

Sci Phi: Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy

Sci Phi Productions
www.sciphijournal.com
editor@sciphijournal.com

Copyright © 2008 Sci Phi Productions

NOTICE : This work is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives License 3.0

Relearning Touch By Mel Cartagena

The exposed wiring wasn't truly the power company's fault; the underground utility line carrying 15,000 volts of electricity was in fine working condition, had been tested and approved by the manufacturer, and was installed according to the standards of the National Electrician's Union.

What happened was: first, the thin polyvinyl casing was not designed for prolonged low-frequency stress. Continuous jack hammering to reach subsoil, vibrations from giant excavators reaching for cable television, water and other utilities and then tamping after repacking the earth covering the utilities lines had caused a hairline stress-fracture on the surface of the cable, which had simply expanded under the seasonal strain of frost heave and spring thaw.

Then, the constant traffic of the Chinatown district placed a lateral stress on the power line, which by now was kinked at odd angles throughout its length. One such bend on the line arced under a manhole cover, and exposed filaments that had been less than a quarter-of-an-inch below the corrugated metal of the manhole. These were raised to the point of brushing the metal after an eighteen-wheel truck drove by, scant seconds before Lalo Higgins walked by. He was on his way home, to tell his wife the news that he'd been given a raise at his job, and the manager at the Comicazi club was placing Lalo's name at the top of the lists of stand up performers for Friday and Sunday night. His steps had an invigorating bounce that was cut short when the right heel of his shoe touched the manhole cover, and a brief jolt of concentrated voltage threw him fifteen feet in the air, to land headfirst on the street three feet from the fender of another truck, whose vibrations after slamming the brakes caused the filament to drop an eighth of an inch from the manhole cover, causing no one else but Lalo to be electrocuted that day.

So it was really no one's fault that Lalo had 15,000 volts of current race through his body in a tenth of a second. Even then the power company, afraid of a crippling lawsuit, intercepted Lalo's wife before she could get a detailed explanation of what had occurred to her husband.

"He's going to be okay. We've established that," said Norman Swan, public

relations expert for Toubriand-Lass Incorporated. "I mean, he'll have to undergo some rehabilitation, but he'll pull through Mrs. Higgins," and he gave the woman a fast, sweet smile, courtesy of \$1,300 worth of cosmetic dental surgery. "Together."

"I don't understand," Keila Higgins said. She dropped her head and ran her tiny hands through her hair. "This is happening too fast." She raised her head and looked up at the four men. "How do you know he's okay if no one can go see him? I tried ten minutes ago."

"We're footing the bill ma'am," Tom Kansas said genially, bowing to give her a kind smile that was hidden under his thick mustache, as red as the tufts of hair on the sides of his head. "So we, uh, extorted some answers from the head doctor."

"Who are you?" Keila said. She shook her head in irritation at the speed of everything developing around her.

"I'm Tom Kansas, vice-president of the Toubriand-Lass Corporation ma'am," Tom said. He stepped to the side and gestured with his right hand to the men behind him. "This here's Andrew Crane, our head of petrol-based products. Jason Grey, our attorney," the two men, similar in suit, tie and shoes save for the severity in the attorney's face against the sagging features of Andrew, nodded once at Keila. "And you've met Norman Swan, our boy in the image department. And as for why we're here, well ma'am, we feel a tiny bit responsible for what happened to your husband. Now mind you, and our lawyer's present," Tom chuckled once after he said this, "I'm not saying we are responsible, but that we feel responsible." He laced his hands behind his back. "You'd be amazed at how many people get those two mixed up and show up at our offices demanding money." He laughed more openly, but immediately his eyes caught the lawyer's. He gave Tom a subtle shake of his head, and Tom stopped laughing at once.

"What he's trying to say ma'am," Norman Swan said in intervention, having caught Jason's head shake as well, "is that we'd like to help your husband, in exchange for him helping us."

Keila looked up at Norman, forlorn. "I'm sorry, but I still don't understand. How can he help you?"

Just then there was a brief commotion at the hospital entrance. A small group of reporters were almost to the glass partition separating the main hall from the waiting room, when hospital security, backed up by private guards brought by Toubriand-Lass, intercepted the mass of men and women hoisting cameras and microphones. Keila looked at them around Norman and Tom, watched the reporters raise the microphone over their heads as they shouted questions at Keila.

"That right there is one way to begin," Norman said while cocking a thumb over his shoulder at the conglomerated press. "You can start by not talking to them."

Keila looked at the rabble fighting for standing space, trying to aim their cameras at the inside of the waiting room while the beefy officers shoved them, and she shook her head in a shuddery reflex.

"Done," she said, her voice breaking a little. "In fact, if you can keep them away from our home I'll appreciate it."

“We’ll do you and your husband one better Mrs. Higgins,” Norman said, and paused, like a comic about to deliver the punchline. “We’ll have you stay at one of our hotels while your husband recovers.”

Keila looked away from the press at Norman. “What?”

“You perceptively understood that they’ll hound you Mrs. Higgins. They’ll set up camp in front of your house, dig up whatever dirt they can find on you and your husband, disrupt your life,” Norman said, and shook his head in solemn disgust. “But with our help, we can escort you to one of the hotels our corporation has standing accounts with. Every comfort will be provided to you, and we’ll make sure it’s within walking distance from where your husband will be recovering.” Norman held out his hands toward Keila, then laced his fingers. “All we need from you is to stay away from the press, and for your husband to talk to us.”

“Why?” Keila asked. Norman’s tones and rhythms were soothing, and she’d given up on asking detailed questions.

“Well Mrs. Higgins,” Tom inserted himself again, “we want to know what happened. We want your husband’s tale, so we can learn from him, make sure our products are not only durable, but ahead of safety standards.” He gave a brief nod, as of dismissal, then stayed next to Norman looking at her. Keila wanted to ask more questions, make sure she didn’t get her husband into something complicated, but she was also overwhelmed. They wanted to help; it was what registered with her, but she had another question.

“Why are you doing all this?”

Tom looked gravely at the floor, and Norman Swan said, “It’s not the best of times for corporate conglomerates Mrs. Higgins. I think you could help us, uh, dispel some of the things they say about us.” He said nothing else, but Tom looked at Norman with mingled awe and pride for his simultaneous conciseness and vagueness. Keila only had one more question.

“When can you move him?”

They moved Lalo by helicopter that night, and placed him on a medical complex wing of the Horatio Lass research and development center, and established within an hour of Lalo’s arrival that he’d suffered mild trauma and concussion from his head injury. This was evaluated and treated in a routine way, while the doctors pondered over the damage done to his nervous system from the intense and brief current contact. Impaired bio-motor functions, diminished reflexes, loss of muscular control were some of the terms the doctors gave to the board of directors of Toubriand-Lass, who took these concerns over to their team of bio-meds, who thought over the challenge long and hard, and presented a solution to the board of directors five days after Lalo’s arrival.

The solution, while not life-threatening, failed to impress the board of directors. It was a technology barely out of the prototype stage, an intrusive device that had a limited success margin. The board of directors thought about it for five more days, then put the proposition to Lalo and his wife. They thought about it for four more days; by then the press had found another victim, a child electrocuted by a toy, and lost interest in searching for Lalo. Armed with this knowledge the board of directors returned to consult with Lalo on his decision; their collective tone

lacked the warmth and friendliness of the previous occasion. It implied they wanted an answer now.

Lalo agreed to undergo the procedure that afternoon, and early the next day he was put under general anesthetic.

A network of mono-filaments of high receptivity was inserted through his major muscle bellies, and linked to a bio-silicate chip placed in a strategic position between the right atrium and right ventricle of his heart. It was jump started and its operation and use was explained to him two days later, when he complained about the humming noise in his room.

“It’s a support unit Mr. Higgins,” the nurse explained. “It’s for your neural aid.”

“What!?” Lalo said, in irritation and inquiry. He’d woken up twenty-two hours earlier to the low-frequency hum inches from his bed, going crazy from the noise but too weak to do anything about it. Now that he’d regained some strength he pressed the buzzer for the nurse, and drew the attention of the head neurosurgeon along the way.

“You were given a neural aid Mr. Higgins,” Doctor Jerry Kinn explained. “It’ll help you with basic functions. You see, your accident left you with a partially impaired nervous system. We gave it a boost. Think of it as a pacemaker for your neural pathways.”

“What!? I’m going to be hooked to a machine for the rest of my life!?”

“Not at all Mr. Higgins, not at all,” Jerry Kinn said reassuringly. The voice didn’t go with the severe lines running down the doctor’s mouth and forehead. “It’s quite amazing in fact, your heart’s electrical impulses actually start the machine. It’s just that you came out of surgery, and we don’t want to place any undue strain on your heart just yet, hence,” the doctor signaled at the small lead box on a cart next to Lalo’s bed, from which the humming was emanating, “we got our generator doing your work for you.”

Lalo looked at the doctor’s severe face for a moment, trying to separate the gentle, patient voice from the hard face. He looked away, saw the remote, and picked it up. He flicked on the television while asking, “So how much longer am I going to have to sleep with that noise next to my head?”

“Mmm, hard to say,” the doctor told him. “You’ll be under observation the next few days. Depending how you recover we’ll reduce or drop the dosage.” He chuckled at the private joke. Lalo looked away from the TV to look at the doctor’s stiff grin. The smile suddenly dropped; the doctor became serious. He looked at Lalo with such graveness that he turned his attention back to the television. A news broadcaster was announcing that a solar storm of medium to high magnitude might hit the earth in the 37 to 53 longitude range.

“Mr. Higgins,” the doctor said. He took a chair near the window and brought it next to Lalo’s bed. “I need to have a frank chat with you about the side effects of the procedure we did on you.” Lalo kept his head centered, but his eyes rolled toward the doctor’s face.

“Now wait, before you say anything hear me out,” the doctor said, reading the cold anger in Lalo’s eyes. “Now, what you have will help you with your daily functions almost as good as before the accident.”

“Almost?” Lalo asked with sarcasm.

“You have to understand Mr. Higgins,” the doctor said, “the chip that controls the network in your body is highly sensitive. It’ll pick up anything, and I mean pretty damn much anything that comes within a foot of you that emits magnetic pulse or small electrical discharges...”

“...So that means a goddamn cell phone or a kid with a remote control car will throw me out of whack,” Lalo explained to Keila.

“Don’t curse,” Keila said softly. “I don’t like it when you curse.” Her stare changed, became demure. “Are you sure it’s really going to be that way? There’s isn’t a teeny-weeny chance you’re exaggerating just a mite?”

While Lalo pondered her questions she fed him more gelatin. “I’m pretty much quoting what the doctor told me Keila,” Lalo said. “On the one hand it’s not too bad. He said things like that boost the chip, that it’s less work on my heart,” he said as he touched himself in the chest, feeling the incision scar through his pajama. Keila put the gelatin cup down on the tray and absently stroked her fingernails along Lalo’s forearm.

“Lal?” she said, so low that he didn’t hear her. His attention was on the television. The announcer said it was imminent a solar storm would hit the belt of the northern United States and southern Canada within four to six months. The broadcaster ended the report with the stern warning that major power outages and downed telecommunications systems were expected.

“Lalo?” Keila said, louder. He looked down at her, surprised to see she’d been touching him.

“Hmm?”

“Please don’t hate me,” she said, and Lalo sighed in impatience at her habit of assuming Lalo could draw conclusions from vague mumblings.

“Don’t start with me Keila. Just tell me what it is.”

“I, I’m the one that...” she took a breath, “I told them to go ahead and do this Lal.”

“Do what?”

“This,” she waved at the elegantly antiseptic recovery room, then touched his chest where his hand had been a minute before. “This,” she repeated.

“Why am I going to hate you for this?” He asked, annoyed. He kept his tone gentle. “You saved me.”

“I don’t mean now,” she explained. “Later, when you try to get back to your...to the things you used to do.”

“The things?” Lalo asked.

“Your job,” she explained. “Your stand up gigs at the club.” She was silent for a while, and Lalo almost wished the generator was still humming. “It’s going to be different now, and I don’t want you to hate me, because, because I think it might have been a mistake...” she leaned forward, her face inches away from Lalo’s chest. He pulled her to him and held her in silence.

“You forgot one thing.”

“What’s that?” Keila asked.

“Sex,” Lalo said. “Is it going to be the same as before, or better?”

She stayed in the same position for a moment, then pulled away and looked up at him, a smirk playing at the corners of her lips. It became a full smile after their eyes locked, then she got up to lock the door while Lalo took off his pajamas.

It was different from before, and not in a good way. Their combined arousal and raised pulses sent Lalo’s body into sudden jerks and spasm fits that simply could not be controlled because the bio-chip fed on the tiniest impulse and amplified it through Lalo’s body. Keila kept apologizing, until Lalo’s embarrassment and anger sent a concentrated burst of pulse from Lalo that turned on the TV. Keila offered him oral sex to make up, but Lalo refused, and sulked into a troubled sleep.

Later that night, lying in the narrow bed with Keila snoring softly next to him, Lalo had the impression of someone calling to him. He swam between the dream state and wakefulness, ignoring a voice had to be a dream. It was a pleasant sensation; the voice—rich and female—called from within Lalo’s body, his name reverberating through his bones. He stirred in the bed, smiling at nothing, feeling aroused, then the sensation of a presence coursing through him in a sensual way, then sudden embarrassment and surprise. His eyes snapped open, dead set on the TV screen and the words already fading in the black screen.

CAN YOU LOVE WITHOUT TOUCHING?

Lalo sat up in bed, looking at the screen. He rubbed his eyes, looked again. It was just as black as before, the words becoming a faint unreliable memory. He could not remember turning off the TV; the only certain thing was the warm sensation of someone calling to him, a voice that invaded his body in an arousing way with the mention of his name. He rubbed his eyes again and looked around the room. The holographic clock on the wall read 12:01.

After four months on the medical facility Lalo was happy to be in front of the Seneca Café, holding open the door and greeting people like he used to.

His first night went fine. It was a slow Tuesday that didn’t put heavy demands on him, and caused him to dream of the future, of his return to the stage of the Comicazi bar and stand up club.

Lalo was working on material, writing snippets of dialog and jokes in his battered notebook, when he felt the need to look up, a gentle nudge that came from within his mind. Past the tightly clustered buildings were the slanted poles of the announcer. The inverse-polarized, three-hundred foot long poles forming a ninety-degree angle to one another, and manipulating a field of color-coded nanoflickers that gave arranged themselves into announcements visible from within ten miles of the poles.

When Lalo looked up the field there were cascading red, green and yellow colors, a commercial for tobacco chew whose time slot had just expired. The time solidified massive bright digits. 10:01 PM. Then, the nanoflickers rearranged themselves into a request.

TELL ME A JOKE.

And Lalo knew without question that it was for him. He looked around, feeling exposed, a sensation akin to being seen in public with someone you'd rather not. Two couples walked to the door and Lalo looked away from the sky to greet and hold the door for them. When he looked back at the field he saw the words JUST ONE PLEASE I HAVEN'T HEARD ONE IN A LONG TIME.

Lalo looked around again, then up at the letters. Now it said YOU DON'T NEED TO SAY IT OUT LOUD JUST THINK IT I CAN HEAR YOU JUST LIKE YOU CAN HEAR ME.

Lalo sighed, shook his head, and after another moment's thought focused on a joke he read once in a magazine.

A woman visited her doctor for her annual exam. The doctor asked, "Are you and your husband sexually active?"

"Yes," the woman said. "We have verbal sex every day."

"Verbal sex? I think you mean oral sex."

"I mean verbal sex," the woman said. "Every morning my husband and I pass each other in the hall and say, 'fuck you!'"

The sensation running through Lalo's body was like tiny bass vibrations fluttering at random intervals, tickling his insides. Like robotic laughter, Lalo thought, and shivered, trying to shake the sensation off him. He couldn't, but the thrumming gradually subsided, and when an impulse made Lalo look up again he saw TELL ME ANOTHER THAT WAS GOOD dominating the announcement field. A lone woman in leather and studs approached the door of Seneca and Lalo went to greet her. She went by, oblivious of him, and when he looked up he saw SHE WAS A BITCH NO MANNERS WHATSOEVER I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU DO A JOB LIKE THAT FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T EVEN SEE YOU BUT CAN YOU TELL ME ANOTHER ONE THE LAST ONE WAS FUNNY.

Lalo looked at the letters, varied in color and font, that cascaded out of view as soon as they were generated.

Who are you? He asked without using his voice, understanding instinctively he didn't need to.

I'M LONELY.

I meant what's your name, Lalo thought in response to the voice.

THAT'S WHAT I AM I WHAT I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN IF I LOOKED LIKE A MOVIE STAR OR HAD A VOICE LIKE A SINGER MAYBE I'D CALL MYSELF SOMETHING DIFFERENT BUT MY ONLY QUALITY IS TO SEE AND HEAR AND NOTHING ELSE SO I CALL MYSELF LONELY I THINK ITS EXPRESSIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE NOW HOW ABOUT ANOTHER JOKE.

"Hey! Buddy. You feel like earning a tip tonight?" A large man in fluorescent shirt and pastel wide pants stood by the door flanked by two women with vacuous eyes framed by thick black hair.

"Oh, sorry. Welcome to Seneca," Lalo said as he went over to get the door for them. The man flicked a bill at Lalo as he went in and the two women giggled with their backs turned. Lalo pocketed the ten dollar bill and looked up again.

THOSE WERE AWFUL PEOPLE SOMETIMES I'M GLAD I'M LONELY AND NO ONE CAN SEE ME I DON'T THINK I CAN STAND THAT KIND OF TREATMENT YOU SUFFER-

What are you!? Lalo interrupted angrily, upset at the relentless presence.

I CAN'T REMEMBER BEING BORN OR IF I AGE OR WHEN I BECAME AWARE OF MYSELF SAVE THE FACT THAT I FEEL FEMALE IN PSYCHOLOGICAL MAKE UP AND HAVE A VORACIOUS CURIOSITY FOR EVERYTHING BUT COULDN'T COMMUNICATE WITH ANYONE UNTIL I FELT YOU ACROSS THE VOID AND-

Slow down! Lalo ordered. Her speed demanded focus, and this time he failed to hear a lone woman waiting for him to open the door, or her threat to complain to the manager about his behavior as she let herself in.

I DON'T KNOW HOW I CAME TO BE. I JUST KNOW THAT I EXIST IN THE WAVES GOING THROUGH THE AIR. I'M IN EVERY NEWS BROADCAST, ANNOUNCEMENT OR SONG THAT TRAVELS THE AIRWAVES, AND FOR SOME REASON THE PULSE DIFFUSION IS JUST RIGHT FOR ME TO APPROACH PEOPLE BETWEEN 10:00 AND 12:00 AT NIGHT. BUT NOBODY COULD HEAR OR FEEL ME BECAUSE I LIVE ON A VERY HIGH FREQUENCY, UNTIL YOU.

“What do you-“ Lalo started to ask out loud, then stopped just as a large group was approaching. He held the door and each man held out a bill for him as they went in. He counted the money, and as he pocketed it he asked, what do you mean until me?

YOU CAN HEAR ME. YOU CAN FEEL ME ANYWAY. WE'RE ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH, SO TO SPEAK. WE'RE THE SAME.

We're not the same, Lalo argued, I'm a person, though he sent this statement to Lonely without conviction. I eat, breathe, sleep, have sex, Lalo added with deliberate gloating. He looked up at the screen, but the characters were gone, replaced with a toothpaste commercial. Lalo felt a tremor of guilt, and then anger at himself for feeling guilt. He tried to concentrate on his work for the rest of the night, though every once in a while, as he greeted people, he felt himself looking at people through different eyes.

The size of the crowds at Seneca Café increased over the next three days, culminating with a packed salon on Friday, and Lalo's first attack since leaving the clinic.

Nearly every patron inside had a cell phone, pager or ambient simulator implant in their heads, hundreds of tiny pulses acting all at once on Lalo's bio-chip. His arms jerked spastically and he lost control of his legs. Seven women dialed 911 thinking he was having an epileptic seizure on the front door of Seneca's.

Lalo tried to explain that he'd be okay if they'd turn off their devices, but he bit his tongue three times as his head bounced on the pavement. He was taken to the thickly padded manager's office to recover on the couch. When he felt better he explained what happened.

“Lalo you have to see I'm against the wall here,” Riddick Samms explained, a former wrestler who gravitated toward club ownership after an injury in the ring ended his career. “You've done a good job Lalo. There's no arguing that. But,

Jesus, you gave everyone a scare out there tonight kid. I'm going to have to work like a dog to kill the rumors already going around that you OD'd on coke."

"I'm sorry Rid," Lalo said. It was all he could say. He knew what was coming.

"Not as sorry as I feel right now," Riddick said ", 'cause there's only one way to solve this. I can't tell the customers to switch off their toys in here Lalo." He put up his large hands toward Lalo. "It's part of the hipness of the club. But you'll be okay, I can feel it. You got a hidden talent, and this is your chance to work on it. Like me and wrestling. I was a damn good wrestler. I was on my way to a nice career until that high-wire match messed up my back for good, but then my girlfriend showed some plans for a saloon while I was recovering, and right away I knew the design was all wrong, and that's how I found out about my other talent, about how to design..."

"I'm sorry Lal, I really am," Keila said, kneading the muscles in his neck. "But we'll be okay. I'm bringing enough from the beauty salon, and you're getting the stipend from the corporation for those tests they run on you once in a while." She switched her hands to his upper back and her face brightened up.

"You know what? Now you can spend more time on your act Lal," she said as she massaged him. Lalo sat on the edge of the bed, facing the entertainment system. The television suddenly came on loudly, and Lalo tensed up.

"Oh, sorry," Keila said, feeling the change in his body. "I hit the remote with my knee. Didn't mean to startle you. Is there anything you want to watch?"

Lalo didn't answer immediately. He looked at the model selling ambient simulators.

"But my favorite of all places," the blond woman on the television said with a lip-splitting grin, "is the limbo setting." She pressed a point in the back of her skull and swooned, "To drift away and become nothing, feel nothing, be weightless and free like ether." She suddenly looked right at Lalo, and said, "To visit this place that only you and I can go, because we are one and the same."

"Shut up," Lalo said impulsively.

"I was just asking a question," Keila said. "You don't have to snap at me."

Lalo reached for the remote and turned off the television, then pushed Keila on her back on the bed.

"We're not the same," he mumbled as he began to pull her shirt open, tearing off the pink buttons in his haste.

"Lal, slow down," Keila said as she reached for his shirt."

Lalo unzipped and pulled down her pants, feeling his muscles twitch as the anger built up inside. "I'm not like you," he said as he reached for his own pants.

"Lal, what are you talking about?"

"Shut up and spread!" Lalo ordered. "I'll show her."

"Lal, you're scaring me," Keila said, holding Lalo by the shoulders, feeling the tension and rising vibrations under his skin.

"I'm not like you," Lalo insisted. "I can fuck." He tried to insert himself in her, but his angry pulse and her scared heartbeat began to work on him, and his body

started to twitch uncontrollably. The veins in his neck stood out with his effort to control his body.

“Lalo, don’t!” Keila screamed as he fell on her in a shaking fit. His body rolled to the side and she immediately rolled off the bed.

“Don’t go,” he croaked at her, the chronic shaking causing him trouble speaking. “I can do it. I’m not like her!” Keila looked at him with tears in her eyes.

“Don’t try to fight it honey,” she told him between sobs. “I’m sorry, but it’s only going to get worse. Relax and it’ll go away, then we can talk,” and she ran out of the bedroom. Lalo continued to fight it. His eyes fastened on the TV, and he unwittingly focused his anger in a pulse wave that shattered the screen.

Lalo managed to roll face down on the bed and he stayed there, panting, letting a reluctant calm wash over him.

He damaged a lot more than the television.

He didn’t realize it until he finally got up from the bed, twenty minutes later, and walked across the apartment toward the kitchen. He saw a mass of cars three blocks away from his second floor kitchen window, and stopped, curious to see cars lined from half a mile back to the very edge of the four-way intersection. After a few seconds he learned the traffic light was not working. A glance beyond the traffic jam showed him the office buildings a mile away had no lights, and the announcer was not working, the angled poles stood glaring in the sun useless. He realized he could not hear the hum of the refrigerator, and the microwave screen was blank.

There was a knock on the door, simultaneous with a gruff voice at the other end.

“Mr. Higgins,” the voice demanded, “open up Mr. Higgins. We gotta talk.”

Lalo opened the door and the tall, heavysset form of Damen Holmes let himself in without waiting for invitation.

“Mr. Higgins,” the black man said in his heavy Barbados accent. “I ain’t never had a complaint about you, and that’s the truth. Always pay the rent on time, don’t sneak pets in here like I caught your wife doing that time, and don’t give me no grief.”

Lalo sighed and leaned against the windowsill, already sensing what the landlord was leading to. He didn’t try to argue.

“Now, when you went and told me they put something in from your accident,” Damen said, moving his arms in exaggerated chops to emphasize his point, “something that made you do crazy things, I was like, ‘cool, cool. He alive.’ But then you go and do something like that!” He jabbed at the air with both arms, signaling at the power outage he’d caused with one angry pulse burst. “Well, that’s not good. That’s bad for you, and for me too. And Barbara, she angry now,” he stared at Lalo, his face making an amusing contrast between his white hair and mustache and black features. “Oh boy, she missing her soap opera.” He shook his head. “Not good for nobody. Now, I really feel rotten doing this, even more because I know you haven’t worked for a while, but maybe you need a place where the electronics are protected for, for any kind of surcharge. See what I mean? A place where you can go crazy if you need to and such stuff..”

Damen gave Lalo seven months to find new housing. Lalo found himself going on long walks. He told himself he walked in hopes of finding Keila on the streets, who was not at her mother's house, but he deliberately made sure to be awake between 10 and 12 at night, even though he didn't know where else to go look for Keila.

Lonely approached him six nights after he caused the power outage.

you won't even apologize after hurting me? She asked him. Lalo sensed her apprehensive attitude in his body, in the way the words resonated within him. It was a subdued threnody, a gentle vibrating in his bones that didn't jar him like the time she introduced herself on the announcer.

can't you at least admit to being wrong about what I said?

Lalo walked on, eyes downcast, ignoring her voice. In his mind her pleas took the form of green neon characters, so gentle in tone that he could not see capitals in her words.

you're only hurting yourself Lalo. they're casting you aside little by little.

Lalo stopped, looked up at the starless night. He sensed her eyes there. Leave me alone, he told Lonely, shut UP!

At first there was no response Lalo could feel, then a pink, warm sensation invaded his body. He shuddered at the soulless and intimate touch; he was back in the medical complex, the first night Lonely approached him, and he shook his body angrily.

Get off me! Lalo shouted at her soundlessly, this is rape!

can you love without touching? Lonely asked. Lalo started throwing himself against the wall of an apartment building, feeling the rough brick surface against his clothes. After a minute the sensual touch left him, and Lalo was panting against the wall, looking around him.

you're not ready yet, Lonely said to him, a hint of sadness in the tones dissipating inside Lalo's body.

By the time he was scheduled to perform at the Comicazi, a community notice telling of Lalo's electromagnetic abilities had been covered in local news networks, along with repeated warnings on the announcer, to the effect such person should be banned from social establishments to avoid risk of severe damage to electronics and appliances.

Lalo confronted Mitch Tubbins, the manager, in front of the club. He was polite but fearful; despite numerous newscasts warning of Lalo's true capabilities, rumors about lightning shooting from his fingertips had reached Mitch's ears, and now he talked to Lalo in soothing tones, having chosen rumors over facts.

"I can't Lalo," Mitch said, looking up at Lalo with pleading sad gray eyes. "It's not really up to me anymore. The zoning law says you're a fire hazard."

Lalo insisted, trying to explain his situation to Mitch and growing angrier at his refusal to listen to facts, until Lalo accidentally blasted the neon display in front of the club. Mitch cowered behind his two bouncers and shouted for the police,

while Lalo ran before they got there.

He went through the streets without a particular destination, becoming aware only when he saw police. There were an extra number of officers on duty, and Lalo assumed they were looking for him.

He made it to the city limits, and found himself sitting on a rock on a plateau of Mount Rone, with a transmission tower behind him. He sat for a long time by himself, watching a bulletin on the announcer, about Lalo being wanted for willful damage of private property. The announcer exhorted people to call the police if Lalo was spotted.

Gradually he became aware of another presence enveloping him, a presence that had been there for some time.

Alright, Lalo said, you win.

why does it always have to be win or lose with you men? Lonely said in bickering tones.

Lalo shrugged. What do you want me to say then?

just that I was right, Lonely said. Lalo could feel the tartness in her voice as she said this. He shrugged again.

You were right. I can't love without touching. And you were right about them too, Lalo nodded his head toward the city lights, they're after me for what I am, what they made me.

never mind that, Lonely told him, can you love?

Why do you ask that!

i want to hear you say it.

Lalo inhaled deeply, sighed as deeply. Yes, he told her. I can love. I can love you. I want to love like you, to feel loved like you make me feel. Lalo felt a great weight lifted off him as he admitted this to himself. He already felt Lonely's ethereal embrace on him.

What do I do now? Lalo asked her. I can't go back there, and I can't touch you either.

She didn't answer right away, and yet Lalo could feel an aura of feminine contempt hang over him. It reminded him of Keila's obstinate vagueness. He felt that she wanted more humility from him.

Can you help me? Lalo asked her.

the storm, Lonely told him. Lalo stared at the particle charged air.

the solar storm silly! Lonely explained. it's tonight. that's why there's more policemen tonight. did you think they were for you? silly boy. now, do as I say and we'll be together.

Yes, Lalo sighed.

forever.

Yes, Lalo replied, and then listened. After a minute of sitting with his head cocked to one side he got up and walked toward the transmission tower. Lalo laid hands on one of the orange-painted struts and waited. The announcer gave the time as 10:40 PM.

At that time Keila was asking Damen Holmes of Lalo's whereabouts. He started to tell her how he had no choice but to send her husband packing after he left their grid of the city without power, and Keila cut him off, demanding to know where he'd gone to.

The trail led to the Comicazi, where Mitch didn't know where he'd gone to, but told her in exaggerated detail about Lalo's attack on his club. By then it was night, and extra policemen were patrolling the streets for the expected riots the power outages the extreme-classified solar storm would bring.

Keila walked away from Mitch while he was in the middle of telling her about the fistfight he got into with Lalo. The time was 10:50 PM.

At 10:57 PM eastern standard time the solar storm hit the surface of the planet, creating a major disruption in the earth's magnetic field. Power was lost from Toronto down to Newark, from western Massachusetts to western Illinois, temporarily disabling telecommunication services for 52 million customers in the northeast, and unleashing a series of organized looting riots in major cities from New York to Chicago.

In the midst of the police barricades, chemical bullets, directional sound crowd controllers, dragnets, arrests and brutality, Keila remembered the place where Lalo first proposed marriage to her, and she weaved her way out of the violence to the foot of Mount Rone. From the plateau the city was a swirling chaos of scattered smoke columns, diffuse lights and continuous updates on the announcer.

Keila reached the flat white rock where Lalo had sat earlier. She looked around her, and on impulse walked to the base of the tower. Ever since she saw the news announcement about Lalo she had pushed the thought of suicide out of her mind, until she could no longer avoid it. She went to the tower with hesitant tiny steps, but found nothing that hinted of a person jumping from a high place.

All she found after going once around the base was a set of hair-fine wires attached a small chip with Lalo's name on it.

Meanwhile, at stratospheric level, entwined in the company of Lonely, with unblinking eyes that could see across the curvature of the earth, Lalo watched the violence unfold, and was glad he could not call himself human anymore.