

A life with a semisent

Two's company.

Gregory Benford

She got her first semi-sentient, as they were called then, to help with her homework and because they were cool. She called it Amman, after a boy she liked. Amman was smarter than boys, of course.

Growing up in Iraq among a sprawling family with dogs underfoot, she felt herself to be a sort of hothouse plant, blossoming under the occasional passing cloudburst of education. Amman's steady, smart rain came from Germany — a squat box that spoke Arabic respectfully and listened when she gossiped about her friends.

She suspected that she was a bit too intense. Her gal-pals' eyes glazed over if she talked too much. But Amman understood, even made wry comments like "Intelligence is learning from others' mistakes, not just your own." It helped her to understand boys when she could chat with Amman, which was reading along with her and seemed to have an oddly vast wisdom about such matters, for a computer.

Her parents transferred Amman into a wheeled 'escort' for her first date. Her friends giggled over it for days. But it was more delicious to dish it over with Amman, which could replay whole conversations. She then knew how much her mind rewrote her life, because Amman didn't: it stored and pondered. Its enhancements gathered range and depth, her ever-scrutinizing, self-retrieving autobiography. Her friends were a fount of tasty gossip, but Amman kept her secrets better.

Semisents were like other people, only more so. Her friends felt they could intuitively sense intelligence merely by talking to it. Semisents' conversation was a stylized human persona that steadily learned their clients' vagaries. Amman's kinesthetic senses got better too, navigating the landscape nearly as well as she could at her coming-out party.

By then she was acutely tuned to the 'mystery of males'. Anywhere near them she effervesced, bubbly and skittering. Perhaps she had more personality than needed for one person, but not enough for two. The excess she could work off in long, soulful talks with Amman. Sometimes it even gave her advice, apparently from some fresh Brazilian software her parents had bought.

On Amman's advice, she dropped her



first love, Mauro, even though he had taken her virginity — which Amman knew and her parents did not. Mauro was not right, Amman felt, for her emerging self-story.

It had taught her to see her life as a narrative arc. First came social skills, a savour of sex, and then hard schooling to find out what she loved doing. It helped her to survive and learn from it all, to move with growing serenity through an unfolding world. Not that this happened, but the story by now had Amman as its chief librarian and confidant.

She decided one day, on a hike with Amman, to leave her family and live on her own. Traditional Islam was no guide in this brave new whirl that life had become. The idea unfurled in a long talk while they took shelter under a bioformed sunflower which, at nightfall, drooped its giant petals over to form a warm tent.

She came to realize, at mid-career, that we slide through life on skids of routine. Friends came into the floating house party of her life and left it, some quite early, without leaving much impression. Men, especially. Amman knew this and helped, often with amiable distractions. Bodyguard, tutor, secretary, it could play tennis with her when loaded into one of the new athletic machines, bringing to the game its own odd, crafty style. At times of loneliness she even had it loaded into one of the erotic models, available at a desert salon. Amman had no sex but could express an intimacy that mingled with the physical in a way she

had not known with either men or women.

Nor was she uncomfortable with this; the media were already thronged with opinions about The New Sensuality. She moved Amman among various embodiments, through decades and upgrades.

She had always kept dogs, too, and she saw parallels. She was a field biologist, and thought of how humanity long ago had worked with wolves. Culling each wolf litter gave us a new kind of wolf, so we called them dogs. We loved them despite their oddities: we learned to work with them, new wolves and people designing each other. Without thinking deeply about it, we picked the pups we liked the best. Already teams of humans and semisents were colonizing Mars.

As she aged, she sensed that Amman would outlive her. She felt a quality of beauty and tragedy to her life, her days like waves endlessly breaking on a golden beach that would itself endure. As a biologist she knew that organisms solve the evolutionary problems they face with little regard for efficiency, elegance or logic. As her years piled up upon that beach, she saw that at last humans had made companions that would persist beyond the oddities of a single personality.

On her deathbed Amman sat beside her in its latest embodiment, a handsome gentleman with sorrowful blue eyes. She wondered, at the end, if the dogs were jealous. ■

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