

PROLOGUE

Deep in woods west of Hartford, Connecticut, the late autumn air musty with the smell of decaying leaves, the killer pointed his gun at Kevin Applewood, an average guy whose prior brushes with danger had come only in petting strange dogs. An ordinary guy, an engineer with a large manufacturing corporation and military contractor, except he'd pursued an innocent but out-of-the-ordinary activity that turned into a nightmare. The muffled bang of a pistol firing through a silencer signaled the end of his misery.

The same activity, an online pursuit called "Personal Portal," intrigued another regular guy, Richard "Rick" Collins of Charlottesville, Virginia." It had been recommended to him by a friend who, with his wife, had recently taken it up as a hobby. Eager to learn more, Rick walked upstairs to the computer in his home, a small tract house in the Jefferson's Woods subdivision near the main University of Virginia campus, and Googled an online article whose first paragraph introduced Personal Portal:

"PP, as its adherents call it, is a social media phenomenon that combines the companionate aspects of Facebook with the fun of computer games. It's catching on fast with computer-literate people. A virtual world, it's a free website that's a make-believe Earth, a cartoon land, where each participant, who may be online from anywhere on the real Earth, uses a keyboard to control the movements and speech of an avatar representing him or her. Think of it as a hi-tech adult dollhouse, a place for grownups to play 'let's pretend' and act out their fantasies. Participants meet other people from all over the globe and often make friends. They pursue simulated activities, ranging from hiking the Appalachian Trail to ballroom dancing, frequently in the company of PP friends. Worldwide, tens of millions of adults—no youngsters allowed—take part in PP, which is newer and more advanced than its principal competitor, Second Life."

Rick's friend, Ron, had told him it was "kind of a non-competitive video game or something like watching a TV reality show where you control what one of the characters does and says."

The article's depiction of a virtual world simulating reality so well it seemed true to life appealed to Rick's sense of adventure, and he finished it keen to sign up. PP was another activity he and his wife, Martha, could do together.

He sauntered downstairs, dawdling while he decided how to frame his suggestion to Martha, who was suspicious of frivolity. He found her reading a magazine in the family room, where he described PP to her in glowing terms, stressing the educational opportunities in "travel" to other lands and cultures. "It's a pastime we could share if we bought a cheap second computer so we could enjoy it as a couple. How about trying it with me?"

"I'll wait to see how you like it."

Disappointed but not surprised, Rick returned to the computer room and jumped enthusiastically into the virtual world, where he worked painstakingly to create an avatar that looked like him. The next day he practiced with it and explored parts of the virtual

world. Feeling comfortable with the technology and having enjoyed his PP adventures, he invited Martha to sit beside him after dinner for a session to see what it was like.

“I don't see the appeal. It seems juvenile, but I'll watch if you want me to.”

“Give it a try. You might change your mind when you learn the possibilities.”

She followed him upstairs into the small, crowded room that housed the family's computer system, desk, file cases, bookshelves, armchair, and sewing machine. He moved the sewing machine chair in front of the computer for Martha and settled into the gray-cloth office chair that was part of the computer setup.

Using the mouse to bring the desktop to life, he logged on to PP by clicking an internet icon labeled “Personal Portal,” which looked like the magical wardrobe in the Narnia movies that served as a portal to a fairyland. A sprawling, ornate building with a plaza appeared on the large flat-screen monitor. Standing in the plaza, his back to the screen, was a realistic cartoon figure of a man dressed in white shorts, an electric blue Tee shirt, and sandals. A sign above his head read “Isaac Asimov.”

“That can't be the famous author,” Martha said.

“It's my avatar. He represents me.”

“Your cyber Barbie doll.”

Annoyed at the put-down but ignoring it, Rick worked non-typing functions on the keyboard, and the man turned to face the screen.

“Ta-da!” Rick held out his hands theatrically and turned to face Martha.

She hesitated and then leaned forward for a closer look. “He looks enough like you to be a brother.”

“PP calls its avatars doppels, from the German word doppelganger.”

“Meaning?”

“A ghost who's the exact double of some person. But the free software can't produce a perfect likeness. That takes a special program.”

“What are we paying?”

“Nothing, except for purchases. So far, that's only Isaac's wardrobe.”

“How much did that cost us?” Her voice rose in annoyance.

Her implication of reckless spending irritated him. “They're just pixels, so less money than the cost of a real pair of jeans.”

“Why Isaac Asimov? Why not your actual name?”

“For anonymity. Nobody uses their real name. They don't want to be bothered by people they meet online intruding into RL. That's PP jargon for real life as opposed to fantasy life.” He glanced uneasily away from Martha, thinking it unwise to mention that a made-up handle also allowed people to go unrecognized to shady places such as clubs catering to sexual interests.

“You picked your pseudonym because you hope to be a famous writer on science like Asimov?”

“You got it.” He pointed to the large building in front of Isaac. “Recognize that?”

“Looks like the Louvre.”

“Correcto. Isaac is in Paris. It's a replica of the museum and most popular exhibits.” Virtual pubs were his favorite places to practice PP skills because he could

meet and talk with many friendly people, but the virtual Louvre was a better choice to introduce Martha to PP since she liked anything cultural and had worked for museums. “Let's go in.” Under his control, Isaac walked through the entrance. The “camera” transmitting the picture from PP to his monitor stayed a few feet behind and a little above Isaac and showed what he was seeing. At Rick’s commands, Isaac stopped, looked around, and strode to a man looking at a painting. Named Walla Bee, he wore an Australian bush hat. In a box in the lower left corner of his screen, Rick typed, “Excuse moi, parlez-vous anglais?”

“Can I help?” The typed words appeared under Rick’s question.

“Those words were sent by the real person behind Walla,” Rick said. “He’s on the internet now somewhere in the world and controlling Walla, safe to say in Australia.”

“Where’s Mona Lisa?” Rick typed.

“Just came from there,” Walla answered. He gave Rick directions.

“Thanks. May ask where U R in RL?”

“Sydney, Australia. You?”

“Virginia, USA. Appreciate it. Bye!” Rick walked Isaac to a bench and sat him down. “That’s how you talk here. A telegraphic style. Texting shorthands. Abbreviations. Hitting the ‘Enter’ key after each sentence. PP software converts what you type into full words and fills in missing words. Walla saw my typed ‘U R’ as ‘you are’ on his screen and ‘May ask’ as ‘May I ask.’ So conversations aren’t much slower than normal if you’re an experienced typist like me.”

“I’d think such a high-tech place could use spoken words.”

“Anonymity rules here, and people find spoken language too revealing.”

Rick “teleported” Isaac to a various other PP sites, where they ran into people from several states and every continent. He zipped Isaac to a ballroom in Austria where he asked a statuesque Icelandic woman to dance as the orchestra started a tango. Rick activated an app that took control of Isaac and had him dancing like a master.

“Bet you didn’t know I was so talented,” he said to Martha.

“I’d be happy if you could just learn the box step.”

His companion knew English, and they chatted after the dance. A waiter came by with a tray of champagne-filled glasses. Isaac took two, which he and the woman sipped as they talked.

“I like that about PP—having conversations with people I wouldn’t meet in ordinary life,” Rick told Martha. Isaac said goodbye to his dancing partner and walked out on the balcony overlooking Vienna. Rick swiveled around in his chair. “Want to join PP?” He knew the answer from her impassive expression.

“I may have no imagination, but it doesn’t grab me. There are evidently hordes of people in PP who feel differently, so you don’t need me to play ‘house.’ It wouldn’t be worth spending the money even on a used second computer. I’ll be happy to experience PP secondhand when you tell me about your experiences.”

From then on, Rick went into PP when he could as a pleasant diversion, enjoying on an adult level the escapist fantasies he’d had as a boy with action figures.

Months later, slumped in his computer chair pondering the doom he and his family faced, Rick could hardly believe the horror that Personal Portal had become. It had begun so innocuously.

CHAPTER 1

As I had sat in a quiet room at the University of Virginia library perusing the employment section of the *Wall Street Journal*, an ad jumped out at me. Just what I was looking for. Excited, I hustled to copy it and get home.

The ad seemed to describe a job, probably high salaried, that was geared to my qualifications and offered career satisfaction: "Science writer with at least 10 years experience in public relations wanted to lead effort in energy technology PR by renowned multinational corporation." However, the last phrase, "multinational corporation," added complications. A position in public relations with a university or other nonprofit appealed to me more than a job with a corporation because nonprofit priorities seemed nobler. However, the tight job market kept corporations in the running, particularly since they paid so well.

Martha would want to see the ad, which troubled me. She regarded working for corporations as akin to slavery and tried to dissuade me from even considering them. She had strong opinions and wasn't easily influenced by the opinions of others, including me. She could be swayed by forceful reasoning or new evidence, although occasionally her emotions got the better of her. This sometimes created a prickly relationship, but her independence commanded my respect, and her self-confidence endeared her to me.

It occurred to me that the discussion might be more congenial if we talked over our daily mulled wine. We'd made a batch when we had friends over on Halloween and had been replenishing it and quaffing a cup every night since.

"I have something to show you, but let's get our punch first."

She looked at me quizzically. "It's so bad you want me tipsy when I see it?"

"No, but I'd like you mellow."

We stepped into our kitchen, redolent of cabbage and lamb and fish and all the other foods that had been cooked in it through the years. I filled two cups and heated them in the microwave oven. We went through what had become a nightly ritual. Standing face to face, we toasted one another, sipped the wine, and kissed.

"I'm glad I married a tall man. It makes kissing so much easier."

"And a tall wife means I don't have to bend so far."

Aside from height, we have little in common physically. My northern European ancestors gave me light skin and brown hair, and her southern European forebears gave her a darker complexion and black hair. Sports and outdoor activities have always been part of my life, giving me well-defined muscles and a hard body. She's not an athlete—more of an earth mother type, with a soft body—and has a medium build bordering on heavy.

Taking our cups of mulled wine, we sat at our usual places for meals, the opposite ends of the rectangular kitchen table her mother had passed on to us when she remodeled. I handed Martha the ad. She read it, frowned, and put her cup down hard. "Geez, Rick, no, not a corporation! You're no organization man, and I'm no corporate wife. Why pick a company run by suits right at the start?" As expected.

“I didn’t look for a corporation. I’m looking for the best job, and this one is promising.” I tried to project reasonableness and reassurance.

“But corporations suck.” She brushed her hair away from her eyes.

Sipping wine helped me gather my thoughts. “All employment sucks. Corporate culture isn’t as bad or as different from university life as academics think. Universities can be heartless bureaucracies, too. It still makes me angry that Vic’s supposedly liberal school denied him tenure because he supported the adjunct instructors’ union. Companies wouldn’t be thriving, and so many people wouldn’t be working for them, if they were as awful as many people imagine.”

Martha scrunched up her face and passed the ad back. “I guess there’s no harm in applying, but let’s talk if this goes anywhere.” The outcome I’d aimed for.

The hostility was typical of her reaction to everything I did in my job search. She had agreed to the search but wasn’t happy about it. In theory, she knew I needed to bring in more money for us and our two kids, three-year-old Jeff and one-year-old Elisa. For one thing, we’d soon need a home with more room than our “starter” house.

We’d discussed careers, marriage, and children before we married and decided I could pursue my dream of writing books by freelancing and trying to get a book contract after work and on weekends. This wouldn’t allow me much time to share housework or childcare, but Martha didn’t mind doing it herself if she could stay home rather than continue working as a museum administrator. Our agreement on the arrangement was sealed when we discovered the high price of daycare.

So it was up to me to earn the entire income. My current position in public relations with the University of Virginia didn’t pay enough and offered no way to advance, but there was no suitable alternative work for me in Charlottesville.

“I know we may have to move, hon, but the thought of moving depresses me,” she’d said. Even more than I, she loved life in Charlottesville, a beautiful, historic old college town and retirement Mecca at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. She’d lived there all her life, and her mother still lived just minutes away. And I liked my work. Many of our friends and neighbors also worked for the University of Virginia, known in the state as UVA. We both enjoyed being part of the city’s academic community. We should have moved on years ago to advance my career but hadn’t wanted to disturb our happy life. Yet Martha criticized every step in my job search that threatened to take us away from the city. She undoubtedly wasn’t conscious of being relentlessly negative and often unreasonable. Her bad attitude strained—but didn’t bend—my deep love for her.

My reply to the ad led to the most unusual interview of my life.

CHAPTER 2

An email response came from a person named Joan d'Arc saying she was conducting interviews with promising candidates in cutting-edge fashion: meeting them in PP. Not knowing I was already participating in PP, Joan asked me to join it and let her know when we could meet there. The unique interview seemed a way to eliminate technophobes and was therefore to my advantage, so it delighted me to answer that I could see her immediately. Joan replied that evening suggesting we get together the next night and including a link that would take me to her PP “home,” a cottage in PP’s Hawaiian section.

As the appointed time approached, I raced up the stairs to our top floor, eager to use Personal Portal as more than entertainment. Plunking myself in front of the monitor, I logged into PP and followed the link to Joan's house. A living room with wicker furniture appeared on the screen. Isaac stood in the center of the room. Pressing an arrow key turned him all around. No one else was there. Other arrow keys made him walk into a kitchenette, also empty, and a bedroom with a king bed. Nobody. Where can she be? Worried that I might have fallen for an internet prank, I keyboarded the name "Joan" into the chat window and sent an instant message: "Where are you?"

“Outside in my hammock.”

Relieved, I marched Isaac out the front door into a Hawaiian landscape painted in tropical colors brightened by the midday sun. Purple hibiscus flowers surrounded the pink cottage. A deep blue ocean appeared before me, with waves forming whitecaps and crashing loudly. A person was swinging in a green hammock slung between coconut palm trees. The sign above her read “Joan d'Arc.” I made Isaac hustle over the fluorescent-white sand to her, typed “Aloha!” and hit the “Enter” key.

Instantly, she replied “Aloha!” A remarkably realistic, almost photographic, cartoon rendering of a woman swung her legs over the side of the hammock and stood. Tall, blond, and “built,” with movie-star beauty, she wore a bright red thong bikini. Her animator must have utilized the expensive advanced computer program that used photos and videos to reproduce a person's looks exactly. Wow! This was one interview that could be fun.

“Take a seat, please,” she said, pointing to one of two orange lawn chairs while she took the other facing me. “Let me tell you what I’m doing. I’ve built a worldwide network of contacts in PP. They help me, and I help them. A contact sent me an ad from his company’s employee publication for an open position. Trying to get referrals from their employees before going public. This gives me the opportunity to add another person to my network—whoever can win that job.” She reached over to a table beside her chair, picked up a notepad and pencil, and made ready to take notes. “So I’m looking for an accomplished science writer. Some people who answered my ad claim they’re science writers but aren’t. What do you do?”

Nice to start by fielding a softball. “I write about science and technology in the same way sports writers covers sports. I do articles and press releases about the

University of Virginia's scientific research, explaining technical matters in terms I try to make interesting and understandable to lay people."

Joan gave me thumbs up. "Perfect, but you have a drawback. The company wants someone with business experience, and you have none. Job ads are wish lists, so they may disregard your inexperience if you have strong advantages otherwise. How would you persuade them you can do public relations for an energy technology better than anyone else?"

Learning of the requirement for business experience unsettled me, but I'd expected the question about my expertise and practiced an answer. "I'm uniquely qualified. I majored jointly in physics and communications at Virginia Tech. Magna cum laude. I'd have a running start because I'm in charge of public relations for UVA's science and engineering departments. I ran the PR side of the fund-raising campaign to get UVA's Nuclear Fusion Institute up and going and now lead the PR program for the institute. Fusion is the energy technology of the future."

Joan kept nodding as I answered. "That experience is a giant plus because fusion is central to this job. Let's talk more about you."

She grilled me at length, getting into personal areas and asking questions that would be illegal for employers to bring up, such as "Are you married?" and "How many children do you have?" They seemed harmless, so I answered straightforwardly.

"Please bear with me while I digest what I've learned about you," she said, looking down at her notes. Her gaze remained frozen on the notepad for a minute, probably because her animator was reviewing the actual notes. Joan looked up at me. "One more question."

CHAPTER 3

“Would you enjoy being my friend in PP as part of my network, doing virtual fun things with me?” Joan asked.

The very question I was tempted to ask her. She wasn't only a sexpot but struck me as being as forceful and capable as my women friends have usually been. My quick “yes” made her smile.

“I couldn't find a better candidate for the position, so the job lead is yours. The company is Molcom Electric Corporation. I'll email you their ad right away so you can apply ASAP. Keep me informed. Best of luck! Aloha!” I didn't know until Joan told me later that aloha means both hello and goodbye.

Victory is mine! The prize was a chance for a terrific job at a company that sat near the top of the Fortune 500 list of the wealthiest corporations. I checked my email box every half-minute until the ad appeared: “SCIENCE WRITER Molcom Electric Corporation needs a science writer for a new program that will tap the power of the stars. The next generation of electric utility plants will use the energy released by nuclear fusion, the process responsible for the heat and light produced by the sun and stars.” A perfect match.

My excitement mounted as my eyes raced through the rest of the ad: “Molcom, world leader in development and manufacture of electric power systems, is pioneering commercial fusion power plants. The final steps leading to realization of this clean, safe, inexpensive, and virtually inexhaustible power source will require a national commitment. The public and leaders in government, business, and the media need to know and understand this complex, revolutionary technology and its importance to world progress. Molcom is undertaking a public relations program to accomplish this.” A commercial fusion power plant! The technical community thought that was so far in the future that I never expected one to be built in my lifetime.

The ad continued, “Our corporate communications department in vibrant Pittsburgh, PA, is looking for a science writer with business experience to join our PR team. This person will plan and coordinate a communications program and produce or contribute to an array of written materials such as press releases, brochures, advertisements, and speeches.” That's ME! Can I make them see that?

Clicking the on-screen button sent the ad to my printer. While the command was being processed, I sat back and stared at the computer monitor, thinking how Martha would react to this job possibility. She wouldn't take kindly to the thought of moving to Pittsburgh. I reached for the mouse and Googled “Pittsburgh,” hoping to find positive points to rebut what was sure to be her attack on the city. It turned out Pittsburgh has much to offer.

I went downstairs, sat on the couch beside Martha, told her about the interview, and handed her the ad. I scrutinized her face as she read it. Soon she pressed her lips together and made a “No” sign with her head. She must have gotten to the Pittsburgh line. She slammed the ad into her lap.

“Pittsburgh! A dirty, smelly eyesore populated by shot-and-a-beer types. The polar opposite of Charlottesville. Like the evil city of Mordor in the Hobbit books.”

It was my turn to shake my head “No.” “Pittsburgh might have been like that once, but I just read some articles on it. They say it's re-invented itself dramatically, so it's now one of the country's most attractive cities.”

Martha rolled her eyes. “I'll have to see that to believe it. If you get a job offer from this that you want to accept, I won't consent to move until I've been there and found it acceptable.”

“Agreed.” The best I could hope for.

The rest of that evening and part of the next was dedicated to meticulously crafting every word of a cover letter for my resume and polishing it until it would make the company lust after me. I attached writing samples, and feeling optimistic about my chances, whacked the computer's “Enter” key, casting the document through cyberspace to Molcom's human resources department.

One evening as I awaited Molcom's response, we sat in pajamas and bathrobes eating ice cream and watching a TV spoof of dramas about cops. Detectives were looking at a map of the U.S. and discussing where a fugitive might have fled. Somebody suggested Pittsburgh. I stole a glance at Martha as another said, “Are you kidding me? Nobody runs away to Pittsburgh.” The humor didn't even draw a smile from Martha, who slowly shook her head.

Two weeks passed with no contact from Molcom. Discouraged, I intensified my search for other job possibilities.

On a Monday afternoon, I was at work in my office at the western edge of the campus when Martha phoned and spoke in a quavering voice. “You got a call from the human resources department at Molcom. They want you to get back to them ASAP.”

After checking my calendar for the next month and looking for the best times to take off for an interview, I grabbed my cell phone and hurried outside to a tree away from pedestrian paths, the isolated spot I went to for personal calls while at work. My desk was in a crowded place where no call was private. I called Molcom, and a human resources staffer, Cathy Huber, answered. She asked if I was still interested in the job.

Duh! “Absolutely!”

“We're quite impressed with your credentials. Could you come in for an interview two weeks from today?”

It took an effort to calm my excitement and steady my voice as I agreed and later to restrain my exuberance when I called Martha to tell her.

That evening, when I got home, Martha was at the counter beside the refrigerator pouring Legend Brown Ale, a Virginia craft beer, into steins. “I have my reservations about this job, but I thought we should drink to your getting an interview,” she said before we hugged and kissed. Besides our nightly punch, we had “lawnmower” beer, cheap stuff you swill on a hot day after mowing the lawn, during my “decompression” time after work, reserving more expensive Legend for celebratory occasions and evenings

with company. She carried the drinks to the couch in the family room ahead of me bearing the tray of crackers and cheese she had prepared. We discussed what questions might be asked in the upcoming interview and what I might do to prepare.

Later, when I proudly gave Joan the news, she shared my happiness but cautioned me about Molcom. “They have a reputation for an ultraconservative culture. You’ve told me about your long hair and casual clothes you now wear at work, which will turn off your interviewers. I urge you to Google the culture and turn yourself into a Molcom man for your trip to Pittsburgh. Otherwise, they’ll reject you on sight.”

I hadn’t bargained on having to change my persona. Could I do it? Online, I found an article the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* had published on Molcom’s unique culture, including its conservative—a person quoted in the article termed it “old-fashioned”—unofficial dress code that Pittsburghers called the Molcom uniform. Martha and I despised the conformity enforced by large corporations, but books about job hunting stated, as Joan had, that candidates should look and act like potential colleagues of the interviewers. So I’d make myself look like a Molcom man although I dreaded the metamorphosis as a curse akin to the one that changed princes into frogs.

“Do you truly want to do this?” Martha asked as she helped me compile a list of things to do and buy for my transformation.

“Ya gotta do what ya gotta do.”

The requisite dark blue suit and white shirt were already in my closet. The next day I dragged myself to a men's store to outfit myself with wing-tip shoes and a rep tie. I bought a slim, business-like analog watch with a leather strap to temporarily replace my radio-controlled digital sports watch with a metal band, accurate to within a second—I run my life on exact times.

My hair has been long since my marriage. Martha likes me to keep it in what she calls a “Justin-Bieber-lite” style. Before I left to get my businessman’s haircut, Martha took my picture with her iPhone. “If your new hairstyle becomes permanent, I want something to remind us in the future of your real self.” Then I had my barber shorten and trim my hair in the fashion of a Molcom man.

Martha used the time before I left for the interview to research Pittsburgh. One evening, she lowered an article she was reading. “Pittsburgh isn't as bad as I thought,” she said, plainly surprised. “White collar businesses have replaced the old steel mills and factories. Ranked twice as the best city in the country to live in.” She picked up a pad she'd been using to make notes. “Top universities like Pitt and Carnegie-Mellon. First-class museums. World-renowned symphony. Ballet. Opera. Theaters. More to do than in Charlottesville.”

“With a higher salary to take advantage of them if Molcom hires me.”

“So the big questions for me are: How bad are the negatives that make Pittsburgh a city no one would ever run away to? And do the many positives outweigh the negatives?”

“How did it go?” Martha asked as we unclenched after she greeted me on my return from the interview.

“They whisked me from office to office and person to person. I hope they remember me better than I remember each of them.”

“Do you think you impressed them?”

“I think I handled all their questions well, but I don’t know if I pulled off a believable impersonation of a Molcom man or how much my lack of business experience matters. I don’t know what they thought. Waiting for their decision will be hard on my nerves.”

After dinner, I hurried upstairs to report to Joan about the interview, remembering the memorable night two weeks before when I’d visited her virtual Hawaiian cottage to tell her about winning the interview. It was then that our relationship had changed from strictly business to friendship.

CHAPTER 4

As Joan and I had talked that night about my upcoming trip to Pittsburgh, she'd stretched, thrusting her large breasts toward Isaac. Her provocative posing caused a tightening in my groin. She put her right hand on Isaac's shoulder. "I'm proud of you. I think you'll do well." She kept holding Isaac as she gave me the tip about making myself into a Molcom man.

I fantasized the electric feeling of Joan's animator touching me and breathed a little faster. "I'm grateful for your help."

"You can thank me with a hug and kiss." She called up an app, represented on my screen by the label "Hug & Kiss" over blue and pink balls. The pink ball was replaced by Joan holding her arms outstretched. Clicking on the blue ball made the two figures embrace, but instead of a quick, socially correct peck, a polite squeeze, and immediate disengagement, Isaac and Joan locked lips.

"Mmmm," appeared beside Joan's name in my conversation box. Excited, imagining the feel of the real Joan's body and lips, I indulged the fantasy until the conscience of a married man with two little kids asserted itself. Clicking the "Stop Animation" button made Isaac step back.

"I hope that's the start of a warm friendship," Joan said, smiling. "But I have to leave now for an appointment."

"Let's get together soon."

"I'd like that."

"Yes!" I shouted to Joan's image on my screen. During the month since our first meeting, she'd often been too busy to meet me, couldn't spend much time with me when we did meet, and was always aloof. It thrilled me to think this might be a turning point in our relationship. I typed "Aloha!"

"Aloha!" She waved goodbye.

I logged off, grinning as I had as a teen after my first "goodnight" kiss.

As I drove to work the next morning, separated from the make-believe of PP and back to reality, I pondered the propriety of having fantasies while Isaac kissed Joan. I'd shared a pretend kiss with a woman I'd never really met who wasn't really there. It would never lead to anything real. It seemed no different from fantasizing as I read a sexy novel, so I concluded it was equally innocent.

After dinner that evening, I excused myself from Martha's company, scampered up the stairs, and checked the PP function that listed friends who were logged in. Delighted to see Joan's name, I shot her an instant message asking if we could get together. She sent an invitation to teleport me to what she said was one of her favorite hangouts, PP's Tropicana Beach. I put a multicolored, tropical-style bathing suit on Isaac, clicked on the "Accept" button, and materialized next to a group of people lying on chaise lounges arranged in a circle. As Isaac approached, Joan, looking ravishing in a white bikini, got up from a lounge and said, "See ya later" to her friends. She suggested we go to an uncrowded section of the beach to talk.

Proud to be seen with a gorgeous blonde, I followed her, through Isaac, to one end of the sunny beach, passing swimmers, surfers, and other shore denizens. As we strolled, she explained that she got together every Wednesday at Tropicana with friends who also owned Hawaiian houses. We spotted two beach towels spread next to each on the sand away from the crowd, unattended and available for public use. Lying on our sides facing each other, we began a long, pleasant talk on a wide range of subjects. She was intelligent and educated. Like me, she seemed to be in her late thirties. We told each other how we'd named our doppels.

"Joan d'Arc is, of course, French for Joan of Arc," she said, taking off her sunglasses. "I admire her courage and determination. She had balls."

I talked freely about myself, often with her encouragement, while she continued to avoid specifics altogether.

"I want a picture of the RL you in my mind when we meet," she said, asking how closely Isaac resembled me, what kind of computer I had, and where in the house I was using it. I answered in detail. Since she had a realistic doppel, I didn't have to ask what she looked like, but I asked about her computer. Maddeningly, she refused to answer. She put her sunglasses back on.

I pressed on, keen to connect with the real woman behind the Joan toon. "Does your love of Hawaii and tropical beaches have RL roots?"

She lay on her back. "I'm sorry, but I'll never answer questions about my RL."

Damn! Why? She knew by then there was no danger in letting me in on the basics of her life. What was her problem? Perhaps she'd open up as our friendship grew stronger.

We found much to talk about despite her reticence, and our chat didn't end until my watch surprised me by showing we'd spent an hour online. We parted with a hug and kiss.

Joan was now available almost every night. We took full advantage of PP's offerings, visiting diverse sites—restaurants, lakes, enchanted forests, and more—and engaging in a wide range of virtual activities from parasailing to dancing, all the while chatting as if we were on dates. They couldn't compare to real dates, but they were fun. Joan introduced me to the PP writers' group, which held meetings and sponsored lectures and seminars.

I enjoyed the company of women, especially sexy women, but marriage limited what I could do. A virtual relationship seemed an acceptable way around the constraints. Nevertheless, my earlier unease with pretend kisses returned, and I questioned again whether it was appropriate for a married man to carry on a virtual friendship. I mentioned my uncertainty to Joan.