

THE GIRL WHO CRIED GLASS

- R J Burgess -

Dinner was served with a bustle of efficiency; the passing of space from in front of us to be replaced by steaming plates of food; the scurrying shadows of departing waiters leaving us - "Would sir care to try the wine?" "Is everything okay for you both?" - alone in the darkness at last.

There is a moment of uncertainty - a pause whilst he looks at me and I to him. The food between us vents away happily. We smile, look away. We make polite conversation about the weather and the quality of the restaurant. Both are fair. I have smoked rib-eye stake (medium/rare) with peppercorn sauce and mange tout. He has the braised lamb shank, the mint sauce glistening in tiny dollops over the meaty bone.

He's the first to break the silence. "Well. Bon appetite, hey?"

"Bon appetite," I echo, clinking my glass against his before setting it back down on the table untouched.

The restaurant he's taken me to is passably romantic. Not expensive by any margin, but sufficiently over-priced that those who sit around in the gloom - the twenty or thirty of us crammed into the semi-darkness, our huddled forms peering for each other around the scurrying candle

light - at least have the dignity of wearing suits. Most pay by card.

My date for this evening also wears a suit and pays by card. He tells me his name is Carl, an accountant for some inner-city business on the edge of the True Born district. I tell him my name is Kiris. He makes pleasant conversation between greedy mouthfuls.

He seems friendly enough, but I've noticed the curious looks he gives me between slurps of wine, the frown he casts my way whenever he thinks I'm not looking. It's a look of fear. A look of questioning why he's actually come here tonight. I've been on a few dates of this type before with people from all walks of life. That look is universal.

The conversation lulls and again I catch him staring at me. I put down my fork.

"You might as well come out and ask."

"Sorry?" He looks startled.

"You're staring."

"Sorry." He stares down at his plate, the faint flush of blood staining his cheeks with guilt. He swirls his fork through the remains of his meal and tries to recover his dignity.

"It's just... When we arranged this date, I didn't realise you'd be... what you are."

"What I am."

"A *metapath*." He almost hisses the word as though overhearing it would be blasphemy. As though everyone in this damned restaurant couldn't tell the moment I walked through the door exactly what I am. We're not difficult to spot, even the out-dated models like me. Just look for the perfectly symmetrical features, the skin completely untainted by even the slightest blemish, the undeveloped form of our bodies, the skin pale like frosted glass. There's no doubt that everyone in this room knows by now there's a *metapath* eating amongst them. Even the staff seem nervous.

"Does it bother you?"

"No." He's a bad liar. It bothers him. It bothers him that I'm genetically perfect, my DNA custom-built in a laboratory; my embryonic cells forged from gelatinous gloop, sparked to life and allowed to spread on a petri dish before being implanted into a surrogate womb. It bothers him that, technically speaking, I qualify as a man, my 24th chromosome reading XY under any blood test. Year's ago, scientists discovered they could use the missing half chromosome in the Y part of the XY pair to graft on artificial information and make a false X. That's half a chromosome of missing information to exploit, to fill with totally alien DNA of their devising. *The Metapath Gene*. As computers and machinery became ever more complex, they realised that a more adaptable

interface was needed, something easier to use than the usual clumsy terminals humans used to access information. That link became the metapaths, the perfect link between man and computer.

All of this bothers him, Carl, the little chubby businessman who sits there playing with his meal, battling with the ethics involved with taking me to bed. I place my hand gently against his in comfort. He flinches but doesn't pull away.

"I'm not due on for another five hours," I tell him.

"And then what?"

"I do my duty. Until then, I'm a person just like you."

"You're nothing like me. You're a metapath."

"Only for twelve hours a day. Human physiology just isn't able to cope with the amount of information I have to handle for longer than that. Some - the newer models they're creating now - have a totally revamped neuro-chemistry meaning they can be plugged in almost constantly but I'm... one of the older types. I'm not a meta right now. Not for hours yet."

He sighs. "Then you're not anything."

I let the hand slip away from his, dab at the corner of my mouth with a napkin and ask for the bill from a passing waiter. Carl watches with growing irritation.

"What are you doing?"

"Leaving."

He sighs. "Alright. Fine. I live across town. You want to get a taxi?"

"No need," I say, sliding back into my seat. "I have a place just around the corner."

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Carl fucks badly. He scrambles around on top of me for a few minutes, all limbs and wet kisses before climaxing in an awkward fit of wailing. Afterwards, I let him roll off me and lie there staring at the ceiling as he pants and sweats next to me and tells me that was amazing. Pretty soon he's passed out, his snores dull in the air of my apartment. Even in the darkness, the room appears soulless, functional. A bed, a shower, a toilet and a window. They don't allow us personal effects.

Outside the window, the city flashes by in its continual thrum of people travelling to work, or from work, or away from work for the weekend. Cars and buildings stretch out across the horizon like the blooming of an exit wound. And at the centre of that exit wound, the Hub: the central processing core of every metapath in Lythea. A gigantic depository of information to which all roads lead.

I sigh, picking my way around the room, gathering my clothes from where they fell during our earlier attempts at passion. Carl continues to sleep.

I watch him for a while. I think of Isra.

The last time I saw Isra was three weeks ago. She was sitting in the foyer of the apartment block at the time, playing cards with a couple of other off-duty metas I didn't recognise.

She was sympathetic, of course, but then, she was used to my tetchiness by then. She looked almost bored as I came over, eyes downcast, and told her I was unhappy. She dealt me into the game.

"I don't know what you're complaining about," she sniffed. Next to her, the two metas I didn't recognise passed words amongst themselves, their eyes sliding over me between murmured breaths. I pretended not to notice. "We're not people, Kiris," Isra continued. "We're better than that, don't you get it? We *know* why we're here. We were created in order to fulfil a function, a gap in society that could only be filled by us. Everyone else - those random blurs of genetic code we call *True Born* - who the fuck are they? They exist because their parents got horny one night and forgot to use protection. Most of them spend their entire lives asking themselves why they're here, what their *purpose* in this world is. They look to religion or else just waste their lives on trivialities because they're too frightened to face the prospect that there's absolutely no meaning to any of it. But we don't need to deny ourselves like that. We know

why we're here. Surely, there's no greater peace of mind than that?"

Her gaze was cold, considered, perfect. Her answers were identical to those I'd heard a hundred times before from a hundred different meetings. The others nodded along with her words, smiling faintly with what I could swear was satisfaction. I trusted Isra, but right then I hated her for her refusal to bend, even a little, for someone as close to losing it as me.

"But we do their bidding."

"No," she corrected me, laying down her last two cards and winning the game. I blinked. I'd barely even been aware we were playing. "We do the Hub's bidding. The two just happen to coincide for the time being."

She sat back and looked at me. She told me that the True Born's were in chaos before we came along. "We've redesigned everything. Nothing is wasted; there are no loop holes, no administrative blunders, no gigantic files of paperwork clogging up office space. Human error only applies to humans after all."

"But we *are* human," I protest.

"Don't be dumb, Kiris. We're a halfway species, like a horse and a donkey breeding together to make a mule. Sure, take a blood test and we'll *read* human but we're no more that than a chimpanzee is." She smiled at the

comparison and, turning back to the others, dealt another hand.

I feel almost pathetic as I recite this to myself in the dingy light of the apartment. I stare down at Carl, my little balding businessman. One of those odious men who fester in the dark places of Lythea trying to pretend they're content with their lot. Surely, he'd understand. Would he care if I told him any of this? If I broke down into tears, would he comfort me? Would he wrap his arms around me, kiss me and say, "Shhh, there, there, everything will be better soon." No. He'll just lie there and sleep and then afterwards... Regrets.

I want him to ask about me. I want him to sympathise when I tell him that I've only three or four years left before I'm phased out completely. Three or four years before metas like me become so obsolete, our only course is termination.

Carl makes a sound and turns over. He lies there blinking at the clock for a moment.

"How long was I out?" he murmurs from the bed sheets.

"A few hours. Can I get you anything?"

"No." He sits up, searching blindly in the darkness for his clothes. I watch him passively as he dresses.

"Are you leaving?"

"I think it's best." He looks up. "I had fun tonight, so thank you for that, but..."

"You don't want me."

He frowns. He pulls up his trousers and buckles them.

"Of course I don't," he says.

"I thought that maybe..."

"What? Where did you think this would *go*?" He's angry now; he strides over to me, shirt still undone, hands flying apart in gesture. "Even if I wasn't one of the most important men in my company, you honestly think I'd consider *dating* a... walking computer? You're insane! Did you even *feel anything* just now?"

I feel my cheeks reddening; I stare at the floor. "I felt the closeness. The intimacy."

He snorts. "You know that's not what I meant."

I say nothing. He already knows the answer he's looking for.

"Then why do it?" He shakes his head, muttering something under his breath as he buttons up his cuffs and storms out the room without saying goodbye. I hear him descending the stairs outside two at a time, barging through the doors on his way out of the building. If I walked over to the window now, I could probably see him wandering down the street, hailing a taxi, getting away from me as fast as he can.

I stay where I am. The others laugh at me sometimes. They ask me why I always do this to myself. I wish I had an answer.

The clock says I'll be on again in three hours. I sit on the bed. I wait.

I wait for that tingling numbness that always accompanies the first phase of genetic shift. It always happens the same way: the dizziness, the sickening nausea as the metapath gene flares into life. The buzz of static as my thoughts are pushed aside and I cease to exist - washed away on a sea of ones and zeros to hide in some remote corner of my sub-conscious, limpet-like, and watch as computer code becomes my everything.

It always hurts.

And as I sit there waiting, I can't help but run through my mind that same tired mantra that always accompanies me. The seven things that all beings require in order to classify as a life form:

The ability to respire; the ability to move; the ability to react to ones surroundings; to grow; to excrete; to get nutrition from ones environment and lastly, most importantly, the ability to reproduce.

I lie back, my body inert against the sweat-soaked mattress beneath me. I'm bored but it doesn't matter. The time always passes eventually.