Shoppers

No purchase necessary.

JACEY

James Patrick Kelly

They pass down the row of shops, not exactly together. Rick keeps wandering ahead of her and then pauses to ogle the display windows. He does not notice the cold. He will never notice the cold. Rick lingers over an array of designer sheets in a linen store. He's dressed for another place and a different time, black crushed-velvet jacket, glitter shirt with a whisper of lace at the sleeves, gabardine trousers. He has a smooth young man's face with skin of fourteen carat gold.

She drags herself after him. She is stooped and as grey as the dirty snow caked along the gutter. When she wheezes, she can see the breath curling out of her mouth into the chill air. Her bulky fur coat clamps her in a bear hug. She slides to his side, feeling for black ice with tiptoes as if it might bite her. If she falls, she might never get up.

"That one." Rick points at a set of Bellino sheets the colour of blood oranges. "Buy me that." A label opens on the shop's window: sateen weave thousand thread count Egyptian cotton.

"Please." She leans into him as if to propel him down the street. "You have enough."

"You could be sleeping on them." He brushes a hand against her withered cheek. "You."

They stop and start their strolling tango past a dozen stores. She waits outside while he tries on some artful scars at Malade and buys a mink hat at Skarsgård's that costs as much as a geriatric nurse makes in a year. He teases her in front of an ice-cream shop.

"Remember pistachio?" says Rick.

"Remember when snacks weren't an IV drip?"

"Why are you being mean?" Her disposable eyes get bright and a little misty; the latest Cibas come with a special-effects package. "It's my fault I'm a hundred and eighty-three?"

"You chose." Rick slips an arm around her waist. "You're still choosing."

Their appointment at Evergreens isn't until three and they are early. Rick takes her coat and hangs it up and she sags onto a chair in the waiting room. He leaves her so he can poke around, picking up fingers from their display cases, aiming them at her like guns. There are medfingers, chatfingers, dofingers, sexfingers, mindfingers and glowfingers. There are fingers of rain forest mahogany and fingers of carbon allotropes stronger than high-tensile steel. He reads the label on the vintage Bösendorfer handset in a display case. Its fingers can play Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand* or the single-hand études of Saint-Saëns.

A salesgirl in a white smock appears at the door at the far end of the room. "Master Evergreen will see you now." She carries herself with the unconscious ease of someone still in her birth body.

Rick pulls the sexfinger from his manual unit and replaces it in the display case. He crosses the showroom to her.

She tries to get up but she can't. Rick and the salesgirl each take an arm and guide her into the showroom.

Evergreen is a vision of white teeth, dark polyskin and post-retro body design. It is happy to see them, or at least as happy as a bot can get.

"So we're back then," it says. "Are we any closer to a decision?"

She brushes past it to the two naked bodies

suspended from the neural web. One is sleek and hard and eternal; the other soft and warm and human. She touches the chin of the flesh body.

"As I said last time, these are just base models." Evergreen comes up behind her. "We have many, many options to consider before you make the transfer."

"Will it hurt?"

Evergreen shrugs. "A passing moment in a long, long life."

She snorts in disbelief and turns to him. Rick is staring at the glowing breasts of the bot body, his face flushed bronze. There is a word on his lips that she can't quite make out.

"What do you think?" she says.

Rick starts as if roused from a daydream. "Don't ask me." He sticks his hand into the pocket of his jacket. "I'd love either one." He turns the pocket inside out and flicks lint onto the showroom floor.

Evergreen's smile flickers as if from a power surge, and then brightens to maximum again. "Shall we step into my office then?"

She shivers. "It's a big decision," she says. "I guess I'm still looking." Then she tugs at the sleeve of Rick's jacket.

He scowls. "This can't go on."

"But it can." She pinches his golden cheek.

Reluctantly, he offers her his arm. "You're wasting our time."

She propels him toward the exit. "But it's mine to waste, dear."

James Patrick Kelly has won the Hugo, Nebula and Locus Awards. He podcasts free readings of his work at <http://feeds.feedburner.com/freereads>. *The Wreck of the Godspeed*, a new collection, is forthcoming in August.