

Futures

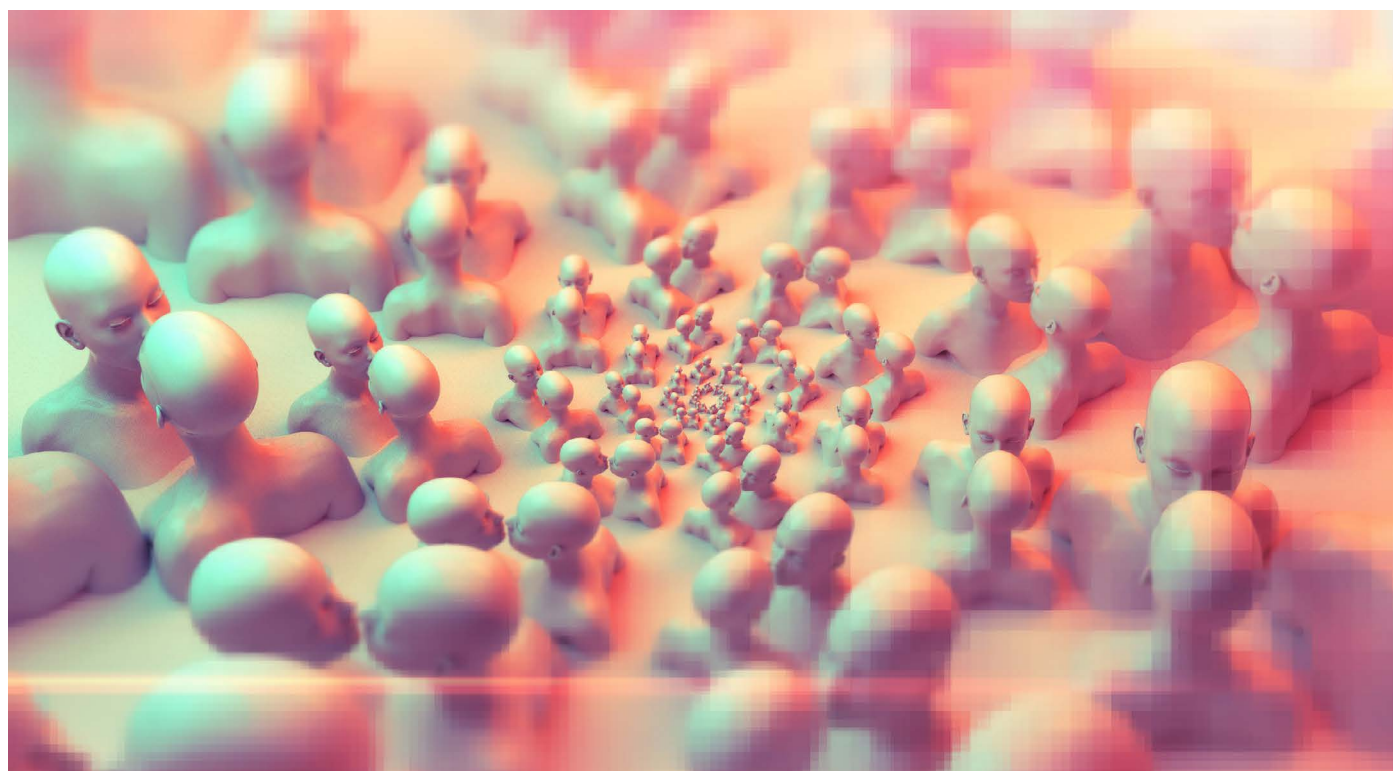


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

RICOCHET-T-T-T-T-T

Love is the drug. **By Judy Helfrich**

We're racing through the streets, leaping over people slumped on sidewalks and spilling from cars, and all I can think is *I can't remember where we're going* when I slam into Neven. He's stopped dead and I'm about to scream *RUN!* when he whispers, "It ricochets."

My belly tightens in a tourniquet of dread. That's what they all say. Right before the fugitive bio-nanites, lab escapees hiding out in all our brains, go berserk. *Oops*, the researchers had said. *We didn't foresee the whole airborne thing. The lung-transference thing. The brain-breach thing. Sorry about that.*

"Neven!" His gaze is vacant. Preoccupied. He collapses.

"No!" I shake him wildly. We'd held out for so long. Why now? He's staring up at a print taped inside the window of a store: Escher's iconic drawing of hands drawing themselves. My mind cramps. *Hands drawing themselves drawing hands drawing themselves drawing hands* –

ricochet

The thought rebounds inside my mind, faster and faster, scything through my memories. I clutch my head. I need to go ... somewhere. Do ... something. I hug Neven. "Please wake up. You said you'd never forget me. That you forgive me." Because the ricochet, it's –

All my fault.

Inexplicably, my memories flood back. I swallow. After the infestation, while governments scrambled, while the world held its collective breath, I'd reasoned the nanites were, fundamentally, computers, and did what any self-respecting programmer would do.

I wrote an app for that.

Oh my God.

I race towards my apartment, because that's where we were heading. That's where I can fix it. Fix Neven.

Oh Lord. What did you do? I'd only wanted to find my soulmate, that's all. So I wrote a dating app. Used myself as a beta tester. Hacked the nanites and instructed them to find my perfect match. Neven. But to fulfil that directive, they

evaluated everyone. Signed up everyone. Networked everyone. And spread the ricochet.

Anguish pours into my blood, and I stumble. *Don't leave him. Go back. GO BACK.* I shriek and collapse, every muscle a knot of agony. *Dear God, WHAT IS THIS?* But I know.

My app exploited the bio-nanites' access to love's secret sauce: chemistry. *Biochemistry.* Hormones, pheromones, neurotransmitters; the nanites not only matched couples who were compatible, they were *biochemically* compatible. Relationships shattered as old married couples and newlyweds alike abandoned their current partners for their perfect match. That's why the streets were so clogged. They were frantic to be with their newfound loves. Because the nanites forced everyone into a state of biochemical withdrawal until they were.

The state I'm in now.

My withdrawal fades as I rush back to Neven. I kiss him desperately, then gasp as his arms encircle me, sleeping beauty awakened. "*RUN, GODDAMMIT!*" I yell, and he does.

