of course – and a pair of clean socks. Jerome stripped off, not bothering to fold them, and placed them into the clothes receptor. He hadn't needed to request a towel as the shower unit was totally integrated, providing water, liquid soap and

shampoo, and warm air to dry him when he'd finished showering.

He didn't bother to put a towel around his waist in an unnecessary act of modesty since nobody else could see him. He lived alone. Everybody lived alone. It's how things were.

After a brief but efficient shower, Jerome dried himself off underneath the warm jets of air and returned to the bedroom. He confirmed the time with his home management system. It was 18:53; just enough time to get dressed and get to the pub. Once dressed, he went into the living room and the 144-inch television monitor automatically switched itself on. The LED above a small ultra-high-resolution webcam glistened red and a perfect image of him was displayed onscreen. He looked himself up and down, checking that he looked presentable. Actually, he wanted to look more than presentable; this time he particularly wanted to impress Katrice. He'd fancied her for quite a while and felt that tonight was going to be the night to finally do something about it.

"The time is now eighteen hundred hours and fifty-seven minutes, Jerome. Time to go to the pub."

"Thank you, Chrono."

Some people called their chronometers by a real name, according to the gender of the voice that was selected. For example, Eddie's chronometer

was called Zoe. He said that he liked the idea of being woken up every day by a woman's voice. But Jerome had chosen the neutral setting, which meant that his chronometer's voice was more robotic than anything else. And the name Chrono was of sufficient gender neutrality to remove any traces of anthropomorphism.

"The time is now eighteen hundred hours and fifty-nine minutes, Jerome. You should be at the pub"

Jerome finally settled himself on his black synthetic leather sofa in front of his oversized computer monitor.

Sixty seconds later Jerome was facing six split-screen images, five of which contained a live video feed of his friends. The sixth showed his own image. He smiled at them and selected emojis from his touchscreen remote control, handshakes for the men and kisses for the girls. His friends did the same; it was another nightly ritual that never changed. Once the greetings were over, Eddie made a suggestion.

"I know we always have the same drink, night after night, but let's go crazy for once. Let's be kinda spontaneous. Let's have a cocktail."

Jerome could see the confused looks on the faces of his friends, all except Eddie's that is; Eddie was positively excited. Jerome was a little anxious.

“I don’t know, Ed. What if we don’t like it?”

“Have you ever eaten or drank anything you didn’t like?”

Jerome had to admit that he hadn’t. There were things that he preferred over other things but he’d never actually tried anything to eat or drink and not liked it. He looked at his friends’ faces and noticed a slight change in Katrice’s expression.

“Katrice? What do you think?”

Katrice leaned back, allowing her black synthetic leather sofa to embrace her.

“I think...I think it could be fun.”

That sealed it for Jerome. She wasn’t going to be impressed with him if he poured cold water on Ed’s suggestion. He nodded his head.

“Okay. I’m in. What’s a cocktail?”

Eddie was prepared.

“I’ve googled it. A cocktail is a mixed drink, consisting typically of gin, whiskey, rum, vodka, or brandy, with different admixtures such as vermouth, fruit juices, or flavouring, usually chilled or frequently sweetened.”

Terry looked uncertain at the explanation.

“Not sure I’m going to like that, Ed. Sounds complicated. Just make one and we’ll try it.”

Eddie was prepared for that response too.

“We’ll have something called a Tequila Sunrise. I tried one earlier. Shall I do the honours?”

Martin was becoming impatient.

“Well, do something Ed. I’m bloody thirsty. We’re wasting valuable drinking time.”

Eddie went into his kitchen and pressed a few icons on his food dispenser’s control panel. Within seconds each of the friends heard a chime from their own dispensers, meaning that something was ready to be removed.

The six segments of the monitor screen showed empty chairs for about thirty seconds until the previous occupants returned, each holding a tall glass containing a fresh tequila sunrise. Emily took a sip and squealed.

“Mmmm! This is delicious. I could get addicted to this.”

Katrice nodded furiously.

“Me too. Sod the wine.”

Jerome wasn’t convinced. It was a little too sweet for his palate. To be honest, he would have preferred his Fosters Ice but he didn’t want to appear a party-pooper and so he gushed about it too.

“I like the sunrise effect. It’s just like some I’ve seen on TV. And a few sunsets too. I wonder why they call it a tequila sunrise and not a tequila sunset?”

Martin was definitely unconvinced.

“I don’t think I’ll be having any more of these

tonight. Way too sweet for me. I'll stick to my Heineken."

Terry nodded in agreement. He and Martin were free to decline further cocktails, they had each other, but Jerome didn't want anything to get in the way of a chance with Katrice.

The evening went pretty much as any other evening; drinks were drunk, video games were played, and conversations were had. Soon it was 10 pm and each of the friends' chronometers warned them that the evening's entertainment was about to draw to a close. Goodbyes were said and, one by one, Jerome's friends' images disappeared. There was a strict order to the sign-offs; first Martin and Terry would say goodbye and disappear, then Emily would do the same. Eddie would be the fourth to leave, followed by Katrice. Then Jerome would switch off his monitor and go to bed.

Jerome had to get his timing correct so that Katrice didn't disappear and he wouldn't miss his opportunity to talk to her alone.

Just before Katrice was about to sign off, he forced himself to break the unofficial protocol that the group followed.

"Katrice, don't go just yet. I need to ask you something."

Katrice smoothed her long auburn hair and looked intently into her webcam.

“You want to ask me something? What could that be, I wonder?”

Jerome suddenly felt a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach, like a hundred butterfly wings beating randomly. Did she know what he was going to say to her? How could she? He'd been careful to hide his feelings. It must have been last week when he'd complimented her on her dress. He hadn't said anything to Emily about her dress. Katrice must have guessed that he was attracted to her. His behaviour had been totally out of character for him. He suddenly realised that he'd spent the last thirty seconds or so just looking at her. She was a very attractive, her brown eyes glistening and the few freckles on her cheeks appearing to dance in the subdued lighting of her apartment. He had to say something before she got tired of waiting for him to speak.

“Katrice. I was wondering, that is, I was hoping, if you like – I'd really like – I mean, oh crap, I'm rubbish at this.”

Katrice took pity on the babbling fool that was struggling to construct a cohesive sentence.

“Jez, just say it. Don't think about it – just say it.”

Jerome took the plunge.

“Katrice, I want to ask you if you'd do me the honour of coupling with me.”

He hoped that he hadn't been too forward.

Terry and Martin were coupled, and he'd a strong suspicion that Eddie and Emily were coupled – or very close to being so. That left just the two of them uncoupled. And it wasn't as if Katrice was Hobson's choice. He really did like her. He just hoped that she felt the same way about him.

Katrice pretended to be weighing her options for a minute, but she was only teasing Jerome. She'd grown fond of him in the months that they had known each other, and saw no reason not to accept his invitation.

“Ok, Jerome. Despite the formality of your invitation, we'll couple. I know it was just nerves. But I have one condition. You have to call me Kat.”

She blew him a kiss.

“I'll see you at midnight.”

And with that, her image disappeared from Jerome's monitor screen.

CHAPTER 2

“Jerome, it’s twenty-three hundred hours and forty-five minutes. Time to prepare.”

Jerome had been dozing on the couch, which surprised him as he was very excited about what the next hour or so would hold. He’d never coupled before. Of course, he knew the theory – most of it, anyway – but putting the theory into practice was an entirely different kettle of fish. Would he be any good at it? Would Kat enjoy it? Would *he* enjoy it?

“Thanks, Chrono. Wish me luck.”

Jerome said this without any expectation of any meaningful response but, in a rare departure from its normal non-interactive state, the chronometer responded with something other than pure factual information.

“Good luck indeed, Jerome.”

The shower was very busy that night. Jerome was a hygienic individual but to take two showers within five hours was unusual, even for him. However, instead of requesting clean clothes, he asked the clothes dispenser for a coupling suit. The clothes dispenser, which usually passed him his attire in silence, raised an invisible eyebrow.

“Hey, Jerome. Getting laid are we?”

“I’m about to couple, yes. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“If I could I’d give you a high-five but, as I can’t, I’ll just say – you da man!”

There were days when it was quite fun having appliances with personality, but Jerome could have done without the attitude that night. This was going to be a big night, a special night; tonight he was going to lose his virginity.

He took the coupling suit from the dispensing tray. Of course, he’d always known of its existence, that its design was part of the original programming of the clothes dispenser, but he’d almost given up hope of ever making use of it. He held it up before him, the flexible mesh of the one-piece costume rippling as it passed between his fingers. It looked far too flimsy to be able to provide the sensations that would be expected of it, but Jerome knew from what his friends had told him, that it should be the best experience that he’d ever had in his life and that he would ever have in the future. The first time would always be special.

He undressed and slid into the coupling suit, the fine webbing of the costume snug against his body contours, making him look like he was wearing a tight-fitting fine spider’s web all over his body. He felt embarrassed at his appearance, totally conspicuous, although there was nobody else in the apartment to see him. He wondered if Katrice – sorry, Kat – was trying on her coupling suit for the

first time and feeling the same anxieties that he felt.

Was it her first time? Jerome had no idea. Part of him wanted it to be her first coupling experience, for it to be a first that they could share together, but another part of him wanted her to at least have a little experience, so that she could show him what to do and guide him as to what pleased her. And, if she had that previous experience, then she would have a good idea of what would probably please him too.

Maybe he could ask her in a nonchalant way if she'd coupled before. He practised his speech by using the tall monitor alongside the wardrobe as a mirror.

“Hey Kat. You look great.”

No, that wouldn't do. A cake can look great.

“Hi Kat. You look hot.”

Too crass.

“Hi Kat. You look lovely.”

He looked at his image on the monitor. What was he thinking? He never had trouble with talking to her on pub nights. He shouldn't be so nervous; she wasn't anyone special – well, that was a lie actually, she had become special to Jerome – but she wasn't a queen or a goddess. Not even a princess. She was Katrice Hastings. She lived on her own, in her own apartment, just like Jerome. Just like all of the pub group actually. Just like everybody else in

the world did.

It suddenly dawned on him how ridiculous he looked. He was dressed head to toe in something resembling lightweight chain mail, a concentration of sensors woven into the material to stimulate the main erogenous zones of his body. The sensors were invisible to the human eye but his friends had assured him that they were there.

The only parts of his body that were visible were his eyes and mouth, peeping out of what would have been called a couple of centuries earlier, a 'ski mask'. How could anyone think this was a sexy look? He'd watched movies where people dressed like this were psychotic killers. To be quite honest, seeing himself dressed like this was rather disturbing. He hoped that Kat wouldn't think he looked like a psycho-killer. How could Kat possibly find a psycho-killer attractive?

This preoccupation about his own appearance was suddenly replaced by the realisation that Kat would be just as bizarrely dressed. During his regular day-to-day interactions with her she looked beautiful, her sparkling brown eyes, her slightly freckled cheeks, that pert little nose. If she were dressed like him, he'd miss out on that beautiful little nose. He loved that nose; it was a crime to cover it up.

He suddenly became aware of the time, thanks

to Chrono's metallic voice trying to jolt him into action.

"Jerome. Jerome. It's twenty-three hundred hours and fifty-eight minutes. You must hurry."

The clothes dispenser joined in.

"Get your skates on. You don't want to be late for your big night. Tonight's the night you pop your cherry."

Jerome rushed over to his bed and puffed up the pillows so that he would have neck support during the coupling. He clambered onto the blue sheets that enveloped the mattress and took hold of the remote touch screen control pad. He looked at the selection of icons that were listed on the right-hand side of the device; TV, movies, radios, podcasts. He'd used all these functions before, especially podcasts. He could – and often did – sit for hours listening to antique podcasts from the 21st Century. He loved to listen to science podcasts, especially the StarTalk Radio podcasts from a long-dead astrophysicist, Neil deGrasse Tyson. It must have been great to live in those days when exploring your environment and even the cosmos was still possible. He would have loved to have met the great man; he was sure that he'd have come up with a good 'cosmic query' for him. But nobody explored anymore. People had stopped wondering about the world and what lay beyond. Jerome

wasn't sure why, that's just how it was. It had been that way ever since The Event. Nowadays everybody got their information from the internet. There was no need to leave the apartments, even if they wanted to.

Jerome had never touched the icon that showed red silhouettes of a man and a woman before. It had sat there below the 'podcast' icon gathering dust, inasmuch as a touchscreen control could gather anything. His finger wavered over the icon for a few seconds whilst he summoned up the courage to tap it. As his finger made contact the wall in front of him turned into a three-dimensional image of Kat's bedroom. She was standing in front of her bed, waving her finger at him.

"You're late, Jerome. I thought you'd changed your mind."

Jerome fumbled in his mind for sufficiently apologetic words.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to keep you waiting."

He took a deep breath. The anticipation of the forthcoming night's events was almost overpowering. Kat laughed.

"I'm winding you up, silly. Don't worry about it."

Jerome's next breath was a sigh of relief. So far so good. He hadn't messed everything up before they'd even started to couple. He looked at Kat,

trying to imagine the woman beneath the mesh. He could see her eyes, that was no problem. They were glistening in the light of her bedroom lamp. Yes, they were definitely Kat's eyes. But her nose, her beautiful nose, was nowhere to be seen. He knew it was there – he could see the shape of it distorting the mask slightly – but he missed watching it occasionally twitch as she talked. Her lips were a surprise. Jerome knew she had lips, he'd seen them hundreds of times before, but – isolated from the rest of her face – he was amazed how succulent they looked. He felt an urge to touch them, but that was out of the question. She was at the other end of a virtual communications system. He'd never touched another person and he never would.

His eyes moved down her body. She was covered head to toe in a similar costume to Jerome's and he couldn't see a single piece of bare skin, but there was something very pleasing about her shape. The coupling suit clung so tightly to her body that every single contour was accentuated as the light caught the mesh and gave her the appearance of a shimmering sensual robot.

He was dragged back to reality by a question.

"Have you applied the gel?"

Had he applied the gel? What gel? Where was he supposed to apply it? His coupling suit was such a close fit that there was no way to apply gel to any

part of his body without completely removing the suit again. Was he supposed to have applied it before putting the costume on?

“Erm...what gel Kat?”

“It should have been alongside the coupling suit. Unless your clothes dispenser is faulty.”

The clothes dispenser took umbrage at this suggestion.

“Hey. Leave me out of it. There’s nothing wrong with me. It’s not my fault if he can’t see what’s in front of his own eyes. It’s right here, where it’s always been. He must be in lurve.”

Jerome leapt off the bed and dashed over to the clothes dispenser. Sure enough, there was a tube of gel sitting there, right alongside where the coupling suit had been. The dispenser began to sing.

“Jerome and Katrice sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G...”

The last thing Jerome needed was a home appliance taking the piss whilst he was experiencing the night of his life, although he did wonder what this ‘kissing’ thing was that the machine was singing about. He launched himself at his bed, grabbed the control again and muted the mischievous piece of equipment. He looked at the tube of gel and then looked at Kat.

“What am I supposed to do with this then?”

“Use your imagination.”

“I tried that, and I don’t see how I can get to where I think it perhaps should go.”

“It’s for your mouth, silly. You rub it inside your mouth. How else are you going to feel sensations in your mouth?”

So, Kat *did* know what she was doing. She *had* done this before. Jerome wasn’t sure how he felt about this revelation, but he only allowed it to bother him for a couple of seconds. It didn’t really matter that she wasn’t a virgin. Although he did wonder with whom she had coupled. It had to be Eddie – Martin and Terry preferred each other. Or maybe it was Emily? It had to be one of those two – they didn’t know anybody else. It didn’t really matter who it was, anyway. What was important was that *now* she was going to couple with *him*, Jerome Cooper. And she’d said yes straightaway – she hadn’t even asked for time to think about it.

He squeezed a small portion of the strawberry coloured gel onto a finger and began to spread it around his mouth, making sure that every square centimetre of the inside of his mouth was covered. The colour of the gel belied the taste, which was more mango than anything else.

“It doesn’t taste like it looks, does it? Don’t forget your tongue, Jerome, unless you don’t want the full coupling experience. If you don’t cover your tongue with the gel, you’ll be really missing out.”

Jerome didn't want to miss out on anything, and hurriedly put some more gel on his finger, before applying the gel to the top and the underside of his tongue. The action made him feel like gagging; he hoped that this wasn't the sensation that he would feel whilst coupling. Kat smiled at her novice lover.

"Don't worry. I'll be gentle. Maybe. I'm going to get on my bed now. Just lay back and tap the 'couple' icon twice."

Jerome did as he was told and the screen of the control pad changed to display a red gender-free outline of the human body, the erogenous zones highlighted. Suddenly he was aware of pressure inside his mouth, swirling around and moving from side to side. His tongue felt like it was in a wrestling match as Kat deftly applied and released pressure remotely through her control pad. Jerome had never experienced anything like it before. And then, as suddenly as it had started, it was over. Kat grinned.

"Now you try it. It's important to master the controls, although they're not that difficult to get used to really."

Jerome touched the human diagram and tapped on the area that represented the mouth. The section of the image faded out and an outline drawing of a mouth took its place. There were four icons below the image, signifying rotate right, rotate left, move

up, and move down. He selected rotate right, and the control panel spoke, giving him his next instructions.

“Put your finger on an area of the picture of the mouth.”

Kat thought he might need some encouragement.

“Don’t let the inbuilt instructor put you off. It knows that it’s your first time. When it senses that you know what you’re doing it’ll remove the training prompts.”

Jerome did as the control panel had instructed and watched as Kat closed her eyes, enjoying the tingle of an invisible and independently controlled tongue gyrating in her mouth. He was feeling brave now and moved his finger around the picture of a mouth and noticed that Kat seemed to be enjoying the interaction even more. He carried on like this for another thirty seconds or so, before moving his finger away from the device. Kat winked at him.

“Not bad for a beginner. Are you sure you haven’t coupled before.”

“Nope. Never.”

“Ok. Let’s try something else.”

Kat moved her fingers rapidly around her control panel and Jerome suddenly became aware of what appeared to be a pair of hands caressing his torso. This was truly weird. He could certainly see

why people bothered to couple. There was a strange pleasure to be derived from not knowing what was going to happen next. The invisible hands ran up and down his back, sending shivers up his spine. Then the pressure increased as the unseen hands moved down his back, sliding onto his bottom, and gave his buttocks a squeeze. Kat giggled.

“Did you enjoy that? Now it’s your turn.”

Jerome held the remote in his left hand and selected the torso on the main diagram. He hoped that Kat wouldn’t mind as he moved his finger around the image and watched Kat’s coupling suit reacting to his commands. The mesh costume’s sensors stroked her waist and then Jerome started to feel brave and guided the stimulation diagonally up her body. Her tongue was now slowly licking her lips and her eyes were closed, so Jerome assumed correctly that she was enjoying whatever it was that he was doing. She gasped as pressure was suddenly applied to her right nipple after an invisible finger had traced the circle of her areola several times. Jerome had no idea that nipples or even breasts existed and was just happy to be doing something right. Kat slapped the mattress three times with the palm of her right hand.

“Are you sure you haven’t done this before?”

Jerome felt quite proud of himself.

“I’ve never done anything remotely like this

before. I'm just experimenting with the controls."

"Well, keep on experimenting. You're doing fine."

Jerome moved his finger back across the diagram and let it rest upon where he imagined she might have a navel. He had one himself and thought that it was entirely possible that Kat might have one too. He tapped the 'rotate' icon and let Kat's suit tickle her belly button.

"Jerome, that's not really doing much for me."

He quickly drew his finger down the picture and let it rest elsewhere, twitching nervously.

"I'm sorry. I don't really know what I'm doing."

Kat's back arched without warning. Jerome panicked.

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt you? It was an accident."

He looked down at the diagram and saw that his finger was positioned between the legs of the image. He was mortified.

"I'm so sorry. I'll stop."

"Don't you dare bloody stop! I know you don't know what you're doing – yet – but if you stop I'll bloody kill you!"

Jerome knew that this was an empty threat, but it still shocked him.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm more than alright, Jerome."

Kat was thoroughly enjoying the surprise. She

hadn't expected to be pleased in such a way that night, especially considering Jerome's inexperience. She encouraged him to continue doing exactly what he was doing for a while but could see in his eyes that he seemed to be a little traumatised by the situation.

"Maybe we should stop for tonight. You look a little stressed now."

Jerome had to confess that he was.

"I was afraid I'd hurt you. I don't want to hurt you."

"Believe you me, you didn't hurt me. Quite the opposite. Just make sure you remember it for next time."

Jerome immediately cheered up.

"There's going to be a next time?"

"Of course there is, dummy. We're coupled now. There are going to be lots of next times."

Kat remembered something else that Jerome wouldn't know about.

"Oh, Jerome."

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to wash the gel out of your mouth before going to sleep. If you do, the consistency will change and it's a really uncomfortable feeling. Trust me. I found out the hard way."

"I won't forget."

"And there's a program you can download from

the internet to help you improve your manual dexterity and coordination. Pretty soon you'll be an expert on that control pad."

"Thanks. Will we couple tomorrow?"

Now that Jerome had discovered the fun of coupling he wanted to do it again and again. It sure beat the other entertainment options that his control pad offered.

"No. Not tomorrow. In a few days time. If we couple every day it'll become a routine and the excitement may fade away. Plus you can get some coordination practice in before next time."

Jerome reluctantly agreed and watched the monitor dissolve into darkness as first Kat and then he deactivated their equipment. He had no idea how he would be able to sleep that night, but he would. That was a certainty.

CHAPTER 3

Jerome woke up at 11 am sharp, just as he did on any other day, but this day was different from all previous days. He was no longer a virgin; he had coupled. Normally he would ease into the day with a shower, followed by a light breakfast, but this day he was more excited to download the dexterity program than to worry about breakfast. His shower lasted half the normal time and his breakfast was eaten particularly quickly so that he could get on with his training as soon as possible.

He had expected the training program to be a coupling simulation program and was a little disappointed when it was nothing of the sort. But it was still fun. He was required to navigate a jet copter through various obstacles and terrains without crashing the aircraft, He couldn't see any direct association with the coupling process, but Kat had recommended it so it must be good. She seemed to know exactly what she was doing last night and her hand-eye coordination was incredible. She was truly a coupling expert, and Jerome was looking forward to learning from her.

After lunch, he needed a break from his training, despite enjoying the challenge, and settled down to listen to a StarTalk Radio podcast which asked the question 'is our universe a simulation?'

Jerome felt sad that nobody made podcasts anymore. In fact, there had been no new broadcasts of any kind for almost one hundred and fifty years; no new radio programmes, no new movies or TV series, and no new podcasts. But the automated control centre that streamed the digital delicacies to the apartments seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of entertainment, so he and his friends would never get bored. An hour later it was back to avoiding buildings, mountains, and enemy attack with the video game. After several crashes that morning he resolved to do better in the afternoon, and make an effort to approach the challenge in a more instinctive fashion, not concentrating so hard and allowing his intuition to guide him. He wanted to delight Kat with fluency, not clumsiness. He'd stumbled upon a sweet spot earlier on and, although it had brought her a lot of pleasure, he wanted to do so deliberately.

He was so engrossed in sharpening his skills to such an extent that he almost didn't hear the chime that signified an incoming call.

"You coming down the pub tonight?"

Jerome thought that he and Eddie might just as well pre-record this daily exchange. It would save them having to interrupt whatever they were doing, and they could take the situation as read. But it was an involuntary Pavlovian enquiry response. The

two friends appeared to have no choice but to act as they did.

“I think I may be able to force myself to partake of a beverage or two. Are Martin and Terry going? And the girls?”

“I haven’t asked them yet, but I’m sure they will. They usually do.”

Jerome was looking forward to seeing Kat again. He particularly wanted to see her nose. It was so cute, and it had been completely obscured from view by the coupling suit earlier on. He wondered if his friends knew that he’d finally coupled. Would they be able to tell, just by looking at him? Would he look any different? He felt like he’d spent the entire day smiling inside – maybe he’d been smiling outwardly the whole day too. He honestly didn’t know. It was too late to worry about it now, anyway.

Had Kat told anyone? He certainly wanted to shout it from the rooftops – but that would have meant going outside. Maybe it wasn’t such a big thing to Kat. She wasn’t a virgin. That much was obvious. Perhaps she may have coupled dozens of times before, maybe hundreds. Perhaps she had coupled with Eddie, Martin, or Terry. Perhaps she’d coupled with Emily too. Maybe he was the last on her list. He hoped not, but there was nothing he could do about it, even if he was. Coupling was a

very big deal to him but perhaps it wasn't to her? But he was certain that she did like him, so maybe their coupling had meant something special to her too.

Jerome wished that he didn't have such an analytical personality. He didn't seem to have the capacity to accept things for what they were. He needed to second guess situations, he over-thought everything. Maybe now that he'd coupled for the first time, and this major life event was now out of the way, he could chill out. The clothes dispenser seemed to have calmed down again, so Jerome unmuted it. He knew that it would only be a matter of time before it misbehaved again but, if he were honest with himself, he quite enjoyed the banter between them. It was just that he'd been a bit stressed about 'popping his cherry' (as the dispenser had said) and hadn't been in the mood for anything that could have made him even more nervous. But now he had no need to worry anymore; the hurdle had been overcome and he could look forward to the next time with more confidence.

He accepted the vivid orange shirt that the clothes dispenser had suggested, and it had suddenly occurred to him that he should finally give the appliance a name. He had named the home management computer, Chrono, but he actually had

more enjoyable interactions with Clive – that’s it – he would name the clothes dispenser, Clive. Chrono was all business, more concerned with the efficient running of the apartment, but Clive? Clive was fun – usually.

At 7 pm, the group came together on-screen. Eddie, Martin, Terry, Emily, and, of course, Kat. Jerome felt like he was looking at them through different eyes now. They had a shared experience now, an experience that he was now privy to. Martin and Terry had been coupling for months, as had Emily and Eddie. And now he was one of them, thanks to Kat. He wanted to tell them, he wanted to let them know that he was now a member of their ranks, but he also didn’t want to speak out of turn. He decided to hold back and follow Kat’s lead. But maybe he was giving off signs that they would pick up on? He certainly felt very happy – perhaps he looked excessively happy too?

As the group started on their second drink of the evening, Eddie pointed from the screen at Jerome.

“So, you got laid then.”

It wasn’t a question, it was more a statement of fact. How did Eddie know? He couldn’t know. Could he? Jerome almost spat out his mouthful of Fosters Ice.

“What?”

“You got laid, you did the deed, and you sullied the suits.”

Jerome’s eyes darted towards Kat’s section of the screen. What was he supposed to do? Should he try to ignore what Eddie had just said or should he admit it? Jerome couldn’t decide if Kat’s next comment saved the day or made things worse for him.

“Yes, he got laid good and proper. I popped his cherry for him. Jerome is no longer a virgin.”

Jerome felt strangely relieved that everything was all out in the open now. He didn’t like keeping secrets from his friends but thought that he shouldn’t say anything out of turn. He was glad that Kat had taken that responsibility off his shoulders? Eddie saw it as a cue for further investigation.

“So Kat, what was he like? Was he good in the suit?”

Kat flashed her eyes at Jerome as if to say ‘don’t worry’.

“He was great. Surprisingly good for his first time. I’m looking forward to the next time.”

Jerome could relax again. His belly-button mishap would be his and Kat’s secret, although, in all fairness, his slip had led to an unexpected and pleasant conclusion. He was looking forward to the next time too. Kat had sent an instant message before going to sleep to say that she would return

the favour next time.

There was still something that bothered Jerome.

“Eddie, how did you know?”

“You told me.”

“No, I didn’t. We haven’t spoken since the pub last night.”

“You didn’t tell me in so many words, but you did tell me.”

That confused Jerome. What was he doing that could possibly be construed as a sign that he had coupled? He thought about it for a few seconds, before admitting defeat.

“I give up. How did you know?”

“Your shirt.”

“My shirt?”

“Yes. Your shirt. I got Jack...”

“Jack?”

“I got Jack, my clothes dispenser, to interface with yours – you really should give it a name, you know.”

“I have. It’s Clive.”

“About time too. Anyway, I got Jack to tell Clive to hold back on giving you the bright orange shirt until you’d got laid. And here you are, in your finest bright orange shirt.”

The night continued as it normally did, discussing whatever movie, TV show, video game,

or podcast that they'd watched or listened to that day, but with the occasional knowing glance passed between Kat and Jerome. Nobody read books anymore. There was no need to read since computer software transcribed to audio any internet page that was accessed. Reading had become a lost skill. People could recognise the shapes of words sufficiently well enough to tap the correct icon on their control pads, but there was no way that they could read a whole sentence, let alone eBooks which, with the passage of time, were now only available as audio-files and catalogued with podcasts.

10pm came very quickly that night. The evening had been more fun than usual after the exposition of Jerome and Kat's coupling. It had given them something other than online entertainment to talk about and they had spent half the evening talking about their first times. It was almost like a release for the group like a taboo subject was now on the table for discussion. It hadn't been possible to chat about coupling before, as it would have meant inadvertently excluding Jerome from the conversation, but now that he was no longer a virgin they could tell their stories.

Jerome lay on his bed, wishing that perhaps Kat had changed her mind about not coupling again so soon, but the call never came. He drifted off to sleep

with the memories of the previous night swirling around his mind, safe in the knowledge that even though he might have to wait a day or two – maybe even three – he *would* couple again with Kat.