

30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

WITH NEVER-BEFORE-PUBLISHED MATERIAL



NEAL STEPHENSON SNOW CRASH

'Fast-forward free-style mall mythology for the 21st century'

WILLIAM GIBSON

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BY NEAL STEPHENSON

The Big U

Zodiac

Snow Crash

The Diamond Age; or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer

Cryptonomicon

THE BAROQUE CYCLE

Quicksilver

The Confusion

The System of the World

Anathem

The Mongoliad

Reamde

Seveneves

The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.

Fall; or, Dodge in Hell

Termination Shock



SNOW CRASH

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A NOVEL

NEAL STEPHENSON



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FOREWORD

There's little to add about the origin of *Snow Crash* that's not already covered in the thirty-year-old acknowledgments section. What has changed between then and now is that a lot of people have worked on actually developing systems that are explicitly based on, or at least indirectly inspired by, this book.

When I started writing the novel, I had recently set fire to a big pile of money buying computer-graphics hardware and software intended to produce images for a graphic-novel project. I had spent a lot of time writing code to make all of that hardware work together. The Internet had existed for about six years, but few people outside of academia used it or even knew of its existence. The World Wide Web was still in the future, and most people who had email were still doing so on proprietary systems such as CompuServe. Videogames were two-dimensional. But the ability (at least in theory) of computers to perform the calculations needed to generate three-dimensional graphics suggested a future in which immersive audiovisual experiences might become possible.

This left me fascinated by the question of how the price of hardware might be brought down to a level where it was within reach of typical households. Something similar had happened during the 1950s with television. A feedback loop somehow got started whereby the popularity of certain programs caused more people to buy televisions, which drove their price down while giving manufacturers incentives to invest in larger screens and higher quality. The

Metaverse was my conjecture as to what might do for 3D computer graphics what *I Love Lucy* had done for television.

As it happened, what actually brought the cost of graphics hardware down was videogames—in particular Doom, which came out the year after *Snow Crash* was published. That and the many games inspired by it caused the videogame industry to grow to the point where its revenues have long since eclipsed those of Hollywood. The World Wide Web came into existence at the same time and led to the explosive growth of the Internet. It also sold a lot of computers and graphics cards to users who wanted to be able to see pictures and videos on their screens. Those two factors made computer graphics cheap and ubiquitous without the need for a single Metaverse as described in the novel. If such a Metaverse is going to happen, it's still in the future as of this writing. But that future doesn't seem far off.

Various efforts have been made over the decades to adapt *Snow Crash* for the screen. A number of screenplays have been written to that end, some for film and some for television. In general I have left that kind of thing to people who do it for a living, but from time to time I have written new material in that vein, more for my own amusement than for any immediate purpose. I've always felt that Lagos gets the short end of the stick in *Snow Crash*; he gets murdered by Raven on page 156, during the Vitaly Chernobyl concert, and other characters spend the rest of the book talking about him.

In spare moments since writing the novel, I have filled in a detailed timeline that explains the backstory of how the world of *Snow Crash* came into existence. Lagos is a big part of it. Gathering dust in my archives are some scripts (both audio and audiovisual) telling his story. I don't know if they'll ever be produced, but as a way to mark the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of *Snow Crash*'s publication, I'm including them in this new edition.

NEAL STEPHENSON

JULY 2022



SNOW CRASH

THE DELIVERATOR BELONGS TO AN ELITE ORDER, A HALLOWED subcategory. He's got esprit up to here. Right now, he is preparing to carry out his third mission of the night. His uniform is black as activated charcoal, filtering the very light out of the air. A bullet will bounce off its arachnofiber weave like a wren hitting a patio door, but excess perspiration wafts through it like a breeze through a freshly napalmed forest. Where his body has bony extremities, the suit has sintered armorgel: feels like gritty jello, protects like a stack of telephone books.

When they gave him the job, they gave him a gun. The Deliverator never deals in cash, but someone might come after him anyway—might want his car, or his cargo. The gun is tiny, aero-styled, lightweight, the kind of a gun a fashion designer would carry; it fires teensy darts that fly at five times the velocity of an SR-71 spy plane, and when you get done using it, you have to plug it into the cigarette lighter, because it runs on electricity.

The Deliverator never pulled that gun in anger, or in fear. He pulled it once in Gila Highlands. Some punks in Gila Highlands, a fancy Burbclave, wanted themselves a delivery, and they didn't want

to pay for it. Thought they would impress the Deliverator with a baseball bat. The Deliverator took out his gun, centered its laser doohickey on that poised Louisville Slugger, fired it. The recoil was immense, as though the weapon had blown up in his hand. The middle third of the baseball bat turned into a column of burning sawdust accelerating in all directions like a bursting star. Punk ended up holding this bat handle with milky smoke pouring out the end. Stupid look on his face. Didn't get nothing but trouble from the Deliverator.

Since then the Deliverator has kept the gun in the glove compartment and relied, instead, on a matched set of samurai swords, which have always been his weapon of choice anyhow. The punks in Gila Highlands weren't afraid of the gun, so the Deliverator was forced to use it. But swords need no demonstrations.

The Deliverator's car has enough potential energy packed into its batteries to fire a pound of bacon into the Asteroid Belt. Unlike a bimbo box or a Burb beater, the Deliverator's car unloads that power through gaping, gleaming, polished sphincters. When the Deliverator puts the hammer down, shit happens. You want to talk contact patches? Your car's tires have tiny contact patches, talk to the asphalt in four places the size of your tongue. The Deliverator's car has big sticky tires with contact patches the size of a fat lady's thighs. The Deliverator is in touch with the road, starts like a bad day, stops on a peseta.

Why is the Deliverator so equipped? Because people rely on him. He is a role model. This is America. People do whatever the fuck they feel like doing, you got a problem with that? Because they have a right to. And because they have guns and no one can fucking stop them. As a result, this country has one of the worst economies in the world. When it gets down to it—talking trade balances here—once we've brain-drained all our technology into other countries, once things have evened out, they're making cars in Bolivia and microwave ovens in Tadzhikistan and selling them here—once

our edge in natural resources has been made irrelevant by giant Hong Kong ships and dirigibles that can ship North Dakota all the way to New Zealand for a nickel—once the Invisible Hand has taken all those historical inequities and smeared them out into a broad global layer of what a Pakistani brickmaker would consider to be prosperity—y’know what? There’s only four things we do better than anyone else

music

movies

microcode (software)

high-speed pizza delivery

The Deliverator used to make software. Still does, sometimes. But if life were a mellow elementary school run by well-meaning education Ph.D.s, the Deliverator’s report card would say: “Hiro is so bright and creative but needs to work harder on his cooperation skills.”

So now he has this other job. No brightness or creativity involved—but no cooperation either. Just a single principle: The Deliverator stands tall, your pie in thirty minutes or you can have it free, shoot the driver, take his car, file a class-action suit. The Deliverator has been working this job for six months, a rich and lengthy tenure by his standards, and has never delivered a pizza in more than twenty-one minutes.

Oh, they used to argue over times, many corporate driver-years lost to it: homeowners, red-faced and sweaty with their own lies, stinking of Old Spice and job-related stress, standing in their glowing yellow doorways brandishing their Seikos and waving at the clock over the kitchen sink, I swear, can’t you guys tell time?

Didn’t happen anymore. Pizza delivery is a major industry. A managed industry. People went to CosaNostra Pizza University four years just to learn it. Came in its doors unable to write an En-

glish sentence, from Abkhazia, Rwanda, Guanajuato, South Jersey, and came out knowing more about pizza than a Bedouin knows about sand. And they had studied this problem. Graphed the frequency of doorway delivery-time disputes. Wired the early Deliverators to record, then analyze, the debating tactics, the voice-stress histograms, the distinctive grammatical structures employed by white middle-class Type A Burbclave occupants who against all logic had decided that this was the place to take their personal Customerian stand against all that was stale and deadening in their lives: they were going to lie, or delude themselves, about the time of their phone call and get themselves a free pizza; no, they deserved a free pizza along with their life, liberty, and pursuit of whatever, it was fucking inalienable. Sent psychologists out to these people's houses, gave them a free TV set to submit to an anonymous interview, hooked them to polygraphs, studied their brain waves as they showed them choppy, inexplicable movies of porn queens and late-night car crashes and Sammy Davis, Jr., put them in sweet-smelling, mauve-walled rooms and asked them questions about Ethics so perplexing that even a Jesuit couldn't respond without committing a venial sin.

The analysts at CosaNostra Pizza University concluded that it was just human nature and you couldn't fix it, and so they went for a quick cheap technical fix: smart boxes. The pizza box is a plastic carapace now, corrugated for stiffness, a little LED readout glowing on the side, telling the Deliverator how many trade imbalance-producing minutes have ticked away since the fateful phone call. There are chips and stuff in there. The pizzas rest, a short stack of them, in slots behind the Deliverator's head. Each pizza glides into a slot like a circuit board into a computer, clicks into place as the smart box interfaces with the onboard system of the Deliverator's car. The address of the caller has already been inferred from his phone number and poured into the smart box's built-in RAM. From there it is communicated to the car, which computes and projects the optimal route on a heads-up display, a glowing colored

map traced out against the windshield so that the Deliverator does not even have to glance down.

If the thirty-minute deadline expires, news of the disaster is flashed to CosaNostra Pizza Headquarters and relayed from there to Uncle Enzo himself—the Sicilian Colonel Sanders, the Andy Griffith of Bensonhurst, the straight razor-swinging figment of many a Deliverator’s nightmares, the Capo and prime figurehead of CosaNostra Pizza, Incorporated—who will be on the phone to the customer within five minutes, apologizing profusely. The next day, Uncle Enzo will land on the customer’s yard in a jet helicopter and apologize some more and give him a free trip to Italy—all he has to do is sign a bunch of releases that make him a public figure and spokesperson for CosaNostra Pizza and basically end his private life as he knows it. He will come away from the whole thing feeling that, somehow, he owes the Mafia a favor.

The Deliverator does not know for sure what happens to the driver in such cases, but he has heard some rumors. Most pizza deliveries happen in the evening hours, which Uncle Enzo considers to be his private time. And how would you feel if you had to interrupt dinner with your family in order to call some obstreperous dork in a Burbclave and grovel for a late fucking pizza? Uncle Enzo has not put in fifty years serving his family and his country so that, at the age when most are playing golf and bobbling their granddaughters, he can get out of the bathtub dripping wet and lie down and kiss the feet of some sixteen-year-old skate punk whose pepperoni was thirty-one minutes in coming. Oh, God. It makes the Deliverator breathe a little shallower just to think of the idea.

But he wouldn’t drive for CosaNostra Pizza any other way. You know why? Because there’s something about having your life on the line. It’s like being a kamikaze pilot. Your mind is clear. Other people—store clerks, burger flippers, software engineers, the whole vocabulary of meaningless jobs that make up Life in America—other people just rely on plain old competition. Better flip your burgers or debug your subroutines faster and better than your high

school classmate two blocks down the strip is flipping or debugging, because we're in competition with those guys, and people notice these things.

What a fucking rat race that is. CosaNostra Pizza doesn't have any competition. Competition goes against the Mafia ethic. You don't work harder because you're competing against some identical operation down the street. You work harder because everything is on the line. Your name, your honor, your family, your life. Those burger flippers might have a better life expectancy—but what kind of life is it anyway, you have to ask yourself. That's why nobody, not even the Nipponese, can move pizzas faster than CosaNostra. The Deliverator is proud to wear the uniform, proud to drive the car, proud to march up the front walks of innumerable Burbclave homes, a grim vision in ninja black, a pizza on his shoulder, red LED digits blazing proud numbers into the night: 12:32 or 15:15 or the occasional 20:43.

The Deliverator is assigned to CosaNostra Pizza #3569 in the Valley. Southern California doesn't know whether to bustle or just strangle itself on the spot. Not enough roads for the number of people. Fairlanes, Inc. is laying new ones all the time. Have to bulldoze lots of neighborhoods to do it, but those seventies and eighties developments exist to be bulldozed, right? No sidewalks, no schools, no nothing. Don't have their own police force—no immigration control—undesirables can walk right in without being frisked or even harassed. Now a Burbclave, that's the place to live. A city-state with its own constitution, a border, laws, cops, everything.

The Deliverator was a corporal in the Farms of Merryvale State Security Force for a while once. Got himself fired for pulling a sword on an acknowledged perp. Slid it right through the fabric of the perp's shirt, gliding the flat of the blade along the base of his neck, and pinned him to a warped and bubbled expanse of vinyl siding on the wall of the house that the perp was trying to break into. Thought it was a pretty righteous bust. But they fired him anyway because the perp turned out to be the son of the vice-

chancellor of the Farms of Merryvale. Oh, the weasels had an excuse: said that a thirty-six-inch samurai sword was not on their Weapons Protocol. Said that he had violated the SPAC, the Suspected Perpetrator Apprehension Code. Said that the perp had suffered psychological trauma. He was afraid of butter knives now; he had to spread his jelly with the back of a teaspoon. They said that he had exposed them to liability.

The Deliverator had to borrow some money to pay for it. Had to borrow it from the Mafia, in fact. So he's in their database now—retinal patterns, DNA, voice graph, fingerprints, footprints, palm prints, wrist prints, every fucking part of the body that had wrinkles on it—almost—those bastards rolled in ink and made a print and digitized it into their computer. But it's their money—sure they're careful about loaning it out. And when he applied for the Deliverator job they were happy to take him, because they knew him. When he got the loan, he had to deal personally with the assistant vice-capo of the Valley, who later recommended him for the Deliverator job. So it was like being in a family. A really scary, twisted, abusive family.

CosaNostra Pizza #3569 is on Vista Road just down from Kings Park Mall. Vista Road used to belong to the State of California and now is called Fairlanes, Inc. Rte. CSV-5. Its main competition used to be a U.S. highway and is now called Cruiseways, Inc. Rte. Cal-12. Farther up the Valley, the two competing highways actually cross. Once there had been bitter disputes, the intersection closed by sporadic sniper fire. Finally, a big developer bought the entire intersection and turned it into a drive-through mall. Now the roads just feed into a parking system—not a lot, not a ramp, but a system—and lose their identity. Getting through the intersection involves tracing paths through the parking system, many braided filaments of direction like the Ho Chi Minh trail. CSV-5 has better throughput, but Cal-12 has better pavement. That is typical—Fairlanes roads emphasize getting you there, for Type A drivers, and Cruiseways emphasize the enjoyment of the ride, for Type B drivers.

The Deliverator is a Type A driver with rabies. He is zeroing in on his home base, CosaNostra Pizza #3569, cranking up the left lane of CSV-5 at a hundred and twenty kilometers. His car is an invisible black lozenge, just a dark place that reflects the tunnel of franchise signs—the loglo. A row of orange lights burbles and churns across the front, where the grille would be if this were an air-breathing car. The orange light looks like a gasoline fire. It comes in through people’s rear windows, bounces off their rearview mirrors, projects a fiery mask across their eyes, reaches into their subconscious, and unearths terrible fears of being pinned, fully conscious, under a detonating gas tank, makes them want to pull over and let the Deliverator overtake them in his black chariot of pepperoni fire.

The loglo, overhead, marking out CSV-5 in twin contrails, is a body of electrical light made of innumerable cells, each cell designed in Manhattan by imageers who make more for designing a single logo than a Deliverator will make in his entire lifetime. Despite their efforts to stand out, they all smear together, especially at a hundred and twenty kilometers per hour. Still, it is easy to see CosaNostra Pizza #3569 because of the billboard, which is wide and tall even by current inflated standards. In fact, the squat franchise itself looks like nothing more than a low-slung base for the great aramid fiber pillars that thrust the billboard up into the trademark firmament. Marca Registrada, baby.

The billboard is a classic, a chestnut, not a figment of some fleeting Mafia promotional campaign. It is a statement, a monument built to endure. Simple and dignified. It shows Uncle Enzo in one of his spiffy Italian suits. The pinstripes glint and flex like sinews. The pocket square is luminous. His hair is perfect, slicked back with something that never comes off, each strand cut off straight and square at the end by Uncle Enzo’s cousin, Art the Barber, who runs the second-largest chain of low-end haircutting establishments in the world. Uncle Enzo is standing there, not exactly smiling, an

avuncular glint in his eye for sure, not posing like a model but standing there like your uncle would, and it says

THE MAFIA

YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND IN THE FAMILY!
PAID FOR BY THE OUR THING FOUNDATION

The billboard serves as the Deliverator's polestar. He knows that when he gets to the place on CSV-5 where the bottom corner of the billboard is obscured by the pseudo-Gothic stained-glass arches of the local Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates franchise, it's time for him to get over into the right lanes where the bimbo boxes poke along, random, indecisive, looking at each passing franchise's drive-way like they don't know if it's a promise or a threat.

He cuts off a bimbo box—a family minivan—veers past the Buy 'n' Fly that is next door, and pulls into CosaNostra Pizza #3569. Those big fat contact patches complain, squeal a little bit, but they hold on to the patented Fairlanes, Inc. high-traction pavement and guide him into the chute. No other Deliverators are waiting in the chute. That is good, that means high turnover for him, fast action, keep moving that 'za. As he scrunches to a stop, the electromechanical hatch on the flank of his car is already opening to reveal his empty pizza slots, the door clicking and folding back in on itself like the wing of a beetle. The slots are waiting. Waiting for hot pizza.

And waiting. The Deliverator honks his horn. This is not a nominal outcome.

Window slides open. That should never happen. You can look at the three-ring binder from CosaNostra Pizza University, cross-reference the citation for *window*, *chute*, *dispatcher's*, and it will give you all the procedures for that window—and it should never be opened. Unless something has gone wrong.

The window slides open and—you sitting down?—*smoke* comes

out of it. The Deliverator hears a discordant beetling over the metal hurricane of his sound system and realizes that it is a smoke alarm, coming from inside the franchise.

Mute button on the stereo. Oppressive silence—his eardrums uncringe—the window is buzzing with the cry of the smoke alarm. The car idles, waiting. The hatch has been open too long, atmospheric pollutants are congealing on the electrical contacts in the back of the pizza slots, he'll have to clean them ahead of schedule, everything is going exactly the way it shouldn't go in the three-ring binder that spells out all the rhythms of the pizza universe.

Inside, a football-shaped Abkhazian man is running to and fro, holding a three-ring binder open, using his spare tire as a ledge to keep it from collapsing shut; he runs with the gait of a man carrying an egg on a spoon. He is shouting in the Abkhazian dialect; all the people who run CosaNostra pizza franchises in this part of the Valley are Abkhazian immigrants.

It does not look like a serious fire. The Deliverator saw a real fire once, at the Farms of Merryvale, and you couldn't see anything for the smoke. That's all it was: smoke, burbling out of nowhere, occasional flashes of orange light down at the bottom, like heat lightning in tall clouds. This is not that kind of fire. It is the kind of fire that just barely puts out enough smoke to detonate the smoke alarms. And he is losing time for this shit.

The Deliverator holds the horn button down. The Abkhazian manager comes to the window. He is supposed to use the intercom to talk to drivers, he could say anything he wanted and it would be piped straight into the Deliverator's car, but no, he has to talk face to face, like the Deliverator is some kind of fucking ox cart driver. He is red-faced, sweating, his eyes roll as he tries to think of the English words.

"A fire, a little one," he says.

The Deliverator says nothing. Because he knows that all of this is going onto videotape. The tape is being pipelined, as it happens, to CosaNostra Pizza University, where it will be analyzed in a pizza

management science laboratory. It will be shown to Pizza University students, perhaps to the very students who will replace this man when he gets fired, as a textbook example of how to screw up your life.

“New employee—put his dinner in the microwave—had foil in it—boom!” the manager says.

Abkhazia had been part of the Soviet fucking Union. A new immigrant from Abkhazia trying to operate a microwave was like a deep-sea tube worm doing brain surgery. Where did they get these guys? Weren’t there any Americans who could bake a fucking pizza?

“Just give me one pie,” the Deliverator says.

Talking about pies snaps the guy into the current century. He gets a grip. He slams the window shut, strangling the relentless keening of the smoke alarm.

A Nipponese robot arm shoves the pizza out and into the top slot. The hatch folds shut to protect it.

As the Deliverator is pulling out of the chute, building up speed, checking the address that is flashed across his windshield, deciding whether to turn right or left, it happens. His stereo cuts out again—on command of the onboard system. The cockpit lights go red. *Red*. A repetitive buzzer begins to sound. The LED readout on his windshield, which echoes the one on the pizza box, flashes up: 20:00.

They have just given the Deliverator a twenty-minute-old pizza. He checks the address; it is twelve miles away.

THE DELIVERATOR LETS OUT AN INVOLUNTARY ROAR AND PUTS the hammer down. His emotions tell him to go back and kill that manager, get his swords out of the trunk, dive in through the little sliding window like a ninja, track him down through the moiling chaos of the microwaved franchise and confront him in a climactic thick-crust apocalypse. But he thinks the same thing when someone cuts him off on the freeway, and he's never done it—yet.

He can handle this. This is doable. He cranks up the orange warning lights to maximum brilliance, puts his headlights on auto-flash. He overrides the warning buzzer, jams the stereo over to Taxiscan, which cruises all the taxi-driver frequencies listening for interesting traffic. Can't understand a fucking word. You could buy tapes, learn-while-you-drive, and learn to speak Taxilinga. It was essential, to get a job in that business. They said it was based on English but not one word in a hundred was recognizable. Still, you could get an idea. If there was trouble on this road, they'd be babbling about it in Taxilinga, give him some warning, let him take an alternate route so he wouldn't get

he grips the wheel

stuck in traffic

his eyes get big, he can feel the pressure driving
them back

into his skull

or caught behind a mobile home

his bladder is very full

and deliver the pizza

Oh, God oh, God

late

22:06 hangs on the windshield; all he can see, all he can think about is 30:01.

The taxi drivers are buzzing about something. Taxilinga is mellifluous babble with a few harsh foreign sounds, like butter spiced with broken glass. He keeps hearing “fare.” They are always jabbering about their fucking fares. Big deal. What happens if you deliver your fare

late

you don’t get as much of a tip? Big deal.

Big slowdown at the intersection of CSV-5 and Oahu Road, per usual, only way to avoid it is to cut through The Mews at Windsor Heights.

TMAWHs all have the same layout. When creating a new Burbclave, TMAWH Development Corporation will chop down any mountain ranges and divert the course of any mighty rivers that threaten to interrupt this street plan—ergonomically designed to encourage driving safety. A Deliverator can go into a Mews at Windsor Heights anywhere from Fairbanks to Yaroslavl to the Shenzhen special economic zone and find his way around.

But once you’ve delivered a pie to every single house in a TMAWH a few times, you get to know its little secrets. The Deliverator is such a man. He knows that in a standard TMAWH there is only one yard—one yard—that prevents you from driving straight in one entrance, across the Burbclave, and out the other. If you are squeamish about driving on grass, it might take you ten minutes to

meander through TMAWH. But if you have the balls to lay tracks across that one yard, you have a straight shot through the center.

The Deliverator knows that yard. He has delivered pizzas there. He has looked at it, scoped it out, memorized the location of the shed and the picnic table, can find them even in the dark—knows that if it ever came to this, a twenty-three-minute pizza, miles to go, and a slowdown at CSV-5 and Oahu—he could enter The Mews at Windsor Heights (his electronic delivery-man's visa would raise the gate automatically), scream down Heritage Boulevard, rip the turn onto Strawbridge Place (ignoring the DEAD END sign and the speed limit and the CHILDREN PLAYING ideograms that are strung so liberally throughout TMAWH), thrash the speed bumps with his mighty radials, blast up the driveway of Number 15 Strawbridge Circle, cut a hard left around the backyard shed, careen into the backyard of Number 84 Mayapple Place, avoid its picnic table (tricky), get into their driveway and out onto Mayapple, which takes him to Bellewoode Valley Road, which runs straight to the exit of the Burbclave. TMAWH security police might be waiting for him at the exit, but their STDs, Severe Tire Damage devices, only point one way—they can keep people out, but not keep them in.

This car can go so fucking fast that if a cop took a bite of a doughnut as the Deliverator was entering Heritage Boulevard, he probably wouldn't be able to swallow it until about the time the Deliverator was shrieking out onto Oahu.

Thunk. And more red lights come up on the windshield: the perimeter security of the Deliverator's vehicle has been breached.

No. It can't be.

Someone is shadowing him. Right off his left flank. A person on a skateboard, rolling down the highway right behind him, just as he is laying in his approach vectors to Heritage Boulevard.

The Deliverator, in his distracted state, has allowed himself to get pooned. As in harpooned. It is a big round padded electromagnet on the end of an arachnofiber cable. It has just thunked onto the back of the Deliverator's car, and stuck. Ten feet behind him, the

owner of this cursed device is surfing, taking him for a ride, skateboarding along like a water skier behind a boat.

In the rearview, flashes of orange and blue. The parasite is not just a punk out having a good time. It is a businessman making money. The orange and blue coverall, bulging all over with sintered armorgel padding, is the uniform of a Kourier. A Kourier from RadiKS, Radikal Kourier Systems. Like a bicycle messenger, but a hundred times more irritating because they don't pedal under their own power—they just latch on and slow you down.

Naturally. The Deliverator was in a hurry, flashing his lights, squealing his contact patches. The fastest thing on the road. Naturally, the Kourier would choose him to latch onto.

No need to get rattled. With the shortcut through TMAWH, he will have plenty of time. He passes a slower car in the middle lane, then cuts right in front of him. The Kourier will have to unpoon or else be slammed sideways into the slower vehicle.

Done. The Kourier isn't ten feet behind him anymore—he is right there, peering in the rear window. Anticipating the maneuver, the Kourier reeled in his cord, which is attached to a handle with a power reel in it, and is now right on top of the pizza mobile, the front wheel of his skateboard actually underneath the Deliverator's rear bumper.

An orange-and-blue-gloved hand reaches forward, a transparent sheet of plastic draped over it, and slaps his driver's side window. The Deliverator has just been stickered. The sticker is a foot across and reads, in big orange block letters, printed backward so that he can read it from the inside.

THAT WAS STALE

He almost misses the turnoff for The Mews at Windsor Heights. He has to jam the brakes, let traffic clear, cut across the curb lane to enter the Burbclave. The border post is well lighted, the customs agents ready to frisk all comers—cavity-search them if they are the

wrong kind of people—but the gate flies open as if by magic as the security system senses that this is a CosaNostra Pizza vehicle, just making a delivery, sir. And as he goes through, the Kourier—that tick on his ass—waves to the border police! What a prick! Like he comes in here all the time!

He probably does come in here all the time. Picking up important shit for important TMAWH people, delivering it to other FO-QNEs, Franchise-Organized Quasi-National Entities, getting it through customs. That's what Kouriers do. Still.

He's going too slow, lost all his momentum, his timing is off. Where's the Kourier? Ah, reeled out some line, is following behind again. The Deliverator knows that this jerk is in for a big surprise. Can he stay on his fucking skateboard while he's being hauled over the flattened remains of some kid's plastic tricycle at a hundred kilometers? We're going to find out.

The Kourier leans back—the Deliverator can't help watching in the rearview—leans back like a water skier, pushes off against his board, and swings around beside him, now traveling abreast with him up Heritage Boulevard and *slap* another sticker goes up, this one on the windshield! It says

SMOOTH MOVE, EX-LAX

The Deliverator has heard of these stickers. It takes hours to get them off. Have to take the car into a detailing place, pay trillions of dollars. The Deliverator has two things on his agenda now: He is going to shake this street scum, whatever it takes, and deliver the fucking pizza all in the space of

24: 23

the next five minutes and thirty-seven seconds.

This is it—got to pay more attention to the road—he swings into the side street, no warning, hoping maybe to whipsaw the Kou-

rier into the street sign on the corner. Doesn't work. The smart ones watch your front tires, they see when you're turning, can't surprise them. Down Strawbridge Place! It seems so long, longer than he remembered—natural when you're in a hurry. Sees the glint of cars up ahead, cars parked sideways to the road—these must be parked in the circle. And there's the house. Light blue vinyl clapboard two-story with one-story garage to the side. He makes that driveway the center of his universe, puts the Kourier out of his mind, tries not to think about Uncle Enzo, what he's doing right now—in the bath, maybe, or taking a crap, or making love to some actress, or teaching Sicilian songs to one of his twenty-six granddaughters.

The slope of the driveway slams his front suspension halfway up into the engine compartment, but that's what suspensions are for. He evades the car in the driveway—must have visitors tonight, didn't remember that these people drove a Lexus—cuts through the hedge, into the side yard, looks for that shed, that shed he absolutely must not run into

it's not there, they took it down

next problem, the picnic table in the next yard

hang on, there's a fence, when did they put up a fence?

This is no time to put on the brakes. Got to build up some speed, knock it down without blowing all this momentum. It's just a four-foot wooden thing.

The fence goes down easy, he loses maybe ten percent of his speed. But strangely, it looked like an *old* fence, maybe he made a wrong turn somewhere—he realizes, as he catapults into an empty backyard swimming pool.

IF IT HAD been full of water, that wouldn't have been so bad, maybe the car would have been saved, he wouldn't owe CosaNostra Pizza a new car. But no, he does a Stuka into the far wall of the pool, it sounds more like an explosion than a crash. The airbag inflates, comes back down a second later like a curtain revealing the

structure of his new life: he is stuck in a dead car in an empty pool in a TMAWH, the sirens of the Burbclave's security police are approaching, and there's a pizza behind his head, resting there like the blade of a guillotine, with 25:17 on it.

"Where's it going?" someone says. A woman.

He looks up through the distorted frame of the window, now rimmed with a fractal pattern of crystallized safety glass. It is the Kourier talking to him. The Kourier is not a man, it is a young woman. A fucking teenaged girl. She is pristine, unhurt. She has skated right down into the pool, she's now oscillating back and forth from one side of the pool to the other, skating up one bank, almost to the lip, turning around, skating down and across and up the opposite side. She is holding her poon in her right hand, the electromagnet reeled up against the handle so it looks like some kind of a strange wide-angle intergalactic death ray. Her chest glitters like a general's with a hundred little ribbons and medals, except each rectangle is not a ribbon, it is a bar code. A bar code with an ID number that gets her into a different business, highway, or FOQNE.

"Yo!" she says. "Where's the pizza going?"

He's going to die and she's *gamboling*.

"White Columns. 5 Oglethorpe Circle," he says.

"I can do that. Open the hatch."

His heart expands to twice its normal size. Tears come to his eyes. He may live. He presses a button and the hatch opens.

On her next orbit across the bottom of the pool, the Kourier yanks the pizza out of its slot. The Deliverator winces, imagining the garlicky topping accordioning into the back wall of the box. Then she puts it sideways under her arm. It's more than a Deliverator can stand to watch.

But she'll get it there. Uncle Enzo doesn't have to apologize for ugly, ruined, cold pizzas, just late ones.

"Hey," he says, "take this."

The Deliverator sticks his black-clad arm out the shattered win-

dow. A white rectangle glows in the dim backyard light: a business card. The Kourier snatches it from him on her next orbit, reads it. It says

HIRO PROTAGONIST

Last of the freelance hackers
Greatest sword fighter in the world
Stringer, Central Intelligence Corporation
Specializing in software-related intel
(music, movies & microcode)

On the back is gibberish explaining how he may be reached: a telephone number. A universal voice phone locator code. A P.O. box. His address on half a dozen electronic communications nets. And an address in the Metaverse.

“Stupid name,” she says, shoving the card into one of a hundred little pockets on her coverall.

“But you’ll never forget it,” Hiro says.

“If you’re a hacker . . .”

“How come I’m delivering pizzas?”

“Right.”

“Because I’m a freelance hacker. Look, whatever your name is—I owe you one.”

“Name’s Y.T.,” she says, shoving at the pool a few times with one foot, building up more energy. She flies out of the pool as if catapulted, and she’s gone. The smartwheels of her skateboard, many, many spokes extending and retracting to fit the shape of the ground, take her across the lawn like a pat of butter skidding across hot Teflon.

Hiro, who as of thirty seconds ago is no longer the Deliverator, gets out of the car and pulls his swords out of the trunk, straps them around his body, prepares for a breathtaking nighttime escape

run across TMAWH territory. The border with Oakwood Estates is only minutes away, he has the layout memorized (sort of), and he knows how these Burbclave cops operate, because he used to be one. So he has a good chance of making it. But it's going to be interesting.

Above him, in the house that owns the pool, a light has come on, and children are looking down at him through their bedroom windows, all warm and fuzzy in their Li'l Crips and Ninja Raft Warrior pajamas, which can either be flameproof or noncarcinogenic but not both at the same time. Dad is emerging from the back door, pulling on a jacket. It is a nice family, a safe family in a house full of light, like the family he was a part of until thirty seconds ago.

HIRO PROTAGONIST AND VITALY CHERNOBYL, ROOMMATES, ARE chilling out in their home, a spacious 20-by-30 in a U-Stor-It in Inglewood, California. The room has a concrete slab floor, corrugated steel walls separating it from the neighboring units, and—this is a mark of distinction and luxury—a roll-up steel door that faces northwest, giving them a few red rays at times like this, when the sun is setting over LAX. From time to time, a 777 or a Sukhoi/Kawasaki Hypersonic Transport will taxi in front of the sun and block the sunset with its rudder, or just mangle the red light with its jet exhaust, braiding the parallel rays into a dappled pattern on the wall.

But there are worse places to live. There are much worse places right here in this U-Stor-It. Only the big units like this one have their own doors. Most of them are accessed via a communal loading dock that leads to a maze of wide corrugated-steel hallways and freight elevators. These are slum housing, 5-by-10s and 10-by-10s where Yanoama tribespersons cook beans and parboil fistfuls of coca leaves over heaps of burning lottery tickets.

It is whispered that in the old days, when the U-Stor-It was actu-

ally used for its intended purpose (namely, providing cheap extra storage space to Californians with too many material goods), certain entrepreneurs came to the front office, rented out 10-by-10s using fake IDs, filled them up with steel drums full of toxic chemical waste, and then abandoned them, leaving the problem for the U-Stor-It Corporation to handle. According to these rumors, U-Stor-It just padlocked those units and wrote them off. Now, the immigrants claim, certain units remain haunted by this chemical specter. It is a story they tell their children, to keep them from trying to break into padlocked units.

No one has ever tried to break into Hiro and Vitaly's unit because there's nothing in there to steal, and at this point in their lives, neither one of them is important enough to kill, kidnap, or interrogate. Hiro owns a couple of nice Nipponese swords, but he always wears them, and the whole idea of stealing fantastically dangerous weapons presents the would-be perp with inherent dangers and contradictions: When you are wrestling for possession of a sword, the man with the handle always wins. Hiro also has a pretty nice computer that he usually takes with him when he goes anywhere. Vitaly owns half a carton of Lucky Strikes, an electric guitar, and a hangover.

At the moment, Vitaly Chernobyl is stretched out on a futon, quiescent, and Hiro Protagonist is sitting cross-legged at a low table, Nipponese style, consisting of a cargo pallet set on cinderblocks.

As the sun sets, its red light is supplanted by the light of many neon logos emanating from the franchise ghetto that constitutes this U-Stor-It's natural habitat. This light, known as loglo, fills in the shadowy corners of the unit with seedy, oversaturated colors.

Hiro has cappuccino skin and spiky, truncated dreadlocks. His hair does not cover as much of his head as it used to, but he is a young man, by no means bald or balding, and the slight retreat of his hairline only makes more of his high cheekbones. He is wearing shiny goggles that wrap halfway around his head; the bows of the goggles have little earphones that are plugged into his outer ears.

The earphones have some built-in noise cancellation features. This sort of thing works best on steady noise. When jumbo jets make their takeoff runs on the runway across the street, the sound is reduced to a low doodling hum. But when Vitaly Chernobyl thrashes out an experimental guitar solo, it still hurts Hiro's ears.

The goggles throw a light, smoky haze across his eyes and reflect a distorted wide-angle view of a brilliantly lit boulevard that stretches off into an infinite blackness. This boulevard does not really exist; it is a computer-rendered view of an imaginary place.

Beneath this image, it is possible to see Hiro's eyes, which look Asian. They are from his mother, who is Korean by way of Nippon. The rest of him looks more like his father, who was African by way of Texas by way of the Army—back in the days before it got split up into a number of competing organizations such as General Jim's Defense System and Admiral Bob's National Security.

Four things are on the cargo pallet: a bottle of expensive beer from the Puget Sound area, which Hiro cannot really afford; a long sword known in Nippon as a *katana* and a short sword known as a *wakizashi*—Hiro's father looted these from Japan after World War II went atomic—and a computer.

The computer is a featureless black wedge. It does not have a power cord, but there is a narrow translucent plastic tube emerging from a hatch on the rear, spiraling across the cargo pallet and the floor, and plugged into a crudely installed fiber-optics socket above the head of the sleeping Vitaly Chernobyl. In the center of the plastic tube is a hair-thin fiber-optic cable. The cable is carrying a lot of information back and forth between Hiro's computer and the rest of the world. In order to transmit the same amount of information on paper, they would have to arrange for a 747 cargo freighter packed with telephone books and encyclopedias to power-dive into their unit every couple of minutes, forever.

Hiro can't really afford the computer either, but he has to have one. It is a tool of his trade. In the worldwide community of hackers, Hiro is a talented drifter. This is the kind of lifestyle that

sounded romantic to him as recently as five years ago. But in the bleak light of full adulthood, which is to one's early twenties as Sunday morning is to Saturday night, he can clearly see what it really amounts to: He's broke and unemployed. And a few short weeks ago, his tenure as a pizza deliverer—the only pointless dead-end job he really enjoys—came to an end. Since then, he's been putting a lot more emphasis on his auxiliary emergency backup job: freelance stringer for the CIC, the Central Intelligence Corporation of Langley, Virginia.

The business is a simple one. Hiro gets information. It may be gossip, videotape, audiotape, a fragment of a computer disk, a xerox of a document. It can even be a joke based on the latest highly publicized disaster.

He uploads it to the CIC database—the Library, formerly the Library of Congress, but no one calls it that anymore. Most people are not entirely clear on what the word “congress” means. And even the word “library” is getting hazy. It used to be a place full of books, mostly old ones. Then they began to include videotapes, records, and magazines. Then all of the information got converted into machine-readable form, which is to say, ones and zeroes. And as the number of media grew, the material became more up to date, and the methods for searching the Library became more and more sophisticated, it approached the point where there was no substantive difference between the Library of Congress and the Central Intelligence Agency. Fortuitously, this happened just as the government was falling apart anyway. So they merged and kicked out a big fat stock offering.

Millions of other CIC stringers are uploading millions of other fragments at the same time. CIC's clients, mostly large corporations and Sovereigns, rifle through the Library looking for useful information, and if they find a use for something that Hiro put into it, Hiro gets paid.

A year ago, he uploaded an entire first-draft film script that he stole from an agent's wastebasket in Burbank. Half a dozen studios

wanted to see it. He ate and vacationed off of that one for six months.

Since then, times have been leaner. He has been learning the hard way that 99 percent of the information in the Library never gets used at all.

Case in point: After a certain Kourier tipped him off to the existence of Vitaly Chernobyl, he put a few intensive weeks into researching a new musical phenomenon—the rise of Ukrainian nuclear fuzz-grunge collectives in L.A. He has planted exhaustive notes on this trend in the Library, including video and audio. Not one single record label, agent, or rock critic has bothered to access it.

The top surface of the computer is smooth except for a fisheye lens, a polished glass dome with a purplish optical coating. Whenever Hiro is using the machine, this lens emerges and clicks into place, its base flush with the surface of the computer. The neighborhood loglo is curved and foreshortened on its surface.

Hiro finds it erotic. This is partly because he hasn't been properly laid in several weeks. But there's more to it. Hiro's father, who was stationed in Japan for many years, was obsessed with cameras. He kept bringing them back from his stints in the Far East, encased in many protective layers, so that when he took them out to show Hiro, it was like watching an exquisite striptease as they emerged from all that black leather and nylon, zippers and straps. And once the lens was finally exposed, pure geometric equation made real, so powerful and vulnerable at once, Hiro could only think it was like nuzzling through skirts and lingerie and outer labia and inner labia. . . . It made him feel naked and weak and brave.

The lens can see half of the universe—the half that is above the computer, which includes most of Hiro. In this way, it can generally keep track of where Hiro is and what direction he's looking in.

Down inside the computer are three lasers—a red one, a green one, and a blue one. They are powerful enough to make a bright light but not powerful enough to burn through the back of your

eyeball and broil your brain, fry your frontals, lase your lobes. As everyone learned in elementary school, these three colors of light can be combined, with different intensities, to produce any color that Hiro's eye is capable of seeing.

In this way, a narrow beam of any color can be shot out of the innards of the computer, up through that fisheye lens, in any direction. Through the use of electronic mirrors inside the computer, this beam is made to sweep back and forth across the lenses of Hiro's goggles, in much the same way as the electron beam in a television paints the inner surface of the eponymous Tube. The resulting image hangs in space in front of Hiro's view of Reality.

By drawing a slightly different image in front of each eye, the image can be made three-dimensional. By changing the image seventy-two times a second, it can be made to move. By drawing the moving three-dimensional image at a resolution of 2K pixels on a side, it can be as sharp as the eye can perceive, and by pumping stereo digital sound through the little earphones, the moving 3-D pictures can have a perfectly realistic sound track.

So Hiro's not actually here at all. He's in a computer-generated universe that his computer is drawing onto his goggles and pumping into his earphones. In the lingo, this imaginary place is known as the Metaverse. Hiro spends a lot of time in the Metaverse. It beats the shit out of the U-Stor-It.

HIRO IS APPROACHING the Street. It is the Broadway, the Champs Élysées of the Metaverse. It is the brilliantly lit boulevard that can be seen, miniaturized and backward, reflected in the lenses of his goggles. It does not really exist. But right now, millions of people are walking up and down it.

The dimensions of the Street are fixed by a protocol, hammered out by the computer-graphics ninja overlords of the Association for Computing Machinery's Global Multimedia Protocol Group. The Street seems to be a grand boulevard going all the way around the

equator of a black sphere with a radius of a bit more than ten thousand kilometers. That makes it 65,536 kilometers around, which is considerably bigger than Earth.

The number 65,536 is an awkward figure to everyone except a hacker, who recognizes it more readily than his own mother's date of birth: It happens to be a power of 2— 2^{16} power to be exact—and even the exponent 16 is equal to 2^4 , and 4 is equal to 2^2 . Along with 256; 32,768; and 2,147,483,648; 65,536 is one of the foundation stones of the hacker universe, in which 2 is the only really important number because that's how many digits a computer can recognize. One of those digits is 0, and the other is 1. Any number that can be created by fetishistically multiplying 2s by each other, and subtracting the occasional 1, will be instantly recognizable to a hacker.

Like any place in Reality, the Street is subject to development. Developers can build their own small streets feeding off of the main one. They can build buildings, parks, signs, as well as things that do not exist in Reality, such as vast hovering overhead light shows, special neighborhoods where the rules of three-dimensional spacetime are ignored, and free-combat zones where people can go to hunt and kill each other.

The only difference is that since the Street does not really exist—it's just a computer-graphics protocol written down on a piece of paper somewhere—none of these things is being physically built. They are, rather, pieces of software, made available to the public over the worldwide fiber-optics network. When Hiro goes into the Metaverse and looks down the Street and sees buildings and electric signs stretching off into the darkness, disappearing over the curve of the globe, he is actually staring at the graphic representations—the user interfaces—of a myriad different pieces of software that have been engineered by major corporations. In order to place these things on the Street, they have had to get approval from the Global Multimedia Protocol Group, have had to buy frontage on the Street, get zoning approval, obtain permits, bribe inspectors, the whole

bit. The money these corporations pay to build things on the Street all goes into a trust fund owned and operated by the GMPG, which pays for developing and expanding the machinery that enables the Street to exist.

Hiro has a house in a neighborhood just off the busiest part of the Street. It is a very old neighborhood by Street standards. About ten years ago, when the Street protocol was first written, Hiro and some of his buddies pooled their money and bought one of the first development licenses, created a little neighborhood of hackers. At the time, it was just a little patchwork of light amid a vast blackness. Back then, the Street was just a necklace of streetlights around a black ball in space.

Since then, the neighborhood hasn't changed much, but the Street has. By getting in on it early, Hiro's buddies got a head start on the whole business. Some of them even got very rich off of it.

That's why Hiro has a nice big house in the Metaverse but has to share a 20-by-30 in Reality. Real estate acumen does not always extend across universes.

The sky and the ground are black, like a computer screen that hasn't had anything drawn into it yet; it is always nighttime in the Metaverse, and the Street is always garish and brilliant, like Las Vegas freed from constraints of physics and finance. But people in Hiro's neighborhood are very good programmers, so it's tasteful. The houses look like real houses. There are a couple of Frank Lloyd Wright reproductions and some fancy Victoriana.

So it's always a shock to step out onto the Street, where everything seems to be a mile high. This is Downtown, the most heavily developed area. If you go a couple of hundred kilometers in either direction, the development will taper down to almost nothing, just a thin chain of streetlights casting white pools on the black velvet ground. But Downtown is a dozen Mannhattans, embroidered with neon and stacked on top of each other.

In the real world—planet Earth, Reality—there are somewhere between six and ten billion people. At any given time, most of them

are making mud bricks or field-stripping their AK-47s. Perhaps a billion of them have enough money to own a computer; these people have more money than all of the others put together. Of these billion potential computer owners, maybe a quarter of them actually bother to own computers, and a quarter of these have machines that are powerful enough to handle the Street protocol. That makes for about sixty million people who can be on the Street at any given time. Add in another sixty million or so who can't really afford it but go there anyway, by using public machines, or machines owned by their school or their employer, and at any given time the Street is occupied by twice the population of New York City.

That's why the damn place is so overdeveloped. Put in a sign or a building on the Street and the hundred million richest, hippest, best-connected people on earth will see it every day of their lives.

It is a hundred meters wide, with a narrow monorail track running down the middle. The monorail is a free piece of public utility software that enables users to change their location on the Street rapidly and smoothly. A lot of people just ride back and forth on it, looking at the sights. When Hiro first saw this place, ten years ago, the monorail hadn't been written yet; he and his buddies had to write car and motorcycle software in order to get around. They would take their software out and race it in the black desert of the electronic night.

Y.T. HAS BEEN PRIVILEGED TO WATCH MANY A YOUNG CLINT plant his sweet face in an empty Burbclave pool during an unauthorized night run, but always on a skateboard, never ever in a car. The landscape of the suburban night has much weird beauty if you just look.

Back on the paddle again. It rolls across the yard on a set of RadiKS Mark IV Smartwheels. She upgraded to said magical sprockets after the following ad appeared in *Thrasher* magazine.

CHISELED SPAM

is what you will see in the mirror if you surf on a weak plank with dumb, fixed wheels and interface with a muffler, retread, snow turd, road kill, driveshaft, railroad tie, or unconscious pedestrian.

If you think this is unlikely, you've been surfing too many ghost malls. All of these obstacles and more were recently observed on a one-mile stretch

of the New Jersey Turnpike. Any surfer who tried to groove that 'vard on a stock plank would have been sneezing brains.

Don't listen to so-called purists who claim any obstacle can be jumped. Professional Kouriers know: If you have pooned a vehicle moving fast enough for fun and profit, your reaction time is cut to tenths of a second—even less if you are way spooled.

Buy a set of RadiKS Mark II Smartwheels—it's cheaper than a total face retread and a lot more fun. Smartwheels use sonar, laser rangefinding, and millimeter-wave radar to identify mufflers and other debris before you even get honed about them.

Don't get Midasized—upgrade today!

These were words of wisdom. Y.T. bought the wheels. Each one consists of a hub with many stout spokes. Each spoke telescopes in five sections. On the end is a squat foot, rubber tread on the bottom, swiveling on a ball joint. As the wheels roll, the feet plant themselves one at a time, almost glomming into one continuous tire. If you surf over a bump, the spokes retract to pass over it. If you surf over a chuckhole, the robo-prongs plumb its asphalt depths. Either way, the shock is thereby absorbed, no thuds, smacks, vibrations, or clunks will make their way into the plank or the Converse hightops with which you tread it. The ad was right—you cannot be a professional road surfer without smartwheels.

Prompt delivery of the pizza will be a trivial matter. She glides from the dewy turf over the lip of the driveway without a bump, picks up speed on the 'crete, surfs down its slope into the street. A twitch of the butt reorients the plank, now she is cruising down

Homedale Mews looking for a victim. A black car, alive with nasty lights, whines past her the other way, closing in on the hapless Hiro Protagonist. Her RadiKS Knight Vision goggles darken strategically to cut the noxious glaring of same, her pupils feel safe to remain wide open, scanning the road for signs of movement. The swimming pool was at the crest of this Burbclave, it's downhill from here, but not downhill enough.

Half a block away, on a side street, a bimbo box, a minivan, grinds its four pathetic cylinders into action. She sees it catercorner from her present coordinates. The white backup lights flash instantly as the driver shifts into D by way of R and N. Y.T. aims herself at the curb, hits it at a fast running velocity, the spokes of the smartwheels see it coming and retract in the right way so that she glides from street to lawn without a hitch. Across the lawn, the feet leave a trail of hexagonal padmarks. A stray dog turd, red with meaty undigestible food coloring, is embossed with the RadiKS logo, a mirror image of which is printed on the tread of each spoke.

The bimbo box is pulling away from the curb, across the street. Squirrely scrubbing noises squirm from its sidewalls as they grind against the curb; we are in the Burbs, where it is better to take a thousand clicks off the lifespan of your Goodyears by invariably grinding them up against curbs than to risk social ostracism and outbreaks of mass hysteria by parking several inches away, out in the middle of the street (*That's okay, Mom, I can walk to the curb from here*), a menace to traffic, a deadly obstacle to uncertain young bicyclists. Y.T. has pressed the release button on her poon's reel/handle unit, allowing a meter of cord to unwind. She whips it up and around her head like a bolo on the austral range. She is about to lambada this trite conveyance. The head of the poon, salad-bowl size, whistles as it orbits around; this is unnecessary but sounds cool.

Pooning a bimbo box takes more skill than a ped would ever imagine, because of their very road-unworthiness, their congenital lack of steel or other ferrous matter for the MagnaPoon to bite

down on. Now they have superconducting poons that stick to aluminum bodywork by inducing eddy currents in the actual flesh of the car, turning it into an unwilling electromagnet, but Y.T. does not have one of these. They are the trademark of the hardcore Burbclave surfer, which, despite this evening's entertainment, she is not. Her poon will only stick to steel, iron, or (slightly) to nickel. The only steel in a bimbo box of this make is in the frame.

She makes a low-slung approach. Her poon's orbital plane is nearly vertical, it almost grinds on the twinkly suburban macadam on the forward limb of each orbit. When she pounds the release button, it takes off from an altitude of about one centimeter, angling slightly upward, across the street, under the floor of the bimbo box, and sucks steel. It's a solid hit, as solid as you can get on this nebula of air, upholstery, paint, and marketing known as the family minivan.

The reaction is instantaneous, quick-witted by Burb standards. This person wants Y.T. gone. The van takes off like a hormone-pumped bull who has just been nailed in the ass by the barbed probe of a picador. It's not Mom at the wheel. It's young Studley, the teen-aged boy, who like every other boy in this Burbclave has been taking intravenous shots of horse testosterone every afternoon in the high school locker room since he was fourteen years old. Now he's bulky, stupid, thoroughly predictable.

He steers erratically, artificially pumped muscles not fully under his control. The molded, leather-grained, maroon-colored steering wheel smells like his mother's hand lotion; this drives him into a rage. The bimbo box surges and slows, surges and slows, because he is pumping the gas pedal, because holding it to the floor doesn't seem to have any effect. He wants this car to be like his muscles: more power than he knows what to do with. Instead, it hampers him. As a compromise, he hits the button that says POWER. Another button that says ECONOMY pops out and goes dead, reminding him, like an educational demonstration, that the two are mutually exclusive. The van's tiny engine downshifts, which makes

it feel more powerful. He holds his foot steady on the gas and, making the run down Cottage Heights Road, the minivan's speed approaches one hundred kilometers.

Approaching the terminus of Cottage Heights Road, where it tees into Bellewoode Valley Road, he espies a fire hydrant. TMAWH fire hydrants are numerous, for safety, and highly designed, for property values, not the squat iron things imprinted with the name of some godforsaken Industrial Revolution foundry and furry from a hundred variously flaked layers of cheap city paint. They are brass, robot-polished every Thursday morning, dignified pipes rising straight up from the perfect, chemically induced turf of the Burbclave lawns, flaring out to present potential firefighters with a menu of three possible hose connections. They were designed on a computer screen by the same aesthetes who designed the Dyna-Victorian houses and the tasteful mailboxes and the immense marble street signs that sit at each intersection like headstones. Designed on a computer screen, but with an eye toward the elegance of things past and forgotten about. Fire hydrants that tasteful people are proud to have on their front lawns. Fire hydrants that the real estate people don't feel the need to airbrush out of pictures.

This fucking Kourier is about to die, knotted around one of those fire hydrants. Studley the Testosterone Boy will see to it. It is a maneuver he has witnessed on television—which tells no lies—a trick he has practiced many times in his head. Building up maximum speed on Cottage Heights, he will yank the hand brake while swinging the wheel. The ass end of the minivan will snap around. The pesky Kourier will be cracked like a whip at the end of her unbreakable cable. Into the fire hydrant she will go. Studley the Teenager will be victorious, free to cruise in triumph down Bellewoode Valley and out into the greater world of adult men in cool cars, free to go return his overdue videotape, *Raft Warriors IV: The Final Battle*.

Y.T. does not know any of this for a fact, but she suspects it. None of this is real. It is her reconstruction of the psychological

environment inside of that bimbo box. She sees the hydrant coming a mile away, sees Studley reaching down to rest one hand on the parking brake. It is all so obvious. She feels sorry for Studley and his ilk. She reels out, gives herself lots of slack. He whips the wheel, jerks the brake. The minivan goes sideways, overshooting its mark, and doesn't quite snap her around the way he wanted; she has to help it. As its ass is rotating around, she reels in hard, converting that gift of angular momentum into forward velocity, and ends up shooting right past the van going well over a mile a minute. She is headed for a marble gravestone that says BELLEWOODE VALLEY ROAD. She leans away from it, leans into a vicious turn, her spokes grip the pavement and push her away from that gravestone, she can touch the pavement with one hand she is heeled over so hard, the spokes push her onto the desired street. Meanwhile, she has clicked off the electromagnetic force that held her pooned to the van. The poon head comes loose, caroms off the pavement behind her as it is automatically reeled in to reunite with the handle. She is headed straight for the exit of the Burblave at fantastic speed.

Behind her, an explosive crash sounds, resonating in her gut, as the minivan slides sideways into the gravestone.

She ducks under the security gate and plunges into traffic on Oahu. She cuts between two veering, blaring, and screeching BMWs. BMW drivers take evasive action at the drop of a hat, emulating the drivers in the BMW advertisements—this is how they convince themselves they didn't get ripped off. She drops into a fetal position to pass underneath a semi, headed for the Jersey barrier in the median strip like she's going to die, but Jersey barriers are easy for the smartwheels. That lower limb of the barrier has such a nice bank to it, like they designed it for road surfers. She rides halfway up the barrier, angles gently back down to the lane for a smooth landing, and she's in traffic. There's a car right there and she doesn't even have to throw the poon, just reaches out and plants it right on the lid of the trunk.

This driver's resigned to his fate, doesn't care, doesn't hassle her.

He takes her as far as the entrance to the next Burbclave, which is a White Columns. Very southern, traditional, one of the Apartheid Burbclaves. Big ornate sign above the main gate: WHITE PEOPLE ONLY. NON-CAUCASIANS MUST BE PROCESSED.

She's got a White Columns visa. Y.T. has a visa to everywhere. It's right there on her chest, a little bar code. A laser scans it as she careens toward the entrance and the immigration gate swings open for her. It's an ornate ironwork number, but harried White Columns residents don't have time to sit idling at the Burbclave entrance watching the gate slowly roll aside in Old South majestic turpitude, so it's mounted on some kind of electromagnetic railgun.

She is gliding down the antebellum tree-lined lanes of White Columns, one microplantation after another, still coasting on the residual kinetic energy boost that originated in the fuel in Studley the Teenager's gas tank.

The world is full of power and energy and a person can go far by just skimming off a tiny bit of it.

The LEDs on the pizza box say: 29:32, and the guy who ordered it—Mr. Pudgely and his neighbors, the Pinkhearts and the Round-ass clan—are all gathered on the front lawn of their microplantation, prematurely celebrating. Like they had just bought the winning lottery ticket. From their front door they have a clear view all the way down to Oahu Road, and they can see that nothing is on its way that looks like a CosaNostra delivery car. Oh, there is curiosity—sniffing interest—at this Kourier with the big square thing under her arm—maybe a portfolio, a new ad layout for some Caucasian supremacist marketing honcho in the next plat over, but—

The Pudgelys and the Pinkhearts and the Roundasses are all staring at her, slackjawed. She has just enough residual energy to swing into their driveway. Her momentum carries her to the top. She stops next to Mr. Pudgely's Acura and Mrs. Pudgely's bimbo box and steps off her plank. The spokes, noting her departure, even

themselves out, plant themselves on the top of the driveway, refuse to roll backward.

A blinding light from the heavens shines down upon them. Her Knight Visions keep her from being blinded, but the customers bend their knees and hunch their shoulders as though the light were heavy. The men hold their hairy forearms up against their brows, swivel their great tubular bodies to and fro, trying to find the source of the illumination, muttering clipped notations to each other, brief theories about its source, fully in control of the unknown phenomenon. The women coo and flutter. Because of the magical influence of the Knight Visions, Y.T. can still see the LEDs: 29:54, and that's what it says when she drops the pizza on Mr. Pudgely's wing tips.

The mystery light goes off.

THE OTHERS ARE still blinded, but Y.T. sees into the night with her Knight Visions, sees all the way into near infrared, and she sees the source of it, a double-bladed stealth helicopter thirty feet above the neighbor's house. It is tastefully black and unadorned, not a news crew—though another helicopter, an old-fashioned audible one, brightly festooned with up-to-the-minute logos, is thumping and whacking its way across White Columns airspace at this very moment, goosing the plantations with its own spotlight, hoping to be the first to obtain this major scoop: a pizza was delivered late tonight, film at eleven. Later, our personality journalist speculates on where Uncle Enzo will stay when he makes his compulsory trip to our Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. But the black chopper is running dark, would be nearly invisible if not for the infrared trail coming out of its twin turbojets.

It is a Mafia chopper, and all they wanted to do was to record the event on videotape so that Mr. Pudgely would not have a leg to hop around on in court, should he decide to take his case down to Judge Bob's Judicial System and argue for a free pizza.

One more thing. There's a lot of shit in the air tonight, a few megatons of topsoil blowing down from Fresno, and so when the laser beam comes on it is startlingly visible, a tiny geometric line, a million blazing red grains strung on a fiber-optic thread, snapping into life instantly between the chopper and Y.T.'s chest. It appears to widen into a narrow fan, an acute triangle of red light whose base encompasses all of Y.T.'s torso.

It takes half a second. They are scanning the many bar codes mounted on her chest. They are finding out who she is. The Mafia now knows everything about Y.T.—where she lives, what she does, her eye color, credit record, ancestry, and blood type.

That done, the chopper tilts and vanishes into the night like a hockey puck sliding into a bowl of India ink. Mr. Pudgely is saying something, making a joke about how close they came, the others eke out a laugh, but Y.T. cannot hear them because they are buried under the thunderwhack of the news chopper, then flash-frozen and crystalized under its spotlight. The night air is full of bugs, and now Y.T. can see all of them, swirling in mysterious formations, hitching rides on people and on currents of air. There is one on her wrist, but she doesn't slap at it.

The spotlight lingers for a minute. The broad square of the pizza box, bearing the CosaNostra logo, is mute testimony. They hover, shoot a little tape just in case.

Y.T. is bored. She gets on her plank. The wheels blossom and become circular. She guides a tight wobbly course around the cars, coasts down into the street. The spotlight follows her for a moment, maybe picking up some stock footage. Videotape is cheap. You never know when something will be useful, so you might as well videotape it.

People make their living that way—people in the intel business. People like Hiro Protagonist. They just know stuff, or they just go around and videotape stuff. They put it in the Library. When people want to know the particular things that they know or watch their videotapes, they pay them money and check it out of the Library, or

just buy it outright. This is a weird racket, but Y.T. likes the idea of it. Usually, the CIC won't pay any attention to a Kourier. But apparently Hiro has a deal with them. Maybe she can make a deal with Hiro. Because Y.T. knows a lot of interesting little things.

One little thing she knows is that the Mafia owes her a favor.

AS HIRO APPROACHES THE STREET, HE SEES TWO YOUNG COUPLES, probably using their parents' computers for a double date in the Metaverse, climbing down out of Port Zero, which is the local port of entry and monorail stop.

He is not seeing real people, of course. This is all a part of the moving illustration drawn by his computer according to specifications coming down the fiber-optic cable. The people are pieces of software called avatars. They are the audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse. Hiro's avatar is now on the Street, too, and if the couples coming off the monorail look over in his direction, they can see him, just as he's seeing them. They could strike up a conversation: Hiro in the U-Stor-It in L.A. and the four teenagers probably on a couch in a suburb of Chicago, each with their own laptop. But they probably won't talk to each other, any more than they would in Reality. These are nice kids, and they don't want to talk to a solitary crossbreed with a slick custom avatar who's packing a couple of swords.

Your avatar can look any way you want it to, up to the limitations of your equipment. If you're ugly, you can make your avatar

beautiful. If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup. You can look like a gorilla or a dragon or a giant talking penis in the Metaverse. Spend five minutes walking down the Street and you will see all of these.

Hiro's avatar just looks like Hiro, with the difference that no matter what Hiro is wearing in Reality, his avatar always wears a black leather kimono. Most hacker types don't go in for garish avatars, because they know that it takes a lot more sophistication to render a realistic human face than a talking penis. Kind of the way people who really know clothing can appreciate the fine details that separate a cheap gray wool suit from an expensive hand-tailored gray wool suit.

You can't just materialize anywhere in the Metaverse, like Captain Kirk beaming down from on high. This would be confusing and irritating to the people around you. It would break the metaphor. Materializing out of nowhere (or vanishing back into Reality) is considered to be a private function best done in the confines of your own House. Most avatars nowadays are anatomically correct, and naked as a babe when they are first created, so in any case, you have to make yourself decent before you emerge onto the Street. Unless you're something intrinsically indecent and you don't care.

If you are some peon who does not own a House, for example, a person who is coming in from a public terminal, then you materialize in a Port. There are 256 Express Ports on the street, evenly spaced around its circumference at intervals of 256 kilometers. Each of these intervals is further subdivided 256 times with Local Ports, spaced exactly one kilometer apart (astute students of hacker semiotics will note the obsessive repetition of the number 256, which is 2^8 power—and even that 8 looks pretty juicy, dripping with 2^2 additional 2s). The Ports serve a function analogous to airports: This is where you drop into the Metaverse from somewhere else. Once you have materialized in a Port, you can walk down the Street or hop on the monorail or whatever.

The couples coming off the monorail can't afford to have custom avatars made and don't know how to write their own. They have to buy off-the-shelf avatars. One of the girls has a pretty nice one. It would be considered quite the fashion statement among the K-Tel set. Looks like she has bought the Avatar Construction Set™ and put together her own, customized model out of miscellaneous parts. It might even look something like its owner. Her date doesn't look half bad himself.

The other girl is a Brandy. Her date is a Clint. Brandy and Clint are both popular, off-the-shelf models. When white-trash high school girls are going on a date in the Metaverse, they invariably run down to the computer-games section of the local Wal-Mart and buy a copy of Brandy. The user can select three breast sizes: improbable, impossible, and ludicrous. Brandy has a limited repertoire of facial expressions: cute and pouty; cute and sultry; perky and interested; smiling and receptive; cute and spacy. Her eyelashes are half an inch long, and the software is so cheap that they are rendered as solid ebony chips. When a Brandy flutters her eyelashes, you can almost feel the breeze.

Clint is just the male counterpart of Brandy. He is craggy and handsome and has an extremely limited range of facial expressions.

Hiro wonders, idly, how these two couples got together. They are clearly from disparate social classes. Perhaps older and younger siblings. But then they come down the escalator and disappear into the crowd and become part of the Street, where there are enough Clints and Brandys to found a new ethnic group.

THE STREET IS FAIRLY BUSY. Most of the people here are Americans and Asians—it's early morning in Europe right now. Because of the preponderance of Americans, the crowd has a garish and surreal look about it. For the Asians, it's the middle of the day, and they are in their dark blue suits. For the Americans, it's party time, and they are looking like just about anything a computer can render.

The moment Hiro steps across the line separating his neighborhood from the Street, colored shapes begin to swoop down on him from all directions, like buzzards on fresh road kill. Animercials are not allowed in Hiro's neighborhood. But almost anything is allowed in the Street.

A passing fighter plane bursts into flames, falls out of its trajectory, and zooms directly toward him at twice the speed of sound. It plows into the Street fifty feet in front of him, disintegrates, and explodes, blooming into a tangled cloud of wreckage and flame that skids across the pavement toward him, growing to envelop him so that all he can see is turbulent flame, perfectly simulated and rendered.

Then the display freezes, and a man materializes in front of Hiro. He is a classic bearded, pale, skinny hacker, trying to beef himself up by wearing a bulky silk windbreaker blazoned with the logo of one of the big Metaverse amusement parks. Hiro knows the guy; they used to run into each other at trade conventions all the time. He's been trying to hire Hiro for the last two months.

"Hiro, I can't understand why you're holding out on me. We're making bucks here—Kongbucks and yen—and we can be flexible on pay and bennies. We're putting together a swords-and-sorcery thing, and we can use a hacker with your skills. Come on down and talk to me, okay?"

Hiro walks straight through the display, and it vanishes. Amusement parks in the Metaverse can be fantastic, offering a wide selection of interactive three-dimensional movies. But in the end, they're still nothing more than video games. Hiro's not so poor, yet, that he would go and write video games for this company. It's owned by the Nipponese, which is no big deal. But it's also managed by the Nipponese, which means that all the programmers have to wear white shirts and show up at eight in the morning and sit in cubicles and go to meetings.

When Hiro learned how to do this, way back fifteen years ago, a hacker could sit down and write an entire piece of software by him-

self. Now, that's no longer possible. Software comes out of factories, and hackers are, to a greater or lesser extent, assembly-line workers. Worse yet, they may become managers who never get to write any code themselves.

The prospect of becoming an assembly-line worker gives Hiro some incentive to go out and find some really good intel tonight. He tries to get himself psyched up, tries to break out of the lethargy of the long-term underemployed. This intel thing can be a great racket, once you get yourself jacked into the grid. And with his connections, it shouldn't be any problem. He just has to get serious about it. *Get serious. Get serious.* But it's so hard to get serious about anything.

He owes the Mafia the cost of a new car. That's a good reason to get serious.

He cuts straight across the Street and under the monorail line, headed for a large, low-slung black building. It is extraordinarily somber for the Street, like a parcel that someone forgot to develop. It's a squat black pyramid with the top cut off. It has one single door—since this is all imaginary, there are no regulations dictating the number of emergency exits. There are no guards, no signs, nothing to bar people from going in, yet thousands of avatars mill around, peering inside, looking for a glimpse of something. These people can't pass through the door because they haven't been invited.

Above the door is a matte black hemisphere about a meter in diameter, set into the front wall of the building. It is the closest thing the place has to decoration. Underneath it, in letters carved into the wall's black substance, is the name of the place: THE BLACK SUN.

So it's not an architectural masterpiece. When Da5id and Hiro and the other hackers wrote The Black Sun, they didn't have enough money to hire architects or designers, so they just went in for simple geometric shapes. The avatars milling around the entrance don't seem to care.

If these avatars were real people in a real street, Hiro wouldn't be able to reach the entrance. It's way too crowded. But the computer system that operates the Street has better things to do than to monitor every single one of the millions of people there, trying to prevent them from running into each other. It doesn't bother trying to solve this incredibly difficult problem. On the Street, avatars just walk right through each other.

So when Hiro cuts through the crowd, headed for the entrance, he really is cutting through the crowd. When things get this jammed together, the computer simplifies things by drawing all of the avatars ghostly and translucent so you can see where you're going. Hiro appears solid to himself, but everyone else looks like a ghost. He walks through the crowd as if it's a fogbank, clearly seeing The Black Sun in front of him.

He steps over the property line, and he's in the doorway. And in that instant he becomes solid and visible to all the avatars milling outside. As one, they all begin screaming. Not that they have any idea who the hell he is—Hiro is just a starving CIC stringer who lives in a U-Stor-It by the airport. But in the entire world there are only a couple of thousand people who can step over the line into The Black Sun.

He turns and looks back at ten thousand shrieking groupies. Now that he's all by himself in the entryway, no longer immersed in a flood of avatars, he can see all of the people in the front row of the crowd with perfect clarity. They are all done up in their wildest and fanciest avatars, hoping that Da5id—The Black Sun's owner and hacker-in-chief—will invite them inside. They flicker and merge together into a hysterical wall. Stunningly beautiful women, computer-airbrushed and retouched at seventy-two frames a second, like *Playboy* pinups turned three-dimensional—these are would-be actresses hoping to be discovered. Wild-looking abstracts, tornadoes of gyrating light—hackers who are hoping that Da5id will notice their talent, invite them inside, give them a job. A liberal sprinkling of black-and-white people—persons who are accessing

the Metaverse through cheap public terminals, and who are rendered in jerky, grainy black and white. A lot of these are run-of-the-mill psycho fans, devoted to the fantasy of stabbing some particular actress to death; they can't even get close in Reality, so they goggle into the Metaverse to stalk their prey. There are would-be rock stars done up in laser light, as though they just stepped off the concert stage, and the avatars of Nipponese businessmen, exquisitely rendered by their fancy equipment, but utterly reserved and boring in their suits.

There's one black-and-white who stands out because he's taller than the rest. The Street protocol states that your avatar can't be any taller than you are. This is to prevent people from walking around a mile high. Besides, if this guy's using a pay terminal—which he must be, to judge from the image quality—it can't jazz up his avatar. It just shows him the way he is, except not as well. Talking to a black-and-white on the Street is like talking to a person who has his face stuck in a xerox machine, repeatedly pounding the copy button, while you stand by the output tray pulling the sheets out one at a time and looking at them.

He has long hair, parted in the middle like a curtain to reveal a tattoo on his forehead. Given the shitty resolution, there's no way to see the tattoo clearly, but it appears to consist of words. He has a wispy Fu Manchu mustache.

Hiro realizes that the guy has noticed him and is staring back, looking him up and down, paying particular attention to the swords.

A grin spreads across the black-and-white guy's face. It is a satisfied grin. A grin of recognition. The grin of a man who knows something Hiro doesn't. The black-and-white guy has been standing with his arms folded across his chest, like a man who is bored, who's been waiting for something, and now his arms drop to his sides, swing loosely at the shoulders, like an athlete limbering up. He steps as close as he can and leans forward; he's so tall that the