# SPACE

"Information networks all along the Pacific Rim are going haywire! Catch the news at five past the hour for more! Now, Screaming Manx with their latest single …"

Suzie switched off the radio and found one of her socks rolled up by the side of the mattress, pulled it on, scanned around for the other. "Mum! What did you do with my socks?!" Her mother looked into the room through the door. "Over there, on your shelf, next to the computer." The sock was in a ball nestled up to one of the ear-phones of the virtual reality headset. Suzie located her shoes, wriggled her feet into them, and raced into the bathroom. She briefly studied herself in front of the mirror. No spots! She pulled a brush through her long, straight blonde hair. What would go with the skinny top? She really loved the heavy black leather jacket Paul had got her for her birthday. That would be fine.

The TV was on in the living room. A breakfast show. Zinny Adams was singing her latest hit. Suzie wished she had a leather like that one. Still, what she had wasn't bad.

"Where are you going, Suzie?" asked her Mum. "Out to see someone" she replied. Then she relented. "I'm seeing Marie – she's having a party this weekend, and I'm helping her organise it."

"What about school?" sighed her mother. Suzie was ready for this. "I can log on later. I'm well up on my maths and geography, and the rest are pretty even." Her mum always seemed to think you had to go to school at the same time each day. But it wasn't like that any more. VR meant you didn't need to get on a bus or a tube – you just logged on.

She made her way down the stairs to the door.

The street was empty as usual, though, as she crossed the road to avoid a particularly dense patch of weeds on the pavement, a lone taxi sped up the middle of the street. As she rounded the corner and came upon three boys kicking a ball around. She was

alarmed at first, but then, with some relief, she noticed the warden further along the road. These days, the wardens kept an eye on things. Her mum said that, before VR, the wardens used to make sure cars didn't block the streets, but not many people had cars now. It was unusual to see anyone on the street – the main people you did see were dealers and street-gangs. The boys were probably just out for some exercise – VR sports were much more fun, but they didn't get you moving around much!

She arrived at Marie's; Marie answered the door and they went upstairs to her bedroom. Marie's parents were quite well-off, so the machine that Marie had in her bedroom was much nicer than the one she had at home. Her mum couldn't afford to buy one, so what they had was Government Issue. Only one person could use it at a time, and it was pretty lo-res. Marie's machine was scintillating! Suzie and Marie talked for a while about plans for the party and discussed who they should and shouldn't invite. They decided on what food and drink they wanted, and then they were ready to go shopping. They donned their headsets, put on their gloves and logged in.

They were in a small, round room which contained only one feature – an ornate arched gate in the centre of the room. The entrance shimmered like a metallic red-gold sheet – insubstantial yet quite opaque. It was exactly the same from both sides of the gate. "Food first, then we'll go to the Mall." Marie spoke to the gate to say where they were going, and they stepped through into the SafeCo hypermarket.

They selected what food and drink they wanted and paid for it using their VR IDs. Although the food looked as real as it did in real life, there was no sense of taste and smell in virtuality, so shopping for food was a convenience rather than any fun. The real goods would be delivered to Marie's house in a few hours time. Once they had finished, they stepped through the hypermarket's portal and arrived at the Grand Mall.

The Mall was crowded with people from all over the city. Virtuality (which was what everyone called VR space) had rules just like the real world; these varied from place-to-

place, but here most of the rules were normal. One rule which was the same everywhere was that people in virtuality had to look like their real selves. False identities were strictly taboo, and anyone found breaking this rule could be banned from virtuality for life.

They made their way through the central park at a leisurely pace towards the viewing tower. Suzie stepped out of the way of an older girl pre-occupied with her boy-friend. The girl was wearing one of the fashionable day-glo orange and shocking pink slash dresses. The diagonal slash went all the way around, revealing midriff and back. There was nothing joining the top and bottom halves of the dress. Gravity applied in virtuality, so the effect was rather startling. Suzie had seen these dresses before, and knew that the two parts of the dress were actually joined by a transparent strip of fabric – but the fabric had exactly the same refractive index as the air, so it was quite invisible. In VR-speak, it was "de-textured". A little further ahead, a spiky-haired youth complete with leather jacket was towing a small dragon. Suzie thought the dragons were cute, and wished she could take one home.

They reached the tower, which stood at one of the foci of the roughly elliptical Mall. From the tower, you could get a great view of the Mall and the city surrounding it. They took the lift to the top – the lift was nothing more than a translucent blue disk set in a cylindrical shaft. They were lucky – once at the top, they were completely by themselves. In the distance, the sun was sinking behind one of the ChinaBank towers. The sky was brilliant blue, and the tower shimmered in the light. The tower almost seemed transparent. To Suzie's surprise, as she looked at the tower, it did indeed become transparent, then entirely disappeared. Nearer buildings started to grow transparent, and in turn disappeared. Even more alarming, beyond where the buildings had stood, there was no sky-line, just a pervading deep blue. The wave of transparency rushed closer, and into the Mall itself. A cry went up from the people in the Mall closest to the disappearing buildings; there were screams and people started to run away from the

wave. Many people simply disappeared, flicking out of virtuality. Others ran towards the nearest portal.

"Something's wrong. We need to go," said Suzie. "But the nearest portal is down on the ground," replied Marie. Panic was in her eyes. "It's OK," said Suzie, " - we can just use the get-out incantation." Incantations were special phrases you could use in virtuality to break the normal rules. But neither of them had ever used the incantation – they had always relied on the portals. Although they had been taught it as infants, neither of them could remember it. "We've no choice but to take the lift." They ran to the opening onto the lift shaft – there were no doors – and ordered the blue disk to come to them. Nothing happened. Suzie looked down the shaft – she could not see the blue disk. She realised that she could not see the bottom of the shaft – it had started to become transparent. As she looked, the wave of transparency crept up the shaft towards her. She and Marie looked despairingly at each other. Marie's face was pale – unnaturally pale. Then the colour started to leach from it altogether, her hair receded, and in a few seconds, Suzie could no longer see her friend. She looked down at her own hands – there was nothing there. The surrounding tower had now completely disappeared. Suzie looked around her. In every direction, there was nothing but blue – space.

The sights and sounds of virtuality were no longer present, and as she gradually unfroze from the envelope of fear that surrounded her, Suzie began to feel the sensation of her hands wrapped inside the VR gloves she wore in real space. She took comfort from the natural sounds of her own body. She brought her hands together and felt the pressure of one against the other. At school, they had been taught about the history of early VR systems. These had always been unreliable, so their makers had needed to ensure they could get out easily. The gloves could only control things in virtuality – but now, there was none. But outside the gloves, in the real world, there was a keyboard! The designers would have had an escape sequence. Suzie tried to remember from her infant years what it might be. Control-alt-del? Esc? Alt-tab? No, of course, the key to escape had to be the easiest one. The great key. Suzie brought her hands up slowly, almost imperceptibly felt the edge of the desk though the gloves – there was the keyboard. She triumphantly brought her hand down on the bottom of the keyboard. The key to unlocking the terrible blue space was … space!

"Time for bed," said Marie. "Right," said Suzie, rubbing her head.

Robert Miller, 26 February 2004

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