



**BYLINER
SERIALS**

POSITRON

EPISODE 4

THE HEART GOES LAST

MARGARET ATWOOD

POSITRON | EPISODE 4

The Heart Goes Last

By Margaret Atwood

Byliner

BYLINER SERIALS

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Stan's in the Possibilibots cafeteria with the guys from his team—his new team, the team he's just been inserted into. He's having a beer, that weak pissy beer they're brewing in Consilience now; plus a side of onion rings and some fries to share, and a platter of BBQ wings. Sucking the fat off a wing, he reflects that he himself might have tended the owner of this wing when it had been covered with feathers and attached to a chicken. A Positron chicken, in the Positron Prison chicken facility he'd once supervised on alternate months, when his life had passed for ordinary.

It seems a century away now, that stretch of time when he'd lived with Charmaine in their bland but well-tended Consilience home. She'd done a lot of laundry and ironing and worn an apron, as in some re-creation of a fifties sitcom, and he'd kept the lawn mowed neatly and the hedges trimmed, and they'd made sedate domestic love under a floral-patterned sheet with ribbon bows and bluebirds on it. Yes, he'd been bored, he'd had the urge to wander, though doesn't every husband? And yes, he'd been obsessive about a woman who turned out not to exist, but even that was well within the range of normal, most guys did it at least once in their lives. It was a hormone thing, the illusion, the disillusion. Par for the course. And yes, he'd discovered that Charmaine had been cheating on him; that was par for the course too, and in time he could have handled it.



But that was before the ground had been whipped out from under his feet like a sheet of greased Astroturf and he'd found himself strapped to a gurney and drugged to the gills, so thick-tongued he'd been unable to speak. And then angel-faced Charmaine had come into the room and tearfully stuck a needle into him, fully believing that she was murdering him. At least she'd had the decency to cry, not that the waterworks meant much. She'd always been an easy weeper.

The bitch. If the tables had been turned, would he have done such a thing to her? No. Of course not. Well, possibly. Under persuasion. Or under coercion. Depending on what was at stake. If he himself would be killed otherwise.

Or maybe to save humanity. Though increasingly he wonders why he would even bother to do that: the more he knows about humanity, the less he likes it. And the more he suspects that beneath every innocuous-looking surface—such as the smiling, big-eyed, innocent blond surface of Charmaine—there's a toxic cesspool. Terminal selfishness, lust and greed, malevolent intentions: these abound. Not that he himself

has been immune to such motives; but he's had limited scope to act on them.

Luckily for him, he wasn't really dead after that needle, just out cold. When he woke up, he was tethered to a binful of blue knitted teddy bears, in a warehouse full of what looked like coffins. Then his minder, Jocelyn, had arrived to rev him up with some fuckawful coffee and give him a set of cryptic instructions—basically, wait for more instructions. After which he would be smuggled out of Positron, and then outside the walls of the town of Consilience. Then he could proceed to rescue democracy single-handedly or some such crap. As if there was any democracy left, and even if there was, as if he could rescue it. He'll be a message bearer, according to Jocelyn; but what exactly is the message, and who's he supposed to deliver it to? He has no fucking clue.

Naturally he'd gone along with her plans. There weren't any options: if he'd told her to take a hike, Jocelyn could have broken his neck in one quick move. He'd had ample proof that she was trained in neck breaking or the equivalent during the enforced time he'd done as her sex toy and houseboy. Whatever it takes, he'd thought. Anything to make it out of this nightmare, out through the gates of Consilience, back into the admittedly crumbling and anarchic outside world. Once there, he could make a run for it, through the deteriorating urban scumlands he used to know so well. He could run far away from Positron and its grand schemes, those grand schemes that Jocelyn—once their greatest supporter—was now determined to undermine. He could run far away from Jocelyn, too, with her lofty intentions and good legs and edgy sexual tastes. He could run and run.

(But what about Charmaine? Whatever she thinks she did to him, it wasn't premeditated: she was really upset. He can't leave her behind. Or can he? Maybe she'll be safer in there, away from the thugs and gangs. Maybe she'll be happier.)

* * *

After caffeinating him, Jocelyn had equipped him with a name tag and steered him toward the warehouse door. He'd found himself in a hallway, a hallway with the Positron color scheme of boiled-chicken beige and gallbladder green. And, fuck! Who should be waiting for him there but Phil, or possibly Max, man of two names and a thousand faces, all of them handsome, all of which Stan would enjoy smashing in. Phil/Max, the factotum and compliant husband of Jocelyn herself; and Max/Phil, the oily seducer of Charmaine. Or Stan can only suppose the seduction was oily.

Scratch that thought: he can live without the mental images of lubricants. He has enough mental images of that treacherous event, thanks to the all-living, all-breathing videos Jocelyn had seen fit to show him of Charmaine and Phil/Max fornicating like weasels on a griddle. So, Philmax: one moment video-porn lothario, next moment Jocelyn's husband and co-subversive; and now, presto! Maxphil in a Positron boiler

suit and a fleece jacket of a better grade than Stan's, and a badge that said POSSIBILIBOTS PERSONNEL.

"Welcome back to full consciousness," Philmax had said, with—was that a superior smirk, the smirk of cuckold to cuckold? At least he'd had the sense not to stick out his hand for a friendly shake: Stan would've fucking mangled him. Or tried to.

Stan refrained from making some below-the-belt quip about Jocelyn's sexual antics: that could wait for a more propitious occasion, such as just before he got his hands around Mr. Romeo's neck. "Come and meet your team," said Philmax, this time without the smirk.

So Stan had met them. They didn't say boo. He was a replacement, that was all they knew. Replacements, it seemed, came and went.

* * *

The guys on his Possibilibots team look normal enough on the outside, just ordinary guys sitting around in the cafeteria having lunch, like him. Not young, not old; fit enough, though a couple of them are getting plump around the middle. They've all got name tags, like his. His says WALDO, and he really needs to remember that his name is Waldo now, not Stan. All he has to do is to stay Waldo until someone reveals what it is he has to do next; or else until he figures out how to make a break for it on his own.

Tiptoe through the Tulips is supposed to be his code, his signal, his secret handshake. Will his unknown contact speak it or sing it? He hopes there won't be singing. Who chose that hideous tune? Jocelyn, naturally: along with her other complex personality traits, she has a warped sense of humor. She'd relish the idea of making some poor sod croak out that brain-damaged ditty. Not one of the guys at lunch looks like the *Tiptoe through the Tulips* kind; not one looks like a possible undercover contact. But then, they wouldn't.

Waldo, Waldo, he tells himself. *You are Waldo now*. It's a feeble name, like something in a kids' kitten book. The other names around the table are more solid: Derek, Kevin, Gary, Tyler, Budge. He's only just met them, he knows almost nothing about them, so he has to keep his mouth shut and his ears open. And they know nothing about him except that he's been sent to fill a vacancy on their team in the usual way. Whatever that usual way is. Have they all been injected with bogus death drugs and embedded in bins of knitted teddy bears?

* * *

Charmaine did not sleep well last night, even though she was in her own bed. Though increasingly she's come to realize that this bed isn't really hers, it's only on loan from Consilience, because they bought all of the basics inside this control-freak town, right down to the dishcloths. And anyway, the Alternates sleep in this bed when they live here, during the turn-and-turn-about months when she and Stan are doing their duty inside Positron Prison.

Or were doing their duty, before ...

But anyway, it's a bed she's used to. Or she *was* used to it when Stan was in there with her. But now it feels alien to her, like one of those scary movies where you wake up and find you're on a spaceship, and you've been abducted, and people you thought were your friends have had their brains taken over, and they want to do kinky probes; because Stan isn't in this bed with her anymore and he will never be in it again. Face it, she tells herself: you carried out the procedure on him, you kissed him goodbye and then you stuck the needle in him, and he died. That's reality, and it doesn't matter how much you cry about it now, because he's still dead and you can't bring him back.

She hadn't meant to kill him. She hadn't meant to kill *him*. She'd been expecting another Anonymous, she'd just been doing her job, removing the disruptive elements from society but not in a cruel way: it was deeply pleasurable for them, they literally died of pleasure, and their removal was better for them because they would never be able to fit into the new and safer world the Consilience project was building, would they?

But when she'd walked into the room in the Medications Administrations wing of Positron Prison, suddenly there was Stan, strapped to the gurney and mumbling and gazing at her pitifully. How else could she have acted? She'd had a bunch of last-minute desperate thoughts about how to get Stan out of there, but there was no way, she was trapped. It was a loyalty thing, it was about the subversive elements that Ed the director was talking about more and more on Consilience TV. It was a test of how dedicated and committed she was, and how well she could suppress her own feelings for the greater good, and she passed that test. She sacrificed Stan, it was the only possible choice she could make, but it ripped her in two. They forced her to use her head and discard her heart; but it wasn't so easy, because the heart goes last and it was still clinging on inside her all the time she was readying the needle and nerving herself to use it; which is why she was crying the whole time.

Then Stan's eyes rolled up, and everything went black, and she must have fainted and banged her head on the floor. And the next thing she knew, she was back in this house, lying on the sofa, with a headache.

At least she didn't have a concussion. That's what they told her at the Consilience clinic after the CAT scan they'd put her through. They'd sent her home with three kinds of pills—a pink one, a green one, and a yellow one—to help her relax, they said. She hadn't taken them, however: she didn't trust what was in those pills. Slipping a person some kind of knockout thing was what those aliens did before they got you onto their spaceship, and then you woke up surrounded by tubes, right in the middle of a probe. That isn't going to happen, there aren't any aliens; but still, she didn't trust what might happen to her while she was sleeping like a baby.

“You’ll sleep like a baby” was what Aurora from Human Resources had said about those pills. She’d been at the clinic, waiting for Charmaine to arrive. There was collusion going on, there were arrangements being made. How many of them were in on it? Aurora, for sure. And the woman who’d taken Charmaine to the clinic, the woman with dark hair and square teeth and hoop earrings. She was the same one whose head had appeared in the TV-screen box at the Medications Administrations reception desk, and that head had given the orders about Stan. Not that Stan had been mentioned by the head, not by name.

Charmaine had recognized that woman. She’d blurted out, “You’re the head! The head in the box!” But all she’d gotten was a stone-faced stare and then a blanket denial.

She should have put it better: telling a person that they were a head in a box was too blunt. She should have been more tactful. “Haven’t I seen you before?” Something like that.

She’d blundered again, because the driver of the pickup car was Max, her onetime passionate secret lover, and she’d blurted that out, too. But Max claimed he’d never seen her before. He said he wasn’t Max at all, only a chauffeur called Phil. Phil! She could never have flung herself into the arms of a man called Phil, or let him call her a hot little slut. Phils were pharmacists, they were rug-cleaning specialists, they had no inner shadows and banked-up flames of desire. They were not compelling and mysterious. And Max was, even in that ridiculous driver’s uniform he was wearing, so she knew it was all a big fat lie.

Then she realized she should play mute, and act dumb, and not take any kind of a pill, because they were messing with her head. She’d seen movies like that: people disguising themselves as other people and pretending not to know you, and hiding your things; then, when you accused them of doing it, they’d say you were crazy. So if she acted crazy by telling the truth, they would have an excuse for the straitjackets, or for pushing her out a window and then saying she’d jumped. So her best bet is to go along with whatever made-up version of themselves they want to put out there.

Though if she could corner Max alone, and make him kiss her, and get a firm grip on his belt buckle—a familiar buckle, one she could undo in her sleep—then his stupid cover story would smoke and burn, and turn to ash, like the flammable thing it was.



There’ve been a lot of yuks at the lunch table, a lot of in-jokes that Stan didn’t quite catch. He’s reading facial expressions, or trying to: behind the genial grins there’s a wall, behind which a foreign language is being spoken; or is that paranoia? Around the room, at other cafeteria tables, there are other knots of men. Other Possibilibots teams, would be his guess. He’s doing a lot of guessing.

The cafeteria is a long room with light green walls. Frosted glass windows down one side: you can't see out. On the side without the windows there's a couple of retro-looking posters. One of them shows a little girl of six or seven in a ruffled white nightie, rubbing one eye sleepily, a blue teddy bear cradled in the crook of her other arm. There's a steaming cup of something in the foreground. SLEEP TIGHT, says the slogan. It's an old poster—twenties or thirties, it looks like—for a chocolate malted bedtime drink.

The other poster shows a pretty blond girl in a red and white spotted bikini, doing a pinup pose, hands clasped around one drawn-up knee, the foot in a sling-back red high heel; the other leg extended, the shoe dangling from her toe. Pouty red lips, a wink. Some writing in, it must be, Dutch.

"Looks like a real girl, yeah?" says Derek. "But she's one of ours." He sounds proud. "They did that poster in a fifties style. It's one from the overseas line. Those Dutch are so far ahead of us!"

"Yeah, they've done the legislation and everything," says Gary. "They anticipated the future."

"What's it say?" Stan asks. He knows what they're making here at Possibilibots. Replica women, robotic women: prostibots, some for the export trade, some for domestic use. Slut machines, some called them. There was vague talk about them at his Consilience workplace among his fellow scooter repair guys, before Jocelyn toy-bayed him and Charmaine murdered him, and he ended up in the binful of knitted bears. Maybe all women should be robots, he thinks with a tinge of acid: the flesh-and-blood ones are way fucking out of control.

"It's Dutch, so who knows what it says exactly," says Kevin. "But something like 'Better than real,' " says Kevin.

"And is it?" says Stan. He's feeling more relaxed now—nobody seems to suspect him of not being Waldo—so he can risk a few offhand questions.

"The voice options are great," says Derek. "You can have silent or, like, moans and screams, even a few words: *more*, *harder*, like that."

"In my book it's not the same," says Gary, head on one side as if tasting some new foodstuff. "I didn't go for it that much, myself. It was too, you know, mechanical. But some guys prefer it. No worries if you fuck up."

"So to speak," says Tyler, and they all laugh.

"You need to fiddle with the settings," says Kevin, reaching over for the last onion ring. "It's not one size fits all. You guys want another round of beers? I'll get them."

"I vote yes," says Tyler. "And throw in some more of those wings."

"Maybe you just picked the wrong model," says Budge.

"I don't think it will ever replace the living and breathing," says Gary.

"They said that about e-books," says Kevin. "You can't stop progress."

"With the Platinum grade, they do breathe," says Derek. "In, out. I prefer that. With the ones that don't breathe, you sense there's something missing."

"Some have got heartbeats, too," says Kevin. "If you want to get fancy. That's the Platinum Plus."

"They should stick some kneepads into the kit, anyway," says Gary. "Mine got

stuck in high gear, skinned my knees, I damn near crippled myself, and I couldn't turn the damn thing off."

"You might like that feature in a real one," says Kevin. "No *turn-off* button."

"Trouble is, with some of the real ones, there's no *turn-on* button," says Tyler, and this time it's laughs all round.

"But you need to remind yourself they're not alive; they're that good," Derek says to Stan, once the rest have settled down. Of all of them, he seems the biggest booster of product quality.

"We should let old Waldo try it out, don't you think?" says Tyler. "We all did, first chance we had! Give him a test run? What about it, Waldo?"

"It's not officially allowed," says Gary. "Unless you've been assigned for it."

"But they turn a blind eye," says Tyler.

Stan gives what he hopes is a lascivious grin. "I'm game," he says.

"Bad boy," says Tyler lightly.

"So you don't mind pushing the boundaries," says Budge.

"Well, I ..." Stan says. Has he made a mistake, displayed criminal tendencies, put himself at risk?

"Okay, then," says Derek. "First the tour, then the test run."

They're all looking at him: smiling, but not laughing. There's something odd about those smiles, but Stan can't pin it down.



After they'd driven her back from the clinic and she'd crawled into bed, Charmaine kept as quiet as a mouse. She couldn't even pace the floor or wail, because Aurora from Human Resources had insisted on sleeping in the guest bedroom, right next to her own room. Someone needed to stay with Charmaine, said Aurora: considering the deplorable shock of the chicken facility tragedy, Charmaine might do some rash and ill-considered thing that Aurora was obviously dying to spell out.

"We wouldn't want to lose you, too," she said in her sugary, falsely considerate voice, the one she used to demote people. The square-toothed woman—who'd finally introduced herself as Jocelyn from Security—had backed Aurora up in an overly firm way. *Strongly advisable* was the phrase she used. Though, she added, Charmaine was free to make her own decisions.

Like heck I am, Charmaine thought. "Leave me the F alone!" she'd wanted to scream. But you didn't argue with Security. Pick your battles, her grandmother used to tell her when she was nine, and there was no point in getting into a tug-of-war over whether or not pushy Aurora, with her pulled-back fail of a facelift, was going to be allowed to rumple up Charmaine's neatly ironed floral sheets.

And muss up the clean towels, as well. And waste a rose-scented miniature guest

soap; though she and Stan never had any guests, because no one you'd known before could get into Consilience for a visit—you couldn't even phone them or e-mail them. But just thinking you might someday have a real guest, like an in-law or an old high school friend, people who you hoped wouldn't stay long, and they most likely hoped it too, but still, it was nice to catch up—just thinking about it was a comfort. She tried to see Aurora as that sort of a guest, instead of a spy in disguise; and that was when she finally went to sleep.



“Rise and shine,” says Aurora’s voice. Darn it if she isn’t barging in the door, carrying Charmaine’s tray with Charmaine’s teacup on it. “I’ve made you a wake-up tea. My goodness, you really did need that beauty sleep!”

“Why, what time is it?” says Charmaine groggily. She acts groggier than she is so Aurora will think she’s taken those pills. She did flush a couple of them down the toilet, because she wouldn’t put it past Aurora to count.

“It’s noon,” says Aurora, setting the teacup down on the nightstand. There’s nothing on that stand, none of the usual clutter—the nail file, the hand lotion, the lavender aromatherapy sachet pincushion—only the alarm clock and the tissue box. And Stan’s nightstand has been cleared off, as well. “Now, you just get yourself up, take your time, no hurry. I’ve fixed us brunch.” She smiles her tight, wrinkle-free smile.

What if it’s not her real face? thinks Charmaine. What if it’s only stuck on and there’s a giant cockroach or something behind it? What if I grabbed her by both of the ears and pulled: would the face pop off?

“Oh, thank you so much,” she says.



The brunch is laid out on the sunny-nook kitchen table: the eggs in the little hen egg cups Charmaine bought as a tribute to Stan’s chicken work, the coffee in the mugs with gnomes on them, a grumpy one for Stan and a happy one for Charmaine, though sometimes she’d switch them around for fun. Stan needed more fun in his life, she’d tell him. Though what she’d meant was that she needed more fun in her own life. Well, she’d gotten some. She’d gotten Max. Fun plus, for a while.

“Toast? Another egg?” says Aurora, who has taken full possession of the stovetop, the pots, the toaster. How has she known where to find everything in Charmaine’s

kitchen? A horde of folks has been trooping in and out of her house, it seems: checking up on her, taking away Stan's things, and lord knows what else. The place might as well be made of cellophane; and Charmaine too, because they want her to be transparent. Not that she's about to let them inside her head.

"More coffee?" says Aurora. Charmaine looks down at the mug: Aurora has given her the happy gnome. She feels tears trickling down her cheeks. Oh, no, not more crying; she really doesn't have the strength for it. Why had they wanted to kill Stan? He hadn't done anything, he wasn't a subversive element; unless he'd been hiding something from her. But he was so simple, so easy to read ... On the other hand, that's what he'd thought about her, and look how much she'd hidden from him.

Maybe he'd found out something about Positron, something really bad. Dangerous chemicals in the chickens, and everyone was eating them? Surely not; those chickens were organic. But maybe the chickens are part of some terrible experiment, and Stan discovered it and was going to warn everyone. Could that be it, the bad thing he'd done? The reason they wanted him dead? If so, he really was a hero, and she was proud of him.

Or maybe it was something about the procedure itself, such as who those people really were. The ones she'd been injecting were mostly men, young men: the criminal demographic, they said. But she wasn't the only one at Positron doing the procedure, so most likely there were women, as well. And maybe those people weren't subversive elements at all. Maybe they were like Stan—people who happened to find things out.

And what happened to the bodies, really? She'd never asked; she must have known even then that it would be crossing a line.

She wipes her nose on the napkin, a cloth one with a robin embroidered on it in tiny stitches. Aurora reaches across the sunny-nook table, pats her hand. "Never mind," she says. "It will be all right. Trust me. Now, finish your breakfast, and we'll go shopping."

"Shopping?" Charmaine almost shouts. "What in the heck for?"

"The funeral," says Aurora, in the mollifying, reasonable voice of an adult to a balky child. "It's tomorrow. You don't have a single stitch of black in your entire wardrobe."

"You've been going through my closet!" Charmaine says accusingly. "That's not your right; that closet is ..."

"It's my job," says Aurora, more strictly. "To help you get through this. You'll be the star feature, everyone will be looking at you. It would be disrespectful for you to wear ... well, pastel flowers."

She has a point, thinks Charmaine. "Okay," she says. "I'm sorry. I'm on edge."

"It's understandable," says Aurora. "Anyone would be the same, in your place."

There has never been anyone in my place, Charmaine thinks. My place is just too weird. And as for you, lady, don't say *understandable* to me, because what you understand is nothing. But she keeps that perception to herself.



After lunch is over, Stan gets the tour. Or Waldo gets the tour. Waldo, Waldo—drill it into your head, he tells himself. He hopes to fuck there's no other guy called Stan in this unit, because then he might make a slip. Someone would call his real name and his head would snap up, it would be a reflex, he wouldn't be able to stop himself.

Derek leads Stan and the rest of the team along a long hallway, blandly painted, blandly tiled. On the walls there are glossy photographs of fruit: a lemon, a pear, an apple. Round white-glass light fixtures. They turn a corner, turn another corner. No one teleported in here would have a clue where he was—what city, what country even. He'd just know he was somewhere in the twenty-first century. All generic materials.

“So, there's basically six divisions,” Derek is saying. “For the standard Economy-class models. Receiving, Assembly, Customization, Quality Control, Wardrobe and Accessories, and Shipping. Past that door you have Receiving, but we won't bother going through; there's nothing to see, it's just guys unloading boxes from the transport trucks.”

“How do the trucks get in?” asks Stan, keeping his voice neutral. “I never saw any big trucks driving through the streets of Consilience.” It's a scooter town; even cars are a rarity, reserved for Security and the top brass.

“They don't come through the town,” says Budge casually. “This place is an extension, built onto the back of Positron Prison. The back portal of Receiving opens onto the outside. 'Course, we don't let any of those truckers come in here. No information exchange, that's the policy—no gawkers, no leakers. As far as they know, they're delivering plumbing fixtures.”

Now, that's interesting, Stan thinks. An outside portal. How can he wangle a job in Receiving without appearing overly eager about it? If he gets fingered as a non-Waldo, he may have to bolt.

“Plumbing fixtures,” he says, with a chortle. “That's good.”

Budge grins happily.

“The boxes have only the basic parts,” says Kevin. “Made in China like everything else, but it doesn't pay to assemble them over there and ship them here. That would take up too much room.”

“Plus there would be breakage,” says Gary. “Too much breakage.”

“So they come in parts,” says Derek. “Arms, legs, torsos, basically the exoskeleton. Basic heads, though we do the customizing here. There's a lot of special orders. Some of the end users are very specific in their requirements.”

“Fetishists,” says Kevin.

“Stalkers,” says Tyler. “They'll get one made with the face of someone they're hot for but can't have, such as rock stars, or cheerleaders, or maybe their high school English teacher.”

“It can get sleazy,” says Budge. “We get some demand for female relatives. We even had a great-aunt once.”

“That was a gross-out,” says Kevin.

“Hey. Everyone’s different,” says Derek.

“But some are more different than others,” says Budge, and they all laugh.

“The info storage chips are already installed, and the voice elements, but we have to 3-D-print some of the neural connections,” says Gary.

“We put the skin on last,” says Tyler. “That’s a skilled custom job. It’s got sensors, it can actually *feel* you, in a way. With the more expensive line, it can get goose bumps. When you’re in contact, up close and personal, it’s really hard to tell the difference.”

“But after you’ve seen one of them being assembled, you can’t shake the knowledge,” says Budge. “You know it’s just an *it*.”

“They’ve done double-blind tests, though,” says Gary. “Real ones, and these. These had a 77 percent success rate.”

“They’re aiming for 100 percent,” says Kevin, “but no way they’ll ever get there.”

“No way,” Budge echoes. “You can’t program the little things. The unexpecteds.”

“Though there’s these settings on them,” says Kevin. “You can push RANDOM and get a surprise.”

“Yeah,” says Tyler. “She says, ‘Not tonight, I’ve got a headache.’ ”

“That’s no surprise,” says Kevin, and they laugh some more.

I need to come up with some jokes, Stan thinks. But not yet: they haven’t accepted me completely. They’ve reserved judgment.

“Up ahead we’re coming to Assembly,” says Derek. “It’s not that interesting either. Have a look, but we don’t need to go in. Remember car factories?”

“Who remembers those?” says Tyler. “Long gone.”

“Okay, movies of them. This guy does nothing but this, that guy does nothing but that. Specialized. Boring as hell. No latitude for error.”

“Get it wrong and they can have a spasm,” says Kevin. “Flail around. That’s not pretty.”

“Bits can come off,” says Gary.

“One guy got clamped. He was stuck like a rat in a trap for fifteen hours, only it was more like a gyroscope. It took an electrician and three digital guys to unplug him, and after that his dick was shaped like a corkscrew for the rest of his life,” says Derek.

They laugh again, looking at Stan to see if he’s believed this. “You’re a sicko,” Tyler says of Derek, affectionately.

“Think of the upside,” says Kevin. “No condoms. No pregnancy woes.”

“No animal was harmed in the testing of this product,” says Derek.

“Except Gary,” says Kevin. More chuckles. Don’t they think there’s anything wrong with this? Stan wonders. But he doesn’t want to say anything: it would draw attention.

* * *

“This is it, in here,” says Derek. “Assembly.” He uses his card key to open a double door, with a notice on it warning against dust and digital devices, these last to be turned firmly off, because, as the sign says, delicate electronic circuits are being activated.

Assembly lines is what Stan would expect to see, and that’s what he does see. Most of the work is being done by robotics—attaching one thing to another, robots making other robots—though there’s a scattering of human overseers. There are moving belts conveying thighs, hip joints, torsos; there are trays of hands, left and right. These body parts are man-made, they’re not corpse portions, but nonetheless the effect is ghoulish. Squint and you’re in a morgue, he thinks.

“How flammable are they?” he asks Derek. “The bodies.” It’s Derek who seems to have the authority. And the card key for the doors: Stan must take note of which pocket he keeps it in. He wonders what other doors that key can open.

“Flammable?” says Derek.

“Supposing a guy is smoking,” says Stan. “Like, a customer.”

“Oh, I don’t think they’ll be smoking,” says Tyler dismissively.

“Can’t walk and chew gum at the same time,” says Derek.

“Some guys like a smoke, though,” says Stan. “Afterwards. I used to smoke myself, before ... So what if? And can they add a few words, like ‘That was awesome?’”

“Good idea, but it’s not going to happen,” says Tyler. “The lower-tech models can’t make small talk.”

“These are the cheapest ones,” says Gary. “Language costs extra.”

“They can’t even pester you, like, ‘Did you lock the door?’ ‘Did you take the garbage out?’ All of that,” says Budge.

Stan is overcome with a wave of nostalgia: it smells like orange juice, like fireplaces, like leather slippers. Charmaine had once said things like that to him, in bed. He warms towards Budge: he, too, must have once led a normal life.



Black flatters me, thinks Charmaine, checking herself out in the downstairs bathroom mirror. Aurora had known where to take her shopping, and though black has never been her color, she’s not negative about the results. The black suit, the black hat, the blond hair—it’s like a white chocolate truffle with dark chocolate truffles all around it; or like, who was that? Marilyn Monroe in *Niagara*, in the scene right before she gets strangled, with the white scarf she should never have worn, because women in danger of being strangled should avoid any fashion accessories that tie around the neck. They’ve shown that movie a bunch of times on Positron TV, and Charmaine watched it every time. Sex in the movies used to be so much more sexy than it became after you could actually have sex in the movies. It was languorous and melting, with sighing and

surrender and half-closed eyes. Not just a lot of bouncy athletics.

Of course, she thinks, Marilyn's mouth was fuller than mine, and you could use very red, thick lipstick then. But we share that innocence, that surprised look, that expression of Red Riding Hood as the wolf on two legs steps out from behind a tree. *Oh! Goodness me!* Big doll eyes. Not that Marilyn's innocence was much in evidence in *Niagara*. But it was later.

Her own eyes in the mirror are slightly puffy, with faint dark semicircles under them. Alluring, or not? That would depend on a man's taste: whether he's aroused by fragility with a hint of spitfire underneath, or perhaps a suggestion of a punch in the eye. Stan wouldn't have liked it. Stan would have said, *What's wrong with you? Fall out of bed or what? Or else, Don't fucking look at me like that. Or else, Aw honey, what you need is a big hug. Depending on which phase of Stan she's remembering. Oh, Stan ...*

Stop that, she tells herself. Stan's gone.

She considers the black hat, a small round hat with a little brim—sort of like a schoolgirl hat—that Aurora said was just right for her. Should she really wear it? Aurora said yes, but is it necessary to wear a hat to a funeral? Everyone did, once; then hats disappeared. But now, inside Consilience, they're appearing again. Everything in this town is vaguely retro, which accounts for the large supply of black vintage items in the accessory shop. It's because the past is so much safer. Whatever's in it has already happened. It can't be changed; so, in a way, there's nothing to dread.

That must be why she once felt so safe inside this house, the house she still thinks of as hers. Hers and Stan's: their own warm cocoon, their shelter from the dangerous winds of the outside world, nestled inside the larger cocoon that was this town. First there are the town walls, like an outside shell; then, inside the walls, Consilience, like the soft white part of an egg. And inside Consilience is Positron Prison, the core, the heart, the meaning of it all.

And somewhere inside Positron, right now, is Stan. Or what used to be Stan. If only she hadn't ... What if, instead ... Maybe she herself was a kind of fatal woman, like Marilyn in *Niagara*, with invisible spiderwebs coming out of her in which men got entangled because they couldn't help it, and the spiders couldn't help it either, because it was their nature. Maybe she was doomed to be sticky, like chewing gum, or hair gel, or ...

Because look what she's done without meaning to. She's caused Stan's funeral, and now she has to go to it. But she can't reveal her guilt at the funeral, she can't cry and collapse and say, *It's all my fault*. She'll have to behave with dignity, because this funeral will be very solemn and pious and reverential, it will be the funeral of a hero, who died in the service of others. What the whole town believes, because it was on the TV, is that there was an electrical fire in the chicken facility, and Stan died to save his fellow workers.

And to save the chickens, of course. And he did save them: no chicken had perished. That fact has been emphasized in the news story as making Stan even more heroic than if he'd saved just people. Or maybe not more heroic, only more touching. Sort of like saving babies: chickens were little and helpless, too, though not so cute.

Nothing with a beak can be truly cute, in Charmaine's opinion. But why is she even thinking about Stan saving chickens? That fire was made up; it had not in any way happened.

Stop dithering, Charmaine, she tells herself. Get back to reality, whatever that will turn out to be.



The bell's chiming. She teeters down the hall on her black high heels, opens the front door. It's Aurora, who slipped out earlier to change into her funeral outfit. Behind her, waiting by the curb, is a long, dark car.

Aurora's wearing a Chanel-style suit, black with white piping: way too boxy for her figure, which is boxy anyway. Dump the shoulder pads, Charmaine finds herself thinking. The hat is a sort of modified shovel design that does nothing for her, but no hat could, on account of that unfortunate face job. It's like there's a hand pulling her hair back so her face is stretched like a small rubber bathing cap over a large bald head. Her eyes, for one thing, are now too far to the sides.

Long ago, when Charmaine was a little girl and *recession* was a dirty word and not a permanent fact of life, her grandmother had told her that no one should be called ugly. Instead, such people should be called unfortunate. It was just good manners. But the same grandmother had told her—grimly, years later, once things had gone bad in a really serious way—that good manners were for those who could afford them, and that if an elbow in the ribs for the person trying to shove you out of the food queue was what it took, then an elbow in the ribs was the new reality. So what was a young person to make of that?

Aurora smiles her unsettling smile. "How are you feeling now?" she says. She doesn't wait for an answer. "Bearing up, I hope! The suit looks perfect." Again she doesn't wait for an answer. She steps forward, and Charmaine steps back. Why does Aurora want to come in? Aren't they going to the funeral?

"Aren't we going to the funeral?" says Charmaine, in a voice that sounds—to herself—plaintive and disappointed, like a child that's been told it won't be taken to the circus after all.

"Of course we're going," says Aurora. "But we need to wait for a very special guest. He wanted to be here in person, to support you in your loss." She's holding her Positron cell phone, Charmaine sees now; she must have just made a call. "Oh, look, here he is now! Johnny on the spot!"

A second black car oozes down the street and draws up behind the first. So Aurora arranged to come first, to make sure that Charmaine is still holding together and not staggering around and raving; then she sent an all-clear signal on her phone, and here comes the mystery man.

It's Max. She knows it is. He's slipped away from that cold and controlling woman, the head in the box. He's snuck off, the way he used to, and very soon she'll be wrapped in his familiar arms. Nothing stands between them except Aurora—how to get rid of her?—and also the funeral, the one she has to go to. She and Max can just ... But what is she thinking? She needs to attend. But wait: Aurora can go to the funeral in her own car, and Charmaine and Max can take the second one, the one Max has just arrived in, and sink back into the luxurious upholstery, and then ... Because the funeral isn't real, Stan isn't actually there, he's dead, so it won't count as cheating.

No, Charmaine, she tells herself. Max can't be trusted, he's already shown that. You can't let yourself be swept away on a tidal wave of treacherous hormones.

But the man clambering awkwardly out of the second car isn't Max. It takes Charmaine a moment to identify him: it's Ed, the big cheese. The biggest and most powerful cheese in the whole Consilience complex. Now *that's* a surprise, and maybe not a good one: is he here to reprimand? But Aurora is beaming at her as if she's just won the lottery.

"He wanted to make the effort," she says. "It's a tribute to you."

Does Charmaine feel flattered? Yes, she does. This feeling is not a good thing morally, she knows that. She should be too distraught by the death of Stan to feel flattered about anything. But still.

She smiles uncertainly. It can be very appealing, uncertainty—a sort of modest, hesitant, virginal but guilty look, especially if not fake, and hers is not fake, because right now she's thinking, even as she smiles: *What in holy heck is this man doing here?*



Stan's getting the general idea, here at Possibilibots. Receiving and Assembly are straightforward enough. Now they're in Customization, which is a much larger space, and looks more complex. None of the workers here are robots: too much individualized detailing, says Tyler, because this is where they finish the heads. The hairstyling, the finer points of the features. The beards and mustaches, when required.

"The what?" says Stan, in slightly too loud a voice. "There are guy prostibots? Since when?"

Kevin shoots him a look. "Possibilibots is for everyone," he says.

Of course, thinks Stan. It's the age of tolerance. Stupid fucking me. Anything goes, out there in the so-called real world; though not inside Consilience, where the surface ambience is like a Doris Day film, relentlessly, smilingly, wholesomely hetero. Have they been eliminating gays all this time, or just not letting them in?

"Granted, most of the orders are for females," says Tyler. "Though that could change, but as yet there's not the market demand, so much."