

Patrick Harrison
2-495 E28th Ave
Vancouver, BC V5V 2N2
604-215-0474
flick@flickharrison.com
93,000 words

Home Is In The Hard Drive

by Flick Harrison

-- BOOK 1 --

CYBERPUNK

CHAPTER 1

"We've got something to talk about," Mom announced, white knuckles clutching Mikil's sleeve. She looked at Dad, whose lips were twisting, fingers twitching on the controls of VR goggles. He turned them off, stared at Mikil through the suddenly-clear lenses.

"We'd better sell out of T.L.R.," he said. He scratched his neck and grimaced.

"Sorry to interrupt, but Asia-Pacific's wild this morning. Something about volcanoes."

Mikil felt Mom's fingers loosen on his arm. He slipped free, stepped back, and locked eyes with her.

"There was another bubble-sort in my office this week," she said. "Two people moved down past me, but three went up! We can't afford... I can't keep up..."

The auto-kitchen whirred with hidden activity. Breakfast

was coming. Looking down at his watch, Mikil checked the world tension indicators ticking upwards on the Polimatrix, the multi-dimensional political modeler. An extreme smog warning for Vancouver blinked insistently. His stomach was tight.

"The markets are up and down everywhere," Dad said. His scowl wiggled in harmony with the readouts zipping once again past his eyes. "At least I think they are."

Trolls, provocateurs and maniacs shared the nets with generals and presidents. By following the official newsnets of Empire and its rivals, plus the various political party channels, anyone could get a handle on the real situation, and decide for themselves where the truth lay.

"First things first," Mom said, turning back to Mikil. She waited till he looked up from his watch, then a second longer. "Mikil, we looked at your books this morning."

"What?" Mikil blurted. Not that! Not today! "I don't care. I have to go."

She stood in his way.

"Mikil! You've been in the red ever since you started that business..."

A mute-waiter beeped open, and then there were eggs.

"Mom," he began calmly.

"We are sinking good money after bad in that goddamn brokerage and you don't even care. Don't even care!"

Fuck. Why was this making him angry? It was so small, so stupid. Something big was happening. Right now. He had to leave. Ignore her. Shove back if he had to.

"Shut up," he said, amazing himself. "I hate that stupid business and I always did."

If he'd meant to amaze her too, he failed. She looked down at her hands, gathering words. Or pretending to be calm. Mikil's earphone buzzed. This was not the time. The mute-waiter beeped impatiently.

"Now listen to me," she said. "You're almost twenty. Your Class-One status isn't guaranteed."

Dad's fingers were drumming on the goggles, now perched up on his head. "You could even get busted down instead of up," he added.

Like your brother, his mom would say next. Mikil did shove back, after all. He chucked his coffee cup into the mute-waiter, saw it explode through the glistening eggs. As the clatter faded, he stormed back upstairs.

#

Mikil's earphone buzzed again as he stomped into his room.

"Go ahead," he barked.

"It's Jerk," came his brother's voice. Jerk's real name was Jeremy, but he'd always insisted on the nickname. "Go to teleconscious, quick!"

Obeying, Mikil went to the desk and grabbed his teleclava. The moment he shoved his head into the transparent hood, a blue LED blinked on at the back of his neck, and he entered teleconsciousness: Mikil shared Jerk's vision, smell, and hearing. Jerk raised his middle finger and wiggled it at himself. Through the teleclava link, Mikil saw it just as if he was giving himself the finger. That was how Jerk liked to welcome his brother to the shared experience.

Beyond the finger, which did stop wiggling and moved out of the way, Mikil saw bushy green trees flashing past. The viewpoint was rocking. The clatter of train wheels told him Jerk was on his way to work in an open boxcar.

There were voices Mikil couldn't understand. It sounded like Tagalog or maybe Spanish: the other workers. Jerk was looking in the opposite direction, watching the country roll by through the big bright doorway.

Then the image flickered. Now, instead of just seeing the bedroom, including his own feet struggling into his pants, plus Jerk's rattling train ride, he also saw a plain white room with several serious-looking folks sitting around a circular table. All of them wore bandanas covering the lower half of their faces, muffling their quiet discussions.

"Hello Mikil," came Tria's voice, a low whisper, almost to herself. If she could hear her own voice, they could too.

"Maybe put some clothes on, little brother?"

Mikil was changing into his uniform; he always did it after breakfast to avoid a clash with his parents. Oops. Tria, through the teleclava, was looking at his naked legs. He kept getting dressed but looked up instead.

Then again, he, Tria, and Jerk were together so much -- telettogether, that is -- that she might as well be his sister.

Tria's colleagues finished up their individual chats and settled in to face her. She took a sip from her mug. Mikil took a deep breath from the teleclava's smell-simulator. The confines of Tria's bandana held the rich coffee smell close to her nostrils. This was the first time he'd seen coffee in the Philippines since he'd known her. They must have found an antidote to the Imperial coffee-killer virus.

Tria looked at the delegates around her table. They were part of NGO - the Non-Governmental Organization, a global, plastic confederacy of non-profits, political councils and social clubs that old anarchist dreamers like Bakunin should have had wet dreams about in high school. Working with local causes and international contacts, they'd managed to keep the Philippines fed and clothed these seven years, and what's more, they'd fended off the Great Liberty despite their terrible slogan, "They shan't return."

Mikil lay on the bed and looked at his plastic ceiling,

where he'd painted an infinity symbol for times like this. Staring at it seemed to help him follow two distant realities: in Jerk's space the sickening visual motion, and through Tria's ears, the trial of a suspected informer. He watched her hands, rough and wrinkled but elegant, shuffling a pile of handwritten paper notes. Mikil couldn't read the language, and by the time his built-in translator typed "CLOSING ARGUMENT" like a subtitle under his personal display, she'd put them back down to take a deep breath and address her audience.

"This man was once in the Imperial army," Tria said. She spoke in her loud, steady voice, her tone militant. The sound of her Tagalog words carried more weight with Mikil than the English translation in unaccented, mechanized tones, which his teleclava provided.

"We accepted him as a deserter," Tria declared, "a new comrade. But our trust was returned with treachery, treachery which threatens our lives and organization."

"From a hideout inside McArthur's former command headquarters," she said, "this man is convicted of transmitting intelligence info to AOL/DC: home addresses and daily routines of prominent NGO activists, schedules and minutes of large gatherings, personal information that might be used to concoct terror." Tria listed these offences with barely-controlled passion. Her name would be among those the man threatened.

She turned to face him now, seated at the table among the decision-makers of his own fate. He was a small man of peasant background, with terrified eyes, a weathered face, dressed in a simple white shirt, drenched in sweat. He had a black eye. His hands, folded neatly on the table in their steel handcuffs, twitched like insects.

On his wrist-terminal, Mikil ran a search for public cameras inside that room and saw Tria through television now, a silver bandana covering her mouth and nose. She was a bit stocky and muscled, more like a soldier than an athlete. Only her big, sharp eyes and long, dark hair were visible, obscured slightly by the transparent teleclava hood.

The bandana smelled like her sweat, but then again maybe that was Jerk's sweat on Jerk's own bandana. Teleconscious could be confusing -- especially before coffee.

Mikil held a deodorant stick under his nose. Jerk chuckled and Tria stifled a guffaw. She looked down at her notes to hide it.

"This is serious," Tria said, under her breath, just to them. Mikil felt a pang of shame for interrupting a treason trial so frivolously. "Better get to class, Mikil. We want the inside scoop."

Mikil couldn't find Jerk on any public third-party channels. No one bothered to broadcast the view from the

freight train, the daily routine of thousands of Vancouverites with no other transport to their factory jobs far out of town. It was illegal to ride them, but the trains ran every day, to and from the factories and sawmills. It was cheaper, no doubt, than running a public transport system.

Jerk turned around and saw others in the car, watching an old-fashioned battery-powered television. They'd patched it, using duct tape and twist-ties, into an ancient second-hand net adapter so it could receive modern signals. They'd also tuned it to the trial in the Philippines, though they were watching the prisoner rather than Tria.

A large old woman called Missy was chairing Tria's meeting, holoprojected from somewhere in the world. Through the TC connection, Mikil couldn't see well enough to know who in the room was physically present and who was only there as a holo. One of Missy's rugged hands clawed a carved walking stick, and she leaned heavily on it. Missy seemed to nod constantly when Tria talked. Her crooked, wrinkled smile seemed unusually forced today, and at one point she coughed so long that it seemed they might have to stop the discussion.

"What's happening, Jerk?" Mikil asked.

"Tria says all indicators show a major clash today," he answered. "Somewhere between Japan and Mexico."

"And the Polimatrix ordered a mobilization?"

"Worldwide," Jerk said. "World fucking wide."

The Polimatrix: an n-dimensional prediction modeler, which charted the plots and moves of Empire with roughly the accuracy of a meteorology computer. On Tria's hand-unit, the Polimatrix spoke to her in rotating hyper-charts. Political vectors could map out along x-gender, y-race and z-class axes, switching at the touch of a button to a-religion, b-nationalist, c-military, or to whatever number of dimensions and factors seemed useful in the n-dimensional Hart-Negri index.

Tria's job was to analyze the Polimatrix readout, trusting her comrades to keep the data up-to-the-second and sabotage-free. She devised action strategies based on the shape of the situation, translated them into plain language, real-world decisions, possible alliances.

No doubt, Empire's computers were planning in the inverse fashion - in the hopes of outflanking the Polimatrix. And occasionally, Empire could second-guess her, using the same data. If they got one step ahead, it could mean disaster.

Mikil hurried to tie his boots, his fingers clumsy. Nervous tension had a way of seeping across the TC. He tripped on the edge of his bed frame while leaping over it, stumbled up again trying to keep an eye on all three perspectives. A sharp stabbing pain crept up his shin. Luckily, his grimace was invisible to the others.

"Suggested, not ordered," Tria muttered, while waiting for another of Missy's coughing fits to pass. "Word is we mobilize, sit tight and wait. For now. Let's hope Empire has the same orders." And then she turned her attention back to the trial. Missy finally got control of herself.

"Sort of like a fire drill," Jerk added. "Only we start the fire afterwards."

CHAPTER 2

Mikil never used to wear a uniform. Like everyone else he knew, he wore a holosuit -- a three-dimensional avatar that coated the body like an animated costume. He used to dress like Nessus, the three-hoofed, two-headed alien from an old science-fiction book he'd read as a kid. Other times he would make his own avatar of a giant robot, a knight in shining armour, or when it was just other teenage kids around, things that were much more rude and scandalous.

The only time he took the holosuit off was on family camping trips, when he was a kid. Jerk enjoyed throwing things in the campfire to see how they'd burn -- old electronics, high-pressure appliances, stuff that would wake up their parents with a shriek when it popped. Those were his favourite memories.

But when Mom and Dad got out of their sleeping bags and stomped to the campfire in their housecoats, there would be

shouting. In fact, the family used to fight all the time, screaming arguments about this and that. Jerk was supposed to "clean up his act" and everyone else was supposed to "fuck off." He was too messy, he argued with his teachers about the rules, he was "too familiar" with the servants and workers.

"You're making your parents out for fools," Mom screamed one day. Jerk had chatted with the clerk at a shop. Then he'd rolled his eyes when their mother bossed the clerk around.

Eventually, the camping trips petered out, and family life dissipated. Everyone tended to float from work or school to solitary pastimes, tuning out with the VR nets.

Jerk finally moved out at fifteen. Mikil was ten. Jerk wore a cocky, nervous smile when he picked up his tiny backpack and walked out the door. He'd chosen April Fool's day, just to mock Mom and Dad, to confuse any resistance.

He didn't turn once to wave, just headed across the street past the docks, off to the left and down a path which Mikil thought led nowhere. Mom and Dad scowled, powerless, arms crossed. They'd worn their Sunday best, dialed up a beautiful, nostalgic breakfast, and hadn't said a word all morning.

Nowadays, Jerk never turned up besides the odd Sunday dinner -- he wasn't so estranged as to pass up a free meal now and then. Mikil knew little of his new life on the outside, in the real world -- Realtown. The family got along fine once Jerk

no longer had to obey their orders, and he never asked for anything from them. He even brought the odd dessert, sticky rainbow-coloured Class-Three packaged treats that Mikil loved but his parents tended to pick at with terse politeness.

The constant struggle wherein their parents tried to cajole Jerk back into normal society -- school and career -- became background noise. Jerk would smile, chewing with his mouth open, and mumble "That's not the life for me, folks." He said folks with cartoonish sarcasm, high camp. He was stooping to their level with a word he clearly didn't believe in.

"The ant race, folks, is a dead end on a dead planet."

"There is no other way," Dad said, as usual, tapping his finger on the table for emphasis. Every time he said it, the tapping got softer. Dad was giving up. He took a deep breath, let it out theatrically, and kept eating. Mom's knuckles were white on her fork, which clanked, as loudly as good manners permitted, to scrape up her next mouthful of tofu.

After one Sunday dinner, when Mikil was fifteen, Jerk invited him to Realtown. They'd never left the house together in the five years since Jerk moved out. From the sidelong, hesitant way Jerk made the offer, Mikil figured the invitation was one-of-a-kind. If he said no, he imagined, it would not be repeated.

"I moved out at your age," Jerk reminded him, as they

stepped out the front door and headed on foot towards the waterfront.

Mikil liked to wear holosuits back then, just like all his classmates. Instead of clothes, he had a 3-D projected costume of a knight in armour that mimed his movements along with him. It was like being in a cartoon all the time. That way, you could keep up with fashion just by reprogramming your suit; you could also be anonymous when you walked around your neighbourhood. Jerk never wore them. It was one of the reasons his parents scowled through his visits. He wore the black and red of the Free Association.

The harbour with its yachts and sea-planes was right across the street. Mikil had gone there to make out with Trilly on warm evenings, climbing the fence or wrenching a gap in the edges. Hell, even on rainy, freezing evenings -- it was good to warm one another. But today, instead of stomping onto the wooden docks, Jerk and Mikil turned left and followed the water. It was a direction he'd never gone, since it didn't lead anywhere -- or so he thought. In fact, it led to Realtown.

They got to the end of the nice stone seawall. Halfway across a cracked street, underneath the Skytrain that squealed by on unoiled wheels, Jerk held Mikil back.

"You gotta lose the holo, bro. Illegal past this point."

"What?"

"Not allowed in Realtown. That's why they call it that. They say it's dangerous -- people hiding their identities, terrorists undercover, that kinda shit."

Mikil turned his suit off. The gleaming armour of the knight glittered, twitched, then blinked away. Underneath was a skinny young boy, with bare knobby knees and a look of nervous excitement on his face.

He was exposed. He had only a white t-shirt and skimpy shorts. He looked like he was about to run laps in gym class.

He felt born again, naked, into a new world.

Thus exposed, Mikil stared at the littered sidewalk, the shabby human beings and shuttered storefronts. Jerk didn't wait for him to sight-see, instead picked up his pace in the mean street. The beggars, Mikil saw -- and it was the first time he'd seen them -- were torn between approaching his obvious dumbstruck vulnerability and backing off from Jerk's hard features and determined march. One woman looked back and forth between the two, raised open palms, but then Jerk swished past and Mikil had to trot to keep up. The beggars' uncertain shuffles and mumbling lips faded quickly behind.

They came to a café-pub. Ever after, the smell of roasting beans wafting into the street would bring that moment back to Mikil.

Inside, it was dark. There were video screens projecting

a similar, dimly-lit shop somewhere else in the world.

"This is the Manila Wormhole," Jerk said. "Can't do 3-D here -- it's illegal in Realtown. But we can see the other side of the wormhole, and they can see us on TV."

Manila! That was in the blockaded zone, and here he was, practically in it!

As Mikil adjusted to the dark, he saw writhing figures in the booths and chaise-lounges.

"This is a make-out bar!" he gasped. He'd heard about them, but they were beyond reality in his mind. Too fantastic. He felt self-conscious about his silly outfit.

"Yeah, little shit," Jerk said, "keep your pants on, you'll embarrass me."

"I'm not wearing pants!" he barked back. "I need some pants! I can't go in there with these on!" He gestured to his shorts.

Indeed, his excitement about entering a make-out bar for the first time was threatening to express itself physically -- never mind the terrible fashion statement which his outfit was making all by itself. A cold shot of embarrassment tingled down his spine.

Mikil nearly shrieked. His voice broke, making his terror more dire, as he demanded, "Can't I put some pants on? I look like a loser!"

It was too far, Jerk said, to go home for them, so they compromised. Slightly annoyed, Jerk led Mikil just around the block to his own place for some ill-fitting black uniform trousers. Jerk was taller and heftier, so Mikil put on a belt and rolled up his pant cuffs. He felt like a hick, but it was better than the alternative. He checked out a couple of shirts that offered more coverage than his own thin one, but Jerk's were all too big. Getting his shorts covered up was enough to calm him down, though, and he ventured back out behind Jerk. The older brother's annoyance had given way to a few quiet chuckles.

"You all set now, big guy? Can I take you out in public again?"

They went back into the Manila Wormhole and Mikil got nervous again. There was no more excuse, though, and he plunged through the door behind Jerk.

That was when Mikil met Tria. Jerk sat in a booth next to the video screen, ordered beer for both of them, and Tria sat in the video-projected chair which appeared to be next to Jerk, but was actually thousands of miles away. She strummed a little ukulele and wore a cowboy hat and army fatigues that looked tattered and dirty.

Jerk introduced his little brother, and Tria gave a wink and a smile, a coy conspiracy. "Welcome to the club," she said.

For the rest of Mikil's life, whenever he wanted to appear sophisticated, he would try to imitate Tria in that moment.

"Uh," he began, "hi." He'd spent a lot of time in virtual-reality hoods, but sitting here in a crowded room, talking to a TV screen that blended into his own reality was, well, much more convincing. Behind her, he could make out shadowy figures engaged in lively conversation and slithering embraces.

Tria launched what sounded like a rehearsed introduction. It was Mikil's first meeting with a politician, and so he was a sitting duck for her.

"I was a Class-Three servant to a government minister, just outside the city," she said. "My mother was crippled by a life of hard labour. She died during the uprisings. Not in combat, but starvation, in an abandoned hospital stuck for a few days in no-man's land. A lot of people died trying to rescue the patients before Empire finally retreated from the islands."

Mikil simply stared and nodded, his eyes wide.

Her cowboy hat and ukulele, she explained, had belonged to that minister. They were his folksy trademarks. Now he was nowhere to be found.

"A bourgeois affectation, I admit," she chuckled.

She lifted the hat from her head, swung it over towards Mikil, and tapped it against the video screen. It was as if only a foggy window blocked her from placing it on his head,

instead of thousands of miles and a deadly naval blockade.

"But I'll trade them with you," she said, "for whatever you liberate, when the day comes."

"Okay," he said, smiling. He'd never been the target of a direct charm attack before. He couldn't resist, just smiled with all his teeth.

Perhaps he'd glimpsed a real world, at last, something more meaningful than the kudos of teachers and parents, or the excitement of a successful business. Taking someone's hat for being a jerk.

He tried to imagine his teachers scurrying away from a revolution, leaving behind their trademark personal items. It didn't seem very glorious, but the thought made him smile anyway. He didn't really have a problem with them. Any of his classmates who did resent the teachers were generally lazy -- or smartasses. Mikil thought, smiling again, that he'd rather run those kids out of town than the teachers.

Mikil turned around to see Jerk making out with some freaky guy who had spikes in the middle of his forehead -- S & M surgery, no doubt -- and then, when he turned back to Tria, she was also tangled up, with a girl whose face was obscured by shadows and video noise. Mikil sat shivering in excitement, immobilized by the possibilities. He was frankly unsure what to do with himself, until a plump twenty-five-year-old chick with

flashing eyes and a cast-iron bustier plunked down beside him in local space. She shoved her tongue down his throat.

She was a giant, compared to his tiny frame. Her thick arms wrapped around him, grabbed him by the hair, and pulled him to her thick lips. He couldn't separate surprise from excitement, terror from lust.

He had begun to imagine, way back then, that his girlfriend Trilly loved him, and he loved her. They had been together a few months, and their courtship was following age-old ritual. He asked her out, she said yes, and they slowly pushed one another's emotional and physical boundaries with blind, clumsy, selfish curiosity. Sometimes, he put his hand in her pants and she said no; sometimes she said yes. He stumbled forward, surfing the mysterious boundary between burgling her chastity and following her subtle lures.

But that day, in the Manila Wormhole, he felt raw, anonymous passion for the first time, and he liked it.

"Um..." he said, during a lull in the action. "What's your name?"

She giggled and reached for him. "Don't be so bourgeois," she said. Thus ended the verbals.

It was sometime later Mikil realized she was in an FA uniform. Perhaps that was what later attracted him to the organization.

That first youthful bender kept him out all night and then some. Jerk was careful to keep booze out of his hands and generally steer him clear of trouble, which meant paying for the coffee and advising him to keep his mouth shut.

"What's bourgeois?" he asked Jerk at one point.

"Depends on who you're reading and when it was written," Jerk answered. "Lately it refers to middle-class concerns -- sorry, Class Two they're called these days -- uh, ...concerns that mean nothing outside their carefully-built house of socio-economic cards." Jerk cracked a beer while answering, finished it at a swig.

"The bourgeois aren't royalty, they're permanently nouveau-rich. Their so-called social status is like those giant hot-dog-shaped hot-dog stands in California. They aren't hot dogs and they never will be, and they are best enjoyed by those who know they look ridiculous.

"But the bourgeois rule the world, and so the giant hot dog occasionally gets called a parliament or a temple."

When Mikil rolled back home after two days of this debauchery, he'd missed two mid-term tests, his fifth-ever date with Trilly, and his dog's birthday that his Mom had been planning for weeks. The dog had already chewed halfway through the rubber banana that was its favourite present.

"You missed it! You should have seen him unwrap it!" Mom

was half joking, half tragic.

Last week, he would have laughed with her, cried with her over such drama. Today, something new came over him: separation, distance.

Nothing his mother said seemed important to Mikil now, especially with such a headache. He thought of the dog unwrapping the banana and the label BOURGEOIS screamed at him through the image. He felt the label sticking to him like flypaper on his fingers that wouldn't scrape off.

He pulled back from the sticky feeling by lying to her, pretending he was sorry. With a little box of spicy treats for the dog, he squeaked out of this jam.

Then he went to see Trilly.

"I have to study tonight," Trilly said. "That's why our date was last night."

Weekends didn't exist anymore; days were a rotating cycle for each individual, ironing out rush-hours and power-use patterns, line-ups at the movies and crowding at the beach. Mikil had the next day off, but Trilly had an exam.

But he pulled her lips to his, fired up some of that new-found raw, anonymous passion, and she ended up doing very poorly indeed on her exam. He was forgiven for missing the date, but when she got her exam back, covered in red ink, it was the start of a conflict that would, after a few years of festering, finish

them off.

#

The next Sunday -- Mikil's family clung to the illusion of a day of rest - Jerk didn't show up for dinner. That was normal; he only came once a month at most. But it wasn't good enough for Mikil; he wanted more. He rushed from the table before dessert. For the first time, he called his brother up on the teleclava.

"I got a meeting tonight, man," Jerk said, staring at his ceiling. "I can't make it. Why don't you come down here, bro? See how the other half lives."

"I'm going to study at the library," Mikil shouted into the apartment a minute later, addressing no one in particular, trotting out the door. He wore his holo-suit -- concealing a plain old pair of pants and a boring, real denim jacket.

"Okay," his mother shouted back from the other room.

She believed him. It was so easy to fool her, Mikil got embarrassed. Why'd he been so honest all his life?

The answer was obvious: he'd never wanted something like this before. He'd always gone with the flow, letting his instincts guide him through the hoops at school and home. Finally, it was time to start dodging around those hoops, to see what else was out there.

But when Mikil showed up on Jerk's doorstep (a tad

desperate, he felt), Jerk was ready for him.

"I bet you wore clean underwear this week, under those snazzy pants!" He chuckled. "But there's no beer and make-out for a while, bro; I gotta admit, I gave you a taste of the sugar just to get you hooked on Realtown. There's lots more interesting things going on there."

"Oh, um..." Mikil replied, as Jerk led him into the street.

"Seriously," Jerk said, "nice pants, though."

Mikil followed Jerk through more littered sidewalks and darkened alleyways to the back door of a shoddy Chinese dry-goods store. An old man sat on a stool outside. He looked at Mikil, then back to Jerk, and seeing something which satisfied him in Jerk's face, nodded and resumed his watch on the alley.

Through a rickety wooden door was a dark staircase leading down into damp, bare concrete. As they reached the bottom, the clatter of mah-jong tiles filled their ears. But there was no mah-jong, just a dingy store-room filled with chairs and milling people. When they stepped off the stairs, the mah-jong clatter ceased abruptly. It was nothing but audio camouflage, Mikil realized with a shock.

What was it hiding?

"Hey," Jerk said to the first person they met. "I'm Jerk, this is my brother Mikil. He's new."

The man, a tall old fighter with one glass eye, shook Mikil's hand firmly.

"I'm Miguel. Welcome to the revolution," he said, and smiled. "You here to find out about the Great Liberty?"

Mikil shrugged, unable to blink or look away. The Great Liberty: the day national citizenships across the Americas were officially converted to Class IDs. He knew all about that, he thought. He learned it in school. It created freedom of movement all across the continents. Eliminated racist boundaries. There was terrorist resistance at first but Empire triumphed. Empire always triumphed. What more was there to learn?

But then he remembered Tria and her ukulele, and put two and two together at last. Empire hadn't triumphed. Something was happening outside Empire, and, well... here he was in the middle of it.

It was the first lecture of many that Mikil would attend. Miguel spoke at the front of the room.

"I was a union leader," he said, in a booming, friendly voice, "in Argentina. When they proposed class IDs, all my men were promised a Class Two. We thought it might work out, just maybe this could be something we could live with.

"But when I went to the Imperial embassy to apply for my ID, it was closed. That was thirty days before the Great

Liberty. I went for three days in a row before I started to panic.

"Someone was pulling a fast one. We had no election on the topic, no one asked our opinion, but they gave us vague promises on TV, said we had jobs, so we could get Class Two status.

"My local and I showed up at the Imperial embassy in a group and demanded to get our Class-Two applications. The doors were locked, so we made our demands to the security camera. I could see the little red light was on, so someone was watching. But no one came out that day, during the night, or the next morning. Finally, from somewhere inside, a guard came out and opened the doors to let us in, one at a time, to apply for status.

"Let me tell you, that wasn't a very good feeling, my friends. The guards walked us in front of a camera to take our picture, and then handed us an application form. It looked like it had been made up on the spot. Name, employment, salary, address, and phone number. That was it. The picture was for them, not us -- to know who the troublemakers were. They told us to go home and wait for our approval in the mail."

"That satisfied a few people -- but not me. Not others. We stayed there, camped out around the embassy. This was one spot, mind you -- all over South America similar things were

happening.

"That was a long thirty days, let me tell you. One by one, the civil leaders who disagreed with Empire disappeared. Shot, arrested, gone underground, lost their minds, given up hope.

"On day twenty, the embassy closed. No one had been coming in or out anyway, after that one day of activity. Our camp had grown, and someone looked over at the door and there was a sign inside -- 'permanently closed.' It said all business would resume at a new location after the day of Great Liberty. Who put the sign up? Did they sneak out? We didn't know. It didn't matter.

"We started banging on the doors. We smashed it open and went inside, but there was nothing to see -- just a bunch of desks and computers and telephones and teleclavas, all erased and useless.

"And so the army showed up on day twenty-one. I woke up in the morning and there was a bunch of shots, people screaming, and everyone was running.

"They were pretty low-tech compared to your robot cops up here, but they did the trick. They had bats and guns and they just decided to clear us out. Never mind tear gas and water cannons. They just started shooting. They weren't from Argentina, these guys -- they were Mexican or something. Nothing

to do. No warning. Just run.

"I ran home and stayed out of sight. The next morning I woke up to find my power cut off. I picked up the phone, and instead of a dial tone, I heard a voice telling me to surrender. I looked out the window and there were soldiers everywhere."

"So I surrendered. There was nothing else to do. I had a gun in the closet but what was the point? Die now or die later? Always choose to die later, comrades -- that's my lesson to you.

"They put a hood on my head and drove me around. After an hour or so the car stopped. They took me out by the curb, I could smell the river and the sewage nearby. They left my hands tied and threw me down the bank into the water. I couldn't see. I tried to swim but it was no use. I sunk under the stinking water.

"But someone found me, someone pulled me out. A woman who had been scavenging through the garbage by the riverbank, she dove in and saved me. I thanked her and ran before the soldiers could check their handiwork."

Miguel pointed slowly to his glass eye.

"That's how I lost this," he said, emotion finally creeping into his voice. He took a deep breath, looked at his shoes for a minute, then went on.

"They gave me a few kicks in the car, when I had the hood on. Diving into that sewer water wasn't the best thing for a

scratched eyeball. And neither was hiding out, sleeping outdoors, and running to Canada. It's cold up here," he said, finally getting a chuckle out of the audience.

Only then did Mikil notice he'd been holding his breath. There was more to the story, but Mikil was already hooked. He listened to every word with wide eyes and mouth agape.

#

For the next few years, while waiting for High School to end, Mikil stole an underground education by lying to his parents. He was working for the other parent's business, or on schoolwork at the library, or hanging out with Trilly. When they bought him his own business at eighteen, that made the charade even easier. Thus the deadly red ink his mother had finally discovered much later.

He spent that liberated teenage time in Realtown, exploring bootleg history in moldy shops, grungy alleyways, and Free Association lectures. Always offline, undercover, and on the move. It was highly irregular for a Class Two like himself to hang around where holos hadn't intruded -- it was, to his peers, something like digging through garbage. Litter and dirty needles co-hazardous with wretched, malnourished bodies and the dirty secrets of the Great Liberty.

It was under cover of a baseball game, therefore, that Mikil heard a Bolivian worker's FA lecture about communal

rioting leading up to the Great Liberty. In another secret gathering in a crowded railway car, a grey-haired and radiation-scarred survivor described the horror of the Nuking of New Mexico, when clashes between the tidal wave of southern workers and resistant northern bigots threatened to erupt into civil war... and, of course, Mikil met with other kids who helped him hook into the FA's communications nets, pie-eyed Class Twos like himself. They were mostly angry at their parents and teachers for hiding this thrilling history. Street-fighting and revolution sounded much better than online trading and hypnosis.

#

The first time Mikil showed Trilly the uniform, it was as if she'd been handed a dead rat. She curled up her nose and shrivelled away.

"Ugh!" she barked. "It's a janitor suit."

"It was," he said. "It was the right colour. I sewed the insignia by hand..."

"Blech," she said. "Ick."

"Come on! I cleaned it!"

"Gross."

He told her more about it, about Jerk's instructions on when and where it was unsafe to wear it. At FA gatherings, it was obviously a police magnet, but in his daily life, outside of

Realtown, he could get away with it. Wearing it to school would be a definite provocation. She had the same look on her face throughout this monologue.

"Ewwwww," Trilly said. "Yuck."

He didn't wear it around her again. She wouldn't touch him while it was anywhere in sight.

#

"Your son's business activity has been almost nil," said the Hegeversity recruiting officer, when enrollment day came, one year ago. He was frowning.

"Oh my," said his mother, "wasn't he working for his father quite a lot?"

"I thought he was working for you, dear!"

"Neither," said the officer, "the records show no activity."

"How will you pay for school, Mikil?" she almost shrieked.

"I've no savings," he answered.

His parents gasped. Their eyes begged the official for sympathy, perhaps on psychiatric grounds.

"But my marks are good."

"That's true," his mother said, terrified.

He had never had to study; he caught on to stuff in class, copied his friends' homework, and aced his tests.

"Listen," said his father, "without a degree, he'll be

busted to Class Three!" What he didn't say, he was probably thinking: Like his no-good embarrassment of a brother. Dad's finger had started tapping on the arm of his chair, very hard.

"What were you thinking, Mikil?" his mother yelled.

"Can't we do something, oh lord please?"

"Perhaps a loan," said the officer, a smile forming. "No savings at all? Tsk, tsk. It will be quite large. I have a lending agency on the side, myself. Mostly micro-credit to Chinese coal-miners. But this might be an opportunity to expand."

His scowl had become downright profitable.

"I could make up for my mistakes," said Mikil, already thinking ahead to the first late-payment notice on the loan. "I just started the brokerage... maybe I can catch up."

"You could make it to Class One," his mother pleaded, hope daring to creep back into her voice, "if you earn enough money, someday, if you work hard, Mikil."

But the enrollment officer didn't care, as long as tuition was paid and his parents co-signed the loan. Listening to the rustling papers, Mikil stared at the man's desk, where a 150-year-old recording cylinder of the song "Beer, Beer, Beer" was being used as a pencil-holder.