

EXTREMES

Living on the edge.

BY RACHEL SWIRSKY

So there I was, as near to the lava vents as I could get in a Bubble, with the robots droning on about extremophile lifeforms and whatever. Blank metal looks. Blank metal voices. "... Organisms that thrive in physically or geochemically extreme..." All the passengers and me, we're ignoring them, just staring down at the red and the burble, and I start to wonder, what if I took off my suit?

Fire hot, death bad, etc. etc.. Except that's all brain stem. Very twentieth.

We've all done that thing where we stick our hand on the stove and keep it there just for the XP, you know, to see how it feels. And it's riot, blistering agony, but then you've got through it, you've proved you're a real man or a real woman or a real tweener and they make you a new hand and that's that.

So wouldn't it be kinda sport? Just to dive? Char, burn, bubbling red and black, hot liquid ouch — but then they'd kick you into new skin and there you'd be. Only, like, with new experience cuz you've lived extremophile.

Would that be effer? That would be effer. Would that chat up any Fifi you want? That would chat up all the Fifis in the solar.

So I doff the suit, naked and already rocking from heat through the Bubble, push the emergency, klaxons going off all behind me, robots off to restrain the other passengers, the gasps, the shouting and me going free into the magma flow, me and hot, red rock and the little bug-gers that live in it.

Like I said — riot, blistering agony.

But I wake up, and I'm in the growing tank, swimming around all fetal, with my brain loaded into a proxy computer while I'm waiting for flesh to pile. And me, I'm sport. Sports rocket. I'd lived the lava vent. Held my hand to the stove, but 20 million times more X.

I'm expecting everyone to be like you are so rocket, so whoa, but no one's zinging, so I tap my direct and

➔ **NATURE.COM**
Follow Futures on
Facebook at:
go.nature.com/mtfoodm

whoa but
everyone's talking
about me, but not
me-me, because there's



like another me, and it's still swimming down there in the lava, and how is that possible? It's taken less than a day for every trace of me-me — the one that's not lava-me — to disappear from the top link lists. I'm subterranean. I'm invisible. I'm replaced by lava-swimming me, and this weird link-up he's broadcasting that no one understands. Boom. It's everywhere.

I try to find out what's going on, but no one will zing, they're all directing this other me instead, so I have to go infoblip and it turns out no one's yessir, but...

They think it's got something to do with the plastic mods from when our greats took the sleep to this planet, when they were stitching into our gene code, in case we

needed to have five legs or huge eyes or whatever, to cope with the new planet. And they tried to neg it all when we got here, but they left in strings for the medlinks and once you're that small on the micro, no one's 100 sure what everything does, like you ping one bit on and two off, and then you get sun-burn-proof skin and everyone knows that, but later, it turns out that it makes everyone really like neon orange, too.

So somehow, the fluid, the plastic, the string, all pulled and twisted, and there's me, in the lava, *adapting* and sending back this sphincter-screech footage no one can decode, and no one will zing me cuz they're all zinging him.

And that's who I've been since. Me that's not the real me. No one even recognizes me, because me and him, first, we don't look at all the same, and also second, they don't expect to see him not being in lava.

Technically he's the A1 and I'm the clone, so my friends and family mostly are on him. He's famous, and I'm just A2. The robots made me because my rec said to do that if I was ever as good as dead, and they figured I was. They didn't know I'd still be all A1 in the lava, and even though I am, it's not like he thinks much like I do, much like any human does. It's not like he knows how to zing, or how to do anything but send footage nothing can translate.

I tried to make an infoblip on what it's like to melt in lava, but everyone's more interested in what it's like to *live* in lava, which I guess I twig, and besides, I get spam-waved a lot because he and I've got the same ID, and it looks like I'm forging.

So there's me. The most boring me out of 2. I'm thinking of going into deep ice, or out into vacuum, see if there's something special about my code, see if I can switch-change again. Might do it one, two, three times, if it works. Extreme-o-mes. Me-o-philes. But when I'm done, chill, I'm all bout nulling that good-as-dead rec. Gonna wink out, normal-me. No more A2. Just A1s on the edges, all alien and unknown. ■

Rachel Swirsky's short fiction has been nominated for the Hugo, the Nebula and the Sturgeon among other awards. She holds a fiction MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop. Visit <http://www.rachelswirsky.com>.

JACEY