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Steve Renna was absorbed in the impressive, modernistic C.E.S.H. Building he was approaching.

As was the case with most of the population over the past 20 years, Steve no longer thought about the meaning of the initials, but merely called it the C.E.S.H. Building, pronouncing it “cash”. The initials stood for “Center for Ectopic Species Homogenesis”, but at this juncture in time no one but the Board of Directors and some Government agencies called it by its official name. A translation of the scientific terminology into everyday language was, “The Center for Displaced Reproduction of the Species.”

It was an ironic title at best, as the people being reproduced were not flesh and blood at all, but rather, with remarkably advanced, miniature computers instead of brains, and plastic or electronic components instead of the other organs.

The final result was amazing. The Ectopic or non-normal people were very difficult to distinguish from the normal people. To outward appearances, one could not tell by looking at or even touching, whether it was a C.E.S.H. person (as they were now called), or a normal person. The “skin,” was indeed a marvel. Made up of composite materials, it not

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only had the feel, but the almost perfect look. It even had pores on the outside, which sprouted very human-like hair.

Occasionally the electronic circuitry maintaining constant temperature of the “skin” surface would go haywire, but this didn’t happen too often.

As he got closer to the C.E.S.H. building, he was trying to remember the various models pictured in the catalog for secretaries. He knew she would have to look considerably different than Beth the housekeeper he’d purchased about 1 1/2 years ago.

Little did he know that unlike that prior purchase, the purchase he was about to make would have a life-changing effect on him.

Steve had arrived at the C.E.S.H. building, so he stopped his musing.

He was greeted by a strikingly beautiful receptionist. She had auburn hair and a beautiful face. She smiled and said,

“May I be of service Sir?”

Her question, the universal prompt by C.E.S.H. persons, cooled him immediately. *“My God”, he thought, “She must be a C.E.S.H. person.”*

He gave her his name and told her he was looking for a secretary. She told him she would get Mr. Holden for him. She buzzed Mr. Holden on the intercom and told him someone would like to see him.

Turning to Steve again, she asked him for his I.D. number. When he gave it to her, she punched it into a compu-monitor on her desk. She proceeded to read from the monitor.

“You paid for your previous purchase promptly, make 43,000 Credits a year, own a business and employ fewer than three employees, which is the maximum the government

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will allow for purchasing C.E.S.H. persons. You are also 5 feet 10 inches tall, weigh 190 lbs., have black hair and brown eyes, and are an eligible and good-looking bachelor.”

“The Compu-monitor said all that?”

“No, I added the descriptive adjectives and your marital status.”

“Well I thank you,” he said, feeling flattered.

Steve thought, *“she couldn’t possibly be a C.E.S.H. person. C.E.S.H. people would never think of saying a thing like that, nor would they have such sparkling eyes as they generally don’t show much emotion.”*

Just then Mr. Holden came out. The receptionist made the introductions.

Mr. Holden said, “Please follow me to the secretarial section.”

As they were walking down a long corridor, Mr. Holden embarked on a new subject.

“You understand, of course, why the Government limits a businessman to the purchase of only two C.E.S.H. employees for his business.”

Without waiting for a reply from Steve, he went on,

“You see they must maintain the level of employment. The real persons you hire, can of course, purchase a C.E.S.H. person to work on the job for them.”

They finally arrived at the secretarial section. Steve found himself in a large room with glass-enclosed cubicles lining the wall. Each cubicle had a different secretarial model in it. They were of many sizes, shapes, and apparent ages. Some were older, short and buxom; others tall, mature, attractive and elegant; still others were young and attractive with different heights and personalities. The catalog numbers ranged from #Sec-450-A to #Sec-600-G.

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They came to one cubicle off by itself. Mr. Holden started rubbing his hands gleefully together.

“Mr. Renna, this is our *coup-de-grace*. This is #Sec-750-xpl.”

Steve almost expected to hear the fanfare of trumpets. “What’s special about her?”

To Steve she was merely a very attractive blonde, somewhat similar to the auburn-haired receptionist, but there were other very attractive models in the room.

Mr. Holden seemed almost personally insulted.

“In addition to her unusually good looks, Mr. Renna, she is capable of highly advanced and highly individualized thoughts and actions. As her catalog number stipulates, she is an experimental model. There is a limited number available and we are selling them on a trial basis, awaiting responses from buyers, before going into full-scale production.”

Steve moved closer for a better look. She was very attractive, and her eyes did seem more human than a regular C.E.S.H. person.

“What can she do that’s special?”

Mr. Holden opened the cubicle, stepped on the platform behind the model and pressed the activator button concealed under the ‘skin’ at the base of her neck. Her eyes immediately brightened and her body seemed to lose its stiffness.

Mr. Holden then said, “#750-xpl this is Mr. Renna. I would like to ask you some questions to show him what you can do.”

The Secretarial model turned toward Steve at the introduction, smiled at him and nodded her head slightly in his direction. Mr. Holden then proceeded to ask her questions, which seemed rather complicated for a C.E.S.H. person. She answered them all politely and charmingly. Mr. Holden then told Steve he was free to ask her questions if he wished.

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Steve thought awhile and said, “Miss 750-xpl, suppose I told you I had some extremely important work to do and didn’t want to be bothered by anyone. Let’s further suppose that a Mr. Brown came to you and insisted on seeing me, saying it was urgent. How would you handle it?”

“Of course you understand that without specific instructions from you as to what to say, I must tell the truth. But, what I would say is - I’m sorry Mr. Brown, Mr. Renna said he is extremely busy and left word not to be disturbed. However, since you say it is urgent, state your problem and I will interrupt him and tell him what it is. If it is possible for Mr. Renna to break away he will, if he cannot I will tell you so.”

She then said, “The decision would then be yours as to whether Mr. Brown’s problem is urgent enough or important enough for you to stop what you are doing.”

Steve said, “I’ll take her. The only thing, however, is that my clientele is rather conservative, and a blonde looks just a little too flashy. Can I have one with dark brown hair?”

Mr. Holden said, “No problem.” He deactivated her by turning off the switch under her skin. She stiffened and her eyes glazed over.

Mr. Holden went on, “There are a few more features I would like to acquaint you with. First of all, you can program her to do something yourself, by merely preceding your instructions with the words *“I want you to learn this and do it until I tell you to stop.”* Secondly, she has auto-programming. This means she will continue to learn by what she sees, hears and reads. Your reaction to what she has learned will determine whether she stores the information in her memory banks or discards it. Another thing, and this is a stipulation we make, she must be treated like a normal, real person. This means, that unlike

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the other secretarial models, you cannot leave her in the office overnight. Her major asset is that she has auto-programming and continues to learn. She cannot do so in a darkened office. You must take her home every night. She must have a room of her own, which you will decorate to her taste, and she will have her supper with you on weekday nights. On weekends, if you prefer, she will eat alone. I noticed that smile when I said she will eat. It's true. She can eat and swallow her food. It will then remain stored in a special compartment in her body until she discards it at a later time."

"It sounds like she can do everything a person can do. I feel like I'm taking home a real person, rather than a C.E.S.H. person."

Surprisingly, Mr. Holden didn't laugh, but rather, said seriously, "You are closer to the truth than you realize, Mr. Renna. She can do almost anything a real person can do, and I do mean almost anything. I don't want to overwhelm you at this time, but we will schedule an appointment for a month from now. I'm sure you will have many questions at that time and be better able to understand the answers."

Mr. Holden then went to a wall intercom and ordered a model #SEC-750-xpl, with dark brown hair. He ushered Steve into a small room off to one side and said, "We'll wait here. The technician will bring her to us. Because of your good credit rating, you can take her home with you now."

When the technician brought her in, Mr. Holden introduced her to Steve and asked Steve what he wanted to name her.

Steve replied, "Vanessa."

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Mr. Holden said to her, "From now on you will answer to the name Mr. Renna just gave you. He is also your new owner and you will respond to him in the manner in which you have been programmed."

Vanessa smiled and said, "Okay."

Steve was very pleased. She was just as beautiful as the other model he had been shown, but she seemed even warmer.

After all the formalities were taken care of, Steve took her home. He was particularly pleased that the C.E.S.H. Center gave her a couple of changes of clothes. Now they didn't have to stop and do any shopping.

Steve was amused and surprised at Vanessa's reaction to so many things along the way. It was somewhat like taking a child to a museum. She kept asking, "What is that?"

After a couple of dozen questions she said, "Am I bothering you with all my questions?"

Steve replied, "No."

When they arrived home, Steve introduced Vanessa to Beth. He then programmed Beth to prepare two meals from now on. He fixed himself a drink, with Vanessa watching intently, took a sip, and then said, "Let me show you to your room."

She said she was pleased with the room. She hung up her clothes and joined Steve in the living room. By that time Beth announced that supper was ready.

After supper, Vanessa again joined Steve in the living room. She then spent the rest of the evening alternating between watching Steve and the wall-sized Visi-screen.

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The next day Steve took Vanessa to the office with him. He introduced her to Cathy, his outgoing secretary. Cathy was leaving because her pregnancy was now quite advanced. Steve told Cathy to have Vanessa work along with her so that she would learn the routine.

Vanessa learned quite rapidly. Within two days she was able to do most of the things Cathy could do, and within a week, she was able to do anything Cathy could, and most times better.

There was a slight interruption of the learning routine when Vanessa started asking questions about Cathy's pregnancy. She had already been programmed with some general information about pregnancy, but a lot of the personal details were left out. Cathy didn't mind telling her, as Vanessa had such a frank and innocent look on her face when she asked.

By the end of the second week, Cathy was about ready to leave. She went in to tell Steve good-bye. Steve asked her how Vanessa was doing. Cathy told him that Vanessa was excellent. That, as a matter of fact, she was a little miffed because Vanessa could do everything better than her and she didn't think she would be missed.

Steve reassured her somewhat when he said, "I will still miss you as a person."

He then gave her a good-bye kiss on the cheek.

For the first week after Cathy left, things in the office were working out fine. Vanessa was doing a great job, both in the office and at home. Steve really enjoyed having her around. He found himself looking forward to the evenings at home. Vanessa would fix a drink for him and they would spend the evening looking at the visi-screen together or reading an electronic book, or just plain talking together.

The only problem Steve had, was to keep reminding himself she was a C.E.S.H. person. She was so real, and alive and warm that he kept forgetting.

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About two weeks after Cathy left, Steve was faced with his first minor crisis.

Vanessa came into his office and asked if he remembered Mr. Williams from United Tool Co. Steve nodded.

“Well, he just asked me for a date, and I’ve been programmed to check with you before I do anything on my own.”

Steve started sputtering,

“But, but, but...”

Finally he shook his head to clear it and said, “Let me get this straight. Mr. Williams asked you for a date, and you are seriously thinking about it? Don’t you know you are a C.E.S.H. person?”

“Oh yes! I know that. But in our orientation programming we were told it would be all right as long as our owner has given approval.”

“But doesn’t he know that you are a C.E.S.H. person?”

“Oh yes! One of the rules we learned in our interpersonal relations orientation session was to always make sure a normal person asking us for a date knew that we were C.E.S.H. persons. I told Mr. Williams, but he just smiled and said that it was okay with him.”

Steve said, “I don’t understand the Center’s attitude.” Then he continued, “What other rules did they program you with during that orientation session?”

“Well, the first rule is that we were not to allow any kissing or other tactile responses on the first date, with the exception of shaking hands, dancing, or allowing to be guided by the arm. The second rule is that subsequent requests for dates must have our owner’s permission, except where our “brain” interprets our responses to that individual as being

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uncomfortable. We could then say “no” without bothering our owner. The third rule is that we may allow kissing on subsequent dates if our “brain” interprets our response for that person to be in the “pleasant” to “very nice” range.”

“Do you want to go out with him?”

Vanessa replied without hesitation. “Yes. I think it would be good for my learning process to try it.”

Steve then said it was okay.

On the appointed night, Vanessa was ready at the proper time. She sat calmly watching the visi-screen. Steve, however, seemed quite agitated. He would read his e-book for a while, put it down, appeared to be looking for something, then go back to his e-book.

When Mr. Williams arrived, Steve went to the door and let him in. Mr. Williams said hello to Vanessa, noted that she was ready, then turned to Steve and said,

“Hi Steve! Say, aren’t you going out?”

“No, I changed my plans and decided to stay home and catch up on my reading. Oh, by the way Henry, don’t keep her out too late!”

Henry said, “Yes, daddy.”

Vanessa said good-bye to Steve and they left.

Steve took a deep breath and said aloud, “Well, I’m going to fix myself a drink and relax with my book.”

Throughout the course of the evening he did fix himself quite a few drinks, but was not too successful with the ‘relaxing with the book’ part. He spent most of the evening wandering around, and picking up or putting down the book he was supposedly reading. On

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a couple of occasions he mumbled to himself about how ridiculous it was for him to worry about her so much, but it helped him to relax.

Finally, about midnight, Steve heard them arrive, heard some mumbling outside the door, then Vanessa came in.

“Oh Steve!” she exclaimed after shutting the door, “I didn’t think you would still be up.”

Trying to appear calm, Steve said, “Well, how was it?”

“I’ll tell you all about it as I fix us some drinks. I noticed that your glass is empty.”

While she mixed their drinks, she told him in detail about Henry taking her to the Excelsior Restaurant, that they dined and danced. She even told him what she ate and how many times they danced.

“Then what?”

Vanessa handed Steve his glass, picked up hers and sat on the modernistic sofa, before resuming.

“He took me for a ride. He took me up to a place called ‘lookout point’ and parked the car.” She took a sip of her drink before continuing, and went on, “I asked him why he stopped the car and he replied that he wanted to look at the scenery. However, he no sooner said that when he tried to kiss me.”

“What did you do?”

“I just told him what the rules were. When he persisted, I pushed him firmly away, and told him I wanted to come home. When we got here, he tried again, so I told him again the answer was ‘no’ and came in.”

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“Well, how do you rate your date?”

Vanessa knitted her brow and said, “Well, based on a preliminary analysis, I would say it was somewhat uncomfortable.”

“Well, I think we had better go to bed. Good night Vanessa.”

He turned to go, but noticed that she had not moved. He turned back again and saw her looking at him in a thoughtful manner. She walked to him, took his face in both her hands and gave him a soft kiss that lasted about 2 seconds. She then stood looking at Steve rather pensively.

“Why did you do that?”

“Well, there was nothing in the rules about not kissing our owner, and I just wanted to see what it was like.”

“Okay”, Steve said, “What do you think about it?”

Vanessa thought about it for a moment. “My brain evaluated my response as falling within the ‘very nice’ range.”

As an afterthought she added, “Thank you Steve.”

“Thank you. Now run to bed.”

Things proceeded in the days that followed, much as it had before Vanessa’s date with Henry Williams, except for two changes. The first being that every night since that date, Vanessa always gave Steve a goodnight kiss before going to bed. What perplexed Steve was that C.E.S.H. persons were not known to display emotions of any kind. Yet, after each kiss, Vanessa would smile warmly at him, and the twinkle in her eyes became more pronounced.

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What bothered Steve even more was the fact he enjoyed those good night kisses very much, and actually looked forward to them.

The second change was that Steve found himself looking at her more and more. Without intending to, he often found himself admiring the line of her nose, the color of her eyes, the softness of her lips, the uplifting curve of her bust.

“This is ridiculous,” he would say, banging his fist on his desk. “Of course her bust and nose and everything else is perfect. She is a C.E.S.H. person! She’s artificial!”

Yet, shortly after, he found himself watching the sweep of her waist and hips as she walked by, or the curve of her legs as she sat at her desk.

More and more he found himself banging his desk and mumbling how ludicrous the situation was. After one of his outbursts, Vanessa innocently walked into his office.

“Steve, is something troubling you? Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” he said, looking away from those troubling eyes.

“But, you seem so unhappy or displeased. If there is anything I could do, please, tell me.”

It was the day after that particular episode, that Steve received the call from The Center. It was Mr. Holden’s secretary. She told Steve it was well past the one month period of his ownership of a #SEC-750-xpl. She went on to remind him that an appointment had been set up on the day he had selected her, but he had not shown up for the appointment, nor had he called them. She wanted to know if anything was wrong.

Steve hesitated for a moment, thinking to himself how alien the catalog number seemed. It seemed he was not getting out of going to the Center for that ridiculous appointment, so he agreed to a new appointment, which was in two days.

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After he switched off the visi-phone, Vanessa came in looking a little concerned.

“The girl said she was from The Center. Was that the C.E.S.H. Center?”

Steve looked up and said, “Yes.” Then for some reason he could not explain, looked guiltily away.

For two days, Vanessa didn’t say much, but walked around looking a little subdued.

When the day finally arrived, Steve walked into her office and said, “Well, it’s time for me to go. Carry on for me here until I come back. Hopefully, it won’t take too long.”

Vanessa looked at him for a while, then huskily said good-bye. As she said that, she smoothly slid out from her desk and into his arms. She gave him one of her sweet good-bye kisses, albeit one that lasted a little longer than usual. Then with her arms still around his neck, she gazed into his eyes for quite a while. Finally, she pulled away from him.

Steve thought for a moment that he actually saw anxiety in her eyes. But that had to be nonsense. C.E.S.H. persons did not have emotions.

* * * *

Steve took the Metropolitan Air Transit Car (sometimes called the MAT) to get to the Center. At the appropriate stop, he stepped off the (MAT) as it hovered 10 inches off the roadway and stepped onto the moving sidewalk going west.

When Steve arrived at The Center, he was welcomed by the same auburn-haired receptionist and guided to Mr. Holden’s office.

Mr. Holden smiled when Steve walked in. He came around his desk and shook Steve’s hand, then motioned him to a chair.

“Well, how do you like her?”

Steve tried to be casual, but failed, “I think she’s terrific.”

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“Good, but, I’m sure you must have quite a few questions by now, so let’s have them.”

“Okay, first question - How can a C.E.S.H. person exhibit emotion? I am sure I have seen her exhibit pain and sadness and joy and yes, even anxiety. How can this be so?”

“I’m sure you don’t want the engineering, electronic, and biochemical details on the mechanics of all this. It would be as difficult to explain that to you, as it would be to understand the biochemical reactions within your own body. I will say this, however. As you may recall, I told you when you purchased her that due to recent advances in miniaturizations, she was capable of highly individualized thoughts and actions, and has a very advanced computer for a ‘brain’. In addition, we perfected her other circuitry so that varying responses could be reflected in her face and actions.

You must remember, Mr. Renna, we are living in the end of the twenty-second century. Many advances were made in this century in the fields of engineering, electronics and biochemistry, but until recently we didn’t have the miniaturization nor the courage to do what we did with Vanessa or others like her.”

“But don’t you realize you are playing with fire. You are allowing them to go out with humans, have social interactions with humans like never before. I don’t think it’s possible for a C.E.S.H. person to fall in love, but what about a human falling in love with a C.E.S.H. person? Did you ever consider that possibility and the anguish that could create?”

“Let me ask you a question, what’s wrong with that?”

Steve was aghast at his casualness.

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“That’s right. People for countless millennia, have loved dogs, cats, and other pets in addition to or instead of human loves. What’s wrong with loving something that is so human-like, that it is as good if not better than a human.”

“Did I hear you right?”

Mr. Holden nodded, “Look, maybe I’m going at this wrong. Let me have you meet Mr. Andrews. He is Director of The Center. Maybe he can explain things to you better.”

Mr. Holden led Steve out of his office, up a flight of stairs and to a large imposing door with another receptionist at her desk before it. He whispered something to the receptionist. She smiled at Steve, got up and went through the large door. She came out again shortly and said, “Mr. Andrews will see you now.”

Steve walked into a spacious office with drapes on two of the walls, a huge desk and a wall made entirely of glass behind the desk. The man behind the desk appeared to be tall and lean. His hair was rather leonine. He had a high forehead and high cheekbones, with a well-defined nose and jaw. His hair was all white, but he had a young face.

Mr. Holden made the introductions, pointing out that Mr. Archibald Andrews, as Director of The Center for Ectopic Species Homogenesis, was not only responsible for all hiring, but also for setting all policy and guidelines for The Center, then excused himself.

Mr. Andrews motioned for Steve to be seated and said, “Mr. Holden probably has filled you in on our current accomplishments. I would like to go back into the past a bit.

As you probably already know, the past century saw fantastic progress in many fields of endeavor. One of these fields was medical research. Virtually all diseases were wiped out. Pharmaceuticals are now available to cure or control any illness.

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The second field of endeavor to make great strides was in the making and transplanting of artificial organs. Now, even if an organ fails from wear or old age, it can be replaced with an artificial organ that can go on for many more years. The Center that handles that aspect is The Center for Organ Replacement or The C.O.R. Center. Some people have had many of their organs replaced.

With the advancements made in those two fields, human life spans have been increased tremendously. Thankfully, there has also been progress in the field of Population Control. The world finally reached zero population growth about 25 or 30 years ago.

Of course, people still die occasionally, and when they do, we salvage any artificial or real organs (in good condition) they may have and keep them in the appropriate tissue bank.”

“Why the need for artificial organs if you have tissue banks?”

“Well, there could never be enough real organs to go around. Secondly, there are fewer problems with rejection and fewer side effects. Thirdly, it’s just generally easier all around to transplant artificial organs.”

Mr. Andrews was interrupted by his secretary.

“Here is that file you asked for Mr. Andrews.”

She laid it on his desk and walked out.

Mr. Andrews picked up the file and leafed through it for a moment or two.

“To get back to our discussion,” Mr. Andrews continued, “What do we do with the human (real) organs? The answer is that, despite our advances, real organs can still have certain advantages, i.e. response to stimuli is more varied and complex. Since there is a

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limited number, we have only been using them in our -xpl models. As a matter of fact, I note here in the file, that your #SEC-750-xpl is one of them.

One thing that Mr. Holden neglected to tell you, is that the C.O.R. Center is right next door and that I am the Director of that center as well as this one. That becomes very convenient.

So, the question becomes a philosophical one. Who is more human; the one with the human body, that now has a half dozen or more artificial organs, or the one that has a C.E.S.H. body but has a half dozen real organs?

Since the one with the C.E.S.H. body can last longer, and in my opinion is superior, I would say the latter.”

“There we go again, Mr. Andrews. I resented it when Mr. Holden inferred the superiority of the C.E.S.H. people, and even more now that you have blatantly stated it. There are many things that make a real person superior to a C.E.S.H. person.”

Mr. Andrews smiled. He leaned back in his chair, touched his fingertips together and said, “Such as?”

“Well, for one thing, can a C.E.S.H. person have a baby?”

“No problem. An artificial womb can be installed with attached telemetry to receive instructions from the Central computer. The human ovum and sperm can be obtained from the tissue bank and fertilized prior to implantation.”

Steve looked a bit stunned.

“Okay, what about the brain? Despite your advances in super-miniaturization, you still cannot duplicate the human brain in that size.”

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“That’s true, but we can come pretty close, and with the indwelling telemetry, anything the C.E.S.H. brain can’t handle can be referred to the Central Computer.”

Steve groaned.

“Relax, Mr. Renna. It’s the beginning of a whole new world you’re seeing.”

Just then, Mr. Andrews’ secretary put her head in the door and said,

“If you are done with that file Mr. Andrews, I’ll return it to its proper place before I go to lunch.”

“Okay, Myra. Would you also take the files that are on the cabinet behind me?”

“Yes, of course.”

She picked up the file from his desk and walked behind him toward the cabinet. In doing so, she accidentally brushed against the back of his neck with her elbow. Mr. Andrews immediately stiffened and his eyes became glazed.

Steve gasped, “Oh my God!”

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