

## MAKE-UP

I see her sitting on a stool in front of the cosmetic counter. She has a white towel draped around her neck; her lank brown hair is pulled back from her face. The clerk, a thin dark-haired girl whose blood red lipstick dominates her pale face, is applying foundation to the woman's face and neck. The woman's eyes are weary and I know she is sorry she has agreed to the makeover. Get up and leave. I send a telepathic message to her. She glances at me, but I know she will not leave. She has found an identity in stoically enduring life's humiliations. I turn my head and take the escalator to home furnishings to buy a wedding gift for a former student—towels, I think.

I pick out an off white; the label says sea foam. Two bath, two hand, two washcloths. I like the sunflower yellow, but sea foam is safer. They are on sale and will add up to \$19.45 plus tax. I take them to the counter. Two sales clerks are talking. The one called Nancy asks if she can help. She has four red apples attached to her name card to indicate that she is good at being a sales clerk. She has frizzy gray hair and wears her glasses on a cord around her neck. I send her a message: Put your glasses on and keep them on. I know she receives the message because she puts them on. Her magnified blue eyes stare myopically at me. Her husband is an alcoholic and her teenage daughter is pregnant. Work is her escape.

The towels ring up at their regular price. She doesn't notice and hands me the sales slip to sign. I explain the error to her. Why didn't she say something, I wonder. She shakes her head in disgust; her gray curls bob up and down. "I wasn't watching," I reply. I check my anger because of her difficult home situation. She punches in the sale price, repeating the numbers loudly for my benefit. "I'd like a box, please." She compresses her lips into a straight line and we stand looking at one another for a moment. Finally she turns and goes into a curtained-off section behind the bath accessories.

Several messages are accumulating in my mind. I am only halfhearted in my attempt to contain them. My head has begun to hurt and as she returns with a box that will obviously be too small, I fling them toward her: stupid bitch, acatharsy; green carrion. The last two will confuse her. She is unacquainted with Shakespeare. I am surprised she remains so calm. She puts the box in the large green sack containing the towels and turns away. I take the bag without comment and go to the escalator.

As I pass by the cosmetic counter, I see the woman still sitting resignedly on the stool. A mask of makeup has obliterated her face. I know it is her though because of her hair. I know that she will go to the mall restroom and wash it all off. I consider a didactic warning: You cannot hide behind makeup. Changing your lipstick will not change your life. But I resist—too obvious. I prefer subtlety in these cases.

I wait for her in the restroom. She ignores me and begins to rub at her cheeks with a tissue. She bends over the sink and splashes water on her face. The water has turned pinkish

orange. I stare at her reflection in the mirror, but she has wiped away her face. She pats the blank oval dry with a paper towel and leaves. I notice she has left her package behind. I pick up the green bag and leave the restroom. I look for her in the mall, but she has disappeared.

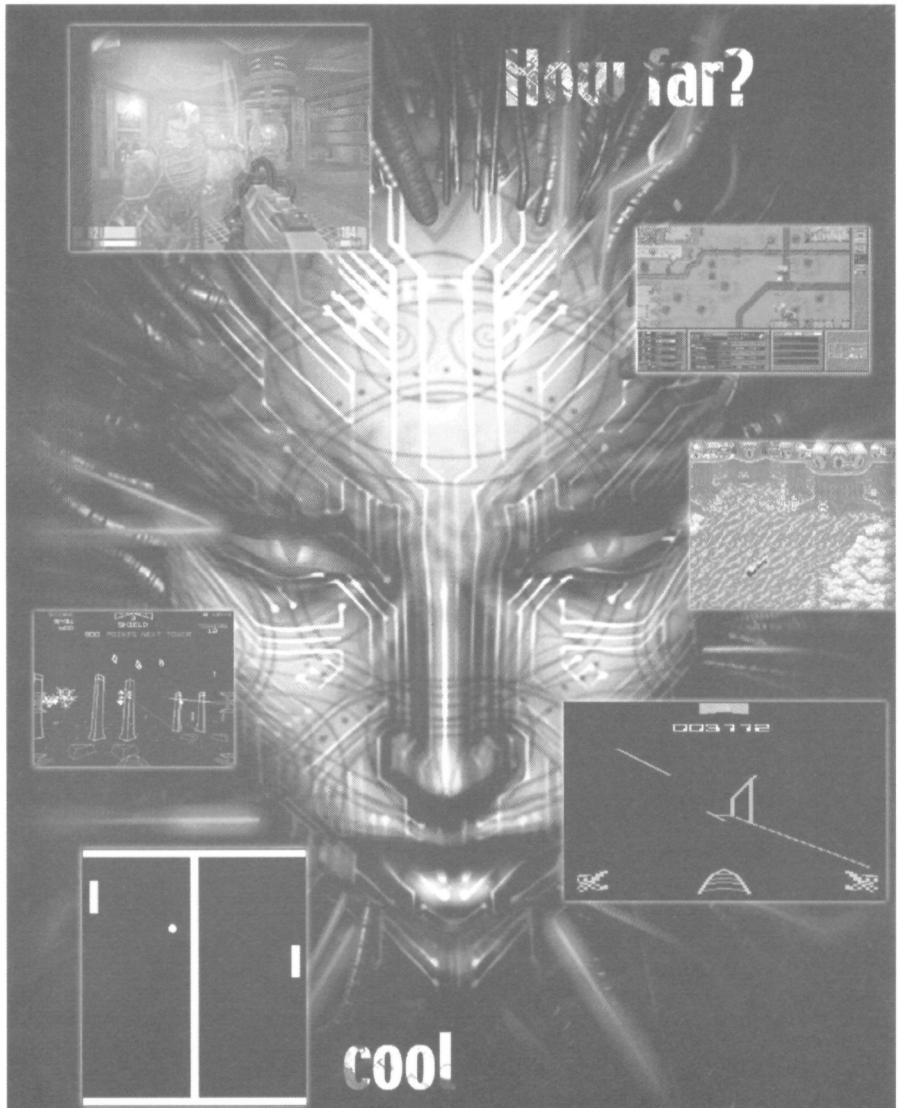


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