

THE SUIT

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My morning did not get off to a great start.

YOU DID NOT PICK UP YESTERDAY'S MILK ORDER, the fridge chided over my house link. I looked in my to-do and couldn't find the order. Once again, my unpatched suit hadn't picked up the fridge's message, but just try explaining that to an irate icebox at too-damn-early on a dismal November morning when you're standing around in the bath wearing nothing but your earbud.

After cursing the engineers who had bestowed that Pandora's box of a modern appliance on me, I added "Get milk" to my to-do and resigned myself to a milkless breakfast of dry VegeCrunchies and the electrolyte-supplemented juice my ever-solicitous toilet had recommended in its prim schoolmarm voice after analyzing my morning pee and dump.

I wanted to follow my breakfast with a chocolate doughnut and a hot cup of coffee, but the kitchen overseer insisted I eat one of Merck's enhanced biomedical apples to go with the stove's selection of an invigorating organic herbal tea. FLU SEASON IS APPROACHING, it warned me as I took the apple from the tray. YOU DO NOT NEED ADDITIONAL STIMULATION, it added as I sipped the vile, decaffeinated brew that it had dribbled into my commuter's cup.

For a moment, the thought crossed my mind that the whole kitchen was pissed at me for forgetting the milk. I took a bite of the apple, mindful of my toilet's warning about restricting my sugar levels and wondered, as I dumped the apple's core into the disposal, how my ancestors had managed to survive without smart appliances ensuring their continued health.

But a part of me wished I could find out.

The closet wanted to know what I wanted to wear to the office but, without the coffee and doughnut I was too sleep-fogged and sugar-deprived to think. Instead I grabbed the dark blue, double-breasted Lauren I'd worn yesterday. I really liked that suit, even though it was running a buggy version of e-suitware.

I stopped upgrading and patching that suit's software when I heard Lauren was about to release version 7.0. I generally avoid buying the first version of any release, but for Lauren suitware, I'll always make an exception.

With Lauren about to release, it was certain that the other major lines would quickly follow with upgrades of their own. Everyone in the dog-eat-dog world of e-Fashion industry was anxious that no rival gained more than a microsecond's advantage.

For a moment I considered wearing the Armani, just for variety. I'd gotten that suit for a semi-formal dinner party two months ago. It was nice-looking, fit me well in fact, but, like most of that line's strict protocols, refused to link with those suits that had been crafted by an "inferior clothier." The suit was gorgeous but was only useful in those circles where its e-snobbery was acceptable, if not expected.

The Armani's haughty incompatibility hadn't saved me from the clutches of a woman who had been wearing an Eddo gown. I later learned too late, and much to my embarrassment, that she'd set her e-jewelry to autoblog a continual stream of everything she was doing, both clothed and otherwise. That was a little too much disclosure for my taste, especially since it reflected poorly on my, how shall we say, performance.

So I put on the six-months-old Lauren, whose timeless cut was still fashionable. That's the value of classic cut and fabric.

Even with its occasional problem, the buggy v6.3 suitware was adequate for my work a day needs. The software kept a close watch on my health, maintained my appointment calendar in real time, and knew when to adapt to the sudden changes in temperature as I moved from frigid conference rooms to overheated offices, cold washrooms, or even into the intense heat of Dallas's summer afternoons. I could put up with the occasional communications bug for a few more days, I thought.

Lauren had announced that the new suitware would have not only all the functionality of v6.3, but would maintain active links to the local environment, perhaps alerting the owner when their favorite restaurant was featuring something they liked or discovering where new shows were opening nearby. It even had a flash advertising suppression feature, which was skirting on the illegal but, so long as the suppression remained on less than ten minutes, it was permissible. That was a small price to pay to keep the suit network viable.

The suit's bug sometimes made meetings awkward. The automatic exchange that was part of the communications package sometimes locked up. When that happened I had to go through an awkward suit-to-suit request-permit-acknowledge routine that wasted precious seconds and made me look like a novice e-suiter.

The new version supposedly prevented that sort of gaffe and, in addition, promised to grab name, title, business names, web URLs, addresses, cell and other phones, suit numbers, email, personal web sites, blogs,

registered biases or proclivities that were legally required or that demanded a degree of discretion, and any allergies or medical conditions of which I should be aware, all within one microsecond. Acquiring that much richer data set would place me at a definite advantage when it came to office schmoozing, or even measuring up a client. The first one with any advanced e-suit features always got a leg up on the competition.

YOU HAVE GAINED TWO POUNDS OVER YOUR IDEAL WEIGHT, my shoes announced as I slipped them on. I already suspected that from the way my underwear had tightened my waistband and how my SmartShirt had loosened the fit around my stomach.

WATCH YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE, my tie warned me as it clicked into place against my neck and synchronized with the shirt, suit, underwear, and shoes.

Thankfully, my suit had nothing to say as I slipped on the jacket. I suppose it was just happy to be worn.

DON'T FORGET THE MILK, the fridge reminded me on the way out. WATCH THOSE CALORIES, the kitchen reminded me. HAVE A NICE DAY, said the door.

The morning went quite smoothly as my suit and I swam through the tsunami of junk calls, messages from assorted clients and vendors, competing text, cell, and phone calls, and requests from all the office machines, all anxious to perform some task for me. None of them gave rise to the appearance of the bug.

At the same time I was trying to keep up with the office's suit-to-suit banter, news, and the continuing arguments about football, baseball, soccer, and damn near every other sport I never watched. From the reactions of others my suit was probably missing half of what was being transmitted. Bugs. Sometimes I was grateful for them.

By the time my lunch break arrived I was fed up with the cascade of missed jokes, partial gossip, and tiny, tantalizing snippets of someone's previous night's adventures. I think there was a futile attempt to organize another disastrous office kick-ball league, but it might have been another sports discussion. Hard to tell when you can't monitor the entire string. Although I love my job, lunch gave me an opportunity to get away from the confusing din.

Dallas's downtown was teeming with the hustle and bustle of the workaday crowds and the buzz of a million advertisements shouting on every channel of my suit as I strolled along. Despite the commercial and political cacophony, I loved walking around downtown and watching people in their endless variety: a stagger of joggers churning legs at a stoplight, the gabble of women carrying on a six-way vocal and electronic conversation, a

fat man gesturing wildly as he shouted into his earbud, and two rich ranchers in suppression coats, dumb canvas pants, and unsubsidized leather boots ambling along and laughing, deaf to the electronic cries from storefronts, street vendors, and sidewalk kiosks. I resented them for flaunting their wealth so brazenly in public as if nothing mattered to them but what they heard and saw through their naked ears and eyes.

A moment later, my resentment evaporated as I passed by Giorgio's and saw that they were featuring orange blossom salad, my favorite, as a luncheon special. I queried the menu and, since its response didn't produce a stern warning from my briefs, I figured either the salad's labeled sugar content was acceptable or that not having that chocolate doughnut had kept my blood sugar levels at an acceptable level.

After a delicious lunch I wandered across the street to Dankers to see if they had the new Lauren in stock. I rarely came away from there without buying something, even if it was only an expensive pair of dumb, unsubsidized socks.

The atmosphere inside the store was a welcome relief. Even in autumn, Dallas' afternoon heat can be oppressive. My suit adjusted the weave to let the cool air flow over my skin and, at the same time, dumped the heat into my soles, where the cool Mexican tiles would absorb it.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dwight," an obsequious sales robot said. "Dankers has a nice line of winter wear that just arrived. There are four models that would be a fine addition to your wardrobe." It flashed an image on its screen. "Note the fine attention to detail, the delicate stitching on the lapels, the . . ."

I interrupted, not wanting to hear the store's spiel. "What are your latest versions of suitware?"

"We have a gorgeous double-breasted Julian running Microsoft's SW6.6," the robot responded immediately. "Version 6.6 offers several features that will allow you to . . ."

"How about the new Lauren that's been announced?"

The robot blinked to check inventory. "I'm sorry, sir, but their suitware won't be in stock for several days. Can I interest you in anything else?"

I was disappointed that I'd have to wait, but I didn't want to waste the trip. I needed something more casual than suits. "What have you got in sport jackets and slacks?"

“We have some excellent GTC coats in your preferred color range,” the robot continued smoothly as it displayed a selection of coats fabricated by the General Threads Consortium. I watched with some excitement as it paged through the selections just slowly enough for me to appreciate the details of cut and fabric.

I spotted a nice Harris Tweed with cinched belt. “It comes with the latest Apple suitware,” the robot whispered when it detected my interest. “The fabric is completely waterproof, stain-resistant, and temperature-compliant. In addition, the suitware can handle up to sixteen suit-to-suit interactions simultaneously. What’s more,” it added softly as if to convey a great secret, “it is on sale at a price you can afford.”

For the tenth time in as many days I regretted not restricting disclosure of my account balances to commercial inquiries. Sure, making my financial health available to authorized stores made shopping more convenient and efficient, but still, it rankled that my finances should be so transparent.

“I’ll take it,” I said, deciding, after a moment’s consideration that the price was eminently affordable. “I’d like a new pair of shoes as well,” I added, hoping that I could find a pair that wouldn’t be so critical about my weight.

“Of course, sir. Would you like them in brown, cordovan, or black? Would you like loafer, or laced, boot or moccasin style, leather or . . . ?”

I stopped the robot, not wanting to hear every option the store might offer. “I think a pair of leather loafers would be nice.” A simple, understated pair would go well with the tweed jacket.

The robot blinked again. “We have two hundred and fifty-three possible variations of leather loafers in our inventory,” it said. “Shall I display them?”

I knew that the only way to find a pair I liked was to plow through the list. “Let’s begin,” I said with a sigh.

The robot brought a dozen pair of shoes into its display. I admired the handsome leathers, the fine stitching, and the exquisite polish that seemed inches deep. The pair with a lustrous pearl color and pink highlights was particularly beautiful. There was only one problem. “These are all women’s pumps,” I exclaimed.

The robot blinked again. “But you requested . . .” it began and then switched to “Of course, sir. My mistake,” and displayed a selection of more appropriate loafers.

“No tassels, please,” I insisted, which dropped the number of possible styles to a mere one hundred. We proceeded merrily along until a collection of woman’s red heels appeared on the screen. They were elegant—more suitable for an evening out, I thought, than a business office.

“Those are lovely,” a husky voice announced from behind me. “I admire your taste. I’ll bet your wife or girlfriend would be very happy with any of those.” I turned to find myself facing an attractive redhead. “Unless they are for you?” she added.

“First,” I corrected her, “I am not shopping for anyone, and, I should add, there is no way I would wear these,” I pointed at one pair of highly decorated four-inch heels, “under any circumstances.”

She tilted her head to one side, put a finger to her cheek, and looked me over. “I don’t know,” she grinned. “You’d probably look cute with those – taller, for sure.”

“They’d probably look better on you,” I replied and returned the smile, thankful for that extra tuck on the waistband. She was awfully cute.

Before she had a chance to answer, her obviously distraught robot interrupted as it rolled up. “Madam,” it declared obsequiously. “Your selection, please.” Its screen was displaying an array of cordovan, tassel-free, men’s loafers.

She glanced over her shoulder and then at me. “I was shopping for a pair of evening shoes. In fact, those.” She pointed to one pair on my robot’s display panel. “Apparently the store has gotten our accounts confused.”

The robots insisted, but slightly out of synch, to each of us. “Aren’t-t these-se what-t you-ou requested-ed?”

There was quite obviously a serious glitch in the store’s inventory software. Instead of continuing to argue with the witless robots, I said as plainly as possible. “I’ll take those cordovans,” and pointed at a pair on the woman’s display. “I’m sure those red shoes will look great,” I added in an aside.

“Perhaps, but only with the right dress,” she replied. My suit alerted me to a download request for my profile. Flattered, I responded with a request of my own. A man two aisles over smiled and waved for no obvious reason.

“Any dress would look great on you,” I answered gallantly, hoping I was not overstepping the bounds. Flirting had gotten less perilous of late, but the threat of a harassment charge still loomed large. For some reason her data wasn’t coming across.

She clapped her hands and called up a green dress on her robot’s display. “This is the one I already picked. It comes with the latest e-dress upgrade too.”

“A beautiful dress,” I said, struggling to keep a smile on my face as I tried to force the damned suit to link to hers.

“Since you agree, that’s what I’ll get.” She leaned toward my robot and said, “I’ll take those red heels with the strap,” and touched the pair she wanted.

While our robots negotiated with our clothing over the billing, I smiled and got a nice one in reply. Who knew what this could lead to if only my suit would establish that damned link? Were beads of sweat forming on my forehead? In desperation I turned off the comm feature entirely.

Her face became expressionless, the usual sign that someone is turning their attention inward. Her face lost the smile. “Look, I’m sorry,” she said quickly as she came out of the call and stepped backwards. “But I have to rush. Nice meeting you and all that,” she shouted over her shoulder as she practically ran from the store.

Had it been something she got from my suit?

I tried to access the data my suit had downloaded as I walked back to the office but there were nothing but blank fields. Had she refused to send her data or was it the buggy suitware acting up again? Damn, and here I thought we were making a real connection, more than just casual conversation, at any rate. Had I read the situation wrong? Was there something about my data that had caused her to rush away? Had a serial killer or potential rapist hacked my suitware? No, that couldn’t be. A moment’s check told me there was nothing untoward in my files. In fact, there was nothing in my files whatsoever and the suit insisted I was named Susan.

A quick reset restored the suit as of the last backup, which was fifteen minutes before I ate that delightful salad. Sadly, I had no record whatever of anything that had happened while I was in Dankers.

I had to assume that the redhead simply did not like whatever my suit had downloaded to her. The more I considered that possibility the more despondent I became. Why had I ever chosen to wear a suit that wasn’t functioning properly? Stupid, stupid, stupid, I cursed.

I needed something to make me feel better so I instructed my suit to call in an order for a pint of chocolate chip ice cream from an automated kiosk near my apartment. I knew that the pleasure of tasting those chill chunks of chocolate surrounded by creamy vanilla would bring my wounded emotions back into balance.

“YOU SHOULD NOT INDULGE IN ICE CREAM,” my underwear informed me. I ignored the warning. The ice cream wasn’t about weight, calories, or blood sugar levels and I damn sure wasn’t going to let a pair of nagging briefs tell me what I needed to fill the emotional void that had suddenly opened.

DID YOU GET THE MILK? The fridge demanded as I opened the door. I glanced at the yawning emptiness where the milk jug should be and realized I had missed the reminder once again. Was that my fault or was this yet another manifestation of the suit's problems? I'd have to check later.

I'd scheduled the artificial sashimi tuna with wasabi, but the freezer had thawed out a vegetarian medley instead. I stared at the low-cal dinner choice, wondering if this was the fridge's punishment for forgetting the milk. A second's thought made me realize that the kitchen must have learned about my ice cream order and adjusted the dinner choice. Damn, it's really rough when your clothes and appliances conspire against you. "Traitors," I hissed at them as I picked up my ration of squash and corn, asparagus and potatoes, and tomatoes and onions, all afloat in some sort of undoubtedly nutritious and vitamin-fortified sauce.

The package from Danker's arrived and begged to be opened as I munched my way through my obscenely healthy dinner. Despite their pleas, I finished my plate and dumped the dirty dish and tableware into the washer. THANK YOU, it said, no doubt grateful for the small bit of attention it got from me twice a day.

I opened the shoebox that should have held my loafers but, instead, I beheld the redhead's three-inch heels. It didn't take a genius to figure what must have happened: I'd ordered my shoes from her screen and she from mine. The perplexed store software must have confused our orders. The mix-up wasn't that big a problem. I'd just send them back with a note. Sure, and she'd probably do the same with the loafers she got, and that would be the end of it.

Before I could open the other box, my cell chirped. "You must have my heels," an obviously distraught female voice proclaimed before I could say hello. "I needed those for tonight, damn it."

"How did you . . ." I began and then remembered that she'd accepted my profile and had my number. This was an opportunity not to be missed. I thought quickly, wondering how I could take advantage of this chance. "I can bring them to you," I suggested. If I could arrange a meeting, perhaps she'd clarify how my profile had offended her.

"Great," she quickly replied. "We don't live that far from each other. Bring them over." The phone clicked without another word from her.

That would have been great if I had her address. Not knowing where she lived left me somewhat embarrassed, frustrated, and wondering if suitware could be jailed for mismanagement of a person's files. I tried to redial her number, but the suit had already deleted it, along with the reminder about the damned milk.

Wait a minute! Didn't she say we didn't live that far apart? She had to be within walking distance. All I had to do was wander around and hope she would spot me. What else could I do? Maybe she'd call again, I hoped.

I pulled on a dumb pair of jeans with a decent communications link and slipped on a pair of running shoes. YOU NEED TO RUN AT AEROBIC SPEED FOR TWENTY-FOUR POINT FIVE MINUTES, the shoes said as soon as I fastened them. YOU NEED TO LOSE WEIGHT.

Obviously it had been talking to the kitchen about my lunchtime orange blossom salad containing excess calories. Hadn't I burned enough calories, despite eating the vegetarian medley, or did they just want a nice run? Regardless of the reason, it was obvious that the household conspiracy was growing and the other gadgets had recruited my running shoes.

The shoes began playing the opening riff of Jackson's Apple Downbeat Rag as I headed out. PICK UP THE PACE it said every twenty steps. PICK UP THE PACE. I ignored it as I set out on my search with her shoebox under my arm.

The area where I live is pockmarked with redevelopments – industrial sites, shops, and storage buildings converted to apartments, condominiums, and multi-family homes. The only way you could tell was that most of the converted ones had awnings over the main doors. The doormen all gazed suspiciously at me as I walked slowly past with uplifted eyes, as if I were casing their posts. Their gazes grew steadily more suspicious every time I passed. I ignored them and prayed that she would spot me as I continued to jog along to alternate exhortations to PICK UP THE PACE and bits of new jazz at an aerobic tempo.

After the third repetition of my circular trek I started to doubt that my lovely redhead would be glancing out her window in anticipation of the arriving pumps. What reason would she have? She probably thought that I, like 99 percent of the population over five years of age, had captured her address during our exchange, just as she had captured mine.

But I hadn't. I was the idiot who decided to wear unpatched suitware and was now suffering for his sins. This wasn't going to work. There was no chance that I would find her among the hundreds who occupied the densely populated area. She would never get her shoes, miss her party tonight, and probably hate me forever. Even if I eventually ran into her somewhere else I'd still be the jerk who ruined her evening by wearing unpatched suitware.

Finally, concluding that this wasn't going to work and much to the relief of numerous nervous doormen, I headed for the kiosk to pick up my ice cream. Maybe that would console me for my loss.

"I ordered chocolate chip," I keyed to the machine.

ERROR. YOUR ORDER WAS A PINT OF LOW-FAT CHOCOLATE CHUNK PISTACHIO, the ice cream kiosk disagreed with all the weight of authority vested in it by its software.

I checked my to-do and found that damned milk reminder I had missed earlier. Where was the ... There, I had it: one order for low-fat chocolate chunk pistachio, just as the machine claimed. Obviously the dietary conspiracy had changed my order. It wasn't the kiosk that screwed up, it was those damned appliances.

"I'm changing the order. Give me a pint of chocolate-chip," I keyed.

YOU HAVE NOT BURNED SUFFICIENT CALORIES, my shoes said in rhythm to its aerobic background beat. There was a twitter of interchange from my briefs.

CONFIRMING, the machine acknowledged as a pint clunked into the delivery chute. HAVE A NICE DAY.

I looked at the container. It was a pint of low-fat, chocolate chunk pistachio. I looked around but there was no one I could complain to. It seemed that all my software were now part of the conspiracy.

Slowly I slouched away from the kiosk. Nothing, not a damn thing was going right today. I couldn't eat the food I wanted, couldn't find a freaking address I needed, and I'd never get to find out why the redhead had run away from me.

Then the phone rang. "This is Viola, Jeff. Where are you? Did something happen?" It was a reprieve, a breath of fresh air, an awakening of possibility once again. Life was suddenly good.

"I didn't get your address," I blurted. "My suitware has a bug that . . ."

"Never mind," she replied before I could finish. "I'll bring your stuff over and take a cab. I'm late already."

I beat her to my flat by three minutes, threw the pint on the table and barely had time to grab the other package when she rang the bell.

She was as breathless as I. She had a makeup case and two packages under her arms. “I got here as fast as I could,” she said and pointed at the larger package in my hands. “Is that my dress?” I nodded dumbly. “Now, where can I change?”

“The bath’s over there,” I pointed at the door. “The other door’s my closet.” Stupid thing to say, I realized as she took her packages and disappeared into the bathroom. I prayed she didn’t get too chummy with my toilet. As it had with previous women, and notably with my mother, it would lecture her on the dangers of unprotected sex, the evils of excess sugar, and the need to remain hydrated.

I slipped off my running shoes. YOU DID NOT EXERCISE SUFFICIENTLY, the shoes said in their drill sergeant manner as soon as my fingers touched the straps. YOUR AEROBIC HEARTBEAT HAS NOT BEEN RAISED SUFFICIENTLY FOR GOOD CARDIAC HEALTH.

“Screw you,” I said as I threw them across the room. I opened the box with the new loafers. They looked as nice as I imagined they would. SEARCHING FOR DATA was all they murmured in a refined voice as I slipped them on. I was admiring the look and feel of the new jacket when the bathroom door opened and a vision in green stepped out.

Viola had done something with her hair and makeup that took my breath away. Her eyes looked larger, her lips more full, and her figure in that green evening dress was breathtaking. I barely noticed the tips of her red shoes as she stepped daintily forward.

The tweed’s link was going insane from the downloads her dress was throwing at me. Music, images, lists of favorite topics, foods, colors, and a plethora of possible conversational gambits. I stood there, mouth agape, not knowing how to deal with this tsunami of information. I hadn’t had time to set the filters on the defaults. The tweed was having fits trying to access the apartment’s databanks, find my personal profiles, and respond in kind.

Viola looked as confused as I and was fumbling at her waist. “Sorry,” she said. “I forgot to adjust the dress. The default’s Cocktail Party.”

I was struggling to gain control of the tweed, which was merrily downloading my entire music library, to shut off the gushing flood of unwanted data. On top of running buggy suitware I now looked like someone who couldn’t control their own clothes.

“Think what a crowded room must be like with everyone’s clothes throwing out that much information,” I laughed as I tried to access the tweed’s menu.

“It probably wouldn’t matter in the general din at most of those affairs,” she replied as she continued to flail at her dress. “Why do they set the damn defaults like this?”

I tore the jacket off and threw it down, breaking the circuit and hopefully silencing the stream of too much information.

“I think it’s stuck,” Viola cursed as she beat at her waistline. “Oh, crap.” She ran back into the bathroom as my briefs beeped for attention.

YOU ARE UNDER STRESS, they said. LIE DOWN AND BREATHE SLOWLY. YOUR HEARTRATE IS EXCEEDING NORMAL LIMITS, my new loafers said. DID YOU GET THE MILK? asked the refrigerator.

Viola emerged from the bathroom, a dripping dress in one hand. “I had to drown it to shut it off,” she said. “Your toilet is very upset with me.”

“I ought to shut everything down,” I said. “I don’t think I can take it any more.” When she gave me a perplexed look there was nothing else to do than explain how my day had gone: my issues with the kitchen; my choosing to wear buggy suitware; the screw-up in Dankers; the argument with the kiosk; not being able to find her apartment; and the desolation that I felt that I would never again see this attractive, intelligent, wonderful woman I’d met as a result. If I had less self-control I would have cried at that point. “I’m almost at the point where I want to just shut down my links and cut myself off from everything.”

“I sometimes feel the same way,” she admitted. “But I can’t imagine what it would be like to be unlinked. Oh, did you know that your ice cream is melting?”

I had forgotten the pint of fat-free I had absent-mindedly set aside, a container that was now leaking a bilious green flow across my coffee table and spilling onto the rug. I turned, scooped up the container and tossed it into the fridge.

YOU SHOULD EAT NO MORE THAN AN EIGHTH OF A PINT, the fridge chided as I dropped into the freezer slot.

“I’ll never eat any of that low-fat crap,” I remarked as I slammed the door on the fridge’s dietary advice.

“I guess I can forget going anywhere else this evening,” Viola said sadly. She was looking at the sodden dress.

“Maybe I can make it up to you,” I suggested tentatively. “We could go somewhere we don’t have to dress up.” There was no way I was going to risk wearing a suit this time.

She glanced at the refrigerator. “That would be nice. I doubt I have anything to fear from someone named Susan who’s never even gotten a traffic ticket.”

When I saw her inviting smile I felt as if I had won the lottery. “Do you like chocolate chip ice cream?” I ventured.

“The only thing better is Rocky Road,” she replied with a wistful expression. “Or maybe Tin Roof.” Then her face fell. “But my dressware won’t let me have it.”

We looked at each other for a moment, nodded, smiled, unlinked, and shut off the world to everything but each other.