

COMMUNICANT

The ties that bind.

BY JOHN GILBEY

We'd been dating for years, but we were still tiptoeing around the question that faces many couples in our situation. It was, we agreed very late one night, a matter of commitment and trust — and not something to take on lightly.

In retrospect, it was probably me that blocked the discussion from going any further which — I realized far too late — may well have been why Helen was so enthusiastic about the Silicon Valley job. It was a wonderful opportunity: three months with a bio-data start-up company in Mountain View getting them up to speed on the new techniques that she had just published.

Sure, we vowed to stay in touch, but as her work ramped up and the schedule began to bite, our conversations all but petered out. Glumly, I began to understand just what a mistake I'd made. I had, I reasoned, completely blown it — so I was really surprised when she wanted to see me the first evening after she'd got back from her trip. She had, she said, something to tell me.

We agreed to meet for dinner at the Tandoori place near the railway station — where we'd had our first date. I got there early and sat nervously scrunching poppadoms and drinking too much cold Indian lager while mentally preparing my speech of apology.

She looked fantastically alive. The Californian sun had tinted her hair slightly auburn and her skin had acquired a fresh glow of health and well-being. Helen smiled at me — the smile of someone who has important news that they are dying to share. I put two and two together and asked her if she was pregnant. Her laugh came as a relief to me, although the loud whoop I gave gained me some baleful stares from the other diners. So, if not that — then what?

Helen turned slightly in her chair and scooped her hair aside with one hand. There, at the base of her skull, was the thing we had spent so long discussing: a small, dimpled disk of alloy, anodized a fashionable lime green, laser engraved with the tiny characters

defining her range of MAC addresses. Helen had got a Connection.

I can't remember everything I said, but I know I used "betrayal" a few times — and "selfish", and possibly a few worse epithets. Helen sat serenely until I'd finished my rant, then she smiled away the waiters who were trying to come to her rescue.



She looked at me with something that I hoped was compassion — but it was the kind of look you give to a grumpy child who doesn't understand the adult world.

"I know we said we'd wait — but when I got to the lab and saw how much synergy everyone got from being Connected, I just couldn't resist. They were really kind, but I could see that I wouldn't be able to work there effectively without it. It's more than that though — it gives a wonderful sense of... well, belonging and understanding."

I asked — testily — for an example, and Helen thought for a moment. "Well, things like knowing that the X32 bus is running nine minutes late, that the guy over there in the corner is really excited about his new media job — he is here to celebrate with his friends but they are still on the bus. He thinks I'm cute, by the way — he especially likes my... Uh, never mind. Oh, and it's going to rain later — so I'd like to be home by ten... There is just so much richness and texture; I thought you, of all people, would understand."

Just because I'm a

software developer doesn't mean I have to like the stuff, I thought gloomily. Having worked in the industry for years, I know just what happens when you are working against a wildly optimistic deadline with a microscopic budget — and that isn't the sort of code I want plumbed permanently into my nervous system, even if it does mean I

can read my e-mail while walking down the street. I considered remonstrating with her about the lack of adequate testing protocols, the myriad unknown risks of interactions and privacy — don't get me started on privacy — but they were all old, stale arguments.

Helen now had a golden world — a world without me — with the millions of other Connected folk who obviously shared startlingly intimate details of her life. Nothing I could do or say would change her delight in this new set of senses. I have to admit, though, that I was curious about what it felt like when the software was running, so I asked her.

She wrinkled her nose, then her eyes defocused slightly while she reviewed her symbiotic systems and tried to put words to the sensations. "Kind of nice, like wearing a cosy pair of slippers — or walking with a friend. But the best bit is when an application gets upgraded, there's a sort of tingly rush of anticipation like you get on Christmas Eve when you're a kid."

Her cheeks flushed slightly in a way that I recognized from a much more private moment. "In fact," she said quietly, "the core system is updating itself right now."

I waited expectantly for a moment, and then slowly became aware of the lack of movement in the space around me. Across the table, Helen was rigid — with her pupils slowly dilating. As I watched with mounting horror, a small bead of saliva slid from one side of her mouth. Then the screaming started: sharp, guttural and inhuman — but it was a long time before I realized it was coming from me. ■

John Gilbey is currently wrestling with his first science-fiction novel, Contextual, and fears that it may be gaining the upper hand.

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