Soul of Science
DANIEL MARTIN DIAZ
II.
APRICOT LANE
by
RUDY RUCKER
“Julie went to yoga with Dan Joiner this afternoon,” said the
girlish voice of Julie's shoe. The shoe was a high-fashion item,
a skintight flicker-cladding foot glove with a polka-dot finish,
the shoe lying on the floor of our tiny apartment. Thanks to the
Quarpet interface, the shoe's voice was in my head, along with a
flexible little icon that postured like a cartoon character.

“I don't like hearing that,” I told the shoe, not out loud, just
thinking the words. “Please be quiet.”

“I stepped on chewing gum outside the studio,” continued the
shoe, ignoring my request for silence. “I wish you’d clean me with
soap and water, and a stiff brush.”

“Use me!” urged a scrub brush from under our kitchen sink, its
icon and its raspy voice also inside my head. The brush icon had
rolling eyes; he wore his bristles like a silly mustache. I ignored
him.

“Ask Julie to clean you,” I told the shoe. “Meanwhile she's out
jogging. To her office. There’s a big meeting.” Julie was a rental
broker for Welsh & Tayke. These days more and more things
were for rent. Efficient resource allocation. Handy because hardly
anyone could afford to buy something new.

Another of our possessions piped up. Julie's lipstick. “Actually,
Julie is jogging to Dan's car for a quickie. She was whispering
to him on the net while I touched her up just now. She got so
excited that she forgot to take me along.”

The lipstick's voice was low, seductive, intimate. Its icon had
a gossipy California-girl face with, of course, dramatically red
lips. It seemed be done talking for now, but I wished I could
permanently turn it off.

As of three days ago it had become impossible to deactivate
an object's voice and icon. This had happened after the latest
Quarpet upgrade had self-installed onto all its clients and users.
Objects were clients, people were users. All were of equal status
now, each of us part of the Quarpet empire. We were supposed
to get used to living with inner babble, and with Quarpet sprites
filling our eyes.

It was sunny outside, April, late afternoon, with a sweetness to
the damp air. I'd been sitting here with our front door open so
I could look at the golden light on the concrete alley. Apricot
Lane. It ran along the backs of some big houses that rented out their retrofitted garages and outbuildings, including the pathetic newlywed love nest that Julie and I had managed to lease for a ten-month term. A toolshed, actually. We didn't have any windows. Four months we'd been together in our nest, and now Julie's lipstick said she was cheating on me.

Cheating with her fellow rental broker Dan Joiner, no less. Dan was not a content provider, not an engineer, not a craftsperson, no, he was a flipmeister like Julie, shuffling hapless users in and out of short-term leases that traded on the open market like oil stocks or soybean futures. I could forgive chirpy, chatty, oblivious Julie for her occupation—but there was no forgiving Dan Joiner, that hideously tanned hyena, unable to converse about anything other than business and sports, forever rolling his neck as if he were an athlete with an ache, seemingly unable to remember my name: Tuck Playfair. Dan acted like he was a big deal, but he earned so little that he lived in a car.

I myself did contract programming on Quarpet apps. Sometimes. I worked in my apartment when I had one, or in whatever coffee shop would let me stay, or, when it occasionally came down to that, I'd work in whatever car I was renting. When I had a car. And when I had a project to work on. Which I didn't just now. I hadn't made any money in six weeks.

The wheel of fortune spun faster all the time. Everything in the world was on the make. Everything was potentially a bully, a snitch, a shopkeeper, a do-gooder, a scammer, a marketeer, an enemy, a beggar, a bore, a landlord. It was still a little hard to grasp that objects could think at all. It came down to the fact that objects are full of jiggling atoms and molecules. And that makes for processing power.

I zoned out for a minute there, sick of it all, slackly watching the Quarpet client sprites swirling across my visual field. Julie's shoe, the lipstick, the scrub brush, my unwashed laundry, our sadly unused candelabra, stale breadsticks, can of anchovies, a dusty crystal vase, my sunglasses, my wallet, my keys, my now-heartbreaking locket of videos of Julie, the neighbor's garbage can, the slabs of concrete in our alley, the shingles on our roof, an empty bottle under a bush—all these things softly talking at me in likeable and interesting voices.

"I'm in good shape, I'm in an unusual spot, I need maintenance, perhaps you should replace me with a newer model, you could
sublease me, I was assembled in San Diego, put me in the trash can, do you still love me . . . ”

The voices of the sprites were modulated by a Quarpet app that I'd had a small part in. Quarpet's default voices were high and horrible with corny accents—a lamentable interface decision that emanated from Quarpet's ultranerd zillionaire founder Ned Ruscha, who had a thing for old-school TV commercials. Ned had bought into the idiotic notion that real life is cute—rather than unspeakably futile and tragic. Cute for Ned Ruscha maybe. Cute at our expense.

Human sprites mingled with the icons of ordinary objects. The humans were a little larger and brighter. If you were online, your sprite tended to model your current appearance and activity. Julie's sprite, however, was dim and motionless. Offline mode. I didn't have the heart to call her. Didn't want to open a data gate into a foul, writhing quickie with Dan Joiner.

But maybe Julie's lipstick had been wrong. Or maybe the lipstick was staging a vendetta against me. We now knew that the molecular vibrations of any object could embody a human-level intelligence. Maybe the lipstick had it in for me because I was broke. Maybe it wanted me and Julie to break up.

The official line on the latest Quarpet upgrade was that objects would behave in more productive ways. “A world at work,” Ned Ruscha had said in the promo announcement. “Helpful genies all around. Comfortable control.”

Maybe, from Quarpet's viewpoint, it would be a better world if I stopped living with Julie. I was a parasite, an underperformer. And—another angle—it was well known that the Quarpet organization didn't like freelance apps programmers. They would have preferred to control the interface ecology themselves.

Maybe I was getting too paranoid. I took two cans of Julie's beer from our fridge and walked outside. The twinkling Quarpet icons circled my head like a ragtag rabble of paparazzi, like bill collectors on my case, like horror-movie toys crawling after a doomed kid. Once upon a time I'd had private memories, personal possessions, my own life.

As I got farther from the toolshed where Julie and I lived, additional sprites came clearly into focus. A power saw in a garage, a bird feeder, a shovel, a lawn chair, yellow sunglasses, a
dark-haired woman lying on the chair and wearing the sunglasses. An actual woman named Cambria in shorts and a long-sleeved jersey. A friend. And single.

Cambria was a freelance Quarpet apps programmer like me. In the old days she'd been a physicist. And I'd been designing interfaces for charity fund-raising sites. But now Quarpet was all that mattered.

"Hi, Tuck," said Cambria. Her chair was wedged onto a strip of grass next to the garage that she rented.

"Yo, Cambria. The sprites and voices are eating my head. I'm going to the park."

"I'll come too." Cambria sat up and wriggled her bare feet into her flip-flops. "Where's Julie? In your opinion." Cambria was a friend of Julie's from high school. She'd clued us in about our toolshed's rental opportunity before the shed had even announced itself.

"Julie's doing a quickie with Dan Joiner at work," I blurted, wanting to externalize my pain, wanting to hear what Cambria would think. "Having? Enjoying?"

"Error code!" Cambria unleashed an explosive laugh. "Dan the foxy flipmeister with the baked-on tan. And now you know. Poor Tuck. Can I have that other beer?" Cambria was single.

Our tiny park was at the end of Apricot Lane. Thanks to the Quarpet upgrade, a lot of people were in the park this week, wanting some physical distance from their talking things. The only things in the park that talked were the playground equipment and the picnic tables. And people's clothes, and the stuff that people carried with them. Thus far, plants, animals, and insects hadn't been Quarpeted.

Yes, it was quieter in the park, although I could still faintly hear the things in my apartment. Matter of fact, I seemed to hear Julie's lipstick give a scream.

But never mind that. Cambria was perched next to me on a picnic table, talking to me out loud, her voice like rough silk. "Word is, the Quarpet upgrade is meant to be a major disruption," she said. "The always-on feature isn't going away. The client objects have clear-channel access to everything, all the time, forever, with no firewalls, and they're under Quarpet control. No more quantum
entanglements with each other. Divide and conquer. You know what I mean?"

“I know that you’re a geek with low empathy,” I said. “But maybe that’s comfortable for me. Like lying in the mud.” I had this sense that my life as I’d known it was ending. I could say whatever I liked.

“Are you saying I should be talking about Julie and Dan?”

“A little,” I said. “Let’s open these beers.”

“Your blood alcohol level is in the normal range,” said my beer can’s voice in my head. Its top split open like a molting lobster’s shell. I was allowed to open the second beer as well, and I gave it to Cambria.

“If a can senses an irregularity, then it won’t open, and if you force your way in, it lists you on the online I Need Help page,” said Cambria. “And then maybe a freelance social worker tracks you down. Or a vigilante. I was on the team that wrote the beer-can app. What did you ever see in Julie, anyway?”

I pulled at my beer, enjoying the cool tingle in my throat. “I used to feel like she needed me,” I said. “She’s unsure of herself and I’m nice to her. I validate her. And in return I feel validated. I have a purpose. Even if I’m not making money.”

“What is love?” said Cambria. “You ever wonder about that?”

“I like the sound of Julie’s voice. The way she smells. We enjoy kissing.”

“To be expected,” said Cambria. “Little-known fact: love is physics. Love is a form of quantum entanglement. Your wave function and Julie’s wave function are merged into a single wave function. She’s you and you’re her. One flesh. At least that’s the way it’s been. But now—”

“Now it might be over,” I admitted.

“So...” said Cambria. “Do you feel any quantum entanglement with me?” She had a pixie face and lively eyes, faintly visible behind the amber lenses of her shades. Her expression was friendly and a little amused. Maybe she was gaming me. With women I could never tell.
“You’d move in on Julie’s man that fast?” I asked.

“Just trying to make you feel wanted,” said Cambria. “Two alligators lying in the mud.” She waggled her pink tongue and winked at me.

“What’s the wink?”

“Maybe I’m testing your loyalty. For my friend Julie. Julie’s shoe tells you what Julie does, but your shoe tells Julie what you do. The shoes are all spies now. Working for Quarpet.”

“Because of the upgrade?” I said.

“Yeah. I guess I’m more in the loop than you. I met with an apps broker today, angling for a gig. He didn’t want to tell me much, but I got the facts from his shoes. About objects becoming lovelorn cogs working for the Quarpet empire. Like us, in a way. Everyone out for themselves. In thrall to a voice in the sky.”

“You’re saying that’s because of less—quantum entanglement? The objects don’t love each other anymore?”

“Dig this,” said Cambria, gesturing in the air, pointing into our shared mental Quarpet space. “Disentanglement on parade. See the sprites goose-stepping around like soldiers? The picnic tables and everyone’s shoes and clothes. All together, with the commands coming via official Quarpet channels. Hut-two-three-four. A world of slaves.”

“Their voices are synched too,” I said, cocking my head. “Like a stadium full of fans. An armored tank that’s made of ants.”

“Guess what the tank is gonna enforce,” said Cambria. “Not so nice. Universal monetization.”

“How do you mean?” The phrase filled me with foreboding.

“Julie and Dan Joiner know. They’re rental brokers. Surfing the wave.”

As if cued by Cambria’s intro, Dan and Julie came walking into the park, heading straight toward me. For a moment I couldn’t make out their expressions—what with the low evening sun and the throng of sprites in my eyes—but then I could see Dan and Julie were expectant, smiling, keyed up.
“Dan and I were not having sex,” said Julie, running the last few steps. “Not really. My lipstick is a big liar. I pounded her flat with a rock.”

“I’m still talking,” said the crushed lipstick tube in my head. “Julie can’t shut me up. She’s the one who’s lying. She’s redefining sex. You should leave her.”

“The whole staff of Welsh & Tayke had a business meeting,” said Dan, rolling his neck like a football fullback. He had his arm around Julie’s waist. “Ned Ruscha acquired our parent company. From now on, everything charges rent. And Quarpet is outsourcing the real-time pricing to us.”

“To you, Dan?” I said. “You’ll program the apps?”

“It’s not about programming,” said Julie, smiling up at Dan. “It’s about mentoring.”

“Who mentoring who?” I demanded. A balloon of fury was rising in my chest.

“Us mentoring the Quarpet client objects,” said Julie with a sincere nod. “We brokers can size up the values of things, you see.”

“We read vibes,” said Dan. “Intuitively. In the blink of an eye. The objects will be rookies on our team.”

“Rentals will be automatic,” said Julie. “You help yourself to whatever you want. And the things decide how much to charge. Micropayments.”

“Maybe a hundredth or a thousandth of cent,” said Dan. “Thanks to our coaching, the objects will know how to optimize net returns.”


“A smaller charge if you don’t enjoy,” said Dan quickly. “Or maybe you don’t see the picture at all. Quarpet is rolling out a tweak for that, I understand.”

“Involuntary selective blindness?” said Cambria. “Wow. Like burning out a debtor’s eyes with a hot poker.”
"The world's a sliding-scale buffet," said Dan in a comfortable tone.

"And no fibbing about what's on your plate!" added Julie. "Our shoes keep us honest. It's all worked out."

"Flying on that magic Quarpet," said Cambria. "Ain't it great?"

"Let's back up a minute," I said to Julie. "Why did you rush to the park to talk to me?"

"I—I saw an opportunity," said Julie. "Your shoes told me long-distance that you and Cambria were here drinking beer and flirting, and I've been feeling like we two are over it, and you haven't been earning, and Dan's tired of living in his car, and his and my incomes are sure to go up now that we'll be Quarpet client mentors, and—"

"Julie really did have sex with Dan," said one of Julie's jogging shoes just then. "In the broader sense of the word. In his car right before the meeting. A quickie. It's better if you know." The shoe was smug and giggly inside my head.

I considered this for a moment. Unbearable. "Over it," I finally said, echoing Julie's phrase. "I'll miss you, baby."

Another pause. And then I turned to Dan. "So go ahead, fine, move out of your car and into our toolshed." I lost control and my voice rose to a shout. "Make yourself at home, you baked moron!"

"No offense!" said Dan. "I'm grateful to accept your generous offer, uh . . . "

"Tuck!" I screamed, the cords standing out in my neck. "My name's Tuck! I'm somebody! I'm a man!"

"You're cute when you get all red," said Julie. "This doesn't have to be permanent. I heard you talking to Cambria, and it's true, you do make me feel validated sometimes. Maybe we'll stage a comeback one day."

"But first Tuck moves in with me," said Cambria, nudging my arm.

"You see?" beamed Julie. "Everything's perfect."
So that was okay, in a way, although Cambria’s bed didn’t like my credit, and I had to sleep on the floor.

Suicide rates shot up over the next week, not to mention murders, assaults, and psychotic breaks. Universal monetization was particularly hard on those who had no money. Up to a point, you could run a tab, eating into your credit. But once you hit a certain strict limit, the Quarpet client objects would curtail your services. They wouldn’t so much as advance you one extra thousandth of a cent.

It was fun living with Cambria—while it lasted. I liked her voice and the way she smelled. And her laugh. She still had an app job to finish, and I helped her a little. The app was about tracking how many objects were watching you. Not something that Quarpet wanted people to know, but there was a market for the app anyway. The programming related to Cambria’s quantum mechanics thing. When an object was watching you, it made a very slight disturbance in your personal quantum wave function, and you could notice that. In some weird way, working with quantum processes was the same as learning to think in certain ways.

I helped Cambria with her new app’s interface, and she gave me a little cut of her delivery payoff. But most of my money was gobbled up by my online creditors, and a day later my credit was maxed out again. Cambria’s possessions were harshing on me for freeloadng. She couldn’t take it anymore. I had to go.

“I’m sorry, Tuck,” she said as she sent me out into Apricot Lane. “You’re cute, but I’m—”

“Semi over it?”

“No, over it. We’re fully entangled. But it’s inconvenient.” Her door closed.

The concrete paving slabs of Apricot Lane set an insufferable beeper to running in my head. I didn’t have a lousy hundredth of a cent to pay for walking on the street. I scooted over to the dirt edge, made my way to our little park, and flopped down in the shade of an oak tree. Thinking I might look for work, I peered into Quarpet space.

What I saw was feeble, but at least I saw something. There was no way to turn off a person’s access to the net. The net was like air or light, a low-level physical phenomenon. So, yes, the
Quarpet clients were still there for me to see, but their icons were dull text labels. And they stayed silent when prodded—or at best spoke to me in sullen monotones. And the standard search apps weren't working for me at all.

Even so, I wasn't entirely helpless. I was, after all, a Quarpet apps programmer. To start with, I needed a way to disable the insufferable beeping of, like, an unpaid slab of pavement that I might want to walk on. I began doing some work on the problem, lying in the shade, looking up at the oak.

In their slow search for light, the oak's branches had grown into lovely, twisted patterns. The bark was a mossy maze of mites and cracks. The spring-fresh leaves traced chaotic paths, nodding in the breeze. These weren't things I normally would have noticed. But in some odd way they were helping me design my app. Nature was my last resort. And maybe I was hers.

"I'm thirsty," said a guy lying near me. A fellow bum. His name was Carlo.

"No hope of the park's water fountain working for us," I said. "But there's a creek in that gully down there. I've seen dogs drink out of it."

"What about food?" asked Carlo as we knelt by the stream. "Eat minnows? Slugs?"

"Let's hit some garbage dumpsters," I said. "Behind restaurants and supermarkets." All of a sudden, I'd finished my anti-beeper app. Thanks to the quantum jive that Cambria had taught me, it hadn't been all that hard to write. My app was like a meditation technique.

"The dumpsters are gonna scream shrill in our heads," fretted Carlo. "The sidewalks and the streets, too. We can't even leave this park."

"BeepBeGone," I said, wrapping a container around my app. "Here, I'm passing you a copy on the net."

I couldn't exactly charge money for BeepBeGone, given that it was for penniless homeless people. So I made it public domain. It spread fast. The next day, bums all over town were walking the streets and eating garbage in alleys. A few merchants chained up their dumpsters or poured bleach onto their leftovers, but most people felt sorry for us and let things slide. Nearly everyone had
a friend or a relative whom Quarpet had cut off.

But we still had to sleep in parks or in the boonies. If you tried sleeping anywhere else, the Quarpet response went beyond beeping. The sidewalks called the cops. Or maybe the vigilantes. Even if people didn't want us to starve, they didn't want us underfoot.

The vest-pocket park by Apricot Lane grew crowded, but I still liked it. It was close to where Julie and Cambria lived. I had my spot under my favorite oak tree. I spent a lot of time lying under that tree, imagining new kinds of bum-friendly apps—but feeling like I wasn't thinking big enough. What we really needed was to roll back the recent Quarpet upgrade—the one that had made objects less mellow.

Although Julie was still tight with Dan Joiner, Cambria came and visited with me every night. For a chat, or even for sex. She half wanted to ask me back into her garage, but we knew her possessions would find a way to thwart me. The Quarpet tweaks were making the world meaner all the time.

"I finally have an idea for a way to help objects love each other again," Cambria said on my fourth night in the park.

We were lying together on a blanket that she'd brought from her house. I had BeepBeGone in my head to mute the blanket's protests at being lain upon by a pauper. It was dark. Cambria and I were practically naked. We'd just had sex and we were gearing up to do it again. Meanwhile we were talking about quantum physics and Quarpet app design. Not everyone's idea of romance, but that's the kind of people we were.

"We want objects to be quantum entangled with each other again, right?" I said.

"Love is the answer," said Cambria, caressing me. "My take is that we'll train the objects by example."

"Mentoring? By doing what we're doing right now?"

"We'd have to go further," she said. "We'd have to entangle ourselves deeply with some particular object. So it really really notices us. Show it the way. I'm hoping that'll start a domino effect. A chain reaction."

"So let's do it." I was ready to get back to our lovemaking.

"Maybe," I said. "Darling." We had sex, and I dropped off to sleep, and Cambria crept back to her garage.

In the night, Quarpet sprang a new upgrade. I heard a low-flying plane overhead, but I didn't really focus on it. If anything, I assumed it was an anti-mosquito aerial spray routine. I'd later learn that the plane had deployed a mist of special-purpose molecules that parasitically affixed themselves to plants, animals, insects—and to human bodies. Tagging us all. Breaking down our quantum entanglements. Giving Quarpet central control. Divide and conquer.

When I awoke in the morning, I thought I was blind. Looking up at a somewhat blotchy sky, I didn't see my oak tree overhead. Just a motionless vertical line. A placeholder. The oak was a Quarpet client and my vision centers were tweaked. It cost money to see the oak. And if you were a bum, the oak's image was edited out.

"Fubar," said my friend Carlo. He was on all fours, about twenty feet from me, running his hands across the ground. "No grass no more."

Carlo didn't look so good. His face was a circle with three black dots. His body was a sketchy skeleton like a crooked bunch of sticks. For that matter, my own hands were pathetic wireframe claws.

All the trees and bushes were gone as well, both in the park and all the way down Apricot Lane. Trees were lines, bushes were disks, and grass was black scribbles on the ground. The cawing crows overhead were arrows, the ants on the ground were stupid dots. A sterile world, a moonscape—if you couldn't pay your bills.

I called Cambria on the net and told her about the change. She was still seeing okay. She still had some money. She dashed out of her garage and came running to me, a stick figure with a generic happy-face.

"Let's do it!" she yelled. "The love merge!"

What with my Quarpet-caused lack of quantum entanglement, I hardly remembered what love was. But intellectually I knew it was the only safe place. I hadn't forgotten our plan.
The idea was that Cambria and I would lovingly merge our minds and flow into a nearby object. We'd provide a crystallization focus. Like a single speck of dust that turns a supercooled pond into a unified slab of ice.

We lay down at the foot of my oak, our arms tightly wrapped around each other, our minds in full communication via the net. We rubbed our bodies together like two cold sticks trying to make fire. I willed myself to be part of Cambria, prodded my wave function to superimpose itself upon hers—and, yes, the entanglement came back. Once again we were falling ever deeper in love. Her bland artificial features softened and took on the form of her playful living face. I kissed her.

"Now comes the dangerous part," Cambria whispered into my ear.

We went for the old oak. We were inside the great tree's body—within its roots and pith and bark, feeling its juices, filtering through its inner channels, relishing the light upon its leaves. For a moment the tree remained cold and distant. Haughty. Possibly we'd extended ourselves too far. Conceivably our wave functions would collapse. Maybe we'd forget how to breathe.

Cambria and I focused our quantum waves, putting everything we had into sensations of love, all but dissolving into mindless white light, approaching a point of no return. And now the tree caught on. The oak's mind reached out to us, welcoming us into its world—quantum entangling with us, sending friendly ethereal roots into our souls.

We were on our way. The recrystallization had begun. Cambria, the oak tree, and I began awakening the Quarpet clients around us—the plants, the tables, and the sidewalks—reminding them to quantum entangle with each other, reminding them to fall in love. To obsess over each other once again. To forget about bosses on the net. To melt with tenderness and joy.

The wave of quantum entanglement spread across the planet in the blink of an eye. Once again things were their good old selves—merged into a convivial mutual reality, not giving a damn about Quarpet at all. Dumb as rocks and yet, in some wider sense, all-knowing and omnipotent.

It was a return to the garden of Eden, the garden we'd once taken for granted. Savoring the taste of a nearly forgotten freedom, the populace arose—and destroyed the Quarpet offices and labs.
Even the police joined in. Even the vigilantes.

And now? Dan and Julie are still together—they've repositioned themselves as old-school realtors. Cambria and I are setting off on a bicycle trek up the West Coast, starting from Apricot Lane and blogging as we go. We have quite a few supporters.

As for Ned Ruscha? He's been running a carnival puppet show, the last I heard. Carnivals are big again.