

DANCERS

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

SHE NEVER LOOKED away from the monitors, her fingers crawling like pale spiders over the keyboard. In the cramped room below, four faceless chrome steel robots writhed in spastic *tai-chi*. Each movement was a subroutine, read from an FM signal generated by Poly's program.

"Beauty," said Sy, who was running the master VTR.

Poly's hand moved to the ten-key, zooming in an overhead, and the monitor flashed stiff chrome nipples, erect steel penises, just visible under the orange quilted frocks. She cut to slo-mo for a final, blurred sweep across the bodies.

"Hot," Sy said. "Really hot, babe."

The program scrolled off the screen. She let her hands fall into her lap. Not so hot, she thought. Strictly art imitates art. But good enough for *Cable Vogue*.

What she'd wanted was to get the feel of the robot dancers that were suddenly everywhere on cable. In the two years the robots had been commercially available nobody had found much to do with them; they didn't have enough dexterity to work an assembly line and they were slaves to their programming. Poly had done a couple of static layouts with them for *Cable Vogue*, but other than that they had ended up collecting garbage and handling nuclear waste.

Then the first dancer tape had shown up on an access channel. Nobody knew how long it had been happening, the robots spinning and posing in their own twisted, cybernetic art form, but once it caught on the cable was full of it.

The style was more complex than it looked. Poly had approximated the timing with a random number generator, but she knew she didn't have the essence of it. The failure left her irritable and a little depressed.

Just the perfect mood, she thought, to go see Helen.

She dropped down the ladder to the living room of the converted studio flat. Sy was working his way through the robots, collecting the one-of-a-kind, stapled-together designer originals and putting them on hangers. The robots, disconnected from the transmission, slipped into a maintenance mode that was part of their firmware. A thin film of oil seeped out of their joints and then disappeared as they stretched slightly, slumped forward, and went dead.

"Good shit," Sy said to her.

She nodded and pulled heavy drapes off the window. The inside of the paperweight Helen had given her last year was moving slowly in the last rays of the sun. It was a glass dome with two perpendicular foil sails inside, held in a vacuum. The fronts of the sails were silver and the backs were black and it was so perfectly balanced that the pressure of the sunlight alone could make the sails spin.

"What now?" Sy said.

She looked at the robots. "Get them out of here."

"Okay."

She took her jacket off the hook behind the door.

“Hospital?” Sy asked.

She nodded again.

“Any...?”

Word? she thought. Improvement? Hope?

“No,” she said.

SHE DOZED OFF in the cab. It was sleep as defense, the kind of sleep that comes after early alarms and before appointments with abusive clients. She woke up at the hospital and wandered groggily into an elevator.

Why do I keep coming? she asked herself. Helen doesn't even expect it any more. Is it just that if it hadn't been for the cancer we would probably have broken up? That I got pressured into something that's pretending to be love because she's going to die?

The elevator chimed her floor. She stumbled getting off and nearly fell. Even my own feet are trying to keep me away, she thought.

The overhead lights were on in Helen's room. Poly stuck her head through the doorway, saw a doctor on either side of the bed. They had Helen's gown up so they could look at the growth. When they noticed Poly they nodded vaguely at her and kept talking.

The medical name for it was Type II Teratocarcinoma. Superficially it resembled malignant teratoma, a fairly rare cancer that attacked germ cells in the ovary and testes. Teratomas produced specialized tissues—skin, hair, sometimes even teeth. But teratoma was just cancer, and most cancer was under control these days, between radiation and chemo and beta carotene.

The new tumors didn't respond to any standard techniques. When the pathologists autopsied them they found something they'd never seen before. The new virus, and they were pretty sure it was a virus, was even more specialized than teratoma. Sometimes it built kidney cells, sometimes liver cells. One built a nearly functional, hormone-secreting ovary inside a patient's scrotum.

But most of all it liked to make brain cells.

The patients called it T-2. Some of them called it Tea-For-Two. Easier, Poly thought, than to go on day after day calling it by its real name.

Cancer.

Through the thin, jaundiced skin next to Helen's hip she could see the whorls and indentations of the fist-sized tumor. In a matter of days, a week or two at most, it would poison her liver or perforate her intestines and she would die.

One of the doctors pulled the gown back over the swelling and smiled. “Sorry,” she said, and Poly smiled back at her mechanically. The doctors left and Poly wondered how they could stand it, the sight of muscles tight with pain, the stink of stale farts and antibiotics, the sound of men crying hopelessly in the dark.

“How are you feeling?” she asked Helen.

“Super,” Helen said. “Hundred and two percent.”

Poly moved her feet uncomfortably. She couldn't find any humor in the disease, black or otherwise, and attempts at it struck her as tasteless and cruel. She remembered a visitor in the cafeteria wearing a T-shirt that said, "Cancers Need Love Too." Under the words was a drawing of the hideous, mutated heart they'd taken out of one woman's belly.

"Really," she said.

"Okay. No pain. How's work?"

"Another *Vogue* shoot. The new Versace stuff. It's nice."

Helen nodded and closed her eyes. Her blonde hair looked gray and shadows made long vertical lines down her face. On the right side of her forehead was a smudge of yellows and browns.

"Your head..."

"Nothing," Helen said, her fingers hovering over the bruise, not quite touching it.

Poly thought of the robots, on their way back to the warehouse now, their harsh clean lines that would never bruise, never age, never bulge with cancer.

"What happened?"

"I was...sleepwalking."

"Sleepwalking?"

"It happens. With the disease. With...this kind of tumor."

For the first time Poly noticed the straps hanging limply from the side of the bed. "Helen, I..."

"Don't."

The silence began to sound like it could go on forever.

"You're tired," Poly said at last.

"Yes."

"I'll go."

"Thank you...for coming."

Poly squeezed her hand. It was cold, withered, freckled with liver spots. I'm no help, Poly thought. She doesn't even want me here. Because she has the disease and I don't and so we can't even talk to each other any more.

ON TV THE ROBOTS were dancing. Poly left the channel on and walked through the apartment, moving the furniture from where it had been pushed against the walls, shutting the cameras and computer consoles back in their closets. Everything tucked away, back to stark white walls and hardwood floors and cold, antiseptic air.

Safe, she thought. Back in control.

She put something in the microwave and watched the TV, telling herself she was doing research, knowing the motion of the gleaming bodies was beginning to hypnotize her, the meaning dancing just beyond her reach.

When the phone rang she answered it without looking away from the screen.

"It's Sy."

"And?"

"I'm at the warehouse. You better get over here."

"Why? What's wrong?"

“You better see it.”

SPIN. BOW. ONE KNEE collapsing, then coming back up. One arm out, the other shoulder dropping. Shuffle. Turn. No rhythm. No synchronization. No pattern. But something there just the same, like the barely discernable humanity of twelve tone music.

“Christ,” Poly said.

“I just got the last one in. And they started.”

“They can’t be doing it themselves,” she said. “Can they?”

Sy shook his head.

“Then who is? Who’s running them?”

“I already swept the place. Not transmissions. Not in or out.”

“*Then what’s making them do it?*”

The thrust of a glistening metal hip seemed sexual, threatening. She wanted to look away but couldn’t. I was wrong to mimic this, she thought. Alien, yes, sinister, yes, but pure somehow. This dance belongs to whoever is running it.

Whoever it is.

“Don’t know,” Sy said. “Probably nobody does.”

“What about the others? The ones on cable. Some of those are taped around here, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, some.”

“Where?”

“Clubs. Places downtown. The Licks, I think. Some others.”

She started for the door.

“Hey. What if they don’t know either?”

“Somebody knows,” she said. Somebody could explain, find a compartment to put them in, a word for what she was feeling that would give her a handle on it.

“What about...them?” Sy asked.

A smooth, steel oval of a face seemed to be staring at her. The head tilted slightly, quizzically, and then the body underneath it spun it away.

“Leave them,” she said.

THE DOWNTOWN SIDEWALKS seethed with life. Neon reflected from mirrored glasses and spattered the dirty white robes of the shaykers. Just to get from the cab to the front door of the club she had to push her way through what seemed to be a hundred of them, her padded jacket protecting her from their jutting elbows and shoulders.

The inside of the Licks was dark and crowded as the street, but the smoke and beer fumes and the residual amyl nitrate tang added grit to the air. On stage five robots danced, one of them stenciled with a radiation hazard symbol. Huge speakers battered the audience with computer generated twelve-tone.

Poly’s stomach crawled and her eyes burned. She looked for somebody in control. Both bartenders were in full Noh makeup, their faces slack and impassive. The only other employee in sight was a scrawny boy in a sleeveless T-shirt, running lights and tapes from the top of a padded booth.

She had to cross the dance floor to get to him. The small open area was packed with spaced-out shaykers and sullen straights, their feet planted and their bodies swaying to some soundless communal rhythm.

She reached up and rapped on the window of the booth. The scrawny kid stared down at her, the black speaker grid taking the place of his mouth.

“Can I talk to you?” she shouted.

The eyes stared at her without expression, then disappeared. A door opened in the side of the booth and she squeezed through. The space inside was no bigger than the toilet on a plane. The kid sat on a ladder that led up to his controls, his knees on a level with Poly’s face.

“The robots,” she said. “Who runs them?”

The kid’s lips moved, but she couldn’t hear him over the noise.

“What?” she shouted.

“Nobody,” he repeated. “No transmitter. Nothing. Cops looked. Two, three times. Nothing.”

“Where do they come from? How do they get here?”

“Walk. Different ones, all the time.”

“Why here?”

The kid shrugged. “You from the cable?”

“No,” she said.

“Want some snort?”

“No,” she said. “Thanks.”

She pushed her way out of the booth. From where she stood she could see the glazed eyes and parted lips of the mob, swaying back and forth.

Like some crackpot religious cult, she thought, watching their prophets. Or maybe like they were just walking in their sleep.

Sleepwalking.

She saw where her thoughts were going and her hands and feet went cold.

THE FRONT DOORS of the hospital were locked, so she went in through Emergency. Nobody tried to stop her.

Helen’s room was dark. Poly left the door open to get a trickle of light from the hall and quietly moved a chair to the side of the bed.

Helen was asleep, her fingertips twitching in tiny convulsions on top of the straps that held her down. Even through the sheet and the hospital gown Poly could see the bulge of the tumor.

She took the paperweight out of her jacket pocket. In the darkness of the room the foil sails were motionless.

Poly sat and waited, hardly breathing, holding the paperweight directly over the cancer.

New toy, she thought. Come on. Reach out, play with it. I dare you.

Her eyes hurt from staring. She blinked twice, quickly. Or better yet, she thought, just prove me wrong. I’ll feel like an idiot, but at least I’ll get some sleep tonight.

Slowly the sails began to move.

Poly looked away and then back again.

The sails spun, faster and faster. The dome began to vibrate in Poly's hands. Her teeth sank into her lower lip and she tasted blood. The sails were a gray blur inside the dome.

And then Helen's head came up, eyes open, one clawed hand jerking free from the strap and reaching for the paperweight. The eyes were not Helen's any more. Something blind, deaf, and horribly alien was trying to see out through them.

Poly's mouth opened to scream and nothing came out.

The hand snatched the paperweight away and Poly watched the fingers tighten until it imploded with a sharp crack and tiny bits of glass spewed over the room.

She flinched from the sound and it was enough to break the contact with those awful eyes. She lurched sideways out of her chair and went onto her hands and knees in the broken glass. And then she ran.

SHE SAT ON her couch, a drink untouched on the table beside her. The blood from the cuts on her hands had dried. She sat and tuned through the channels on the cable, one after another.

I could never prove it, she thought. But I know it's true.

She thought about all the patients in all the hospitals, about the cancerous brains that grew inside them, minds without eyes, without mouths, without arms or legs or vocal cords. Minds reaching without hands for bodies they *could* control, chrome steel bodies that would live far beyond their few weeks of feeble awareness. Bodies that would live forever.

She dropped the remote control and her hands clenched until the knuckles went yellow with the strain.

On the screen the robots danced.