

CLOCKING OUT

Time to go.

BY PRESTON GRASSMANN

As May walked back through the time zones of her company town for the last time, she stared at the hands of her watch. She could feel her mind adjusting to its tiny motions, its auto-syncing movements slowing down as she passed through each border. Company news and notifications pulsed over her vision in a palimpsest of coded text.

It meant nothing to her now.

“What will you do on the outside?” Raja had asked her that morning.

Her over-clocked mind offered a range of possibilities, but only one of them made sense.

“Get my life back together,” she had said.

Once, she was naive enough to believe that her mental enhancements would offer solutions to the problems in her personal life. After all, she had developed new patents and coded a submodule on robotic proprioception that would’ve taken years on the outside.

But this was only part of the life she had made for herself, and she finally understood that there were more important things to think about than patents and proprioception.

I can't live this way anymore.

She could hear those words in the distant sound of cars passing outside, in the chiming of a clock tower, in the cries of children playing in a park. In the subjective space and time of her own mind, they were still too far away to reach.

“Get your life back together?” his doubtful voice had echoed, staring at her as if those words had been arcane ciphers that needed to be translated. She could see his thoughts racing, trying to unpack the question into logical solutions. “Think of what you’ve sacrificed to be here.”

“I know what I’ve given up,” she had said. *Something has to give.*

“Are you sick? Whatever it is, we can help you deal with it...”

It was common enough in a fast-town like hers. Some of the workers couldn’t take the strain of moving between zones. During their brief company breaks, the time-zone shifts would require careful adjustments at

each level, allowing workers to acclimatize to faster or slower rates of clock-speed. Despite the precautions, there were still documented cases of permanently over-clocked minds, or workers suffering from mental time-lag, forced to live out their

Maybe it would be better for the both of us if I left.

In that moment, she hadn’t been able to respond, the words too abstract and far-away; slow-motion sounds escaping through a long and languorous sigh. And when the

realization had finally come that she had to make a choice, all she had wanted was to over-clock her mind, believing that it would give her a solution, a way out of her misery. But as she made her way through each time zone, she felt the space between them growing, until it seemed like a chasm she could no longer bridge. She was getting farther and farther away, each increment of enhancement putting more distance between them.

What if I leave the company?

How many times had she said that before?

Now that she was finally leaving, she had to wonder why it had taken her so long. The square buildings and the tea gardens and the company shops were full of scurrying motions. She walked by a crowd conversing in Goglot, a tiny cloud of private drones purring above them. She had spent years learning the native tongue of fast-towns, but for all its efficiency and compactness, it seemed so empty of meaning.

She fought through the time-lag, walking through the gate as carefully as she could, letting her natural proprioception take over. She closed her eyes and took off her watch, her mind slowing down, her thoughts syncing to the natural rhythms around her. She could only hope that they would mean something to her again.

“Am I late?” a thin voice said, slow and beautiful. It stretched and held itself in her mind. She opened her eyes then, and felt the time and distance between them closing.

A slow smile came to her lips as she reached out to bridge that final space and said: “You’re just in time. You’re just in time.” ■

Preston Grassmann is a contributing editor of *Locus Magazine*, where he writes a regular column called *The Cosmic Village*. His recent work has been published in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Mythic Delirium* and *AE: Canadian Science Fiction*. He currently lives in Tokyo.



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

lives in the company towns.

“No, I’m not sick. But I won’t be coming back,” she had said, simply.

“Have you forgotten what it is we’re working towards here?” he had said. “It’s not just about changing the working conditions of the world outside. It’s about remaking the human condition itself.”

She had heard it all before. The edge of a human singularity was a dangerous place to be, but it was also a privilege.

Her time zone was often referred to as the eighth and inner circle on the outside, regarded with an equal measure of fear and respect. They were seen as wraiths, living out their lives for the sole purpose of CAD and code. For those on the inside, it was known as the pinnacle of productivity, the peak of human over-clocking. And she had worked her way up, knowing the risks involved, until she had all but forgotten what it meant to live on the outside.