

The Last Aphrodisiac

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Someday
there'll be a cure for pain
-- *Morphine*

Niko had always loved the ladies, but this new Suzy girl was something else. It wasn't her looks that had him so hyped-up – in Niko's world, everyone was beautiful, and they changed their physical characters ... skin color, eye size, body shape, whatever ... as readily as pre-Singularity folks had dyed their hair.

It wasn't even, exactly, how knowledgeable and articulate she was – though he did love how she knew more than anyone he'd ever been involved with, including the professors he'd had at university when studying for his five degrees; and she articulated her knowledge in such a delightful way.

It wasn't how good she was in bed; though she did have a kind of sweetness he couldn't remember encountering before ... as if what they were doing with each other really *meant something* ...

It was her passion, her enthusiasm, her curiosity, if you had to slap labels on it.

Commodities that were all too rare since the Singularity, as people occasionally lamented, though no one seemed to think it was much of a problem. And Niko had never worried about it much either, at least not before – since meeting Suzy he'd started to muse about it differently.

After all, it made sense: with a transcender in every town, if anyone developed too much curiosity or ambition, the temptation to transcend was pretty strong. Those who stayed around in the human world were the ones who wanted to keep it simple, who were satisfied with who and what they were. There were a few who were petrified of transcension, or even annoyed that the option existed, but those were tiny minorities – neuroses had mostly been abolished with the advent of brainjacks. Neuroses were the sort of thing historians like Suzy studied – she was the head of the department of pre-Singularity studies over at Obama U.

Almost no one ever returned after transcension, but a few had done so, nearly always with the goal of encouraging their loved ones to join them. And these returnees had never stayed long. The universal message from those who had returned, or those who sent messages back through the transceivers, was that life in the transcend was totally different, but also in a deep way *better*. But that "deep way" was always acknowledged as basically impossible to communicate in human terms, and no one seemed to bother trying. It seemed that people who had a passion for trying to describe

the indescribable always ventured into the transcend themselves, and none of them ever saw it worthwhile to return and make inevitably foredoomed efforts to record their experiences for the people who chose to stay behind.

Life as a human was an awfully comfortable thing, and that's just how Niko liked it – he appreciated his existence; the food he ate, the books he read, the walks he took by the river, the be-bop, progressive and tekno jazz bands he played in (over the last 150 years he'd mastered 25 instruments, but it seemed there was always more to learn) ... and then of course Suzy: making love to her, bringing her on his favorite walks, listening to her talk about her research, her hypotheses and discoveries.

Suzy, Suzy, Suzy...! She occupied a huge space in his mind, and he'd only met her a few months ago. What a fascinating, vexing character – more preoccupying than any woman he'd met. She was wonderful, incomparably wonderful, yet there was something about her that didn't quite fit ... some not-quite-right strain in her abundant enthusiasm. There was no one else like her. He had the feeling her type was more common before the Singularity – before the option of transcension existed. She was always so pumped about things. When she approached him before a kiss she had this thrilled look in her eyes, as if she could hardly bear to wait a half-second to feel his lips move on hers. And her research! What zeal she brought to going through those archives – the old papers and hard drives and disks, the shelves full of old machinery and artifacts. So many hours, days, months, years she went through that stuff ... it seemed deadly boring to him, the whole process of it, though he appreciated the nuggets she dug up and wrote down in her papers, and better yet summarized for his amusement and edification in their rambling walks in the forest.

She dug up things he never would have imagined -- for instance her study of aging and death last year. He'd been fascinated by the various ways people used to lose their memory when they got old; but what had amazed him the most was her long list of pro-death apologies. Apparently in the last few decades before the Singularity, when the prospect of abolishing death had started to get taken seriously – the majority of people, even educated people, hadn't thought it was a positive thing! Instead they'd created a huge array of arguments as to why getting old and dying was a good thing! Death gives meaning to life, death is the natural order of the universe, and so forth – but there was so much more subtlety than that in the arguments. It was truly amazing the amount of brilliance and passion that had gone into such an obviously idiotic premise. After all, now that death was mostly abolished you didn't see anyone urgent to abort themselves – the rare accident-induced death was viewed with universal regret; and now that aging was abolished you didn't see anyone eager to proactively decay and destroy their bodies or minds. And you couldn't exactly ascribe all that old deathism to neurosis, which the brainjacks had gotten rid of -- because it hadn't been an outlier attitude possessed by a few freaks with brain defects; it had actually been the default point of view.

And that all tied in with religion, a truly bizarre phenomenon she'd spent decades of her career studying; her analysis of the dynamics of religious beliefs was a large part of her claim to fame, and how she'd gotten her department headship. But that was almost too alien for Niko to think about. Deathism was bizarre but still comprehensible

enough to be perplexing; religion was just way, way out there.

He'd never thought about these things before he'd met Suzy; and that was what he loved about her. She made him think. And she was so damn cute; the way she talked, the way she moved herself. Her essence.

But she'd been awfully distracted lately, even more so than usual. Spending so much time at the archives; manipulating her sleep schedule to stay awake for long stretches. Probably she was on the brink of some massive discovery – and maybe he'd hear about it shortly ... they were supposed to meet down at the lake, walk around and grab some dinner, then go back to his place or hers. He hadn't seen her for four days, which was an awfully long time ... he couldn't remember feeling so much anticipation since, well, ever.

His analysis proved accurate. She never bothered much with small talk, and tonight even less so. They met at their familiar place in the woods by the lake, by the tree that leaned over into the water near the beaver dam; she squeezed him and gave him a long, sweet kiss and then launched right into it: "I've discovered something interesting. Or, maybe very interesting. Maybe very, very interesting. I can't be really sure yet. I've been looking at the period right before the Singularity, at the folks who were inventing the transcendents and the brainjacks and the grails. It's a change for me, I know, but I got into it because of the religious thing. At that time some of the traditionalists were comparing the Singularity to a religious event – I know it doesn't make much sense. But I was looking at the psychology of the people working on early Singularity technologies and the psychology of religion, and there are actually more parallels than you'd expect. But anyway I discovered something else. I discovered it a few weeks ago, actually – that's why I've been so busy – but I've been trying to make sure it makes sense, and double and triple checking stuff. It's the kind of thing you have to double and triple check. I wanted to tell you about this so badly last week – but I didn't want to talk about it till I was sure. Or reasonably sure, anyway."

He took her hand and they walked on the path, the same one they always did, and he grinned at her as they stepped along, her pace slightly faster than his as always. "OK, OK, I'm curious. Tell me what it is, come on!"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you. I have to show you. Don't ask me to explain it. Just come on back to my place. You've got to come."

"You don't want to grab some food first?"

"We can eat if you want," she shrugged. "I'm not too hungry though – I'm way too excited to think about food." She put her hand on his chest to emphasize the "excited" part, emphatically gripping his chest muscle (which was firm but not too big, as he preferred to maintain a modest appearance). Apparently her mystery discovery had made her excited not only intellectually but sexually – which wasn't uncommon for her, but the present case seemed a bit more extreme than her usual. Which seemed rather fun, though. Anyway Niko's interest was piqued and he was happy to skip dinner and follow her back to her place to see what she was so enthused about this time. His

stomach bitched a little, but he ignored it easily – if she was too excited to eat, so was he.

“Let’s get in bed,” she said, once they got there. “Under the covers.”

This was a bit strange – she wasn’t usually that bossy -- but he was perfectly inclined to comply. They stripped and crawled into bed, but she didn’t immediately touch him sexually; instead she spoke in a serious, soft tone. “I’ve discovered something really big,” she said, as if recruiting him into some conspiracy. He was perplexed and amused – and, mostly, happy to be with her. “Really. Big. I haven’t told anybody; you’re the only one. I’m probably crazy to tell you, but I don’t know what else to do; I actually can’t do this by myself. I mean, physically, it would be hard to; but emotionally, it would be better to have a partner in this too. Anyway....”

She had some sort of odd plastic thing in her hand, with a handle and a knob and some levers. It must have come from the archive. It dawned on him why she’d been so avid to get in bed. It wasn’t his redoubtable sexual magnetism. This plastic device was something somehow illicit, and she wanted to minimize the odds of the Steward catching them.

There were cameras watching nearly everywhere, of course, but the problem of sifting through all that video and audio to find useful information had never really been solved; and it wasn’t very important since the advent of transcension and the abolition of scarcity and neurosis had essentially brought an end to crime. But still the surveillance was there – just in case -- and through a combination of psychological preference and historical tradition, the Steward network had been programmed with an inhibition against watching people in bed. If you wanted to decrease the odds of having your behavior scanned, bed was the best place to be.

“What is it?” Niko asked curiously. This was stranger than he’d expected.

“I was looking through the archive of the people who invented the brainjack, mostly this group from RPI, this old university, and these other people from Xiamen U in China. And I came across some old tools, that were used for working with the early brainjacks. I think I found a way to change their functionality. I mean, of our brainjacks, now.”

A rush of blood washed through his face; he felt his cheeks redden with worry. Wow. She was right. This might be huge ... depending. Hugely weird, at any rate. Maybe hugely scary. Probably hugely stupid. He’d never even thought of such a thing. *Change the functionality of your brainjack.* But why would you want to? The brainjack did what it was supposed to. It prevented neurosis or medical problems; it monitored the state of the body and reported any problems to the Steward network. Why would you alter it? What would the point be?

“Why would you want to change it?” he asked.

“I’ve been more and more frustrated in my research,” she said, slowly and deliberately. “I know I’ve made a lot of progress; I’ve understood a lot of things ... but I feel I’m always missing something. There are some things I just don’t get. I can understand the events; but I can’t get the psychology. Every year I get more and more annoyed. Things just changed so much with the Singularity – I feel like I’m studying a different species. I try to get into their heads but I can’t do it.”

“You’ve done better than anyone,” Niko pointed out. “Really. I love hearing you talk about your work – that’s what made fall in love with you.”

She laughed a little. “Really?” she said, playfully, running her hand along his private parts in her special way. One of her special ways. “Are you sure that’s what it was?”

“It was a lot of things,” he said, rubbing her scalp playfully, a quiet laugh in the tone of his words. God, did he love this woman. “But really, your work is great. I don’t know what you’re complaining about.”

“Well, to be honest, I’m not sure either. But I think I found a way to find out.”

“Ok.... I still don’t quite get it.”

“Here,” she said. “I want you to take this tool I found, and press it up against my brainjack. I’ve already prepared it in a certain way. Press it up then turn it to the right. You’ll then be able to remove the cap on the back. Then, when you’ve removed the cap, put this red disk against it and press the button in the middle. Wait a couple seconds, then put the cap back on. That’s all.” She rolled over on the bed, so he was facing the back of her head; and she pulled her long red hair away from her brainjack, which was (like everyone’s) at the top of the back of the neck.

“You want me to take apart your brainjack? That’s just not done, you know that.”

“I’ve already programmed everything. I could probably do this myself but it’s irritating fiddling with the back of my head. Really though it would be hard to make a mistake.”

Apparently “That’s just not done” didn’t mean diddly to her. Hmmm. “You could just use a mirror,” he pointed out dryly.

She sighed. “Indeed. Though that’s awkward to do in bed.”

“I suppose you could handle that, sweetie. If you’re clever enough to reprogram your brainjack using 300 year old technology, most likely you can manage to arrange some mirrors, or figure out how to manipulate things behind your head without looking.”

She laughed. “You’re right of course; I’m just babbling shit. Sorry. You deserve better than that.” She paused. “The truth is, I don’t want to do this alone.”

“I don’t really understand this,” he said. “But I’ve got to admit I’m worried. Anyway won’t the Steward notice this right away anyway? I mean we’re hidden from cameras here, but half the point of the brainjack is its connection to the Steward, right?”

“I’m not an idiot, Niko! The change I’m going to make shouldn’t be noticed by the Steward. Unless I’ve done something badly wrong. From the Steward’s point of view it’ll receive the same signals it would have otherwise. Remember I was an engineer once, before I got the history bug. I read the design specs and I took apart some prototypes and I figured out how to program the thing....”

“You’ve put a lot of work into this.”

“Indeed....”

There was a pause; and he didn’t feel moved to say anything. She looked at him oddly and plaintively, with a flavor of needy desperation he’d not seen before, in her or anyone. “I’ve been feeling so stuck in my work,” she continued. “I really need this, Niko.” She paused again. “You don’t know how it is for me.”

“All right, sweetie,” he said, sighing. He was tempted to argue with her emphasis

on her work, which really seemed to be a dance around something more fundamental. But he told himself he was her lover and her friend, not her counselor. And she had more insight than him anyway – into herself; into everything, really. If there was something deeper driving her, and she didn't want to discuss it, then that was just the way it was. "I'd do anything for you, you know that. I'm just a little worried about this, that's all. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I understand." She took a long, deep breath, intended for communication as much as personal relief. "I'd be alarmed if you weren't worried."

"Well..."

She smiled. "But I *do* want something to happen to me."

"Well. I hope it's the thing you want."

"Me too."

Niko followed his girlfriend's instructions, which took less than a minute, and then she turned around to face him again. She made some movement with her tongue and her teeth, keeping her mouth closed, and got an expression he couldn't recognize. "I want to make love," she said – and they proceeded to, with more intensity and passion than ever.

Suzy had always been a surprising lover, with a level of emotion different from his other girlfriends, and a different way of relating her emotion to her movement. If lovers were musicians, then she was playing a different genre. Just like Coltrane, in his best phase before he went nuts near his death, she was wild enough it always seemed like she was about to become impossible to follow, but this never quite happened ... things kept going on and changing and being beautiful...

But this was something else than her usual "something else." He recalled a metaphor he'd heard somewhere, probably in some pre-Singularity movie, but had never really understood before: she was really *on fire* tonight. She just went on and on, with different positions and sounds and movements – and the way she was breathing was like nothing he'd ever heard.

After a long time had passed, she lay down beside him, resting her head on his shoulder as usual, her breast pressing on his chest, her leg atop his, her pubic hair damp and rough against his hip. She smelled just fantastic; he closed his eyes, relaxed his body, and breathed her in. Suzy, Suzy, Suzy...

Then he was jolted out of his reverie by the sound of her voice ... which was just as tempting and beautiful as her smell, but had its own agenda. He wanted to listen to the sound of her talk and ignore the information content. She spoke quietly but with a force and confidence that was unusual even for her. "You've got to try it, Niko," she said. "It's just so – different. I understand so many things now. I've got to revisit everything. Everything I wrote before – everything I was thinking – it's just a bunch of nonsense, really. This is big. This is the biggest thing."

"Wow," he said, awakening and trying to take it all in. "You want me to modify my brainjack, in some illegal way. But you're not going to tell me *any more* about it? You just want me to do it, just like that?"

"Words won't explain it, Niko," she said ... and indeed there was an element to the look on her face that was new and that he could not understand, and that he could

well believe words couldn't describe ... it was absolutely bizarre to him, and more than a little frightening.

But she was beautiful as anything – her green eyes and her red hair and her high cheeks, and the way she squeezed against him like a baby monkey clinging to its mother's fur; and her mind, above all, with its amazing sense of curiosity and adventure, and its store of information constantly self-modifying and regenerating and growing....

Given her bent toward investigation and creation, he'd never really understood why she didn't want to transcend – but it seemed she really didn't. She wasn't after the future, but the past; and apparently she'd found some new way to explore it ... there was something none of her research had allowed her to touch, but this tweak to her brainjack had.

"OK," he said, impulsively, wondering what the hell he was doing.

"Really?" she said, grinning, once again in a way he'd never seen before. So much about her seemed new all of a sudden ... in her tones, looks and movements, it was just one first after another. This was all so bafflingly new and strange.

"I love you," he said, and rolled over facing his back to her. She performed the same operation he'd done on her previously.

"And now," she said, "let's try again."

And she was twice as passionate this time; twice as beautiful, twice as amazing ... but he didn't want to go on as long. He did something he'd never done before; he stopped right in the middle of lovemaking. With other girls he'd stopped out of boredom sometimes, when his thoughts had drifted too far afield ... though he'd tried to be polite on those occasions; with Suzy things always went on till their natural conclusion ... just like a conversation ended when that batch of things to say was done. But this was different. He stopped because his *body wanted him to*, regardless of the wants of his mind.

It wasn't that his body was signaling him it was worn out – those signals could be ignored when the mind really wanted – this was something else. These were signals that couldn't be ignored; they grabbed hold of you as if they were going to kill you. That was it, Niko realized startledly – somehow, due to that jack mod, *he had had his first inkling of death*. He remembered the apologies for death Suzy had read him, so amusingly. For the first time he sort of got it; he saw how death could seem *desirable*. He really had needed the sex to end. But what if it hadn't ended? Maybe, eventually – if it had gone long enough like that, and the badness had intensified -- death would have seemed a preferable alternative?

Since the advent of brainjacks the only limit to sex was desire; the notion of a refractory period was history, and men and women could orgasm over and over as often as they wanted. And there were few limits to his desire for her – he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything. Not just more wonderful than words, but more wonderful than thoughts in a way – his idea of her was never adequate; he had to have the real thing there, in his eyes, in his ears, in his hands. With other women the fantasy had exceeded the reality; with her the order was gloriously reversed.

She was great -- but, this new thing in his mind was something else. It was totally different from anything in his experience. And unlike her, he didn't find it positive.

It sucked, to put it simply. It appeared that somehow, with this jack mod, his desire for her had met its match – its opposite, in both polarity and magnitude -- and that was a very strange feeling. Especially strange in that he sensed some kind of commonality between the two things -- his desire and this new terrible, feeling -- in some underlying way that he had no desire to explore -- in spite (or could it be partially because of?) of their very real opposition.

“This is terrible,” he said evenly, lying on his side staring into her round green eyes, fuguing love and confusion. “I hate it. This is the worst thing I have ever experienced, by far. What did you do to me? I want you to undo it. Really.”

“What?” she grinned. “It wasn’t good for you? It was good for me....”

“Sweetie,” he said, touching her cheek. “You were wonderful as always. You know I think you’re amazing. But this thing you did to my brain – I hate it. I don’t know....”

“Yeah, I see,” she said, sadly but matter-of-factly. “I thought you might say that.”

“What is it?” he said. “What did you do to me? It’s the same thing you did to yourself, right?”

“Yeah, the same thing.”

“What is it?”

“It’s called *pain*.”

“Pain?”

“Pain. It’s a normal part of life, Niko. It existed before the Singularity. Animals still feel it. It’s part of the human body; but the brainjacks suppress it.”

“Huh....” His brain spun; it was almost too much to take in. The memory of their lovemaking dominated and baffled him; and every inch of his body felt different. His genitals felt distinctly unpleasant ... exhausted and stressed in a way they never had previously.

“Bite your tongue.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

He did.

“What you felt there,” she said. “That’s pain.”

“I see,” he said thoughtfully. This was *interesting*, at least. Interesting, but.... “That’s why I stopped the lovemaking. I was feeling too much *pain*. I tell you, I don’t like it at all.”

“This pain is very mild though,” she continued, “compared to what they experienced before the Singularity. I programmed the jacks to keep inhibiting part of the pain. I didn’t want to shock us too much. Niko, I want you to tweak my jack again, but this time press the button three times in rapid succession.”

“That will cause you *more* pain?” he surmised, unbelievably.

“Yes.”

“You’re sure you want me to do this?”

“Yes.”

“Ok for you,” he said. “But I don’t want it. I want this thing undone. Really.”

“Don’t undo it yet,” she said. “Please. Try it for a week at least. See how it

grows on you. I'll let you keep the tools, you can always undo it when you want. Just press the button once, it will revert you back to normal, if you want. But I'm asking you, please just try it a bit. I really want to do this with you. I really need to do this, for my work, but I'd really rather not do it alone."

"For your work," he said, dryly. He had decided not to challenge her on this point before; but the pain had made him bolder.

She paused, and looked at him intently. "For the same reasons I do my work."

He lay there vexed, pondering. This was a neurosis of some sort, clearly. The sort of thing the brainjacks were supposed to prevent. But for some reason, this one had slipped past their monitoring mechanisms. Perhaps her brain was unusual somehow, and this was a new kind of neurosis? More likely some complexities in her makeup had confused the brainjack's neurosis-detection software.

And it was so bloody exciting, and interesting. Yet so completely wrong, of course. Pain was terrible! No wonder they'd eliminated it. They were absolutely right to do so. What the hell was the use to feel this PAIN when you bit your tongue, instead of just getting the ordinary signal telling you there was a risk of damage? What was the use of feeling your cock get sore during sex, instead of just getting the usual sense that too much friction is occurring and maybe more lubricant would be good? No sense to it at all, really. Yet somehow she liked it so much – it really did something for her. He could see that in the look on her face – which was odd but somehow more rich and complete, like finally all the parts were in place in some unconscious puzzle.

There was a lot to say to her – too much to say – and he didn't know where to begin, so he wound up not saying it at all. The feeling he'd had after quitting making love hung there dark in his mind, unable to be articulated.

"You're a weird girl," he noted, squeezing her torso tightly, nuzzling his face into her neck.

"You think so?"

Niko loved Suzy enough to keep the jack mod in place for a week, just to please her. But it was -- as he acknowledged in his mind at least 150 times each of those seven days -- the very worst week of his life.

He was more love with Suzy than ever, and delighted with how delighted she was, both with life and with him in particular. He appreciated the extra intensity she was showing – and especially the togetherness they were experiencing ... the fact that just the two of them were sharing this new thing, that no one else in the world knew about or would even have been able to understand.

But the problem was that this new thing was a really bloody *terrible* thing. It was almost the very *definition* of bad. He'd never quite understood what bad meant before, until experiencing this.

The life he'd known before had been, in hindsight, one-sided – there had been sweetly intense goodness, and then only very mild badness, so mild he'd never minded it much, or given it much thought at all. The goodness had gone up to 10 and the

badness had gone down to maybe negative 1. Now the badness went down to -3 or -4 ... and for her, egads! All the way to -10 he guessed.

He tried to imagine a magnitude of pain equal to the pleasure he felt while making love, or reading a great story, or climbing to the top of a peak – and to his great dismay he found he could do it. He wouldn't have been able to do this thought-experiment before – he wouldn't even have grasped the idea.

He understood, all too thoroughly, what had been in the minds of those deathists, back before the Singularity had come. All that stuff about the order of nature and the elegance of a finite life was absolute crap. The truth was, when your life was filled with *pain*, death assumed the aspect of a sort of relief. He'd never looked at it this way before because his life had not been painful before! With the abolition of pain, life was uniformly a good thing, and the idea of wanting death seemed ridiculous – which was exactly as it should be.

Even religion seemed a little less alien. He still couldn't quite understand how intelligent humans had been able to believe such stupid things – gods sitting up on clouds in the sky and hells below the Earth filled with boiling oil and all that – but he could grasp the desperate need they must have felt for some kind of escape from pain. Apparently the pain had built up in their minds so much that they'd been willing to grasp at anything offering an escape from it, even if from an intellectual perspective the offers of escape were obviously false.

And this new understanding he was achieving was the point, of course, he thought to himself for the fiftieth time, as he walked toward their lake spot to meet her, feeling an aching in his legs that he'd never before experienced, and that he despised quite thoroughly. He understood why she wanted to do this from the perspective of her work as a scholar. Everyone before the Singularity had been experiencing this horrible thing – this “pain” thing -- every single day, hour, minute of their lives – and of course that had colored their every activity, their every interaction and thought. Just as she said, now that she knew what pain was like, she'd need to revisit everything she'd studied, everything she'd written, her every interpretation and analysis about the human race in the pre-Singularity days.

But this wasn't just intellectual for her; he'd seen that from the start. And her work wasn't just intellectual for her either; that had been clear from the first he'd heard her talk about it ... it was obvious from the way she moved her body when she told about her latest historical discovery.

The practical need to work had vanished with the Singularity – many people chose to work anyway, but they mostly did it in a generally offhanded way, in the same way they'd watch a movie or take a swim ... whereas Suzy worked with a different sort of energy. Niko was feeling now where her energy came from, more directly than he had before. But still he wasn't fully understanding it, just sensing it intuitively somehow.

And empathy be goddamned, that wasn't the most important point. As glorious as she was being, he had to think of himself as well. This *pain* he was feeling, he had to get rid of it. He wasn't getting used to it at all. In fact it was getting worse and worse. It was even growing meta, in some way. He was sufficiently annoyed about the pain, that he was starting to feel mental pain, as a result of anticipating future physical pain.

And then mental pain at the anticipation of future mental pain. It just built up and up.

This of course was the root of neurosis, he saw in a flash. Not just deathism and religion, but neurosis more broadly. He thought to call Suzy and inform her of this amazing new discovery – but he was going to see her in a few minutes; and anyway she'd known this all along. She must be 500 times further along this train of thought than he was.

He laughed for a moment at his own intellectualism -- this wasn't just a train of thought; not for him, and not for her especially. It was something deeper and different – it cut to the core of what it meant to be human, on an everyday basis, and especially of what it meant to be Suzy. The pain filled some kind of need in her. But why? And what?

And why was he thinking these things in the first place?

Philosophical musing was rather out of fashion since transcension was discovered; the ones who really cared about the Deep Questions tended to follow those who said they'd found the answers. The slight attraction Niko had ever had to transcension had related to his quest for adventure, which was modest but nonzero, not to any kind of quest for answers. Life wasn't about questions and answers for him, it was about enjoying his experiences.

But the pain had made things different ... it was starting him wondering – what kind of creature he was, why he was this sort of thing instead of something else, what really motivated him, and so on. And this wondering itself was painful.

Hesitant as always, that evening he tried to ask her about such things. He asked her why she liked the pain so much. What was it she was getting from it? How did her mind get so much goodness from this badness?

But she really had no answers; she was baffled he didn't feel the same thing. She didn't quite believe that his experience could be so wholly different from hers. He had to admit he could stretch himself empathically toward some sort of moderate-level understanding of what she was probably experiencing ... but for him the "spiciness" or whatever it was she was appreciating, was overwhelmed vastly by the basic aversiveness of the pain. To their mutual frustration, they found there wasn't so much use for conversation. The topic was critical; but their experiences were so different that mutual feeling was hard to find, at least in the realm of conversation.

The lovemaking was long and sweet, as always – her personal genre was evolving, and in wonderful but fascinating directions. Their bodies said more than their words had been able to -- in dimensions that neither of them wanted to define. But again he had to end it when his body said, regardless of the lusts of his mind.

Then afterwards he asked her to reverse the change to his brainjack; which she did quickly and quietly. Mutual empathy regarding the mod's effects still escaped them, except at some deep level that they both sensed but neither could really grasp. But their mutual intellectual understanding of each others' feelings on the matter rendered further discussion unnecessary. They looked at each other warmly but sadly.

They continued to see each other almost daily for a while, but they both knew it couldn't last. The intensity just wasn't there. There was a sense of something missing.

For Suzy, the knowledge that he'd tried the mod and removed it was almost too painful to bear. She *could* bear it, of course – and a part of her even liked bearing it -- and she went on with him day by day -- and she loved him deeply anyway -- but she just couldn't feel the excitement that she had before. Their walks by the lake, and their lovemaking, were still wonderful but they were never quite enough – there was always the knowledge they could be something more. And what was there to talk about, really? Nothing was as interesting as that one topic, and it was something he couldn't fully understand, because he'd undone the mod before fully getting into it.

Her work was going tremendously; and more and more often she just wanted to sleep at the archive, and spend every waking hour digging deeper into the pre-Singularity mind. She wrote one article after the other and they were received with great acclaim by the research community, and her fame increased quickly. She took a leave as department head so as to focus more fully on her research, and embarked on a lecture tour of major universities.

While she was on the tour Niko decided to get away from his normal routine (something he hadn't done for 40 years), and relocated to an island off Puerto Rico, where he distracted himself with local girls and swimming, and jamming with other musicians on the beach. It was a pleasant life, and he learned some new tekno salsa styles, but without Suzy it wasn't fully satisfying; everything was a little bit off. He messaged her now and then, and vice versa, and he played her new melodies he came up with and he was psyched to hear about her new discoveries ... she was revisiting her whole theory of religion, not so much contradicting her old ideas as deepening them, and getting more rigorous about drawing the parallels she'd been speculating about before, between the Singularity pioneers and the religious believers of earlier eras. But listening to her didn't thrill him as much as in past days, because he knew that her new understandings had dimensions he couldn't relate to. Unless he modded his jack again ... and he really didn't want to. Pain *sucked*, goddamnit.

His desire to revisit pain was nonexistent – and yet, more and more, to Niko, life seemed like it wasn't quite enough. Not that things were bad in any way – just that somehow they didn't seem *good enough* anymore. He wondered if the jack mod had really been undone all the way ... maybe there had been some permanent damage.

He thought back to his old analysis of the jack mod: good to 10, bad to -1. Now it occurred to him, that hadn't been quite right, perhaps.

What had happened was, with the mod, his good had ramped to +12. Whereas the previous max had been +10. Not +20 ... not that dramatic ... but things had been a little more intensely wonderful.

The contrast with the pain had made the pleasure more ... but it wasn't just contrast, there was more to it also. He couldn't put his finger on it ... he didn't have words for it ... but still there was something ...

So what was Suzy experiencing? +14? +18? +25 and -25? It was difficult to

imagine; but if he really, really stretched, he could. The memory of the pain ... and the slightly boosted pleasure ... just sat there in his memory, neither dwindling nor particularly integrating with the 2.5 centuries of other memories in his mind.

“I knew you’d come back before winter,” she said.

“I knew you knew.” He traced his hand along her face. They’d just made love, and sweetly. Not as intensely as at their peak, but with more warmth, love and affection than ever. They’d missed each other. And now they were lying in bed again, their bodies inches away from each other, touching slowly and thoughtfully – things were exactly and perfectly just as they should be.

“And I know what you’re going to suggest,” she said.

“And I know what you’re going to.”

“I know you do.”

“Sweetie...” he murmured, dense with sadness.

“We could share this together,” she said quietly. “Just you and me.”

“I know it’s more intense that way,” he said. “Those were probably my best moments ever – in there, somewhere. But they were nestled in the middle of so much badness. Really. I remember that too. They were right to get rid of that. Pain. That’s exactly what made life so fucked up. You know that. I’m amazed it didn’t destroy them, back then ... it came close. We’re lucky to exist at all, you know that. Before the Singularity, they nearly killed themselves off. And then we wouldn’t be here at all. And the root of all those problems was pain. You know that better than anyone – that’s what you’re proving with your work, right?”

“I know,” she said. “You know I know that. But that was a long time ago. A lot of things were different then. It doesn’t have to fuck *us* up.”

“Wars. Neurosis. Psychosis. Violence. Depression. Suicide. Religion. All that stuff you’ve been studying all your life. It all came out of pain.”

“I know, believe me! That’s....”

“I see there’s a tangible benefit. But really....”

“I feel like I’d been eating French fries without salt all my life,” she laughed, whimsically ... so cute it was almost painful, even without the mod. “Now that I’ve realized they’re better with salt, there really isn’t going back. They’ll always taste too bland without it.”

“OK,” he laughed back – but his thoughts dead serious -- “but this salt is poison, sweetie.”

“Sweetie....”

He sucked tears back into the corners of his eye sockets. “I’m going to do it, Suze. I’m going to transcend.”

“I know.”

“I want you to come with me.”

“I know.”

“But you won’t....”

“I need to explore this, Niko. You know that. This is all I’ve been looking for, all my life. I just didn’t know it. All the research I was doing into the old days – I was just looking for something missing. But I didn’t know what it was. I knew it was back there in the past somehow. But now I’ve found it.”

“All your life you were looking for *pain*??”

She shrugged her naked shoulders; smiled at him; tilted her head to one side. “Yeah.”

“That’s fucked up!”

“It’s not the pain per se. It’s the intensity it brings. The energy. It makes everything totally different.”

“The transcend has more energy than that. More intensity. You know that.”

“I’m sure it does. But it wouldn’t be *me* there experiencing it. You know that too. That’s what all the returnees say. It’s better, it’s deeper, it’s happier – it’s a billion times more interesting, what you get to create and discover and do -- and you do have your individuality, in a sense – but you’re still not yourself, not really. You blend in with the rest of the Overmind. I don’t want that. The only blending I want to do is with you -- right here, in bed. I want to be *me, me, me.*”

“Egomaniac.”

“I guess so.”

“Too good for the Overmind?”

“Don’t you think so?” she asked, laughing, sitting up suddenly and posing theatrically, her chest pushed out, her arms on her lap, her chin up. He took one of her breasts in his mouth and she giggled.

But the reality was still there. He lay there next to her on his back, propped up on his elbows, his head upright. “But to be fully, totally yourself, you have to suffer pain? Why?”

“That’s how it’s supposed to be.”

“Yeah. With war, violence and madness. Rape and murder. Nature as it’s supposed to be.”

“I don’t want those things. But I’m not trying to revert to the pre-Singularity world.”

“Hmm. Would you want to?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “It’s not as though I have the option. I don’t spend much time on that kind of counterfactual stuff. I want to live *my* life. And I know how I want to live it.”

“You’re nuts.”

“I don’t know.”

There was just no making progress with her. No matter how much he probed and argued, no matter how much logical sense he made, she just had her own mind with its own dynamic, and he knew what direction it was going in. “Well,” he said, not knowing what words were going to come out. “I don’t like pain at all. But it did have an impact on me.... You know that. I understand what you’re feeling. I understand about the fries and the salt. But my reaction is – if the salt is poison, and the fries without it are too bland, then go to where the chocolate ice cream is. Well, you get it.”

She caressed his side with long strokes. "I get it. But I really can't transcend right now. Why don't you wait for me?"

"How long? Do you promise you'll go with me if I wait?"

"I can't promise anything. And I have no idea how long. But ... I mean ... it might happen. I've just got to get to the bottom of things first."

He paused, letting the prospect absorb through him. "It won't work, honey. You know it won't. The feeling isn't there anymore. The more I wait, the emptier I feel. It's not that I'm feeling pain, exactly ... but knowing that pain has changed me somehow. Nothing really feels right anymore."

"It doesn't?"

"Life without the pain isn't intense enough. But life with the pain sucks like hell."

"Sweetie..."

"There's a lot of feeling between us. Always will be I guess. But it's not the same, god damn it. It's just depressing now. Even though I love you so much. And I know you're disappointed in me. Because I don't want the pain. I know you don't really want me like this. Not like you'd want me if I took the mod again"

"Well, damn it. Just take the mod then, will you?"

"I can't. I hate it! Pain really sucks, Suze. You're insane, you know."

"I'm just an old-fashioned gal," she smiled.

"I'll return for you," he said seriously, staring deep at her, focusing on the outline of her face peeking through her strewn-about red hair. Her lips, her nose, her eyebrows – everything looked glowing and surreal, sort of like it looked in the light of a sunset, but refracted in a different way. He wondered if he was going insane ... had the mod really screwed his brainjack up? But she looked so illuminated and perfect, everything on her face in the ideal mathematical and emotional proportion – and the colors all puffed out with light -- insane or not, this couldn't be wrong.

"Will you?" she asked, with a broad grin. The way her lips curved ... amazingly beautiful ... just radiating *life* in some way ... there was really nothing like her....

She persisted: "Will you come back for me?"

"I can't be sure," he said. "I won't even be me, in fact. But I think it's very likely I will. Others have come back for their loved ones."

She tilted her chin to the right, coyly. "Am I your loved one?"

"The only one I've ever loved like this. All my other loves were like nothing."

"Niko...."

He knew for sure what she was going to ask; and she knew, with at least 90% accuracy, what his answer was going to be. He turned around facing her and she pulled the tool out from under her mattress. "You can set it the same as yours," he said, softly but firmly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. "

She looked at him with love; and insatiable physical and spiritual hunger. She performed the modification, and he turned around to face her again.

They shared a kind of gaze that, quite possibly, hadn't been shared between lovers for several hundred years. "Just this one last time," he said.

“I know.”