

GUY'S BOX

by Joseph Corrado

When the mon announced wakeup, Guy bounded from bed and remembered first that it was the first day of his first real job. In a blur of excitement, he showered, shaved, dressed while eating a Mama's Real Breakfast Bun, and folded up his bed. Slowly, with excitement laced with anxiety, Guy walked over to the corner where his box was installed. His hand groping like a suspicious tentacle, he swung out his coaster chair, settled into the chair's warm hug, and put on the glowing halo.

"Good morning, Guy," a cheerful mon said. "Do you want to go to the office?"

"For sure," Guy said with a muster of confidence.

"Very good. You are clocking in at 7:11. Your punctuality is always noted."

Waiting for the office to resolve, Guy shut his eyes and gripped the chair's handholds to steady himself. He remembered that moment—during his early teens—just before the curtain went up that first night of *Tartuffe* at the academy. He was playing Damis, the somewhat impetuous son of Orgon. Then his mind's eye fell on the final curtain call for the following year's production of *Everyman*. He was Good Deeds, dressed in a flowing white cloak with a gold cord and sparkling tassels—the only character to accompany *Everyman* to heaven. He heard the thunder of the applause, the whistles. He saw again the audience on their feet, their hands clapping high for his mature performance. Why did theater fascinate him then? Was it just the applause and bravos?

Guy remembered about how he had been dissuaded from following an acting career. He remembered his meager Synchronicity scores in his Employability Profiles—scores too low for a high probability of success as an artist or theatrical performer. Then too, as Guy and some of his friends had quickly discovered, O-jobs paid a lot better than live in-your-face gigs, not to mention that there were a lot more of them and they mostly lasted longer.

"Hello Guy, good to see you in the office so early."

Guy's eyes snapped open to see his new office. In a rear corner, the mon was standing erect, aloof, his bald head bent over his clipboard. In the middle of the room, his new boss, Bob Hartman, was sitting at a carved oak desk. He had an athletic build and a handsome brown chiseled face and an engaging smile that broadcasted perfect teeth. Guy's boss bounded from his chair, leaned in toward Guy, and stretched out his hand for a shake. Guy extended his hand into the box and immediately felt the telltale itch that comes when there is no real-time connection. Guy flushed, embarrassed that he had been temporarily fooled by the very high-res and energetic, but offline Hartman avatar.

"Ho, ho," the figure chuckled as it reached out to clap Guy on the shoulder in a gesture of virtually shared humor. "Bob Hartman is not online now. But, wait just a moment; I'll adjust the mode indicator—there—to make it more obvious." In a blink, the mode tool on Guy's project bench brightened. "See it now Guy? There, in the lower-left corner?" the Hartman continued in a self-satisfied air, "I am only Bob Hartman's offline...uh...understudy...ha, ha."

Guy had already learned the basics about detecting different classes and modes of sims. Studying Perfunctory Courtesy Widget algorithms and other standard net automata had been part of getting certified as a Content Packager. But the boxes at school had been nothing like this. This was 4-D, cut-edge, max class.

"Welcome to the Factoids Group in the Infotopia Engineering Division of Globe4U," his boss avatar beamed as it sat down in a large chair upholstered with fine needlepoint. Guy noted the resemblance to the "big chair" in his family's living room—the one his *grand mère* had sent from her old family home in Quebec. The Hartman started doing biz-baz so Guy let his imagination drift to a scene with his mother sitting in that grand chair as if on a throne, sorting through flimsies, hunting for food coupons and new recipes.

Now, with his first full-time job, and more than that, a Provisional Labor Contract with Globe4U/Factoids, Guy had entered a whole new world. For the first time in his life, he now had his own space—his own apartment with a 4-D net link box and personalized halo. He had tried to describe this world to his parents but he sensed only limited success in that effort. Basic mobile phone functions and apps and lame PC stuff was about as far as he had seen them venture.

With an energetic jump, the Hartman stood up and the offline mode glow disappeared like a silver will-o'-the-wisp. "Well hey there Guy, welcome to your max future here at Factoid Div."

"Than...th...thanks," Guy stammered with the sudden arrival of his boss avatar with an online glow.

"Well carry on...you are doing pretty max for a beginning guy." The Hartman sat down in the finely upholstered desk chair, bent his head in a sign of new task focus, and abruptly ignored Guy.

For just a swiftly wilting moment, Guy was very aware that he was swimming in a strong current, a compelling sensorium that was sweeping him along in a merging with the box. Then he was caught in an unconscious undertow of planning memos and swirling trend graphs and headline blats and changeling shapes and shifting colors and tonal eddies that flowed through his halo directly to his prefrontal cortex. Then came rapids of buoyant data containers and bobbing project widgets that compelled focus. Time evaporated in the thrilling, unpredictable rush.

"Total work time this session is nine hours at the tone," the mon droned as it turned and flashed a brief smile at Guy. Then a soothing cooing filled the box. With a military bearing, the mon marched through a rear door marked by an Exit sign that now pulsated with intermittent promos for the day's specials down in Mama's Real Kitchen.

Guy's boss shifted position in his big armchair and looked up at Guy with a hint of a smile. "Guy, your total work time today is above average. Good job! You have already earned 307 GlobeCard creds—including 100 first day bonus creds. Plus, your card will automatically compute a 10% new-hire discount...all this week. So, now's a perfect time for some leisure. Treat yourself to a special supper...maybe in Mama's Kitchen. It's on us."

The Hartman stood up in a surprising leap to his virtual feet. "Globe4U is very satisfied with your performance today Guy." The Hartman extended its hand to shake. This time, Guy knew there was indeed a synchronous Bob Hartman ID guiding the avatar, so he reached out his hand and instantly felt the pleasant thrum in the box. The Hartman settled himself back into his chair and he turned his head away as if attending to some out-of-box

scene. “Remember Guy, there’s a max future for you at Globe4U.” he said in a quiet, confidential tone that faded as the mode glow shifted to offline.

Guy quickly removed his halo and slowly lifted his stiff limbs from his form-fitting chair. He put on his best summer shirt, locked down his apartment, and sauntered down the ramps and tunnels to Mama’s Real Kitchen—a sprawling food emporium and lounge on the ground level of the Globe4U campus. He ordered a big meal of Mama’s Real Hot Potato Stew, a dozen Mama’s Real Ookies, and Car-Pay-DM tea—all compliments of Globe4U. He spread out his food containers at an empty table with a view that included the garden hub of the complex. From this vantage point, Guy observed the denizens of this new world as he ate. He watched as they hurried around the sprawling, well-manicured park filled with turrets and ramparts of employee apartments—a hive of workers flying around the globe in personalized 4-D boxes. Now, he too was part of this sophisticated club of certified professionals—a class of humans that, as Guy was coming to see it, had fewer atavistic tendencies than most street people. He ate all the cookies, left Mama's, wandered through the hub gardens with a relaxed, confident strut. Before the sun had completely set, he returned to his apartment in a stupor of contentment. He swung down his bed, climbed in, and fell fast asleep in a conviction that, in all respects, it had been a perfect first day on the job and perhaps his max best day ever.

The following morning, Guy awoke in a mist of memories of a new and exciting adventure joined. Then he remembered that his boss had cautioned him yesterday about not having an adequate breakfast before going into the office—something about electrolyte depletion. So he heated a full pan of Mama’s Real Hot Buns & Jelly. In his early morning fog, Guy stared absent-mindedly at the glossy Mama’s package as it gradually bloated and then vented steam. It was not clear what “Homemade Style” meant in his current circumstances. He tried to superimpose an image of his old shabby East Palo Alto home over a vista of Globe4U conveyor lines that carried extruded substances to various bot stations for inspection and packaging. The scale was all wrong so he zoomed in for a close up of a line of buns leaving an oven. There was a packaging bot scooping a cluster of buns and sealing them in a wrapper that clearly indicated: “Just Enough Size - Oven-Ready – Enjoy Hot or Cold.” Then Guy’s oven announced that his buns were “done—real hot.”

Still licking warm jelly from his fingers, Guy settled into his chair and carefully positioned his halo, tilting it back and forth until he heard the balance tone. The box resolved as massive doors swung open onto a Great Hall attended by more sturdy doors and lofty archways.

“Good morning, Guy,” a perky mon said. Do you want to use the office?”

“Yeah, for sure,” Guy said.

“Very good. You are clocking in at 7:17. Your punctuality is always noted.”

Guy’s vivid daydreams of what life beyond the barrio, after graduating school, would be like had not prepared him for the brilliance and intensity and pace and thrill of the box. The almost continuous visual novelty slaved his visual cortex. In the foreground, he watched the list windows louver open and shut followed by the slowly morphing data aggregators that bloomed from them. Behind that, the Hartman was in his chair reading a report—something he could apparently do intently for hours until interrupted. And behind his boss, in the back corner, the mon huddled over something with his back to him, his head slowly nodding and tilting as if in conversation.

With a wind-chime tone, the front door of the office swung open and a young, poised, female avatar in online mode moseyed in. “Oh, hi Guy. I’m Alice, Bob’s Personal Assistant.” Smiling pleasantly, the Alice walked directly over to him, and gracefully extended a delicate hand. “It is *such* a pleasure to welcome you to Factoids Group,” she said as the box hum surged.

“I’m uh... it’s max to be here and meet you...and uh...” Guy groped for something clever or impressive to say next.

Alice nodded, and then quickly turned and retrieved a short stack of blooming data containers. “So, what brings you here to our little neck of the woods? You must be pretty smart to have gotten a job here as a CCP,” she said turning to face Guy.

“Oh... I groove being a Content Packager...it was easy to learn...I guess I just have a max knack for it.”

Alice regarded him with a subtle smile that was now compromised by a blinking moiré effect, a digital artifact in her left pupil. Was she winking at him? “Well, you just let me

know if you have any questions about our routine ops here or if you need an extra hand. No need to bother Bob unless it's not routine!" Alice said with a cheerful helpful tone that suddenly reminded Guy of his mother at a party somewhere when he was a boy.

"Well, uh, I did have a question...umm..." Guy began. "I...so I'm curious about the design on Mr. Hartman's chair."

"Oh, what an interesting question," Alice said. She sat down on a stool and stared intently toward the Hartman sitting stone stiff reading a report. "What about the chair's design interests you?" Alice asked in a sudden tone of analytic detachment.

"I was wondering about the needlepoint design," Guy said. "It looks a lot like my mother's big chair...the one she had when I was growing up."

Alice turned toward Guy and smiled, this time without the tic. "Ahhh...it *is* quite a chair."

"Yeah, it was my favorite because it was the softest and warmest chair to curl up in." Guy was surprised to find himself talking so personally to someone he had not known five minutes earlier, and who was merely virtually present. But it was online mode and the Alice was now signaling that it was in full listening mode too. So Guy told her the story of the chair. How it had been sent one Christmas by Grandma Foucault, all the way from Quebec. How it had seemingly magically helped his mother recover from an illness that had lingered all through the fall. How his father had built a side table and a small book cabinet to accompany the chair. And how they put the chair with the intricate needlepoint and the table and the family's best lamp and the book cabinet in the corner of the living room that had the best window. It had been Guy's favorite spot for talking and texting with his friends late at night—if his mother wasn't using it.

His mother had not used the "big chair" often. Most of the time she had been busy on the phone or on the old PC that his father had set up in a kitchen alcove. That was the office for Sanchez Plumbing 24/7 Leak Repair. It was a modest business that his father had started and steadily built with an old friend who had also managed to escape from the *maquiladoras* in Ciudad Juarez. Eventually migrating to the "wrong side of the tracks" from Stanford University, Julio Sanchez had met Isabel Foucault at an ESL evening class that she was teaching. They fell in love. Soon came Guy, their only child.

But *le petit prince*, as his mother sometimes called him, had not grown up with any special advantages or privileged circumstances. He lived in a nexus of chronic borderline poverty; of years when his mother's fibromyalgia was a daily torment; of seemingly endless nights after supper when he studied at the kitchen table by a solitary NRG Saver bulb and the dim glow of the old Windows XP screen; and of black spells when his father shouted Spanish obscenities and smelled like Tequila.

"I don't know how many vids I watched in that chair...on sick days and weather days and weekends and holidays and alert days...a lot of days in that chair..." Guy's words drifted away and merged with the mon's perpetual, barely audible murmur.

"Here," Alice said as she handed a flimsy telltale to Guy. "Use this discount code for your next purchase of any Disney sim—compliments of the Factoids team."

"Max out!" Guy blurted as he eagerly accepted the gift. "I've been thinking I've got just about enough credits to downpay on that new fish sim.

"Ahhh, the Aquarium of the Gods," Alice said knowingly.

"Yeah, they say you can design your own mermaids and sea monsters and...."

"Oh yes," Alice bubbled, "I hear it's a real max sim...first edition release sometime soon I hear."

"Yeah, I still have time to get my paydown in. Yo thanks, Alice!"

Something in her smile reminded him of his mother smiling at him—waving goodbye in the doorway of their *Eldorado Villas* apartment—the red, white, and blue SmartMart carnations he had given her clutched tightly in her weak hand. "What a smart little *moutarde* you are Guy—study hard!" she kept saying, her fingers working as if praying on her rosary. And there was his father, working on the roof of their apartment building—a gleam in his tired eyes. "Remember, you are a Sanchez—mucho smart...mucho strong," his father was shouting and somehow grinning at the same time.

Then the mon stirred and Guy realized it was almost quitting time. Where had all the time gone? He stacked his answer arrays in the Out Box, each array icon blinking its time stamp. Standing back, so to speak, Guy surveyed the fruits of his labor. He saw towers of synchronously blinking, pastel-colored telltales and stacks of adaptive data containers.

Then in his own phantasm, he almost saw his mother's face light up as she opened her Mystery Box and retrieved one of his toy wood blocks that she still kept.

And just about then, Guy's boss fairly jumped from his big chair. He walked over to Guy and extended a large hand. "Guy, we are quite satisfied with your performance today."

"Thanks, Mr. Hartman." Guy reached out his hand and there was hum in the cube.

"Remember Guy, after content packaging, you could qualify to advance to content assembly or even extraction. There's a future for you at Globe4U." The agile avatar returned to the big chair, sat down with a pleased countenance that slowly dimmed into offline mode.

Eager to please, observant, and persistent, Guy quickly adapted to his new job. He even enjoyed the challenge of the increasingly difficult learning assignments that usually appeared on Monday mornings. And with a similar gusto, Guy explored his new world at Globe4U Central. He roamed all the levels, each divided into groupings of modular apartments—egg carton arrangements of moded studios that Globe4U rented to its fortunate, qualified employees.

Like every other apartment on the campus, Guy's was equipped with a Globe4U 4-D box that hulked in the corner like a miniature proscenium. The remaining living area was given over to a Murphy bed, a Murphy stove, a Murphy sink, and ingeniously reconfigurable furniture that let occupants easily transfigure chairs into small cots or small tables or small storage containers.

With his Certificate in Content Packaging, he had qualified for the prime employment package: a corporate apartment furnished with a cut-edge box and halo, plus discounted meals at Mama's Real Kitchen, and full-cred drinks and snackies at the U Go café, not to mention the low-pay laundry, and free Globe4U credit counselor. He not only had a coveted job at a cut-edge tech company, he had even qualified for Central Campus residence. Already, Hartman had told him several times: "You're in the max success groove—looking good!"

As the new guy in his apartment cluster, Guy R. Sanchez, CCP, spent his first days alone as he unpacked and arranged and reconfigured his apartment after a long day at the office,

all the while quietly observing his cluster mates—just as they were observing him. Then, one night, just as he was folding down his bed, a loud thumping came through his rear wall. At first, he ignored it, but it continued with a steady rhythm. Guy went to his back wall and knocked lightly. “Hey, it’s sleep time; down tone please,” he said softly but firmly to the wall. The thumping continued. Then he raised his voice: “Hey, down tone in there—hey.”

The thumping stopped abruptly. “Hey, fork you if you go to sleep early,” came a surly voice through the wall. Before Guy could reply, another voice, his left-side neighbor’s, hooted: “Don’t be such a node, Thom. Why don’t you do your sit-ups or push-ups or other ups during break time like normal people—OK?”

“Hey, fork you too Mark” came the loud retort through his rear wall.

“You’re the real forker,” Mark replied.

Some silence gathered and Guy was on the verge of uttering a soft “thank you” as a minimal denouement, but another new voice breached the thin walls first.

“If we were all more objective in our data evals, I think we would all have to say that we are all forkers,” a soft voice sifted through Guy’s right-wall.

“Hey, fork you too, Alfredo,” Guy’s rear wall fairly shook.

“Fork you too Thom,” Guy’s left wall replied briskly.

Then from Guy’s right wall: “Perhaps you guys could take it into your boxes with your ears on and cut the real vibes?” And with that pragmatic suggestion, what passed as normal quiet returned.

A couple of days after this episode, Guy met these same “cluster mates” face-to-face for the first time at Mama’s Real Kitchen. He had just ordered dinner when a voice behind him yelled “Get the fork away from me you forkin node.” Turning, Guy saw a stocky young man shaking his fist at a retreating sim blimp—a well-endowed young woman in a shimmering skin-tight wrap—that insistently whispered “Mama’s Real means a real bonus wherever you go.”

"That's our crazy mate Thom," a voice at one side announced casually. And so Guy met his cluster mates: Thom, Mark, and Alfredo. To his surprise, he learned that they had already worked and lived at Globe4U for almost half a year.

"We've already earned a 3.2% discount on all Mama's Real stuff snagged with our GlobeCards," Mark boasted to Guy.

"Why don't you just fork the Mama's Real pitch," Thom jabbed.

"Hey, don't be a node," Mark shot back. "I think it's max max that we all work for the globe's top food and bev brand...largest network of moded food..."

"Yeah, forkin iccy," Alfredo interjected.

Mark furrowed his broad black brow and blurted "What's iccy?"

"Don't ya remember the acrobuzz? I C C—Integrated Consumption Conditioning. That's what's iccy," Alfredo explained with an edge of exasperation.

"Oh fork it Fredo," Thom rejoined.

Guy quickly felt synced with his cluster mates. He thought they were a lot like him: smart, savvy, certified, with mod jobs with max tools. Almost every evening after work, they rendezvoused at their corner table at Mama's, sharing stories of their past lives and present struggles. One night, Guy told his mates about his first small box gig—the *Mr. Know It All* game show.

"It was basically an info search race between viewers and Mr. Know-It-All. So, I worked in a back room with high-speed links and moded workstations with AI search genies. So then, I snagged and fed data frags to Oskar Balz, the big roly-poly Mr. Know-It-All. He was the producer and on-air talent. So then, he used my secret, max fast feeds to tease and mislead contestants and viewers. Who would first get *The Right Answer* and beat *The Big Clock*? That was the snag—plus the occasional jackpot giveaway. So, mostly, Mr. Know-It-All beat the clock and Oskar Balz became very wealthy. I got a few cred crumbs but a lot of tech buzz."

Guy recounted how, after he had received the Globe4U scholarship and submitted his resignation notice, the bear-size Balz avatar had almost collapsed to the floor during the

online exit interview, his paunch deflating, moaning that one of his star “back room boys” was leaving for “greener boxes.” But as a parting gift, he gave Guy a gig reference to Mr. Prik, known to Guy only via his small, spindly avatar that sourced in Bangkok.

After several big Balz and little Prik stories, Guy's mates were almost falling off their plastic stools laughing and hooting. Amid this camaraderie, Guy confided that he considered Globe4U his day job since he still did small moonlight jobs for Mr. Prik, a high-level executive in a Thai trading company.

“Ohhh...Mr. Moonlight, are ya?” Thom clapped Guy on the back and all his mates hooted drooling and sputtering their Mama's Real Hi-Rec Brew.

Soon, Guy was in a smug daily rhythm of working and playing and eating and sleeping. Almost every night, he met his mates at Mama's Real Kitchen. Afterwards, back in their boxes, they sparred in 4-D action sims, hung out in cyber salons, and swapped stuff in eShoppes—all provided by Globe4U for after-work entertainment—only a monthly min fee automatically charged on their GlobeCards.

As the winter holidays loomed, the max trend buzz in the box was the impending release of *Aquarium of the Gods I*, the newest Disney sim bundled with a Mama's Real promo—a “Sim-N-Snack” bargain. It was expected to be the most realistic and immersive sim ever produced—and probably the most expensive. Guy felt fortunate that his job was a top-credit-level position that qualified him for the RapidPay plan: “Sim play now. Min pay wow!” Then too, there would be the extra discount for being a Globe4U employee in good standing. Guy and his mates were dimly aware that their groove status would actually be enhanced by the indulgent expense. This was no dumb-ass street people game at Wally's Arcade back in Guy's old neighborhood!

One night, Guy was lolling in a box queue waiting to play a sneak-view version of *Aquarium* when he got a Hello4U addressed to Mr. Moonlight. It was brief: “Hey Mr Moonlight. I see u down in Mamas with u buds blah blah 4 Aqua partees. u half room 4 - 1 mor? —the Jewel.” Guy and his mates had already talked about starting a large sim team—perhaps a school of morphing fish. Without hesitation, Guy replied “Sure if u b cool.”

A few days later, there was a top box overload that crushed all the boxes lower in its stack. So Guy and his pals gathered early at Mama's. They were all supposed to be in their own apartments until the office officially closed and quiet time ended, but none of them thought it made any sense to continue waiting after already waiting almost four hours. What were they supposed to do in their apartments with crushed boxes during quiet time? Already, Mama's Kitchen was as busy as regular supper time.

Guy and his friends ordered Mama's Real Ookies and Hi-Rec Brews. They swapped rumors and theories about the condition of the top box, but soon their chat turned to the latest *Aquarium* blips.

"I hear you can set different swim and float rates for different aqua groups," Alfredo said.

"I hear it's got X-rate tracks by Infiltration—forkin hot vibes they say," Thom added.

A spirited discussion on the Globe4U Entertainment's five-star synthofrag band ensued. Then Guy's eyes drifted to a nearby corner table where the most beautiful green eyes he had ever seen looked back. Their eyes immediately locked like a congruence app, Guy thought. He caught his breath, captivated by her easy, wide smile that seemed to curve congruently with the arc of her ample cleavage. Then, as if floating off her seat, she drifted to Guy's table, all the while their eyes locked.

"Hi guys. I'm the Jewel...maybe you've heard of me? I work over in Info Repo."

"I've heard of you! You are max for Aquarium. That's max with us," Guy blurted as his heart raced. A chorus of "yeahs" followed. "C'mon...have a seat," Guy said as he stood and cleared a stool next to him. A few minutes later, Julie Betourne became the fifth member of a new sim gang, the "Argonauts."

With a rude snap, the com suddenly interrupted and announced that all boxes were stacked again—all employees were to return to their apartments for the remainder of standard office hours. Julie lightly touched Guy's arm as they climbed off their stools. Again their eyes locked, like beautiful magnets, Guy thought as he awkwardly waved a "bye for now."

Guy trudged back to his apartment, slumped into his coaster chair, and donned his halo.

“Good afternoon, Guy,” a somber mon said. You will be returning to the office again, yes?”

“Yeah,” Guy said with a sigh.

“You are clocking in at 3:57p. You have a priority message waiting.”

The office resolved with a telltale blinking insistently on the Hartman’s desk—but his boss was nowhere to be seen. When he touched the hot telltale, the mon stepped away from his corner huddle and turned a reproachful face to Guy: “We note that you deviated from procedure. Valuable box time has been lost because you and others violated office protocol. In the future, if the top box goes down during office time, you must remain in your apartment.” Then, slightly raising an admonishing finger, the mon whispered “Remember, box time equals credits cubed!” Abruptly, the mon turned his back and bent his head to a hidden task.

In fact, Guy did dimly remember the obtuse formula he had learned during div orientation—an equation that somehow proved that the number of standard minutes of office box time was the cube root of the number of standard credits generated for Globe4U. With the sting of the mon’s reproach still in him, he started to estimate the number of credits lost due to transit to and from Mama’s. He had barely started entering values when Alice glided in and nudged his calculator aside. “Priority message for you,” the delicate avatar announced with a sniff. Guy tapped the proffered envelope and a message opened: “4:00 Standard Box Time | Aquarium of the Gods Now Released | The latest 4-D sim, Aquarium of the Gods, was released today by Disney Digitals and Globe4U Entertainment. With infinitely variable synthofrag settings and nano response times, it sets the standard for immersive realism and...”

Guy skipped to the end of the message and entered his pre-paid priority order code and signed for the 12-month min pay option. The message unfolded to show a credit transaction receipt. Unfolding again, the message dropped a genuine Disney eLicense which Alice deftly snatched and placed on Guy’s bench.

With a strangely empty assignment board and an absent boss, Guy decided to leave the office early. The mon became agitated when he clocked out, but Guy ignored him as he

imagined himself and Julie riding astride a magnificent sea dragon which could go anywhere they wanted. He was clutching shimmering reins. Julie's breath was warm on the back of his neck, her arms encircling him in a hold-on-for-your-life embrace.

Everyone on campus, except weird Turk Sturm in Info Repo, was soon playing in the new Aquarium. For Guy and everyone else he knew, work in the office began turning grey. Monotony was creeping in, crawling slowly, an office box mold of sorts. Guy started to cut corners on his schedule to spend more time with Julie and play in the Aquarium. Every day, they dispatched multiple inter-office Go4s to deliver coded messages to each other. Almost every lunch and dinner period they met at Mama's or cruised Central Mall. And every evening, Guy synched with the other Argonauts in the Aquarium. There seemed to be no limit to where they could go: one night a stormy tempest that stirred up prehistoric beasts from the deep; the next, a dreamy tropical underwater garden with glowing fish and sentient anemones; the next, a massive multiplayer sea battle with custom-designed monsters and sensual but dangerous hydriads—all under the watchful eye of Poseidon and his terrible trident of judgment.

The formerly pleasant, slightly rhythmic hum in the office box was becoming monochromatic and dull compared with the synthofrag vibes in the Aquarium. The office widgets had become stodgy, stiff, and slow. The rotating containers and trend graphs were now just annoyingly predictable clockworks. Even the blooming data aggregators had lost their luster and surprise. Guy began to ignore the cautionary notes from his boss about his declining PQ and PI. He was mildly amused that the once-smiling Hartman now almost always scowled. What difference did it make? Besides, the Hartman was almost always in offline mode—actually working online much less than him. Of course, the mon was always standing in the corner in his secret huddle—its mode status never exactly clear. Guy only knew that it never interrupted him.

In their rambling discussions about working in the office, Thom and Alfredo had convinced him that all the authority avatars were basically just stupid nodes that were supposed to make you feel like you were being watched while you worked. They were, on this account, merely another layer of control mechanisms that operated, usually unobtrusively, throughout the box. Alfredo summed it up one night: "You don't exactly sell

your soul when you join Globe4U. You just agree that it can be slowly nibbled to a nub—a pathetic residue of conditioning for consumption.”

A few days later, just as Guy was about to leave the office early, the Hartman launched from his chair and walked to the front of the box. His face was stern and the voice somber. “Mr. Sanchez, I want to have a priority meeting with you tomorrow morning—seven sharp. Don’t be late.” Abruptly, his boss turned, resumed his seat, and switched to offline.

The next morning, Guy awoke early and ate a worried breakfast of Mama’s Real Breakfast Bars and Car-Pay-DM tea. He folded up his bed and stove and sink. He rolled out his chair, and put on the glowing halo.

“Good morning, Guy,” a dour mon rasped. We’re expecting you in the office.”

“Yes...of course,” Guy mumbled.

“Good. You are clocking in at 6:54. Your punctuality is always noted.”

When the office resolved, Guy saw that Bob Hartman had already arrived online. The Hartman appeared intent on thumbing through paper pages in a file folder on his desk. Trying to ignore the chill atmosphere in the office, Guy began writing new data filters for customer message intercepts—the first task on his daily assignments board. Then the office clock chimed 7:00, and his boss and the mon walked slowly to the front of his bench. Guy had never seen the mon's face up close before, and he was shocked to see that it was disturbingly similar to Poseidon’s stony rough-hewn visage when he was angry in the Aquarium.

“Good morning Guy,” the Hartman said somberly. “We have had a growing concern about your performance here at Globe4U and we want to talk with you about your future with us.”

“Sure,” Guy said weakly.

“Specifically,” his boss continued, “we have noted serious erosion in your Productivity Quotient and Punctuality Index. You have also ignored the rule for apartment time during work hours. We have sent you several messages about this, but we have seen no improvement.”

Then the stern mon stepped forward. “We understand that this is your first full-time job and that you may not fully appreciate the terms of your Provisional Labor Contract. So, we are here to remind you that, in return for a generous salary, a subsidized apartment, a free 4-D box, and full campus privileges, you have agreed to work according to our certainly fair terms.”

The mon looked down briefly as if studying his tasseled loafers and then raised a sad face. “Also, we must remind you that, as part of your contract, Globe4U purchased the balance due on your certification training loan—money that probably would have to be repaid by your dear parents if for some reason you defaulted on your contract with us.”

“Now you know, Guy,” the Hartman interjected in a confidential tone, “good jobs are very scarce these days. In fact, we get more than two thousand job applications almost every week. Do we need to remind you that there are many very talented people lined up outside our door just waiting for the chance to take your box?”

“No sir,” Guy barely mumbled.

“Well then Guy,” the mon said in a reluctant tone, “we can only conclude that your recent performance—or lack thereof—must be the result of either an attitude problem or a competency deficiency.”

“But what is *attitude* anyway Mr. Sanchez?” the mon continued in a rasping voice that unsettled Guy. “It is a subjective thing...a fuzzy concept...an unquantifiable abstraction. It’s the old fog of Deliberationism...a witch mix of biochemistry and atmospherics and the globe only knows what else. No, no, I detect no attitude problem.”

“So,” the mon oozed, “we can only conclude...how shall I put this... you may not be competent enough for Globe4U. True, you have a certificate in content packaging. But of course, without the performance, certificates are worthless.” Guy’s whole body began to tremble in the silence that stretched after “worthless.” His mouth went dry and all he could think of was a cold Mama’s Real Hi-Rec Brew.

“Still...we think you deserve one more chance to prove yourself, Guy” his boss said with a faint smile. “We think you just might be able to turn yourself around and prove that you have the right stuff for Globe4U. So, we are putting you on probation for the next three

months. If we see clear improvement, your position here will be resecured...plus we will consider granting a raise of ten credits per hour. So, what do you say? Is that a, uh...max deal or not?"

Guy's tongue was thick like a gag in his mouth. Finally, he stammered "Yes...yes thank you Mr. Hartman." A moment later, the mon pivoted briskly and walked back to the far corner. "Remember, box time equals credits cubed!" the mon chided softly before turning his back as usual.

The Hartman extended a hand to Guy: "Remember, there can be a future for you at Globe4U," he said with a soothing tone that seemed to meld with a resurgent hum in the box.

Guy stayed working in the office late that day, hoping that this would quickly signal his renewed commitment. Even when shouting and banging erupted in Thom's apartment in the middle of the afternoon, Guy suppressed the urge to leave his box to investigate. That evening he went to Mama's for a late supper rendezvous with Julie and the other Argonauts. He found Julie already there—crumpled at their corner table. "Hey Julie, another day in paradise huh?"

"Yeah, living Mama's Real dream," she said stretching out her words like, Guy thought, pulling apart clumps of macaroni baked with Mama's Real Cheese. "I got a warning from my boss and mon today...said I was spending too much time messing you in the box about non-work stuff...eating up valuable processing resources..."

"Max down. I got a warning today too about maybe losing my job if I don't straighten up and float right and stop being late to work and all. If you weren't here and we didn't have the Aquarium...I'd maybe just say fork it all."

"Yeah, I feel that too." Julie looked at him with a tender earnestness he had never seen in her before. "You're sort of my anchor here...you know that Guy?" Without thinking, he put his arms out to hug her. She folded into him, as Guy imagined, like a fragile jellyfish—and then a sobbing jellyfish.

Julie and Guy were still holding each other, almost frozen like a statue of embrace, when Alfredo and Mark arrived.

“Yo Argos,” Mark blurted. “Get the feed about Thom?”

“What news?” Guy said absently as he released Julie's warm body.

“Got fried this afternoon. I ran into him when he was leaving his apartment with some luggage...said his boss told him his output for filtering and tracking trademark infringements was below standard...stuff like wasting work time on personal stuff. Anyway, Thom said he was actually happy to be leaving. Yeah, and he said to say bye and max max to all the Argos—the only real people in this forkin stupid place. Anyway, that's pretty max what he said.”

The group fell silent and Julie began to cry again. Guy held her fast as a sim blimp—a doe-eyed woman wiping her hands on her green gingham apron—drifted over their table and murmured “Mama's Real means a real bonus wherever you go.”

“Not for Thom,” Alfredo whispered in response. “No more discount on his card now...maybe even no more card at all!”

“Oh, they'll let him keep his card for sure,” Mark said confidently. “How else could he downpay in the Aquarium and stuff like that?”

“His hide is fried,” Alfredo said calmly. “It's the net's ultimate control: they just won't let you in anymore. You've been bad so no more box for you...it's the streets for you.”

“Aw, go,” Mark and Guy both responded. Mark continued, “Fredo, now you're talking that Deliberationist stuff again.”

“You know mates,” Alfredo said, “we're not anti-efficiency or anything like that. We just say that all the box is a stage and the only way out of the box is the way you got in. Most of us believe that all the avatars and other box artifacts have subvert uses. We say you have to be very deliberate—that's the only way to avoid self-induced hypnosis.

“Yeah,” Mark retorted, “then why did they fry Thom instead of your subvert butt?”

Alfredo thought for a moment, as Deliberationists were wont to do, and slowly replied: “Because Thom was more dangerous to them than a compliant Deliberationist.

That evening, when the remaining Argonauts gathered in the Aquarium, they selected a languid pool with iridescent water lilies using the Nymphs-Monet environment setting.

They all became water striders, skating with their surface-tension dimples across the mirror-smooth water, looking for patches of sunlight to warm themselves, and skimming in tune with Guy's and Julie's favorite Infiltration track: *Capriccio Moderno*.

As their days evaporated into a featureless fog of work and schedule, vanishing beyond an evanescent, but boxed, event horizon, Guy and Julie drew closer. With renewed motivation, their work acquired a new dimension—a sense of security in the repetition of predictable, tedious, even mind-numbing procedures. Even the occasional data disruptions and stack crashes and spastic aggregation blooms had become ho-hum in their inevitable recapitulations.

Finally, after Guy's probationary period had passed, his boss informed him that he was "quite pleased with Guy's improved performance." So pleased, in fact, that he was recommending Guy for a promotion to IT—Information Triage. Julie, too, received an "above average" performance review. Soon after, one evening when they were strolling in Central Mall, savoring their rising-star statures, Guy suddenly turned to gaze into Julie's limpid sea-green eyes. "You know, jewel, we are max lucky...you and me, both winners: rock steady jobs, good cred, and we can sim in the Aquarium every night. But...mostly it's us."

"I max feel that way too, Guy. We're not like a lot of those bottom feeders out there...scavenging for little pieces of this and that on the street. Yeah, it's mostly us. You're my Mr. Moonlight...my max glow anchor. I...I really do love you."

They embraced long and hard in the middle of a long and deserted ramp dappled with dancing moonlight shadows. Guy felt Julie's warm breasts heaving like gentle waves on his chest. "Oh Jewel," Guy whispered in her ear, "I love you too...my own beautiful jewel. Will you...marry me?"

Shadows swayed in the silent warm breeze across the ramp. "Yes...yes I will Mr. Moonlight."

The following day, Guy and Julie informed their bosses about their plans. They both received preliminary approval—pending finalization of contract adjustments and scheduling issues. Then, one morning, a few days later, Guy and Julie found each of their

offices adorned with a large bouquet of coloratura humming roses—compliments of Globe4U. Attached to each of their bouquets was a permission slip for a four-day honeymoon and a free GlobeGetaway ticket for a Mama's Real Retreat at the coast—including a 24/7 free 4-D box in their room.

Their wedding was a modest affair at St. Joseph the Worker church where Guy's parents had been life-long members. Guy and Julie exchanged vows of forever, their eyes locked in an electric trance—a circuit that only they could complete. They were too self-absorbed to hear much of what the priest said in a short homily that followed. About how St. Joseph had labored diligently in his carpenter's shop day in and day out. Resisting the temptations of an easy life lounging in the rowdy markets and drinking Mogen David wine in the taverns of Nazareth. Building simple but sturdy furniture that he could trade for good food and clothing and tools for him and Mary and their growing boy. Maybe building beautiful Cedar of Lebanon treasure boxes for storing their menorah and fine linens and precious gems and other appurtenances in a devout Jewish home. Maybe carving holy designs, flickering in candlelight, into a box almost finished as the moon climbed into the black sky embroidered with dazzling stars—the full end of Saint Joe's work day full of love.

Afterwards, in the shabby, monochromatic parish dining hall, now decorated with twisted crepe streamers and pots of real daisies and Mama's Real Scent Bouquet Decos, there was a small reception open to the whole parish. It was all-you-can-eat lasagna, salad, and a towering vanilla wafer wedding cake. Guy's incessantly smiling parents gave the newlyweds an old bone china tea set that had once belonged to Grandma Foucault. Mark gave them a 100-cred Mama's Real Downpay Card. Alfredo gave them a used, leather-bound, real paper edition of *The Glass Bead Game* by Hermann Hesse. Julie's parents gifted them a jaw-dropping 5,000 cred card for Mama's Real Fashion/Furnish.

After uncountable hugs and kisses and laughs and cries and smiles and tips for success or health or longevity all around the room, Guy and Julie gathered their gifts and meager luggage and caught the last train for the coast. That night, when they arrived in their Real Retreat room, they could hardly believe their eyes. There was a discount beverage butler, and a giant 4-D box hovering over a plush crescent-shaped couch. Their spacious room featured a large, real window onto a narrow ribbon of beach that sloped to a calm ocean. A

gibbous moon floated near the horizon, reminding Guy of the mon in the box. Was it waxing or waning, going online or offline? Did it matter how it blazed a path of shimmering silver light that stretched across the water and straight into their room—straight to their burning hearts? They shed their clothes and danced naked in the moon beams.

"Let's jump into the Aquarium now, Guy," Julie suddenly pleaded. "Totally max max naked...we've never done that before."

"Uh...sure...max sure," Guy said with a hint of hesitation at this unexpected twist in his mentally rehearsed honeymoon sex script.

Guy and Julie ordered glasses of Mama's Real Chianti from the discount butler and settled into the sumptuous couch. They toasted to their families and friends and good fortune and the future and the kind of fashion furniture they envisioned for a dream villa by some faraway sea in a wild land outside the Globe.

Soon the wine was gone and their laughter segued into making silly sounds in their private language and then into sniffs and silent silly faces of their "Guess what I'm feeling now" game. "I haven't seen any people walking on the beach," Julie finally ended the game.

"Probably too cold or windy or something," Guy said after a long pause while he imagined their nude torsos locked and rolling in a heat on warm moonlit sand.

Julie laughed a sparkling laugh. "You're starting to sound like a forkin Deliberationist."

"Huh," Guy barely managed as his eyelids began to droop.

"Hey Guy," Julie perked as she nibbled his ear, "let's go into the Aquarium now and become the most beautiful creatures and make max max sim love—our special moonlight box—huh?"

"Uhh...yeah," Guy agreed with a dim awareness, "that would be max...yeah max." He leaned forward, tapped the box, and then resumed snuggling, their bare bodies sinking into the pliant folds of the couch. They looped their arms and placed a glowing halo on each other's head.

A theatre usher appeared and handed them two free tickets to a feature-length performance of Aquarium of the Gods-Real X Edition. Guy and Julie pecked fast little kisses

as the sim began to glow and hum. A tag cloud of Globe4U Entertainment credits floated down in front of a curtain of iridescent water that glistened, it seemed to Guy, in a subtle liquid rendering of hints of the fine needlepoint design of his mother's big chair. The curtain slowly parted. Their excited eyes locked briefly and then Guy and Julie dove into the sim in synch, smoothly submerging into a dappled coral and anemone garden as strains of *Capriccio Moderno* washed over them.

“Oh, Guy, this is just so perfect,” Julie said breathlessly as their glistening virtually wet bodies virtually touched thrumming in the box. “Will you always be my glowing love sim?”

Surging in the strong current that carried them into the deep, Guy gasped. “Yes, my always jewel, of course...everything...max glow...max real.”

