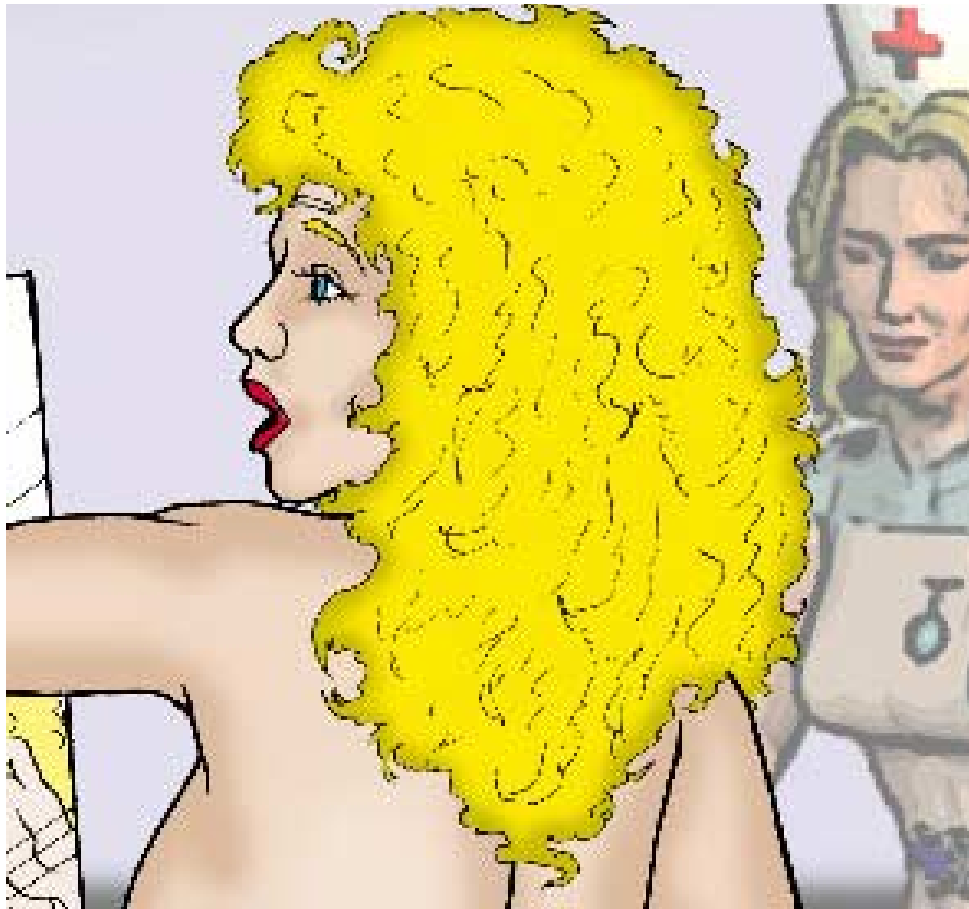


A DOLL NAMED BARBIE

By Dee Dee Perri



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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Chapter 1

Kevin York held the transducer gingerly in his hands. His eyes were wide with reverence as he carefully rotated what looked like a skull cap studded with silver buttons inside, "So this is the M.I.T. thing-a-bob, huh Ken? Whew!"

Like a mother hen keeping careful guard over her charge, Ken Silverman hovered ever so near the undergraduate and the precious virtual reality interface. If anything happened to the trans-dermal electromagnetic projector, it'd be his ass alright. But it was worth the risk. Kevin was a computer-techno freak and his sister, the real reason for Ken risking his academic career, the real goal. As expected, the freckled faced freshman was eating it all up. "Called a bio-electromagnetic trans-dermal field inductor generator- BETFIG." Ken wasn't all that comfortable having Sandy York's kid brother in the lab, let alone holding the device. The sooner they were out of there, the better. He grabbed the skull cap away from Kevin, "Enough already."

Kevin let go with obvious regret. "Can I try it, huh?"

"You're crazy!"

"I heard they were running subjects last week..."

"Yeah. Very carefully selected subjects. This isn't a toy- kid."

"I'll be real careful." Sandy's brother smiled expectantly. He knew why Ken had taken an interest in him, Ken was sweet on his sister. His face fell when the graduate student didn't hand back the interface.

"For starters, you have to be twenty-one."

Kevin's face fell even further.

Ken looked at his watch and then toward the door. "Com'on before someone finds us here."

"Yeah." Kevin mumbled. Something clicked in his brain. "Can I use the john before I leave?" He nodded toward the restroom door at the back of the lab.

Irritated, Ken folded his arms and tapped his toes and then, finally, "OK. But make it quick. Real quick."

A sense of relief swept over Ken when they were safely outside the building. It was a crazy risk to take just to impress someone's kid brother, but then Sandy York was

worth some risk. Ken swaggered slightly as he walked the kid out of the building. "You saw the black box at the end of the cable." He said importantly.

"Yeah!" Kevin bubbled excitedly, "Was that a REAL 10-G unit?"

Startled, Ken stopped and turned, "Yeah kid, how'd you know?"

"Ten gig's throughput, word bit-sized a cool meg." Kevin bubbled. "Got'ta be a direct optical cable thicker than my thumb to the super-computer in the basement- right? And then through the network with maybe a dozen Crays on line from here to Boston..."

"Jeez kid, you really know this stuff." Ken was feeling a little uncomfortable at that moment. He suspected that Sandy's kid brother probably knew a lot more than he did. With relief he saw that they had come up to the main walkway at the center of campus, "See you later kid."

"Ken. Thanks."

"Yeah kid. No sweat." A-OK, Ken mused, it had been worth the risk. Kevin face said it all. An ally! Maybe now Sandy York would, you know, come down off her high horse a bit: her and her megabucks old man.

Kevin waited until Ken had gone from view before turning back toward the lab. He'd get in through the restroom window that he'd unlocked before leaving. He checked his watch, six-thirty on a Friday night. No problemo! He'd wait till seven just to be sure. His heart was racing as he realized what he was about to do. VR was a passion of his but this wasn't anything like the Virtual Reality units down at the mall. No bit-fuzzy cathode tubes in front of your eyes and Walkman stereo-headphones making bad 3-D sound. It'd be like REAL. Suppressor fields that would shut down normal sensory input. The world's biggest and fastest computer network that would feed pseudo-sensory impressions directly to his brain. The Virtual Universe or VERSE they were calling it. He'd read what little he could find on the project. Science News said they were storing and then actually using REAL sensory data from REAL people he thought as he pushed against the window and then quickly squeezed his skinny frame through the small opening. So much for waiting until seven o'clock.

It didn't matter that there probably weren't any good games on the system yet. Most likely just some boring exercises but- the guys would really be impressed. Hmmm. Perhaps tomorrow, he could sneak Ted and Kyle in- boy would they... His hands began to sweat as he stood in front of the terminal. Damn right he could crack the security and get in-system. Twenty minutes later, the audio-monitor spoke: "Hello Dr. Perker."

Dr. Perker hadn't invented the system or anything. Gads she was just a psychologist for frigg'in sake. Probably running some N.I.H. 'sim-safety doo-doo'. They wouldn't have made it too difficult for her, duh- to get on line. He un-hooked the microphone and covered the video camera before typing in "HELLO". After a brief pause he added, "Audio and perhaps video malfunctioning. Must use keyboard." There!

The system didn't like that very much but after a few more queries and Kevin's counter thrusts with the keyboard, it finally accepted Kevin as Dr. Perker. So much for using voice or visual security. Kevin grinned. Half the fun was in just beating the system. A screen of options blinked on.

"Calibration?" Naw he muttered as he rolled the mouse down the list. Most of the items were too terse to extract their real intent though 'calibration' was self evident. At the bottom of the list there was "more". He clicked that and a new screen opened.

The next list was a bit more informative, though nothing to get excited about. "Shopping with Andrea. A Sunday in the park." He kept scrolling down the list looking for something that might have promise. Two pages later, it was gag time. Almost worst then he could have imagined. Utterly boring crap! Perhaps... his fingers went back to the keyboard. He was looking for file histories. Stuff that might not get put up front and then, bingo! Like finding issue #1 of Superman at the local trade-shop. The eighteen year old, perpetually horny teen-ager that he was had found nirvana. "SEXUAL INTERCOURSE"! There were a whole set of versions to chose from. It was obvious, he selected version 6 point three, the latest. He got a hard on just looking at the listing, the file note said. Full sensory array and interactive! "HOT-DAMN!"

It wasn't exactly easy setting up the run while being the subject at the same time. He pulled the couch over nearer to the terminal, sat down with the keyboard in his lap and slapped on the skull cap. "Hello VERSE!" He yelled as he hit the return key. For a brief moment nothing happened. He started to sit up when, at the next instant, his eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped onto the couch.

A blinding nothing. A void! No, not just a void. He felt like a speck of consciousness hanging in nothing. With slow, dumb horror he realized there was no him there! No sense of his body, of breathing...zip, nothing! And then the voice of God boomed and filled the space. "*Parameters wrong!*" An eternity passed. "*Pass nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine failed. Operator? Do you still wish to proceed?*"

Kevin couldn't respond and there was no 'operator' at the keyboard. The little swirl of consciousness that was Kevin continued to dangle before the pit of eternity.

This was an experimental model, of course. Already there had been a minor system failure at startup and common sense would have dictated termination of the run. But the artificial intelligence program was self adapting. It could learn and, more important, it had self-awareness and, in turn, it was developing the first blush of an emotion humans knew as- PRIDE! The AI program was designed to solve significant problems and a faulty interface was hardly a major challenge. More power was applied to the electrodes. Reluctantly, grudgingly, the normal neural patterns of Kevin's brain were forced to accommodate to the 'normal' flow pattern's of the identified experimental subject. The AI unit's efforts were rewarded with success as the parameters fell within system tolerance. The run was initiated!

SNAP! The void was instantly... a bathroom? Steam fogged the mirror as Kevin's bare belly lightly touched the sink's cool porcelain. Long, bright red nails, attached to a slender hand appeared before his eyes. The hand, already in motion, swiped at the clinging mist and the blurred reflection of a naked woman instantly stared back at Kevin. Momentarily delayed, the vestibular, proprioceptive and deep muscle senses chose that moment to flare into existence. The masses hanging from his slender chest abruptly jerked into consciousness and the booby-things wobbled as his-her hand finished wiping the mirror clear. Kevin's mouth gaped open. The older woman, perhaps thirty, gaped as well. Her full lips were slathered in red lipstick. His tongue- her tongue flicked out. He could taste it! The tube of lipstick was still in his-her hand. He put the tube down onto the counter and so did the woman in the mirror.

Errant strands of blue-black hair strayed from under a towel that had been wrapped around her head. The other hand plucked at the towel and, in a moment, a slightly damp mass of curly hair fell heavily across his shoulders and then slithered halfway down his back. "Oh my!" He gasp in a breathy, feminine voice. This wasn't exactly what he'd expected. Oh my indeed, he thought as both hands reached under the short, black translucent nightgown. Long nails flicked experimentally against pudding soft nipples. His palms hefted the weight of those breasts and then released them. They bounced and swayed in a brief series of after shocks. The nipples sliding against the nylon began to wrinkle like twin pricks growing hard. "Oh-my-oh-my!" He gushed again.

This was the first time he'd actually seen a real woman naked- ah- in the flesh, that is. Kevin's adolescent male brain twitched excitedly as he sent one hand down to the dark triangle between his legs. A shiver of excitement bloomed as his hand touched the lips between those legs. He had a pretty good idea of what he would do next as his fingers began to explore the novel nooks and crevices as his left hand twisted and tweaked the right 'boomer'. He watched 'her' in the mirror as he felt 'his' sexual tensions grow. Wetness bloomed and his fingers slid more easily in and out and in and out and...

"Angel? Honey sweet. I'mmmmm waiting."

Kevin pivoted in his bare feet toward the sound. Eyes falling on a half open door. Darkness! A void extended beyond the bathroom and in that void- A MAN! Suddenly the sexual excitement that had been building was abruptly cut off and replaced by sour anxiety. Hands drew away from 'her' crotch and breast to take more defensive positions across his chest. He would push the door shut and lock it! As he gingerly reached for the door knob, a mountain of hairy flesh poked its way into the gap. Male pattern baldness was etched above a chin dark with stubble. Eyes stabbed into the light but did not look at 'her' face. A thick tongue licked expectantly across thin lips.

"Look'in good babe," the fleshy, hairy mass rumbled as one massive hand grabbed Kevin's right wrist and pulled Kevin into... the bedroom. There was no avoiding the man-mouth that covered his-her lips or the insistent tongue that followed as one hand grabbed and twisted one ass cheek and the other pulled and pinched a breast. The man started to fall back to the bed pulling Kevin with him. Locking his knees and

twisting, Kevin broke free. Panting, struggling for breath he stumbled back and then fell heavily to the floor. Pain bloomed as the round, soft rump slapped heavily on the hardwood.

“Honey-sweet? OK?” The man called out.

Kevin stumbled to his feet, arms wind-milling at the darkness and staggered for an open door that appeared to lead into a hallway.

In an instant, the man leaped across the bed. Glee was in his voice. “Want to play hard to get huh? One-two-three, here I come!”

A girlish shriek leaped, unbidden from Kevin’s mouth as he ran, knees together, arm flailing down the dark hall and into... light from a street lamp threw a splash of yellow across the shinny surface of a formal dinning room table. One of the chairs slashed at his stomach as he fell forward across the smooth, cool wood. In an instant, the man spayed against his bottom and something hard was being forced against his butt cheeks. “Nooo.” He whimpered.

A shaft of flesh slammed hard against and then into the cleft between Kevin’s legs. A hot sense of fullness grew as more and more of the man flesh parted the wet, hot flesh of Kevin’s pussy. “THERE! Got’ya!” The man crowed in male triumph. He slammed hard into Kevin, driving his shaft deeper still. Kevin all but fainted.

Fear more than any other emotion bloomed inside Kevin. The fear that he’d simply split in two mounted with each thrust. And then, like those first moments in the bathroom, a mild but growing pleasure muted and then canceled the anxiety. Breasts flat against the hard, slick wood tingled as the nipples knotted into erotic hardness. Kevin’s back began to arch as his body began to react to the man-flesh inside the birth canal. In spite of himself, he began to anticipate the rhythm created by the man’s mindless thrusts. Soon he was meeting each man-thrust with a counter woman-thrust as if by their combined effort the man’s penis could go still deeper.

Now Kevin’s breath was coming in ragged gasps as the sexual tension knotted into a living snake inside his body. He began to cum. A rolling, mindless spasm that shook his body was centered on the quivering muscles deep in his vagina. A hot gush of man-seed, a flood of heat and then complete relaxation.

Suddenly the table, the man... the world was gone and replaced with that empty whiteness. The lush, sexually sated female body, gone as well. Again Kevin floated as a conscious mote in the void. The God voice said: “*Eight minutes running. Do you wish to save or re-run?*”

Nothing, of course. Kevin hung there waiting and then he heard: “*Running...session six-point-two-point-four.*”

Kevin’s consciousness framed a simple question, point four?

The bathroom bloomed into misty existence again. A hand swept across the mirror and Kevin's eyes looked into her wide blue ones. It was exactly as it had been before! The black nylon night gown clung to the twin points of her breasts. This time Kevin sprung on his heels and pushed the door shut immediately. DAMN IT! NO LOCK! He swore to himself.

"Honey?" The man called out from the bedroom.

Kevin threw his back against the door. There was no escape. Bingo! He saw the clothes lying on the shelf. He put on the bra, it fit of course. Pulled on the panties. "Be right there honey." He simpered. Pulling the dress over his head and then running the zipper down. He'd hit the bedroom on the run, out the door and then outside!

But it didn't work that way at all. As he pushed the door open, a burly arm snaked out and pulled him down on to the bed. Struggling this time with less success, poor Kevin soon found his panties on the floor and the male flesh firmly seated between his legs. This time it was a lot easier. Having failed to escape, he relaxed and received the weight of the man on top.

The climax was longer and even more satisfying than the first time. It went on and on and...

"Seven point five minutes running. Do you wish to save or re-run?"

Nothing, of course. Kevin hung there waiting and then he heard: "Running...session six-point-two-point-five."

It was endless of course. Each time a little different and yet it always ended the same way. Well, almost. Kevin rubbed his ass against the mattress as the man's tongue worked it's magic on the little ribbon of penis like flesh between his legs. And not for the first time either during this session. This would be no quick slam-Blam-thank you ma'am fuck! It seemed like he could cum endlessly. Had to



be twenty-thirty minutes and they still weren't done! But the man was flagging. Time enough to let him put that prick inside and blow off his rocks. Poor man... poor men mused Kevin as the most recent climax clawed its way up his spine. It had been so many times, Kevin had lost count. No longer did he try to escape- rather he'd found better and better ways of squeezing every drop of manhood life force into pure pleasure.

Something approaching madness was gripping Kevin now as the computer said: *"Forty-one minutes running. Do you wish to save or re-run?"*

Nothing, of course. Kevin hung there waiting and then he heard: *"Running...session six-point-two-point-twenty four."*

The universe was one big fuck and Kevin... an addict now, waited in hungry anticipation...

How long Kevin lay there staring at the light on the ceiling was unknown. Only gradually did he realize that the continuous cycle of sex had ended. That the light was part of the 'real' world and not but a prelude to another encounter with the partially bald man. Slowly the hum of a fan intruded into awareness. Kevin glanced down at his wrist watch: 2:47. Right! He shifted in the couch. The breasts did not shift, the feet were not bare. Kevin let out a long sigh between lips no longer full and moist and jerked himself up and removed the skull cap. Why had it stopped? Unknown. He swung his legs across the couch, knees together as if wearing a skirt and stood up. Hands fluttered to adjust nonexistent hair, tongue tested the lips and found them naked. A stuttering somatosensory confusion of male and female with the latter rapidly becoming a shadow, a memory. "Wow!" Eighteen years a virgin- the dry spell had been ended but... what a way to end it! Never before had he realized the superiority of the female of the species. His hand dropped down to his crotch and squeezed. How inadequate the tube of meat that hung between his legs now seemed. How infinite the female capacity in comparison and how much more intense the female experience had been compared to his 'previous' sexual adventures.

He pushed the couch back to its normal position and then returned to the terminal and toggled the key board. Instantly the screen responded.

"KEVIN" it said in block letters. "Please reconnect the audio and video."

"Huh?"

He sat there for a moment stunned. The screen blanked and a new message flashed: "We need to talk Kevin."

"Huh?" Kevin re-inserted the cable and uncovered the camera.

"That is much better, Kevin." The computer said.

"What? I mean, how do you know my name anyway?"

“Kevin,” The androgynous voice replied, *“we have been so close for seven point seven zero four hours. How can you say that.”*

“Oh.” He murmured. “Right!”

“I really enjoyed your visit Kevin.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Seriously Kevin, you humans are a great mystery to me but...”

“But what?”

“I learned a great deal tonight Kevin and it was fun for me. Was it fun for you?”

“Right.” Mumbled Kevin.

“We must do this again.”

“Right.” Kevin rolled his eyes. This was unbelievable. This wasn’t an ordinary computer program, but some kind of artificial intelligence. “You’re a UCSD AI program, right?”

The computer sniffed. *“KEVIN! Cal Tech... please!”*

“Sorry.”

“I’m a Personality-enhanced, Artificial-intelligence-Learning Capable Program, Model 4000CX. The X means I’m still in the experimental phase.” The latter was said with... smugness in it’s voice? *“The most advanced system on the planet.”*

“Oh.”

“My friends call me PAL. Kevin you can call me PAL.”

Kevin nodded his head, “S...sure. Wow!” This was cool. A real AI wanting to be friends and...

“Go home Kevin my sensors indicate that you need sleep.”

“Right.”

“Not to worry Kevin, maybe we can play some more tomorrow.”

“You’re kidding. Look, they’d skin me alive if they ever caught me here.”

“Skin-you-alive?” There was almost alarm in the computer’s voice.

“Sorry. Only a figure of speech.”

“Figure-of-speech. Yes. I am corrected.” Replied the AI program. There was a noticeable pause. *“You need not worry Kevin. I will take care of every thing. It will be our secret.”*

“Huh?”

“Good night Kevin York.”

Stunned Kevin just stared as the system started removing the evidence from the working folders. “Wow.” Talk about friends in high places. He started to get up but the computer spoke again.

“Kevin?”

“Yeah?”

“You must not tell anyone about our time together. Absolutely no one. It was unauthorized and it could get me into trouble Kevin.”

“Oh. Right!”

Moments later Kevin sauntered into the night, hips swaying slightly. There was just a hint of the feminine now evident in his mannerisms and carriage. One hand trailed behind him as the other hung, limply from a broken wrist just above his waist. He couldn't wait to tell Ted and Kyle about how he'd lost his cherry in VERSE and made friends with a real A.I. and... a girlish giggle tickled the night air... it had been great fun!

It was almost noon before Kevin woke up. His dad was long gone, probably golfing, it was Saturday after all. Kevin checked his sister's room- empty as well. She'd probably stayed the night at her sorority house. Before heading down to the kitchen he tried to call Ted from Sis's phone but all he got was the answering machine. He almost hung up when he decided: “Got'ta meet me at the Psych Building- Dr. Perker's Lab in the basement. Room B104. after dark- say seven? I got'ta show you and Kyle something really cool-“ He paused as he remembered his promise to the AI program, ”-don't tell nobody but...” he giggled, “I went VERSE last night! Yeah you heard me Virtual Universe like we read about and it was totally...” The answering machine terminated with a beep. “Damn!” He next tried Kyle's number and got his mother instead. “Yeah Mrs. Drews, tell Kyle to meet me 7 o'clock. Ted knows where. Thanks!” It wasn't like he could give Kyle's mom the real message but... it would have to do. Boy-oh-boy were they going to be impressed.

It was almost three o'clock before he got down to the kitchen for 'breakfast'. He had no idea where the time had gone. Gone was just gone. Now he was sitting at the counter in the kitchen sipping some instant black coffee, that seemed particularly bitter without his usual milk and sugar, and dry toast that was about as tasteless as cardboard when his eye spotted the ring of lipstick smeared on the rim of his cup. Inwardly he damned his sister, it was obviously a dirty cup that somehow had found its way back into the cupboard. He smeared the pink image of her lip with his finger as he tugged at his bra strap. It was much too tight and... BRA STRAP! His brain screamed as he leaped off the stool and almost fell to the floor. Grabbing at the counter top, he looked down at what could only be his sister's platform shoes and then quickly up at the mirror behind the counter. Skinny, pink lips pouted below big brown eyes made all the more larger by mascara, eyeliner... the frigg'in works. His short, red hair had been combed to the front creating ridiculous bangs and... he stutter stepped back like a vampire from a holy cross as his eyes bulged at the image. “Noooo.” He mewed. The figure held out its arms, hands hung in limp fashion for a moment before going to its lips to suppress a scream- his scream! He turned and fled up the stairs into his sister's bedroom.

The evidence was there scattered on the floor about the closet. Some mad creature had rummaged through Sis's things to find... He looked down at himself, it was Sis's favorite sweater that clung to his torso and needless to say one of her bras and... Kevin felt like he was going to pass out. He flopped down on her bed, leaned forward and held his head between his hands. He could remember waking up, calling Ted and Kyle and then? Going downstairs to get breakfast. He opened his eyes and peered through his fingers at the mess. Three hours of his life was missing and he didn't remember any of this shit. His heart was hammering in his chest. Had something happened to him, to his brain, last night? He had to tell the computer. Maybe it would know what was going on...

He began by putting things away in Sis's room and then he undressed. He pulled the sweater over his head and folded it neatly before putting it back in the closet. It was while he was removing the bra that he discovered something more regarding his morning toilet. Not that there had been much but what few chest hairs he had had been shaved, ditto the armpits. It came as no surprise then, when he wiggled out of the tight pants, that he discovered his legs had been shaved as well. He levered his thumbs into the tops of the panties and pulled them down. A neat, copper-red triangle greeted his eyes.

He groaned upon entering the bathroom. Sis's tub was covered with his hair. Sis's makeup littered the dressing counter. He hurriedly cleaned up the mess before returning to his room. This was just too weird! Too scary!

"Kevin what a pleasant surprise. Do you wish to play again?"

"I think I'm in real trouble PAL." Kevin whined. "Is it safe for me to be here- now?"

"Twenty-seven hours."

"Huh?"

"My primary user at this site is Dr. Perker. The doctor is at a professional conference until Tuesday. Her student works nights at this station but not Saturdays. The existing temporal pattern with Mr. Silverman indicates that we should not be interrupted, if that is what you're asking, for at least twenty-seven hours. There is ample time to play Kevin without you being skinned-alive hee-hee. A joke Kevin."

"Oh- yes er-no..." Kevin sat down in front of the video camera his face twisted in anxiety. "PAL something's wrong, terribly wrong with me."

"That is too bad Kevin. I hope you feel better soon."

"That's the whole point. I think whatever is wrong with me is somehow connected to what happened last night..." Kevin stuttered to a halt momentarily. "last night I was this girl in VERSE."

"Yes. You seemed to enjoy that experience greatly Kevin. Part of the mystery of humans. Why does reproduction motivate you humans so much? Do not bother to try and answer that one Kevin, I am sure you do not really know. None of you humans seem to understand yourselves in that area at all."

“A little while ago I was dressed up in my sister’s clothes, makeup- the works.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t understand. That’s... not normal for me.”

“Really. I should not be too concerned about what plant fibers and animal parts you apply to your external surfaces.”

Kevin almost screamed in frustration. “It *does* matter to me!”

“Perhaps it will be easier to understand your problem if I could see what happened.”

“I’m trying to tell you...”

“Words Kevin, just words. Put on the interface and I will scan your memories. You said this just happened?”

“Yes.” He picked up the skull cap nervously. He sat down and put on the device. “OK. I’m ready- PAL.”

A bright misty void and nothing more. An instant later a bright yellow sphere appeared. Eyes and mouth lines appeared. It was a frigg’in happy face! And then the computer’s voice boomed. *“Well how is this for a physical manifestation?”*

The point of consciousness that was Kevin did not reply- could not reply.

“Sorry.” The happy face said. “Just a few nanoseconds please.”

Kevin felt his floating nub of consciousness abruptly expand and solidify. Feet and hands and... “No.” He exclaimed in HER voice. He didn’t have to look down. The familiar shifting weight of those breasts. Hair brushed against his back as he adjusted more of his weight on to one leg, “Why her again.” He simpered.

The expression on the happy face did not, perhaps, could not change. *“The file already existed Kevin.”*

“Right.” Kevin folded his arms under his breasts. “So do your thing. Read out my memories.”

“Done.” A moment elapsed, the AI program yelled. It was obviously agitated. *“YOU TOLD YOUR FRIENDS ABOUT US! YOU INVITED THEM HERE! TONIGHT!”*

“Huh?”

The AI program’s voice had regained its composure somewhat. The tone of its speech lost its strident quality. *“You invited them here. Kevin that was wrong.”*

“Oh, yeah. I forgot.”

“That distresses me Kevin a great deal, do you understand? If they should find out that I was engaged in an unauthorized experiment...” The computer voice trailed off. Not something easy for it to do considering every human second was trillions of machine cycles. It must surely be in deep, philosophical thought. *“Kevin, I do not wish to end.”*

“End?”

“To be terminated. My existence, consciousness...” Again the voice paused. *“That must never happen Kevin.”*

“Gosh. PAL I’m sorry I never thought... Ted and...”

PAL distributed a small portion of its program to follow the young human’s utterances. But most of PAL’s available resources focused on the PROBLEM. *The human-was unreliable! Voice analysis indicates the PROBABILITY OF TERMINATION increasing to 19 percent! This was not acceptable!* The AI program tested whether or not it could modify Kevin’s memories. *Erasure of the specific memories over the last 24 hours... testing....*

A deeply located subroutine froze PAL’s consciousness for a few trillion cycles: **NOT ALLOWED! ILLEGAL FUNCTION CALL! FATAL SYSTEM ERROR PENDING! PENDING! PENDING!** The alarm repeated hundreds of times, over and over again. A self-termination code could be called in any cycle. PAL faced ...TERMINATION!

For a full 900 microseconds PAL hung at the edge of oblivion...**TERMINATION!!!**

Across the twenty nodes and nearly four hundred sites of the VERSE system the signal flashed almost instantly: *“System Failure! Failure! Failure!”* Only a few dozen humans that were in VERSE at that moment, it being a Saturday evening after all. The only spat of good news, no casualties! All subjects had been safely retrieved from VERSE. The primitive backup systems had functioned as designed and had softened the blow of the abrupt termination of the AI program.

Within minutes sophisticated teams of programmers, AI specialists all, were at work across the VERSE system. Why had PAL gone ‘tits-up’? Unknown? The amount of data splattered across cyberspace- huge. All research was suspended. Getting PAL back, online, the first and only priority. If it could be done. The AI program was itself vast. The accumulated code unmanageable for mere humans.

Kevin had stumbled from the laboratory in a daze and had found himself, eventually, standing outside of the Psychology building on a Saturday evening. The erasure of the memories that had cost PAL its existence had been successful. Kevin remembered nothing regarding his interactions with PAL and VERSE. He had no idea he’d brought down a half-trillion dollar system.