

Strange machine

A fair exchange?

Taik Hobson

“It wasn’t always like this, ya’know.”

Molly had said that, the day Lorraine had got her Baby Maker®.

Lorraine could tell that Molly had just returned from the lie-brea-ri, east of town. She could read, that Molly, was high on them sweets most of the time, but boy could she read.

Lorraine had been working as far back as she could remember, getting a Maker® was all that she had ever hoped for; it was an achievement in her eyes, it meant that you were on your way to becoming more than just another girl on the street. You were going to be a woman.

Molly was higher than Lorraine had ever seen her, laughing as she clutched her belly, tears swelling beneath her eyes. Between the laughing, Molly’s half-formed sentences made no sense at all.

It wasn’t long before tears were all that was left, and Molly became a mess, as Molly always did, crying about everything she and every other girl had lost the moment they were born. The operations. The scars. Lorraine had just held onto her as Molly went on, her fingers tracing the scar that stretched the distance of her small waist, right below her belly. Having sat through talks like this a hundred times over, Lorraine was beginning to wonder if those visits to the building with the books ever did Molly any good.

Lorraine found her gaze drawn to the Maker®. It was just getting too much for her, and Molly’s endless episodes about a time when girls didn’t need Makers® seemed nothing less than crazy talk. Lorraine couldn’t help herself, she didn’t know a lot of words, but the Maker® was just so nice on the eye. So *smooth*.

And *hell*, if it didn’t make her just want to *ride* it.

Three days later Lorraine had bluntly refused Molly’s offer of sweets, having traded her one kidney for the GeTube® to make a boy. She wasn’t stupid, you couldn’t handle them sweets without your kidney. Everybody knew that. Standing by the doorway, Molly had made to say something, but had left instead.

It was a responsibility, when you got down to it, and Lorraine couldn’t help but

think of Sweet Sally, who’d traded GeTubes® for every organ she had.

Too bad she went for them sweets with twice the fury. Which was how Sweet Sally had got her name. One day Sally had taken something her body — whatever was left of it — couldn’t handle, and ended up swallowing the contents of every Tube she had. Molly and Lorraine had arrived to a mess of empty tubes and coupons — some with running counters — scattered across a soaked mattress. Piled in the corner was a lifeless husk of half-digested grafts, prostheses and duct tape, that could still have



been Sally if it had screamed, “*I’m there, baby!*”

Lorraine had kept one of Sally’s coupons, good for a GeTube® trade for her baby boy before the counter ran out.

“That’s right,” said Lorraine to no one in particular, “a boy.” No, if she was going to make a baby then it would work on the other side of the Wall, that 20-foot-tall structure that reached into the sky, forever closed to the likes of her. Beyond that lay the city of perfection, where her son could become a productive member of society, instead of running around the streets like the rest of them. And the only way to be sure of that was to have a boy. It had cost her a kidney and three of her good fingers, but it was what she wanted, and she reckoned that it was a fair deal if ever she saw one.

“Word is,” Molly had said, and Lorraine wasn’t sure why she even listened to her any more, “that folks used ta walk around with two of dem beans.” Yeah, but *hell* Molly, folks’ll say anything if they thought they could make you buy the *same* Tube twice.

Do right for you what mama couldn’t do for me, thought Lorraine, eyeing the DKit® that replaced her kidney. It was her ma’s but at least the lights still blinked. Her mother had died at the ripe old age of 32, and by then the only real thing she had left going for her was her heart, which she never traded for anything.

“I’d be lucky to live that long.”

Lorraine couldn’t remember what her mother looked like, she’d traded that memory for the GeTube® that would give her son Humour®.

Three weeks of turning 15, the legal age to buy a Maker®, and she already had all the important tubes. Her son may still be missing a few fingers, *but at least he’ll have all them arms and legs... ’sides, it’s what’s in the heart that counts, ain’t it?*

“And boy,” Lorraine half-said to her future son, “did I ever get you a good offer on that one?”

The Pur-sow-nah-lee-tee list that came with the Maker® proved harder than she had first thought, but after a week’s worth of work, sweat, tears, traded organs and memories later, Lorraine was finally onto the ‘Ts. She couldn’t rely on her memory anymore, wasn’t sure if it was even hers, the list was what kept her on track.

But now she was thinking about Molly. What if Molly was right, about never needing a Maker®? *Had things always been like this?* Molly could read, *and books don’t* —

“*Goddammit!*” glancing at the coupon’s expiry counter, Lorraine cursed that she’d even stopped to think. Carrying a bag of green silvery tubes, she set off for the Trading Zone.

She’d better hurry, she thought, if she wanted to trade in the next coupon and get her kid some good quality Indecision®. ■
A product of *in vivo* Baby Making, Taik Hobson (www.taikhobson.blogspot.com) lives in Japan.

Join the discussion of Futures in Nature at go.nature.com/QMAM2a

JACEY