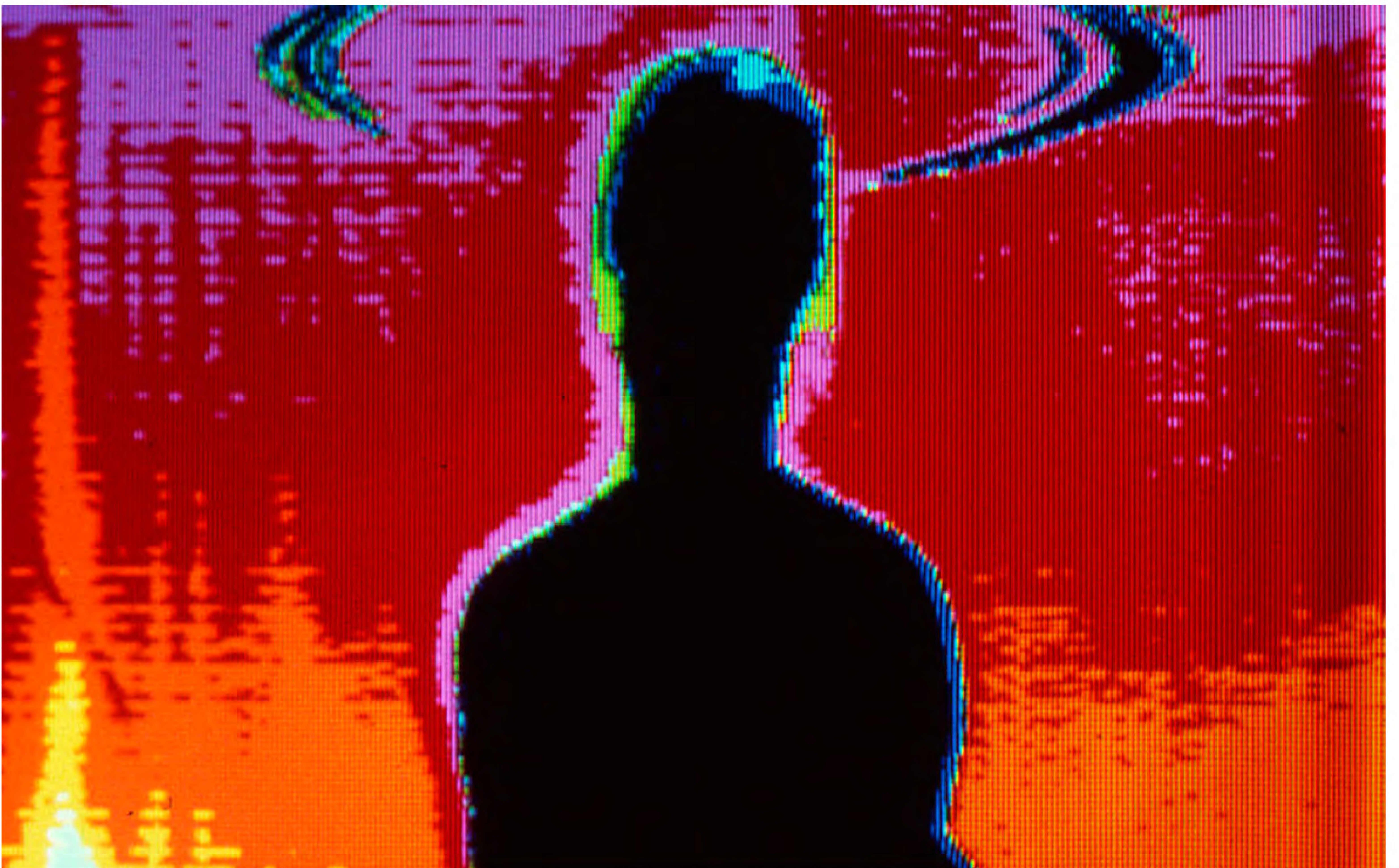




Bits 'n Pieces

by STEVE BENTON

Ronald Simmons struggles to understand why bits 'n pieces of his life are disappearing in front of his eyes.



"Linda, dear? Have you seen my favorite tie? You know, the blue one with orange stripes?" Ronald Simmons didn't want to be late for work, especially as he had an important meeting that afternoon. He knew that if his presentation was well received he'd be up for that promotion—the one he had been working toward for the past six months.

"It's in your top drawer, honey," his lovely wife responded from downstairs, as she

attended to their son and daughter, ready to rush them out the door to meet the school bus.

That's odd. I could have sworn I hung it on my tie rack.

Ronald quickly went for his top drawer and indeed found the tie he was seeking, and then quickly knotted it around his neck and adjusted his collar. He went toward the bedroom door, grabbing his suit coat on the way, and made a mad dash down the stairs to their expansive kitchen in their newly upgraded home. It always seemed like his wife was getting new things for the house, and he really didn't mind, as long as the books were balanced. His wife and children were everything to him. He had worked so hard for so long it all seemed like a blur, but he had achieved what he had initially set out to do—to own a large home in the suburbs, have two cars, a son and a daughter and, of course, a beautiful wife.

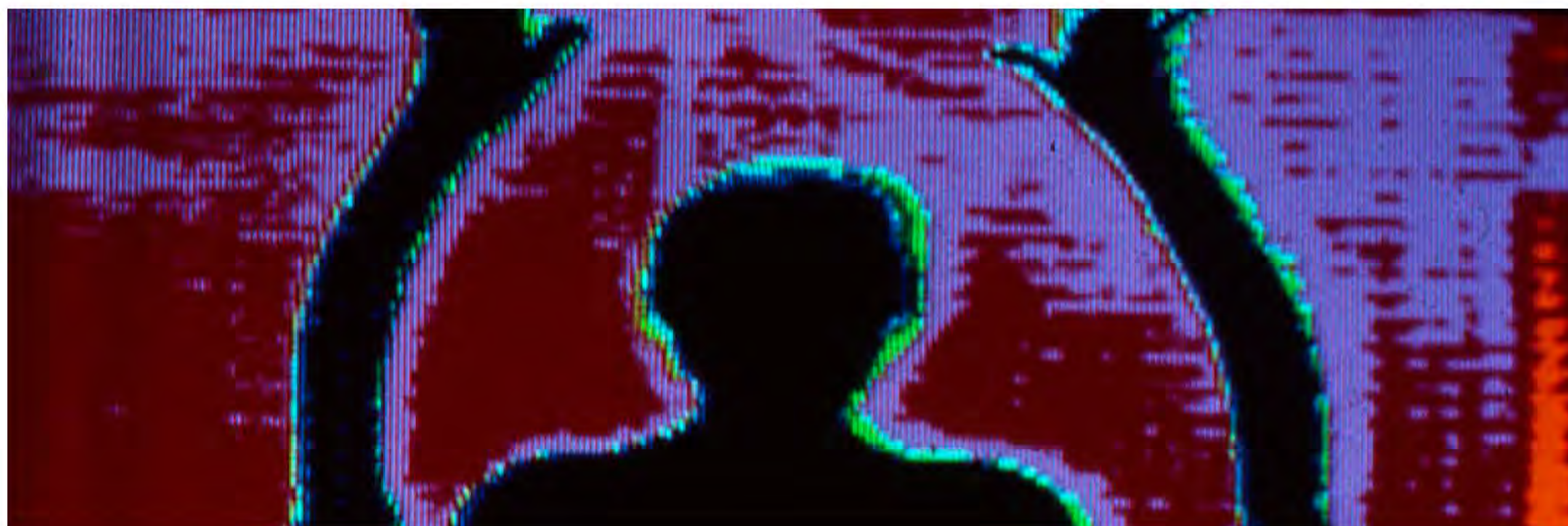
"Okay, my love, I'm off. Wish me luck in my meeting," he said, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

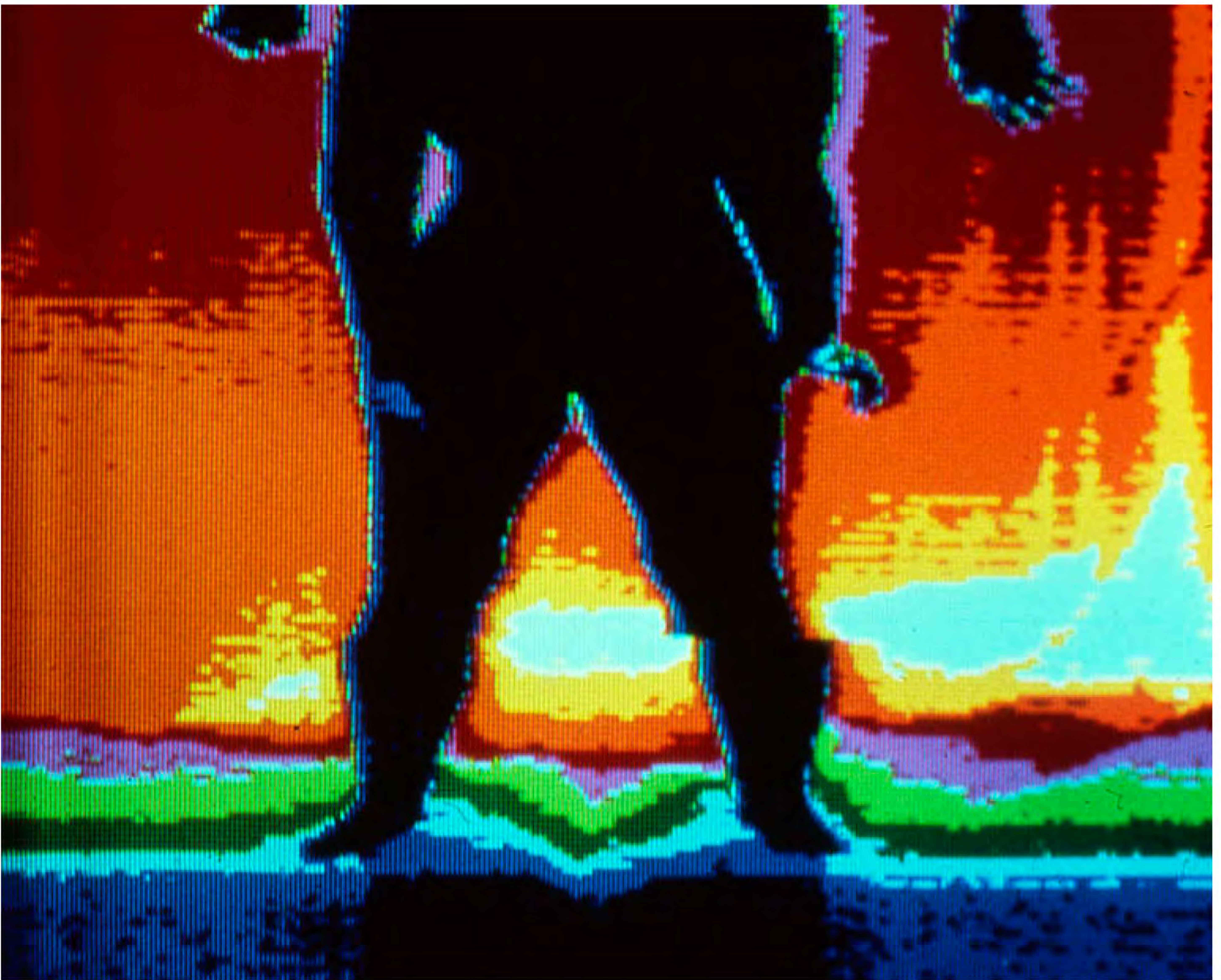
Linda, dressed in a classic, light blue chiffon skirt and yellow blouse, gave him a quick kiss on the cheek as she practically pushed all three Simmons out of the door, just as the classic, yellow school bus stopped out front.

"Bye Daddy!" the children called out in unison, right before they clambered onto the noisy school transport, already filled to near-capacity with students.

Linda gave her doting husband a wink as she shut the door, leaving him to the rest of his day. He would later drive home, arriving in time to sit down at a table with steaming, perfectly-cooked food.

His life was, at the risk of sounding redundant, perfect.





Unusual Occurrences

Ronald sat in his office, going over his presentation, which consisted of numerous colorful block diagrams and bar charts. He had 30 minutes before his meeting, which was nothing more than a structural reorganization of his company's warehouse. Opening the pencil drawer of his desk, he grabbed a pen, but clumsily dropped it onto the ground.

Bah! Where'd that thing go?

He slid off his chair and got down on his knees, and climbed underneath his desk. It was the first time he had ever been underneath that particular piece of office furniture, and was immediately struck by the fact that the unseen underside seemed to have no finish to it whatsoever. It was like nothing—not even plastic. Curious, Ronald flipped over onto his back, and pushed the pencil drawer out, only to see the word DEMO, apparently burned or somehow attached to the bottom side of the

desktop. Only visible from underneath, it was partially obscured by the joining of the side drawers with the desktop.

Thinking nothing more of the furniture oddity, Ronald grabbed his pen, which was off to the right side of the desk, and popped back up, looking around at his perfectly appointed, yet small office.

The meeting went just as planned, and Ronald was certain he would get the promotion he deserved due to his hard work. Excited, he arranged some of the objects on his desk as he thought about how happy his wife would be once he got the news and had told her. With this promotion they would be able to add a guest room in the back of their home, or perhaps even a swimming pool.

Ronald picked up a box of folders and walked over to his office closet. Trying to open the door while carrying the box, he accidentally dropped it, spilling the contents all over the floor and into the closet itself.

"Aw, darn," he said aloud, as he bent down to pick up the items on the floor. Quickly putting the folders back into the box, he noticed a strange-looking, but attractive calculator on the ground, partially obscured by a lone box. Curious, as he had no memory of ever having possessed the item, he picked it up and examined it closely.

Must have belonged to the former occupant of my office, he thought to himself.

He finished storing his box next to an empty one that was labeled "Inventory," and took the calculator, intent on adorning his desk with the unusual device.

Later that evening, Ronald sat at the dining room table with Linda and their children, Bobby and Cindy, having just finished a fantastic dinner of roasted chicken, potatoes, and home-baked bread.

"Sweetie, dinner was excellent, as always," commented Ronald, with his two perfectly behaved children nodding in agreement.

"Thank you, dear. There is something to be said for sweating over a hot oven all day," mused his pretty wife. "By the way, the countertop mixer you brought home was immensely helpful with the bread. I couldn't have done it without it. And it matches so well with the kitchen décor."

"Huh?" queried the man of the house. "I... I didn't bring home any mixer. Where is

it?"

Linda casually pointed over to the kitchen counter, where an attractive and expensive-looking KitchenAid Professional Mixer sat in plain view.

"Linda, I didn't buy that. Did it come in the mail?"

"No, dear. It was just... there."

"How odd. Well, perhaps we bought it when we went shopping a while back, and one of us just put it out to use," said Ronald, unease lining his voice.

Bobby and Cindy gave each other silly grins, causing their parents to believe that somehow the children had something to do with the mystery, so Ronald and Linda shrugged their shoulders and got up from their seats.

All four members of the household assisted with dinner cleanup, as was their tradition, so once they were done the children went off to finish their homework, while Ronald and Linda relaxed in the family room of their lovely two-floor suburban palace.

A brandy snifter in hand, Ronald looked at the attractive room in which he sat, proud of his achievements and wonderful family life. Linda was working on a crochet project, which appeared to be something small—like something for a newborn. He almost dared not ask, but did hope that she would announce they were to have yet another child. Bobby and Cindy were fraternal twins, and being seven years old would be just old enough to assist with babysitting, once the newest family member was attending school. Ronald hoped to take his wife on that romantic vacation they had always talked about.

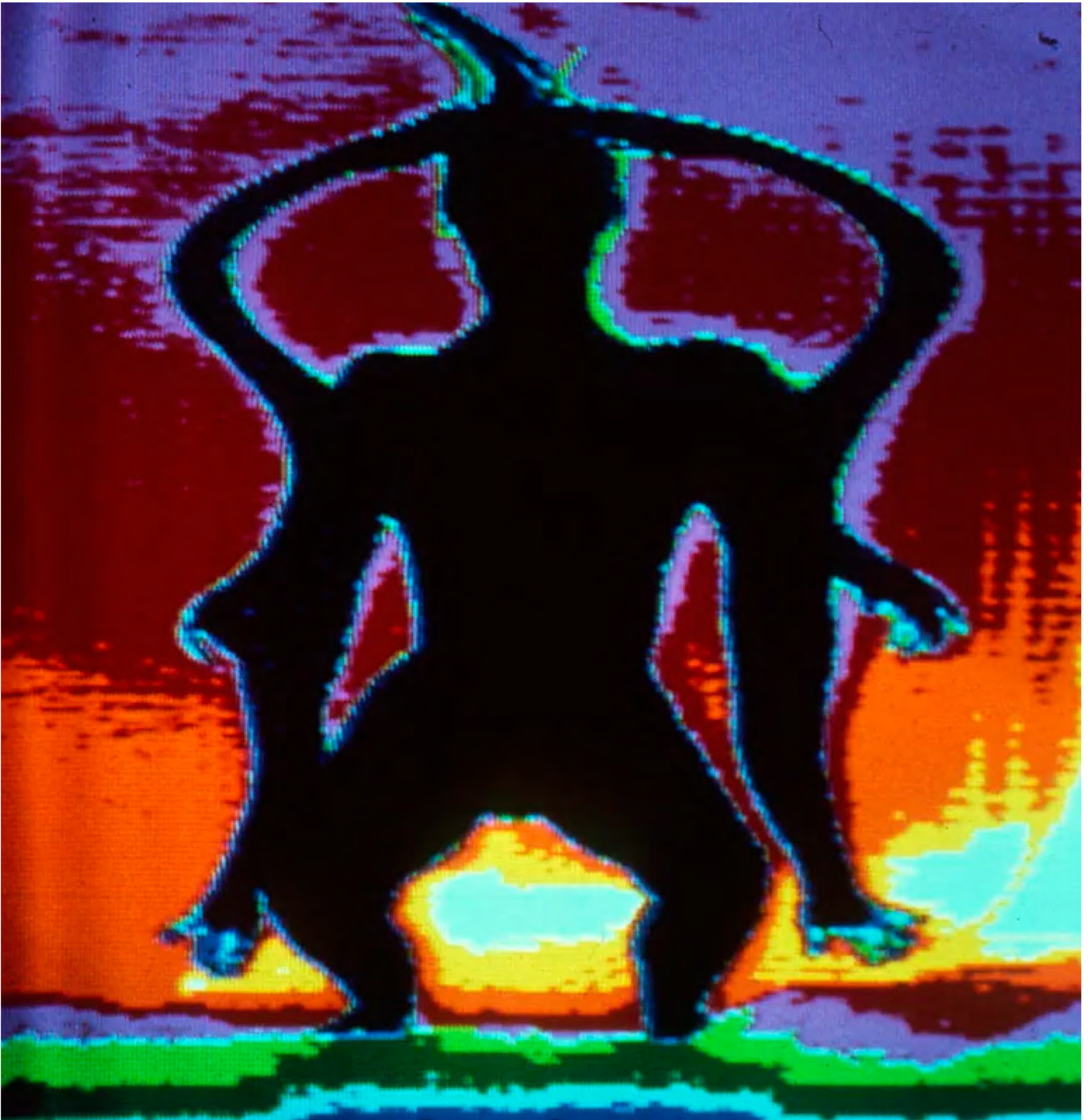
"Dear, is there something you'd like to tell me?" asked Ronald, as he swirled the golden cognac around in his snifter, noting Linda was without her usual glass of red wine.

"Hmm? Such as?" she rhetorically questioned.

"We're having another baby, aren't we?"

Linda just grinned and kept on with her crocheting project.





Jumbled Memories

The next day, Ronald sat at his well-appointed desk in his office, studying the calculator he had found in the closet. It was odd-looking, and had a wide LCD interface. Picking it up, he tried to turn it on, but was unable to locate a power switch.

This is weird, he thought to himself.

He went to set the electronic object down, when it suddenly displayed some text in

its small screen.

}

return KitchenAid;

}

This isn't a regular calculator, or it's busted.

Ronald set the small device back onto his desk, keeping it simply because it looked good there.

That evening, while he and Linda sat in their comfortable lounge chairs, Ronald looked around, again scanning their surroundings, as he would usually do. Descending into deep thought, he tried to remember the day they bought their lovely home, and to his dismay was unable. Nor could he remember their wedding day, even though the official photo of their nuptials was clearly hanging on the wall.

Ronald shrugged and polished off his cognac, nodding off into a relaxing slumber.

In the morning he awoke, not remembering how he got into his bed, but having an idea, he bound down the stairs, heading directly for the kitchen.

It wasn't there.

"Honey, where's that mixer? You know, the new red one you used to make bread dough?"

"Mixer? Love, we never had a mixer, no matter how many times I asked for one," responded Linda, as she filled their children's two small juice glasses.

"Daddy, you look silly, you know that?" commented Bobby, as Cindy snickered at her brother words.

"Yes, dear. You really should shave that beard," said Linda, causing Ronald to reach up and touch his facial hair.

I never had a beard before.

"Okay, children—off to school," he said. "Linda, I'll be working late today."

"Good morning, Mr. Simmons," said Sherry, the office receptionist.

"Morning. Did I get any messages?"

"None, sir."

He didn't know what he would do without Sherry. She always seemed to know what he needed, and when he needed it. Forgotten anniversary? Sherry had flowers for him to bring home. Daughter's piano recital? Sherry not only cleared his schedule, she walked him out the door when it was time to go. She was truly a treasure. He liked her—a lot, but not in a romantic sense. He loved his wife, and Sherry was a faithful ally who helped to make sure Mrs. Simmons was a happy woman.

Ronald entered his office and shut the door, going straight to his closet. As he stared into the small space, he heard a small dinging sound from his desk. He turned and walked over, picking up the calculator he had found the day prior. Its display now had some flashing numbers.

Wow, that's weird, he thought.

Returning to the closet, he remembered the box labeled "Inventory." He climbed back into the small space and pulled the box out, noting it now had a folder inside.

Blender? I wonder what this is?

Quickly opening the folder labeled "Blender," a single sheet of paper fell out, landing on the ground at his feet. Ronald unceremoniously dumped the box onto the ground, bent over and grabbed the piece of paper, which, along with a picture of a red KitchenAid blender, seemed to have technical specifications. Some he basically understood, such as "dateCreated" and some dimensions, but what perplexed him was the entry that said "Land Impact = 13." There were also lines that said "Scripts" and "Permissions," but he had no idea what they meant.

However, he knew one thing for sure—it was a picture of the blender that had disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared in his kitchen, and his wife and children remembered nothing of it.

Getting an idea, he walked out to the receptionist's desk. Slyly leaning onto the small counter, he said, "Hey Sherry, do you notice anything different about me?"

"Hmm?" she murmured, slowly looking up. "Such as, Mr. Simmons?"

"Well, my beard for one. You didn't mention it, like you do every time I wear a new

tie."

"Mr. Simmons," she said, "what are you talking about? You've always maintained a well-trimmed beard."

"Oh... well, yes. You are quite correct. I was just testing you, see?" he joked, but at the same time realizing that something was seriously wrong.

Back in his office, he sat at his desk, going over some figures for the next season's marketing campaign, and noticed nothing else unusual in his otherwise perfect life.



A New Life

Ronald Simmons awoke in his large bed the following morning, to the sound of birds chirping and some light music coming from his clock radio. He rolled over to put a hand on his wife's shoulder but found only empty space. In fact, the pillow was perfectly placed, and it seemed that no one had slept there all night.

As he brushed his teeth, he took notice of the toiletries on the counter next to the sink. He saw only his items.

Linda must have put her stuff away.

He walked out his door and went to drop down the stairway, but stumbled and fell, having miscalculated his step due to the fact that there was no stairwell. Cautiously, he moved down the small, unrecognizable hallway, approaching a small kitchen off to the right.

He wasn't in his house. It was as if his bedroom was moved somewhere in the middle of the night while he slept.

There wasn't a single picture of his family anywhere. Just a couple framed photos of him with his college buddies on a backpacking trip through Europe. Ronald reached up to rub his beard, but to his surprise he was again clean-shaven.

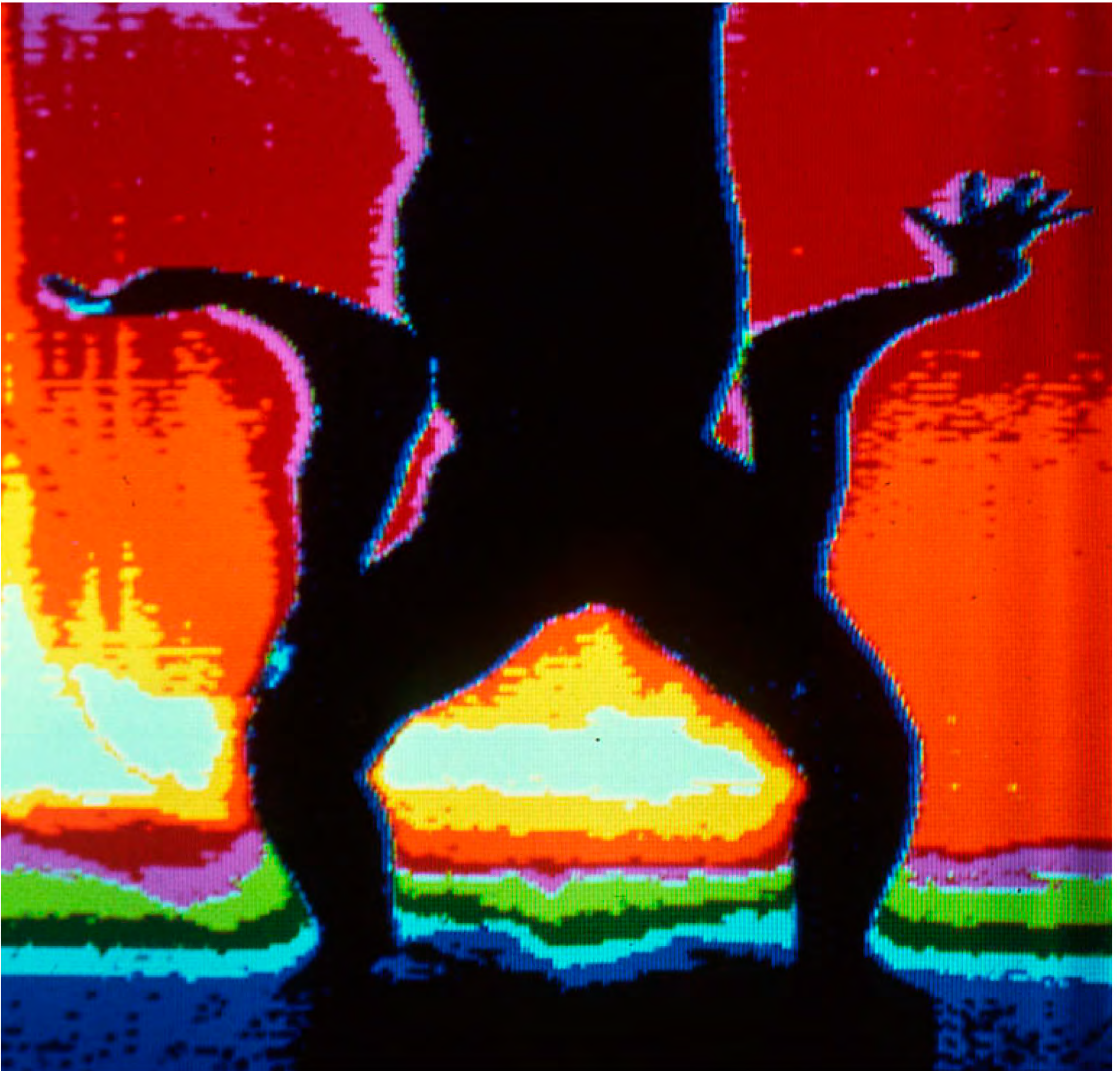
"Linda? Linda! What's going on here?" he cried out, by now completely confused and distraught.

No one answered.

Ronald had never dressed so quickly in his life. Once he was ready, he sprinted toward the front door of the house, only to find he was in an apartment complex. It was a simple click of his key fob that enabled him to discover the location of his car. However, his car had also changed. Instead of driving a smart, four door Ford sedan, he was now the owner of a yellow, late model Corvette.

I always wanted one of these, but not at the expense of my family...





Making Changes

As he entered the expansive entrance to his company's headquarters, he saw a larger, much more attractive reception desk. There to greet him was a gorgeous blonde who sported a low-cut blouse.

"Good morning, Mr. President," said the new girl.

"Mr... huh?"

"Mr. Simmons, you have a meeting with the Board of Directors at 2 PM."

"I do?"

"Yes, sir. You asked me to remind you. Your personal secretary will notify you later today."

Ronald awkwardly crossed his arms and pointed his hands in opposite directions, while giving the receptionist an inquisitive, yet expectant glance.

"That way... sir," she responded, pointing to her left, while returning an odd stare.

Ronald walked down the hallway until he saw Sherry, whom he had always known as the sole receptionist for the small company—a company now apparently much bigger than it had been before.

"Mornin', Sherry. Um, anything new?"

"Good morning, Mr. Simmons. Your schedule is free until your afternoon meeting with the board. Shall I call the country club and schedule a quick round of golf for you?"

"Golf? Um, no. That's okay. I need to do some research. Oh, and Sherry? Will you notify me if my wife calls, please?"

"Wife? Sir? Did you just go to Vegas and do the unthinkable?"

Shaking his head, he walked past Sherry and entered his office, only to find an expansive and luxurious space. His desk had changed, and was now a massive mahogany structure, with four large flat screen monitors on top. To the back of the room was a full bar, beautifully lit and backed by mirrors. He walked over and opened one of the numerous crystal bottles, taking a sniff. Vodka. He opened another. Cognac. And yet a third, which was obviously a fine Scotch whisky.

I could get used to this, but... my wife and kids. I have to find them. What the hell happened?

Then he saw the closet.

It was the same exact size as the closet he had the day before. In fact, it was the only thing that remained the same in his office. Ronald opened the door and noticed that it was deeper than it had been previously. He grabbed the box labeled "Inventory" and dropped it on top of his new, larger desk. There were now numerous folders inside, as well as folders within folders.

Let's see, he thought to himself, this one's called Ford Taurus.

Opening the folder, a single sheet of paper fell out. He glanced at it, and noted it had the same basic information as the paper he had seen the day before for the blender.

Shit. That was my car. What the hell?

He scanned some of the other folders, not even bothering to look inside them. He saw "Family Photo1," "Dining Room Set," "Beard"...

Beard! What is this?

Ronald grabbed the paper from inside the folder and read the detail on "Beard." It even had a creepy picture of the beard that he had worn for a single day.

He went to the bar and poured a long, stiff drink. Choosing the scotch, as he intended on chugging whatever it was that he put into the small glass, he savored the scent for a moment and then pounded the contents in one gulp. Then he drank another. And another.

Ronald stumbled over to his desk and plopped down into his chair, his head buried in his hands. As he sat still, he pondered the state of his existence, trying desperately to remember his life. To his surprise and dismay he could not remember one detail—only a basic overview, and that also seemed to be fading.

Then, he thought he heard some odd static and muffled voices. They were almost possible to understand, but he found they became louder and intelligible when he touched the mysterious calculator he had found in the closet, which still sat on his desktop. As he listened, he noticed it was a conversation between a man and a woman.

"Okay, I have voice chat on. Can you hear me now?" asked the man.

"Yeah. So... wow. It's over?"

"Sure is. I ejected her stuff last night.

"So, what happened? You two seemed so happy," said the feminine voice.

"Hello!" Ronald yelled at the top of his lungs. "Who's talking?"

The two voices continued with their conversation as if he hadn't said a thing.

"I found out she was married and had kids in RL," said the male voice

"No way! She had a real family and everything? I knew she was hiding something. Her online schedule was just too weird, ya know?"

"Yeah," he said.

"So what are you gonna do?" asked the unseen woman.

"I already made some changes. Packed the house away and put some furniture in an apartment on the mainland. But I think I'm just gonna wipe it all and start from scratch. I'm already storing everything in my inventory folder. Hell, I even made myself head of the corporation, but it's tough finding people who wanna role-play. Everyone wants to be in charge, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, tell me. Oh gawd, do you remember when *Avatar* came out? Every frikin' Na'vi female was Neytiri and every male was Jake Sully. Made it impossible to RP. But, you know what? I've got an idea! Why don't you do something... different?" said the female voice.

"Well, I guess I could. I mean, Linda's gone—she even blocked me from her, but I saved the kids for a future family. What are you thinking?"

"This is Ronald Simmons, president of this company, and I demand to know who is speaking!"

"Go female avie. You know, it's a lot of fun, and the clothing options are so much better. We could play sisters."

"Yeah, why not? Hell, I have the avie config saved anyway. Wanna help me shop? I'm kinda clueless with those things," the invisible man inquired.

"Oh yeah, hun. I know all the best stores. By the way, did I ever tell you your RL pic is awesome? When did you take it?"

"Last year, so it's kinda old, to be honest. This is weird. I've never used voice, and here we are. Oh, and your RL pic is amazing. How old is it?"

"This new one? Last week. Um, I have some... better ones, if you know what I mean," the woman answered with a hopeful giggle.

Ronald was nearly at the point of a complete mental meltdown. Unable to

comprehend what he was hearing, he believed it could have been coming from an adjacent office, until he heard the last of the otherworldly conversation.

"So, sweetie, you ready? Ready for the change?"

"Yeah. Already have a mesh bod. Swapping the shape now. Hey, why don't you watch?"

"Sure, okay," said the female voice, as Ronald's personal assistant walked into his office, wearing a serene look on her face.

"Well, make the change and we'll go shopping," said Sherry.

Looking down, Ronald Simmons screamed as large breasts suddenly protruded from his chest.



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Based in Southern California, Steve is the author of The Prīmulī Prophecies series, which so far includes Lives of Future-Past, Lives of Lost Angels and Lives of the Provectus.