

HARSH

Paul

Introduction by



Oases

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Although this small postmodern fairytale derives its

title from a Sonic Youth album, its ambiance has little to do with that group's wild-eyed experimental music. Instead, I tried to achieve a kind of Tom-Dischian sardonic romanticism, and think I succeeded pretty nicely.

Damien Broderick was kind enough to purchase the story for the newish Aussie zine Cosmos, where he serves as fiction editor. I liked the fact that it was the sole piece of fiction in that issue, amidst a host of well-done pop-science articles. I never got to appear in Omni, in a similar setting, so this felt like a second chance to reach an audience attracted more by technology than dreams.

DAYDREAM NATION

*A*LONE AGAIN, DAMN IT.

Cirri Beausoleil carried a twist-tied plastic bag filled with random, trivial possessions Ken had left behind down the corridor to the fifth-floor garbage chute. A pair of smelly gym socks; several Chinese take-out cartons filled with remnants of that noxious sweet-and-sour chicken he adored; a key-fob USB device big as a dime containing terabytes of possibly-important-but-screw-him files. And assorted other grimly quotidian reminders of another affair that had ended before it had really even begun.

Unlatching the stained, scratched metal door, Cirri launched the emotional ballast downward into dark basement oblivion, and instantly felt a little better.

She and Ken had been basically incompatible. Matters were as simple as that. She wasn't a bad person, and neither was Ken. (It cost Cirri a twinge to affirm this latter statement, but she immediately felt big-hearted for doing so.) They were just two different types who had grown to grate on each other's nerves in daily proximity.

Of course, she had been blinded to Ken's annoying features and habits for the longest time by his original seductive iDreams presentation. God, how strongly that parasensorial burst had hit her, some six months ago! She recalled those moments as if she were undergoing them again right now.

She had been sitting at an outdoor café in Union Square at lunchtime, not far from where she worked. (Cirri was employed in New York's Toy District as a sales-rep for a line of kawai Japanese designer vinyl toys. Her best-seller was a hedgehog named Hinoro who resembled a fat jagged pin-cushion with adorable neotenic facial features.) She had just come off her year-long, live-in affair with Mark, and was still emotionally vulnerable, she realized now. Perhaps she had donned the bindi that signified her receptivity to iDreams before her heart had fully healed. But she was so lonely after Mark left, and wanted to feel that she was back in the game right away. Her various girlfriends had counseled her to go slow, but she hadn't listened.

But all her doubts about playing the dating game, 2015-style, so soon after her latest breakup had vanished in the hot milliseconds after the tightly collimated and intricately modulated pulse of ultrasound from Ken's iDreamsCaster hit her skull.

A wave of thrilling emotions accompanied by a vivid slide-show of imagery caused the environs of Union Square to vanish instantly from Cirri's sensorium. Instead, flitting glimpses of a lush tropical beach and a handsome male companion flashed before her, accompanied by impressions of comfort, satiation, adventure, security, love, and erotic beguilement.

Cirri had been in the process of lifting her cup of espresso for a sip. The cup was only inches away from her lips when the iDream hit. But the whole dreamburst came and went in the tiny interval needed by her hand to close the gap between cup and lips.

Although she had been stunned by the artful, alluring tenor of the dreamburst, Cirri was too experienced a player to naively and quickly acknowledge her honest reaction. She imperturbably finished her sip of espresso (although, truthfully, her hand was shaking a bit), set her cup down calmly and slowly, and then, as if manifesting an idle impulse, took out her own iDreamsCaster, a recent Daewoo model with the programmable cosmetic skin.

Was this particular iDream simply a random, typically urban intrusion on her voluntarily permeable privacy sphere, cast by some crude lout looking to impress his buddies? A kind of small mental frottage? Or

was it a sincere attempt to win her attention and speak to her soul, as a prelude to a face-to-face encounter?

If she was just being cruelly gamed, then whoever had sent the iDream would not respond to Cirri's bluetoothed query. But if the sender was genuinely interested in her—

Before Cirri sent her query, however, she looked around her in an inconspicuous fashion.

An iDream had an effective casting range of only ten feet or so. In that space, there were at least half-a-dozen attractive men of roughly Cirri's age, and not a single troll. (And oh, yes, at least that many good-looking women. But Cirri didn't think she gave off the L-word vibe, and in fact had never been on the receiving end of an iDream from someone of her own gender in the two years she had been wearing the bindi.)

So far so good. Crossing her fingers in her mind, Cirri sent out her omnidirectional bluetooth ID signal, itself limited to the same range as the iDream. Instantly, her National ID signifier would be downloaded into all the iDreamsCasters in the immediate vicinity. Whoever had sent the iDream her way could now access certain basic public facts about her, as well as her photo. The sender would know that the chosen recipient of his dream was willing to meet.

Cirri could have responded by casting her own iDream, of course. But to whom? In a one-on-one situation, where the sender's identity was obvious, Cirri preferred to respond this way, in fact. A two-way satisfactory swap of iDreams was the surest confirmation of mutual attraction. But in a situation like this one, Cirri could only hope that the man who had sent her such an appealing iDream would be as receptive to her fantasies as she was to his.

A man was approaching her table now, smiling. Light brown hair, trim build, dressed sportily, dimpled chin—what wasn't to like?

Cirri stood up and extended a hand. They shook.

"Ken Clement," said the man. "I hope you enjoyed that little interlude, Cirri. I had a feeling you'd appreciate a few moments away from the city, your job and all."

"I did, Ken. That was just—just perfect. Did you write that dream yourself?"

“Why—yes, I did.”

“Maybe you’d like to discuss your scripting techniques over dinner tonight.”

“Of course.”

And so her latest romance had begun.

She should have realized it would end badly at the three-month mark, however, when she discovered that the iDream with which Ken had seduced her had been a cyrano.

Scrolling through the iDreams download website, Cirri had encountered the very same dream, offered as a \$29.99 download by a professional oneiric designer named GaimanStud.

Cirri’s face went hot. She felt cheap and easy. Her heart captured by off-the-shelf dreamware! She debated confronting Ken instantly with her discovery. But in the end, she had kept silent. Surely the reciprocal attraction she and Ken felt for each other was unchanged, even if he hadn’t compiled the winning iDream personally. Theirs was hardly the first romance that had begun with a little fib, yet gone on to happy longevity.

The trash-chute door slammed shut, ending Cirri’s reverie. She turned back down the corridor to her apartment.

Once inside, she went directly to her nightstand. From a small, dusty box similar to a contact-lens case, she took a fresh iDreams bindi, a self-adhesive circlet displaying the iDreams logo: a stylized human head wreathed in fluffy clouds and displaying a Third Eye. This she applied to her forehead an inch or two above the bridge of her nose. Then Cirri docked her long-unused iDreamsCaster for charging, and cabled it to her computer. She uploaded several of her favorite iDreams into the machine while its batteries were being replenished. Only then did she turn her attention to her closet, in search of the perfect outfit.

It was still a Saturday, after all, and she’d be damned if she’d stay home all weepy and self-pitying, when there was a city’s worth of dreams to be shared.

The club’s lighting was so dim that Cirri could hardly distinguish

anyone's iDreams bindi unless she was practically on top of the person. You couldn't just assume that anyone wearing a paste-on circle on their brow was open to your dreamcast. With the popularity of iDreams, various reactionary bindis had become fashionable. One of the most common showed a head wrapped in chains, while another displayed a head protected by a halo. Zap one of these folks, who almost seemed to court such mistaken encounters as excuses to vent their bile regarding iDreams, and you could find yourself on the wrong end of a civil lawsuit.

So Cirri had almost to climb into the lap of the brawny red-haired guy on the stool next to hers before she could be sure he was a dreamer too. When they had mutely acknowledged their kinship with a smile—the Chechen country-crunk music filling the club was amped up to eleven, and made talking impossible—the guy nodded to Cirri that she should go first. A good sign.

Cirri sent him the most recent iDream she had assembled in DreamShop. Many of its components derived from the standard toolkit, but she had incorporated an emotional track that she had reverse-engineered from her own brain. The sequence revolved around a dance contest which she and her partner won with a flurry of outrageous moves, earning massive audience acclaim.

The guy reacted positively enough, although without any signs of extreme enthusiasm. Then he sent Cirri his iDream.

Cirri had a typically liberal attitude toward sex. She subscribed to Nerve and Fleshbot. She was open to kinky suggestions from her lovers. She never missed an episode of *Desperate Soprano Wives*.

But the raw libidinous crudeness of the iDream that Big Red sent her shocked her like grabbing a live wire. That part involving the donkey-derived chimera—

Cirri had hopped off her barstool before she even realized she had commanded her body to move. She hastened to the opposite end of the club, her face burning.

It took Cirri several hours and a few drinks before she tried exchanging any more dreams.

What she got back for her earnest efforts were dreams that ranged the

spectrum from passive and wimpy to macho and domineering, all unimaginative and clichéd. Happily, none of them were as loathsome as Big Red's. But that was the best that could be said for the offerings of the various males who cast their dreams Cirri's way. Not one of them featured an ounce of real romance.

At least Ken's cyrano had been a quality product. Maybe she had been a little too hasty in ending their affair? No, there was no utility in trying to revise the past . . .

Dispirited and despairing, Cirri left the club around 1:30 AM.

Trudging through the cobbled streets of the Meat-packing District, heading toward the nearest subway stop, Cirri wondered if courtship by iDreams was much of an improvement on the ancient methods. This supposedly deeper and more telling glimpse into the soul of a potential partner, designed to circumvent glibness and facile flattery, boasted unique new pitfalls.

Cirri's train arrived before too long, and she got on the closest car.

About ten people occupied the many available seats, scattered here and there. Cirri dropped wearily into a random one, taking little notice of her fellow riders.

When she finally glanced up from her self-absorption, she encountered the expectant gaze of a fellow dreamer seated just across the aisle.

The guy was a little older than Cirri. Wearing a leather jacket over a ripped tee-shirt, and paint-stained pants, he was a pudgy, unshaven bohemian of some sort, his face more homely than handsome. Hardly Cirri's type.

And of course, he just had to be sporting an iDreams bindi. God, she could only imagine what kind of puerile fantasy he'd send her way. Probably something involving hobbits . . .

Having gotten Cirri's attention, the guy waited patiently for her to offer him an iDream. But she looked deliberately away instead. She even considered peeling her bindi off, to legally block any contact. But some last shred of hope forestalled that gesture.

Out of the corner of one eye, Cirri could see that the fellow was not dissuaded. In fact, he took out his phone and snapped her picture! Then he caused his phone to project a glowing hologram display in the air.

Cirri recognized the icons of DreamShop. Was the guy going to compose a spontaneous iDream right here?

His flickering fingers signaled that he was.

In short time, the dream was fully compiled. Cirri had never seen anyone craft a dream so fast.

From phone to iDreamsCaster the file flowed. The fellow aimed his caster politely at Cirri, waiting one final moment for her to register some objection.

Then he zapped her.

Cirri and Boho Guy were dancing. On the Moon. Nearly weightless, they pirouetted in long graceful spirals beneath the stars, protected by a transparent gaudy pleasure dome, the only two lovers in the whole universe. She felt immeasurable happiness and contentment. The aerial waltz seemed to go on forever, ending only when they sank into a pile of colorful cushions.

The deceleration of the train pulling into the next station was hard to reconcile with the lingering imagery of the dream. Cirri was breathless.

Boho Guy was smiling hopefully, but with an undercurrent of fatalism.

Cirri took out her own iDreamsCaster, intending to respond. But she realized that none of her stored dreams could match what she had just experienced.

So instead she stood up, crossed the aisle, and took the seat beside Boho Guy.

“Hi,” she said. “Do I know you?”