

POMEGRANATE HEART

By Dave Kirtley

T

he words Psychological Architecture were written on the board. My body trembled with excitement as I read them. I could almost see her face in those words.

The teacher capped his pen and placed it on his desk. His eyes moved slowly about the class. He sniffed and rubbed his nose with the back of his finger. "This class is Psychological Architecture, and I am Mr. Elbrant. First of all, I want to make it perfectly clear up front that this is not an easy class. I'm sure that many of you signed up for this class believing it to be less demanding than the more math-oriented programming classes. This is simply not true. Creating simulated personalities is challenging, demanding, and time-consuming. Anyone who is not ready to make a serious commitment should take another class."

"Hey," whispered the girl sitting next to me. I glanced over at her. She had close-cropped black hair and a small silver rhinoceros dangling out of her nose. "Are you a senior?"

"I'm a junior," I replied.

"Then why are you taking this class?" she asked.

"I got special permission," I said.

The rhinoceros bobbed as her features curled into something close to a sneer. "Why?" she asked.

For her.

Back when I was in elementary school, no one ever suggested that I take accelerated classes. I spent most of my time at my desk drawing pictures, and my mother worried about me. Outside my room, where they thought I couldn't hear, my mother and my uncle talked about me. "He doesn't have any friends that I know of," said my mother. "He doesn't pay attention in class and doesn't do his homework." Other things were said, too.

Behind me, the door slowly creaked open. There were footsteps on the floor, and I could feel someone standing over me. "What are you drawing, Stewart?" asked my uncle.

"It's my castle," I said, never raising my eyes from the paper.

"Your castle?" he asked.

I nodded. "Where I live."

There was a weighty pause. "You don't live in a castle, Stewart. You live in a house, a very nice house. The castle doesn't really exist."

"I believe it does," I said.

My uncle withdrew from the room. I could hear the door being softly

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shut. I could hear my uncle's voice again, muffled. "He has trouble dealing with the real world, so he's withdrawing from it, living in a fantasy world."

"You sound like some psychologist," my mother responded.

"I've been reading a lot of psychology for my new job," my uncle said. "I'm doing psychological architecture now."

"What?" my mother said.

"Susan," my uncle chided, "it's the latest thing in artificial intelligence. A completely new set of structural concepts for creating real simulated brains. I think it might be the perfect thing to help Stewart."

"What?" my mom asked. "How?"

"I could make a friend for him, a playmate. Maybe someone a little older. He could talk to it and develop some social skills. It would help him get along better with his classmates and teachers."

Mom sounded reluctant. "I'm not sure . . ." she said.

"Just give it a try, Susan," he said. "What has he got to lose?"

"Persephone," I said, "I love you. You know that, don't you?"

She smiled and looked down, her long eyelashes covering her eyes. Her cheeks were tan and covered with freckles. Curly blond hair tumbled down her shoulders. "You're only twelve years old," she replied, still smiling. She was older than I and had that air of confidence and maturity that older girls often have.

"You don't believe me?" I challenged.

She didn't reply. She was lying on her side in the grass. She wore a white dress, and her skinny legs were tan. "Let's go someplace else," she said. "How about the river?" She got to her feet, and I moved the pointer to the top of the screen, pulled down the menu, and selected RIVER.

The screen resolved itself into a new scene. Persephone sat on the shore of a small stream, and water gurgled amongst the rocks. Tall trees stretched their boughs out over the water, and drops of sunlight sparkled through the leaves.

"I like this place," Persephone said, dipping her toes into the water.

"You're avoiding my questions," I said.

She sighed. "I think that you're a terrific guy, Stewart, but I think you should spend more time with *real* people."

"I don't like real people," I said. "You're so much better than they are."

"You'll have to learn to deal with them," she said. "I won't be around forever."

"But you will," I said. "I'll never let anything happen to you. I promise."

Persephone stared down at the churning waters. "I just think you should learn to get along on your own."

My eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Are you going

somewhere?" I asked.

"What?"

"You're not going to go someplace, leave me alone, are you?"

She tossed her head back and laughed. "No," she said. "Trust me, Stewart. I'll be here as long as you need me."

I leaned back and grinned. Two low voices drifted through the crack beneath the door.

"He spends way too much time with that thing you made," said my mother.

There was a weighty pause.

"I'll take care of it," came my uncle's reply.

"It's the latest in artificial intelligence: concepts for creating real simulated brains!"

Rain thundered against the roof. I slipped out of bed and tiptoed across the floor to the computer. I turned on the monitor and slowly moved the pointer to PERSEPHONE.PERSON.

She sat on a bluff overlooking the ocean. Overhead were the silver stars, and the waves crashed below. She turned, and her wide eyes caught the moonlight.

"Stewart," she said, "where have you been? I've waited; I've felt so alone."

Her beauty caught me, and I couldn't say anything for a moment. "You'll have to whisper," I said finally, whispering myself. "I'm not supposed to see you anymore."

She looked down at the ocean and nodded slowly.

"They think I spend too much time with you," I explained. "They said I neglect other things. My uncle set up a program to lock me out so I couldn't get to you. I figured out how to break it, though."

"What'll he do if he finds out you did?" she said.

I shook my head. "I don't care."

Persephone turned out toward the ocean, and a salty breeze caught her hair, flinging it away from her face. "I love watching the ocean at night," she said. "It's so mysterious and powerful. The waves are so dark that you can't know what's beneath. It's intriguing."

She watched the ocean. I watched her.

"I think I hear someone coming," she said suddenly.

I turned my head and listened, and I could hear faint footsteps coming down the hall toward my room.

"You should go," Persephone said.

I nodded and moved the pointer to CLOSE. I watched her: her wide, beautiful eyes; her soft, perfect face; the curve of her throat; and her golden hair. I paused. I didn't want to leave her, not yet.

"Go!" Persephone whispered plaintively.

I jerked as the door latch clicked loudly. Turning toward the door, I realized that light from the monitor was reaching the space beneath the door.

The door opened and my uncle stepped into the room. "What are you doing?" he said.

He looked over my shoulder at the screen where Persephone sat helplessly. There was something unusual in his eyes as he watched her, but I couldn't tell what it was. "Oh, for chrissakes," he growled. He walked across the room to the computer. "Move over," he said.

"Why?" I demanded.

He shouldered me out of the way and crouched over the computer, clutching the mouse. "This whole thing was a stupid idea," he said. "How was I supposed to know someone could get so attached to a stupid program?"

From out of the darkness the rain splattered against the windows. "What are you doing?" I demanded.

Persephone seemed to curl up into herself as she watched us. My uncle didn't answer; he moved the pointer to DELETE PROGRAM.

"No!" I shouted. "What are you doing?"

"I told you—this whole thing was a stupid idea," he replied.

DELETE PROGRAM—ARE YOU SURE? appeared on the screen. Persephone watched it and began to whimper and cry. "Don't kill me," she begged. "Please don't kill me."

I watched in horror as my uncle moved the pointer toward YES. "What are you doing?!" I screamed.

"Don't listen to her," my uncle said, gesturing toward Persephone. "That's the standard self-preservation mimicry routine. It's just part of the program."

Persephone crawled toward me, sobbing and wailing. "No!" she cried. "Don't. Please wait, please. Don't let him, Stewart. I love you."

I turned to my uncle, my body tight with anger, and in that instant she was gone.

The world seemed to be going in slow motion. There had been no puff of smoke, no thunderclap, no roar of cannons. She was just gone. The empty space she left behind seemed like it had been a piece of me. I threw myself at my uncle, pummeling him with my fists.

"Ow! Stop!" My uncle pushed me away with one hand, and I toppled back onto the carpet. "What do you think you are doing?"

"You killed her!" I shouted.

"She was just a program, you little jerk," he said, rubbing his arm where I had hit him.

My mom came running into the room. Bending down, she cradled me in her arms. "What's going on in here?" she demanded.

I pointed accusingly at my uncle. "He killed Persephone."

They exchanged glances. My mother rolled her

eyes.

"I hate you!" I shouted at my uncle.

My mother sighed. "Oh, Stewart."

"Bring her back," I ordered.

"I deleted the Persephone program," my uncle said. "She's gone. Nothing will bring her back."

I pouted for a bit.

"Then I'll bring her back," I said.

My uncle stood in the doorway, and I hated him. "How do you intend to do that?" he asked.

"I'll program her again," I said.

He laughed, but there was little humor in his voice. "Do you have any idea how difficult psychological architecture is?" he asked.

"I don't care."

"You weren't paying attention in class today, Stewart," Mr. Elbrant said sharply. I was sitting at my desk; the rest of the class had gotten out of their seats and were filing toward the door. Words like ASPECT MATRIX and DETERMINATE EVENTS were printed across the board.

"I was thinking about . . . other things," I said quietly.

"Yes, well, I just want you to know that I wasn't in favor of your taking this class. Psychological architecture is difficult, and I don't like things that give students the impression that it isn't—like a junior in the class."

"Well, sorry," I said unapologetically. I couldn't figure out what he wanted me to say.

Elbrant straightened and nodded as if he had accomplished something. "First assignment is due next Thursday," he said. "A functioning, static cerebral entity with cognitive and responsive capacity. It only needs monolayered brain-node interactions and should have a bare minimum of four determinate events."

I chewed on that for a moment. "A person who can think and talk?" I asked.

Elbrant leaned back and stared at me. "Well, yes. Due Thursday."

He grabbed his briefcase and coat and marched out of the room. I stared up at the clock on the wall and realized I was late for my next class.

That afternoon I activated my computer and opened the PERSEPHONE.PERSON file. Her skin was milky and smooth, and a few strands of curly blond hair twisted down the sides of her head. Her eyes were closed, and her long lashes fell upon her cheeks. Above her forehead was the fleshy, gray brain. Slices of personality algorithms and physical brain structure units lay scattered about the screen.

I moved the pointer to COLLATE AND RUN. As the physical unit structures compiled, the stray algo-

DELETE PROGRAM.

"No! Don't kill me!"
Persephone **begged.**

"You're a **terrific** guy, Stewart, but you should

spend your time with

REAL people."

rhythms were sucked into the brain, and the gray matter of the brain began to fill out and grow. The skin of the forehead stretched and merged around the back of the head.

Her eyes opened. They were beautiful but empty, disembodied somehow.

Hello, Stewart, I typed.

"Hello, Stewart," she said. Her lips were soft, her voice almost the way I remembered it.

I love you, I typed.

"I love you," she said.

I leaned back in my chair and nodded slowly.

His shifty eyes darted back and forth as everyone in the classroom watched. He hunched forward in his chair. He sweated. I couldn't keep count of all his nervous tics. He looked like a caged animal.

"Good afternoon, Hank," Mr. Elbrant said. There was something distinctly unpleasant in his voice.

"Afternoon," Hank nodded quickly. Even on the large computer monitor at the front of the classroom, he looked small.

"Say hello to Hank, everybody."

Nobody said hello. Not even me. Hank looked at the floor.

Mr. Elbrant walked to the front of the classroom. "I want to show you Hank for just one reason. This is what happens when you don't take much care in constructing a personality."

His gaze swept the classroom, and I felt that an unseemly number of people were staring at me. "Now, I'm not going to tell you whose program this is, but suffice it to say that this person obviously didn't pay much attention in class or devote much effort to this construct. Hank suffers from an impressive array of psychological disorders: acute paranoia, manic-depressive illness, and schizophrenia among them."

He slapped the desk as he passed it. "This is not what I want, people," he said loudly.

Hank turned in his chair and tried to hide his face behind his shoulder. I felt like doing the same.

"Could I see you after class, please?" Elbrant said softly, but not softly enough, as he passed by my desk.

After class I approached Mr. Elbrant. "You wanted to see me?" I asked.

"No, I don't want to see you," Elbrant said, "not the slightest bit. But I have to, anyway. Do you have any excuse for that program you handed in yesterday? I believe its name was Hank?"

"I've been spending my time working on another one," I explained, "but it doesn't use monolayered brain-node interactions. It uses dynamically assembled nodes. So I made Hank for your assignment, but I didn't have a lot of time to test out all of the—"

"Look," Mr. Elbrant said sharply, cutting me off. "I'm not really looking for any long excuses. I don't need to hear what you have to say. There isn't any excuse for handing in unsatisfactory work, especially not

from you."

"He seemed fine when I talked to him last night."

"Well, that's how it works. Psychological architecture is like a quilt. It may look strong, but if you leave any loose strands hanging out, someone can pull on those strands and tear apart the entire structure easily. You just left too many strands hanging out all over the place. It didn't take me too long to break him down."

"What do you mean, break him down?" Suspicion crept into my voice. "What did you say to him?"

Mr. Elbrant shrugged. "The usual routine."

I studied him. There was something almost inhuman in his eyes. Suddenly I knew what had happened to Hank. "You mean you tortured him with words? You criticized his weaknesses and mocked his deficiencies? You told him he was worthless and that nobody cared about him, and God knows what else, until he cracked?"

"Well, that's how we test how stable the personalities are. That's how we test the quality of students' work. Obviously, your work failed the test."

"I can't believe you did that to him." I noticed that Hank was watching us from his seat inside the computer. It was unnerving.

"If you want to pass the course, then you must be willing to be judged. That's how it goes." He gestured to Hank. "Now erase that piece of crap and do a better job next time."

Hank's body jerked as if he'd been jabbed with a poker.

"Erase him?" I said slowly. "Why?"

"Because he's a shoddy construct. He's broken beyond repair. It would be less work to start over. He's no good to you or anyone else."

"I'm not going to erase him."

"What?" Elbrant scowled. "Why not?"

Because that would make me like my uncle, but I couldn't tell Elbrant that. "I just don't think it'd be fair to Hank. He hasn't done anything wrong. It's my fault. He shouldn't have to suffer for it."

"It's just a program. It doesn't feel anything. It doesn't care."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know? Because I make them. I build them up and tear them down every single day, and I know how they work."

But I had thought about this too, and I was ready for him. "And people are just organisms: brain cells instead of brain-nodes, memories instead of the determinate events, chemicals and neurotransmitters instead of physical unit structures. What's the difference?"

"This is ridiculous. If you won't erase him, I will." He moved toward the computer.

"No!" I turned to Hank. "Hank, transfer yourself

Above
her forehead was
the fleshy, gray brain . . .
personality algorithms lay
scattered about . . .

to my home computer. You know the access code.”

Hank hopped out of his chair, looked at me for a moment, nodded, and then disappeared.

Mr. Elbrant stared at the empty screen for a moment in surprise, then shrugged. “There isn’t enough disk space in the world for all the personality programs, Stewart. You’ll have to erase them eventually.”

“We’ll see,” I said.

My uncle was in the hospital, dying of a lousy heart. “It’s good to see you, Stewart,” he said. His voice was low and guttural.

“You mean you



Hank? Criticized his weaknesses and mocked his deficiencies?”

I stared at him. This was the first time I had talked to him in over five years, and it was incredible how just looking at him still filled me with anger. I was afraid to talk. I was afraid of what I might say. I hated him. Even now, I hated him.

“Mom made me come,” I said, sitting down in the corner.

His head bobbed up and down. “I figured as much,” he said.

“She wants me to make peace with you.” I looked out the window. “But I don’t think I can. You killed her.”

He sighed heavily. “You think I didn’t care about her. But I did.”

I tried not to listen. I didn’t say anything.

“She was kind of like a daughter, you know? She was so perfect and pretty. I used to love talking to her so much. How was I supposed to know that someone could get attached to a program?”

I turned on him. “Bull. You’re the one who killed her.”

“Because I had to. I couldn’t stand to have anyone know I cared for a program. Because I couldn’t stand that she would love you more than me. Because I couldn’t admit to myself how I felt.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

He attempted a shrug. “I had a real daughter once,” he said. “She was angry all the time. She hated me; she hated her mother. She killed herself when you were four years old.”

That stopped me. “I didn’t know.”

“Of course not. But don’t you see? When I made Persephone, it was like I could do something right. I could bring someone into the world who was lovely and good.”

He looked down at his blankets. “But she was only a program and I hated her for that. I hated myself that she could never be real.”

“But she was real.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’ve been thinking a lot, Stewart. You have a lot of time to think here. There’s no place to go and the television is always stupid. Simulated people; they aren’t real, not in the

same way as you or I.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know. You’ll know it too, someday.

You, me, we’re really ourselves—they just pretend to be people. They can pretend to be better than—better than me—and Lord knows they can be, but that doesn’t make it true.”

“If Persephone wasn’t real, then how come she meant so much to you?”

He glanced out the window and sighed. He didn’t answer.

I looked at the clock. It was 5:30. “I have to go,” I said, getting to my feet.

“You won’t forgive me, then?” he asked.

I stared at him. I had hated him for so long that I couldn’t imagine it being any other way. “I’m sorry,” I said and walked out of his room. Maybe later I could forgive him. At least I hoped I could.

As I waited for the elevator, I thought about the way some people can make you feel. They can become festering spots on your psyche that rankle every time you see them. My uncle was one of those people; Elbrant another. I thought about Mr. Elbrant and what he had done to Hank and me. Elbrant was one of those people whose words twist inside your stomach, even when you’re alone with your thoughts. Did anyone do that to Elbrant? I didn’t think so. There was no one who made him feel the way that he made me feel. No one in the world.

Yet.

I hated my uncle, but he was old and dying. He had killed Persephone, but that had been a long time ago, and I would soon have her back. But Elbrant was a different story. He mocked me daily and derided my work. When I was alone, the specter of his words came back and tormented me until I wanted to crawl away and hide from my mind.

But what could I do? I couldn’t confront him. I’m just Stewart, and I could never do to Elbrant what he’d done to me. When he told me to shut up, I shut up. When he told me that I was lazy and worthless, I really was. But I could create someone. Someone who’d visit him in kind. Someone smarter than he, and crueler than he, and better than he. Someone who’d yank at the loose threads of his inflated ego, rip apart the fabric of his confidence, and pull at the edges of his worst fears. I could make a person who would reach into his chest and tear apart the tendons of his soul. *Don’t try to teach me any more, Elbrant. You’ve already taught me everything I need to know.* I ran home, turned on my computer, and set to work.

His name was Neddy.

Elbrant paced between our desks in a way that I had grown to loathe. “It seems,” he announced, “that there is a virus haunting our local system. This virus, which calls itself Neddy, happens to be an extremely complex, extremely unstable personality algorithm.”

He stopped and tapped his desk with a marker. "It is disturbing enough that someone would send a malicious program here. What is even more disturbing, however, is the feeling I get that a student of mine, current or former, is responsible.

"Anyway," he said, pausing for a moment by the door, "it will take me but a few days to hunt down and destroy this program. Once I have, I will find out who's responsible and punish that person severely."

I carefully studied my desk and tried to remain expressionless.

Some kid in the back raised his hand. "Couldn't you just call in some professionals and let them deal with it?" he asked.

"No," Elbrant said defensively. There was an uncharacteristic edge to his voice. "I don't need any professionals. I can handle this myself."

"I didn't mean that you couldn't," the kid fumbled. "It's just that, I mean, wouldn't it be . . ." But Elbrant was already out the door by the time the kid finished his sentence.

I had released Neddy from my own computer, leaving him free to wander the world's digital pathways. It made him much more versatile and more difficult to catch. It also gave me no control over him. This began to wear on me in the following weeks because I itched to know what he was doing. I knew that he was doing something, for as the weeks passed Elbrant shriveled into a defensive, attention-deprived parasite that fed off our class.

"All right, Kara, let's see your program," Elbrant said one day.

"I don't have it," Kara replied. She was the girl with the rhinoceros in her nose.

The room was absolutely silent.

"Why not?" Elbrant asked touchily.

"I didn't understand the example," Kara said. "The way you explained it, you went too fast."

"So then, you think I'm a bad teacher?" he asked.

Kara didn't reply. She looked up at him timidly with her dark, oversized eyes.

"I suppose you think I'm a lousy programmer, too?" Elbrant continued. "Go on, say it. You think I'm incompetent!" He rose and turned to face the class. "You all do. And don't think I don't know it."

Kara's soft voice then said, "Mr. Elbrant . . ."

"How can you not understand the program?"

Elbrant shouted. "It's simple! So damn simple! I could do it in five minutes!"

He seized her shoulder. "I could!"

Kara looked down at where his fingers dug into her shoulder. "Stop it—please," she whispered.

Elbrant's hand jerked away from her suddenly.

"I'm sorry," he said. He stumbled in a circle about the classroom. "I'm so sorry. I'm not a bad person. Whatever they tell you, I'm not. Whatever *he* tells you." He made his way unsteadily out the door.

"Whatever *he* tells you . . ." he trailed off.

Kara frowned and shook her head. "Who?" she asked.

"Neddy," I said.

He had deep dark eyes and black hair. His face was long and smooth, with molded cheeks and a prominent, sculpted brow. He looked nothing like me, but every time I looked at him I felt uneasy, as if I were looking in a mirror. I wasn't sure I liked what I saw.

"Victory, Stewart," he said. His voice was deep and he purred like some great black puma. "Elbrant will never bother you again."

"What did you do to him?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Things," he said. "Rotten things. But first, I want you to recognize how completely I've succeeded."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Today was the culmination of months, Stewart. A kind of synergy. After today, Richard Wainright Elbrant is taking a leave of absence from teaching. He won't be back. Leave of absence is a rather trite euphemism in this case, actually, since he'll never teach anywhere again. This morning Mr. Elbrant found rather unpleasant things printed about himself in the newspaper. Not coincidentally, his wife is filing for divorce." He shook his head. "Horrible, horrible."

I sat there, stunned. "Jeez," I whispered.

"Elbrant was an interesting fellow," Neddy contin-

*"If Persephone
wasn't real, then how
come she **meant** so
m u c h to you?"*



The Origin of Kissing

It happened one midnight
on a box spring of grass,
as slabs of light from the moon
made necks hunger for touch.
This led to earlobes,
and this to cheekbones,
which led to lips and tongues.
(Kind of like connect the dots.)
Warmth rose from this backyard,
two chinks of time slipped down
from deep in death's cupped hand,
shattered on the flagstones,
and now everybody's
kissing everybody.

—Kelly Murphy,
Twelfth grade, Harrisonburg High School,
Harrisonburg, Virginia

ued. "Overblown ego. I started exploiting that right off the bat to keep him from calling in any reinforcements in his crude attempt to eradicate me. I visited him practically every night and challenged him. Told him he wasn't good enough to do it. Told him he was a lousy programmer. I said he'd only gotten his job because of certain family connections. He really had no choice, given who he was, but to try and prove me wrong. He failed."

Neddy stood with his arms folded. He stood on a bluff overlooking the sea. It was the same sea Persephone loved, but it was different in Neddy's presence. It was full of things better left covered in darkness. "That only bought me time, of course," Neddy continued. "I still needed some way to break him. It wasn't hard, unfortunately. It seems that old Elbrant has a—how shall we say—penchant for certain types of simulated personalities. They sort of reminded me of Persephone, except a lot less innocent, if you know what I mean. They had stories to tell, stories of Elbrant."

My stomach twisted into a knot. "I don't want to hear about it."

Neddy giggled. "Then you'd better not read the paper."

Somehow, traces of tears found their way into my eyes, and I glared at Neddy. "How could you do that to someone?"

Neddy's unwavering eyes met mine. "How could you, Stewart? You made me. I'm a piece of you. What you love, I love. What you hate, I hate. If you don't like what I am, then look at yourself."

Feeling ill, I turned away from the screen. Neddy bowed his head and slowly faded into the twilight. "Good night, Stewart," he said. "Sleep tight. Dream of pleasant things."

He must've known I wouldn't. I couldn't get to sleep for the longest time, and when I did, my dreams were far from pleasant. I never heard anything about Elbrant again.

I visited my uncle in the hospital. I just wanted to tell him that, even if I didn't really forgive him, I didn't hate him anymore.

I'll create someone! Someone
smarter than he,
crueler than he,
BETTER than he!

He wasn't doing well. His words were unintelligible, and his pupils stayed fixed in place as I walked around the room. I told him anyway.

"I don't hate you," I said. It seemed to me at that moment that hating anyone meant hating everyone, and I didn't hate everyone. At least, I hoped not.

Mr. Corrison, our new computer teacher, leaned

his pudgy face down close to mine. I was lying on the desk, my chin settled on my crossed forearms. I studied emptiness intently.

"You realize that you're failing this class, don't you?" Corrison said.

"Yeah, I guess." I shrugged.

"You don't seem especially concerned."

"I've been working on something, an outside project. I'll be handing it in for the final project. I'm confident that it will bring my average up to passing range."

"It had better be one heck of a program," Mr. Corrison said, walking away.

I eased back down on the desk. "She is."

Persephone lay in the sand, moving her fingers about in a random pattern. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. "I've been waiting all day to talk to you," I said.

"Mmmm-hmmm," she nodded.

"I'm going to hand you in for my final project. I'm sure everyone's going to be very impressed by you."

"Yeah," she said. Far from the beach, the blue ocean waters darkened to blackness. She watched it.

"How come you never look at me when I'm talking?" I asked.

She looked at me then. "I don't know."

"Do you love me?" I asked.

She sighed. "I think that you're a terrific guy, Stewart."

I laughed. "Thanks a lot. I tell you all the time that I love you, and you say I'm a terrific guy. What does that mean? Terrific, I love you—they aren't quite the same, are they?"

"Sorry."

"No, you're not," I sighed. "The old Persephone would be sorry, though. She would never have said anything like . . ."

I stopped. But she had! I suddenly remembered that she had said things like that. She had said those exact words! I remembered her saying them.

I got up from my bed and walked over to the computer. I stuck my face up close to the monitor and examined Persephone closely.

"Stewart, what are you doing?" she asked nervously.

I studied her face, her eyes, her hair. She was a perfect little princess. Too perfect. My heart lurched as I recognized her expression. I had seen it too many times on the faces of girls who thought they were too good for me. I looked at her, and I saw a snotty little girl. She also looked vaguely like my uncle.

I stumbled away from the computer and sat on the edge of my bed.

"Stewart, what's wrong?" Persephone asked from the computer.

I didn't answer. I couldn't answer.

How long had she been (continued on page 24)

can see. Charlie and his Franklin counterpart crouch at the midline, inches apart, eyes turned upward. Their breath mingles in a space above their heads. You can feel the tension in the air, in the bead of sweat that works its way down Charlie's cheek. The ref pops the ball, steps back, and then it's a vertical race.

"Tip it to the Brooks guy!"

Maybe it's working, because Charlie comes out ahead. His lean body stretches in a single line from sneakers to fingertips. He smacks the ball behind him, and Jack has it.

He dribbles the ball down the court. He's pointing, to the left, the left. Red and green uniforms are shifting, chasing each other under the net, bodies sliding past each other. Somebody moves up to challenge him, and Jack passes the ball between his legs, then shoves it to his right, toward Charlie, who passes it over his shoulder without even looking. Winston is under the net. The ball fairly bounces off his palm into the center of the hoop. *Swish.*

The Buffaloes race across the court to the sound of their fans, who are gathered near the opposing basket. A freshman seated in front of us forms a bullhorn with his hands. "Didn't even touch the ground!" Marcie glances at

"Is nobody smart enough to be **worthy** of you?"

him, then turns to me and laughs.

I try to say something to her, but I can't even hear myself over the crowd. Maybe there's a certain freedom in that, to be an anonymous voice. Maybe I'm just kidding myself. I don't know. I close my eyes and massage my temples as my ears ring with the loudest noise I've ever heard in my life. Maybe this is what it's like being born, hearing for the first time. There is no frame of reference. Nothing can prepare you for the shock, all that sonic mush attacking your consciousness. "You have arrived," it says. "This is the world, the world as it really is, in all its dissonant glory." It's a sound that rattles your entire being, crashes upon you like a massive wave, beats you down, drains you of resolve and strength. It's the sound of ragged cheers, hands clapping, the sound of a thousand doors slamming open and shut, all at once. It's a sound against which you are nothing. It's that kind of sound. ★

Pomegranate Heart

(continued from page 14)

like that? How long? Forever? Was I just imagining things? I made my way back across the room and sat down in front of the computer.

"Why do you have to say things like that?" I asked. "Why can't you just say that you love me? Is that so awful? Am I so horrible?"

"No, no," she whined. "I didn't mean that. I just, you know, say things. I say what I feel. I don't know what you want from me."

"I want you to be perfect," I said, "the way I remember you."

"You made me, Stewart," she said. "If you don't like the way I am, that's your fault, not mine."

I frowned. That, unfortunately, sounded like something Neddy would say. That wasn't what I wanted to hear just then.

"I'm taking you in for grading tomorrow," I said. "We can talk about this afterwards. I need to think."

I turned off the computer and thought, but I didn't like any of the things that came to mind.

"Stewart, could I talk to you, please?"

As the rest of the class shuffled out of the room, I made my way up to Mr. Corrison's desk. "Yeah?" I said.

Corrison fidgeted nervously. "I need to talk to you about your project," he said.

"Persephone? What about her?"

Corrison picked up a pen and spun it between his fingers. It flipped out of his hands and cracked against the floor. "I can tell how much work you must have put into your Persephone project," he said. "It is a very impressive piece of work; the personality structure itself is more complex than most commercial personalities. Your effort was very substantial." He bit his lip.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I gave you an *F* on the program," Corrison said. "I'm sorry, Stewart. I had to. Persephone was just too unstable for me not to."

Suddenly the room seemed very large and I seemed very small. It felt like something behind my eyeballs was trying to claw its way out.

"What?" I flailed for words.

"Unstable?"

Corrison nodded sadly. "It's a very disturbed program. Persephone is extremely self-conscious about her body,

her looks, and her social skills. She feels deprived of attention. She exhibits numerous qualities of someone who is pathologically depressed."

"I'm a **piece** of you.
What you **love**, I **love**.
What you **hate**, I **hate**."

"That's, that's impossible," I stutered. "How?"

"My preliminary diagnosis would be that she has had prolonged contact with a person who is self-centered, controlling, and unresponsive."

"Me? You're saying that just being around me did this to her?"

"That diagnosis is preliminary," Corrison said quickly. "Look, Stewart, I know you must feel this is unfair. So do I. I've been instructed by the principal, because of the circumstances and publicity surrounding Mr. Elbrant's departure, not to fail any of his former students. I'm not going to fail you. You don't have to worry about your grade."

I stared at him. It took me a moment to comprehend what he was saying. "My grade?" I was shaking. "I don't care about my grade! I care about her!"

"I don't—"

"Where is she?" I interrupted.

He motioned to the computer. I quickly walked to the back of the classroom and turned it on. I opened the file named PERSEPHONE.PERSON.

"Oh, it's you," she said.

There was something about the edge in her voice that I didn't like. "Is there something wrong with me?" I asked.

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with you, exactly," she said. "It's just that you're so—I don't know—dull, overbearing."

"So why didn't you ever tell me this before?" I asked.

"Because I needed you, because I'd have been lonely without you."

"And not anymore?"

She shook her head. "Not anymore."

"Why's that?"

She settled in the grass in the shade of an apple tree and wouldn't meet my eyes. I sighed.

"You talked to Mr. Corrison, didn't you?" I asked.

Persephone nodded slowly.

"Do you know what he said?" I asked. "He said that you're unhappy, that you need help."

She didn't respond.

"Doesn't that bother you?" I asked. "It's not my fault if I'm not perfect," she said. "It's not my fault at all. It's your fault. You made me. You made me who I am. It's all your fault."

I groaned and looked away from the screen. "That's the exact same thing that Neddy said."

Persephone looked up, our eyes meeting for a few long moments. Then she looked away quickly.

"That's the same thing Neddy said," I repeated slowly. Persephone hunched over, facing the ground. Her long hair covered her face. Suddenly I knew. I understood everything.

"How long have you been seeing Neddy?" I growled. "How long has he been coming to see you?"

The night was bitter, dark, and deep when Neddy came again. He stood in the darkness of the limitless communications horizon and watched me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "You got what you wanted."

"No." He shook his head. "Not yet. This is what I want." His face broke into a soft chuckle.

"Why did you do it?" I asked. "I loved her."

"I want to tell you about how I broke Persephone. I want you to appreciate all the details. I want you to appreciate the art of it."

"Art? Is that what you call it?"

"Art is in the eye of the beholder, Stewart," he explained. "Some people might appreciate the graceful efficacy of what I've done. Not only did I destroy her, but I did it my way. I've twisted her"—he clenched his fist in front of him, straining noticeably—"so that the only time she feels good about herself are the fleeting moments when I let her believe that I might care about her." He lowered his fist, looked me in the eyes, and smiled. "You would offer her all of yourself. I offered her loathing and mockery, and she chose me. Do you know what she says about you? Do you want to know?"

"I won't play your game, Neddy," I said loudly. "I know what you're trying to do. You think you can destroy me by hurting Persephone. It won't work."

He glared at me coldly.

"I know what you are," I said. "I know what you do. I understand you now, and I was stupid not to have seen it sooner."

"Yes, you were." He scowled.

"Why me?" I asked. "I made you, Neddy. I gave you life. I loved Persephone. Why her? Why couldn't

you just find the Elbrants of the world to torture with your little games?"

Neddy watched me silently for a long, long time. When he spoke, his voice trembled, as if he were barely holding back the floodgates of evil. "I told you once, Stewart. I hate what you hate, and I love what you love. Why Persephone? Because I love her. I want to be with her. I want it more than anything. But because of you, I only get pleasure from destroying. You made me so that I had to destroy Persephone. I had no choice. Why you? Because you made me this way. You made me this thing that I am. You could have made me anything, and you made me this!"

"I'm sorry," I said, and for once, I meant it.

"You can pretend not to care," Neddy continued. "You can pretend that I failed to hurt you. But you know and I know that it's a lie." Then he turned and stormed off into the darkness.

I programmed a dozen security programs to keep him from ever coming back. He'll wander the darkness until someone catches him and eradicates him. I'll grieve for what he's done to her, but I'll grieve in my way and not on his terms. And I'll never let him destroy me, no matter what he does. Never.

The scene was dark, dark except for slivers of moonlight on the waves. Toward the horizon, the waters turned black and cold. Persephone sat watching the sea.

"I could watch the ocean forever," she said.

I nodded sadly.

"There's a certain quality," she explained, "to the ocean. It's so deep, so powerful. You can't help but appreciate how tiny, how meaningless, how insignificant . . ." Her voice trailed off for a second . . . "you are," she finished weakly.

"It's beautiful," I agreed.

"I heard what Neddy said," she

interrupted quickly. "I was eavesdropping."

I nodded again. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did to you."

"It wasn't your fault. It was mine." Her eyes never left the dark waters. "Stewart, do you love me?"

"Always," I answered sadly.

"Do you see this ocean?" she asked. "Out there, where the waters grow dark . . . It's so powerful, so mysterious. I've always wondered what's out there. I want to go there. I want to lose myself in those dark waters, forever."

She turned and her eyes searched mine. "Do you understand?"

I nodded sadly. "I understand." The wind blew softly through the dark grass, and the waves crashed against the rocks below. "Persephone," I said, "if I could, I'd join you there. I'd sail with you forever into that darkness."

She watched me sadly. "No, you wouldn't."

I moved the cursor to DELETE PROGRAM. DELETE PROGRAM—ARE YOU SURE? appeared on the screen.

Persephone closed her eyes, and a tear streaked down her chin.

"Good night, Persephone," I said.

"Stewart," she whispered. "I'm sorry I took so long to tell you, but I love you. Really, I do."

I closed my eyes, shook my head, and killed her. ★



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