

VIRTUA STREET

虛擬街頭漂流記

Winner of the inaugural Soji Shimada Mystery Award

2014. Taipei's once bustling shopping district Ximending has been destroyed in a devastating earthquake, and as the years pass, it never recovers.

2020. Ximending is now a byword for government failure. Desperate to overturn its fortune, the government entrusts the task of regenerating the area to a private company. But rather than the usual new shopping malls or public art, they suggest a more radical solution. Resurrect the area in virtual reality. And so they go about building an exact replica of Ximending in its glory days of 2008. Every detail is the same, every street and shop. But this time, you wander the streets in a specially constructed room, with a conveyor belt floor.

This is Virtua Street.

But just as the developer Da-Shan and his colleague Lu-Hua are about to launch, they discover a technical problem. They enter the system to investigate, only to find... a dead body! A police investigation reveals the victim to have been struck on the back of the head. The body belongs to a man discovered dead in the real world, alone in a room locked from the inside, with no murder weapon in sight.

And the only people who know about Virtua Street and its technical workings are the team of developers, Da-Shan and Lu-Hua...

By mixing science fiction and crime, the conventions of both genres are overturned in original and surprising ways. Soji Shimada, the giant of Japanese mystery writing himself, has said that *Virtua Street* may well set the new standard for Asian crime writing in the twenty-first century.

Mr Pets 寵物先生

Mr Pets, pen name of Wang Chien-Min, previously worked as a software engineer. After reading the classic works of Japanese mystery writers Kyotaro Nishimura and Akimitsu Takagi while at university, he decided that he would dedicate himself to writing crime fiction that could sit alongside his heroes. Now a member of the Mystery Writers of Taiwan, he continues to write criticism, as well as produce his own works of fiction, bringing in elements from fantasy, science fiction and horror to reinvigorate the genre.



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VIRTUA STREET

By Mr Pets. Translated by Malachi McGee.

Prologue: Umbilical Cord

'I'm your mother.'

The woman standing in front of me smiled, paused for a moment, then blurted out this statement to me. I instantly thought of a scene from a movie I'd seen once, *Fly Away Home*. It left the deepest impression on me; the abandoned goose eggs, their rescue, the girl who makes sure they hatch, her artist/inventor father, the awful game warden guiding the geese south for the winter, the light aircraft the girl pilots to lead them there... I was completely in love with this movie at the time, but the plot has since become muddled in my memory. Afterwards, all I could think was, 'I would love to fly,' rather than offering heartfelt encouragement to my own father. The part that came back to me clearest was the hatching of the geese. In that scene the young girl watches intently, her eyes full of wonder and love. It was only later I learned that the first thing young birds see after hatching they believe to be their mother. I did a little research, it's called 'imprinting,' one of the main themes of the movie. But this wasn't what was happening to me now. The geese taking the girl for their mother came naturally to them, not because she announced, 'I'm your mother'.

Needless to say, I'm not a bird. More importantly, the girl in the movie didn't just raise the chicks, she learned how to pilot an aircraft so that she could teach them to fly and fulfill her duty as 'mother goose'. The woman standing before me was a stranger, I couldn't possibly expect that kind of noble sacrifice from her. The whole thing was absurd; her abrupt declaration of motherhood, the scenes from the movie flashing through my mind. So I laughed.

The woman frowned. 'Why are you laughing? That's rude!' she said.

'I'm sorry,' I said, covering my mouth. 'You just look more like a big sister, that's all.'

'The world is full of mothers and daughters that look like sisters.'

'You mean you're as old as the mothers that look like their daughter's older sister? Already in your mid-thirties, almost forty?'

'I happen to be thirty, thank you.' Her eyes were as wide as meatballs, and her anger was rising. I had to find a way out of the hole I'd just dug for myself.

'Ah! So you want to adopt me, then?' I asked.

'That's my plan.' The woman's expression gradually relaxed.

'But isn't that a kinda weird, I mean from a legal and social point of view? You know, that we're too close in age, or whatever,' I asked. She proceeded to count off on her fingers all of the formal restrictions on adoption and the social reasoning behind them. Having come full circle, she sighed.

'So, actually what I'm saying is, I would like you to come *live* with me,' she concluded. I raised my eyebrows at this and was silent for a while. She seemed to interpret this as indecision on my part. 'You don't need to give me an

answer right away. I know it's sudden, but I'm not just saying this. I made up my mind to ask you, knowing you might turn me down, but I want you to seriously consider it. . .'

I felt I should cut in here, but what I said next kind of came out of nowhere. 'You're skipping a big part of the process!'

'Huh?'

'Yeah. . . like the whole giving birth, raising the child, you know?'

'It doesn't matter that I didn't give birth to you. And as for raising you, I'm going to start now.'

It is often said that parents don't always develop a deep familial attachment on first contact with their newborn baby. Mothers gain that through nine long months of pregnancy, or seeing their child grow up after all you've been through together. Otherwise it's just regular compassion. It's having a child or raising a child, one or the other, that forms the bond between parent and offspring. I don't necessarily believe that, it's just what popped into my head after being reminded of the girl who hatched the eggs in *Fly Away Home*. I pointed at the woman's stomach and used my finger to draw an imaginary line in the air from hers to mine.

'Do we have, you know, *this* between us?' I asked.

'You mean an umbilical cord?'

'No. . . ' I couldn't think of what I wanted to say and it bugged me. 'That thing all mothers share with their children. . .'

'You mean a *bond*?' she asked, putting her hand to her forehead. She looked up at the ceiling, as if the answer was written there. 'I think we do. . . No, I know we do, though I can't really say why. Obviously we're not related by blood, and I haven't known you for very long, but I plan to treat you like a daughter. I can't put the reason for that into words. But please believe me, I wouldn't say the words 'I'm your mother,' lightly. . .'

'What if you're the only one who thinks we have a bond?' I interrupted.

'The bond between parent and child has always been unilateral. Just look at the way society works, it's the parents who get to choose whether or not to have children. Children can't choose their parents.'

'Yeah, you're right!' I admitted, the intonation on the last word rising slightly, because although the woman's decision to become my mother sounded arbitrary, I felt happy about it. The woman's feisty attitude reminded me of the girl who hatched the geese. Maybe in the future she could teach me to fly, and we could get far, far away from this place? I closed my eyes for a second. When I opened them back up, I lowered my head and bowed to her.

'I hope you'll be patient with me, Ma.'

The woman went outside and turned to face me, her expression happy yet with a trace of embarrassment.

'I know I asked you to call me 'ma,' but in the future do you think you could only call me that in private?' she asked. So that's what the coy look was for.

'But I think I should practice, to convince myself that's who you are,' I said.

'If you call me that in front of other people they'll look at us strange!'

'You think they'll assume you had me when you were a teenager? Or will they think you're just really good at hiding your age?'

'It might be worth getting excited over if it were the latter,' she sighed with relief. I may have mistaken her motives, but as long as she didn't mind it would be okay. And just like that, I got another mother at eighteen, and

she was only twelve years my senior. I hadn't meant to say the word earlier, but when I looked up at her I was surprised and yet also elated, because I imagined a fleshy red cord swinging in the air between us. An umbilical cord. I felt just like a newly-hatched goose, imprinting.

Part One: Whodunnit

Chapter One Thirty Years Old and Homesick

For someone who didn't sleep well, walking from the dark of the hallway into the bright light of the interview room was almost more than my eyes could handle.

'Yo!' Two sofas sat facing each other in the middle of the room, one occupied by a man who jumped up and raised his hand in greeting as soon as I walked in.

'I knew it'd be you.' He had a smug look on his face.

'I had a feeling it'd be you, too. At least we can leave out the introductions and business cards.'

'You don't look very happy to be here,' he said.

'It has nothing to do with you. I wasn't originally the one coming in for this.' I pulled some cold coffee from the fridge and poured half a glass for both the man and myself. When I set the glass on the table, I remembered the apologetic look on Da-Shan's face when he asked me to fill in. There may have been some sudden system error he had to take care of, and I may have been willing to come and be interviewed, but I couldn't help sulking at always being thrown the hot potato like that.

'I'm assuming Mr Chen of *Fashion Waves* magazine has graced us with his humble presence to ask about Virtua Street?'

'Luva, when did you start sounding so officious?' he asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

'I thought the register fit for the occasion.' I stared at the man across from me, my old college classmate and ex-boyfriend. His name was Chen Yang-Yu, but we called him Shao-Pi. He still talked in the same carefree way that he had when I first met him. It was a disarming trait for a forgetful and overly cautious person like me, but also something I envied him for. It was especially aggravating since interpersonal relationships had always caused me huge amounts of stress, while my boyfriend innocently wondered aloud what could be so hard about it? As far as I was concerned, he was just a friend who happened to be a journalist, and I shouldn't get angry. 'If calling you Mr Chen makes you uncomfortable, I could call you Shao-Pi, but could you *please* not call me Luva? I have a Chinese name, you know, and you said yourself that Luva is just slang for lover, something that you are no longer allowed to call me.' He scratched his head and looked positively baffled at this.

'I'm so used to calling you that, though...'

'My name is Yen Lu-Hua, but you can call me Lu-Hua, just make sure you pronounce it clearly,' I said.

'Alright, then!'

Shao-Pi forced a smile and reached into his shirt pocket for his recorder. 'You're right. The magazine wants to do a whole series of stories on the city's 'Business District Virtual Reality Reconstruction Project.' Of course the first step is interviewing all the big heads in the company. They're just the ones behind the wheel, though. The

public knows the main purpose of the project, to make a virtual model of a gradually fading business district and start conducting all transactions within that virtual model. We've already done a piece on that before.' He coughed and reached for the papers the front desk had given him before he came into the interview room.

'So the plan this time is to focus on the near-finished virtual Ximending model that has entered the testing phase, the so-called Virtua Street,' he said pointing out words on his papers as he read. 'I'd like to start by talking about 'virtual reality' technology, and then move onto the team working on it, their backgrounds, the process of creating the model, and the motivations behind working with the government on this. These points will all be in the final article.' Shao-Pi turned on his recorder and kept right on talking. He wanted to record the entire interview and this was his opening. But I'd already spaced out by the time he'd said the words 'gradually fading business district.' I hadn't heard anything he said after that.

Gradually fading...

I was facing him, but actually looking out the window. It was two o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. It was the weekend, but you couldn't tell by looking out at the street. It looked like any other, with only about one person passing by the window per second. It wasn't a wasteland exactly, but it did feel kind of dead, only made worse by the dark shadows cast by the surrounding high-rises. This was Ximending in 2020, that once prospering hub of business and activity.

After the 2014 Turtle Mountain earthquake in Taoyuan County, reconstruction started all over the north of the island. Wanhua district was the closest to the epicenter, and naturally suffered the worst damage in Taipei City. Wanhua was scarred wherever you looked, and shops, department stores, movie theaters, all had to close temporarily. Similar scenes could be found all over Taipei, and the people who returned were the scabs, slowly healing the wounds. Taipei's population had been gradually moving east since the end of the previous century, and the people in the eastern districts had begun to outnumber those in the west. As such, east Taipei was healing quicker, while west Taipei just kept right on bleeding.

When Ximending finally started to wake from its post-earthquake coma, it was no longer 'happening.' It was just another business district that could barely manage to draw in customers. There had been a slow period in the 1980s, but the city government had responded by pedestrianising, building a movie theater, and appealing to the youth, all of which sustained the area for some time. Post-earthquake Ximending of 2014 hadn't been so fortunate, and even the government finally gave up on the stumbling, aging, district. It went through one rebuilding phrase, introducing more residential housing. And now, the government wanted to rebuild the old Ximending, virtually. They weren't going to bring it back to its former glory, but instead rely on a virtual 'fantasy' to resurrect it, which was really quite ironic.

'Will o' the wisp.' The strange word suddenly popped out of my mouth.

'You mean a ghost light?'

'An imagined target. A castle in the sky. I didn't think that the plan would work at first,' I said.

'Why not?' Shao-Pi asked.

'Because people are very sensitive to 'reality,' right? No matter how deep they go, once they remember they're in a world created by computer code, whose reason wouldn't kick in? It would be impossible for someone to be completely immersed in virtual reality.' I drank some coffee, the caffeine rush calming my emotions. 'Let's say a

virtual pet and a beloved Labrador both die, which one is going to make the owner feel worse? No one would say the virtual pet.'

'I think there's probably people who would!'

'Well they're few and far between. And they probably aren't particularly well-equipped to distinguish between fantasy and reality. But at some point they too have to come to their senses, and realise their pet was just digital code that can be mass produced and sent out to people all over the world.'

'But Luva... Er, Lu-Hua,' Shao-Pi corrected himself, 'you just said you *thought* it wouldn't work. Past tense.' His hand stopped taking notes and he looked up at me.

'I did. The reason I joined the Virtua Street team three months ago was out of pure curiosity. I wanted to understand what Da-Shan was thinking, what he was going to do. It seemed like it'd be entertaining. I mean, no one would support his crazy idea, right? Later I realised I wanted to see him fail. Oh!' I'd just remembered the recorder on the table and quickly covered it with my hands. Shao-Pi looked at me with a 'gotcha' expression.

'Relax! I won't put that in the article.'

'You *can't*,' I said. My groggy eyes were pleading with him not to, and I wondered to myself how effective that would be.

'Don't worry. So, you wanted to see him fail?'

'I was originally doing testing in a different department. I joined Virtua Street because I wanted to see what the witch doctor was trying to pawn off to the masses. But the first time I went into the VR room, put on the Head Mounted Display, slipped into the Force Feedback Clothing, and fired up the system, I was blown away.'

Shao-Pi suddenly lifted his notebook, his face full of curiosity. 'Keep going.'

'There were now doors where the walls had been bare. I chose one and walked through, and found myself in a brightly lit hallway. It was like one of those scenes from a sci-fi film where they travel back in time. I walked to the end of the hallway and then..., I reached for Shao-Pi's papers on the table, turned to the page I wanted, and showed him the image labeled [Picture 1]. 'Look. This is the layout of Ximending a decade ago. You remember? This is also the layout of the world created in Virtua Street. Every building, every alleyway, every bush and tree were all drawn in using computer generated images. They're really realistic.' I pointed at a marker on the map. 'I went in through here, entrance one. How can I explain it? I was totally shocked. There I was, coming out of the subway station and right into Ximending, just as I remembered it. There was the SiMen Walker statue, the entrance to Hanzhong street, and the Eslite I16 bookstore. All the old sights. It felt like I'd travelled through time back to 2008. The only difference was it was empty. There weren't the crowds in this version.'

'Wow!'

'While it all looked real, of course it was nothing but images displayed on the HMD. Because the screen is right in front of your eyes, it feels like everything you see really exists. The pictures follow your eyes, changing direction. Like, if you turn your head to the right, the images on the HMD will move to the left. It makes it even more realistic.' I was turning my head as I explained to demonstrate.

'Okay, so it's realistic?' Shao-Pi said, staring down at his papers.

'It doesn't just look real.' I stood up and paced for a few seconds. 'You can walk inside the world. You can go wherever you want on the street.'

'But you're inside the VR room the whole time, right?'

'Yeah, but the ground works like a treadmill. If you walk forward it moves forward. It can even sense the direction you're heading in and how fast you're walking. So even if it feels like you've walked a long way, you're actually walking on the spot. And not only that...' I reached out and touched the wall of the interview room, then knocked on it lightly with my fist.

'You can touch everything inside the world, you can feel it. If you run your hand over the wall it'll feel sandpaper. You feel pain if you get hit. It's the force feedback clothing that makes it possible. So it feels real, too. And it *sounds* real! The sounds in the virtual world are transmitted through speakers hidden in the wall and floor of the VR room. They also detect and adjust to the position of your ears, so that the source of the sound is congruent with the user's senses...'

'Wait. Wait a sec.' Shao-Pi put up his hand in a signal to stop.

'I'm going to interview the R&D guys about the technical side of virtual reality. Luv... Lu-Hua, you're a tester, right? You only need to tell me about your experience on the team.' He hadn't changed at all. He always liked to shoot me down. I'd gone out of my way to get information from Da-Shan; I'd even looked over it a bunch of times beforehand. And all for nothing. I swallowed my irritation at being interrupted and started thinking about what he said he wanted. My 'experience.'

'Okay... When I came out of Virtua Street after that first time, I was confused.'

'Confused?'

'Yeah. It just felt too real in there. Weren't you listening to me? I thought that if someone was conscious of the fact they were inside a virtual world it would be impossible for them to mistake it for reality. But after I experienced it first hand, I had to ask myself, with a world as real as this, could you really distinguish it from reality? I mean, I felt like I'd gone back in time, and it wasn't until I left the virtual world that I remembered it was real. Fitting for the name of our company, MirageSys.'

I sat back down and took another sip of coffee. 'That's not all. It will change the way we interact with each other as a society.'

'Ah, you're referring to the social theories about the meaning of all of this?'

'The virtual world will disrupt the real world. Someone can be alone in their room but still talk to their boss through a virtual screen. A couple who haven't met in real life can hold hands and go for a walk down virtual streets. Transactions, dating, people-to-people interaction can be conducted almost entirely outside the real world. Everyone seems intrigued by this, but personally I'm against that kind of change.'

'I remember hearing people joke about the sex industry going virtual,' Shao-Pi said.

'Ugh. I felt sick when I saw that. The sex industry itself is another issue altogether, but the thought of making love knowing that your partner's embrace is just digital code... It's frightening if you ask me.' I put my hand on my forehead. My head had suddenly started hurting and I was raising my voice. 'I'm sorry.' I looked down again at the recorder on the table from out of the corner of my eye and realised I was out of line. 'I've gone off topic again. You won't publish any of this, right?'

'Don't worry about it,' Shao-Pi replied.

'I don't know why I care that much about virtual relationships,' I admitted.

'Maybe it's because...' Shao-Pi stared at me, a sorrowful look in his eyes, '...because those eighteen empty years have made Luva more sensitive? But at the same time it's why you care so much?' Why did that asshole always like to pour salt on the wound? And he called me Luva again. I drained the rest of my coffee and accidentally set the glass back on the table harder than I meant to.

The video phone rang from its perch on the wall. I immediately answered and put it on speaker. A fresh-faced man instantly flashed onto the LCD screen.

'Is everything going okay, Lu-Hua?' the fresh-faced man asked.

'Um... yeah, fine,' I lied. Things weren't actually going that well.

'Oh! This is Mr Chen, the journalist from *Fashion Waves*,' I said, pointing at Shao-Pi.

'You can call me Shao-Pi.'

'Hello! I'm the development manager. My name is Ho Da-Shan, you know, Big Mountain.' Shao-Pi glanced down at the paper in his hand.

'You're... Ho Yan-Shan?' he asked.

'Yep, that's me. I'm sorry I couldn't be there for the interview myself. Something came up. Let's find another time, yeah?' said Da-Shan. Then he looked back at me. 'Lu-Hua, come find me when you're done.'

'Okay.'

'Alright, that's all. Don't want to interrupt the interview. It was nice to meet you Shao-Pi.' The screen turned off and I hung up.

'So that's Da-Shan. He's really young!' Shao-Pi said as he looked at the 'Development Manager Bio' section in his papers.

'He just looks young. He's already thirty-eight, eight years older than us.'

'And I thought MIT graduates all went into research.'

'He's been on research teams! Not just in one field, either.'

'Let's see... Computer graphics, AI, robotics, natural language processing, computer vision, and finally virtual reality. My god... is this guy a genius?' Shao-Pi was still reading Da-Shan's bio.

'He's a genius at talking to machines,' I said, raising my eyebrows.

'It seems like he bothers you.'

'What? No, I really like him.' The words had barely left my lips when I added, '...as an employer.'

'Oh?' Now it was Shao-Pi's turn to raise his eyebrows at me. His expression turned thoughtful. 'I guess it makes sense. For someone almost forty he lacks that shadow of middle-age. Quite the youthful charm.'

'What kind of description is that? Da-Shan and I... It's not what you think.'

'You're right, you're right. It's none of my business, anyway. You can stop worrying about the recorder. I turned it off a while ago.' Shao-Pi stopped my hand as it reached for the recorder again.

We didn't say anything for the next two minutes and just sat in the stale atmosphere of the room. Me staring out the window at Ximending's quiet streets, Shao-Pi looking down at his notebook. I made a conscious effort not to look at him, but he seemed intent on organising his notes. Always so damn carefree.

I was just thinking that the interview wasn't going anywhere when Shao-Pi suddenly stood up.

'I should go. I'll be back sometime to interview the developers.'

'I'm sorry. I don't think I gave you anything helpful.'

'Not at all! I now know that MirageSys has a tester on the Virtua Street team who had doubts in the plan. I heard what she had to say, and her thoughts on technology and humanity were very interesting. The most important thing is I met the leader of the team. I learned he's a handsome genius and that right there is enough to sell the story. This right here,' he shook his notebook a few times, 'my next article in the bag.'

He's what? So the focus of the article was Da-Shan's looks? I rubbed my eyes, still heavy with sleep, as I walked Shao-Pi to the door of the interview room.

'Let's grab a bite to eat sometime?' he said.

'Do you date *all* of your interviewees?' I forced a smile. I didn't know if he had caught that little jab at him. He was quiet for a moment, then turned around and walked out of the interview room. I suddenly thought of a question I'd wanted to ask.

'Shao-Pi,' I called.

'What?'

'I wanted to ask you before... You were using a recorder the whole time, so why do you need a notebook?'

He turned around to face me.

'I don't normally use a notebook. It's not used for writing down answers, I use it to work out what to ask the interviewees.'

'Why do you have to work out what you're going to ask?'

'Because 80% of my interviewees are ex-girlfriends, and 80% of these will only look at me as a reporter, so I have to plan out my questions because there's a 64% chance I might forget my manners and say something out of line.' Just as he was walking out the door, he turned back around and shot one last line at me: 'But it doesn't ever seem to work, Luva.' I slammed the door shut, much harder than I'd slammed the glass down on the table. The feeling of alarm had dissipated, but my eyes were still as heavy as they'd been all day.

MirageSys Ltd. was an American company so, naturally, the CEO and higher-ups in the company were nowhere near the Ximending branch. This branch had only been set up specifically for the Virtua Street project, so besides R&D, the testing division, and some government-hired product planners, the three story office building often felt deserted. MirageSys's Taiwan Ximending branch was located at the end of Hazhong Raod. The building had been affectionately dubbed the Little White House, because not only were the walls outside white, but even the floor, ceiling, and walls inside were, too. The overly dull decor brought to mind the still silence of a snowy landscape, but perhaps that was fitting for the Ximending of that era. Silent. The lights in the hallways were rarely turned on during the day, most likely because the combination of fluorescent light bulbs and white walls was too bright. The only light came in from the windows.

Of course, there wasn't an elevator installed in the building. If you walked up the stairs down the hall from the interview room on the first floor, you came to the VR room. It took up the whole floor, and because of the need for extra space, the second storey was taller. There were more stairs to and from the second floor than any other. I arrived at the R&D offices on the third. I remembered the first time I ever walked in there, the checkerboard cubicle arrangement made me think of the epidermal cells of an onion, even though I'd forgotten almost everything else I'd learned in biology class. The four sides of each cubicle were the cell walls, the people working inside of them the

nuclei. The combination of all these cells made up the 'tissue' of the Virtua Street R&D team. The cytoplasm of each cell, the ambience inside, was all different. There were people pounding madly at their keyboards, some with heads lowered in contemplation, others turning the pages of technical manuals. Still others stared blankly at screens, and there were even people with their heads hanging over the back of their chairs, taking afternoon naps right at their desks. I thought of the testing division's office space where I worked, which was more of a honeycomb shape. Although farther away from the watchful eye of our supervisors, employees were diligent worker bees, constantly completing tasks in a mechanical fashion. It was a stark contrast to the R&D offices.

I walked towards one of the many cells.

'Da-Shan.'

'Oh, it's you!' The man inside the cubicle lifted his head, revealing the young-looking face I'd just seen on the video phone. 'So, how'd it go?'

'Fine,' I said with a deliberate sneer.

'I knew it. Your 'fine' usually means 'not good'. So it really turned out to be your ex-boyfriend?'

'Yep. I wanted to treat him like a normal reporter and ignore our past but he didn't feel the same way. Not only did he ask me out, he kept calling me by my old pet name, Luva,' I replied.

Da-Shan suddenly laughed out loud. 'That's funny! No wonder you looked uncomfortable when I asked you if you had an English name. Luva's not bad! I think I'll call you that from now on.'

'Please don't. We're not that close.' I was unamused.

'I was just kidding. But you know, ex-lovers need to tell each other where they stand...'. He took his index finger and wrapped his left hand around it. 'The more you try to look away, to hide your feelings, the more visible they become!'

'I think that when a relationship changes, the way we interact needs to change too,' I said.

'So you want to keep your thoughts and feelings to yourself? That can be pretty rough!' Da-Shan lifted the corners of his mouth in a smile. Oh, no. Here we go again. Please, don't, I thought to myself. 'Take me and my ex-wife. We went to school together. She was in the class above me. We haven't seen each other in a long time, but don't you think it'd be weird if we pretended not to know one another if we met on the street? If we choose to stop, say hello, talk for a minute about our old school days, and never mention our kids or our failed marriage and all of that stuff, I mean...'

Although his point wasn't hard to argue with, I figured changing the subject might be better than starting a debate.

'You were married?' I asked. And she's older than you, and you had kids together? I added in my head.

'You're right. I don't think I've ever mentioned that,' Da-Shan said. At first I wasn't sure if my question had successfully shifted the topic of conversation, but then I saw the smile at the corners of his mouth disappear. He turned his head back to his screen and continued whatever he'd been doing before.

'Why did you... separate?' I pressed.

'There are a lot of reasons people separate.' Da-shan turned back and smiled a smile completely different than the one before. His eyes were squinted so tight they were almost a straight line. The corners of his mouth were raised as high as they could go in a silly grin. This was his 'end of discussion' face. It was only then that his true

age showed in the wrinkles around his eyes.

'What are you doing?' I asked. This question was actually meaningless, I just didn't want to leave on such an awkward note.

'I'm modifying the user interface.'

'Is there a bug?'

'No, but the government wants us to change it. I like the old-fashioned design we've got on the doors, but they're adamant that they want the portals to open at the push of a button. They say it's more 'modern.'" He moved his mouse and double-clicked on a program. One of the simulated images from Virtua Street.