

The Last Transplant

by
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Paul woke up on Monday morning and thought as he lay in his sleeping unit, *Oh that's right! I have the day off today! Thank Joe!*

He rolled over and looked out at the hundreds of other bodies asleep in their own single-body units, open at the ends to the rest of the Complex. He turned away and stared through the other end of his unit, at the great golden forest that grew just beyond the glassteel walls of the Complex. *I'm really quite lucky the Board approved my transfer*, he congratulated himself. His request had come through last cycle for a transfer to this row, facing the edge of one of the re-hybridized forests, and it seemed more like home to him than any unit since his very first Unit.

Outside the floor-to-ceiling window of the south wall, he watched the soft breezes tussle with the yellow-and-gold leaves high in the trees, the just-rising sun painting them even more golden than usual. He'd heard they were called *olms*, or *olm trees*, back when they grew naturally on Planet First, but they all died off. And then a few centuries ago, after the Cloning War, scientists were ordered to branch out in their application of new technology, and began to regrow some of the extinct species, elephants and birds and big cats, olm trees and marsh plants and *reduids*, the really big trees, the ones the Learners called the Grandfather Trees.

Damn Cloning War, Paul thought. It was all their fault that he couldn't sleep this morning. He tossed over onto his other side and gazed at the row upon row of sleeping forms, each snuggled into their body-sized cubicle, peacefully resting until the shift-alarm woke them up with invigorating pheromones. *But*, he decided quickly, *it's also due to the Cloning War that I have the day off today*, and his emotions balanced out on that account.

Paul was scheduled to be Idle today in order to make a trip down the 'Way, to visit the Regrowers. His thirtieth

cycle was coming up and he still had time to arrange his last transplant, before the age-mandated cutoff. *Thank Joe*, he thought again, *that the Watchers allow us so many transplants*. From the age of twelve on, you could ask for one transplant a cycle, and the Watchers paid the charge and gave it to you free, as long as you were a Worker in good standing. Some of the Workers Paul had known before would never ask for any transplant. *Against their beliefs or something*, Paul tried to recall their reasoning. But nearly everyone he knew got at least the one free transplant a cycle, and some had as many as three, if their credits were up to it.

But what to get? he pondered laying inside his unit. Paul looked out across the aisle at the other Workers, each of whom he knew by number, some of whom he even knew by name. They mostly opted for new fingers or knee joints, since those wore out faster when you worked on the Line, but Paul didn't have that problem. He'd been targeted for Worker Direction since his first test at cycle two, and he'd been assigned easier tasks than most because of it. Many of the male Workers elected to have their repro organs replaced, getting a different size and shape each cycle. Sometimes the females did that too, but not usually. Paul liked the one he had, and saw no reason to change it.

You could even get a head transplant. Three cycles ago, Paul had gotten a head transplant, but he'd already decided against getting another one. The operation was longer than most, almost an entire hour, and the retraining time afterwards was extensive. Sometimes you forgot the little things, like who your birth-Workers were, and where your first Unit was. So he'd get something else this time.

It would have to be something special, Paul knew. After you reached thirty, you were no longer eligible for free transplants, or any transplants at all, for that matter. For a while, the Watchers had allowed you to get a transplant in case of an emergency, but too many bizarre accidents in the Line changed the Watchers' minds. Now, no transplants after your thirtieth cycle. It was the Law.

So this is it, Paul decided. After this cycle, it would all be downline. Theoretical life expectancy was close to two-fifty these days, but with the pain and aggravation of aching joints, broken bones and the inevitable dilapidation of the mind, most quietly accepted the Special Dispensation option offered to every Worker. If you volunteered to give up your Worker number before your fortieth, the Overbranch would take your brain out and keep it artificially alive forever — or at least until the next Law. And the Watchers had ordered the Learners to create hook-ups so that the SpeDs, as they were called, could 'know' what was happening on the Planet First they had left behind.

So many Workers had opted for the SpeD plan that thousands of holding facilities had been built in the last quarter-cycle alone. Most were underground, out of the way of the dwindling above-ground space reserved for the best Workers, and of course, for the Watchers and the Learners. There wasn't much room for anyone else.

Paul believed he thought better Outside, among the olm trees, so he decided to take a walk, before the woods filled up with too many Idlers. He got up, slid out, climbed down the four sections of ladder to the floor of the Complex, acquired 'Clothing: Outside - day - mild weather' from the dispenser at the end of the row and put it on. *Thank Joe the shoes fit today*, he thought in his head. He ruminated on what his birth Workers had told him in hushed tones, that the Watchers could hear everything you said even if you whispered it, so that it was best to think some things in your head only, and that was what he did. But he also knew, from some of the products he had helped oversee in his cycles, that the Watchers could sometimes hear what you *think*. So he tried to put out as many thanks to the Supreme Joe as he could, whenever appropriate.

Walking quietly, respectful of the other Workers' need for sleep, he headed for the entrance to the Complex.

He stopped at the Contraband detectors, which already had a line this early in the morning. Most were Workers going on Line early, either to earn more credits or as punishment for some infraction of the Law. Only a few, Paul noted, were outfitted for the Outside.

Good, Paul thought. More trees for me.

Once through the detectors, he placed both hands palms-forward on the Identity Checkers, the last stop before exiting (or entering) the Complex. The number '1857181523-20824/1138' appeared in lights on the overhead display and a section that had been dark now blazed into color. Bars that indicated his honesty, his work habits, his mental stability, health, sexual perversity, loyalty to the Overbranch, all these and more flashed briefly up on the overhead for all to see. But finally, and more importantly, the pads around his hands also flashed green, allowing him to pass beyond to the Portal. Paul took a deep breath and approached the tall, featureless Portal. Though the Checkers were potentially embarrassing, this next part always made him queasy, which is why he only went Outside once a month or so, less often lately. The door appeared to be solid cera-steel, but Paul knew from experience that was not the case. With his breath caught in the back of his throat, he took a step forward into the Portal.

The first tingling began in his toes, ensconced in their Outside shoes, designed by the Learners to protect the feet from injury, or temperature loss, or attack by regrown animals. But the tingling got through. It always did.

Next, the tingling crawled up his leg, as he leaned into the Portal. The fingers in his right hand got it next, a tingling just like when you slept on part of your body too long in your unit. The tingling caught up to his wrist and elbow, and then pricked his nose and chin, and his brow and cheeks, and the edges of his ears and the tips of his hair. Paul had got stuck Outside once when the temperature dropped below freezing, a rare occurrence these days, and his skin had acquired the same feeling after too many hours in the Outside. This was like that too, only it wasn't just your exposed skin. It assaulted your whole body. Your eyes, the hair on the back of your neck, the soles of your feet, the insides of your ears, the pit of your stomach, all of your body flickered with that tingling electricity, more annoyance than pain, but it wouldn't stop, it licked at you, played with you, electrified you completely until it began to affect your mind, you couldn't stand it anymore, you thought you would go in—

Paul was Outside. He said a fictitious prayer of thanks to be Outside. Then the last fleeting wisps of electricity finally left his body alone, and he thanked Joe for real.

He released his breath and inhaled the sweet Outside air. *Ahhhh. Always worth the aggravation.* He stood just to the side of the Portal for a few minutes and allowed his body and his mind adjust to the 'real' world.

A plass-stone path wound down from the Portal, past a few olms to the edge of the 'Way and the Communibus depot. The designers of the Complex had known, through centuries of effort, that Workers worked best when they could view the Outside, but not see a means of travel. Travel always gave the Workers the idea that they'd rather be somewhere else, and all that transferring created too much cyberwork. So a Law was passed that the Portals would always be opaque and that vehicle ownership always be expensive. That fixed that. *But the Overbranch did a great job regrowing the Outside around the Complex,* Paul added hurriedly in his mind, in case the Watchers were listening.

He turned to the right and walked along a narrower path, over to where the pet rentals were. Paul selected a nice Martian pig, and showed the man at the booth the credit code on the back of his right hand. The attendant scanned it and waited while his holo-display called up Paul's record. Paul thought again about getting the new neural implant which would allow him instant purchases, but he decided he was too traditional for that. An old-fashioned tattooed bar

code was good enough for him.

He took the pig on an auto-leash and set out for a section of the olm trees where few people went. It would be out of sight of the complex and would seem more private. Few Idlers went there, he knew from past experience, preferring to stay instead within the more travelled areas, hoping that one of the Worker Directors like Paul would notice them and offer them a place on the Line. *That's the last thing I want today*, Paul realized, so he deliberately chose a more secluded spot.

The pig trotted happily exactly three and a half meters ahead of his toes, attached by the auto-leash to Paul's movements. It wasn't really a pig — a Law had banned them many years ago — but that was the closest equivalent in Planet First terms that the Learners had found for it. The Martian pig was seemingly impervious to cold and fairly resistant to drought and other stresses, so it made a good rental. The pig snuffled its snout along the leafy forest floor, looking for Joe knows what.

Paul headed downhill to the left, up across a small ridgeline and down the other side. Here, the Complex was almost a memory, faded but still existent in the back of Paul's mind. The wind came up and a light rain began to fall. Paul wondered whether he should activate the Outside coat's automatic warming device, and deploy the weather hood and mittens. He decided he would work his body hard today, let it do its own heating and weather resistance. And if any part failed, well then, that would make his decision for him.

A section of the Outside to the left of the path had been sown with wild grasses and hybridized weeds (ones that didn't spread from where they were placed). The resulting open space was called a *med-oh*, Paul recalled. There weren't too many of them, and after experiencing the incredible serenity of the close trees, Paul wondered why the Overbranch would put in an empty field. But his cycles on the Line had convinced him they did nothing without a reason, without a clear profit in mind when all was said and done. He passed through the med-oh and back over another ridge, marvelling at the ingenuity of the Overbranch.

The forest now grew closer together, as if Nature had intended a thicket on the down slope of the ridge. Paul knew in his head that the Learners were responsible for the layout and planning of all the Class-Three forests (at the Overbranch's direction), but he allowed part of his mind to maintain the mistaken belief that all this was 'natural.' The beautiful golden olms, the small bushes that grew in their shadow, the lumps of decaying stumps and moss-covered logs, even the small vines and trippers, all looked perfectly random, perfectly Natural. The path he had been on had long since disappeared and Paul now walked where few Workers or Idlers ever went these days.

He came upon a narrow wall of olms, blocking the view behind. Instantly, Paul desired to be on the other side. He made a *snick-snick* noise to the Martian pig, who lifted its snout and deciphered Paul's intention to head into the trees. With a contented grunt, the pig changed direction and headed into the thickets near the wall of trees. *Smart pig*, Paul thought.

The branches grew lower here and thicker, so Paul had to duck his head as he passed through the wall. It wasn't really a wall, and after he went past four or five older trees he saw they formed the outer layer of a ring. The olm trees had grown (or been planted) in a large circle around a lake, and they hemmed it in on all sides. Whether the lake itself was natural Paul couldn't tell, but natural or not, it served its purpose: diversion, peace, beauty. The lake was clear and pristine, all littering abolished by Law ages ago. The ring of trees made this site so secluded, so aloof, that you could imagine the rest of the world didn't exist, that you were completely alone.

That was probably what the female imagined, too.

She was laying in the tall grass by the edge of the little lake, her legs crossed underneath her on a blanket of old cloth, a blanket not heated or weather-protected at all. Her legs were crossed in a style Paul remembered from his two cycles of neural schooling as a *loattiss* position. She faced the lightly falling rain with her head up and her eyes closed, seemingly at peace.

Paul didn't know what to do. When he met females on the Line, they were usually subordinates that he treated as he treated every other worker, fairly but rather anonymously. He hadn't seen a female off-Line in so long that he didn't really know what to say. He wasn't even sure she wanted to be disturbed.

But the Martian pig solved that problem. He waddled his pink-skinned body over on its six legs and snuffled right behind her back. The female turned her head around suddenly and smiled when she recognized the animal.

"Well, hello there, little fellow. And what brings you out here?" She looked behind her at the edge of the trees and found the answer to her own question, when she noticed Paul standing there. "Hello to you, too," she said in a friendly fashion.

"Oh. Um. Hello there. Sorry to disturb you. I know how rare it is to have time Off."

The female smiled softly and turned her face back up to the light rain. "That's all right. I come out here almost every day, before my shift. I see you've brought Longfellow with you."

"Um, who?" Paul replied awkwardly. When she pointed without looking at the snuffling Martian pig now happily nosing around the lakeside, he knew who she meant. "Oh. I see. Longfellow, is it?"

"That's what I call him when I take him out. See? Longfellow? Longfellow?" She whistled twice at him and he stood up on his rear four legs and pivoted towards her, his blunt nose all aquiver. He leaped surprisingly high at her, but the auto-leash kept him the mandated three and a half meters away from Paul, and he dropped unhurt to the ground at that distance. But he bounced right up again and grunted in his Martian pig voice how pleased he was to see her.

"Well, you two seem to have a continuing relationship going here." Paul wished he knew the female's name, but he hesitated asking her. He walked a little closer, out of the trees and nearer the gravelly shore, ostensibly (he told himself) to give Longfellow enough room to approach his friend. But deep inside, Paul wanted to get close enough to see her clearly. From his spot in the trees, she seemed to be pretty enough, not artificially pretty, like some of those women who had had almost all of their important parts replaced with Externals, as the males he knew jokingly called them.

No, this female was different, he decided as he came closer. For one thing, she had kept her hair's original color, a soft red-brown that seemed so unique after all the ice-blues and sun-yellows of the females on the Line. Her nose seemed oddly large, until he realized she had chosen not to have it altered or shaped, as most people did. Her face was pleasant without screaming out for attention to notice its pleasantness, as so many did these days. But what struck him most of all about her was her calm demeanor, her placidness and peace of mind. *Maybe it's the spot*, Paul thought to himself as he gazed out at the lake, now softly bubbling with the falling raindrops. *No, it's her. Any other female I know, and most of the males, would have their hoods up and would have started back for the Complex.*

He coughed gently and hunkered down next to her. He picked up a small grey stone and tried tossing it nonchalantly across the flat lake, but his memory of skipping stones was vague at best, and he'd never really tried it before. His toss sailed out about five meters and dropped heavily into the water, leaving big rings behind.

The female laughed lightly, and Paul almost swooned when he heard her laugh. Her voice was delicate like a fine memory board, yet powerful like a Watcher's command. He couldn't stop his mouth from saying the words, "You have a lovely voice. Is it original?"

She laughed again, a trifle louder. "Excuse me? What?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. My name's Paul," he blurted out.

"I'm Lalenia," she replied, and finally opened her eyes. They were a haunting blue, dark and inviting, as deep as the lake beside them.

"The thing is, I'm scheduled to have my last transplant today, and I've been wondering what I should get. It's kind of been on my mind."

Lalenia smiled and her eyes squeezed tight as she looked Paul over. She shook her head and held her head at an angle as she said humorously, "Everything looks in good shape to me."

Paul glanced down at the grey stones by his feet, a sheepish smile spreading across his face. Some unasked section of his brain came up with the name *kimberlite* for the stone he held in his hand, an igneous rock of not uncommon value. He thought better of tossing it away and placed it instead in one of the pockets of his Outside jacket. He looked back up at Lalenia and was happy to notice she was still watching him.

"Well, the thing is, I hadn't really decided what to do. I thought if I came out here, with the olms, I could think better. Make a decision."

"Elms," she replied with her eyes still closed.

"Oh, I'm sorry — what?"

"Elms, they're called elm trees," she said patiently.

"Oh, I see." Paul tried out the word silently, to see how it rolled off his tongue. *Elms. Elm trees.* "I see. Eilllmmms. Good, very good."

"I'm so glad you approve," she said half-mockingly. Lalenia nodded her head, turned her face back to the drizzling sky and closed her eyes. "I only feel truly at peace here, along the water, by myself."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... um, we'll go now." Paul got up and *snick-snicked* to Longfellow, but the Martian pig was content to snuffle the thin grasses by Lalenia's feet and chose to remain. Paul was about ready to walk away and let the auto-leash drag the pig back with him, but Lalenia interceded.

"You don't have to leave, Paul. Here, sit a while." She scooted over on her blanket, now quite damp from the falling rain but conspicuously dry where she'd been sitting. She bent her legs away from the center of the blanket, which placed her body almost in the same spot in the middle. Paul cautiously approached and settled down, and Longfellow plopped down right between them.

"You don't have an Outside jacket," Paul commented, half to her, half to himself. "Aren't you cold?"

"No, not at all. I like the rain when the weather-sats allow it to fall like this, soft and silent. It's like taking a shower with real water."

An accompanying image of Paul and Lalenia showering together – with real water, not the chem-clean foam the Workers normally used – flashed through Paul's mind. It'd cost a month's credits for such a reality, but he'd have gladly paid it. Absorbed in the fantasy, he nodded and agreed with her.

She turned her head back and appraised him more fully. Somehow, Paul felt more at peace now, on the wet

blanket with Lalenia, than he had in as long as he could remember. She smiled again. “You don’t have your environment up, or your mittens on. Aren’t *you* cold?”

He smiled broadly back. “Not me. I come Outside every – almost every month,” he said, trying hard to be honest. Lalenia sensed his attempt and said, “More than most.”

“Yes, more than most. Anyway, I was half-hoping that by walking around in the woods, I’d discover if part of me wasn’t up to snuff, and I’d know what to have replaced.”

The wind whipped up a slight breeze and tossed Lalenia’s hair for her. “And what did you discover, Paul?”

It might have been ten seconds before he answered, or it might have been ten days. All Paul knew for sure was that during that interval, all he could do was stare at Lalenia and dream of running his hands through her damp hair, brushing that small drop from her left eyebrow, tasting the sky-water on her lips. Suddenly, he jumped to his feet and began backing away from the blanket. “I – I – I know, I know now what I need. I – you’ll be here? Tomorrow, before shift, I mean?”

She laughed once more, and the sound of it banished all doubts from Paul’s mind, countered any arguments that could have been raised from any other part of his body. “Yes, Paul, I’ll be here. And hey — bring Longfellow, okay?”

“Okay!” Paul said quickly, hoping this was a real agreement, something he could build the rest of the day, the rest of this cycle, the rest of his life upon. He turned and hurried away, almost forgetting the pig at the end of its leash. Longfellow jerked to his feet and flew after him, pulled more by its rented master’s compulsion than by its own movement. Paul waited for three agonizingly long heartbeats while the pig caught up to him, interpreted his intent and trotted carefully off in the direction of the Complex. Paul took four more steps into the trees before he shouted out again, louder, giddy like a child, “Okay!”

He could hardly sleep that night, after the long ride in the triple-decker Communitibus back from the Transplant office. He’d actually spent more time and effort trying to describe what he wanted to the doctors attending him, than they took in performing the operation. They gave him no guarantees on the outcome of the operation and openly hinted his was the first of its kind. He felt only a little sting of pain from the surgery itself after he woke from the hypno-stetic, and wondered if they had done anything at all for him.

Only time would tell, the doctors had said. *You’ll have to test it out to be certain.*

That was fine, Paul replied. He knew exactly how to test it.

He was awake long before the sun rose. The Law stated that after every transplant, the patient was allowed to test out the new item and determine if he or she were satisfied. If there was a problem, a switch in parts could only be done within one day of the operation. So the first twenty-four hours was crucial. The Workers who had chosen new knees or legs would try them out playing bodyball in the Recreation Centers. Those who had opted for fingers or hands would head for the Triview stations and challenge the most difficult hologames available. And for those who had settled for other body parts...well, there were always the Pleasure Zones.

But Paul’s was a unique case, and the doctors had no idea how he should try it out. Usually, the free transplant came with a predetermined amount of credits for testing the new portion, which is probably why so many Workers chose to get new repro organs. The doctors didn’t know what to recommend for testing Paul’s transplant, nor how many credits he should be issued for it.

That was okay, Paul told them. He had everything he needed to test it.

Unable to wait any longer, Paul finally slipped out of his unit and dressed for the Outside. He was so early, only twelve people were ahead of him at the Contraband Detectors, and none of them were heading outside. He checked the display at the Identity Checker that listed those who had accessed the Portal this morning, and found that only three Workers had gone Outside, and only one of them a female. Paul didn't have the clearance to call up the ID numbers or the names of the Outside venturers, but he didn't let that affect his enthusiasm.

For the first time that he could remember, he stepped towards the Portal without fear or trepidation. This time the tingling seemed to be in sync with the heightened emotions he carried inside, and he barely felt the electric spark that rolled along, over and through his body.

Once Outside, he hurried around the corner to the pet rental, but the early hour found the stall still closed and the operator nowhere in sight. Paul figured that'd be okay, that Lalenia would still be glad to see him, even without Longfellow in tow. He turned away and strode towards the rolling hills, heading for the hidden lake.

The doctors had told him what they thought he should expect, but since his was the first transplant of its kind, they weren't entirely sure what exactly would happen. They suggested he might first experience light-headedness, followed by weakness in the knees, possibly accompanied by chills. Or a fever. Or no change in body temperature at all. His face might flush, or it might be his hands. He could suffer a loss of hearing, or even an increase in hearing.

Paul decided, as seven doctors were locked in a heated debate, that they wouldn't be very helpful at all.

But as soon as Paul crested the first ridge and saw the wall of trees off in the twilit distance, he discovered for himself what the initial effects were. For his throat began to tighten, as if caught in a vise. Something clutched him there and refused to let go, held on for dear life and drew all his attention there. Then, as he descended the hill and vainly attempted to ignore the tightness in his throat, his hands began to feel clammy. He held his right palm up to his face and inspected it closely in the dim morning light, but saw no wetness there. He had taken three or four more steps before he realized his heart was pounding faster, threatening to rip right through the walls of his chest. But Paul kept walking, drawing closer with each step to his rendezvous with Lalenia.

I was right, Paul thought, *to have come out for that stroll yesterday*. It did help him decide what kind of transplant to get. And even if the doctors hadn't ever done a 'love' transplant before, they had certainly done something to him.

The most difficult part of his time at the Transplant office was getting the doctors to understand exactly what he wanted. He told them he wanted to feel 'love,' which was an emotion the Learners had little use for and therefore did not research. He had to tell the doctors three times that he did not want a new heart, which they so very much wanted to give him (they had received an unauthorized case of transplant hearts, and would have given him extra credits just to take one off their hands). No, Paul wanted that hard-to-describe part of the body that allowed you to fall deeply in love, head over heels in love. The doctors huddled for a long time, their heads bowed together, before they agreed on a combination surgery that would affect many different sections of the body. They warned Paul that it would be a difficult operation, complex and time-consuming. They made sure he'd be willing to put up with a half-hour's worth of surgery.

Paul thought to himself, as they prepped him for the thirty-minute operation, that he already felt something for Lalenia, but he wasn't sure it was love. And he wanted desperately to be sure. He'd heard about classified discs that contained stories of love from ages past, where men and women felt stronger emotions for each other than for their Lines or even for the Overbranch. But he didn't have the clearance to access such stories, and besides, those were probably

just rumors from daydreaming Idlers. But if it were possible, Paul would do it. After seeing Lalenia, he would do anything.

So the team of doctors went to work, replacing a section of the brain here, a spot of the neural connection here, adding some new nerve connectors here and here, a section of emotional translator currents here. They fiddled with his eye matriculators, readjusted his breathing regulators, manipulated his reason controllers. And after the thirty minutes had come and gone, they let him up off the table, smiled as a group, and made certain he signed a stack of release chips before they allowed him to leave.

A small scar at the back of his neck and two at the temples, already healing under the effects of the Nexosporin bioxidant, were all that remained of yesterday's transplant. Anyone who knew Paul, to look at him, would have thought him the same man as a day ago, or a year ago. But his insides were an entirely different matter.

He crossed the grassland under the brightening sky, stumbled over a small tuft of weeds that hadn't caught him yesterday, and worried. *Had the transplant been botched? Had the Learners made a mistake?* They'd tried to warn him they were breaking new ground here, that they couldn't guarantee anything. The wall of trees were closer now, but whether it was due to the near-dawn conditions or due to his transplant, the trees all looked fuzzy to him, indistinct and out of focus. The grass did too, and even the dark clouds overhead. The sound of his own footfalls sounded distant and muffled, while the sound of his heart raced in his ears. Maybe they'd gotten the connections crisscrossed in his brain, or forgot to reattach some of his higher neural functions.

Or maybe, just maybe, Paul thought, *this is what being in love really feels like.*

He ducked beneath the low olm branches (*elm branches*, he reminded himself to call them) and forced his way through the wall of trees. His heart was racing faster now, his eyes teary, his palms wet, his head spinning. He felt like he might collapse at any moment, yet he knew that as soon as he got through the trees and saw Lalenia, he'd be all right. He stumbled past the last few trees, glimpsed the water's edge and stopped.

She wasn't there. Lalenia wasn't anywhere in sight.

He felt like he would die.

Hurriedly, he sped left down the edge of the lake, then retraced his steps and went right, almost half way around the water, but she was definitely not there. *What happened?* His mind reeled off reply after reply. *Did she stand me up? Did she even intend to be here today, or was she just playing with me? What a terrible, awful thing to do!* *By Joe, if I ever catch her on the Line, I'll...*

Slowly, he got hold of himself. *It's too early. That's the only problem.* To be sure, it was still almost an hour before sunrise, and Paul had met Lalenia yesterday a good three or four hours after sunrise. He'd wait, right here with all the lake in sight, and she'd show up and they would talk. He'd tell her about his transplant. He might even suggest she get one too, so that she could feel for Paul what Paul felt for her.

An hour passed. Paul sat on the damp stones at the edge of the water, oblivious to the discomfort. The sun rose slowly above the trees behind him. Regrown squirrels and other forest animals appeared and tried to ignore Paul as they went about their daily, genetically-programmed routines. For his part, Paul did not even see them. Whether due to his new 'love' ability or not, he found he was capable of forgetting everything around him and concentrate entirely on one thing — when he would see Lalenia next.

Another hour passed. Another. And another. The sun rode high in the sky, and the thought crossed Paul's mind that if the transplant was unsatisfactory, he would have to start back for the Transplant office before too long.

The last Commibus was scheduled to leave three segments following Second Shift's downtime, so he'd have to decide pretty soon. He watched unconcerned as a remarkable blue and black bird dove out of the sky, speared a struggling fish in its sharp beak and climbed unsteadily back into the sky.

That's my heart, Paul thought. *She spotted it, circled, and plunged down onto me without a second thought.*

Two squirrels chattered away noisily in the branches above him, occasionally tossing down bits of shell. Paul ignored them, wondering if he should acquaint the misfortune of bumping into Lalenia with the accuracy of his transplant. The sun floated higher. A few delicate clouds floated by to briefly interrupt the warm sun, but they scudded by so quickly that once gone, they seemed never to have been there at all.

Finally, he got to his feet. He mused sullenly on the inappropriateness of the beautiful day with the dark mood he was feeling. *Better to have been under the gray, rain filled sky today,* he thought, *that was the backdrop of yesterday's unfortunate meeting.* He turned around slowly, regarded the empty trees before him and with downcast eyes, started back for the Complex.

The walk back took much longer than his previous energy-filled journey. He recalled the warning one of the doctors had given him just before he went under the hypno-stetic, that 'love' for those who were really in its grip, had always been said to bring as much unhappiness to its sufferers as it did happiness. That single thought bounced in front of Paul's eyes the entire trip back, until he found himself walking down the plass-stone path beside the pet rental booth. He observed Longfellow being handed over to a customer who had just paid to rent him. *Well, at least someone's going to be happy today.*

Then he noticed the reddish-brown hair of the woman who was renting the Martian pig.

"Lalenia!" he cried out. The woman turned her head about, and the smile on her lips melted Paul's anger and worry into nothing. Instantly his heart regained its worrisome palpitations, his palms regained their slickness, his knees their unusual weakness.

With Longfellow cradled to her chest in the crook of her arms, Lalenia bounded over to him. "Well my goodness, there you are! I was beginning to worry you'd never show up!" She feigned anger with him, but a section of Paul's mind told him she wasn't really angry, that her scolding was merely a cover for the feelings she felt for him but did not want to make public so soon.

"Me? What about you? I thought we had a — a meeting scheduled for today, down by the lake." He added crestfallen, "Didn't we?"

"Of course we did, you!" She smiled again, and the twinkle in her eyes eased all of Paul's pain better than any bioxidant ever could. "But I thought you'd be stopping by here first, to pick up Longfellow. I waited and I waited, and finally I got the idea to let Longfellow track you himself." She rubbed the little animal's pink and green belly and the pig squealed in delight. Paul wished she'd rub his belly like that.

"So... you've been waiting for me here, all this time?"

"Since a half-hour past sunrise."

"Well," Paul said, unsure whether to allow an apology interfere with his unexpected good mood. "I'm glad. I mean, not that I made you wait. But that you waited for me."

The she did something Paul had waited for since the moment they had met by the lake yesterday. She leaned over, pressed her body and Longfellow against his chest, and kissed him. Lightly, on the cheek, but it was as

searing a kiss as any Paul had experienced in his life. He vowed he would not pass out, but it wasn't easy. It took all of his strength to keep his legs from collapsing under him.

"You!" was all she said. She placed Longfellow on the ground and indicated the path towards the lake. The pig snorted three times in quick succession and trotted off that way, quite a distance ahead of Lalenia. Then she grabbed up Paul's dangling arm in both of hers and turned him to follow.

When the pig disappeared into the heavy undergrowth far ahead of them, Paul spoke up. "You don't have him on a leash?"

"No, of course not."

"Aren't you worried? Stray animals are against the Law."

"But he's not 'stray.' He's with us. And besides," she said, flinging her long hair around her shoulders and brushing it against Paul's, "he always comes back." She looked into Paul's eyes to see if he picked up on her meaning.

Warmed by the sun, at ease now with himself and the world, Paul strolled leisurely under the warm mid-day sun, without a care in his heart or a worry on his mind. He spoke to Lalenia in soft tones, sharing few words but buckets of emotion. She responded in kind, with a murmur here and a laugh of appreciation there. It was only when he mentioned his episode at the Transplant office that she stopped short.

"Oh, you didn't! Not for me!" She sounded truly offended, as if he had purchased a tin of gray-market food with a week's worth of credits.

"But I did! I thought... I wanted to be... I needed to be sure I would feel 'love' for you. I'm hoping," he hesitated longer before he got the next words out, "I'm hoping you'd consider becoming my consort." The term 'marriage' had not been recognized officially by the Overbranch for some time now, and even the term 'mate' had fallen into disuse. Now there were officially sanctioned partnerships, or 'consortiums,' consummated at the regional Overbranch office in each Complex.

It was a big step to take, and the sentence hung in the air between them for the time it took to walk four paces. Then Lalenia gave a small giggle and squeezed Paul's hand in hers. "Oh, Paul. I couldn't. I mean, I *could*, with you, but the transplant makes it all different." She glanced briefly into his eyes and looked quickly away. "You see, I'm saving myself for someone like me, who's never had one."

He stared at her original face, her too-large nose, her never-tweezed eyebrows, her freckled cheeks. His mouth opened but no words came out.

Lalenia looked up again into his eyes and smiled. "But that doesn't mean we can't be friends. And who knows? Maybe our friendship will develop into something more. Something special — if we give it time."

Time. Time with Lalenia. That's good enough for me. Paul's heart slowed down its manic pace, his hands lost some of their clamminess and his knees stopped most of their shaking, as the two of them strode off across the ridge in search of Longfellow the Martian pig, who had quite a lead on them.

In the incredibly long, dimly lit room, the lights on the display above one of the innumerable glass receptacles began to flash. The brain in its clean glass dome was active and setting off the electro-probes inserted all through it.

The Learner in the labcoat nearby remarked with casual interest, "Oh, look. 1138's dreaming again."

"Mmm, that's nice," another Learner replied indifferently. "Make sure that's deducted from his account."