Glitch

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Simulations had overtaken gaming as the pastime of Generation K, and Frank Oblensky and Calvin Beale were working on something special. The best simulations were totally immersive, but any real immersion requires “coming up for air”. In the case of simulations that requires that those participating take a break for what some call “HAN time” - Hydration and Nourishment. Frank and Calvin had the idea to build HAN into the simulation – not just a simulated glass of champagne or a hamburger, but simulated consuming accompanied by access to water and a generic food source that could acquire the characteristics of a glass of champagne or a hamburger. To do this would allow a player to exist in a simulation for extended periods. It was, and the phrase is singularly appropriate, a gamechanger.

Ideas like that need to be developed in secret. There is no protecting something until it is real so all the work needs to be contained with a “black box” and all testing done by Frank and Calvin themselves. Only when it is complete can the intellectual property be protected.

They both had the necessary computer skills, but Frank had a background in engineering. Calvin was the imagination behind the game design and the core “scripts” – the story plots that would drive the game. Frank designed the HAN station and how it could be available just by reaching out when the scenario design allowed for a stream of water, or a mug of ale, or meat straight from the grill. They worked together as a team. They knew that while a simulation like this would evolve over time, the concept needed to be complete before they moved to the next step.

They had decided that the full simulation was ready for the initial beta test with both of them taking their positions in the interactive static suits ready to begin. The Han station was loaded to full capacity – enough for 72 hours with the shut off set for 48 and the expected time under simulation perhaps 48 hours. They would need to take their positions and hook up for long term immersion, including catheter and enema tubes that would be optional in the final version.

They both donned their headsets and started to view the game options dropping down and transparent dialog box just in front of them.

“{This looks good so far.” Frank was the one looking for errors as an engineer might – in this case voids or even exposed seams in the simulation to be corrected when they emerged. There was nothing obvious

Frank had an avatar that was effectively a version of himself. It looked like him but without the glasses and with a body under the tight fitting shirt, more muscular that the real Frank. But while Calvin had a version of himself as an option, he proposed another for this exercise.

“I am going to go with a female avatar,” he said. This is about testing new realities so I think at least one of us needs to operate in a completely different space,” said Calvin. He scrolled down the drop down list a couple of times to find something suitable, and started to type “Calvin” in before he stopped himself and backed up a couple of spaces. The final name was “Carole”. He pushed “Enter” and then “Start Simulation”.

“Actually you look pretty good,” said Frank, the smile on his face clearly being picked up from the face in the headset. The Carole character was small with long blond hair, a pretty face and with breasts only slightly out of proportion. She was wearing a simple patterned dress.

“Well, thank you for the compliment,” said Carole in the feminine voice that went with the simulation. “I probably need to get to a mirror to check myself out.”

They were standing in a carpark in front of a strip mall. There was an option of shops or a café, or a roadhouse-type bar at the far end. Adventures were in preparation but were beyond the scope of the beta test. The objective here was to live – eat drink and sleep, and use the drains built in to clear the bladder and bowel, to remain a full 48 hours in simulation. There would be no monsters or sword-wielding villains to fight, just fabricated people to meet, and fabricated food to enjoy.

“A coffee or a beer?” Frank asked.

“Both, in that order,” said Carole. “But first let me step into this beauty shop to check out my look.”

Frank followed his now female friend inside, and watched her examine herself in the mirror. Carole was impressed with her look and stepped closer to the mirror to examine her face and the texture of her hair.

“The AI vision modelling is working better than I could have expected. You can even make out the pores on my skin, and see how the hair moves. Wow – we have got this licked! It looks so real!

“Can we do anything for you, Sweetheart?” asked the lady in the beauty shop.

“I don’t know. Can you?” Carole seemed momentarily entranced by the image in the mirror.

“Not tonight, I think,” said the woman. “You look perfect as you are in that casual dress. But maybe come back on your wedding day and let me put all the beautiful hair up for you. You just have to get your man here to put a ring on the finger and one around the date on the calendar.” She looked at Frank and winked.

Frank looked suddenly pale, almost as if the simulation could pick up on such a thing. He retreated towards the door and Carole followed him out.

“Did you script this dialog?” he said, accusing Carole.

“Do you think I had time for that,” Carole protested shrilly. “It’s AI like all modern simulations. It’s a reaction to our spoken words drawn from collected data.”

“This is weird,” said Frank. “48 hours you say?”

“We’ll sleep for 16 of those hours,” Carole pointed out. “Just relax. Let’s see whether coffee taste like coffee.”

They walked out of the salon and into the coffee shop a few doors down. There was a counter full of interesting food, perhaps baked on the premises, the smell of freshly roasted coffee beans in the air and a mature woman behind the counter with a welcoming smile.

“Good afternoon to you both and what Can I get you?” said the lady.

“I will have a double mochaccino and one of those Portuguese custard tarts,” said Carole.

“And I will have a single shot expresso and a slice of the sour lemon tart,” said Frank. He was interested in the capacity to generate flavors. The idea was to link the images to past experiences to create flavors and as Frank had never tasted a single shot expresso or sour lemon tart, this would be interesting.

They sat by the window so that they could look at the people walking by. What lay outside the window would have no role to play in the active simulation and in the ordinary course would be a dark or fuzz void, but under this simulation they were amazed to see that it all seemed so real.

“Does our unit have the RAM capacity to maintain this level of resolution for peripheral images?” Carole asked.

“To be honest I don’t know,” said Frank. “This is unexpected, but it seems to be going well. Let’s just ride this tiger and see where we end up.”

“I am up for anything,” said Carole.

Frank looked across the table and the woman sitting opposite and felt a strange feeling in his lower body. It was sexual desire, and it did not belong. This was the avatar of his friend Calvin in front of him – something not real. Not that this prevented the huge market for sex-oriented simulations, but this was not what they were about.

“Here you are. double mochaccino and a custard tart, expresso and sour lemon,” the women presenting these items thankfully broke Frank’s disorder, and promptly moved on.

“Oh my God, this tart is good!” said Carole. “I had one in Portugal and this is just like it.”

“That is the point exactly,” said Frank, but when he took a small sip of his small cup of coffee, he too was amazed. “This tastes like more like coffee than anything I have ever tasted. Let me try this pie. Yeah, super lemony and sour enough to screw my face up. This thing works. I tell you, we have struck gold here, Pal. This is great!”

“I just want to taste everything,” said Carole.

“We could do that,” said Frank. “I have unlimited credit on my card. But maybe we should check to see if it works first?” But he was smiling. He knew that it would. Everything was working. It was like a dream come true.

“We need to get out and look at visual things, and maybe smell the flowers,” said Carole. “We can come back here for more tastings, or maybe wait for dinner. We could go somewhere nice. Somewhere with special food, This is great.”

“Okay. Let me pay. Finish your coffee.” Frank used contactless payment. Of course it went through. In his world money would never be a problem.

They went outside and took a good look around. The neighborhood was a mixture of residential, commercial and retail with tree lined avenues and gardens and was unfamiliar to both of them. A short distance away were the tower blocks of the city, also fictional. The largest of these blocks was emblazoned with a name “Meltontech” beneath a starburst logo.

There was a garden area in the corner of the block and Carole paused to smell the flowers.

“This is incredible. I can smell the flowers and feel the sun on my face,” said Carole. “I can feel the skirt of dress against legs without hair on them, and I can feel that there is nothing between my legs at the top. It is a strange sensation, but somehow exciting.”

Frank looked across at her, trying to see past the avatar that had been chosen by his business partner, but he could not. All he saw was the pretty girl in the summer dress, exploring the world like a child’s first outing. He smiled. There was a joy in him that was something that he had never experienced from any previous simulation. There was no challenge before him, nothing to be hit or dodged or tiptoed over – this was just life – unreal although it seemed the opposite of that.

He heard a phone ring. It had not occurred to him that he would have one in the game, but he reached down and pulled it from the pocket of his jeans.

The caller display read “James Bowman – Meltontech”. Frank swiped right.

“Frank, is that you? It’s Jim Bowman from Meltontech here. I have to tell you that we are very excited at what we are seeing here. I have the product assessment team with me and also the president of the company. We would like to meet with you and Carole. This afternoon if you are available? Can you come downtown?”

Frank was confused for a moment, but then he understood. He said – “Can you hold for a minute Jim,” and then he muted the phone.

Carole stood in front of him. She pushed a lock of her blond hair out of her eyes and stared at him inquiringly. Once again Frank found himself seeing only he woman she appeared to be, and it was unsettling.

“Is this part of your script?” said Frank. “You have sent in our new project for assessment by the biggest tech company in town?” He pointed to the tower in the distance.

“What are you talking about, Frank?” she said. “The script is open. Who was on the phone? Actually, do I have a phone. I haven’t even got pockets. Or even a handbag.”

“Actually, why don’t we go for a meeting to push our work. Who could ask for a better dry run that to run it past a virtual investor?” He looked at Carole for approval, but she just seemed confused. He swiped his phone and said – “We are not far away, Jim. We can come to you.”

“I am not going to a business meeting dressed like this,” said Carole. “I need to find somewhere to wear and go back to that salon to be tidied up a bit.”

“Okay,” said Frank. “I am not going to put a suit on though. We are IT developers. Jean a T-shirt are like our uniform.”

“Well get you a jacket. But I am a woman now. If a woman is to be taken seriously, she needs to dress seriously. As it happens, I saw something in a boutique we walked by that will be perfect. And I will need the right hair.”

“I am not about to tell you what looks right, but can I just say that to me, you look great.” Frank swallowed when he realized what he had said, but there was now no doubt that her appearance was having an effect on him. “But you want to go shopping, so let’s go back,” he said averting his gaze and walking back to the crosswalk.

Carole was smiling. She felt alive in a way that she had never felt before, and Frank’s words and even his awkwardness seemed strangely moving. But she knew where she was headed and what to buy, and she suggested to Frank what he needed before she ducked into the salon.

Frank bought the jacket she had suggested, and a blue shirt to wear underneath it. It was a casual look but clearly business. He decided to drop into a barbershop to get a shave and trim. He liked his whiskery look, but he comforted himself by the knowledge that this was not real – it was the avatar’s smooth face, even though it seemed so real as he stroked it. He went back to the salon to meet Carole and pay the cost.

Her hair had been arranged in what he was told was a French roll – smooth polished hair drawn back from her pretty face, with the hint that it could be shaken free with a shake of the head. Some further makeup had been applied making her blue eyes become almost luminous, and her lips were delicately painted an alluring pink.

“What do you think?” she said, smiling at his open mouth. “Just one more thing I need is a bag to go with his outfit and hold all his makeup and hair stuff.” She held out a shopping bag.

He surveyed the captivating view from her perfect hair down past the tailored jacket, the cleavage just visible in the tight knitted dress on down to the shapely legs shown off by the high heels.

“We should get a cab,” he said, once he had recovered the power of speech.

They bought the bag and headed off towards Meltontech Tower. The built up part of the city seemed to be busy but traffic parted and lights turned green, and the soon stepped out onto the massive plaza at the foot of Meltontech Tower with its upper floors seeming to touch the sky. They walked across with the others on the great concrete expanse seeming to make way, into the 5 storey plaza with hanging sculptures and right up to the black marble reception counter.

“Mr Frank Oblensky and Miss Carole Beale, we have been expecting you,” said an attractive well dressed your woman appearing from nowhere to meet them before they even reached the counter. “Come with me to the express lift to he Executive Level.”

They looked at one another, both marvelling at what appeared to be.

In the elevator Frank found himself standing close to Carole and a little behind. She was talking to the woman escorting them about clothes as if she knew anything beyond her present experience. Frank was not listening. He was smelling her hair, and looking at the feminine line of the nape of her neck and thinking only of sex – sex with her.

They stepped out on to what must have been the top floor. Other towers were not visible in the distant windows.

“Frank. Carole. I am Jim Bowman. I am so pleased to meet you at last.” James Bowman was a handsome and intelligent looking man and it seemed to both his visitors that his fawning admiration was genuine rather than just a pitch. He ushered them through to a palatial boardroom where a group awaited them.

They were introduced to various people, mainly men but a couple of women, and with the ethnic diversity that modern business required, but it was clear that the meeting would be led by the older man introduced as the President of Meltontech, Stanley Sandeman.

“Let me tell you that we have all been looking at what you have done here with his simulation, and we are very impressed,” said Stanley. “Our technical people are frankly amazed, so they tell me. They find the detail and the seamless presentation truly remarkable. You seem to have defied all logic with what you have done here. This is something special, but I am guessing that you know that?”

“We’re very happy with it,” said Frank. “But I just did the engineering. Cal, that is to say Carole, is behind everything you viewed, or at least the programming of it.”

Carole turned to him and smiled. He felt a glow inside.

“Look you two, I did not get to my position without being very direct, so let me be very open and honest with you two,” said Stanley. “We want in. You write the deal. Pick any lawyer in town. James will tell you who is the best. Have him write up the contract you want. We will pay the legal fees. Our only condition is that you two have to be involved, and of course, that we are exclusive backers. We have the resources, I can assure you.”

“I can guess that is true,” said Carole. “It that a Pollock on the wall over there?”

“You have a good eye, young lady,” said Stanley. “Eyes for beauty and beautiful eyes.”

The compliment seemed to be from another age, but it made Carole smile and blush a little.

“We don’t know what to say,” said Frank.

“Say yes, dammit!” said Stanley. “Shake my hand. A verbal will do. We have champagne on ice here and dinner for all of us booked in the hotel for all of us. Did you know that the middle floors of this building is a hotel? Yes, the Meltonia opens up of the north side plaza. Their restaurant has won awards. And don’t worry about running late. We have booked the royal suite for you tonight for your exclusive use. Lounge with a full bar, kitchen facilities, a terrace – 3 bedrooms. Strictly for billionaires. And it is all yours. Just shake my hand.”

Frank looked back at Carole and she nodded. He reached out his hand and Stanley Sandeman shook it and then Carole’s. A cork popped at the other end of the room and James Bowman appeared with a bottle with a tray of glasses following behind.

“Here is our chance to experience the virtual high life,” Carole whispered into Frank’s ear. The words bought Frank down a little. He had been living the moment and it now seemed that she was reminding him that I was just an illusion.

Still, as he shook more hands and drank his wine He kept looking around for flaws in the simulation. It was as had been described – incredible detail and the seamless presentation. At first he wondered if it was time to exit. He has been allowed his moment of ecstasy having all of his work complimented and his reward to be delivered, but two things stopped him. First of all there was Carole’s desire to continue her experiences and secondly was Frank’s engineers instinct press on and explore to discover any weaknesses in what had been built.

An hour later the whole group heading downstairs and across to the hotel lobby and the private cocktail and dining area attached to the fine dining restaurant. He was also slipped a key to the Royal Suite, but there would be many hours of expensive wine and fantastical dishes before they could consider retreating there.

Ther were largely separated for their conversations with people from Meltontech, although they did cross paths for moments to share their feelings of enjoyment, properly enjoying the fully immersive experience. At other times he looked across at her smiling and laughing and sensed again the sexual thoughts he had experienced earlier in the da – more than once. She was beautiful and surrounded by men, as she should be. But she also engaged with the women as one of them. How was this so easy for her? Or was this part of the illusion? How much of this has she created? She says that it is AI driven, but he had a role in designing the machine learning – how did it grow into this.

When she came over and suggested that they call and end to the night at go up to the suite, he responded quickly that his thoughts were the same.

“By all means you head up,” said James. “Stanley has already left but he would like you to join a select group of stockholders in the Boardroom for lunch tomorrow at 1 pm? That leaves the morning up to you, but I have sent you that list of commercial contract lawyers if you are up for that?”

They took the elevator and easily found the Royal Suite, fully appointed as a model of one of the finest apartments in the city.

“I just want to take a shower and get to bed,” said Carole.

“Me too,” said Frank. “You take the biggest bedroom.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Carole. He was not sure what she meant by that “Could you please unzip me. It’s at the back,” she continued.

She turned and it seemed that his hands were shaking. He just wanted to touch her flesh, even if by a deliberate accident. The zip slipped down and the tight-fitting dress fell to the floor revealing that she was only wearing a bra and no panties.

“What’s this? Going commando?”

“It’s a knit dress. A panty line would be visible,” she said. “And the bra has no edges and unclips at the front.” And with those words that too had slipped onto the floor. She ten simply had to step out of her heels to stand naked in front of him, but there was one more thing she did before she turned. She drew and concealed comb from her hair – a single pin that held her perfect updo in place, and she then shook her soft shining hair in his face.

“We’ll share the bedroom,” she said. “I want to try out this body. And don’t tell me you don’t want this too. I can see you do.”

She reached out to touch the penis straining the fabric or his pants. It seemed to pounce towards her like an enthusiastic puppy.

“You don’t think that would be weird,” said Frank, praying that she would dismiss his concerns with a wave of her graceful hand.

“This whole thing is weird. I have been for a pee a few times today, and I have had a little explore down there. I am wet. I am wet thinking about sex. It’s either you or anything that I can find … but I want it to be you.”

She stepped up to him and slowly unbuttoned his shirt.

But he had no time for such languid behavior. He took her by the arms and kissed her, deeply and passionately. She returned the kiss with the same heat and energy and before they knew it, he too was naked and carrying her slim and light body in his arms through to the bedroom.

She groped feverishly for his erect penis dragging him by it towards her opening, but he needed no encouragement – he was inside her as a gopher into its burrow – he was home inside her.

He rammed and grunted, and she gasped. “Oh fuck! Oh fuck!” she said. “How good is this?”

“I’m coming,” he said.

“Yes! Yes!” she said. “Oh God, yes!”

The came together, their bodies shuddering with the primal convulsions that drive desires beyond rational control.

They showered together, exploring their bodies, still so hot from their physical connection, and then they lay together in the largest of the here beds in the Royal Suite of the Meltonia, and they fell asleep in one another’s arms.

They woke at least one in he night for more sex, and in the morning it was his penis probing to find his home that woke her.

“Come on then,” she said. “Make love to me, and never stop.” At least he did the first part.

“Let’s not worry about a lawyer,” said Frank. “In fact, let’s not worry about that lunch meeting. Let’s just keep thins running as long as we can enjoy pleasures like this.”

She looked up at the ceiling and said – “Do you think about your body, lying in that pod, with the tubes in and now maybe and a pile of jism in your catheter?”

“No,” he said. “I haven’t given that any though at all, but I suppose that I should pause and I should check. Although I really don’t want to.”

“I haven’t been able to reach my drop-down box to the main menu,” she said.

“Let me check,” he said, rolling onto his back and reaching up. He flicked his fingers and his wrist. Then he decided to use a voice command – “Suspend simulation! Suspend simulation! Exit application! It’s not working. We have a glitch. I knew his was too good to be true.”

“So, what happens if we can’t access the controls?” she asked.

“Well, when the simulation times out then it will automatically terminate the program. We will be back where we started. It will all be over,” he said.

“How many times do you think we could have sex before that happens?” she said, rolling over to lie slightly on top of him and letting a lock of perfumed blonde hair fall in his face.

“We could try to find out,” he said. “But you don’t think that it will get even more weird … the fact that we … you know?”

“The fact that we have fallen in love?” she suggested. “The fact that Carole is in love with Frank and Frank is in love with Carole and that Carole doesn’t exist?”

“I guess that this was a huge mistake – having sex?” asked Frank, ignoring that the word “love” had been used more than once.

“I think that I can feel your sperm inside me,” said Carole. “I like that feeling so much that I could not call any of this a mistake.”

“So, I guess that we just wait it out,” said Frank. “But it could be worse. We have limitless money. We can go to lunch today and be praised. We can go shopping and you can be beautiful and I can adore you. And we can go at it like rabbits and you’ll never get pregnant.”

“You know that we have a spa bath too?” she said with some excitement. “There is room for two.”

They did make he lunch and they me with a lawyer that afternoon, and they had a quiet dinner just the two of them, at a very exclusive restaurant, and the spent another night of lovemaking, and then another and another.

“How is this possible?” said Carole. “You said that the simulation was o terminate and the whole thing should have shut down days ago.”

“I don’t know,” said Frank. “It’s a glitch. The problem is that I can’t get access to the code.”

“So has the HAN supplies run out?” she asked. “Will we die of thirst or starvation, or rather our bodies in their pods slowly shrivel away while we still think we are enjoying caviar and champagne?”

“It doesn’t bear thinking about,” said Frank. “But you know that there is another thought and it’s this. This is all to real and I have never been able to understand it. All this detail is unnecessary, so why is it here? Imagine the possibility that this is reality and what we had before is the simulation. Here we are a happy couple, and that Calvin was the invented person.”

“Why would I ever want his life – toiling a way in a basement beside a man who never even cared about me?” she said. “It sounds like a drab, monotonous and loveless existence.”

“What is true happiness when you don’t have the opposite to compare it to?” said Frank.

“So you mean that his could be real? This could be our life?” She was suddenly excited at the thought.

“Or the food and water runs out and the lives in the pods end and we simply cease to exist,” he said.

“I suppose that is the same for everybody,” she said. “Maybe not all glitches are bad?”

The End

Erin’s Seed: “Two men build a simulation and then get trapped in it so that it becomes indistinguishable from reality - an alternative that leaves them questioning whether their old lives were real … except that in real life Frank the engineer and Calvin the scriptwriter but in the simulation Frank is still in college and Calvin is Carol.”

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