

Draft: A Shellhead's Pearls, by Melissa Walshe

Periwinkle pearls, everywhere. They carpeted the ground with translucent light that swirled as the newborn zephyr spun the imperfect spheres into tiny pirouettes, filling the air with the scent of lilacs and cut grass. Ethan lazed there, staring up into the purple clouds that drifted overhead. His dark hair was messy. He needed a shave. The coat of his navy suit was flung carelessly over a black iron bench, leaving only his rumpled white shirt to cover his fit, tan chest.

Lillian stepped toward him, savoring the smooth feel of the tiny pearls as they rolled across the bare tops of her feet. He opened his eyes at her approach and smiled. "I was wondering when you'd come along."

She reached out her hand to him, closing her eyes and breathing in the scent and sounds all around her, letting her soul drink in the rightness of it all.

But her fingers met only thin air, and when she opened her eyes again, she saw only the concerned face of 1889 leaning over her in the dim light.

"313, you've gone over your required power repletion cycle. Are you functioning well?"

313 sat up, letting the nano-charger slip away from her naked chest. She looked around the room, disoriented. Was this right? This refrigerated room of glass and titanium? This man with the bleach-blond hair and the cat-green eyes? She looked down at herself. This body so young and perpetually perfect?

"I am well, 1889," she replied. "I was dreaming of Ethan."

1889's forehead wrinkled in discomfort. "I wish you would call him 41."

313 sighed. When she had first become a shellhead, the world still used names. She conceded that it was convenient to conceive of oneself as a unique and indivisible number, certainly more accurate than any other handle, but she could never think of *him* that way. "I am sorry for my imprecision, 1889. Ethan, 41, was never called by his number while...while he was alive."

Her words immediately caused a look of consternation to run across 1889's face. He sat beside her and put an arm around her tenderly. "I'm sorry I mentioned it. Did you dream of the accident again?"

"Yes," she lied. She loved 1889 dearly. How could she explain to him the strange longing to take hold of Ethan's hand once more and become once again *his*? 1889 would easily process the psychological computations behind the matter, but the funny thing about being a shellhead was that your emotions stayed as human as they had ever been, regardless of how well your circuits worked. Jealousy over a lover five hundred years dead hurt as much as any jealousy ever had.

1889 was stroking her hair. "It's alright, my love. You survived. You're safe."

She did not say that was the problem. Instead, 313 leaned her head against the smooth silicon muscles of his chest and let him hold her for a while. When she thought she could face the cold steel under her

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feet and the unwavering artificial light, 313 put her hand gently against 1889's shoulder and pushed herself to her feet.

"I'm alright now," she said, giving him a brave smile. "It was just a dream, after all."

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"Good morning, 577," 313 said as the airlock doors swooshed open to let her into the lab. A bleary-eyed man who would, historically, have been called "Asian" opened his eyes and looked at her distractedly. He held up one finger and closed his eyes again.

313 smiled wryly and padded over to her work station to remove her heavy oversuit. Stripped down to her soft, trim work clothes, 313 sank to the mat opposite 577's, mirroring his lotus pose. She brushed her loose cerulean hair from her eyes and firmly pressed the thumb and index finger of her right hand against her temples while pressing those of her left hand to the small white orb that floated above her mat.

577's voice floated into her ear as her connection to the webs activated.

\Good morning, 313\ 577's self-projection shimmered into being as 313 closed her eyes. \I apologize for not disconnecting to greet you in RL, but my subs are working on a shared project at the moment.\

313's projection smiled understandingly. \Of course. I won't put a demand on your processors. I'm here to work on the Omega function anyway.\

577 laughed as he faded out, leaving her alone with a question that didn't need answering. \Aren't we all?\

313 paused to let her mind sync with the Omega threads, grimacing as she realized that the discussion was yet again spinning its wheels in the same rut it had been in for the better part of the last solar year. She linked her subs into the number crunching algorithm to speed things along and turned her attention to her personal project. It had begun as a blog, back in the years when humans had barely discovered the internet, not long before the shellhead project reached human trials. "The Heisenberg Review," she called it. "Changing the world one observation at a time."

Two thousand years and multiple breakthroughs in physics that invalidated the uncertainty principle, but 313 still hadn't changed the name. In a world where people changed faces and body parts as often as they had once changed their socks, a webs presence with a strong sense of continuity did a great deal to limn one's idea of Selfness. With Ethan's face still strong in her mind and 1889's irritation at her use of his name lingering, 313 was particularly aware of this question of how post-humans identified themselves to both themselves and one another as she began to code an artlog.

She let the cortical visualizer tap her sensory experience of walking through the pearls in her dream on a lower level while she composed words to convey her thoughts on the highest.

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\United Nations of Earth, 2125: most of us were still flesh and blood. I had just completed the transition from carbon to silicon, the first triumph of mind over matter. How fearful we were then. I was afraid, terribly afraid, and I was one of the first five hundred to embrace the shellhead revolution, the seed population for a new humanity. We were so worried about being the one and only "me" that we designed the transition to slowly destroy our old selves bit by bit as the silicon parts took over.

\Do you remember the nausea of seeing double for a few hours?