

Rudy Rucker and John Shirley are powerful enough as separate entities—what would happen if you put them together? A frightening thought—and that's what happened. Rucker, who has a degree in advanced mathematics from Rutgers and is also a computer programmer, is known for his exuberant style (as well as, though not in this instance, a comic flair comparable to John Sheckley); Shirley, who is the author of more than a dozen books in sf and dark fantasy (including a recent collection, Really Really Really Really Really Weird Stories, the tales of which actually do get weirder as the book progresses) has been known for his angry, intense, straight-ahead style. What do you get when you put the two of them together? You get the following, which is fast-paced, cyberpunkish, thoughtful, weird—and wonderful.

Pockets

Rudy Rucker & John Shirley

When the woman from Endless Media called, Wendel was out on the balcony, looking across San Pablo Bay at the lights of the closed-down DeC Chemicals Plant. On an early summer evening, the lights marking out the columns of steel and the button-shaped chemical tanks took on an unreal glamour; the plant became an otherworldly palace. He'd tried to model the plant with the industrial-strength Real2Graphix program his dad had brought home from RealTek before he got fired. But Wendel still didn't know the tricks for filling a virtual scene with the world's magic and menace, and his model looked like a cartoon toy. Someday he'd get his chops and make the palace come alive. You could make a killer-ass game there if you knew how. After high school, maybe he could get into a good gaming university. He didn't want to "go" to an online university if he could hear his virtual teachers, parallel programmed or not, couldn't answer all your questions.

The phone rang just as he was wondering whether Dad could afford to pay tuition at someplace real. He waited for his dad to get the phone, and after three rings he realized with a chill that Dad had probably gone into a pocket, and he'd have to answer the phone himself.

The fake porch, created for window washers, and to create an impression of coziness, the place had always lacked, creaked under his feet as he went to climb through the window. The narrow splintery wooden walkway outside their window was on the third floor of an old waterfront motel converted to studio apartments. Their tall strip of windows, designed to show a view that was now unsavory, looked down a crumbling cliff at a mud beach, the limp waves sluggish in stretched squares of light from the buildings edging the bluff. Down on the beach some guys with flashlights were moving around, looking for the little pocket-bubbles that floated in like dead jellyfish. Thanks to the accident that had closed down the DeC Research Center, beyond the still-functioning chemicals plant, San Pablo Bay was a good place to scavenge for pocket-bubbles, which was why Wendel and his Dad had ended up living here.

To get to the phone, he had to skirt the mercurylike bubble of Dad's pocket, presently a flattened shape eight feet across and six high, rounded like a river stone. The pocket covered most of the available space on the living room floor, and he disliked having to touch it. That was that sensation when you touched them—not quite a sting, not quite an electrical shock, but even intolerable. But you didn't want to prolong the feeling.

Wendel touched the speakerphone tab. "Hello, Bell residence."

"Well, this doesn't sound like Rothman Bell." It was a woman's voice coming out of the speakerphone—humorous, ditzzy, but with a heartening undercurrent of business.

"No, ma'am. I'm his son, Wendel."

"That's right, I remember he had a son. You'd be about fourteen now?"

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen! Whoa. Time jogs on. This is Manda Solomon. I knew your dad when he worked at MetaMeta. He really made his mark there. Is he home?"

He hesitated. There was no way to answer that question honestly without having to admit that Dad was in a pocket, and pocket-slugs had a bad reputation. "No, ma'am. But. . ."

He looked toward the pocket. It was getting smaller now. If things went as usual, it would shrink to grapefruit size, then swell back up and burst—and Dad would be back. Occasionally a pocket might bounce through two or three or even a dozen shrink-and-grow cycles before releasing its inhabitant; but it never took terribly long, at least from the outside. Dad might be back before this woman hung up. She sounded like business, and that made Wendel's pulse race. It was a chance.

If he could just keep her talking. After a session in a pocket Dad wouldn't be in any shape to call anyone back, sometimes not for days— but if you caught him just coming out, and he had his phone in his hand, he might keep it together long enough, still riding the pocket's high. Wendel just hoped this wasn't going to be the one pocket that would finally kill his father.

"Can I take a message, Ms., um, . . ." With his mind running so fast, he'd forgotten her name.

"Manda Solomon. Just tell him—"

"Can I tell him where you're calling from?" He grimaced at himself in the mirror by the front door. Dumbass, don't interrupt her, you'll scare her off.

"From San Jose, I'm a project manager at Endless Media. Just show him—oh, have you got an iTV?"

"Yeah. You want me to put it on?" Good, that'd take some more time. If Dad could just keep up the payments.

He carried the phone over to the iTV screen hanging on the wall like a season 10 poster. There was a fuzzy motel-decor photo of a sunset endlessly playing in it now, the kitschy orange clouds swirling in the same tape-looping pattern. He tapped the tab on the phone that would hook it to the iTV, and faced the screen so that the camera in the corner of the frame could pick him up but only on head-shot setting so she couldn't see the pocket, too. "You want to see me?"

"Yup. Here I come."

Her picture appeared in a window in an upper corner of the screen, a pleasant-looking redhead in early middle age, hoop earrings, frank smile. She held up an e-book, touched the page turner which instantly scrolled an image of a photograph that showed a three-dimensional array of people floating in space, endless pairs of people spaced out into the nodes of a warped jungle-gym lattice, a man and a woman at each node. Wendel recognized the couple as his dad and his mother. At first it looked as if all the nodes were the same, but when you looked closer, you could see that the people at some of the more distant nodes were Mom and Dad after all. In fact some of them didn't even look like people. This must be a pocket taken inside a pocket with tunnels coming out of it. Wendel had never seen it before. "If you print out the picture, he'll know what it's all about," Manda was saying.

"Sure." Wendel saved the picture to the iTV's memory, hoping it would work. He couldn't want Manda to know their printer was broken and wouldn't be repaired anytime soon.

"Well it's been a sweet link, but I gotta go—just tell him to call. Here's the number, re"

to save? Got it? Okay, then. He'll remember me."

Wendel saw she wasn't wearing a wedding band. He got tired of taking care of Dad and Manda. He tried to think of some way to keep her on the line. "He'll be right back—he's way over there. Don't expect him . . ."

"Whoops, I really gotta jam." She reached toward her screen and then hesitated, her hand cocked as she looked at his image. "That's what it is: you look a lot like Jena, you know? Like your mom."

"I guess."

"Jena was a zippa-trip. I hated it when she disappeared."

"I don't remember her much."

"Oops, my boss is chiming hysterically at me. Bye!"

"Um—wait." He turned to glance at the dull silvery bubble, already bouncing back from its minimum size, but when he turned back, Manda Solomon was gone and it was only the screen showing sunset again. "Shit."

He went to the bubble and kicked it angrily. He couldn't feel anything but "stop," with his sneaker on. It wasn't like kicking an object, it was like something stopped you, turned you away from your own time flow. Just "stopness." It was saying "no" with the stuff of forever in it. There was no way to look inside it: Once someone crawled in through a pocket's narrow opening, it sealed up all over.

He turned away, heard something—and when he looked back the pocket was gone. Instead, his dad, stinking and retching and raggedly bearded, was crawling toward him across the carpet.

Next morning, it seemed to Wendel that his dad sucked the soup down more noisily, more sloppily, than ever before. His hands shook and he spilled soup on the blankets.

His dad was supposedly forty—but he looked fifty-five. He'd spent maybe fifteen years in the pockets—adding up to only a few weeks in outside time, ten minutes here and two hours there and so on.

Dad sat up in his bed, staring out to the bay, sloppily drinking the soup from a bowl. Wendel had to look away. Sitting at the breakfast bar that divided the kitchenette from the rest of the room, he found himself staring at the pile of dirty clothes in the corner. They needed some kind of hamper, and he could go to some Martinez garage sale and find one next to the door. But that was something Dad ought to do; Wendel sensed that if he started doing that sort of thing, parental things, his dad would give a silent gasp of relief and lean on him, more grateful; and paradoxically fall away from him, into the pockets.

"I was gone like—ten minutes world-time?" said Dad. "I don't suppose I missed anything here in this . . . this teeming hive of activity."

"Ten minutes?" said Wendel. He snorted. "You're still gone, Dad. And, yes, there was a picture for you. A woman from Endless Media. Manda Solomon. She left her number and a picture of her."

"Manda?" said Dad. "That flake? Did you tell her I was in a pocket?"

"Right," said Wendel contemptuously. "Like I told her my dad's a pocket-slug."

Dad opened his mouth like he was going to protest the disrespect— then thought better of it. He shrugged, with as much cool as he could manage. "Manda's down with pockets, Wendel. Half the guys programming virtual physics for MetaMeta were using them when I was t

Pockets are a great way to make a deadline. The MetaMeta crunch-room was like a little of chrome puffballs. Green carpeting, you wave? Manda used to walk around setting sodas pizzas down outside the pockets. We'd work in there for days, when it was minutes or outside—get a real edge on the other programmers. She was just a support tech then. We called her Fairy Princess and we crunchers were the Toads of the Short Forest, popping out loaded on the bubble-rush. Manda's gone down in the world, what I heard, in terms of who works for—"

"She's a project manager. Better than a support tech."

"Nice of her to think of me." Dad made a little grimace. "Endless Media's about one past being a virtu-porn Webble. Where's the picture she sent?"

"I saved it in the iTV," said Wendel, and pushed the buttons to show it.

Dad made a groaning sound. "Turn it off, Wendel. Put it away."

"Tell me what it is, first," said Wendel, pressing the controller buttons to zoom in on faces. It was definitely—

"Mom and me," said Dad shakily. "I took that photo the week before she died." His voice became almost inaudible. "Yeah. You can see . . . some of the images are different further down the lattice . . . because our pocket had a tunnel leading to other pockets. That happens sometimes, you know. It's not a good idea to go down the tunnels. It was the time after this that . . . Mom didn't come back." He looked at the picture for a moment; like its own pocket moment seemed to stretch out to a gray forever. Then he looked away. "Turn it off, will you. It brings me down."

Wendel stared at his mother's young face a moment longer, then turned off the image. "You never told me much about the time she didn't come back."

"I don't need to replay the experience, kid."

"Dad. I . . . look, just do it. Tell me."

Dad stared at him. Looked away. Wendel thought he was going to refuse again. But he shrugged and began, his voice weary. "It was a much bigger pocket than usual," said Dad almost inaudible. "MetaMeta . . . they'd scored a shitload of them from DeGroot, and we were merging them together so whole teams could fit in. Using fundamental space-time geometry and weirdness to meet the marketing honcho's deadlines, can you believe? I was an idiot to buy them. And this last time Jena was mad at me, and she flew away from me while we were in there. And then I couldn't tell which of the lattice-nodes was really her. Like a mirror maze in a funhouse. And meanwhile I'm all tweaked out of my mind on bubble-rush. But I had my life harness, and there was all that code-hacking to be done, and I got into it for sure, glancing at all the Jenas now and then, and they're programming, too, so I thought it was OK, but . . ." He swallowed, turning to look out the window, as if he might see her out there in the world. "When the pocket flattened back out, I was alone. The same shit was coming down everywhere all of a sudden, and then there was the Big Bubble disaster at the DeGroot plant and all the pocket-bubbles were declared government property and if you want to use them anymore you need special people, you know . . ." His voice trailed into a whisper: ". . . they act like you're a junkie."

"Yeah," said Wendel. "I know." He looked out the window for a while. It was a sunny day but the foulness in the water made the sea a dingy gray, as if it were brooding on memories. He spotted a couple of little pocket-bubbles floating in on the brackish waves. Dad had been buying them from beachcombers, merging them together till he got one big enough

crawl into again.

They'd talked about pockets in Wendel's health class at school last term. In terms of dangerous things the grown-ups wanted to warn you away from, pockets were right up there with needles, drunk driving, and doing it bareback. You could stay inside too long and come out a couple of years older than your friends. You could lose your youth inside a pocket. Cool enough, you didn't eat or breathe in any conventional way while you were inside there—parts of your metabolism went into suspension. The pocket-slugs dug this aspect of the high—for after all, weren't eating and breathing just another wearisome world-drag? There were even rock songs about pockets setting you free from "feeding the pig," as the 'slugs' used to call normal life. You didn't eat or breathe inside a pocket but even so were still getting older, often a lot faster than you realized. Some people came out, like, middle-aged.

And, of course, some people never came out at all. They died in there of old age or got killed by a bubble-psychotic pocket-slug coming through a tunnel, or—though this last one sounded like government propaganda—you might tunnel right off into some kind of alien world. If you found a pocket-bubble, you were supposed to take it straight to the police. As opposed to selling it to a 'slug, or, worse, trying to accumulate enough of them to get a pocket big enough to go into yourself. The word was that it felt really good, better than drugs or sex or booze. Sometimes Wendel wanted to try it—because then, maybe, he could understand his dad. Other times the thought terrified him.

He looked at his shaky, strung-out father, wishing he could respect him. "Do you keep doing it because you think you might find Mom in there someday?" asked Wendel, his voice plain in his own ears.

"It would sound more heroic, wouldn't it?" said Dad, rubbing his face. "That I keep doing it because I'm on a quest. Better than saying I do it for the high. The escape." He rubbed his eyes for a minute and got out of bed, a little shaky, but with a determined look on his face. "Get-it-together time, huh, Wendel? Get me a vita-patch from the bathroom, willya? I'll be there. Manda and go see her today. We need this gig. You ready to catch the light rail to San Jose?"

In person, Manda Solomon was shorter, plainer, and less well-dressed than the processed image she sent out on iTV. She was a friendly ditz, with the disillusioned look of a Valley-vet who's seen a number of her employers go down the tubes. When Dad claimed that Wendel was a master programmer and his chief assistant, Manda didn't bat an eye, she just took out an extra sheaf of nondisclosure and safety-waiver agreements for Wendel to sign.

"I've never had such a synchronistic staffing process before," she said with a breathless smile. "Easy, but weird. Two of our team were waiting in my office when I came into work one morning. Said I'd left it unlocked. Karma, I guess."

They followed her into a windowless conference room with whiteboards and projection screens. One of the screens showed Dad's old photo of him and Mom scattered over the nodes of a pocket's space-lattice. Wendel's dad glanced at it and looked away.

Manda introduced them to the other three at the table: a cute, smiling woman named Xiao-Xiao just now busy talking Chinese on her cell phone. She had Bettie Page bangs and the faddish full-eye mirror-contacts; her eyes were like pale lavender Christmas ornaments. Next was a bright-eyed sharp-nosed Sikh guy from India, named Puneet, who wore a turban. He had reassuringly normal eyes and spoke in a high voice. The third was

puffy white kid only a few years older than Wendel. His name was Barley, and he wore a stoner-rock T-shirt. He didn't smile; with his silver mirror-contacts his face was unreadable. He wore an uwy computer interface on the back of his neck. Barley asked Wendel something about programming, but Wendel couldn't even understand the question.

"Ummm . . . well, you know. I just—"

"So what's the pitch, Manda?" Dad interrupted, to get Wendel off the spot.

"Pocket-Max," said Manda. "Safe and stable. Five hundred people in there at a time, strapped into . . . I dunno, some kind of mobile pocket-seats. Make downtown San Jose a destination theme park. Harmless, ethical pleasure. We've got some senators who can pull through a loophole for us."

"Safe?" said Dad. "Harmless?"

"Manda says you've logged more time in the pockets than anyone she knows," said Xiao-Xiao. "You have some kind of . . . intuition about them? You must know some tricks for making it safe."

"Well . . . if we had the hardware that created it . . ." Dad's voice trailed off, which meant he was thinking hard, and Manda let him do it for a moment.

And then she dropped her bomb. "We do have the hardware. Show him Flatland, Barley."

Barley did something with his uwy, and something like a soap film appeared above the generic white plastic of the conference table. "This is a two-dimensional-world model," mumbled Barley. "We call it Flat-land. The nanomatrix mat for making the real pocket offsite. Flat-land's a piece of visualization software that we got as part of our license. . . . lift."

"*Offsite* would be the DeGroot Center?" said Dad, his voice rising. "You've got access?"

"Yaaar," said Barley, his fat face expressionless. He was leaning over Flatland, using his uwy link to tweak it with his blank shining eyes.

"Why was DeGroot making pockets in the first place?" asked Wendel. No one had explained the pockets to him. It was like Dad was ashamed to talk about them much.

"It was supposed to be for AI," said Puneet. "Quantum computing nanotech. The DeGroot techs were bozos. They didn't know what they had when they started up the nanomatrix—I don't even know how they invented it. There's no patents filed. It's like the thing fell out of a flying saucer." His laugh was more than a little uneasy. "There's nobody to ask because the DeGroot engineers are all dead. Sucked into the Big Bubble that popped out of their nanomatrix. I saw it on TV And then Uncle Sam closed them down."

"But—why would the nanomatrix be licensed to Endless Media?" asked Dad. "You're an entertainment company. And not a particularly reputable one, at that. Why you and not one of the big, legit players?"

"Options," said Manda with a shrug. "Market leverage. Networking synergies. And the guys don't want to touch it. Too big a downside."

Part of the setup is we can't sue DeGroot if things don't work out. No biggie for Endless Media. If the shit hits the fan, we take the bullet and go Chapter Eleven. We closed the deal with DeGroot and the feds last week. Nobody's hardly seen the DeGroot CEO since the catastrophe, but he's still around. Guy named George Gravid. He showed up for a minute at closing, popped up out of nowhere, walking down the hall. Said he'd been

up in meetings with some backer dudes— he called them Out-Monkeys. He looked like wearing shades. I think he's strung out on something. Whatever. We did our due diligence, closed the deal, and a second later Gravid was gone." She waved a dismissive hand. "Bottom line is we're fully licensed to use the DeGroot technology. Us and a half-dozen other blue-chip groups. Each of us is setting up an operation in the DeGroot Plant on San Pablo Bay. And we time-share the access to the nanomatrix. The Endless Media mission in this context is to maintain a safe and stable Big Bubble that provides a group entertainment experience beyond anything ever seen before."

"Watch how this simulation works," said Barley. "See the yellow square in the film? That's A Square. A two-dimensional Flatlander. He's sliding around, you wave. And that green five-sided figure next to him, that's his son A Pentagon. And now I push up a bubble out of space." A little spot of the Flatland film bulged up like a time-reversed water-drop. The bubble swelled up to the shape of a sphere hovering above Flatland, connected to the little world by a neck of glistening film. "Go in the pocket, Square," said Barley. "Get high."

The yellow square slid forward. He had a bright eye in one of his corners. For a minute he tumbled around the warped zone where the bubble touched his space, then found an entry point and slid up across the neck of the bubble and onto the surface of the little ball. Into the pocket.

"This is what he sees," said Barley, pointing at one of the view-screens on the wall. The screen showed an endless lattice of copies of A Square, each of them turning and blinking in unison. "Like a hall of mirrors. Now I'll make the bubble bounce. That's what makes the squares go differently inside the pockets, you know."

The sphere rose up from the film. The connecting neck stretched and grew thin, but it didn't break. The sphere bounced back toward the film and the neck got fat, the sphere bounced up and the neck got thin, over and over.

"Check this out," said Barley, changing the image on the viewscreen to show a circle repeatedly shrank and grew. "This is what Square Junior sees. The little Pentagon. He stands outside the bad old pocket, you wave? To him the pocket looks like a disk that's getting bigger and smaller. See him over there on the film? Waiting for Pa. Like little Wendel in the condensation on San Pablo Bay."

"Go to hell," said Wendel.

"Don't pick on him, Barley," put in Manda. "Wendel's part of our team."

"Whoah," said Barley. "Now Mr. Square's trip is over." The sphere bounced back and flattened back into the normal space of Flatland.

"You forgot to mention the stabilizer ring," said Dad.

"You see?" said Manda. "I told you guys we needed a physicist."

"What ring?" said Barley.

"A space bubble is inherently unstable," said Dad. "It wants to tear loose or flatten down. The whole secret of the DeGroot tech was to wrap a superquantum nanosheet around bubbles. Bubble wrap. In your Flatland model it's a circle around the neck. Make a bubble, Barley."

A new bubble bulged up, and this time Wendel noticed that there was indeed a bright line around the throat of the neck. A line with a gap in it, like the open link of a chain.

"That's the entrance," said Dad, pointing to the little gap. "The navel. Now show me how you model a tunnel."

"We're not sure about the tunnels," said Puneet. "We're expecting you can help us with this. I've cruised the Bharat University Physics Department site and found a Chandreskar-Thorne solution that looks like—can you work it for me, Xiao-Xiao?"

Xiao-Xiao leaned toward the Flatland simulation, her lavender eyes reflecting the screens. She, too, wore a modern uvvy-style computer controller. Following Puneet's instructions, Xiao-Xiao bulged a second bubble up from the plane, about a foot away from the first one. A Square slid into the first one of them and a Pentagon into the other. And now the bubbles picked up a side-to-side motion, and lumps began sticking out of them, and it just happened that two of the lumps touched and now there was a tunnel between the two bubbles.

"Look at the screens now," said Barley. "That's Square's view on the left. And Pentagon's view on the right."

Square's view showed a lattice of Squares as before, but the lattice lines were warped and flawed, and in the flawed region there was a sub-lattice of nodes showing copies of a Pentagon. And the Pentagon's view lattice included a wedge of Squares.

"That's a start," said Dad. "But, you know, these pictures of yours—they're just toys. You're talking all around the edges of what the pockets are. You're missing the essence of what they're really about. It's not that they spontaneously bulge up out of our space. It's more that they're raining down on us. From something out here." He gestured at the space around the Flatland. "There's a shape up there—with something inside it. I've picked up kind of a feel for it."

Barley and Xiao-Xiao stared silently at him, their mirrored eyes shining.

"That's why we need you, Rothman," said Manda, finally.

"That's right," said Puneet. "The problem is—when it comes to this new tech, we're behind too."

"I'll tell you what I think," Wendel said gravely. "I think you're lying to them about what we can do, Dad."

It was nearly midnight. Wendel was tired and depressed. They were sitting in the abandoned DeGroot plant's seemingly endless cafeteria, waiting for their daily time-slot to access the nanomatrix. Almost the only ones there. The rest of their so-called team hadn't been coming in. Manda and Puneet preferred the safety of San Jose while Barley and Xiao-Xiao had completely dropped out of sight. What a half-assed operation this was.

Wendel and his Dad were eating tinny-tasting stew and drinking watery coffee from vending machines along the wall opposite the defunct buffets. It was a long, overly lit room, the far end not quite visible from here, with pearly white walls and a greenish floor, asymmetric rows of round tables like lily pads on the green pond of the floor, going on and on. Endless Media shared the cafeteria with the other scavenging little companies that had licensed access to the nanomatrix. None of the reputable firms wanted to touch it.

"Don't talk about it in here, son," Dad said, listlessly stirring his coffee with a plastic spoon. "We're not alone, you wave."

"The nearest people in here are, like, an eighth of a mile away. I can't even make out faces from here."

"That's not what I mean. The other groups here, they might be spying on us with gnat-antenna stuff like that. They're all a bunch of bottom-feeders like Endless Media, you know. No

knows jack from squat, so they're all looking to copy me."

"You wish. It's good to have work, but you're going to get in deep shit, Dad. You're telling them you can stab Endless Media you're down with the tech when you're not. You're telling them you can stab a Big Bubble when you can't. You say you can keep tunnels from hooking into it—but you know how."

"Maybe I can. I have to test it some more."

"You test it every night."

"Not enough. I haven't actually gone inside it yet."

"Come on. I'm the one who has to put you back together after a bubble binge great having an income from this gig, Dad, a better place to live—but I'm not going to let vanish into that thing. Something just like it killed the whole DeGroot team five years ago."

His Dad turned Wendel a glare that startled him. It was almost feral. Chair screeched nastily on the tile, he got up abruptly and went across the room to a coffee vending machine for another latte. Dad ran his card through the slot, and then swore. He stepped back over to the table long enough to say, "Be right back, this card's used up, I've got another one in my locker."

"You're not going to sneak up to the lab without me, are you? Our time-slot starts in ten minutes, you know. At midnight."

"Son? Don't. I'm the dad, you're the kid. Okay? I'll be right back."

Wendel watched him go. *I'm the dad, you're the kid.* There were a lot of comebacks he could've made to that one.

Wendel sipped his gooey stew, then pushed it away. It was tepid, the vegetables made him think of bits of leftover food floating in dishwater. He heard a *beep*, looked toward the vending machines. The machine Dad had run his card through was beeping, flashing a red light.

Wendel walked over to it. A small screen on the machine said, DO YOU WISH TO CANCEL YOUR PURCHASE?

Which was only something it said if the card was good. Which meant that Dad had gone to the lab without him. Wendel felt a sick chill that made his fingers quiver . . . and sprinted toward the elevators.

The pocket was so swollen he could hardly get into the big testing room with it. Maybe a hundred feet in diameter, sixty feet high. Mercuric and yet lusterless. The various measuring instruments were crowded up against the walls.

"Dad?" he called tentatively. But Wendel knew Dad was gone. He could feel his absence from the world.

He edged around the outside of the Big Bubble, grimacing when he came into contact with it. Somewhere beneath the great pocket was the nanomatrix mat that produced it—or attracted it? But it wasn't like you could do anything to turn the pocket off once it was here. At least nothing that they'd figured out yet—which was one of the many obstacles preventing this thing from being a realistic public attraction. "Show may last from one to ten minutes world-time, and seem to take one hour to three months of your proper time." Even if there were a way to shut the pocket off now—what would that do to Dad?

Facing a far corner was the dimpled spot, the entrance navel. On these Big Bubbles

navel didn't always seal over. When Wendel looked into the navel, it seemed to swirl like a slow-motion whirlpool, but in two contradictory directions. Hypnotic. It could still be entered.

Wendel made up his mind: he would go after his dad. He leaned forward, pressed his fingers against the navel, thinking of A Pentagon sliding up over the warped neck that led to a sphere of extra space. His hands looked warped, as if they were underwater. They tingled, but not unpleasantly. He pushed his arms in after and then, with a last big breath of air, his hands sealed. How would it feel to stop breathing?

It was a while till Wendel came back to that question. The first feeling of being inside the pocket was one of falling—but this was just an illusion, he was floating, not falling, and he had an odd, dreamlike ability to move in whatever direction he wanted to, not that the motion seemed to mean much.

There was a dim light that came from everywhere and nowhere. Spread out around him were little mirror-Wendels, all turning their heads this way and that, gesturing and—yes—none of them breathing. It was like flying underwater and never being out of breath, like being part of a school of fish. The space was patterned with veils of color like seaweed in water. Seeing the veils pass he could tell that he was moving, and as the veils repeated themselves he could see that he was moving in a great circle. He was like A Pentagon circling around and around his bulged-up puffball of space. But where was Dad? He changed the axis of his motion, peering around for distinctions in the drifting school of mirror-shapes.

The motion felt like flying, now, with a wind whipping his hair, and he found a direction in which the space veils seemed to curve like gossamer chambers of mother-of-pearl, sketching a sort of nautilus-spiral into the distance. Looking into that distance, that twilight infinity, and feeling the volume of sheer potentiality, he felt the first real wave of bubble-rush. His fatigue evaporated in the searing light of the rush, a rippling, bone-deep pleasure that seemed generated by his flying motion into the spiral of the pocket.

"*Whuh-oaaaah . . .*," he murmured, afraid of the feeling and yet liking it. So this was how Dad came here. Or one of the reasons. There was something else, too . . . something Dad never quite articulated.

The bubble-rush was so all-consuming, so shimmeringly insistent, he felt he couldn't be anything else. It was simply too much; too much pleasure and you lost all sense of self; and then it faded, finally, no better than pain.

Wendel thought, "Stop!" and his motion responded to his will. He stopped where he was—an inertialess stop partway into the receding nautilus-spiral. The bubble-rush receded a bit, damped back down to a pleasing background glow.

"Dad!" he yelled. No response. "*Dad!*" His voice didn't echo; he couldn't tell how loud he was. There was air in here to be sucked in and expelled for speaking. But when he was yelling, he felt no need to take a breath. Like a vampire in his grave.

He tried to get some kind of grasp of the shape of this place. He thought with an ugly frisson of fear:

Maybe I'm already lost. How do I find my way back out?

Could A Pentagon slide back out the neck into the ball? Or would he have to wait for the ball to burn out its energy and flatten back into space?

There were no images of Wendel up ahead, where the patterns of the space seemed to twirl like a nautilus. It must be a tunnel. If pockets were dangerous, the tunnels were

pocket to pocket were said to be much worse. But he knew that's where Dad had gone.

He moved into the tunnel, flying at will.

The pattern haze ahead of him took on flecks of pink, human color. Someone else was out there. "Dad?"

He leaned into his flying—and stopped, about ten yards short of the man. It wasn't Dad. The man was bearded, emaciated, sallow . . . which Dad could be, by now, in the time-bent by the nature of this place. But it wasn't his dad, it was a stranger, a man with big, scared eyes and a grin that looked permanently fixed. No teeth: barren gums. The man sitting was floating in fetal position with his arms around his knees.

"Ya got any grub on yer, boy?" the man rasped. A UK accent. Or was it Australian?

"Um—" He remembered he had two-thirds of an energy bar of some kind in a pocket. Probably linty by now, but likely this 'slug wouldn't care. "You want this?"

He tossed over the energy bar and the pocket-slug's eyes flashed as he caught it, then snatched it out of the air. "Good on ya, boy!" He gnawed on the linty old bar with his calloused gums.

It occurred to Wendel that at some point he might regret giving away his only source of extra energy. But supposedly you didn't need to eat in here. Food was just fun for the mouth, or a burst of extra energy. Right now the scene made him chuckle to himself—the bubble-rush was glowing in him, made everything seem absurd, cartoonlike, and marvelous.

Between sucking sounds, the 'slug said, "My name's Threakman. Jeremy Threakman. What yer doin'."

"I don't know how I'm doing. I'm looking for my dad. Rothman Bell. He's about . . ."

"No need, I know whuh 'e looks like. Seen 'im go through 'ere . . ." Threakman looked at Wendel with his head cocked. A sly look. "Feelin' the 'igh, are ya? Sure'n you are. Stoned boy? Young fer it."

"I feel something—what is it? What causes it?"

"Why, it's a feelin' of being right there in yerself, beyond all uncertainty about where you might go. For here, yer are all that is, in yerself. And that'll get you 'igh. Or some say. Other people like me, they say it's the Out-Monkeys that do it."

"The Out—what?"

"Out-Monkeys," said Threakman. "What I call 'em. Other's call 'em Dream Beetles, 'cause the 'slug in 'ere used ter call 'em Turtles—said 'e saw a Turtle thing with a head like a screw cap on a bottle without the cap and booze pouring out, but 'e was a hardcore alkie. Others they say they're more like lizards or Chinese dragons. Dragons, beetles, monkeys, all hairy around the edges, all curlin' out at yer—it's a living hole in space, mate, and you push the picture you want out. Me and the smartuns calls 'em Out-Monkeys 'cause they're from outside our world."

"You mean—from another planet?"

"No, mate, from the bigger universe that *this* one is kinder *inside*. They got more dimensions than we do. They're using DeGroot and the nanomatrix—they give all the energy to us to pull us in, mate. The Out-Monkeys are drizzlin' pockets down onto us, little paradise where yer don't 'ave to breathe nor eat an' yer can fly an' there's an energy that stim-yer- that part of yer brain, don't ya see. The Out-Monkeys want us all stony in here. Part of their game, innit? Come on, show yer somethin'. The Alef. Mayhap yer'll see yer da."

In a single spasmodic motion Threakman was up, flying off in some odd new direction.

through the silvery scarves of the enclosing spaces— leaving a rank scent in the air behind. Wendel whipped along after him, remembering not to breathe. Soon, if it could be thought of as soon, they came to a nexus where the images around them thickened up into an incalculable diversity. It was like being at the heart of a city in a surveillance zone with a million monitors, but the images weren't electronic, they were real, and endlessly repeated.

"The Alef has tunnels to all the pockets," said Threakman. "Precious few of us know about it."

In some directions, he saw pockets with people writhing together— he realized, with embarrassment, that they were copulating. But was that really sex? He made himself look away. In another pocket people were racing around one another in a blur like the electro-cyclists in the Cage of Death he'd seen at a carnival. Off down the axis of another tunnel, people clawed at one another, in a thronging melange of combat; you couldn't tell one from another, so slick was the blood. But the greatest number of the pockets held solitary 'slugs, hanging there in self-absorbed pleasure, surrounded by the endless mirror-images of themselves. And one of these addicts was Dad, floating quite nearby.

"For 'im, mate," said Threakman as Wendel flew off toward his father.

Not quite sure of his aim, he hit Dad with a thud—and Dad screamed, thrashing back at him. Stopping himself in space to glare shame and resentment at Wendel—like a kid caught masturbating.

"What are you *doing*?" demanded Wendel. "You call this research?"

"Okay, you really want to know?" snapped his father. "I'm looking for Mom."

Wendel peered at his father; his Dad's face, here, seemed more like the possibility of a possible Dad facial expression, crystallized. It was difficult to tell whether he meant it might be bullshit. What was the saying? *How do you know an addict is lying? When his hands are moving!*

But the possibility of seeing Mom made Wendel's heart thud. "You think she's still in here? Seriously, Dad?"

"I think the Out-Monkeys got her. That's what happens, you know. Some of the pockets open up—not *up* exactly, but *ana*—"

"To the shape above Flatland," said Wendel.

"Right," said Dad. "We're in their Flatland, relatively speaking. And I want to get up there and find her."

"But you're just floating around in here. You're on the goddamn nod, Dad. You're not looking at all."

"Oh, yes, I am. I'm looking, goddammit. This happens to be just the right spot to stare down through the Alef and up along the Out-Monkeys' tunnel. Not their tunnel, exactly. The spot where they usually appear. Where their hull touches us. I'm waiting for them to show up."

"The Devil in his motorboat," said Wendel with a giggle. The bubble-rush was creeping back up on him. Dad laughed, too. They were thinking of the old joke about the guys in the standing neck deep in liquid shit and drinking coffee, and one of them says, "Wal, this ain't bad," and the other one says, "Yeah, but wait till—"

"Here it comes," said Dad, and it wasn't funny anymore, for the space up ahead of them had just opened up like a blooming squash-flower, becoming incalculably larger, all

of perspective broken, and an all but endless vista spreading out, a giant space filled moving shapes that darted and wheeled like migrating flocks of birds. It was hard to straight, for the high of the bubble-space had just gotten much stronger.

"The mothership," said Threakman, who'd drifted down to join them. "Yaaar. you feel the rush off it? Ahr, but it's good. Hello to yer, there, Da . . ." He gave a deep, low chuckle. Everything was glistening and wonderful, as perfect as the first instant of Creation, and, as with that moment, chaos waited on the event horizon: chaos and terror.

"Those shapes are the Out-Monkeys?" asked Wendel, his voice sounding high and slow in his ears. "They look like little people."

"Those little things *are* people," said Dad. "They're the pets."

"Livin' decals on the mothership's 'ull," said Threakman. "Live decorations for the Out-Monkeys. An ant farm for their window box. Ah, yer'll know it when you really see the Out-Monkey, Wendel. When 'e reaches out through the hull . . ."

And then the space around them quivered like gelatin, and the cloud of moving people ahead spiraled in around a shaky, black, living hole in space, a growing thing with fractal fringes, a three-dimensional Mandelbrot formation that, to Wendel, looked like a dancing star-edged monkey made up of other monkeys, like the old Barrel of Monkeys toy he'd played with all the little monkeys hooked together to make bigger monkeys that hooked together to make a gigantic monkey, coming on and on: A cross section of a higher-dimensional animal partly shaped by the Rorschach filter of human perception.

Wendel thought: Out-Monkey? And the thing echoed psychically back at him—*Out-Monkey*—with the alien thought coming at him like a voice in his head, mocking, drawling, sarcastic and infinitely hip.

The Out-Monkey swelled, huge but with no real size to it in any human sense, and the fabric of space rippled with its motions—the Devil's motorboat indeed—and Wendel felt his whole body flexing and wobbling like an image in a funhouse mirror. Beneath the space wavered a sinister undertow began tugging at him. Wendel felt he would burst with the disorientation of it all.

"Dad—we've gotta go! Let's get back to the world! Tell, him, Jeremy!"

"No worries yet," said Threakman grinning and flaring his nostrils as if to inhale the vast all-pervading rush. "Steady as she goes, mate. Your dad and me, we've 'ad some practice with the Out-Monkeys. We can 'ang 'ere a bit longer."

"Look at the faces, Wendel!" cried Dad. "Look for Jena!"

Around the Out-Monkey orbited the people imprisoned on its vast bubble. They seemed to rotate around the living hole in space, caught up in the fractals that crawled around its edges, faces that were both ecstatic and miserable; zoned-out and hysterical.

"There goes George Gravid," said Dad, pointing. "The original guy from DeGroot." Wendel stared, spotting a businessman in a black suit. And there, not too far from him were—Barney and Xiao-Xiao?

"Come on, come on, come on," Dad was chanting, and then he gave a wild laugh. "There she is! It's Jena!" His laughter was cracked and frantic. "It's Mom, Wendel! I know I could find her!"

Wendel looked—and thought he saw her. Looking hard at her had a telescopic effect, concentration itself was the optical instrument, and his vision zoomed in on her face—it

his mom, though her eyes were blotted with silver, like the faddish contacts people wore in the World. All those rotating around the Out-Monkey had silvered eyes, mirror-eyes endlessly looking into themselves.

Torn, Wendel hesitated—and then the fractal leviathan swept closer—he felt something like its shadow fall over him, though there was no one light source here to throw a shadow. It was as if the greater dimensional inclusiveness of its being overshadowed the limited-dimensional beings here . . . and you could feel its "shadow" in your soul. . . .

"Dad!" Wendel shouted in panic, and his father yelled something back, but he couldn't make it out—there was a torrent of white-noise crackle upwelling all around him in the "shadow" of the Out-Monkey. "*Dad! We have to go!*" shrieked Wendel.

And then Dad plunged forward, arrowing in toward Mom, and Wendel felt himself on the point of a wild, uncontrolled tumble.

"Ol'roit, mate," said Threakman, grabbing Wendel's arm and pulling him up short. "Keep your head now. Ungodly strong rush, innit? It's 'ard not to go all the way in. But remember—if you really want, yer *can* 'old back from its pullin' field. Let's ease in, nice and quiet-like, and snag your da."

Wendel and Threakman inched forward—Wendel feeling the pull of the Out-Monkey as strong as gravity. Yet, just as Threakman said, you didn't have to let it take you, didn't have to let it pull you down into that swarming blackness of the Out-Monkey's fractal membrane. Jeremy Threakman's grip on his arm was solid as the granite spine of the planet Earth. Wretched, stinking Jeremy Threakman knew his way around the Out-Monkeys. . . .

Wendel stared in at Mom and Dad: they were swirling around one another, orbiting a mutual center of emptiness, just as they and the others orbited the greater center of emptiness within the higher-dimensional being. It reminded Wendel of a particular carnival ride, where people whirled in place on a metal arm and their whirling cars were whirled around a central axis.

"Dad!"

Dad looked at him—if it could be called looking. In the thrall of the Out-Monkey it was more like he was going through the motions of turning his attention to Wendel, and that attention was represented by the image of an attentive paternal face. "Wendel, I don't think I can get out. It's snagging my . . ." His voice was lost in a surging crackle, a wave of static. Then: "purple, thinking purple . . ." Crackle. ". . . your mom! It wants us!"

Wendel's arm ached where Threakman clutched him. "We gotter go soon, mate!" said the scarred pocket-slug.

Mom turned her attention toward Wendel, too, now—she was reaching for him, weeping and laughing at once. He wasn't sure if it was psychic or vocal, but he heard her say, "We're pets, Wendel!" Static. "Waterstriders penned in a corner of the pond." His mother's face was lit with unholy bliss. "Live bumper stickers." A sick peal of laughter.

There was another ripple in the space around them, and all of a sudden Mom and Dad were only a few feet away. Close enough to touch. Wendel reached out to them.

"Come on, Mom! Take my hand! Jeremy and I—we *can* pull you out! You can leave if you want to!"

How Wendel knew this, he wasn't sure. But he knew it was true. He could feel it—could feel the relative energy loci, the possibility of pulling free, if you tried.

"We can go home, Dad! You and me and Mom!"

"Can't!" came his Dad's voice from a squirming gargoyle of his father with a fractal face, weeping and laughing.

"Dad don't *lie* to me! You can do it! Don't lie! You can come! . . ."

His arm ached so—but he waited for the answer.

Wordlessly, his father emanated regret. Remorse. Shame. "Yes," he admitted finally. "But I choose this. Mom and I . . . we want to stay here. Part of the gargoyle. Out-Monkey. The eternal fractals." Static. "... can't help it. Go away, Wendel!"

"Have a life, Wendel!" Mom said. Several versions of her face said it, several different ways. "Don't come back. The nanomatrix—you can melt it. Acid!" Huge burst of static. "Fucking up now. It heard me!"

He felt it, too: the chilling black-light search-beam of the Out-Monkey's attention, spotlighting him like an escaped prisoner just outside the wall. . .

"No, Mom! Come back! Mom—"

Mom and Dad swirled away from him, their faces breaking up into laughing, jabbering fractals. The white noise grew intolerably loud.

"Gotta leave!" screamed Threakman in his ear. "Jump!"

With an impulse that was as much resentment of running away in fury as it was a conscious effort, he leapt with Threakman away from the hardening grip of the Out-Monkey and felt himself spinning out through the dimensions and down the tunnels, he and Threakman a whirling blur, one almost blending with the other . . . he thought he caught a glimpse of Threakman's memories, bleeding over in the strange ambient fields of the place from his companion's mind: a father with a leather strap, a woman giving him his first blow job in the backroom of a Sydney bar, his first paycheck, being mugged in London, a stout woman abandoning him . . . All this time Threakman was steering him through the bent spaces, helping him find his way back.

And then their minds were discrete again, and they were flying through a vortex effaced by a pearly-gray glimmer, through a symmetrical lattice of copies of themselves, back out into the Big Bubble space he'd first entered. And just about then the bubble flattened down into no space—and burst. He was back in the World.

Wendel knelt in the huge lab room, sobs of fury bubbling out of him, beside the floor mat of the little nanomatrix, slapping his palm flat on the floor, again and again, in his frustration and hurt. Especially, hurt. His dad and mom had chosen *that* over him. They hadn't really been inescapably caught—*it was a choice*. They'd chosen their master, the Out-Monkey; they'd chosen to enter into a spinning closed system of onanistic ecstasy; sequestered their hearts in another world in the pursuit of pleasure and escape. They'd left him alone.

"Fuck *you!*" he screamed, pounding his fist on the nanomatrix. The magical bit of high-tech was a fuzzy gray rectangle, for all the world like a cheap plastic doormat. That was the lab was, really. An empty room, some instruments, and a scrap of magic carpet on the floor.

"Roit," said Threakman hoarsely, slumping down wearily next to him. "My old man, 'e left the same way. But for 'im it was the bottle. The Out-Monkeys, they use the 'igh to pull their people in. Something sweet 'n' sticky—like the bait for a roach motel. And, God 'elp me, I'm hooked. I won't make it back out next time. I need to . . . something else. Bloody hell—anything else."

"Mom and Dad coulda left! They weren't stuck at all!"

"Yeah. I reckon." Threakman was tired, shaky. Pale. "Lor' I feel bad, mate. I miss that like it was my only love. Whuh now?"

Wendel stared down at the nanomatrix. Tiny bubbles glinted in the hairs that covered endlessly oozing out from it. It was like a welcome mat that someone had sprinkled with bits of mercury. The little pockets winked up at him, as if to say, "*Wanna get high?*"

"The chemical factory," said Wendel. "Right next door. I know where there's a tank of nitric acid." He pulled at a corner of the nanomatrix. It was glued to the floor. With Threakman working at his side, he was able to peel it free. He rolled up the grimy mat and tucked it under his arm, tiny bubbles scattering like dust.

The clock on the wall outside the lab said 12:03. All that crazy shit in the Big Bubble had lasted about a minute of real time. The next team wasn't scheduled till 2:00 A.M. The labs were empty.

Threakman shambled along at Wendel's side as Wendel led them out of the research building and across a filth-choked field to the chemical plant, staying in the shadows on the left side. Wendel knew the plant well from all the hours he'd spent looking at it and thinking about modeling it. The guards wouldn't see them if they cut in over here. They skirted the high, silver cylinder of a cracking tower, alive with pipes, and climbed some mesh-metal stairs that led to a broad catwalk, ten feet across.

"The acid tank's that way," whispered Wendel. "I've seen the train cars filling it up." The rolled up nanomatrix twitched under his arm, as if trying to unroll itself.

"This'll be the 'ard bit," said Threakman, uneasily. "The Out-Monkeys can see onto us, I'll warrant."

Wendel tightened his grip on the nanomatrix, holding it tight in both hands. It pulsed and shifted, but for the moment, nothing more. They marched forward along the catwalk, their feet making soft clanging noises in the night.

"That great thumpin' yellow one with the writin' on it?" said Threakman, spotting the large metal tank that held acid. Practically every square foot of the tank was stenciled with safety warnings. "Deadly deadly *deadly*," added Threakman with a chuckle. He ran ahead of Wendel to get a closer look, leaning eagerly forward off the edge of the catwalk. "Just a cuppa tea. Wait till I undog this 'atch. Let's get rid of the mat before I change my mind."

The nanomatrix was definitely alive, twisting in Wendel's hands like a huge, frantic fish. He stopped walking, concentrating on getting control of the thing, coiling it up tighter than before. "Hurry, Jeremy," he called. "Get the tank open, and I'll come throw this fucker in."

But now there was a subtle shudder of space, and Wendel heard a voice. "Not so fast, my friends."

A businessman emerged out of thin air, first his legs, then his body, and then his head—he were being pasted down onto space. He stood there in his black, tailored suit, positioned midway on the catwalk between Wendel and Threakman.

"George Gravid," said the businessman. His eyes were dark black mirrors and his suit, on closer inspection, was filthy and rumpled, as if he'd been wearing it for months or years. "The nanomatrix is DeGroot property, Wendel. Not that I really give a shit. This tangle about played out. But I'm supposed to talk to you."

There was another shudder and a whispering of air, and now Barley and Xiao-Xiao were

Gravid's side, Barley sneering, and Xiao-Xiao's little face cold and hard. The plant sparkled on the three's reflective eyes, black and silver and lavender. Wendel took a back.

"Run around 'em, Wendel," called Threakman. "I got the 'atch off. Dodge through!"

Wendel was fast and small. He had a chance, though the bucking of the nanomatrix continuously distracting him. He faked to the left, ran to the right, then cut back to the left again.

Gravid, Barley, and Xiao-Xiao underwent a jerky stuttering motion— an instantaneous series of jumps—and ended up right in front of him. Barley gave Wendel a contemptuous slap on the cheek.

"The Higher One picks us up and puts us down," said Xiao-Xiao. "You can't get past. You have to listen."

"You're being moved around by an Out-Monkey?" said Wendel.

"That's a lame-ass term," said Barley. "They're *Higher Ones*. Why did you leave?"

"You're its pets," Wendel said, stomach lurching in revulsion. "Toys." The fumes from the nitric acid tank were sharp in the air.

"We're free agents," said Gravid. "But it's better in there than out here."

"The mothership's gonna leave soon," said Barley. "And we're goin' with it. Riding on the hull. Us and your parents. Don't be a dirt-world loser, Wendel. Come on back."

"The Higher One wants you, Wendel," said Gravid. "Wants to have another complete family. You know how collectors are."

The nanomatrix bucked wildly, and a fat silver pocket swelled out of its coiled-up end, like a bubble from a bubble-pipe. The pocket settled down onto the catwalk, bulging and waiting. Wendel had a sudden deep memory of how good the rush had felt.

"Whatcher mean, the ship is leavin'?" asked Threakman, drawn over to stare at the bubble, half the height of a man now. It's broad navel swirled invitingly.

"They've seen enough of our space now," said Xiao-Xiao. "They're moving on. Come on now, Wendel and Jeremy. This is bigger than anything you'll ever do." She mimed a sarcastic little kiss, bent over, and squeezed herself into the pocket.

"Me come, too," said Barley, and followed her.

"Last call," said Gravid, going back into the bubble as well.

And now it was just Wendel and Threakman and the pocket, standing on the catwalk. The nanomatrix lay still in Wendel's hands.

"I don't know as I can live without it, yer know," said Threakman softly.

"But you said you want to change," said Wendel.

"Roit," said Threakman bleakly. "I did say."

Wendel skirted around the pocket and walked over to where the acid tank's open hatch gaped. The nanomatrix had stopped fighting him. He and his world were small; the Out-Monkeys had lost interest. It was a simple matter to throw the plastic mat into the tank, and he watched it fall, end over end.

Choking fumes wafted out, and Wendel crawled off low down on the catwalk toward the breathable air.

When he sat up, Threakman and the bubble were both gone. And somewhere deep in his guts, Wendel felt a shudder, as of giant engines moving off. The pockets were gone? Maybe. But there'd always be a high that wanted to eat you alive. Life was a long struggle.

He walked away from the research center, toward the train station, feeling empty, hurt—and free.

There were some things at the apartment he could sell. It would be a start. He would do it right. He'd been taking care of himself for a long time. . . .