

Community Tours

by Jon Brooks

The Coca-Cola hologram in the middle of Winona's forehead winked and glimmered as her eyes held fast to the Big Board. She was speaking, but Lon could barely hear her amid the frantic cries of the crowd.

"Lon, you like have to, now!" Winona shouted above the din, eyes still perfectly fixed on the Board. "I mean, you like have to."

Lon wrinkled up her nose, an expression that might have signified a nasty type of disapproval on a less generous-looking face. Two numbers on the Big Board flashed, and the crowd sent up a thunderous roar. Winona clapped her hands together.

"Yee-haw!" she said. "Lon, what are we waiting for?"

"Oh, hush," Lon said. "Let's go."

Winona shook her head. "Uh-uh. It might go higher. Randy said it would go to at least 68. If it does, I'm going for it, no matter what my Dad says."

Lon picked up a long strand of hair covering her pale but intense face and tucked it behind her ear, a gesture that usually meant she had made up her mind about something. She started pushing her way through the crowd without so much a glance her friend's way. Another roar exploded through the hall. A large woman with two identical holograms on her bare breasts, each bearing the slogan "Suck on a Coke—Now!" raised her arms in the air, wildly shaking her torso, tits flopping against her body. In her jubilation, she came close to hitting Lon in the face.

"Hey!" said Lon. She looked the woman in the eye as a means of reproach. But the woman just beamed at her, ecstatic. She slapped Lon on the back, like they were old buddies.

"Seventy-one!" she said. "That's it, baby. I'm going over to the other side! I'm going over!"

"Fabulous," Lon said, and pushed past, squeezing her way through the seemingly endless wall of people. How had she let Winona talk her into this? She needed some air, even if it was the filthy stuff on Seventh Avenue. She eyed the unit table embedded in her left palm. Eighteen. Not even enough for a hit of oxygen. Now she was sorry she had ditched Winona; she might have been able to scrounge a few units.

She walked out of the amphitheater onto 47th street. A crowd was milling about, the latecomers who couldn't get in gawking at the rates on the Microsofts. A group of teenage Pepsi-Head boys were taunting a young Coker, who looked as if he was desperately trying to keep from crying.

"Coke sucks!" one of the group shouted. "Seventy-one! Coke sucks!"

"That's clever," Lon said, gliding past.

"Fuck you, Coke bitch!" the boy said, the others in the group murmuring approval.

Lon, though yards away by now, quickly pivoted, turning fully to the boy. She pointed to her forehead with one hand, brushed her hair back with the other, and said "Check the head, asshole. Nothing." She spun around again and continued walking.

The crowd thinned as she moved a couple of blocks or so uptown, but she still felt suffocated. A weather Microsoft on the side of a building flashed the temperature: 103 degrees, 104-107 tomorrow.

Her throat parched to the point of soreness, she stopped at a Cherry Coke fountain and placed her hand over the scanner. A stream of the brownish fluid shot out of the spigot, and she eagerly let it flood her mouth and throat. When she had taken her fill, she removed her hand and the tap instantly went dry.

"That was six units," a slightly tinny, sexless voice said from out of a speaker on the fountain's side. "You have twelve units left. It was a pleasure serving you Cherry Coke."

Twelve units left. Not enough to make it back uptown on a subway, though maybe just enough to walk one of the toll avenues. Now she was definitely sorry she had left Winona. This was the type of impulsive thing that was getting her nowhere, just like everyone said.

The only logical thing to do was wait for the rate session to end and hope she'd spot Winona among the crowd. She walked back toward the amphitheater and saw a bench she could sit on. She knew it would cost two units per ten minutes, because she had sat on it before. Though she couldn't afford it, she put her hand in front of the scanner, unlocking the bench's clamped metal bars.

She sat and waited, splurging again by reading two units worth of *The Bell Jar*, which she had downloaded onto her watch. After her ten minutes on the bench were up, she stood and glanced at her unit table. Down to ten units. If she didn't find Winona soon, the day was going to become even more unbearable. She saw her chance when a flood of people came pouring out of the amphitheater doors, shouting, laughing, hugging. Lon had never seen so many people that happy. She visually divided the crowd into segments, hoping to increase her odds of spotting Winona, and saw the bare-breasted woman, who like most of the herd was making her way towards the Pepsi Processing Center on 42nd street. This

reminded Lon that Winona had seemed serious about converting, and she wondered if she had a better chance of finding her at the Center. But in a moment she saw Winona's tall, gangly figure ambling away from the crowd toward a subway. Lon ran after her, shouting her name. Winona turned, saw her, and waited.

"I couldn't do it," Winona said, without even saying hello, her face flushed and grim. "Seventy-one fucking units, and I just couldn't do it."

"I'm sorry," said Lon.

"It's my Dad," Winona said. "I think he'd like really kill me. That's all."

Lon didn't say anything. Winona's father was generally a taboo subject, and she wasn't about to challenge that now. She waited for Winona to get angry at her over her sudden departure, but Winona didn't mention it. They walked in silence toward the Ford subway, the slowest but cheapest of the four lines. Lon took a look down Seventh Avenue and saw the Pepsi facilitators out in force to help process and change over the thousands of new Pepsi-Heads. The facilitators were young—not much older than she was. They greeted the company's fresh recruits with wide, welcoming smiles. Lingering discreetly behind these front-line troops were a smaller number of older employees with distinctly less-animated expressions, except for a few who wore looks of high anxiety.

The two girls reached the elevator that would take them down to the subway, and Winona placed her hand over the scanner. A Microsoft on the elevator lit up, illuminating a handsome young man in a blue sweater. "Welcome to the Ford Subway, Winona." The man pronounced the name 'Why-no-na'. "We travel to all major stops in the greater New York area. If you would like a map and schedule displayed on the screen, please say 'map.' If you would like to discontinue this message and enter, please say 'enter.'"

"Enter," Winona said. The elevator opened, and she walked in.

"Welcome, Why-no-na," the man's voice said from inside the elevator. "Say 'down' or wait for the next person."

Winona stared blankly at Lon for a moment before realizing she wasn't following.

"What're you doing?" she said.

Lon turned her left palm toward Winona and wriggled her fingers, the latest teen gesture indicating lack of units.

"Oh, man," Winona moaned. "You are so irresponsible."

Lon raised her eyebrows and pantomimed a gesture that was comprehensible only to the two of them. Winona tensed. Getting angry at Lon was not something she was good at, though lots of people, from their guidance counselor to strangers on the street, had told her that was exactly what both of

them needed. But the best she could do now was say in an unnaturally indignant voice, "Thanks for telling me before I got in."

Lon gritted her teeth in a kind of comic shameful display. Winona said "Exit", and the voice said: "We are sorry you have chosen to halt your journey on Ford, but hope you come back. Only one unit will be deducted from your unit table. Goodbye."

"Jesus," Winona said, as they walked towards the half-block common area to figure out what to do. "You know, I'd appreciate it if you'd pay me that one unit back."

Lon rolled her eyes. It wasn't that Winona was so out of line; it was just that Lon thought some situations completely ridiculous.

"Look," she said. "I would have told you before you got on the elevator, but you were like in a trance or something. I mean, you were thinking about your father, I guess."

At the mention of her father, Winona winced. Perhaps to wipe away whatever inchoate thoughts were taking shape, she said, "Nah, it's more Randy I was thinking about. When he hears I didn't switch, he's going to make fun of me. I mean he's going to be merciless."

Lon laughed, but after seeing Winona's hurtful look, stopped. She was always reacting the wrong way with Winona wherever Randy was involved, laughing when Winona was serious and showing stoic concern when Winona was trying to make a joke.

They stood in the common area on 44th street, alongside a family of apparent tourists. The father was checking a map on his watch while the mother and two little girls stood quietly beside. The girls were looking around at nothing in particular.

"So what are we going to do?" said Lon abruptly. She was looking at the two little girls, while still maintaining an intuitive attentiveness to Winona. The art in unit-scrounging was approaching a potential benefactor obliquely. There was a certain decorum that had to be observed or else risk an offense that could be irreparable. Lon was more aggressive than most; she had no real stomach for the niceties of begging. Not because she thought them irrelevant, but because their assumed delicacy filled her with a shame that welled ever larger as the moment of actual asking approached. Still, she was a decent scrounge, and managed to borrow a lot of units without ever actually offending anyone past the point of not being able to make another request.

Winona let out a long sigh, and Lon broke her half-gaze at the little girls. A wave of anxiety loopy-looped through her insides as she turned to face her friend. Obviously, Winona knew her well enough to make any attempt at formality between them ludicrous. Usually it didn't matter who you were scrounging from;

be it a stranger or your mother, you were supposed to tip-toe around the subject. But with Winona it was different, something Lon appreciated in her friend more than she could ever know.

"Look, I can walk," Lon said, deciding to abort the attempt altogether. "I swear I don't care. Really. All I need is three or four units for the toll street." She paused to look at the little girls again. They were still standing there, well-mannered and silent. "Or even if that's too much, I can use the common streets. I swear, it's all right. The sun's going down anyway. It might be nice."

Winona let out another heavy sigh. Obviously, Lon was putting her through some sort of crisis, something Lon hadn't intended. Winona, in fact, looked on the verge of tears.

"Hey, Wi, it's okay," Lon said. "I mean, I enjoy a nice walk. The sun's going down. Hell, a walk's fine. Seriously."

Winona put her face in her hands. Perhaps the excitement and disappointment of the day had been too much for her. Lon put her arm around her friend's neck and kissed her on one of the hands covering her cheeks.

"Lon!" Winona said, the words whistling out from behind her palms like escaped steam. "I can't keep giving you units! I just can't!" Winona shook her head back and forth in a state of near despair.

"Hey, you're not *giving* them to me," Lon said. "You're *lending* them."

"Oh, you really believe that, don't you?" Winona said, her tone a mixture of exasperation and pity. "Lon, you're such a dreamer. You can't pay me back those units. You must know that."

"What do you mean?" Lon said. She stared at her friend, appalled.

"How, Lon, how?" Winona spoke with the authority of someone who had been thinking something for a long time and was finally giving it voice. "How are you going to pay me back? You don't have any units, and no way of getting any. Lon, what are you thinking? What's going to happen to you? My family barely has enough units saved for one year of college. And then I'm going to have to borrow so much I'll be lucky if I can take two days of vacation a year. And forget about a six day work week, I mean, I'm resigned to it, that's all."

Abruptly, Winona stopped. The conversation turning back to her own situation caused her to lose focus again, her stare now becoming diffuse.

"Hey, Wi," Lon said. Her voice was on the edge of quivering. "You don't have to explain. I mean. I understand your situation. Really."

Winona's eyes closed, and when they opened again their sharpness had returned.

"That's not the point," she said. "That's not the point at all. Forget my situation. What I'm trying to tell you is, do you realize *your* situation? Do you

realize what's happening to you? I mean, what are you going to do after you graduate, Lon? Have you thought of that at all?"

"Hey, I'm going to college too," Lon said, irritation now replacing the previous note of shame in her voice. "What do you mean? Haven't we already talked about this?"

"How?" said Winona.

"What?"

"How are you going to go to college?"

"Credit," Lon said. "You know..."

Winona shook her head. "No, Lon, no. Come on. You know you don't have any more credit, and neither does your family."

"How the hell do you know?"

"Because my Mom told me." And here Winona's voice dropped an octave, in embarrassment.

"Oh, I see," said Lon.

"Look," Winona said, in a gentler voice. "It's not that hard to figure out. With both your Mom and Dad working sixty hour weeks, with you and your brother working and going to school, and with the whole family but you with their entire bodyspace used up, I mean, it's just pretty obvious, that's all."

"Oh," said Lon again. She was stunned by what Winona was saying. She looked at her one mark, a two-by-three inch hologram on her left forearm, with the words "Community Tours" set against a background of trees and mountains. In the foreground was a vacantly drawn circle of men and women holding hands. She had gotten the emblem on her thirteenth birthday, after her father had told her she was finally old enough to get a sponsor and earn a little pocket money. He said she could pick out any company she wanted and get a small mark on her arm. Lon had argued that her friends were all getting perma-earrings and making twice as much as she could with a hologram that size, but he had been firm in insisting that she was too young. So after a special lunch at McDonald's, her father's employer, he had taken her to the Big Rate Exchange so she could make her selection in style. Lon had already decided on a Sony Classic Media hologram, an oblong patch featuring a long-haired guitarist, a Microsoft showing an episode of "Seinfeld," and a flashing photo montage of President Clinton, all switching positions every 15 seconds. It was part of the retro look fashionable at the time, and paid 16.5 units a day. But when she got to the amphitheater and they were standing at the initial check-in line, an ad on a Microsoft caught her attention, and she pulled her father away.

"I changed my mind," she said, pointing to the screen. "That's what I want."

Her father cast a circumspect eye at the monitor. "Community Tours," a narrator was saying. "An adventure of the spirit." The screen showed a bus driving

through green countryside. Inside the bus was a group of teenagers looking out the window, holding hands, poring over maps. "We take you out into the countryside to sleep under the stars, cook communal meals, and get to know each other. We swim and camp in non-industrial zones."

"Non-industrial," her father muttered, with quiet disdain. The commercial was rather cheap-looking, and non-interactive. Her father took Lon by the hand and they moved closer. He said "Show rates." A row of numbers moved across the bottom of the screen. Her father chuckled unpleasantly. "Well, this pays five units a day," he said. "Five."

Lon frowned. Five units was pretty skimpy.

"That won't even be enough to start a High School fund," her father said. "And it doesn't look like a growth-oriented company. Why don't you stick with Sony. They're doing some pretty innovative things, and they're a safe bet."

But Lon didn't want Sony anymore. She wanted this Community Tours thing. If her father had asked, she couldn't have said why. But luckily, he didn't. It was her choice, and he'd honor whatever decision she made.

So Community Tours it was. Instead of signing up at the Big Rate Exchange, Lon convinced her father they should pay a few units and walk to the company's office, only a few blocks away. When they got there, the place was empty, except for an elderly woman and college-age man sitting behind desks. The woman, a warm, matronly sort, smiled and chatted with Lon in order to distract her from the hologram she was implanting in her arm. The woman talked of how she first became involved with the company, how she thought of it more as a kind of "calling" than a job. Then suddenly, Lon's father appeared. He had been waiting quietly at the front desk, but now he asked stiffly to see the woman's imprinting license, which she immediately and politely produced. Lon was aghast.

The imprinting took about four minutes. Lon kept her eyes averted the whole time, looking at posters on the wall or at her father, who had calmed down and was now chuckling softly, this time, she assumed, at her squeamishness.

And this had been her only mark. She had worn it proudly at first, telling everyone she was going on a Community Tour as soon as she were old enough. But her father had been right; her units, which had dropped to four, then two, finally stopped registering on her table altogether when the company folded. She decided to keep the mark anyway. She had grown used to it, and liked the fact that she had never seen it on anyone else, ever.

Now, Lon sat down among a pile of refuse on the common area sidewalk. Winona kneeled in preparation for sitting herself, but straightened up when she saw all the garbage. She talked to Lon from above.

"If you'd just imprint something," Winona said. "I mean, anything. It doesn't have to be your head. Just an arm, or your neck. Get a small one, for crying

out loud. But just so you'd have a steady income. Don't you get sick of being a scrounge?"

Lon looked straight ahead, at the twin ExxonMobil insignias on Winona's kneecaps.

"Yes," said Lon. "I do."

"Well, you don't have to live like this, walking 50 blocks in hundred degree weather. If you'd just get one or two holograms to start, your credit rating would move up a notch. And maybe it'll take time, but eventually you can borrow enough to go to college, and then we can go to school together. Then it won't be so bad and..."

"Scholarship," Lon interrupted.

"What?"

"Scholarship. I'm going to get the AT&T Writing Scholarship."

Winona nervously adjusted the Toyota ring on her left hand. "No, Lon, you're not," she said.

"Yes I am."

"No you're not."

"How do you know?"

"Because you have no chance, that's why. There's no way they'll recommend you. All that alienated, anti-whatever it is stuff you write, I mean, not that it's bad..."

"It's good," said Lon. She stood up to face Winona. "I know it's good."

"I'm *telling* you it's good," said Winona. "But I'm also telling you that it's out of date and no one takes it seriously. I mean, there's no way you could sell anything like that, you know?"

Lon stared at Winona and Winona stared back. They had been through a lot together. More than a lot. Winona was the one person in the world Lon told everything to. They had tons of arguments, screaming rows even. But the conflicts had always left their bond stronger after they were inevitably resolved. But it had never come to this. This was the—*heart*—of something. And it was going to mark some sort of turning point, Lon was sure. So they stood there, faces flushed with the sting of sudden conflict and embarrassment, struggling to apprehend truths that neither of them cared to admit.

"Let's just walk," Lon said, finally breaking the spell. Winona nodded, and they moved on, snaking their way through various common areas, uptown and west, having to backtrack every once in a while when there wasn't a free path in the right direction. The late afternoon sun seemed as hot as it had been at noon, and their physical discomfort was overshadowed only by the bad feeling that now existed between them. Around 55th street, Winona suddenly stopped and said,

"Look, I can't lend you any units. I just can't. I swear. If I do, my father will kill me."

Lon was silent.

"He checks my table every night. He's giving me an allowance, and I have to tell him what I'm going to spend every morning. He'll find out, Lon, and then..."

Winona's words hung between them, coalescing into a kind of vague mental tableau. Lon smiled at her.

"Let's get a drink," she said. "This heat is ridiculous."

They walked to a Pepsi fountain on Columbus Circle. Lon put her hand in front of the scanner and drank six-and-a-half units worth, leaving her with 3.5; not even enough for a phone call. Winona hesitated. It was bad form for a Coker to drink at a Pepsi fountain, especially a Coke-Head like Winona. But Lon, immediately sensing her friend's discomfort, said, "Oh, go ahead," and Winona eagerly scanned in and drank.

They both felt better, and they gossiped about old topics as they zigged and zagged another few blocks uptown. Winona's boyfriend Randy was going on to Buffalo University. Winona could never afford that, but was hoping to be able to transfer in a year or two if she got some better rates. That's why she was so tempted to switch over to Pepsi. It was typical of her father; he complained and complained about units, but when someone in the family had a chance to do something about it, he could only talk about "loyalty" and "tradition." Ridiculous.

They passed a Ford subway on 66th street. Winona looked sideways at Lon, who was using her shirt to wipe the sweat from her face for the umpteenth time.

"Hey," said Winona. "Let's get on."

"Huh?" said Lon.

"The Ford. Let's get on."

Lon looked at her friend closely. It was certainly tempting, with the sun unrelenting and the toll streets out of reach. Both of them already red as apples, despite the customary globs of sun block. But after what Winona had said about her father...

"No," said Lon. "I'll walk. You go."

A look of relief briefly swept over Winona's face. She said, "I'll keep walking with you."

"I want to be alone, Wi. Get on the subway."

Now Winona looked torn. She must have badly wanted to leave—after all, who wouldn't—but Lon knew her friend was loyal to the core.

"Go," Lon said again, with an air of finality.

Winona sighed again, then said "All right." But she didn't move, looking at the ground as if she were still making up her mind. "Be careful," she finally

muttered. Lon nodded. Winona said, "It'll be dark soon. Is your whole family still at work?"

"Yes," said Lon. "They won't be home until late."

"All right. Call me collect if you have to. I'll make sure I answer the phone."

"I will. Don't worry."

"And don't walk through the park. No matter what."

Winona kissed Lon on the cheek, and they embraced. Winona walked towards the Ford and gave Lon a last little wave before she disappeared into the elevator.

Seven o'clock, and the sun was still beating down. Lon zigged and zagged some more, uptown and west, downtown and east; it seemed like mostly two steps forward, one step back. There were fewer free streets every year, and less people on them. The handful that Lon passed moved briskly, heads bowed. Many kept one eye on whatever they'd programmed into their watches.

It took her an hour to advance eight blocks. Her shirt was so soaked, she thought about taking it off, but decided against it. She was thirsty again, and hungry too; she hadn't eaten for hours. The evening air was still heavy and thick with heat and humidity and dirt, and breathing was hard. She tried not to look at the oxygen pumps on street corners, or the people drawing deep breaths from them. She kept her mind off her discomfort by thinking of a story she'd write, about a girl who was caught in the communal streets without any units or way to get home. This occupied her until 90th street, where she came smack up against a chain link fence. On the fence was a large Microsoft flashing a message: "Detour. Walk to 78th Street and Madison Avenue. This street is being developed by General Electric."

Lon let out a moan. 78th Street! That was twelve blocks in the wrong direction. She wouldn't get home until midnight now. And who knew if there would be other detours. Her already labored breathing quickened. What was she going to do?

She would call Winona collect. Maybe somehow Winona could get a cab on credit, or take out a loan on a larger hologram at an all-night exchange. Lon's mother might be home at eleven. But that was definitely a last resort.

She didn't have enough units to call from her watch, so she looked around for a Microsoft, which was cheaper. The only one in sight had been spray-painted over and half ripped out of its frame. She walked back downtown, looking for another one, or maybe a store. But most of the places were boarded up, and the remaining ones closed. Around 84th Street, she saw an open Merck Pharmacy. She approached the door and put her hand over the scanner. A buzzer sounded,

followed by a female voice saying, "We're sorry, there is nothing inside this store purchasable for 3.5 units. Thank you for considering Merck."

"Shit!" Lon hissed. Through the window, she saw the only person in the store, a young woman clerk standing at the counter, transfixed by a Microsoft. Lon rapped on the glass. The woman didn't budge. Lon pounded, but still no response.

"Hey!" Lon yelled. "C'mon!" The woman ignored her. "Jerk!" Nothing. Lon turned around.

In front of her was a man.

He was about thirty, with the usual businesslike haircut. His face was worried and haggard. And familiar looking. His forehead Coca-Cola hologram was glowing brightly in the now darkened street, which was additionally illuminated by the dim and only sporadically working streetlights.

"Hi," the man said. "I'm lost."

"Oh," said Lon. It was the guy with the wife and two girls she had seen earlier in the common area. Now he was alone. She said, "Where's your family?"

He smiled thinly, looking embarrassed. "Oh, I knew I'd seen you before. They're in a common area. We ran into a little trouble, I guess." He emitted a small, hollow laugh.

"What happened?"

"Well, we checked out of our hotel because it was too expensive. We were looking for another place to stay. So this guy in a common area came up to us with a little scanner, and said he ran a low-priced hotel. It was going to be only 75 units for my whole family. But when he scanned me in, all my units were gone, and so was he." He smirked. "Welcome to the big city."

Lon nodded, relaxing a bit. The man looked harmless enough, but obviously was going to be of no help.

"Well, I'm trying to get home myself," she said. "I don't know what I can do for you."

The man's face sagged. Now she could see he was definitely very worried, even scared. "Is there a common area police? Or a traveler's aid?" he said.

"Nah," said Lon. "What police force do you use?"

"Secureco."

"Well, unless they have some kind of agreement with the firms from around here, you're out of luck. Where you from?"

"Montana."

"Oh, boy." Lon smiled. But the man now seemed so despondent, he could no longer fake even a semblance of cheeriness.

"Look," he said, "What's your name?"

"Lon."

"I'm Jeff, how do you do."

He stuck out his hand and Lon took it, but something about his studied manner tipped her off she was about to be the recipient of an imminent attempt at a scrounge. She needed to nip it in the bud before it got embarrassing.

"Look..." she said.

"I was wondering if I could borrow just a few units so I can call Secureco." He spit the words out as if he couldn't wait to rid himself of them. "I think they'll arrange something." He topped off his pitch with a forced, desperate grin.

"Don't you have any credit?" Lon asked.

Jeff was silent. She didn't press. It was best not to pry into such things.

"Well, I'm flat broke myself," she said. "I mean, do you think I'd be walking around in this heat if I weren't?"

"I guess not," he said. "What do you think I should do?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to walk across the park. If I stick to the common streets, it'll take me all night. If you want, you can follow me, and when we get to my house my father can lend you a few units. I mean, as long as you're a Coke-Head, he won't mind. He thinks you're all in the same fraternity or something."

The man nodded grimly. "How long will it take?"

"Well, maybe an hour. What about your wife and kids?"

"They'll be all right for an hour. They've got some food and water. And my wife still has a few units."

Lon nodded. "This way." She started walking. They moved through the darkening landscape, surrounded by dilapidated, shuttered buildings, toward the park. Lon was silent; her thirst and exhaustion made it increasingly difficult to speak. Jeff followed her bleakly, his breathing thick and nervous. When they reached the edge of the park, he said, "You know, the one thing everyone told me was to avoid the park."

Lon flashed the briefest of acknowledgements. "I've been through here once before," she said. "Daytime. Maybe a half hour to cross."

She took a step forward, but was stopped by Jeff's hand on her shoulder.

"You have plenty of bodyspace," he said blankly. "There must be an exchange around here."

Lon shrugged her shoulder away from his hand. "If you want to go, let's go," she said. Without looking at him, she moved forward, into the yawning blackness of the park. After a few steps, she heard him follow.

Except for the moon, the illumination of the surrounding skyscrapers, and Jeff's holograms, there was no light. They easily could have stepped into a tree or even another person. But Jeff produced a pocket travel flashlight.

"At least I'm not totally unprepared," he said. The beam lit a narrow patch in front of them, about ten feet. He handed the light to Lon, in the lead, and they forged ahead in a straight line.

"How do you know we're going the right way?" Jeff asked.

"Because I've lived here all my life," said Lon.

They walked across the junk-strewn pathways and long dead fields of grass. The park was foul with the stink of sun-baked garbage. Lon felt so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. The surrounding darkness seemed so inviting, it would have been easy to give in and just become part of it. The thought of falling down right on the spot and sleeping until morning occurred to her. But she was wary of Jeff; he seemed so desperate. She kept moving.

But soon she stopped, exhausted to the point of collapse. The flashlight sliced a beam through the darkness as her arm dropped towards the ground. Jeff grabbed her shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"I'm beat," said Lon. "I need to stop."

"Here?" Jeff said. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"It's a better idea than me fainting."

Jeff took the flashlight from her and scanned the area. Rotting trees, gutted Microsofts, mounds of trash. "Nothing," he said incredulously. "What a waste of prime real estate. Why hasn't this been developed?"

"Someone must be making a ton of units off it somehow," said Lon, repeating a favorite phrase of her father's. "It's kind of mysterious, all this land right in the heart of the city. You can smell it for blocks."

Something scurried past their feet, squealing.

"Ugh," said Jeff. "Rats."

"Let's go," said Lon, a surge of rodent-induced adrenaline kicking in. "It's disgusting in here."

Jeff thrust the light forward. They walked on a few steps, past a cluster of trees. They came to a clearing. Suddenly, the beam was intersected by a moving figure, which just as quickly vanished. They both stopped in their tracks.

"What the hell was that?" said Jeff.

"Someone else lost, maybe."

But in a moment, another running figure crossed the light. Then two more. Jeff recoiled in fear. A whole group came tramping past, paying no attention to the two gawking figures.

"Jesus," said Lon, "There's tons of people in here."

Jeff shone the flashlight in a wide arc and gasped at what he saw. People, dozens of them, running in all directions, making hardly a sound. They were all

ages, children too. Most of them unclothed. In a large meadow, in the middle of the city.

"What the hell?" said Jeff.

They were darting every which way, soundless except for low grunts and the treading of feet on dirt. Jeff shone the light on a young man with long scraggly hair, naked. He looked wild, almost bestial. And unmarked. In fact, most of the running horde were. Unfettered, unburdened, and seemingly without purpose. There appeared to be hundreds of them now, scurrying in the darkness like wildlife. Trapped in this one rectangular patch of the city, the only place left that was free. The only place left they could go.

"This is disgusting," said Jeff. His voice was trembling with fear and contempt. "They're all over."

Lon just stared. Imagine, she thought. *No marks.*

Two hours later, Jeff sipped a cup of tea as he watched the President giving her weekly address on Lon's family Microsoft. The country's chief executive was smiling gently, her hands folded decorously in front of her. She wore a light, sleeveless dress, so that the traditional Pepsi emblem on the left forearm and Coke on the right could be seen. On her forehead was a small but elegant hologram of the American flag.

The people in the room were only half-listening to her. Jeff's little girls were sitting on the floor by Lon's chair, playing with each other distractedly. "We were so worried," Lon's mother was saying. "When Winona called and said that Lon was stranded. We're so glad she met up with you, Mr. Smith. All those wild people in the park, it's frightening."

"Well, I'm just glad I met up with her," said Jeff. He no longer appeared scared or even frazzled. He was gracious and fatherly towards Lon. When they had arrived, Mr. Holden had thanked him politely but with suspicion. But when he found out that Jeff worked in Montana for McDonald's, he immediately transferred over two hundred units and treated him like a hero.

"Well, you're welcome to visit us anytime," said Mrs. Smith.

Lon, who had begun playing with the girls, realized she was being addressed.

"If you want, Lon, I might be able to get you a temp job at one of our restaurants." Jeff was sitting back, magnanimous. "It doesn't pay much, but it's great experience, and looks good on a resume."

"That might be an idea," said Mr. Holden. "Lon's always wanted to get out of the city, back to nature and all that."

"The only thing is that the company requires the logo on all their employees. They pay the usual rates, but they do insist on it. I know Lon has a thing about that."

Lon took hold of one of the girls' hair and gently twisted it into a braid. The child was looking at the Community Tours emblem on her arm.

"No," said Lon, her eyes on the braid. "I'm going to take mine off and get a McDonald's one instead."

Her mother cast a weighty look at her father. "Wow," she said to Lon. "You don't know how long we've waited to hear that. That's terrific, sweetheart."

"She's growing up," said Jeff.

"Well, I knew she would," said her father. "I mean, it was only a matter of time."

They all seemed delighted. Lon's mother served some Ritz crackers and Skippy peanut butter, and the mood turned practically convivial.

"Just imagine," said her mother. "All those people in the park. Hundreds of them."

"Maybe thousands."

The conversation rambled on, moving from the park to Montana to the latest rates paid for back-of-the-neck marks. Lon stopped listening and contemplated her soon-to-be-removed emblem. The men and women holding hands, the trees and mountains. It had been a part of her for so long.

But her daydreaming was interrupted when the little girl whose hair she had been braiding suddenly pulled away. She had been sitting contentedly, but now she ran to her mother. Mrs. Smith patted her on the head, and the girl scampered to another corner of the room to sit by herself. Lon watched her for a moment, then turned to watch the President. The little girl's defection had been sudden, but after a few moments, Lon wished the other one would leave as well. She thought: This space is mine.

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