

This was my second sale, to a small Canadian mag called "Prairie Fire" back in 1994. Think "Max Headroom" meets "Terms of Endearment". A lot of people seem to like it, although I keep wondering if it isn't a teeny bit wet. It does, after all, involve a dead cat; so I post it here in memory of the recently-departed Cygnus T.

Flesh Made Word

Peter Watts

Wescott was glad when it finally stopped breathing.

It had taken hours, this time. He had waited while it wheezed out thick putrid smells, chest heaving and gurgling and filling the room with stubborn reminders that it was only dying, not yet dead, not yet. He had been patient. After ten years, he had learned to be patient; and now, finally, the thing on the table was giving up.

Something moved behind him. He turned, irritated; the dying hear better than the living, a single spoken word could ruin hours of observation. But it was only Lynne, slipping quietly into the room. Wescott relaxed. Lynne knew the rules.

For a moment he even wondered why she was there.

Wescott turned back to the body. Its chest had stopped moving. *Sixty seconds*, he guessed. *Plus or minus ten*.

It was already dead by any practical definition. But there were still a few embers inside, a few sluggish nerves twitching in a brain choked with dead circuitry. Wescott's machines showed him the landscape of that dying mind: a topography of luminous filaments, eroding as he watched.

The cardiac thread shuddered and lay still.

Thirty seconds. Give or take five. The qualifiers came automatically. There is no truth. There are no facts. There is only the envelope of the confidence interval.

He could feel Lynne waiting invisibly behind him.

Wescott glanced at the table for a moment, looked away again; the lid over one sunken eye had crept open a crack. He could almost imagine he had seen nothing looking out.

Something changed on the monitors. *Here it comes...*

He didn't know why it scared him. They were only nerve impulses, after all; a fleeting ripple of electricity, barely detectable, passing from midbrain to cortex to oblivion. Just another bunch of doomed neurons, gasping.

And now there was only flesh, still warm. A dozen lines lay flat on the monitors. Wescott leaned over and checked the leads connecting meat to machine.

"Dead at nineteen forty-three," he said into his recorder. The machines, intelligent in their own way, began to shut themselves down. Wescott studied the dead face, peeled back the unclenched eyelid with a pair of forceps. The static pupil beneath stared past him, fixed at infinity.

You took the news well, Wescott thought.

He remembered Lynne. She was standing to one side, her face averted.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know this is never a good time, but it's--"

He waited.

"It's Zombie," she went on. "There was an accident, Russ, he wandered out on the road and--and I took him into the vet's and she says he's too badly hurt but she won't put him to sleep without your consent, you never listed me as an owner--"

She stopped, like a flash flood ending.

He looked down at the floor. "Put him to sleep?"

"She said it's almost certain anything they tried wouldn't work, it would cost thousands and he'd probably die anyway--"

"You mean kill him. She won't kill him without my consent." Wescott began stripping the leads from the cadaver, lining them up on their brackets. They hung there like leeches, their suckers slimy with conductant.

"--and all I could think was, after eighteen years he shouldn't die alone, someone should be there with him, but I can't, you know, I just--"

Somewhere at the base of his skull, a tiny voice cried out *My Christ don't I go through enough of this shit without having to*

watch it happen to my own cat? But it was very far away, and he could barely hear it.

He looked at the table. The corpse stared it's cyclopean stare.

"Sure," Wescott said after a moment. "I'll take care of it." He allowed himself a half-smile. "All in a day's work."

The workstation sat in one corner of the living room, an ebony cube of tinted perspex, and for the past ten years it had spoken to him in Carol's voice. That had hurt at first, so much that he had nearly changed the program; but he had fought the urge, and beaten it, and endured the synthetic familiarity of her voice like a man doing penance for some great sin. Somewhere in the past decade the pain had faded below the level of conscious recognition. Now he heard it list the day's mail, and felt nothing.

"Jason Mosby called again from Southam," it said, catching Carol's intonation perfectly. "He s-still wants to interview you. He left a conversational program in my stack. You can run it any time you want."

"What else?"

"Zombie's collar stopped transmitting at nine sixteen, and Zombie didn't s-show up for his afternoon feed. Y-You might want to call around."

"Zombie's gone," he said.

"That's what I said."

"No, I mean--" *Christ, Carol. You never were much for euphemisms, were you?* "Zombie got hit by a car. He's dead."

Even when we tried using them on you.

"Oh. Shit." The computer paused a moment, some internal clock counting off a precise number of nanosecs. "I'm sorry, Russ."

It was a lie, of course, but a fairly convincing one all the same.

Outside, Wescott smiled faintly. "It happens. Just a matter of time for all of us."

There was a sound from behind. He turned away from the cube; Lynne stood in the doorway. He could see sympathy in her eyes, and something else.

"Russ," she said. "I'm so sorry."

He felt a twitch at the corner of his mouth. "So's the computer."

"How are you feeling?"

He shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"I doubt it. You had him all those years."

"Yeah. I -- miss him." There was a hard knot of vacuum in his throat. He examined the feeling, distantly amazed, and almost felt a kind of gratitude.

She padded across the room to him, took his hands. "I'm sorry I wasn't there at the end, Russ. It was all I could do to take him in. I just couldn't, you know--"

"It's okay," Wescott said.

--and you had to be there anyway, you--"

"It's okay," he said again.

Lynne straightened and rubbed one hand across her cheek. "Would you rather not talk about it?" Which meant, of course, *I want to talk about it.*

He wondered what he could say that wouldn't be utterly predictable: and realised that he could afford to tell the truth.

"I was thinking," he said, "he had it coming to him."

Lynne blinked.

"I mean, he'd spread enough carnage on his own. Remember how every couple of days he'd bring in a wounded vole or a bird, and I never let him actually kill any of them--"

"You didn't want to see anything suffer," Lynne said.

--so I'd kill them myself." One blow with a hammer, brains scrambled instantly, nothing left that *could* suffer after that. "I always spoiled his fun. It's such a drag having to play with dead things, he'd bitch at me for hours..."

She smiled sadly. "He was suffering, Russ. He wanted to die. I know you loved the little ingrate, we both did."

Something flared where the vacuum had been. "It's okay, Lynne. I watch *people* die all the time, remember? I'm in no great need of therapy over a fucking cat. And if I was, you could--"

--have at least been there this morning.

He caught himself. *I'm angry*, he realised. *Isn't that strange. I haven't used this feeling for years.*

It seemed odd that anything so old could have such sharp edges.

"Sorry," he said evenly. "I didn't mean to snap. It's just -- I heard enough platitudes at the vet, you know? I'm sick of people saying *he wants to die* when they mean *It would cost too much*. And I'm especially sick of people saying *love* when they mean *economics*."

Lynne put her arms around him. "There was nothing they could have done."

He stood there, swaying slightly, almost oblivious to her embrace.

Carol, how much did I pay to keep you breathing? And when did I decide you weren't worth the running tab?

"It's always economics," he said. And brought his arms up to hold her.

"You want to read minds."

Not Carol's voice, this time. This time it belonged to that guy from Southam ... Mosby, that was it. Mosby's program sat in memory, directing a chorus of electrons that came out sounding like he did, a cheap auditory clone. Wescott preferred it to the original.

"Read minds?" He considered. "Actually, right now I'm just trying to build a working model of one."

"Like me?"

"No. You're just a fancy menu. You ask questions; depending on how I answer them you branch to certain others. You're linear. Minds are more ... distributed."

"Thoughts are not signals, but the intersections of signals."

"You've read Penthorne."

"I'm reading him now. I've got Biomedical Abstracts online."

"Mmmm."

"I'm also reading Gödel," the program said. "If he's right, you'll never get an accurate model of the human brain, because no box is big enough to hold itself."

"So simplify it. Throw away the details, but preserve the essence. You don't want to make your model too big anyway; if it's as complicated as the real thing, it's just as hard to understand."

"So you just cut away at the brain until you end up with something simple enough to deal with?"

Wescott winced. "If you've got to keep it to vidbits, I guess that's as good as any."

"And what's left is still complex enough to teach you anything about human behaviour?"

"Look at you."

"Just a fancy menu."

"Exactly. But you know more than the real Jason Mosby. You're a better conversationalist, too; I met him once. I bet you'd even score higher on a Turing test. Am I right?"

A barely perceptible pause. "I don't know. Possibly."

"As far as I can tell you're better than the original, and with only a few percent of the processing power."

"Getting back to--"

"And if the original screams and fights when somebody tries to turn him off," Wescott went on, "It's just because he's been programmed to think he can suffer. He puts a bit more effort into keeping his subroutines running. Maybe not much of a difference after all, hmmm?"

The program fell silent. Wescott started counting: *one one thousand, two one thousand, three--*

"That actually brings up another subject I wanted to ask you about," the menu said.

Almost four seconds to respond, and even then it had had to change the subject. It had limits. Good program, though.

"You haven't published anything on your work at VanGen," Mosby's proxy remarked. "I'm unable to access your NSERC proposal, of course, but judging from the public abstract you've been working on dead people."

"Not dead. Dying."

"Near-death experiences? Levitation, tunnel of light, that sort of thing?"

"Symptoms of anoxia," Wescott said. "Mostly meaningless. We go further."

"Why?"

"A few basic patterns are easier to record after other brain functions have shut down."

"What patterns? What do they tell you?"

They tell me there's only one way to die, Mosby. It doesn't matter what kills you, age or violence or disease, we all sing out the same damn song before we cash in. You don't even have to be human; as long as you've got a neocortex you're part of the club.

And you know what else, Mosby? We can almost read the lyric sheet. Come by in person, say a month from now, and I could preview your own last thoughts for you. I could give you the scoop of the decade.

"Dr. Wescott?"

He blinked. "Sorry?"

"What patterns? What do they tell you?"

"What do you think?" Wescott said, and started counting again.

"I think you watch people die," the program answered, "and you take pictures. I don't know why. But I think our subscribers would like to."

Wescott was silent for a few moments.

"What's your release number?" he asked at last.

"Six point five."

"You're just out, aren't you?"

"April fifteenth," the program told him.

"You're better than six four."

"We're improving all the time."

From behind, the sound of an opening door. "Stop," Wescott said.

"Do you want to c-cancel the program or just suspend it?" Carol's voice asked from the cube.

"Suspend." Wescott stared at the computer, vaguely jarred by the change in voice. *Do they ever feel crowded in there?*

"Can you hear it?" Lynne said from behind him.

He turned in his chair. She was taking off her shoes by the front door.

"Hear what?" Wescott asked.

She came across the room. "The way her voice sort of--catches, sometimes?"

He frowned.

"Like she was in pain when she made the recording," she went on. "Maybe it was before she was even diagnosed. But when she programmed that machine, it picked up on it. You've never heard it? In all these years?"

Wescott said nothing.

Lynne put her hands on his shoulders. "You sure it isn't time to change the personality in that thing?" she asked gently.

"It's not a personality, Lynne."

"I know. Just a pattern-matching algorithm. You keep saying that."

"Look, I don't know what you're so worried about. It's no threat to you."

"I didn't mean--"

"Eleven years ago she talked to it for a while. It uses her speech patterns. It isn't her. I know that. It's just an old operating system that's been obsolete for the better part of a decade."

"Russ--"

"That lousy program Mosby sent me is ten times more sophisticated. And you can go out and buy a psyche simulator that will put *that* to shame. But this is all I have left, okay? The least you can do is grant me the freedom to remember her the way I choose."

She pulled back. "Russ, I'm not trying to fight with you."

"I'm glad." He turned back to the workstation. "Resume."

"Suspend," Lynne said. The computer waited silently.

Wescott took a slow breath and turned back to face her.

"I'm not one of your patients, Lynne." His words were measured, inflectionless. "If you can't leave your work downtown, at least find someone else to practise on."

"Russ..." Her voice trailed off.

He looked back at her, utterly neutral.

"Okay, Russ. See you later." She turned and walked back to the door. Wescott noted the controlled tetanus in her movements,

imagined the ratchet contraction of actomyosin as she reached for her shoes.

She's running, he thought, fascinated. *My words did that to her. I make waves in the air and a million nerves light up her brain like sheet lightning. How many ops/sec happening in there? How many switches opening, closing, rerouting, until some of that electricity runs down her arm and makes her hand turn the doorknob?*

He watched her intricate machinery close the door behind itself. *She's gone*, he thought. *I've won again.*

Wescott watched Hamilton strap the chimp onto the table and attach the leads to its scalp. The chimp was used to the procedure; it had been subject to such indignities on previous occasions, and had always survived in good health and good spirits. There was no reason for it to expect anything different this time.

As Hamilton snugged the straps, the smaller primate stiffened and hissed.

Wescott studied a nearby monitor. "Damn, it's nervous." Cortical tracings, normally languorous, scrambled across the screen in epileptic spasms. "We can't start until it calms down. *Unless* it calms down. Shit. This could scotch the whole recording."

Hamilton pulled one of the restraints a notch tighter. The chimp, its back pulled flat against the table, flexed once and went suddenly limp.

Wescott looked back at the screen. "Okay, it's relaxing. Showtime, Pete; you're on in about thirty seconds."

Hamilton held up the hypo. "Ready."

"Okay, getting baseline--now. Fire when ready."

Needle slid into flesh. Wescott reflected on the obvious unhumanity of the thing on the table; too small and hairy, all bow legs and elongate simian arms. *A machine. That's all it is. Potassium ions jumping around in a very compact telephone switchboard.*

But the eyes, when he slipped and looked at them, looked back.

"Midbrain signature in fifty seconds," Wescott read off. "Give or take ten."

"Okay," Hamilton said. "It's going through the tunnel."

Just a machine, running out of fuel. A few nerves sputter and the system thinks it sees lights, feels motion--

"There. Thalamus," Hamilton reported. "Right on time. Now it's in the ret." A pause. "Neocortex, now. Same damn thing every time."

Wescott didn't look. He knew the pattern. He had seen its handwriting in the brains of a half a dozen species, watched that same familiar cipher scurry through dying minds in hospital beds and operating theatres and the twisted wreckage of convenient automobiles. By now he didn't even need the machines to see it. He only had to look at the eyes.

Once, in a moment of reckless undiscipline, he'd wondered if he were witnessing the flight of the soul, come crawling to the surface of the mind like an earthworm flushed by heavy rains. Another time he'd thought he might have captured the EEG of the Grim Reaper.

He no longer allowed himself such unbridled licence. Now he only stared at the widening pupils within those eyes, and heard the final panicked bleating of the cardiac monitor.

Something behind the eyes went out.

What were you? he wondered.

"Dunno yet," Hamilton said beside him. "But another week, two at the outside, and we've got it nailed."

Wescott blinked.

Hamilton started unstrapping the carcass. After a moment he looked up. "Russ?"

"It knew." Wescott stared at the monitor, all flat lines and static now.

"Yeah." Hamilton shrugged. "I wish I knew what tips them off sometimes. Save a lot of time." He dumped the chimp's body into a plastic bag. Its dilated pupils stared out at Wescott in a grotesque parody of human astonishment.

"--Russ? You okay?"

He blinked; the dead eyes lost control. Wescott looked up and saw Hamilton watching him with a strange expression.

"Sure," he said easily. "Never better."

* * *

There was this cage. Something moved inside that he almost recognised, a small furred body that looked familiar. But up close he could see his mistake. It was only a wax dummy, or maybe an embalmed specimen the undergrads hadn't got to yet. There were tubes running into it at odd places, carrying sluggish aliquots of yellow fluid. The specimen jaundiced, bloated as he watched. He reached through the bars of the cage ... he could do that somehow, even though the gaps were only a few centimeters wide ... and touched the thing inside. Its eyes opened and stared past him, blank and blind with pain; and their pupils were not vertical as he had expected, but round and utterly human...

He felt her awaken in the night beside him, and not move.

He didn't have to look. He heard the change in her breathing, could almost feel her systems firing up, her eyes locking onto him in the near-darkness. He lay on his back, looking up at a ceiling full of shadow, and did not acknowledge her.

He turned his face to stare at the faint grey light leaking through the window. Straining, he could just hear distant city sounds.

He wondered, for a moment, if she hurt as much as he did; then realised that there was no contest. The strongest pain he could summon was mere aftertaste.

"I called the vet today," he said. "She said they didn't need my consent. They didn't need me there at all. They would have shut Zombie down the moment you brought him in, only you told them not to."

Still she did not move.

"So you lied. You fixed it so I'd have to be there, watching one more piece of my life getting--" he took a breath, "--chipped away--"

At last she spoke: "Russ--"

"But you don't hate me. So why would you put me through that? You must have thought it would be good for me, somehow."

"Russ, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I don't think that's entirely true," he remarked.

"No. I guess not." Then, almost hopefully, "It did hurt, didn't it?"

He blinked against a brief stinging in his eyes. "What do you think?"

"I think, nine years ago I moved in with the most caring, humane person I'd ever known. And two days ago I didn't know if he'd give a damn about the death of a pet he'd had for eighteen years. I really didn't know, Russ, and I'm sorry but I had to find out. Does that make sense?"

He tried to remember. "I think you were wrong from the start. I think you gave me too much credit nine years ago."

He felt her head shake. "Russ, after Carol died I was afraid *you* were going to. I remember hoping I'd never be able to hurt that much over another human being. I fell in love with you because you could."

"Oh, I loved her all right. Tens of thousands of dollars worth at least. Never did get around to figuring out her final worth."

"That's not why you did it! You remember how she was suffering!"

"Actually, no. She had all those--painkillers, cruising through her system. That's what they told me. By the time they started cutting pieces out of her she was--numb..."

"Russ, I was there too. They said there was no hope, she was in constant pain, they said she'd want to die--"

"Oh yes. Later, that's what they said. When it was time to decide. Because they knew..."

He stopped.

"They knew," he said again, "what I wanted to hear."

Beside him, Lynne grew very still.

He laughed once, softly. "I shouldn't have been so easy to convince, though. I knew better. We're not hardwired for Death with Dignity; life's been kicking and clawing and doing anything it can to take a few more breaths, for over three billion years. You can't just decide to turn yourself off."

She slid an arm across his chest. "People turn themselves off all the time, Russ. Too often. You know that."

He didn't answer. A distant siren poisoned the emptiness.

"Not Carol," he said after a while. "I sort of made that decision for her."

Lynne put her head on his shoulder. "And you've spent ten years trying to find out if you guessed right. But they're not *her*, Russ, all the people you've recorded, all the animals you've...put down, they're not *her*--"

"No. They're not." He closed his eyes. "They don't linger on month after month. They don't...shrivel up...you *know* they're going to die, and it's always quick, you don't have to come in day after day, watching them change into something that, that *rattles* every time it breathes, that doesn't even know who you are and you wish it would just--"

Wescott opened his eyes.

"I keep forgetting what you do for a living," he said.

"Russ--"

He looked over at her, calmly. "Why are you doing this to me? You think I haven't already been over it enough?"

"Russ, I'm only--"

"Because it won't work, you know. It's too late. It took long enough, but I know how the mind works now, and you know what? It's nothing special after all. It's not spiritual, it's not even quantum. It's just a bunch of switches wired together. So it doesn't matter if people can't speak their minds. Pretty soon I'll be able to *read* them."

His voice was level and reasoned. He kept his eyes on the ceiling; the darkened light fixture there seemed to waver before his eyes. He blinked, and the room swam suddenly out of focus.

She reached up to touch the wetness on his face. "It scares you," she whispered. "You've been chasing it for ten years and you've almost got it and it scares the shit out of you."

He smiled and wouldn't look at her. "No. That isn't it at all."

"What, then?"

He took a breath. "I just realised. I don't care one way or the other any more."

* * *

He came home, clutching the printout, and knew from the sudden emptiness of the apartment that he had been defeated here as well.

The workstation slept in its corner. Several fitful readouts twinkled on one of its faces, a sparse autonomic mosaic. He walked towards it; and halfway there one face of the cube flashed to life.

Lynne, from the shoulders up, looked out at him from the screen.

Wescott glanced around the room. He almost called out.

On the cube, Lynne's lips moved. "Hello, Russ," they said.

He managed a short laugh. "Never thought I'd see you in there."

"I finally tried one of these things. You were right, they've come a long way in ten years."

"You're a real simulation? Not just a fancy conversational routine?"

"Uh huh. It's pretty amazing. It ate all sorts of video footage, and all my medical and academic records, and then I had to talk with it until it got a feel for who I was."

And who is that? he wondered absently.

"It changed right there while I was talking to it, Russ. It was really spooky. It started out in this dead monotone, and as we talked it started mimicking my voice, and my mannerisms, and in a little while it sounded just like me, and here it is. It went from machine to human in about four hours."

He smiled, not easily, because he knew what was coming next.

"It--actually, it was a bit like watching a time-lapse video of you over the past few years," the model said. "Played backwards."

He kept his voice exactly level. "You're not coming home."

"Sure I am, Russ. Only home isn't here any more. I wish it were, you don't know how badly I wish it were, but you just can't let it go and I can't live with that any more."

"You still don't understand. It's just a program that happens to sound like Carol did. It's nothing. I'll--wipe it if it's that important to you--"

"That's not all I'm talking about, Russ."

He thought of asking for details, and didn't.

"Lynne--" he began.

Her mouth widened. It wasn't a smile. "Don't ask, Russ. I can't come back until you do."

"But I'm right here!"

She shook her head. "The last time I saw Russ Wescott, he cried. Just a little. And I think--I think he's been hunting something for ten years, and he finally caught a glimpse of it and it was too big, so he went away and left some sort of autopilot in charge. And I don't blame him, and you're a very good likeness, really you are but there's nothing in you that knows how to feel."

Wescott thought of acetylcholinesterase and endogenous opioids. "You're wrong, Carol. I know more about feelings than almost anyone in the world."

On the screen, Lynne's proxy sighed through a faint smile.

The simulation was wearing new earrings; they looked like antique printed circuits. Wescott wanted to comment on them, to compliment or criticise or do anything to force the conversation into less dangerous territory. But he was afraid that she had worn them for years and he just hadn't noticed, so he said nothing.

"Why couldn't you tell me yourself?" he said at last. "Don't I deserve that much? Why couldn't you at least leave me in person?"

"This *is* in person, Russ. It's as in person as you ever let anyone get with you any more."

"That's bullshit! Did I *ask* you to go out and get yourself simmed? You think I see you as some sort of cartoon? My Christ, Lynne--"

"I don't take it personally, Russ. We're all cartoons as far as you're concerned."

"What in Christ's name are you talking about?"

"I don't blame you, really. Why learn 3-d chess when you can reduce it down to tic-tac-toe? You understand it perfectly, and you always win. Except it isn't that much fun to play, of course..."

"Lynne--"

"Your models only simplify reality, Russ. They don't recreate it."

Wescott remembered the printout in his hand. "Sure they do. Enough of it, anyway."

"So." The image looked down for a moment. *Uncanny, the way it fakes and breaks eye contact like that--* "You have your answer."

"We have the answer. Me, and a few terabytes of software, and a bunch of colleagues, Lynne. People. Who work with me, face to face."

She looked up again, and Wescott was amazed that the program had even mimicked the sudden sad brightness her eyes would have had in that moment. "So what's the answer? What's at the end of the tunnel?"

He shrugged. "Not much, after all. An anticlimax."

"I hope it was more than that, Russ. It killed us."

"Or it could've just been an artefact of the procedure. The old observer effect, maybe. Common sense could have told us as much, I could've saved myself the--"

"Russ."

He didn't look at the screen.

"There's nothing down there at all," he said, finally. "Nothing that thinks. I never liked it down there, it's all just...raw instinct, at the center. Left over from way back when the limbic system *was* the brain. Only now it's just unskilled labour, right? Just one small part of the whole, to do all that petty autonomic shit the upstart neocortex can't be bothered with. I never even considered that it might still be somehow...alive..."

His voice trailed off. Lynne's ghost waited silently, perhaps unequipped to respond. Perhaps programmed not to.

"You die from the outside in, did you know that?" he said, when the silence hurt more than the words. "And then, just for a moment, the center is all you are again. And down there, nobody wants to...you know, even the suicides, they were just fooling themselves. Intellectual games. We're so fucking proud of thinking ourselves to death that we've forgotten all about the old reptilian part sleeping inside, the part that doesn't calculate ethics or quality of life or burdens on the next of kin, it just wants to *live*, that's all it's programmed for, you know? And at the very end,

when we aren't around to keep it in line any more, it comes up and looks around and at that last moment it knows it's been betrayed, and it ... screams ..."

He thought he heard someone speak his name, but he didn't look up to find out.

"That's what we always found," he said. "Something waking up after a hundred million years, scared to death..."

His words hung there in front of him.

"You don't know that." Her voice was distant, barely familiar, with a sudden urgency to it. "You said yourself it could be an artefact. She might not have felt that way at all, Russ. You don't have the data."

"Doesn't matter," he murmured. "Wetware always dies the same way--"

He looked up at the screen.

And the image was for Chrissakes *crying*, phosphorescent tears on artificial cheeks in some obscene parody of what Lynne would do if she had been there. Wescott felt sudden hatred for the software that wept for him, for the intimacy of its machine intuition, for the precision of its forgery. For the simple fact that it *knew* her.

"No big deal," he said. "Like I said, an anticlimax. Anyhow, I suppose you have to go back and report to your--body--"

"I can stay if you want. I know how hard this must be for you, Russ--"

"No you don't." Wescott smiled. "Lynne might have. You're just accessing a psych database somewhere. Good try, though."

"I don't have to go, Russ--"

"Hey, that's not who I am any more. Remember?"

--we can keep talking if you want."

"Right. A dialogue between a caricature and an autopilot."

"I don't have to leave right away."

"Your algorithms's showing," he said, still smiling. And then, tersely: "Stop."

The cube darkened.

"Do y-ou want to cancel the program or just suspend it?" Carol asked.

He stood there for a while without answering, staring into that black featureless cube of perspex. He could see nothing inside but his own reflection.

"Cancel," he said at last. "And delete."