Hearts and Flowers

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Jacques leaned back on the cushions as he spoke, his face an eerie blue in the flickering light of the displays—he had the vidcam set for a fairly wide angle, so I could see him sprawled there. I listened to his chatter about our mutual friends, but watched his image with only one eye, as it were. He was clearly doing the same, but where I had a net read-out on the next screen, the shifting shadows on his features told me that he was watching an old movie of some sort.

I had no idea what movie it was, and he didn’t volunteer the information, but suddenly, apropos of nothing we had been discussing, he said, “No one makes the grand romantic gesture any more, Bill.”

“Oh?” I said, not really listening.

“No, they don’t!” he said, emphatically enough to make it clear he wanted my whole attention.

I sighed and turned to look at him—or at least, at his image on the screen. “Whatever are you talking about, Jacques?” I asked.

“The great, foolish gesture,” he said. “The Taj Mahal, built for love of a dead queen; the abdication of Edward the Eighth, for love of a woman far beneath him; van Gogh’s ear, sent as a token of passion. No one does such things any more, Bill. Even when I was a boy, you’d see marriage proposals on billboards or the like sometimes, but not any more.”

“We have more sense now,” I said.

“Nonsense,” he said. “People are as foolish as ever; look at the newsfeed! No, it’s not sense—it’s because we lack passion. It’s been sedated out of us. True love’s given way to easily- satisfied lust and neatly-arranged relationships.” He sighed. “What a loss!”

“What are you watching?” I asked suspiciously.

“Casablanca,” he said. “Humphrey Bogart. Ingrid Bergman. Grand passion, shameless patriotism, and that final great sacrifice.”

“There was a war on,” I pointed out. “Everything was a bit crazy.”

“And the others? The Taj Mahal, the Duke of Windsor, Vincent van Gogh?”

“Van Gogh was psychotic—he’d be on a thorazine drip if he were alive today.”

“Exactly my point!” His image jumped; he’d slammed a fist on the desk, jarring the vidcam. “It was his madness that gave him his art. Bill, we need a little madness in our lives, if we’re to be more than drones, and we aren’t getting it. We’re all on antidepressants and antihallucinogens and painkillers and mood stabilizers, and it’s taken all the romance out of life.”

“There’s plenty of madness out there,” I said. “We use the drugs to deal with it. Modern life’s too complicated and stressful to live straight.”

“Maybe so, but we’ve overdone it, Bill,” Jacques insisted. “We’ve sedated ourselves into uselessness. Not just with drugs, but with entertainments—the VR, the holos, the networks, all of it. We’re all living in our little fantasy worlds where nothing’s real, nothing’s important!”

“People have been saying that for a century,” I pointed out. “Psychologists were worried about kids back in the 1950s watching too much TV, and it’s continued with every new medium since.”

“And they were right,” Jacques insisted. “We’re all boring.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” I asked. “I just don’t see it as a problem, myself, but even if I accept that it is, what are you planning to do to fix it? Why should people be wild and romantic in real life?”

“Oh, Bill, people want to be romantic,” Jacques said. “Think what we watch, what we read, what people post on the nets. Housewives swoon over fantasy lovers, and when their husbands come home they roll over and go to sleep—because the passion’s not there.”

“So why did they stop?”

I thought I was being very reasonable, that Jacques was being absurd, and that sooner or later he would either run out of arguments or see the absurdity for himself.

Looking back, I should have just let it drop.

“Because of our drug implants,” he said. “Bill, love has a chemical basis—the biochemists mapped it out back in the ’90s. The mood stabilizers won’t let it develop. We’ve controlled our rages and depressions, yes, but we destroyed true love in the process.”

“You want to give them up?” I asked.

“No, no,” he said, “I’m not so mad as that. Die of stress before I’m seventy? No, thank you. But can’t the program be modified? Can’t an occasional mad passion be allowed, even encouraged?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Can it?” And I began to think about how it might be done.

And that, of course, was the beginning of Romantic Moods, Inc., though we didn’t know it yet.

Three weeks after that first conversation I had a theoretical model I thought would stand up—but of course, I had no way to test it. I called Jacques to tell him, not really thinking about how he might react.

“You remember what you said about romance?” I asked.

“That it’s lacking?” he said, speaking from a fragmented image—he had been playing with his own computers, and I found myself conversing with something like an animated Picasso. “Of course I remember, Bill. We’ve lost that divine touch of madness that gave our ancestors’ lives meaning—that’s not something I’m likely to forget.”

“Yes, well,” I said, not wanting to get drawn into another of his philosophical rants, “I took a look at it. I think I’ve figured a way you could induce romantic love without otherwise disrupting a person’s mental stability.”

He snorted, and his image spun off fractal sparks. “Is it such a great trick, then, to reconstruct what used to happen naturally? Have we sunk so low, debased ourselves so much?”

“I don’t know, Jacques,” I said. “I just thought you might want to see this. It’s a set of adjustments you could make to the standard implants that would make a person fall in love—the really intense sort of love that those great old romances were supposed to be. But if you’re not interested...”

“Of course I’m interested!” he said, and his image was suddenly solid and normal. “Do you mean you could really do that? To anyone? You could make them fall in love?”

“I think so,” I said warily. “Of course, I haven’t been able to test it, I just have computer models...”

I could see him slump. “Of course,” he said. “Just theory. Virtual reality. You haven’t really found a way to turn our implants to the production of love philtres, and we need have no fear that we’ll find ourselves playing Titania with some random Bottom.”

“It’s not random,” I said, slightly offended—I knew Jacques well enough not to be too upset. “And it’s not limited to VR, either. I could do it for real if I could tamper with someone’s implants. I just don’t have a volunteer.”

He looked out of the screen at me with a look in his eyes that frightened me.

“Bill,” he said intently, “you mean you really could make me fall in love with someone? I’ve never been in love, you know, not really. It wouldn’t just be lust, or euphoria, or something?”

“Not according to the models,” I said, “but I told you, I wasn’t able to test it on anyone.”

“Bill,” he said, “you can now. I’ll be there... you’re at your apartment? I’ll be there in half an hour.”

He was there in twenty minutes. It took him longer than that to convince me to risk actually making the attempt, but at last I gave in. I used my own diagnostic equipment to reset Jacques’ implants—the modifications were easy. The whole thing took half an hour, Jacques sitting nervously there in my own chair while I pressed the illicitly-modified scanner to his skull and spine. I set the whole sequence to begin when the right stimuli came along.

Two days later Jacques had begun to wonder whether the thing would ever work. He was walking through the park, hands in his pockets, head down, frustrated and annoyed, when he heard uneven, scuffling footsteps. He looked up, and saw Renate tangled in her dog’s leash, on the verge of toppling over.

He hurried forward and grabbed the dog and held it, giving her time to unwrap herself; she did, twirling until she was dizzy, and then laughing as she wobbled unsteadily.

“Thank you,” she said, a bit breathlessly.

He released the dog, stepped up and caught Renate by the waist; he looked into her deep brown eyes and was lost, as at last the implants saw their chance and took it, firing microdoses of brain chemicals hither and yon so that he was swept away into, he later told me, a love like nothing he had ever imagined possible.

“You’re beautiful,” he told her, “you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I love you.”

She laughed again. “You’re crazy,” she said. Then she looked down at the leash and the dog and said, “But thank you.”

Then she turned away and walked on, and he hurried down the walk after her; he caught up and walked beside her, peppering her with questions—what was her name? Did she live nearby? Was there anything he could do for her? Did she know that she had the most beautiful eyes in the world?

She laughed, but she didn’t tell him to go away. And she didn’t protest when he followed her back to her condo.

“So it worked,” I said, when he told me over the net three days later.

He looked out of the screen at me, puzzled, and asked, “What worked?”

I decided that I had overdone it, that I had set the doses too high. “How does she feel about you?” I asked, ignoring his question.

He answered with the deepest sigh I had ever seen a living person give. “That’s the tragedy of it, Bill,” he said. “She thinks I’m quite mad, and warns me repeatedly that this is just a brief fling. She tolerates it, for amusement’s sake, but she says she doesn’t love me, and when I think of that I’m plunged into despair—at least, until the implants kick in; I suspect, Bill, that I’m overloading my system’s capacity for anti-depressants.”

That worried me.

“If you come here, I’ll check on that,” I said. “Don’t go to a commercial outfitter, please—I think those modifications I did on you might be illegal.”

“Modifications?” The idea had finally penetrated the romantic haze, and he cocked his head. “It’s quite a coincidence, that... I mean, this is the real thing, Bill...isn’t it?”

“That depends on how you define your terms,” I said. “Listen, if you can bring Renate here, perhaps I can do something for both of you.”

“But that...” He stopped, but I knew what he had been going to say. He wanted Renate to love him for himself, with the same mad passion he felt for her, and right now he was still largely convinced that that was entirely natural. He didn’t want her drugged into submission.

But he wanted to lose her even less, and he was sane enough to understand that my implant modifications might be at least partly responsible.

They both came to my apartment that evening. Renate was an attractive young woman, but nothing remarkable to my unenhanced perceptions. She had a pleasant smile and a throaty laugh, but no great store of conversation or wit that I could detect.

Jacques adored her. He stared at her every second.

I explained our little project to her.

When I was finished she stared at me, visibly offended.

“You mean he’s drugged? That’s why he’s like this, it’s just chemicals?”

I almost nodded, then caught myself. “Not drugged, exactly,” I said. “It’s artificially induced, but the chemicals involved are no different from those in any natural emotions. All our passions are those same chemicals, when you get down to the hard facts. And this... well, this love that I programmed couldn’t have been triggered unless you met every criterion Jacques set me for the woman he wanted to love.”

She looked doubtfully at Jacques.

“If you’d like to see for yourself,” I said, “I could adjust your mood controllers, and you’d be just as much in love with Jacques as he is with you.”

“Not possible,” Jacques protested. “Even were this love not more than you can possibly imagine, Bill, how could so exquisite a creature ever care so much for an unworthy worm like me?”

“You’d be surprised,” I said.

Renate shook her head. “Maybe later,” she said, as she sat on the couch, crowded at one end, once again looking over at Jacques, who was as near as her obvious reluctance would permit him. He was staring at her, and when he met her gaze he smiled the broad, guileless grin of an infant.

She shuddered slightly.

Later that evening, when Renate had gone, I managed to detain Jacques and to convince him to let me adjust his implants—I think he only agreed because he was in a hurry to follow Renate, and he didn’t really believe they were responsible for his feelings.

I wanted to tone down the intensity—and to reduce the term. My researches had indicated that a normal, natural passionate love generally lasted about three years before modifying itself to the less-intense mature, or companionate, love. Infatuations generally lasted less. Either one could be shortened, or extended virtually indefinitely, by the right events, but three years seemed the norm.

I had not thought it was a good idea to inflict that long an effect on anyone, and had instead opted for a six-month term; now I cut that down to two, which would be nothing more than an infatuation, really—puppy love, a brief fling, a mad crush.

I did not dare simply turn it off, however; I was afraid that Jacques would be mortified if he were to suddenly regain his senses and see what he had done. Better to allow a gradual tapering-off.

He squirmed impatiently as I worked; when I finished he jumped up, grabbed his jacket, and bolted out the door, headed straight for her condo.

For the next week Jacques was Renate’s abject slave, catering to her every whim, no matter how trivial or perverse. By the end of that time, however, a mix of guilt, curiosity, and a growing natural affection drove her back to me, and I had my second subject.

I was careful with the dosages and the timing, and the rest of their love affair was a splendid thing. Jacques made any number of romantic gestures—a dive, fully-clothed, into a fishpond to retrieve a dropped coin; an elaborate banquet delivered to her door, with complete table service, at outrageous expense, on the first night that he was unable to join her for dinner; cards, flowers, and sweets on every occasion, or for no reason at all.

None were the Taj Mahal, nor did Jacques cut off his ear for her, but the gestures were heartfelt, numerous, and inventive, and later Jacques looked back at them all with great satisfaction.

So far, the whole thing was merely an interesting experiment, but then came the call from Andre.

“I’m a friend of Renate’s,” he explained.

I looked at him politely, questioningly.

“I’ve been watching her and Jacques,” he said. “The way they look at each other, the way they’re always touching each other.”

“They’re in love,” I said.

He nodded. “She told me,” he said. “She told me what you did.”

I sighed. Visions of police courts and lawsuits hovered over me. “She asked me to,” I said. “I didn’t think...”

He interrupted me. “No, no,” he said. “You don’t understand.”

I looked at him blankly.

“I want you to do the same for me,” he said. “I want to be in love like that, too.”

I blinked. “I don’t know...” I said.

“I can pay,” he said. “I can pay you well.”

I hesitated a moment longer, then glanced at the screen where I keep a display of my current finances.

“How well?” I said.

He was the first. Word of mouth brought in enough that within a month we incorporated and began advertising.

Jacques and Renate fell out of love shortly thereafter and drifted apart; mature, companionate love didn’t develop, I’m not sure just why not. Perhaps it needed a longer incubation than I had allowed.

I thought that was that, that we could settle back and run the company. I certainly wasn’t tempted to try our wares, and Jacques, I thought, had had his fling.

Jacques thought otherwise.

“How am I to praise love, without being in love?” he asked me, and I had no ready answer that he would accept. “What better advertisement could we ask, than that I, myself, should be a repeat customer?”

I reset his implants, and the affair with Kim began three days later with a stormy public brawl over who was next in line for a public terminal, a brawl that turned into a night of brutal lovemaking in Jacques’ car—they didn’t even get to either apartment.

I saw the bruises the next morning, but Jacques could only rave about her. He brought her to me that afternoon; her rationale for accepting the modifications was that she wanted to match Jacques’ passion.

She did, but their behavior frightened me enough, even at the beginning, that I set it for just a few weeks.

A few days later Jacques spoke idly of sending her an ear or one of his fingers as a love-token, pointing out that he could have it replaced, where poor Van Gogh had no such option; I was relieved that Jacques, for once, didn’t carry through on one of his mad notions.

I should have seen then what was to come.

It wasn’t Jacques who started it, oddly enough.

I was watching the financial nets one afternoon when an announcer on another channel told me, “Many of us hope for romance to brighten our lives, but for Ms. Gloria Ramirez of Miami, romance came as a shock. It seems her neighbor, one Jesus Velez, recently became a client of Romantic Moods, Incorporated, and chose Ms. Ramirez as the recipient of a rather extreme romantic gesture.”

I turned away from what I was doing and brought that channel up on the main screen—I was always interested when one of our clients made the news.

The camera cut from the outside of a pink stucco house to Ms. Ramirez in her living room, standing nervously next to something I didn’t recognize; I stared at it, trying to make sense of it.

It was all gleaming gold and glittering crystal, perhaps forty centimeters tall, roughly cylindrical, with an oval panel of beveled glass set in the front, and it sat there on Ms. Ramirez’ coffee table.

The camera zoomed in on the mysterious object, on its front panel, and I saw that grisly bit of flesh beating steadily behind the glass.

“Mr. Velez commissioned this ornate case from Miami’s finest custom jeweler, ordered the mechanism from a medical supply house, and hired the best surgeon he could find, all in order to make an ancient metaphor a modern reality. Mr. Velez gave his beloved his heart.”

I stared, horrified.

And then the announcer moved on to the next story, but I froze that image, looped it, and watched the zoom in, watched Gloria Ramirez billow forward and out the lefthand side of the frame, watched the gold-and-crystal case expand to fill the screen, watched the heart beating inside.

I left it there while I accessed that net’s menus, and found the heading “More of the story.” I skipped the sub-menu entries for “Biographies “ and “Human Interest,” and called for the full info dump under “Technical.”

I spent hours on it, reading over the detailed specifications for the life-support system Velez had had built into the case—the amazingly-efficient nutrient bath, the thousand-year pacemaker, all of it.

The replacement the man carried in his own chest was nothing special, just a standard mini-jarvik.

There, I thought, was the most extreme romantic gesture short of suicide that Jacques could possibly ask for.

I hoped no one would find a way to kill himself for love. It shouldn’t be possible, we weren’t modifying the standard regimen that much, but we’d introduced a new element with our romantic moods, and I’d read about the wave of “romantic “ suicides that swept Europe in the early 19th century.

And I wouldn’t have thought anyone would have his heart cut out as a gift.

I looked at the image of that shining gold case and shuddered.

And when I practically knew the technical read-outs by heart, I put in a call for follow-up stories.

First I got an interview with Ms. Ramirez, asking her reaction to this gift.

She didn’t have much to say, and what she did say wasn’t very coherent, but it was plain that she was horrified—and fascinated.

And in the next follow-up, datelined just hours after the first reports, she had accepted Velez’ proposal of marriage.

I worried about whether this would hurt our business, that one of our customers had mutilated himself.

We should have known. There’s no such thing as bad publicity.

Within a month, we had all the customers we could want—and Jacques had all the grand romantic gestures he could possibly have asked for. The crazes had begun.

Perhaps the worst of it was the lack of originality that most people showed. Love letters written on billboards or broadcast over the nets, absurd gifts of every sort, self-mutilations—and every one to make the nets resulted in dozens or hundreds of imitators.

They did sometimes add new twists, however. That first fellow to give his heart did only that—that, and the gold case, of course. The idea of satellite-linking that heart to its replacement, so that both would beat in perfect rhythm, was added by an engineer in Japan.

The first to put an “off “ switch on the case was a young woman in France; her accompanying letter explained to her lover that she would rather die at a flick of his finger than live without him, or displease him in any way.

The first exchange of hearts took place in California.

Nor were only hearts given—hands were almost as popular, or for those with less nerve, or less money, ring fingers.

A few iconoclasts tried other portions of the anatomy, but none of those caught on.

At times it seemed to me that people were not so much making sincere gestures of love as they were competing with one another to see who could make the more extreme sacrifice. Some of the heartcases were incredibly elaborate.

It didn’t seem a very healthy fad to me, but Jacques was delighted. It kept him entertained for weeks.

Spy floaters came next. I didn’t see the first news stories; I got a memo from one of our salesmen, and called up the net reports.

They were a natural extension, I suppose, of the use eager lovers made of the nets, keeping a constant watch on the whereabouts of their beloved. Putting a direct audio-video link in a maglev floater and programming it to follow one’s lover around was simply carrying it a step further.

I thought it was a rather vile invasion of privacy, myself, and I wasn’t surprised when I heard, at the height of the fad, about the young man who blew his lover’s floater out of the sky with a twelve-gauge shotgun.

The romantic gestures, I realized about then, had become a form of entertainment—people made them as much to give the net-users a vicarious thrill as out of love.

This didn’t always work; the man who overrode eighteen channels in order to broadcast the image of his sleeping bride for six hours found his efforts unappreciated. His house was vandalized, his net access revoked, and in all he received upwards of three hundred death threats.

The fellow who gave his lover a net channel entirely for her own use, set up so that when she wasn’t using it it displayed endlessly-shifting pictures of her, did better; no one seemed offended, as no existing channels were disrupted. In fact, the new channel became popular with certain groups. Rumor had it that another man fell in love with the channel’s subject, and tried, unsuccessfully, to seduce her away.

The mountain someone laser-carved into the shape of his beloved, the genetically-engineered garden that reproduced a face in blossoms—monuments to people who had done nothing but be lovable began to proliferate.

And Jacques began his third affair, with a pretty but insipid young woman living somewhere in Manitoba. Ashley was no great creative mind, by any means, but she had a fine appreciation of fashion; I suppose I shouldn’t have been so startled when I stepped into Jacques’ office one day and found him staring at her heart.

I had seen pictures, even holos, but this was the first time in the real world that I had been in the same room as one of these tokens, and I stared at it in horrified fascination.

The case on his desk was a cylinder, half a meter high, half a meter in diameter, finished in prismatic red enamel set with huge synthetic rubies and trimmed with gleaming chrome; I came around behind Jacques and looked over his shoulder at a heart-shaped panel of beveled glass that allowed one to see inside, to where the woman’s vital organ, wetly red, beat steadily amid a tangle of tubes and wires.

It was hideously ugly. Such things should stay inside our bodies, not on public display in ornate boxes.

“It’s Ashley’s,” Jacques told me, quite unnecessarily. Then he added, “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“No,” I said honestly.

Jacques looked up at me, startled, then turned back to contemplation of this fragment of his beloved. “Well, the thought surely is,” he said.

“I suppose.” Technical fascination overcame my revulsion, and I asked, “Is it satellite-linked?”

He nodded. “Look, there’s even a remote control,” he said, holding up a device the size of a credit card. “It’s linked to her jarvik, and I can let her know I’m thinking of her by speeding it up.” He pushed a small slide with his thumb, and sure enough, the heart’s beating accelerated.

“That’s grotesque,” I said, before I could stop myself.

“It’s lovely,” he replied.

I couldn’t think of anything to say to that; while we might be looking at the same object, our perceptions of it were so different that we had no common grounds on which we might communicate.

And somehow, I didn’t think he’d be able to concentrate on the business I had come to ask about while that thing was sitting on his desk. Perhaps when the novelty had worn off, but not yet.

The business—a question of how many franchises to allow in California—was not urgent; I decided to let it wait, and I left him there staring at the red-and-silver case, the remote in his hand.

It was a week later that he brought in the next heartcase.

That shocked me at first. I’d set his implants myself; I knew that he should still be in love with Ashley, but when I scanned his office one morning I saw a new and different case displayed on the shelf.

And then, when I scanned further, I saw Ashley’s, as well.

Could he be in love with two women? That didn’t seem reasonable, given what I knew of his brain chemistry—but I’m not a neurophysiologist, merely a programmer and tinkerer.

I’d been scanning to see if I’d left a mislaid pocket terminal in Jacques’ office when I was in there a few days before; I hadn’t wanted to bother anyone. Now, though, I put out a call to talk to Jacques, and a moment later the net connected us.

He was in a mall somewhere; I could see shoppers and store displays behind him, and heard water splashing merrily in the background. A silvery spy floater was hovering over his shoulder, watching him.

Was the floater Ashley’s? I didn’t know. He didn’t say. He merely accepted the call.

I didn’t bother with preliminaries. “Care to explain this?” I asked, putting the image of the new heartcase in a corner window.

“I bought it,” he said calmly. “I’ve decided to collect them.”

I was too surprised to reply immediately, and he added, “No one you know, Bill, and it’s empty now, anyway. They broke up, she sent back his heart, he had it reinstalled, I bought the case as a souvenir.”

I still couldn’t think of anything sensible to say, so he continued, “I’m glad you called, Bill; I’ve been meaning to talk to you. I think there may be a problem with the latest... session.”

“Oh?” I was not at my best just then. I knew that by “session “ he meant his love affair with Ashley, and I supposed he was being euphemistic either because he was in public or because his love had made him fastidious, but I had no idea what sort of problem he might mean. I was still dazed by the idea of collecting old heartcases.

Now it was he who didn’t speak, and I realized that whatever the problem was, it was something he didn’t want to discuss over an unencrypted channel—at least, not with that floater hovering nearby. After an awkward moment as we both composed ourselves, I asked, “Care to come talk about in person?”

“I think so,” he said. “It’s too noisy here.”

“We could meet at my workshop,” I suggested.

“Forty minutes,” he said, and logged off.

He slipped in the door right on time, and slammed it quickly; I stared at him. And then I realized what he was doing—he had shut his maglev observer outside, so that Ashley couldn’t hear our conversation through it.

I activated my own security systems, just to be sure, and Jacques relaxed visibly.

After a few words of greeting, he got to the point.

“Bill,” he said, “something’s wrong. I think I’m falling out of love with Ashley—and that shouldn’t happen for a month or more. That robot spy of hers is driving me mad, and her chatter is all aggravating drivel, and when I look through the glass at her heart it’s just a lump of meat. It’s ruining me, Bill—I ought to love everything about her! I do love her sometimes, she’s still attractive, and the sex is wonderful, but the rest...”

He paused, then added hopefully, “Her heartcase is beautiful, though.”

“Which is why you bought another,” I suggested. “An empty one. An appreciation of those things isn’t anything to do with Ashley.”

He nodded.

“Let me check you out,” I said, reaching for the necessary equipment.

Half an hour later I had the results—he was falling out of love. His body was compensating for the artificial stimulation we had given it.

I explained as much, and boosted his brain chemistry appropriately.

“I can’t keep doing this indefinitely, though,” I warned.

The rest of his love for Ashley proceeded on schedule, but a month later I found him sitting morosely in his office, toying with the heartcase remote and staring at his collection—four empties, and Ashley’s.

“It’s over, Bill,” he said.

I knew that already, so I didn’t say anything; I did glance at the display of heartcases.

Ashley’s was still occupied; her heart was still in there, still beating.

I didn’t say anything; I didn’t have to. “She didn’t want to bother putting it back,” Jacques told me. “She said it didn’t matter. The jarvik works just fine, and I can keep this as a souvenir.”

I didn’t think he was in the mood for argument, so I didn’t say anything. I can’t say I approved of the situation.

“I want another, Bill,” he said.

“Another heartcase?”

“Don’t be stupid. Another love. And this time, Bill, I want it to last forever. I want eternal love, as in all the old stories.”

“I can’t do that,” I said.

“Of course you can.”

“No, Jacques, I can’t. I don’t mean I won’t, I mean it’s not possible.”

He put down the remote and turned his chair to face me. “Why not?” he demanded.

I explained about how the brain’s chemistry automatically adjusted itself, how a real grand passion couldn’t be sustained indefinitely, but would transform itself gradually into the more settled companionate love.

“That might do,” he said.

“I don’t know how to do it,” I said—which may or may not have been the truth; I had theoretical methods I was not willing to try out, as I’d had quite enough of these experiments. I had concluded months earlier that love was madness, and had come to regret my part in Romantic Moods. “All I can do is make it possible for it to happen naturally,” I added, to soften the blow.

“But you can set up an open-ended love, one that might last?” he asked.

I reluctantly admitted that I could. I didn’t mention that I didn’t think it would last, in his case—his brain chemistry had already learned to fall out of love, and would probably continue to do so.

“I can’t live like this, without love,” he said, and I finally realized what I should have seen earlier.

Jacques had become addicted to love.

But I didn’t see any way to undo it, and I was hardly the only pusher in the business any more.

So after Ashley came June, and then Gianna and Sarah and Thomasina, and as an experiment Steve, then back to women. I wasn’t the one who set them all up; I began refusing after a few, but each time Jacques would find another supplier, and then, when one ended badly, he would beg me to reconsider. Some lasted just a few weeks, while Anastasia, the longest, lived with Jacques for seven years; the two of them were married for five of those years.

And Jacques continued his collecting. He filled a room with heartcases, shelves and shelves of them—at first, mostly empty, but after awhile the ones still occupied began to accumulate, as cyborgs became commonplace and more and more people decided not to bother with the restorative surgery.

I was amazed—and appalled—that so many people were willing to sell such things. I was even more appalled when one day, with a nervous laugh, Jacques told me how low many of the prices had been.

Romantic Moods flourished, and the wild fads settled down. Heartcases fell out of fashion, and Jacques’ collection stopped growing. Most of our customers were young people who wanted the experience; we got very few repeat customers, and in fact we discouraged them.

But Jacques was addicted. We both knew it by the time Anastasia had been gone for a year; she had been his last, best hope to break the cycle.

We tried cold turkey; he broke down and found a fly-by-night operator.

His new love’s name was Melanie, she was nineteen, and she saw Jacques as something to be used—she had no intention of passing up the opportunity represented by a forty-year-old billionaire falling madly in love with her. The relationship was sado-masochistic from the start, and she all but ordered Jacques to marry her so that she could share in his wealth.

The operator hadn’t known about Jacques’ addiction, however, and hadn’t compensated for it; nor did Melanie. The passion peaked quickly, then vanished, turning rapidly to hate when Jacques saw how she had attempted to exploit him.

One night, when she demanded money, the hate boiled over and he beat her senseless; if the security alarms hadn’t gone off, he would have killed her on the spot.

That’s not supposed to happen. That’s the sort of thing the implants were created to prevent in the first place. The police took Jacques away, and he spent three days in the hospital, being thoroughly checked out.

Then they called in Anastasia, as his ex-wife, and myself, as his partner—he had no other surviving family.

We stood over the hospital bed as a police official told us about Melanie, and we looked down at Jacques—they had him lightly sedated, so that he lay there listening calmly, speaking only when spoken to.

“There’s nothing I can do,” Anastasia said. “I tried, when we were married, but I couldn’t help him.” She sighed. “I don’t think he was ever really in love with me, Bill—I know what your computer models said, but I don’t think they fit Jacques any more. I think he believed he was in love with me—but it wasn’t real.”

“The chemicals...”

She shook her head, and interrupted me. “I don’t mean the chemicals,” she said. “I mean he wasn’t in love with me. He was in love with an ideal, and he’d convinced himself I was that ideal, but...oh, I don’t know. It’s nothing to do with me any more; the divorce was final a year ago. You do whatever you have to.”

She turned and left, and the doctors and the police official let her go.

I sighed, and stepped away from the bed. “I guess I’ll go, too,” I said.

“I’m afraid not,” the police official said.

He and the neurosurgeon explained it to me. Even though I hadn’t been the one who arranged his love for Melanie, my long-term meddling with Jacques’ implants was largely responsible for his actions; I was an unintentional accomplice in a vicious assault.

Jacques’ brain chemistry was irretrievably damaged, and it was partly my fault.

Jacques himself was partly responsible, of course; he admitted it freely and took most of the blame, even after they took him off the sedatives. He declined to sue me, which I thought was generous under the circumstances.

But he and I were in this together. I was placed under house arrest until the matter was settled.

We were very rich, and no one had died, and we had witnesses who would testify to Melanie’s abuse of Jacques, so eventually they released us and that was the end of it. Melanie got her share of Jacques’ fortune in the form of medical bills and a lawsuit settlement, rather than alimony; I don’t think she much cared how she got it, and Jacques argued that at least this way she had, in a way, earned it.

The operator who had reset Jacques’ implants had disappeared before the police or the reporters or Melanie’s lawyers could reach him.

The publicity meant that no other operator would touch Jacques any more, though—no amount of money is worth the risk of being an accomplice to murder, not when there are plenty of other customers. It looked as if his addiction was finally at an end.

I checked on him regularly—partly because I was obligated to by the courts, and partly because he was still my friend, however damaged he might be.

One day I found him in the heartcase room, hands clasped behind his back, staring into a baroque silver box.

“I was always fascinated by love, you know,” he said, without looking at me.

“I know,” I said. “I remember how we started, when you watched Casablanca.”

He nodded. “I never found an Ingrid Bergman,” he said. “But then, I don’t know if that was what I wanted. I was in love with the idea of love. It wasn’t that I wanted a woman, or wanted a woman to love me; it was that I wanted to be in love. That seemed to be the whole point of life.”

“Not to me,” I said.

“It’s what all the songs said.”

I shrugged.

“I’ve turned them all off,” he said, with a wave of his arm.

For a moment I thought he meant he had turned off the songs, but then I looked around at the heartcases, and realized that he had meant those.

He was telling the truth; the hearts hung motionless, dead or dying, in those that held hearts.

“All but this one,” he said, touching the silver one gently.

A horrible thought struck me.

“They were all disconnected, weren’t they?” I asked.

In theory, most heartcases were satellite-linked to the jarviks in the chests of the original donors—if the hearts stopped, so would the jarviks.

But surely, those people hadn’t let Jacques take the hearts without breaking the satlinks?

“Jacques,” I said, when he didn’t answer immediately, “they were disconnected, weren’t they? They weren’t still linked to their donors?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

I was speechless with horror. Jacques might have just committed mass murder. “Turn them back on!” I cried, looking about desperately.

The controls weren’t visible, there was no master switch anywhere.

He shook his head. “I can’t,” he said. “They don’t do that; there’s no way to restart them.”

I realized, remembering what I knew of the technical specifications, that he was right—heartcases were maintenance devices, they didn’t have any sort of electroshock or other systems to start a stopped heart.

“Some of them spasmed,” he said. “Others just stopped. That one over there,” he said, pointing to a golden-yellow case in the shape of a Faberge egg, “held the still-beating heart of a woman who died five years ago. I bought it from her widower. It’s as dead as the rest of her now.”

“Why did you do this?” I demanded. I was trying to think what I could do; who could I call? Could the jarviks be restarted in time? Who would know?

He didn’t answer. He put both hands on the silver one.

“This one,” he said.

“What about it?” I said, not really paying much attention; I was distracted by the thought that some might be saved.

“No remote,” he said. “No fancy controls. Nothing but a switch, ‘on’ and ‘off.’ But love isn’t that simple, is it?”

“No,” I agreed, without thinking. I was punching instructions into my wristband computer, summoning help.

“I’m glad she gave it back,” he said.

I didn’t know what he meant. “Who?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Anastasia,” he said.

He flicked the switch on the silver box to “off,” and crumpled to the floor.

Suicide isn’t supposed to be possible with modern implants—that’s what we’re told. I’d always believed it.

I’d forgotten. With love, all things are possible.

And the heartcase made it so easy.

There was nothing I could do. The rescue team said that resuscitation was technically possible, but there would be severe brain damage; I told them not to bother. They double-checked with Anastasia, and she agreed.

Jacques was gone.

So were a dozen innocent men and women who had been foolish enough to give away their hearts.

We had the silver heartcase buried with him; I sold the company and moved on. I finally found time to marry and settle down, and my wife and I are happy.

But we’re not in love.