

Zero Point Infinity

by John Lazarus

Chapter 1

“What kind of cancer did you say you have again?”

“Lymphoma.”

The assistant scrolls down the release form. She purses her lips, mildly annoyed by the difficulty of the search. Thomas Yu sits next to his wife in the consultation office, tired but mostly just unimpressed. He’s come here solely at her request.

“Doesn’t seem to be any option for lymphoma...” the assistant says, trailing off.

“Can we forget it for now? Where’s Dorothy Evans? We made the appointment understanding she’d be here,” Thomas says.

“Ms. Evans should be here soon. She’s been held up by an important... oh, here it is. No, wait, that’s ‘nymphomania.’ Huh, I wouldn’t think that could be life-threatening.”

Thomas stares at his wife, who as usual has recused herself from the proceedings. Resigned, he watches the pulsing, LCD patterns on her fingernails as they flip through her magazine.

While the assistant continues her quest through the byzantine maze of the release form, the locked doorknob to the office starts jangling.

“The fuck is this?” Thomas hears through the door (and what sounds like clenched teeth).

He looks at the unresponsive assistant, who has apparently plumbed to depths the noise cannot penetrate. The jangling continues for a moment, and is followed by the sound of several stacks of paper dropping to the floor, the clinking of keys, and finally the click of the lock releasing.

Unfortunately, the door has also been deadbolted.

“God damnit!”

A few seconds later, Dorothy Evans enters her office.

“Mr. and Mrs. Yu, please forgive me. I was held up in an important meeting.”

Dorothy pulls up a chair, setting down a briefcase, dozens of manila envelopes, a coffee, a donut and an electronic tablet. Only the coffee and the donut are hers. The rest is to make herself look busy.

“Becky, why did you lock the door?” she asks.

“You always say patient privacy is the most important thing. I didn’t want people barging in here trying to sneak a peek at Mr. Yu’s huge lymphs.”

Dorothy sends Becky out and apologizes again, offering Thomas and his wife a complimentary Dixie cup of lukewarm water, the only extravagance Tiantang Corp is willing to provide prospective clients. She brushes back the stray strands of hair hanging over her face, and failing to locate her tissues, wipes the sweat from her hands on the carpet.

The sight of Thomas’s pasty face and his wife’s tacky jewelry erases the rush she got when she walked in the building two minutes ago and was told she had an important meeting. Dorothy remembers this is still her awful job, still her awful clients.

“Tell me, Mr. Yu: how familiar are you with mind uploading?” Dorothy asks.

“Enough to know your company is by far the lowest rated of the six in Shanghai.”

Obviously, the Dixie cup had done little to assuage his anger. Dorothy isn’t worried, though. Like most of her clients, she knows they’ve come here out of necessity. Nobody with wealth, power, social connections, class or basic human decency chose Tiantang.

“Fair enough. It’s a competitive market. And, I’ll tell you right now, we just can’t offer what they can at MensaDyne or JiYiXiang. We’re not the ritziest. We’re not the biggest. We don’t offer the most.”

“Then why does this brochure say ‘Tiantang: Live the High Life in the After Life – No One Else Offers More.’”

“Well... that really depends on what your definition of ‘more’ is?”

“Okay, well what about environments? Once I’m uploaded, where will I be? Where can I go?”

“At the present moment, our servers only contain enough computing power for a single simulated environment.”

“A single city? I'll be stuck for all eternity in one goddamned city?”

“A city? No, a single room.”

“A single room?!”

“It's a very nice room. There's plush leather seating, velvet drapes, lots of sturdy oak tables, a fireplace for entertainment...”

This is usually the point clients leave the room. Thomas Yu remains seated. Dorothy can tell he is a man accustomed to indignity. He opens his mouth to protest, but decides against it. Thomas is smart enough to know there's no point. He is like a chessmaster who can always see forty moves ahead... to his inevitable defeat. (The first move was always the mistake, and in the general scope of his life, the first move had been being born.)

Dorothy continues. “There's an old saying that ‘a room is no more than the people who inhabit it.’”

There probably is, anyway, Dorothy thinks to herself. She's actually quite proud of this aphorism, especially coming on an empty stomach this early in the morning, and the more she thinks about it, the more she hopes it's unique to her.

Of course, for Thomas the problem is the people sharing this room would be the clients of Tiantang.

Dorothy put them in two general groups: the bumpkins, corrupt ministers of transportation and police chiefs from backwater prefectures, people desperate to follow a trend they were five years behind on, and the sadsacks, urban, middle class terminal cases like Thomas Yu, people goaded into copying their mind with Tiantang by family members too cheap or too spiteful to choose a better company.

“How many copies are actually run here, Ms. Evans?” Thomas asks, his spirits higher, realizing that when lining up at the gates of hell one might as well take in the lava pits.

“Right now? About 60,000. And that number's always getting bigger. Actually, Tiantang runs the largest number of copies of any facility in Asia. Hence the ‘more’ you inquired about. Sure, we might not get the big name celebrities or the high-power hedge

fund managers, but let me ask you this: Is that really who you want to spend your next life with? A bunch of Hollywood phonies and Wall Street assholes?”

For the first time today, Thomas doesn't feel the person across from him is addressing a man six feet to his rear. Dorothy brings her coffee to her lips, closes her eyes and takes a sip, and for a fleeting moment she remembers why she'd chosen this job in the first place.

Then the door to her office swings open.

“Dorothy, do you have any oil or butter? My desk drawer is jammed and I need my gun.”

It's Wang Zong, one of Tiantang's technicians in charge of uploading.

“Wang Zong, I'm in the middle of a meeting.”

“But Becky said you don't care who comes in during meetings.”

“That's not what I...”

“Time is factor, Dorothy. That snake's not gonna kill itself.”

Dorothy reaches into her lower desk drawer, settling for the olive over the peanut and soybean. Wang Zong leaves and Thomas continues his line of inquiry.

“I'll still be able to contact the outside, right? My wife? My family?” Thomas asks. His wife hasn't looked up once since Dorothy arrived - this question is no exception.

“Contact with the outside is confined to Tiantang premises. For safety reasons – and all the other companies are the same, by the way – the environment you will inhabit is completely removed from outside electronic networks.”

“So my wife or friends would have to physically come here to talk with me.” Thomas says this as if its likelihood was only observable on a quantum scale, and seems to take a deep sigh of relief.

“Either that, or you can have Tiantang-employed couriers deliver any message for you. And a little later, I can show you the interface where you can meet some of our clients. Plus, don't forget that Tiantang provides daily updates to your information feed - you'll have access to newspapers, current events, sports, new music, film, television...”

“HBO?”

“No, no HBO. That’s extra.”

“So basically I just sit in an empty room and read for all eternity?”

“Well, it’s not empty. Like I said, there’s a fireplace. But we’re adding things all the time. And with advances in computing power, it’s only bound to get better. In a decade, you could have a whole world to explore.”

“Really?”

“Sure, why not?”

Despite the contempt she has for many of them, Dorothy doesn't like lying to customers. But if the fireplace initiative she pioneered was anything to go by, the timeframe in which it would take Tiantang’s technicians to simulate an entire world would certainly extend beyond the heat death of the universe.

“So what about payment? All the computing power it will take to simulate me – how won’t I accrue a massive amount of debt? I don’t want my wife or son to carry a huge burden.”

“Initial upload is free. And since mind uploading’s commercial application is relatively recent, we still get millions in government research grants. They provide us with the money to maintain computing speed in exchange for the data you provide them into the nature of artificial intelligence.”

“Plus, a lot of copies, once inside, supplement their income. We have writers, visual artists, musicians, all who’ve published and sold their work after crossing over. One of our more successful authors just sold the ten...th copy of his self-published novel.”

“Okay. But they supplement their income to what end?”

Dorothy thinks it best not to mention the prostitutes. “Most use it to extend their memory caps.”

“I read a little about that. How does that work?”

“Memory caps? The longer you keep living inside, the more experiences you accumulate, the more memory storage you require. It then becomes a matter of deciding which memories you want to keep and which to discard.”

“After my initial upload, how much additional memory am I given?”

“Depends how much you want to pay. Here’s a price sheet.” Dorothy slides it over.

Stella Yu looks up for the first time. She opens her mouth, but only to let out a deep yawn.

Dorothy is impressed. Most wives at least cared enough to ask whether or not the sequence of ones and zeroes running on their supercomputers really was their husband. For Stella, uploading Thomas is merely blind adherence to social convention, like not spitting in church.

A few more softball questions and the contract is out and ready to sign. The speed surprises Dorothy, though at the moment the prospect of a commission isn’t as appetizing as the sight of the donut on her desk. With most couples there was enough fighting to allow a nice snack break; with Thomas and Stella the war had ended long ago, the stray hairs on his bald head monuments to defeat like the remaining buildings of a bombshelled city.

Thomas and his wife agree to go with the cheapest memory cap. Stella is convinced any more than four subjective years memory is a waste of money on someone like Thomas who never, even after post-Unification retirement, had a legitimate hobby or artistic pursuit. Except for photography which doesn’t count.

Thomas goes along, though Dorothy suspects that’s just because it’s the quickest path to deleting memories like the one he was currently making. Dorothy walks out of the office to give Thomas and Stella some peace and quiet while they gave the contract one final inspection. Unfortunately, this is followed by several gunshots and the sound of people having sex in the office above hers.

Stella exits the office a couple of minutes later. Her total word count rebuking the reception for their lack of mints dwarfs that of the last hour in the Dorothy’s office.

Thomas hangs back. Dorothy walks over and hands him her business card.

“Mr. Yu, please call me if you have any concerns or second thoughts. And I know we didn’t discuss this but I think it’s important to mention it to all my clients: I don’t want you to worry. I’ve worked here a long time and almost everyone gets nervous about transfer of consciousness. Everything I’ve seen tells me that ‘copy’... he will be you.”

Thomas just stares straight ahead.

“Let’s hope not.”

Chapter 2

A hush falls over the audience in the main hall. The stage is empty and dark, aside from the podium and a large portrait of the departed on an easel. On the podium is the brass symbol of the Church of Guaranteed Miracles: a man standing on a giant hand while holding up a crescent moon with a pair of crucifixes.

A man emerges from stage left. He has dirty blond hair, pale blue eyes and tight skin. His pin-striped suit, puffed-out chest and spiky hair fail to disguise how short he is. His walk is studied, his posture stoic, but despite best efforts to embody a five-star general, he mostly just looks like the world's most high-strung twelve-year-old.

He leans over the microphone and peers out into the audience. With his tiny body shielded, his presence is better felt - everyone in the crowd suspects he's eavesdropping on their innermost doubts and regrets.

He starts his speech.

"Hello, everyone. My name is Daniel Madison and I'm so pleased you could all make it to our mandatory briefing tonight at the Center for the Advancement of Spiritual Healing, Fundamental Love, Openness and Wisdom."

"Four years ago, our founder and leader, Huang Li Rong, pulled himself up out of the trenches and left the church so his could continue his research. It was a sad but necessary departure. As you may also be aware, this happened to coincide with his public indictment for possession for child pornography. But, as we all know, that was merely a result of a dependency illegally implanted into his subconscious by vengeful city officials and never held up in a court of law."

Daniel is unwavering. His voice isn't loud, but each syllable cuts through the air like glass.

"HLR has said, in several notarized statements, he was more than happy to relinquish control of the church to myself and the other members of the Eighth Realm. It's been a wild four years. Under new management, church membership has increased fivefold. We've built temples in Beijing, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Singapore, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Neo Kansas City."

"At the same time, HLR has provided us with instrumental insight into the spiritual world. We've already enjoyed the fruits of his labor to some extent. Consultants

in our R&D department, in conjunction with HLR, have developed special lip balms that eradicate stuttering and other abnormal speech patterns. With HLR's meticulously-designed calisthenics programs, we've finally come to understand the benefit two hours of daily exercise has on the body."

"But the impact is deeper still. Despite the comforts our exalted, 'Unified' society purports to provide – a paltry, universal basic income covering all food and necessities, free healthcare, free air travel anywhere within the nation – the map guiding you to true spiritual enlightenment sits solely on the pages of HLR's writings."

"How many of you still have doubts about your place in the universe? How many still worry about such trivialities like death and how to provide a safe future for your children? How many of you have momentary feelings of despair, guilt, sadness, confusion, discomfort, itchiness or dry mouth? From what our wiretapping records show, it's almost all of you. Well, as a member of the Eighth Realm, I can tell you those feelings are but a remnant from a distant past."

"That's only the beginning. I'm proud to say that HLR, in his final research, discovered pathways leading to a further seven realms, wherein the ecstasy, contentedness and nirvana offered are almost inconceivable, even to an Eighth Realmer like myself. So we must resist, on an occasion such as this, to wallow in grief. On the contrary, this is a moment for celebration."

A mannered burst of applause sprouts from the audience.

"Three days ago, at 0700 hours, Friday the Fourth of August, 72 AD, HLR shed his mortal coil and ascended into the great beyond. This is not a death of the being incarnate. That lives on forever through HLR's teachings, through the acts of his followers, and through the spreading of his liturgy on tax reform throughout the world."

Daniel pauses. Not to compose himself – on the contrary, his eyes burn with an even fierier intensity – but to let the moment breathe. He shuffles a pile of blank papers. This whole speech, every pause, every intonation, has been rattling around in his head for four years.

"Now, as for the seven new realms, we've posted a notice on the bulletin board that lays out the basic pay scale. Details are soon to follow. And in lieu of flowers, HLR's family asks that each of you donate any securities, bonds or stock options to the church as per the stipulations in his will."

"And I'm now seeing we have a question in the second row. Speak up, brother."

A middle-aged, Caucasian male wearing an ill-fitting suit and a dopey smile stands up and lowers his arm.

“Hi. Kevin Owens. Fifth Realmer and assistant director of our germology division. First, I’d like to extend a warm welcome to all church members to come pray with me and deal with any grief issues they may be experiencing over the coming days. I was just curious, Reverend Madison – how did HLR pass away?”

“His heart stopped,” Daniel says.

If the question has taken Daniel by surprise, his face doesn’t show it. The audience can still feel him boring into the recesses of their subconscious.

Mr. Owens continues his line of questioning.

“Yes, of course. What I mean is, what caused his heart to stop?”

“The man was 72. Once you reach that age I think it’s safe to simply chalk it down to natural causes.”

“What did the autopsy show?”

“Brother Owens, you know full well HLR’s teachings strictly prohibit post-mortem examination of any church members.”

“They do?”

A few rows back on the far left end of the hall, two Chinese men in black suits prick up their ears to the commotion. The man on the left, Mr. Zhao, is playing solitaire on top of the evening’s program. He runs an ace through his thick hair and lays it down. The man to his right, Mr. Liu, is slumped back in his chair, rolling an empty shell casing between his thumb and index finger.

“Do we have a troublemaker, Mr. Zhao?”

“It certainly appears so, Mr. Liu.” Mr. Zhao continues his play uninterrupted.

“At a time like this. When we’re all in mourning.”

“No respect for the dead.”

“No respect for the living.”

“Perhaps we should take our heretic heckler up on his invitation. Such an obvious cry for help. I feel he’s not well.”

“You think we should purge him of his sins?”

“Cleanse the soiled soul.”

Mr. Liu pockets the shell casing. He squints at Mr. Owens, then closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

“Yes, though I think it would be prudent to seek approval from Reverend Madison beforehand. You know how he feels about... ‘impromptu interventions.’”

Mr. Zhao lays down the last king, smiles and turns his head.

“Agreed.”

The minor commotion has subsided and Mr. Owens returns to his seat. Daniel Madison continues:

“Thank you for your concern. But I want you all to know that HLR... he would not want us to be concerned with these simple matters of the flesh. The question of how he passed, and where his body is, is immaterial to everything him and his teachings stand for. Next I’d like to invite Mr. Jonathan Cartwright, CGM member of the Seventh Realm and executor of LHR’s estate on stage to corroborate my eulogy.”

An overweight man in a gray suit and a red tie takes the stage.

Daniel Madison steps down from the podium. His skin is completely dry, as if a single tear or bead of sweat would threaten to turn his whole body to rust.

Mr. Cartwright climbs up to the podium, shuffles a second set of blank papers, puts on a pair of reading glasses and starts to speak.

Chapter 3

In a haze of smoke and music, Dorothy swivels her wrist. *Could I do it?*

She's perched atop an uneven barstool swirling a dish of assorted nuts, wondering if allotted enough attempts, the randomized movement of the nuts in the bowl will ever result in the cashews, pistachios and almonds totally segregating: a bowl of thirds without any cross-species mingling.

She stops her hand and looks down to see the nuts mixed as evenly as before.

Just because the universe is infinite does not mean anything is possible. Certain laws are inviolable. It is a question of improbability versus impossibility, and it's clear the latter holds the upper hand.

She swirls some more before reaching the conclusion that she's drunk and really needs more hobbies.

"Man, what happened to you today?" Cao Xiao Lin, Dorothy's drinking partner for the evening, plops down two more pints.

Lin Lin puts back her drink like water, even though she's almost half Dorothy's size. Not that anyone would know it. Lin Lin had a way of bending light toward her and making everyone else recede into the background. Even men complained how unfair her body was.

"Oh, the same as any day, I guess. There was this guy this morning, a new customer. I don't know. I mean, we get a lot of depressing people, but something about him. I felt awful the rest of the day."

"Oh, that's terrible. He was missing the bottom half of his body?"

"Uh... no."

"Oh – then why didn't you call me? I could've cheered him up."

"Jesus, Lin Lin, his wife was with him."

"What, would she have cared?"

“No, I guess not. Probably wouldn’t have even noticed. But I see enough of that at work. Thank God our techs are too incompetent to make a fully-immersive interface.”

“I think it’s romantic.”

“What, blowing a terminal cancer patient in front of his wife?”

“No. Well, I mean, maybe. But I was talking about all those copies. A flesh-and-blood human and a copy, your love only able to take the form of the messages you send over the terminal, the human waiting for the day she can die to unite with her lover in the digital world.”

Lin Lin clutches the edge of the table.

“Bitch, you’re drunk.”

Lin Lin giggles and finishes her pint. Dorothy takes a large swig just to keep it competitive.

The bar they’re in is called Kensington’s, a brick, one-story British-style pub and eatery in the former French Concession of Shanghai. Though the Shanghaiese had a two-century history of cosmopolitanism, they’d still been unable to master foreign cuisines. The food at Kensington’s is no exception - not only is it edible but actually quite appetizing.

Lin Lin orders some chips and waits for Dorothy to finish her drink. She looks at her friend admiringly. Even though Dorothy always complained about her job, and her co-workers stole her phone on a weekly basis (more often than not by accident), she’s still working in one of the most exciting, revolutionary industries on the planet. She made Lin Lin wish she’d done more with her life.

Dorothy kills her drink, indulging in the dizzy head rush. She turns back to Lin Lin. “You’ve got a nice glow today. I mean, more so.” Dorothy knows Lin Lin doesn’t crave the compliment - she’s just filling in a lull in the conversation.

“It’s this new diet I’ve been trying out.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, big focus on juices, getting lots of replenishing vitamins. Oh, and I only eat things that have been burnt.”

“Uh huh.”

“Or charred.”

“That’s... weird.”

“Yeah, supposedly when something’s burnt, all the unnecessary carbs go with it, and the charred chunks soak up any toxins in your stomach.”

“Where did you hear this?”

“This guy I’ve been seeing’s a member of the Church of Guaranteed Miracles. He introduced me to their nutritional guide...”

“Oh, Jesus, not some cult.”

“It’s not a cult. Well, it might be, actually. What’s a cult?”

“It doesn’t matter. So who’s this new guy? A boyfriend or just a customer?”

“Just a customer for now.”

Lin Lin is, as Dorothy likes to call her, a “lady of the night” (though she much prefers the term “hooker” herself). Like Dorothy, the universal basic income administered by the Unified government means she doesn’t need to work, though unlike Dorothy, she does it anyway because the work is fun and you meet interesting people. Also, it’s the simplest, most cost-effective way to get laid the seven or eight times a day she felt the need.

She started when she was eighteen, after she’d bought a full-length mirror and matured to the point of acquiring basic common sense. At the outset, she worked as a KTV girl. She loved screwing on couches and drinking men under the table, but physically it was too much to handle. Those guys nearly destroyed her poor eardrums with all that loud music. A few years later, after Unification, she took to freelancing and has done it since.

Business is good, but, like most other professions, sex work has become almost entirely automated in the past decade. Lin Lin doesn’t have anything against the virtual sex trade, especially since its ubiquity led to a steep decline in international terrorism. Still, she banks on her assumption that lots of men prefer the human touch.

The chips arrive at the table, black as coal. Lin Lin chomps into one and orders four more pints.

“They should be here any minute.”

“They?... Oh no.”

“Come on, don’t be such a loner.”

“I’m really not in the mood tonight.”

“He’s probably a nice guy. If not, just get really, really drunk. You’ll forget all about it tomorrow morning.”

“You’re gonna make a wonderful mother someday.”

“You always say we should try new things. Remember that thing you got me to try last weekend – I’d never heard of that before and it turned out I actually liked it.”

“What? Go jogging?”

“Yeah. ‘Zhog-ging,’ ‘yog-ging.’ What’s that, Swedish?”

Dorothy had dated a couple of guys back in college, though sometimes she suspects she might be confusing those relationships with ones in movies she’s seen. She’s been in a bit of a dry spell as of late, though to Lin Lin, it’s more of a dust bowl. She’d half-heartedly tried her hand at online dating, but anytime she met a guy she liked, it would always turn out to be some fake profile created for the purpose of conducting sociological research.

Now entering her fourth decade in this world, she’s more at peace with the thought of being alone.

As the four pints arrive, Lin Lin waves through the haze at two men in the doorway. Lin Lin’s John is a thin Caucasian man, not unattractive, with horn-rimmed glasses, sparkling blue eyes and a receding hairline. The other guy looks ethnically Han Chinese, a bit shorter with a round, indistinct face. They’re both wearing shimmery silver spandex jumpsuits. *Great, a pair of investment bankers.*

As her date walks closer and sits down, Dorothy finds his face still hasn’t assumed any distinct shape, nor have any features taken form. His body is also a bit chubbier than she’d prefer, but she knows she isn’t one to talk (and the spandex certainly isn’t doing him any favors).

Well, at least he has nice hair.

This much is true. It is a thick, jet-black quaff with a rich, silken sheen. Unfortunately, six inches lower, through a set of ashen, crumb-filled teeth, comes the next sentence:

“Hi, my name’s Yu Wang but everyone calls me Scorpion. I didn’t bring any money, but maybe I could just pay you in insider trading tips.”

And here we go. Dorothy slams another pint and curses herself for taking that pill to prevent the nausea and urination that came with consuming copious amounts of alcohol. At least then she’d have an excuse to leave the table.

“She’s not a pro, dude,” the John (whose name actually *is* John) says to Scorpion.

“Seriously?” Scorpion puts down the chip and pouts. An unfortunate side-effect of automated sex and legalized prostitution is that many men, especially ones with nicknames like Scorpion, think that with dating, the fruits aren’t worth the strenuous effort needed to affect general civility.

In some way, Dorothy feels bad for him. Maybe it’s just an extension of her pity toward Thomas Yu carrying over from the morning. Maybe Lin Lin is right; maybe she should stop being a prude and try something new, even if that thing is bound to be short and disappointing. And he really did have nice hair.

A round later the conversation picks up. Or at least kind of staggers forward slowly.

“So how do you two know each other? I wouldn’t think you’d hang out in the same circles,” John asks Lin Lin.

“We met when Dorothy was in college.”

“I walked in on her and my boyfriend having sex in my dorm room.”

“Oh, that’s cool. You weren’t upset?” John asks Dorothy.

“No. I was mostly just relieved he didn’t try to do that on me.”

“But yeah, after that you taught me how to cook in that communal kitchen, remember? Every Wednesday. If it weren’t for you, I’d still be eating cold, plain spoonfuls of marinara sauce.”

“Aww, that’s cute. You really shouldn’t eat sauces, though. Totally disrupts your *qi*,” John adds.

Ugh. The indestructibility of mystic Chinese bullshit and the idiocy of its followers send Dorothy back to her glass. She'd only vaguely heard of the Church of Guaranteed Miracles, but never realized it incorporated elements of Eastern folklore. After another gulp, she decides to press John on it, not to be spiteful so much as, after a long day, she really needs a good laugh.

"So Lin Lin tells me you're a member of CGM. What's that like?"

"Well, I've only just started recently. But it's totally changed my life."

"Oh, yeah?"

"It's more of a self-help program than a church, actually. Not a bunch of moralizing, but a lot of useful tips on how to live your life."

"Such as?"

"Well, first, you've got to realize you're in charge of your life. You've got to look out for Number One."

"Sure. Makes sense."

"Learn when to say 'no' and just move on."

"Alright."

"I was really getting stressed out at home, always having to cook and change diapers and give the kids baths. And when I finally decided to cut all that out of my life, the changes were staggering. My complexion got better, I slept more, I had more energy."

"You're married?!"

Dorothy shouldn't be surprised. She knows Lin Lin prefers married men because they never get clingy. She still feels it's wrong, but has to admit she's a woman at odds with the zeitgeist. For example, she doesn't show any interest in the couple having sex on the table to their left.

Rather than present a direct reprimand, she attacks in a flanking pattern. "So do you guys believe in a God? Or is it pantheistic? You know, the God of the Sea? The God of Core Workouts? The God of Failed Alimony Payments?"

"It's more like people are free to believe whatever they want." The insult slips right past him. "You know, if you're interested, you could come next time."

Lin Lin's eyes perk up. "Yeah, we should all go. I think it would be fun."

"If the pussy's as good as you said, count me in," Scorpion adds, his attention mostly with the fornicating couple on the left.

"Sure, I think the next free trial is tomorrow," John says.

"Free trial?"

"That would actually be great if you guys sign up because with every ten new members I sign I get to move up another spiritual realm."

Dorothy nods and smiles without committing. She'll have time tomorrow, when they're both sober, to warn Lin Lin to avoid this man like the plague (or like whatever was happening at table five).

An hour later the four of them climb into a cab. There had been a commotion moments earlier inside when a Japanese man in a black trench coat kept walking around to different tables asking people to hide an SD drive.

Minutes later, a pair of hitmen wielding plasma rifles burst through the front door. They blasted shots at the Japanese man, who then lunged behind the bar and retaliated by hacking the robot bartending staff, manipulating them to concoct and launch some sort of alcohol bomb.

Fortunately, the whole scene dematerialized moments later – everything (the three men, the plasma bursts, the bombs) had just been an elaborate prank by some Russian frat boys at table nine who managed to hack into the bar's holo-display systems.

The incident is enough to move everyone onto the next leg of the night, which Dorothy hopes involves the embrace of a warm, empty bed.

The violence had momentarily taken Lin Lin out of the mood. It's one of her few turnoffs. Luckily, it doesn't take much to work her back up. A gust of wind or a pat on the back usually does the trick.

She and John now lock lips and limbs in the back seat. Dorothy and Scorpion get in the front, the car doors the only thing of theirs locking. Dorothy waits, and then allows for retinal scan to make payment. Scorpion says nothing.

"So where are we going?" Dorothy says to Lin Lin.

“Oh, I don’t care. Anywhere’s fine,” says Lin Lin, immersed in the throes of passion. It isn’t exactly awkward for Dorothy. But much like seeing your science teacher at the cinema with his family, or your badminton partner give someone an MRI, it just feels *off*.

“Why don’t I just have it take us back to my place? Okay, Lin Lin?”

Lin Lin would answer but her mouth is currently occupied. Dorothy slumps her shoulders and sighs.

Scorpion pauses and then smirks like an idiot. “Oh. Ohhhh!”

“What?” Dorothy types her address into the navigation screen on the dashboard.

“Nothing. It’s just... I mean, I thought I sensed something between us, when you said your name and shook my hand, but... yeah, totally. Let’s go there.”

“That’s not what I mea...” Dorothy hears an error sound and turns back to the navigation screen. “That’s weird. It says it doesn’t recognize my address. Computer, why isn’t 550 Xujiahui Road registering?”

“This is not a valid address for Shanghai proper. Would you like to search another municipality?” the computer navigation responds.

“What the hell’s wrong with this piece of crap? Computer, please drive us to Baoding Garden Estates.”

“This is not a valid address of Shanghai pro...”

“The fuck? Am I that drunk? What’s going on here?” Dorothy shakes her head. She’s lightheaded but still cognizant of her surroundings, particularly Scorpion’s unmistakable erection slowly rising under his spandex. “*Am I that drunk?*” is all that *he heard*, she assumes.

“I think this center console folds in, if you want to just take care of business now.”

“Look, honey, you’re nice and all, but I find every aspect of you totally repulsive.” If she could, Dorothy would apologize to his hair.

“Wow, you know just what to say to get me going,” Scorpion says back with childish glee. Dorothy ignores him as he moves his hand down to touch himself.

“Computer, please pull up a map of Huangpu district.”

With the other three members of the cab predisposed in matters carnal, Dorothy gets to work, running her fingers over the nav screen, zooming in and selecting her apartment complex, which is clearly labeled with the address she gave moments earlier. The nav com gives off a few superfluous calibration sounds and the car finally moves forward.

Scorpion slides his free hand toward Dorothy's thigh, which she plucks up at the wrist with two fingers like a dirty tissue.

"Remember what I said: horrible, repulsive, ugly."

"Woah, woah, woah. Slow down. There's no tissue in here and I'm not wearing socks or a necktie."

Scorpion is interrupted when the vehicle, turning right onto Fuxing Road, loses power. The nav screen goes blank and the cab sputters to a stop.

Dorothy tries to restart the car but gets no response. "Must be a faulty power cell. I'll go check under the hood. It's no wonder it couldn't find my apartme..." Dorothy says before the power returns and she's thrown back into her seat.

The taxi wildly propels itself forward, sharply accelerating to the speed limit before leveling off.

Has it been hacked? Unlikely, Dorothy thinks, trying to remain calm. These systems are unhackable to all but the most advanced software engineers. The money and know-how needed to purposefully crash a car meant it was impractical for all but the most high-level political assassinations. But now that she thinks about it, Scorpion's mix of incompetence and entitlement has him pegged as a senator's son.

After it turns onto Luban Road, the cab accelerates, exceeding the speed limit. Less than a kilometer ahead, Dorothy can see cars at a red light. The cab doesn't show any sign of slowing down. Dorothy's stomach climbs into her throat, ready to jettison itself.

"Uh, everybody, I think we need to bail." John, Scorpion and Lin Lin are sitting up and mostly dressed.

"It's going too fast," John says.

"It's gonna be going a lot slower in about ten seconds," Dorothy says.

Dorothy grabs at the handle of her door, but it won't give. She pulls at the manual locks. Nothing.

"Computer, disengage door locks," she screams.

"At your present speed, door locks cannot be disengaged."

"Then slow the fuck down!"

No response. The stop light is only 150 meters away. John and Lin Lin start kicking at the glass of their side windows. Dorothy puts on her seat belt and tucks her head between her legs. Scorpion attempts to do the same, but in the reverse order.

Then, suddenly, the car veers to the right and the power cuts out again. Heading toward a light pole with still enough momentum to crush everyone inside, Dorothy clasps her hands over her head. About forty meters away, the emergency brake applies itself and the taxi screeches to a halt. It comes to a complete stop a few feet short of the light.

Everyone exhales in relief. John and Lin Lin bring their feet back to the floor. Dorothy slowly lifts her head up.

"Well, I think we've stoppe..."

The power returns and the taxi lurches forward once again, smashing directly into the light pole.

"You have arrived at your destination," the nav com says.

Dorothy picks bits of shattered windshield out of her hair. She turns around and sees Lin Lin and John crawling out of their window frames. Scorpion is curled up like the inverse of his namesake.

"So, do you still wanna have sex? It's okay if you say no, but if you do I'm gonna need to go home and change my pants first."

