

ALEXIS MADRIGAL

Waiting at the Seal

Looking backward to 2015

His son lay asleep on his chest. Several trucks buzzed overhead, but the traffic did not form the steady hum that he'd been banking on to help the boy sleep, and they were both restless in the tent. Each time a vendor's voice rose above the din, or metal hit metal, the kid stirred.

Everyone wanted to believe the rumors—that this was a place you could make twentieth-century money, even as a human. The insiders weren't predictable enough for optimization, and they *preferred* live human contacts on their rumspringa days. That was how it was on the inside: no robots, no AI, a world frozen in 2015. They needed salesmen to sell them things. They needed people.

He could imagine this spot like the rich freaks who'd gone to live in space must see it through their fancy glass. On one side, this side, the blinking, buzzing, bursting world—and on the other, the rectangular strangeness of the Ban Zone, the last refuge for all those who wanted a place to escape all the body hacking and the strange new intelligences of the machines.

The baby's hand reached up and grabbed his chin for a second, then went limp, asleep again. He'd like life better on the inside—and the sooner the better.

But for now, they were still here, camped outside. The seal was transparent, of course, so they could see the leaves on the trees, the truckless skies, the people *walking*. Physically, and this was just a gestalt impression, they looked bigger, tanner—and they almost seemed to glow, although maybe that was an illusion. But they also looked old. That was part of the deal. No turning back the clock. No telomere treatment. No upgrades. No enhancements. They were just humans who lived and then died.

There were some people in his camp who'd gone in and come back out, basically starving. There was no coin in there; what you ate was what you could grow or barter for. But the skills they needed were so strange. Occasionally, a drive needed to be fixed

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Photograph by Abbruscato.

or an array cleaned or even some people latched on tending the guts of the seal, but those gigs were roughly impossible to get; thousands of people applied for every position. You'd have about as much a chance of scoring an upload or a Google for life or a residence in a tauroid.

Tomorrow, statistically speaking, it would be his turn—their turn—to go inside. He was glad she hadn't come. She couldn't even bear to hear him cry. She could not have handled this wait on the border, which had gone on for two weeks as they waited for the rate-limiter to let them through. He'd told the form that he wanted his son to see bees. That much was true: he did want his son to see bees.

The weight of him. He'd miss that. This density and realness, how close they felt, his tiny noises, and the way he pointed his finger at whatever interested him. This full human life, in his original skin, unchanged from all the humans who came before anyone with the money could recharge his mortal coil.

He couldn't raise him on the outside. Not if there was an option. He had to hand him over. You could find what the process was like on the darknets. They'd hand him an extractor, and he'd press it to his boy's temple and pull all the optimizations they'd bought. It wasn't much. It wasn't enough. His boy couldn't compete in this world with what they could give him. The end.

At the group sessions, other parents turned their backs on them, shielding their children from his son, who had done nothing but stand there, poorly optimized, wobbling on his legs like stilts, pointing, and saying, "Hiiii!" For a while, his mom said things like, "Maybe things'll turn around, and we'll be able to get him the brain he deserves." He'd roar at her, defiantly, that this world was no place for children. He hadn't even known he could roar.

Every morning, as he'd lay in the tent, he blinked away messages, expecting and not expecting to see one from the seal bot. Every day one didn't come he was happy to take his boy wandering through the vendors, keeping him close, but letting the kid's easy charisma make the sad world small and happy. Each day, they'd return with a small bag of gifts from the other unop'ed that they'd play with until bed.

They loved the bee drone. It circled his son's neck, tickling him into happy tears, then landing on the tip of his nose and buzzing out happy birthday. There were other children, of course, but none of the parents could look each other in the eyes, and they easily steered clear of each other.

The strange thing was, some really were just visiting. Maybe they had some relatives inside. Maybe they would find work on the farms or in the tanks.

But he was a realist. That's what the last century had taught him. Don't pretend you're bringing that kid back out. Savor these last moments, this breathing matching yours, these feet tucked up under his body. Store it away.

The baby was sweating. He pulled the kid from his chest, held him in the air for a second, just to look at him, and then dropped him onto his side, arms straight out, head nestled on the cheap superfoam.

He could still turn back. Maybe he could start a stall, or go migrant, following the pings, being eyes, being hands. They could make it.

No.

In the Ban Zone, they'd take care of him. They needed people for their muscles and their minds, for their labor, and—he liked to hope—to tell them jokes and sing songs. It was the last place on Earth that needed humans.

And he really did want his son to see bees. **B**