WAYS TO ENJOY NUTRIENT BLEND 14

A taste of real life.

BY LUC REID

A set of marble stairs led up into the apartment building through tall bronze doors. Inside, shifting sunlight filled an anteroom, carrying colours down from stained-glass skylights. In the distance John heard music — lutes, maybe, and pipes. The air was perfumed with new leaves, water, lilacs.

John climbed the steps, reluctant for no reason he could name. Finally he'd wheedled an invitation to one of the Garrets' dinners, a parade of wonders. Unless he was suddenly tired of marvels, he should be excited.

Other guests were also arriving. He forced a smile to avoid bothering them.

A slave 20 feet away bowed and called out to him: "Citizen Kindersley! My masters welcome you!"

The slave was too much for John and, in a completely irrational fit of annoyance, he switched off his augmented-reality system, something he hadn't done in he didn't remember how long.

The marble, the stained glass, the slave and the statues evaporated to reveal close, badly painted cinderblock walls lit by a flickering fluorescent lighting fixture decades older than he was. Scents of leaves and lilacs gave way to odours of dust and mildew. The slave wasn't a real person, unsurprisingly, and even the space he occupied was false: the real room was much smaller.

He was about to switch augmentation back on when he was distracted by a glimpse of something that wasn't grey or brown. One of the other guests, a calm-looking woman with unruly brown hair, was wearing a bright blue dress. The colour was a little uneven, suggesting she'd dyed it herself, but it was striking anyway, given the dull, faded and stained look of everyone else's clothes, including his. He looked down at himself and powered augmentation back up.

Back came the marble, the colours, the scents and the slave, who said: "This way please, sir," and indicated the stairs. He was blocking John's view of the woman in the blue dress, and John leaned around him to get a glimpse. She was just disappearing up the steps. In virtual, her dress was unremarkable: white, vaguely Roman-looking — and clearly at least four or five weeks out of date. Didn't she care what she looked like? Who didn't have a few minutes to

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update fashions every morning? Yet somehow he envied her. He was envying neglect or social ineptitude, he told himself, but the feeling didn't go away.

Her graceful walk and bright dress played in his head in sharp detail as he climbed the stairs.

The Garrets were greeting the arrivals at the top, laughing as they rode from guest to guest on gold cushions held up by straining cherubs. Their 'apartment' had an expansive mosaic floor and marble pillars under a vaulted roof, the whole arrangement open to the air on three sides. John looked out to see a verdant tumble of hills patterned with woods, farms, streams and flower gardens. Around the guests capered jugglers and fire-eaters, while musicians plucked and winded their instruments, and the table in the centre of the room strained under an eye-popping feast. John distractedly took a seat, searching for the woman with the hidden blue dress, but waiters and performers made it difficult to see clearly. Finally he switched augmentation back off, showing him to be in a crowded one-room apartment

with three rickety card tables surrounded by mismatched kitchen chairs and set with large platters of what looked like Nutrient Blend 14. John hadn't had Blend 14 without augmentation for a long time, but he remembered it being bland and just a little bitter, with a texture like soggy asparagus.

There she was, at the far end of the room, sitting quietly. Around her, guests gaped into the air at the Garrets' marvels. She herself was not gaping: she was looking directly at him.

John started as the other guests burst out laughing and applauded, staring at a nearby dish. He switched augmentation back on and caught sight of the last few birds flying out of a steaming pie. The pie then miraculously filled up with chopped meat, nuts and spices, and Vlad Garret began serving pieces out at random, including to John. John took a bite and grunted with appreciation: the crust was buttery and flaky, the meat rich and succulent, the spices harmonious and complex. Taken all together, it was nearly indecent.

The waiters parted for a moment, and he saw that the woman was no longer sitting where she'd been a moment before. He switched off augmentation, transmuting his pie to bitter mush in his mouth. He swallowed. Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned. It was her.

"Enjoying yourself?" she asked.

"More now," he said. It was a ridiculous statement, considering, but it was true. He studied her, wondering what it was about her that was strange. Then he had it: no augmentation wires going into her temples. She had a small eViewer dangling around her neck, but she wasn't wired, although he could see the ports where she must have been connected once.

What was it like, spending your days seeing people reacting to things that weren't there, wandering through a dingy grey cityscape, the food bland, the scents wretched? Why had she chosen *that*?

She held out her hand, and John took it and stood up. It was warm, and her fingers curled around his as he took them. He'd been thinking the choice she'd made had been to live in the real world instead of the beautiful one. Now he was thinking that might not be what the options were at all. ■

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