



## MULTI MEDEA

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I might be mistaken. I might be the one who has it all wrong. Maybe that's why I did what I've just done. Some people pretend that things are more complicated than they really are. That way, they can defer decisions on anything important; believe whatever suits them, because how can one little human be expected to resolve huge things they don't even understand? These people also like to minimise their risk of exposure to the delusions that others need for their lives. After a while, they conveniently stop seeing anything that conflicts with the rules and assumptions supporting the world they've constructed. What's on the other side of the wall isn't there any longer. From where I'm sitting, things seem like more of a mess. I see it all, including the stuff that doesn't suit me or make my life easier.

The depressing little place where I live is like the junk thrown out by a real town. The only things keeping the buildings here from falling over are luck and each other. These are hardly buildings, more like collapsings. It's not a suburb, unless you'll allow a suburb to be a

jumble of sagging tenements, a mile and a half from the new American sheds.

This place isn't even a ghetto, because we could leave if we wanted to. Nobody put us here. Nobody has a gun to our heads. In theory, we could get out of here whenever we chose to. On the townward side of this not-ghetto is a McDonald's. Exhausted people stagger and stumble there at the end of a shift, dropping their own bodies. Something about using the consoles seems to deplete a person as much as it would to physically push a mop all day.

When the Americans arrived, they discovered that for about \$30 you could get a whore to live with you for a week. As a bonus, these whores would sometimes do the housekeeping as well. Soon the Americans wouldn't rent whores unless they were willing to do the cooking and cleaning. This rapidly evolved into a situation where the Americans expected to screw all the women who cleaned their houses, even if they were just cleaners and not prostitutes.

I haven't seen an American for years, but they still touch us all in a thousand ways. Installed here, their way of doing things a tenacious weed. Most of the whores are too poorly educated and technophobic to get jobs at the new centres, so they're reduced to selling themselves to men from town, for a few cents. The husbands of the whores are pleased, though, because now the whores have more time to do the cooking and cleaning at home.

I suppose I should tell you that I am a housekeeper. I'm not a whore. I still reflexively think I'm a nurse, because all the wasted years I spent learning to be one are stored in my brain and won't wash out. This housekeeping is just an in-between thing. I'll go back to being a nurse soon. Do you remember what I was saying about the ways people delude themselves?

I explain needlessly, I amplify and nobody listens. That's my defence. I have a chip on my shoulder. I don't know what that means, exactly, but the chip seems to be there anyway. It's one of those useful phrases I picked up from the English language. I'm a housekeeper, but not here. The house I keep isn't even on the same continent as me. My husband moved a schoolgirl into our home, but he never bothered to divorce me, so I'm alone but still married. He never corrects the assumption that the teenager with her little tops and her little boobs on show is our daughter. If anyone bothered to think for a moment, they'd realise it's physically and chronologically impossible for me to be the mother of a fifteen year old. It couldn't even happen here in the Third World, even if a man twice my age impregnated me when I was at school. But I'll say it again; most people don't think very much. Not even for a moment. It's too difficult. Most of the people I know who got themselves into serious trouble did it by thinking when they shouldn't have done. Me included.

I sell myself, but I am not a prostitute and never have been. Even when I was studying to be a nurse, I never screwed men for money.

Finding myself still transfixed outside the McDonald's franchise, I make my body turn and walk away from what I don't want to see. A few blocks away I can see the tenement where I mostly sleep (to avoid looking at the building too much). When I reach the free trade zone's border I numbly show my ID, offer my eye and hand and voice and DNA to the machines.

In the American shed, I put on my other body, half a world away.

As I robot in, my retinas are assaulted by a twirling spew of multicoloured floral patterns while the interface boots up. Then I'm looking out of a window at night-time lawns. Beyond the trees, there

are two small illuminated windows— like cat’s eyes— at the top and back of a wing belonging to another friendless house. I’ve never been there. The documentation says it’s beyond the range of my base station. I keep meaning to test this. Everyone assumes that the company lies to us constantly, unless telling the truth is unavoidable. Surely that other house has a base station, too?

The first few seconds are always a little disconcerting, like remembering a confusing dream as you’re waking up from it. Your optic nerves rebel. It feels like you have eyes pointing in four different directions simultaneously. Then you mostly forget that this isn’t really your body. You remember that you’re the killer application for robots. The company decided that artificial intelligence is a waste of time and money when most of your customers are naturally stupid. Our Third (I’m sorry, Developing) world brains control the robots here, the maids, the cleaners, the security. All the nannies and au pairs have gone back to being real, mostly because of what those Croatian hackers did. Some people noticed that the children nannied by robot-ins were growing up even weirder than rich kids usually do.

Out by the pool, wind chimes tinkle ominously against each other. I hate that kind of junk. The sound of them reminds me of something. I’m not sure what, but I don’t like it. I accidentally smashed them once. The next day somebody had fixed the damn things again. Probably another robot-in. The head gardener, perhaps, although the head gardener mows the lawn so badly I’ve decided that the machine is probably just an automatic lawnmower and not a human being at all. Or it could be a person who doesn’t know how to mow grass because they come from a place so drought-stricken they’ve never seen a real lawn. Nearby, Agrippina has heard my arrival. She starts bleating gently, like a goat winged by a passing car

and left to suffer.

I go to her. I find the queen of the anorexic bitches curled on the antique Modernist furniture, with one skeletal arm flung out melodramatically.

‘Injection time,’ she’s muttering, ‘Injection time... injection time...’

I hand her what she wants. It’s lying on the rug a few centimetres away from her talons. I don’t bother checking the syringe’s contents. I half hope that it’s bleach or something, part of her husband’s latest murder plot. I hope that she’ll overdose. That it’s full of air and she’ll kill herself that way. I’d like her to die like they used to at the hospital where I worked: covered with flies, in a corridor crusted with thirty years of peeling paint and choked by the smell of shit and death. That would suit Agrippina very well.

However, if she did an OD here, that would also be good.

As she clumsily shoots up, I notice that she has one of her wrists handcuffed to the bentwood arm of the chair. Claude must be around here somewhere and in need of some peace.

Do you know of a single person who had problems, and solved them by getting addicted to drugs or becoming an alcoholic? One person, even? Did you ever hear of someone who had something go wrong in their lives that they corrected by slowly annihilating the best parts of their own brains?

No, I didn’t think so.

I’ve got no sympathy left for these people, but finding Agrippina this way— alone in her hospital-like living room, handcuffed to her own overpriced and probably uncomfortable furniture, begging pathetically for prescription drugs from a plastic robot— confirms a theory I’ve been developing since I started working here. Most people

in the modern, capitalist world have the same limited range of significant experiences as the kind of people who used to live in huts and who were dismissed as savages. Her life's certainly no less circumscribed than mine is. It might be better, in most ways that mean anything. Easier, without doubt. But fundamentally the same.

If all of us live another fifty years, Agrippina Hewlett-Packard, the savage and me will probably have had one person we're in love with but who doesn't love us; somebody loved us and found their love unrequited. If we're extremely lucky, we might be able to stay with someone for a few years before it all goes wrong, and file the best parts under 'Love'. Tick that one off the action list: Yes, I have been In Love. Next.

In their lifetimes, this hypothetical grass-skirt wearing, spear-chucking, head-shrinking primitive, the lady of the house and her robot servant will all three of them find that only a few friends are really worthy of the description. A few events— probably one or two in their childhood and one or two more in puberty— will determine most of what they are and how they see the world. Everything else just confirms their prejudices. There's so much planet. We're so small. There's so little time. Everything else we think we know about the world can hardly be much more than a fantasy, an extrapolation, a work of imagination. There aren't any savages anymore, of course. I think you'll find that the last savage clocked onto the production line a few years ago to make the shirt you're wearing.

I leave Housewife of the Year handcuffed downstairs while she doses away her dysfunction. Her son, Xerox, is in his cot. He's far too old to be sleeping in a cot, but too young to be embarrassed about being named after a defunct electronics corporation. It makes me cringe every time I have to say his name, so I'm glad that he's asleep.

Of course he is. It's the middle of the night here.

The nanny is human, foreign, and physically present in the daytime, although she sleeps in separate quarters at night. I call it her kennel, although I'm sure she's glad of any respite from the Hewlett-Packards; who could begrudge her that? I suspect she's drunk all day, which is why she so rarely stirs at night.

She and the day housekeeper seem to get on quite well. Until this morning, a woman called Juanita-ita played housekeeper during Agrippina's day (my night). I don't recall ever hearing Juanita-ita complain about working for the Hewlett-Packards, although we never speak much. I half wish that I could get to the place that Juanita-ita seemed to reach: beyond resentment, beyond oppressed, beyond sad. Just so tired and crushed that she really has become a robot, inside and out. Does saying a thing like that make me as bad as Agrippina? I don't know.

Xerox kicks in his dreams. Agrippina enjoys keeping Xerox caged like a pet, with the bars of his cradle locked up and the baby monitor hovering above. Some part of her is afraid of justice. That Xerox could be snatched from them, just as the little boy was confiscated from his biological parents when they were deemed incapable of managing an adoptable child. A healthy and certified gene-clean infant is obviously a valuable commodity. Realistically, I doubt that Agrippina will ever need to fear justice, unless it's of the accidental, storybook kind.

I find Claude in the laundry room, bent over the washing machine, his back arched quizzically as he studies the control panel's icons. He's wearing a set of non-specifically ethnic pyjamas. I'm more annoyed than I should be by his intrusion into what I think of as my domain. There's a momentary twitch of my fingers on the controllers here, as I imagine kicking Claude up the arse as hard as I can, there.

While he's stunned, I'd like to hit him squarely in his rubbery face with the iron. The robot's designers obviously anticipated resentment and violence. Domestic robot bodies are too weak and clumsy to hurt anyone seriously. I once daydreamed of finding a gun somewhere in the house. I'd like to know if I could pull the trigger; I often wonder if the makers thought of that.

Claude turns, and sees me.

'Ah!' he says, thrusting his balled-up clothes into my robot arms.

Men with big hands make me wince. They remind me of my husband. Claude strides away without saying anything else. Because he has so much money, he likes to imagine that he works hard for it and that he must be commensurately short of time. He doesn't have time for conversations with robots. Instead of putting his laundry into the washing machine, I lay out what he's handed me: a pair of sweat trousers and a jersey top with a hood. Claude wears these to run on the machine in his study. If he's just been in his study running, this late at night, it should be safe to go up there without him disturbing me. I quickly iron the clothes, fold them, and put them back with his clean washing. He's never realised how often I do this.

The running machine is placed so that Claude can pretend he is exercising while he looks at his favourite painting. Of course, the first thing I noticed is the painted woman's resemblance to me. My real face, not the calculated polycarbonate blankness of my interface with the Hewlett-Packards. They have no way of knowing what I look like. They probably wouldn't care, even if they knew that this brown-skinned painted woman could be my sister. Our clients don't even seem aware that two different people control their housekeeper, in shifts. I doubt Claude would want a picture of me or of Juanita-ita hanging on his wall.

In the painting, there are four words written— or rather, brushed— above the woman's head: *Vahine no te tiare*. These words must come from some inconsequential or extinct language, because the online translator makes no attempt to interpret them for me.

The woman's holding an orange flower of indeterminate species; more of them float illogically around her. She looks relaxed but also kind of pissed off, perhaps because of the purple dress she's wearing. It's the look of someone wearing their best clothes even though her best clothes are the ones she hates most and wears least. In the top right-hand corner, there's something else, the name of the painter: P. Gauguin. Maybe the flowers are stuck to the wall or painted on, or it's possible they aren't there in any way that makes rational sense at all. P. put them there to remind us that this is only paint on canvas, and not a real person.

By the time I came up here for a furtive second look at Claude's painting, I knew that the artist was famous and dead. He frequently acted like a bastard, he abandoned his wife and children, went to the South Pacific and took up with gullible local girls because they were thrillingly primitive and barely spoke a word of French. The painting is over a hundred years old. It would probably be worth millions of dollars if it ever went to auction, because it is real and the only one of its kind. A copy isn't the same. I don't know why.

I know it won't be up for sale any time soon, though, because it was stolen from a public art gallery in Denmark fifteen years ago. The consensus is that it was a professional theft by someone who already had a buyer lined up. Another consensus is that this kind of thing never happens, because it's what they call an urban myth. The woman and her flower are dead, Paul Gauguin is dead. For the past ten years, nobody but Claude and Agrippina has looked at this stolen picture. It

has no rightful owner, other than the whole Earth— and there's no way the whole Earth is getting it back, not if the Hewlett-Packards have anything to do with it.

Now that I grasp its monetary value and what it represents to them, I also understand why they have this anomalous picture of a Third World woman hanging in their house. They surely see, as well as I do, its (her) beauty. That isn't the point, though. To Mr and Mrs Hewlett-Packard it signifies that they can acquire anything they want and keep it: a priceless Polynesian girl with a flower, a nation, a child, a woman inside a robot.

I've always assumed that Claude's office has at least one camera, so I can't openly look at the painting for too long. I get on my robot knees to scrub the floor for hours until it's almost lethally burnished. I'm not looking at my borrowed hands working. I'm looking at the sulky brown vahine.

Later, I find the handcuffs empty. Claude has hauled Agrippina upstairs. I'm too weak to lift her. If I was strong enough to do that, I'd also probably be able to strangle her. The Hewlett-Packards will be oblivious in their separate beds, drugged to sleep by now; ready for Juanita-ita to drug them awake again in the morning. I guess nobody's told them that Juanita-ita won't be working for them ever again. I keep one eye on Xerox as I turn the hood of Claude's sweatshirt backwards and sew it into a mask with eyeholes. In the nursery, I know that the camera will be watching the sleeping child and not me. With the company's electroplastic fingers and stereoscopic eyes, I can sew almost perfectly... even though on the other side of the planet my real hands grow clumsy and clammy.

I think again of what I saw this morning through the window of

McDonald's. The bodies— perhaps ten of them— mostly lay on the floor, shot in the head. Their blood spreading out into a communal and slowly blackening slick. The yellow plastic Caution! Wet Floor! cone, the burglar alarm ringing. Wild, unaimed bullet holes in the glowing transparencies of fast food that the illiterate people point at when they order. Fat, blue, busy flies. Two of the tills with their guts hanging out. Some piece of kitchen equipment jangling rhythmically as it continued shaking milk for non-existent customers.

It looked like Juanita-ita was one of the panickers, she tried to run and they shot her in the time it took for her to turn around. She holds the brown paper bag tightly. Her Happy Meal's grease is spreading through from behind the yellow M, like the blood that's soaking through her blouse. There's a long, narrow smear of someone's blood on the other side of the glass, right in front of my face. Or is it relish?

The people who got out are worse, in some ways. They look back in through the windows, passively chewing their burgers and fries as if they're watching a television report about people from another continent, fifty years ago. Eventually two policemen arrive and stand around looking bewildered, because there's nobody waiting to bribe them.

I know I can't fix the world. Nobody can. Only— sometimes— a fraction of the world can be remedied. An injury stitched. A bullet deflected. A small imbalance put right. Despite knowing how little I can hope to accomplish, I will do my best to sew a costume fit for an American superhero. The hood I've made fits perfectly over the robot's head, with two tiny eyeholes for my lenses. Dressing my second body is difficult and funny. Yes, I'm enjoying myself. I'm excited. It's like being a little girl again and trying on grown-up clothes with the tiny,

awkward limbs of an excited child.

I'm still laughing as I retrieve the lighter that Agrippina lost two weeks ago from its hiding place. I scratch a spark and touch the small, yellow-blue flame to the bottom of the vahine no te tiare's canvas. For a second, I'm still not convinced that my robotic body will allow me to commit arson. Surely the programmers and designers foresaw things like this? Part of me is thinking: *Stop me. Can't you stop me? Please? Stop me.*

I destroy the painting in only a few minutes. The woman with the flower is impassive— bored, even— as her purple dress burns. Very soon, the gilt frame contains nothing: just flames and dark grey smoke. It's nearly as beautiful as Gauguin's woman used to be; a work of art. I let the swirling airborne scraps of burning canvas catch the wallpaper and the polished tropical hardwood floor on fire. Or I don't prevent them, which amounts to the same thing. The smoke alarms would be going off if I hadn't wrecked them all. The Hewlett-Packards still might escape, though, if they can wake up from their drug-stupor in time.

Xerox isn't afraid of robots, even masked and caped robotic superheroes. He happily points and babbles back over my shoulder at the Hewlett-Packards' burning house as I carry him away across the badly mown lawn. The windows blow out, raining hundreds of shards into the garden. Xerox claps and laughs. I wonder how far we'll get.

Sometimes things are very simple. Some people can only bear to look at what they've already seen. I see things differently.

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