

POP-UPS

Captive audience.

BY ROBERT DAWSON

I was half-starved, my head ached from a long day of selling commonplace holidays to difficult customers, and if I missed the 5:17 dronebus it would be an hour till the next one. Without slowing from my clumsy run, I cybervisualized the timetable. Bus times hovered in front of me in glowing red letters, while a calm voice told me that my bus was running four minutes late and that I could catch it at a walk. Gratefully, I cancelled the app, and let myself relax. I was out of breath, my shirt was wet with perspiration under my jacket, and my shins hurt from the unaccustomed exercise in office shoes. For a 26-year-old, I was in poor shape.

I got to the stop just in time. As the bus slowed to a halt, a sultry and not-overdressed brunette materialized in front of me. She leaned provocatively against the bus shelter, hip jutting, blocking my way onto the bus.

"Hey there, big boy!" she breathed. "Want to make yourself irresistible to women?" Her perfume made my nose tickle and my eyes water. Real perfume would have been illegal in a public place, but they claim that nobody's really allergic to stimplant sensations. All in your mind. Yeah, sure.

I stepped through her onto the bus, swiped my card, and turned towards the rear. There she was again, standing among the other passengers, toying with a button of her tight blouse. "Didn't you hear me, honey? I'm here to tell you how to get any woman you want. Me, for instance."

The door chimed and closed. The bus started moving; those of us who were standing swayed and braced ourselves against the acceleration. She stood motionless in front of me, ignoring the handrail, brazenly flouting Newton's laws of motion.

Where the hell was her cancel button? So far only a few maverick advertisers ignored the law outright, but more and more pop-up designers were making the buttons inconspicuous, forcing you to spend time interacting with their creations before you could exorcise them. Last year's ubiquitous red circle-X was a wistful memory of more civilized times.

There it was, a tiny silver glyph — like a piercing stud on her pouting lower lip. I



reached out my finger, like choosing a floor in an old-fashioned elevator, but she shook her head. "Unh, unh, studmuffin. It doesn't work like that. Even bad girls deserve a goodbye kiss."

I muttered something ungentlemanly, leaned forward, and pecked at her intangible lips: she vanished. I glanced quickly around, but apparently nobody had noticed. There was still an empty seat, beside a white-haired woman wearing jeans and a powder-blue sweater. I sat down before I could make myself any more conspicuous.

From under the seat came a sinister rattle. A big brown and white snake slithered out and started to weave menacing loops on the floor around my feet. Its back bore the name of the Prime Minister, in clear block capitals. I stepped on its head; it vanished with a puff of smoke, and the rattle stopped.

"Aaaah! That's better, isn't it?" said a soothing, friendly voice that came from everywhere at once and that only I could hear. "This June, vote for real change!"

The woman beside me was looking at my foot. "Was that the snake, dear?"

"Yes," I admitted. Across the aisle, a thin girl with dreadlocks seemed to be picking something out of thin air. "Sometimes I wish I'd never got stimplanted. You know, I actually believe the government's doing an okay job, but stepping on the snake is the only way to get rid of it. Otherwise it follows me around all day and gets louder and louder.

And even then it just keeps coming back."

"Oh, I hate that one!"

"You mean you've got a stimplant too? Sorry, that was rude. I apologize."

"It is mainly a young people's thing, isn't it? But my son works in Shanghai and my daughter's in Lagos. And it's almost like being in the same room with them."

"But is it worth the pop-ups? I need my stimplant for my sales job, but otherwise..."

A tiger, the mascot of a breakfast cereal that I had bought a few times, stalked along the aisle, and paused in front of me.

"Have you had *your* Quinoa Puffs today?" it asked reproachfully, and walked on.

She gave me a sympathetic half-smile, and nodded. "I almost got mine taken out last month, though it would have broken my heart. But I got an ad-blocking patch instead."

"I thought those didn't work?"

"My son works for Cybella. He gave me a copy of their newest product. That was thoughtful of him, wasn't it? It would have cost me 300 dollars otherwise, and I'm on a fixed income."

Worth every dime, I thought. "Where can I buy it?"

"I think you can download it. I'm not absolutely sure, though, because mine was a present."

I brought up my visual display and googled. Sure enough: Cybella, Shanghai. "Adprufe?"

She smiled. "That's it, dear." She patted my arm, almost too gently to feel.

I authorized the payment so eagerly that I made a mistake on my password, and had to try again. After a few seconds, the world around me began to fizz and sparkle as the patch installed. I smelled mint green and tasted furry pentagons; a million ice-cold ball bearings slithered over my skin.

When my senses cleared, the seat beside me was empty.

I guess I'm slow on the uptake. I actually looked up and down the bus to see where she'd gone.

And then, from somewhere under my seat, I heard an all-too-familiar rattle. ■

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