Colorful

by STEVE BENTON

Terry's beautiful, colorful, utopic world is perfect; until it is not.

"Terry! We'll be late if you don't hurry!"

"Calm yourself, Bobby. The event doesn't start for another hour, and the pods will get us there in minutes."

Terry Livingston was more excited than she appeared about the grand opening of the latest art gallery in New Francisco. Mopa, the hottest artist on the scene, had held to

his promise of creating a live, interactive gallery, where the mod crowd could go and

play.

Terry was part of that crowd, as was her lover, Bobby Sherwood. In fact, everyone they knew were part of that crowd, so to say the ensuing party was to be epic would have been an understatement.

"There's a rumor that Mopa created a new color. Isn't that brilliant?" Terry asked, while she buttoned her violet tunic.

"Mopa's the best. But don't you find it odd that he's never been seen in public? In fact, we don't even know what he looks like," responded the hurried man, as he quickly donned a pink and yellow blazer and rushed for the door. "Come, we want to be early, so we can join with our friends. This is gonna be great," continued Bobby, as he laughingly grabbed Terry by the arm.

The blonde couple, which by all appearances could have been related, made their way out of their modern apartment and headed for the pod station in the basement of their building. Society had come a long way since The Restructuring, and not only was work voluntary, every need was taken care of. They had the best clothing, food, events, activities, and were only required to keep physically fit and healthy. Their

entire building was filled with people their age, so of course they had many friends

with whom they could play: be it the opera, nightclubs, antioxidant bars or tennis. Terry and Bobby had it made.

Racing down the moving walkway, they stepped into a private pod, which was made even more private when Bobby hit the dimmer button, effectively blocking any outside view. Their lips pressed as they savored each other's scent, and played a bit before they arrived at the all-new Mopa exhibit.

"Bobby! Terry! Over here!" called out Doris Wong, one of Terry's best friends. Terry waved excitedly, as she practically dragged Bobby along to join with the woman.

Doris looked different from Bobby and Terry, as she belonged to a different race of human being. Millennia prior, anyone could mate with whomever they desired. However, this was found to be non-conducive toward proper genetic reproduction with the human gene pool being limited, so the authorities started to make smart matches. Bobby and Terry were introduced to each other after they had turned eighteen years old, as were Doris and her mate, Charlie Lin.

"Bobby! It's so good to see you. I'll bet you two are excited about Mopa's new exhibit, eh?"

It was quite obvious that Charlie thought Bobby was a great guy, most probably due to Bobby's cool demeanor. But Terry knew Bobby didn't really care much for Charlie nor Doris, and only hung out with them for her sake. And that was a good thing, because she knew she would create fine offspring with Bobby once they had received their birthing license from the authorities.

"Yeah, it should be keen," chuckled Bobby. "Let's go get a drink..."

"Wow! I love your blazer, Bobby," said Doris, admiring his colorful jacket.

"I picked it up for him in the Retro Section the other day," Terry proudly stated.

"I sure hope you had a cappuccino when you were there. There's a little place on the corner of Blue and Orange that serves them," advised Charlie.

"I don't drink coffee products. My health report advised me to avoid them, and thus would facilitate a quicker birthing license," said Terry, noting that Doris and Charlie gave each other an excited glance.

"We were going to wait to tell you, but... we got our license this morning!" squealed

Doris, as she leaned into her assigned mate.

"So great!" exclaimed Terry. She was genuinely happy for her friend, as well she should have been. Receiving a birthing license was the pinnacle of any couple's relationship.

"Hey, congrats, you two," added Bobby, forcing a smile as he said so.

The two couples entered into a rainbow portal, which led them into a tunnel that dazzled the senses. Sparkles floated on the walls, creating illusions of profound beauty rarely seen, even in their brilliant world.

And that was where the problems began.

Terry was watching the wall display with piqued interest, losing herself in the depths of the display, when she suddenly saw and heard what seemed to be gray noise – wavy lines and disrupted vision, along with a painful sound that caused her temporary dismay.

"Ouch! What is *that*?" she cried.

"What's *what*, Terry?" asked Bobby.

"Terry, tell me nothing's wrong," Doris kindly demanded.

"It's... like... there are no colors. Oh, wait. Okay. I'm fine."

"Perhaps it was a reaction to that wall you were staring at, Terry," suggested Charlie.

"Yeah, maybe you're right..."

Mopa's exhibit was mind-blowing, offering the best in extra-sensory enjoyment, coupled with antioxidant atmosphere flows and scent blasts of every known color in the universe.

And then Mopa revealed himself, along with his new color.

He was tall; unusually tall. He was also strangely handsome, which caused Terry undue stress, as she was genetically matched to Bobby and should have only found him to be sexually attractive. She watched as Mopa waved his arm through the air, with a color never before seen by human eyes following his hand.

Everyone gasped, held their breaths deep and then burst out into applause.

And it happened again.

Terry saw the same interference, but this time she wasn't staring at a wall. Mopa changed from being a tall, handsome man to looking like something she had never seen before. He was pale, nearly colorless, with soulless black eyes and a fish-like face. His lustrous hair disappeared, revealing a bald, clammy skull that had dark spots all over. Worse yet, the entire exhibit now looked dirty and gray. There was trash on the floor, and aside from being dressed in rags, everyone looked bland and malnourished.

Gazing at her assigned mate, Terry was mortified that Bobby, although looking roughly the same as before, had a tired face and a sallow complexion. Dark circles under his eyes showed a severe lack of sleep, and the attractive blazer she got for him was only a beat up tweed jacket.

What the heck? What's wrong with me?

"I... I need to go home. I don't feel well," she said, turning for the door without another word. Bobby shrugged his shoulders and waved goodbye to the couple he didn't really care for in the first place, and then followed Terry back to the pods, which took them to their apartment.

"Bobby. There's something... off with me. I don't see colors anymore, and everything's ugly and dirty now."

"Come on, let's get you to the hospital then."

"No! If they find something wrong we may not get our license. Doris already got hers. Don't you want to have a baby?"

"Well yeah, of course! But your health is more important than competing with those two. They're no big deal, anyway. Let's go get you checked out."

Later, at the local clinic, Terry waited alone in an examination room, looking at the drab, unpainted walls. There should have been colorful splashes and designs all over, but she now saw everything in black and white; her world had become grayscale. Crumpled papers littered the floor, and numerous ugly boxes lined every hallway of the clinic. But what shocked Terry wasn't the garbage – it was the attending physician who entered and gave her a blank stare.

"Are you Mopa?" she gasped.

"No, I am not. I am Doctor Halloway. I hear you are suffering from visions. Please, tell me what these might be."

"You are... ugly! And the world is gray. There's garbage everywhere and it's scary."

"I see. Hmm, please hold still, Terry," said Doctor Halloway. He held a tuning fork-like instrument up to her ear, which caused a light humming sound to reverberate in her brain. In a matter of moments her vision was returned to normal, and she found herself looking at a very handsome doctor with red hair and a neatly trimmed beard.

"Oh, what happened? I don't understand? Will this affect my birthing license?"

"No, not at all, my dear. You see, throughout the millennia mankind has suffered numerous maladies, which we have always sought to correct. You merely experienced something that used to happen on a casual basis. It is nothing to be concerned with, really. That is all."

Terry sped along the moving sidewalk with Bobby, recounting her distressing events of the evening.

"Everything was gray – ugly. Heck, even the doctor looked like Mopa."

"And what did Mopa look like?" Bobby asked.

"Like a fish-man. No hair, black eyes and spots on his head. There was garbage

everywhere, like the bots stopped cleaning or something."

Why did I tell Bobby? What if he asks for a replacement mate? Am I broken?

The following day, Terry went to play tennis with her friend Felicia. She really liked Felicia, as she and the girl looked very similar. Plus, as an added benefit to their friendship, they were the same size and build, so they could share clothes. Felcia had an outfit that Terry wanted to borrow, and she knew a good tennis match would put her friend in the right mood, being that Felicia usually won.

And win she did.

"Great match! You always get me in the last set," said Terry.

"You were a tough opponent this time, Terry. Your backhand is sure improving."

"Hey Felicia, you know that cute, yellow spring dress you wore to the grand opening of Omar's Antioxidant Bar two weeks back?"

"Yes. It was such a find!"

"Well, do you think I could borrow it for a party tomorrow?"
"Of course! What is the event?"

Terry giggled lightly, and said, "It's a birthing license party for Doris Wong. You do know her, don't you?"

"We've met before. She is a nice girl. Please give her our best wishes. Now let's go get that dress for you."

The two were in Felicia's large walk-in closet, with Terry admiring her friend's expansive wardrobe.

And then it happened again.

One moment she was looking at the pretty yellow spring dress, and the next she heard a raucous noise and found herself holding what was actually a burlap sack with shoulder straps.

Falling to the ground, Terry screamed in agony.

Then everything went dark.

Terry awoke in a filthy room, virtually unfit for human habitation. This time, joining the ugly garbage and boxes was a large amount of rotten food waste, which she could unfortunately smell too. Not knowing where she was, nor how much time had passed, she sat up and looked around, panicking while breathing in deep, heaving breaths.

"Where am I? What's happening to me?" she cried out.

"Terry, please remain calm. You are perfectly safe," a tinny-sounding voice called out from a speaker in the ceiling.

"Who are you? What's going on? I'm scared!"

A door slowly opened, and two identical fish-like people entered, both giving her blank expressions.

"Mopa? There are two of you? What's going on?"

"Terry, please. There has been a malfunction. You must relax. We are not going to harm you," said one of the fish men.

"Who are you?"

"I am Porso, and this is... Mopa."

"Hello, Terry. I do apologize for your distress. This seems to be completely our fault, and is totally unintentional," said Mopa.

"How can I tell you two apart? You look identical," exclaimed Terry, still frightened out of her wits.

"Hmm, I shall hold this paper in my hand," said Mopa, as he bent over and picked up a dirty piece of crumpled paper from the ground.

"Ew, gross!"

"Indeed," said Porso, "but it shall suffice for the time being.

"So, what happened to me? Why is everything so ugly?"

"Well, to be honest, your implant failed," said Porso.

"My what?"

"All humans are given an implant at decanting," said Mopa, staring at Terry with his black, expressionless eyes.

"Decanting? What's that?"

"Terry, have you ever seen a newborn baby?" asked Porso.

"Of course! I see them on the screens all the time!"

"No, Terry. I mean in real life," said Porso.

"Well, no... why?"

"Babies are not born. They are grown," said Mopa.

"I'm confused. What do you mean?"

Porso sighed and seemed to have what resembled an expression of sadness. He took a deep breath and then recounted the tale of humanity to their unfortunate victim of failed technology.

"Of course, you realize we are not like you. Our species is called the K'Nath, and we ruled intergalactic star systems before your ancestors were walking upright. Tens of thousands of years ago we encountered a dying world, orbiting a star on the outer

edge of what is called the Milky Way Galaxy – Earth, the planet from which your people originated. There were few surviving humans left, but enough for us to save your species, on another world, and in another galaxy. At first we thought they would fight against us, but they were weak and only wanted to be cared for. They quickly left everything behind for a new beginning.

"Earth? I only know the here and the now. New Francisco!"

"Of course," added Mopa. "And that is all anyone will ever know. We have brought mankind to an enlightened state. By providing your every need, and giving you sensory enhancements via your implants, every human on this world is happy, healthy and enjoys a wonderful standard of living until his or her time comes to an end."

"To an end? What do you mean?" asked Terry, not knowing the concept of endings or death.

"Terry, of course you've never seen an aged person. Before we restructured your species your ancestors lived for many decades, turning wrinkled and what you would view as ugly, before becoming feeble and dying in misery. We have been able to increase your life expectancy, but when you expire it is sudden, and we modify the memories of those around you so you are not missed. In fact, due to your failed implant, and consequent reaction in front of your mate and friends, we had to modify their memories so you would not be remembered. I am sorry to inform you of this."

Terry stared at Mopa in disbelief, not knowing if she should cry or keep questioning.

She didn't cry.

"Well, I certainly don't want to be ugly or wrinkled. And why is everything so without the beautiful colors I have always known? I miss the colors."

"I can answer that," said Porso. "The implant was developed after our first attempt at saving your species had failed. We provided farms and jobs and many of the things that human society had previously produced on Earth and Mars, the two formerly inhabited planets of the system of your ancestors. However, this experiment failed. Clans formed and were constantly warring with each other, thinning out the gene pool with each savage death. It was at this point that we knew your species could only thrive if properly managed. We gave the humans a choice – be controlled more, or be abandoned. They chose control. However, the required resources for keeping your world perfect and orderly were more than we could spare, so we created the implant that gives you the illusion of beautiful perfection. The energy saved is substantial. So, mankind has been living a peaceful existence now for thousands of years thanks to this wonderful technology."

"And... this is what everything really looks like?"

"Yes, I am afraid so. Is it not much better to see the world through an implant?" asked Porso.

"Maybe, but I also like truth," said Terry.

Mopa and Porso looked at each other, with the latter turning to Terry and saying, "As your implant failed, and you now know the truth of your existence, we could offer you a different life."

"What do you mean, a different life?"

"Yes, you could live amongst our kind. Of course, you could never return to your friends. You would be transported to our homeworld, which is in a nearby star

system. I might add that it is not nearly as dreary as this place appears, although it

tends to be a bit wet in comparison," said Mopa.

"Couldn't you just... you know, fix me? I'd rather not hang out with you guys. No insult intended, but you're pretty ugly, to be honest."

"Mankind is not attractive to us either, young Terry," said Porso, as he formed what resembled a grin on his fish-like mouth.

"I believe we can attempt another implant for you, Terry. However, you would be assigned a new group of friends and a new mate. You would also have your memories altered, and would have no knowledge of our encounter, nor the effects of your failed implant," added Mopa.

"So, I'll go back to my life?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," said Porso.

Terry seemed to concentrate for a moment, and looked long and hard at the garbage-strewn room, figuring it was better to live a lie than to suffer such ugliness.

"Okay, please fix me. I want to go back," she said, as she got up from her filthy cot.

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Mopa, the handsome exhibit artist, was closing his new interactive gallery after a successful first showing, as his assistant, Porso kindly led the spectators out the door, where they would go off to various clubs and events. Terry Livingston hooked her arm around that of her mate, Bobby Sherwood, as they prepared for their next event. The two made for the door, ready to party on into the New Angeles night without a care in the world.

After Porso locked the entrance, he turned back to Mopa and gave his identical friend a kind nod.

"It seems the implant has taken well. Terry has successfully integrated into the birthing group, is with her new mate and has not missed a beat, so to say."

"Yes, Porso. I do believe it shall hold this time. I find it odd that she did not choose to leave, as so many other failed implants had done before. Perhaps we should have told her of the farming community on our world where humans live as they did on Earth. It could have extended her life."

"She, like many others, preferred the security of ignorance. If she only knew that her

ancestors begged us to make them forget so many centuries ago. It was then that we realized their value."

"She is from simple stock, Mopa. Her line is not known for its intelligence."

"Yes, I believe you are correct. Speaking of stock, I do so prefer the Asian varietals. They are much more tender."

"It is their naturally higher percentage of body fat, Mopa. And I must agree. The Caucasians are a bit stringy."

"Oh, I put in a personal request with the New Francisco group for Doris Wong's left thigh, now that we've extracted the fetus for proper growth and decanting. Perhaps we could have a gathering and enjoy the meat together..."

Steve Benton

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.