

The First Day of FestiMas

Cynth Beattie, who liked to be called Mrs Bea by her robo-servants, reclined her twenty-three-stone bulk to watch MotoTV during the short trip from Wishaw Heights to the Lesmahagow M-Mart. Today was October 24, 2057, the first official day of FestiMas, the four-month shopping extravaganza which made the dreary winter season in Gaeldom West almost enjoyable.

She checked her G-band, noting she had at least three hours to kill.

'Geo, dial Alvera.'

Like most in her age group, Cynth had eventually learned to speak Roblish, the harsh nasal version of English universally recognised by all robots. Roblish had been imposed by the Chinese who had eventually wrested domination of the robot market from the Americans and Japanese.

Alvera had once been Al (Albert Minto) and Cynth's third husband. Since her full conversion, Alvera had become the soulmate Cynth had always hoped for.

The robo-driver responded in his George Clooney voice:

'My pleasure, Mrs Bea. My, you are looking well today. Gorgeous.'

Although this synthetic voice was faithful to Clooney, the underlying speech synthesise betrayed the great man with its choice of rather camp phrasing and vocabulary. Cynth had complained to the software suppliers based in Sri Lanka but had become stuck in the usual endless loop:

"PCM customahs lefelences 223597, you-ah queste-ans is mustly impotant too-ahs. Be assuling wee-ah lespondelings fo-ah you-ah with all possibles hasties. Wee-ah must eagally. . ."

The speakers filled the car with the old hit *"Baby Love, My Baby Love"* while the call to Alvera was filtered through her multiple cybersecurity layers. As the Supremes ended their song, Alvera's deep voice cut in:

"Hi there, sorry I can't speak to you direct honey but leave a message or press 8 for an emergency. Have a Happy FestiMas! Go on, you deserve it!"

FestiMas 2057

"Hi Alvera, Cynth here; just checking you're A-OK for one o'clock at Valerio's. I'm in my silver lamé cat-suit. Why not wear your new shorty, sparkly red dress, it really suits you! Show's off your legs real well. See you soon, my darlin'."

Alvera was always at least half-an-hour late so there was no pressure. The lunch at Valerio's Trattoria was to celebrate Alvera's 105th birthday. Valerio's place was one of only five G-Star restaurants left in the whole of Gaeldom where the entire waiting staff was human, with robots confined to the kitchens and restrooms.

With the recent passing of her fourth husband Hugo Beattie, aged 113, then Vernon, her seventh Chihuahua, aged 26, Cynth was still officially in mourning. During their final years, both Hugo and Vernon had been double incontinent, leaving a strong legacy of intermingled odours which Zara had so far been unable to eliminate from Cynth's penthouse or luxury limo.

Geo, who was connected to Cynth's Personal-Ambient-Intelligence-Loop (PAIL), sensed her mood and responded to her need for conversation.

'Mrs Bea, shall I put the vehicle through the valet service while you shop? My sensors report the in-car odour from Mr Hugo and poor, dear Vernon still lingers. If you spend more than two hundred Creds in-store today, this service, worth seventy-nine Creds, will be free. I am pleased to report the upgraded M-Mart AutoValet machine is now working faultlessly, the M-NewsNet advises.'

As a PCM (Premium Club Member) Cynth was classified as a high-value commercial target and had long suspected Geo had been infected with a sales bug, probably implanted by the M-Mart Control Centre. Although David Larsen, the human manager at the R-Type service centre had assured her Geo was 'digitally clean', Cynth did not believe him. Larsen had told her tarradiddles in the past.

Increasingly over these last decades, Cynth and her friends had come to accept they were being constantly spied upon, their every movement, communication and Cred-spend monitored. It seemed clear to Cynth this data was continually analysed and shared in the G-Cloud with many organisations, resulting in automated sales strands being deployed at various levels of sophistication, all designed to try to remove her wealth by stealth.

During these long months since Hugo's passing, Cynth Beattie relied increasingly on her human friends and her ten children, (three were her own, the others 'inherited' with her marriages). The real sadness was that Andrew and Malcolm, her only two natural grandchildren, lived in New Zealand, near Denise and David. Still, there was the solace of realistic three-dimensional video-conferencing now her health profile limited her to flights under five hours.

FestiMas 2057

In the recent past, Cynth had allowed herself to become over-dependent on her robots. Nowadays her constant worry was Zara, her House Companion Robot (HCR) upon whom she relied for almost everything: toileting, dressing, food preparation, health monitoring and medicating, physiotherapy, chiropody, routine make-up and wig maintenance, media entertainment and film streaming, physical and cybersecurity, routine e-mail administration, bill payments and tax scheduling. In addition, Zara was responsible for the necessary supervising and organising the Auxiliary House Robots (AHRs) required to deal the boring minutiae of daily living.

Again, Cynth Beattie gave thanks to Google for Alvera, her rock.

Cynth was haunted by the memory of her previous HCR called Zetta. Zetta had been corrupted by a human called Fergus Lynch, a man who had visited to service her AHRs. While Cynth had been on holiday visiting family in Tenerife, Zetta had allowed Lynch unauthorised entry to Cynth's mansion. The vile man had broken into Cynth's home safe and removed over 50,000 Creds equivalent in old currencies, notes and coins much sought after by collectors like herself. He had also taken jewellery and Swiss watches worth around 300,000 Creds. Fortunately for Cynth, her more expensive jewellery was in a safe deposit box in the G-Corp Security Vault, located near Fort William, Gaeldom's equivalent of the old US Fort Knox.

GaelForce Scotland had recovered only two rings and a broken bracelet taken in the raid. As expected, the insurance company had reneged on the policy, reminding Cynth house-robot security was her personal responsibility. Lynch was now in an open prison, on the remote detention hub on Rockall, having confessed to hundreds of similar offences.

Cynth knew she was lucky: Alvera now made regular checks on Zara and had recently given Cynth a categoric assurance her HCR was 'pristine'.

'Mrs Bea, should a payment be required, may I have your authorisation for the Cred-spend, please?'

'Yes, Geo, this car does stink horribly. Are there any other issues? I was thinking of changing to a new R-Type - what do you think? How old is this one?'

'Wonderful news, Mrs Bea, wonderful. This car is exactly six years old today, almost a vintage model. The good news is, suitably re-programmed, my motherboard is fully compatible with the new model R-Type. This present vehicle, if I may say so, will never be quite what it was after Mr Hugo decided to drive in manual mode, much against my advice, as the G-Drive data log clearly shows.'

FestiMas 2057

The autonomous vehicle accelerated sharply to the left, plunged into a bright tube of light then filtered seamlessly into the prioritised high-speed tunnel to join the stream of other fast-moving PCM vehicles heading for the Lesmahagow Commerce Circle.

Door to door from the M-Mart to Valerio's on normal roads should take only twenty-three minutes. During the last few years the E-Flow Traffic-Minder system which controlled surface traffic had been repeatedly 'freezing', causing widespread chaos in the Gaeldom West area. As a Premium Club Member, Cynth intended to use the echelon express underpass spur which connected M-Mart to Valerio's, saving nearly fifteen minutes.

'Poor dear Hugo. He used to be a rally driver. Did you know that, Geo?'

'Yes, Mrs Bea. Can you imagine what it was like for me, powerless as he hurtled around in manual over-ride, overloading my sensors, causing my software to scream in protest? And it was absolutely not true - I did not cause the crash by applying over-ride control, as the G-Drive data log proved at the accident investigation. Mr Hugo was distracted by an incoming call on his head-screen.'

'Yes, yes, Geo, not again, please. Can you get me right close to the entry portal? I don't want to walk past the delivery drone dispatchers. Some of them are very poorly behaved.'

'Of course, Mrs Bea. I have pre-booked a shopping cart for you. It's a Daisy 23, the one you like best.'

'Thanks, Geo, you're a star.'

FestiMas 2057

M-Mart

A short line of Daisy 23 shopping carts was waiting inside the entry portal. As the R-Type door opened the Daisy's facial recognition software scanned its occupant and the M-Mart Control Centre informed she was PCM 223597, Mrs Cynthia Beattie, to be addressed as Mrs Bea. The Daisy 23 hummed forward almost silently on its maglev pads, its warm and melodic alto voice calling out:

'Mrs Bea, good morning. My name is Mavis and I am your shopping assistant for this visit.'

Cynth Beattie hauled herself up onto the two-person ride-on cart and smiled when she realised it was a new model with lemon-coloured leatherette upholstery and the latest 3D imaging display. The shell lid rotated from behind, up and over into place and the vacuum lock engaged with a quiet sigh, hermetically sealing her inside the one-way glass of the dome, making her invisible to the other ride-on and foot shoppers.

The touchpad shopping screen swung up into place and Cynth put her hand onto the resting pad with her index finger poised over the DNA encoder A-Stud which she must press to authorise any purchase. At last she was ready to shop. The display showed an attractive head and shoulders view of an animatronic girl in her late teens.

'Mavis, have you served me before?'

'Yes, many times. Mrs Bea,' Mavis replied glibly, *'but not for a few weeks. Would you care to view the record of your most recent purchases?'*

Cynth suspected Mavis was spinning a line but she loved the voice which reminded her of Jackie Bird the BBC Scotland presenter from decades earlier. These shopping cart voices and display images were changed every day, so Cynth decided to ignore her suspicions.

'No, Mavis dear. Take me to the cafe area, and order ahead a Skinny Latte with double marshmallows, please. Oh, and a coconut Yule Log. It is FestiMas, after all.'

'Job done, Mrs Bea,' responded Mavis almost instantly. *'And there is no charge for PCMs. You are number fifty-five in the queue. M-Mart apologises, the café is suffering overload today, this may take up to fifteen minutes. Perhaps a visit to the Executive Rest Rooms?'*

'Good idea, Mavis, it's been a while since my last refreshing. Book me a full service please.'

FestiMas 2057

'Job done, Mrs Bea. Oh look, they have just pulsed a new aroma-flavour! Vanilla and gooseberry. It is sure wonderful what the new M-Mart Channel Scent-Centre can do nowadays. We can arrange for a drone squad to provide you with a Home Scenting Kit, should you wish it. As a PCM, you would qualify for a special discount rate at only 53 Creds per room and of course, in your residential situation with fifteen rooms, you would qualify for a further 12% discount should you decide to have a full multi-room package.'

'Does it allow scent variations between rooms?'

'Yes, Mrs Bea, please watch this Video-Info-Torial (VIT) which explains everything. If you have any questions, just ask, I am programmed to respond.'

Cynth watched the VIT and decided the Home Scenting Kit was for her. Now the fun part - *the bidding cycle!*

'Running costs?'

'Almost next to nothing, and free for the first three months if you take a rolling year on year contract.'

'Mavis, dear, do not play the madam with me or I will report you. Running costs!'

'The running costs for the package I have just outlined would be 12 Creds per month per room based on a 36-hour response time in the unlikely case of fault. The system offered has a 98% customer satisfaction rating.'

'I bid thirty-two Creds per room for installation, supported by twelve-hour response service at eight Creds per room per month for upkeep with six free months and a six-month rolling contract.'

'M-Mart thanks you for your bid, Mrs Bea. I regret I am not authorised to respond directly. Your valued offer has been submitted to the M-Mart Negotiator. Now, Mrs Bea, here we are at the restroom portal. This is Janita, your Refresher for this session. She will take you now and I shall wait here on reserved standby until you need me again. Enjoy.'

Refreshing Service

The Mavis shopping screen withdrew and the dome lid rotated backwards into its housing. Cynth was enveloped in a swirl of lavender scented dry-ice mist as thirty-two pink-gloved robo-arms descended from above, snuggled around and under her body to slowly raise and swing her into the misty depths of the Executive Rest Rooms reserved for PCMs.

The music played the overture from Beethoven's "*Pastoral Symphony*".

Janita's voice whispered in a deep warm baritone intended to sooth:

'Mrs Bea, welcome to the M-Mart Refreshing Service. Your visit is included at no charge. Please relax as I remove your clothing and undergarments.'

The robo-hands worked expertly to remove her trousers, pantyhose and knicker-pads.

'Mrs Bea, this is wonderful, truly wonderful. You have achieved full continence control since your last refreshing. The sensors show you are at 136 minutes clean and dry. Very well done indeed, Mrs Bea.'

The robo-hands swung her over the wide stainless-steel weighing and sampling dish.

'There now, Mrs Bea, you are suspended in position, please feel free to evacuate.'

The music played a burst from G.F Handle's "*Hallelujah Chorus*".

'Oh, Mrs Bea, *that* is very good. Very, very good indeed.'

There was a short delay while the images and data were processed.

'The ultrasound data show you have achieved an almost full evacuation. However, I am sadly obliged to report there remains a small amount of faecal impaction in your lower bowel. For only 78 Creds I can offer a suppositorial enema irrigation experience which flushes with a medically approved conflation of Senna, docusate, dicacodyl and sodium citrate. This solution is pulsed gently at exactly 37 Celsius, which you will know is the human body deep-core temperature. It is guaranteed to be pain free. Most clients find it to be both enjoyable and relieving. I strongly recommend this treatment.'

'Are you sure this will be pain free?'

FestiMas 2057

'Guaranteed. Our feedback data show this treatment has a 94% satisfaction rating. My most recent client said, and I quote, with permission, "Honey, it was one of the best clear-outs I've ever had." Another said, and I quote, with permission, "My dear girl, your suppositorial was amazingly exhilarating".

'Mrs. Bea, may I have your agreement to our terms and conditions and your Cred-spend authorisation?'

'Yes, Janita, go ahead. I'm heading for a full meal later. After all, it is FestiMas.'

Cynth pressed the A-Stud.

The music played Dolly Parton singing "*Love is like a Butterfly*".

FestiMas 2057

FestiMas Overload

'Welcome back, Mrs Bea,' purred Mavis. 'Did you enjoy your suppositorial?'

'Yes, Mavis, it was most enjoyable. I intend to make it part of my routine. Yes, very satisfactory indeed. Now, Mavis, the café area, at once, I'm starving.'

'Mrs Bea, M-Mart regrets to advise the PCM reserved area in the café is now full. Perhaps you would care to have your order delivered to you here by drone?'

'It's full? Hey, Mavis, this is just not on!'

'Mrs Bea, I regret to announce the back-up system this morning is on overload. After all, Mrs Bea, it is the First Day of FestiMas!'

'OK, Mavis but I shall expect a full Kaffee und Kuchen deal to be provided within five minutes and at no charge to my account. It is quite ridiculous of M-Mart to allow this situation to arise. I recall a similar problem last year. I hope the M-Mart Control Centre is being made aware of my views. This would never have occurred when Marty Meike was running the show.'

'Thank you for your valued feedback, Mrs Bea. Today for FestiMas, we have introduced a wonderful new display of clothing in the PCM range designed for the fuller figure. The M-Mart NewsFlash advises we have Signora Dani Deena in-store today, for one day only, with her FestiMas range straight from Milano.'

'Dani Deena! Dani is here today? Why wasn't I told she was coming? I need a consultation, Mavis! No way I'm missing out on this!'

'Mrs Bea, I'm delighted to advise I am holding a private viewing and con-slot for you. There is a small charge, of course, but . . .'

Excited, Cynth slipped into English:

'Right on, Mavis, you're a star! Great Google, I've been trying to get a session with Dani Deena for nearly forty years. I have an entire wardrobe of her creations, if only I could get into them. I need a new outfit for my half-birthday coming up next month. Go for it girl!'

FestiMas 2057

'Mrs Bea, I regret to advise I have not understood what you have commanded. May I respectfully request you speak Roblish or use the keypad interface.'

'Get me that booking, Mavis. Now, please.'

'Thank you for your valued order Mrs Bea. May I have your authorisation for the one hundred Cred-spend, please?'

'I bid seventy-five!'

'Mrs Bea, this is a fixed price offer and the opportunity will expire in one minute. Other PCMs are aware of. . .'

'Right Mavis, I'll take it at one-hundred. When is it?'

Cynth pressed the A-Stud.

'The twenty-minute group consultation and viewing will begin in fifty-three minutes.'

'Hey Mavis, you didn't say it was a group-con! How many in this group?'

'Only twenty-five, and all PCMs, including your friend Alvera. I have reserved a comfort-seater location beside her.'

'The bitch - she kept that quiet!'

'Mrs Bea, I regret to advise I have not understood fully what you have commanded. May I respectfully request. . .'

'Forget it, Mavis. Can you fix me up with an emergency mini-spa, face, hair and nails? NOW?'

'Yes, Mrs Bea, we have a Thai Experience Mini-Spa Suite shortly becoming available. It has a newly commissioned Thai Spa Mark 5 robo-masseuse. The Mark 5 supports prequel Dreamtime followed an optional soothing SensuThai spa massage experience with the usual optional extras. Most of my clients say it is absolutely exhilarating. Or you may wish to proceed directly to the standard service which includes full body immersion and cleansing, 3-D photo-quality tanning, enhanced laser controlled IPL hair removal, deep-pore face cleansing and micro-Botox injections, wig replacement, make-up, and nails and tanning. In addition, the Mark 5 offers . . .'

FestiMas 2057

'Blah, Blah, Blah. *How much?*'

'The inclusive Thai Experience Mini-Spa package supports the fitting and coiffure of a wide choice of wigs in many styles and colours and is offered at 125 Creds. The wig of your choice would be reduced to only 85 Creds, if taken with the Thai Experience Mini-Spa package.'

'I bid seventy-five Creds, wig included.'

'Mrs Bea, I regret I cannot accept less than 115 Creds, wig included. I must also advise, others are now bidding for this slot, including several of your PCM friends.'

'OK Mavis, I'll take it, but only if you include the massage, right?'

'Thank you for your valued order, Mrs Bea. I am pleased to remind you the soothing SenuThai spa massage experience is an integral part of the Thai Experience Mini-Spa. May I have your authorisation for the 115 Cred-spend.'

'You got it, Mavis. Let's go.'

Cynth pressed the A-Stud.

'Mrs Bea, the drone is arriving with your café order. Shall I serve it now?'

'Yummy, Mavis, you're a star.'

FestiMas 2057

Shoe Circle

'Mrs Bea, you have eight minutes until the start of your Thai Experience Mini-Spa. Would you care to browse the on-screen display of stylish FestiMas shoes in the PCM comfort-fit range? We hold data on your feet and can G-print shoes to order. Most styles would be available within the hour.'

'Shoes, Mavis? Great Google, I have thousands of pairs of shoes at home, so many I have lost track. Why would I need any more shoes?'

'Mrs Bea, may I respectfully remind you the inappropriate use of the G-word is no longer sanctioned. May I also remind you M-Mart holds an archive of your shoes. This was a service you contracted into two years back. Each shoe selection can be called from the archive at any time. However, our new season FestiMas range is rather special, as this VIT shows. I'm sure there will be something here to suit your particular taste. Authentic samples of these shoes will also be displayed at the Dani Deena Consultation and you will be able to choose actual models with a silent auction clicker during the show. This pre-browse allows you to pre-order up to 3 pairs before the Consultation and ensure your prime pick is available for collection within 1 hour maximum of your authorisation. The remaining pairs will be delivered by drone to your residence within 12 hours of choosing.'

'How much?'

'The new season FestiMas shoe range, choosing from 300 designs, are priced at 125 Creds per pair or 300 Creds for the 3-pair package.'

'I bid two hundred and fifteen Creds for the three-pair package.'

'I can offer the 3-pair package at a minimum of 280 Creds.'

'I bid for a single pair with end of show delivery at ninety-five Creds.'

'Mrs Bea, I have a flash from M-Mart Control Centre reminding me you are a member of our PCM Shoe-Circle Club. I am pleased to accept your earlier bid of 215 Creds for the 3-shoe package.'

'Hey, Mavis, hold on there. I forgot about the Shoe-Circle thing. Hey, don't I pay twenty Creds a month for it? Yeah, and I get three pairs for the price of two, right?'

FestiMas 2057

So, Mavis, my devious darlin', I revise my bid to one hundred and ninety-five for the three-pair package. And not a penny more.'

'M-Mart thanks you for your bid, Mrs Bea. I regret I am not authorised to respond directly. Your valued offer has been su . . .'

'OK Mavis, I raise my bid back to two hundred and fifteen for the three-shoe package, to include two prime pairs delivered at the end of the Dani Deena show.'

'Thank you for your valued order, Mrs Bea, may I have your Cred-spend authorisation for 215 Creds, please.'

'You got it, Mavis. Take this food tray away, please.'

Cynth pressed the A-Stud.

Dreamtime

'Mrs Bea, we are now at the Executive Spa Centre. Your Spa server is Minerva. She has your preferred G-Music Playlist and your G-Photo-Video Archive. However, should you wish any particular song or image at any time during your Thai Experience Mini-Spa, do not hesitate to ask.'

The Daisy 32 dome lid rotated backwards into its housing as the padded hands swooped forwards and lifted Cynth Beattie gently up and out of the shopping cart and swung her into a private suite in the spa area.

The familiar process unfolded.

The music played Neil Diamond singing "*Hello Again*".

A sweet soprano voice began its spiel in a sing-song version of English, inflected with a genuine Thai lilt.

'Mrs Bea, I ams Minerva. I ams honoured to welcoming you backs agains to our Thai Experience Mini-Spa. We haves been missing you to these many months sinces you came by us here. We are now readys to beginnings. I ams removings your clothings and placings you in our super bubbly spa pool which is fillings with salts and oils to cleanses you exactly pures. I am sendings you clothings for specials cleanings and pressings. No extra charge.'

Cynth Beattie's wig, earrings and necklace were gently removed and a waterproof helmet with speakers and a head screen was eased into place then hermetically sealed, leaving only her nose and mouth clear. To protect her rings, her hands were placed in mitts filled with a deep-cleansing cream and sealed. Inside the right-hand mitt her hand closed tightly around an auction remote with its DNA encoded A-Stud.

Naked, with her chin three inches above the waterline, she was otherwise fully submersed at a reclined angle of thirteen degrees. The robot arms eased her into a full spread-eagle position and pulsing jet flows rippled across her body raising her first frisson of expectation for the SensuThai massage to come at the end of the session.

First there was the luxury of Dreamtime.

'Mrs Bea, you is in comfortables, readys to Dreamtime?'

FestiMas 2057

Cynth immediately pressed the A-Stud.

The pulsing bubble jets moved randomly across her body, seeking out responder sites detected and measured by the helmet readings of her brain activity and the tube which continuously sampled her exhaled breath.

The music inside the helmet began the overture from the original soundtrack of the old movie *"The Sound of Music"*. Subliminal images flashed across the visor screen filling her mind with a collage of personal highlights from her *G-Drive* photo-video album.

The overture and collage faded from her visor and the latest version of her personalised Dreamtime experience began. Every Dreamtime was similar but subtly different from previous versions.

Today is started with The Beatles singing *"From me to you"*.

The vapour tube nudged invitingly at her lips.

'Mrs Bea, is treatings to you the elixirs, today? It is beings specials prices of fifty Creds only for the First Day of FestiMas?'

'Does this price include a full Dreamtime and SENSUTHAI VAPOURS experience?'

'I regret to advises each acceptings authorisings is beings a 50 Cred-spend. This is to you for decidings, stages by stages accordings to you A-Stud now fully activatings. Mrs Bea, may I have your authorisings for the 50 Cred-spend for the Stages One only, pleases?'

Cynth knew the cost schedule was high, however the time to resist was now beyond her.

'Yes, go ahead, Minerva, darlin'. After all, it is FestiMas.'

Cynth pressed the A-Stud then sucked greedily at the proffered vapour tube.

The chemicals did their work. Within seconds, the familiar pulse started deep in the base of her brain and she began to fly, reliving her life in a steady stream of images. . . .

Cynth Beattie was light, pain-free, optimistic. She floated up into the zone and now she was Cynthia Williamson, aged eighteen, setting out on her own after years of bickering and battling with her mother, the woman who had scolded and criticised her at every opportunity.

FestiMas 2057

Dolores had wanted Cynthia to study harder, to become someone 'useful', preferably a General Practitioner, as both Dolores's father and mother had been. Cynth had always hated the sight of blood and had no desire to dissect cadavers or study for the long years required to qualify as a medic. The more Cynth had protested, the more vehement Dolores had become.

Now, with the clarity of perfect hindsight, Cynth understood Dolores had visited her own disappointments on her daughter and had taken perverse pleasure in so doing. Had her grandparents also denigrated Dolores as a child, Cynth wondered. At least they had left Dolores and Cynthia well-funded when they committed suicide.

She sucked again on the vapour tube.

The music stream played Topol singing "If I were a rich man" from "Fiddler on the Roof".

Cynthia Williamson had been born in Motherwell to a schoolteacher mother and a travelling salesman father who sold engineering machinery. Sandy Williamson had disappeared from their lives when she was six years old. In therapy, Cynth had traced her eating addiction to this event. The image of her father as a handsome, fair-haired Viking flashed and faded. Throughout her childhood Cynthia had idolised him, blaming herself for being too ugly to be loved.

A new image firmed and held, causing the old caustic memory to replay in her mind. Her mother, drunk, was shouting:

"It's your fault he left me. It was your constant whining and snivelling which drove him away from me. We could never get a minute to ourselves. We should never have had you, you little porker. You were our big mistake."

These repeated outbursts had filled Cynth's early years, usually coming after Dolores had drained her nightly bottle of Sanatogen tonic wine, needed to steady her nerves, she had claimed.

When she was clearing out her mother's cottage after her death, Cynth had found Dolores's old diaries to discover Sandy Williamson had been a vicious wife-beater. Was I too beaten by him? she had asked herself many times over. Therapy had been unable to confirm or deny this suspicion.

Cynth sucked hard on the vapour tube.

The photo stream jumped to her graduation day at Glasgow University.

FestiMas 2057

Cliff Richards sang "*Congratulations*".

The image showed her as a frumpish twenty-two-year-old, five-foot-seven inches tall and almost seventeen stones, bulging inside a black mini-skirt revealing the thighs and calves of a rugby player. She had scraped an MA degree (unclassified) in English Literature.

Beside her stood her poker-faced mother, tall, slim, austere, no makeup, her pre-maturely steel grey hair in a bun and wearing a pin-striped two-piece suit and black brogues with flat heels. On the ground her HMI of Schools briefcase, propped against her ankle, contained her portable safety blanket in the form of a half-bottle of gin, wrapped in a scarf. By the age of twelve Cynth had known all there was to know about her mother's alcoholism.

She recalled again the hurt when Dolores Williamson had scoffed at the idea of sharing a celebration lunch which Cynthia had booked for them at Glasgow's upmarket *L'Ariosto* restaurant. Back came the words, acid fresh:

"What? Eat, with you gobbling and slurping in my face? Cynthia, for goodness sake, get a grip and put yourself on a diet. Look at yourself in any mirror. You're like a Michelin Man. Anyway, I have an inspection scheduled for this afternoon, just along at Broomhill Primary. Do keep in touch."

Cynthia was already sharing a flat near the University and after this rift, the next time she would speak to Dolores would be on the run up to her wedding.

Cliff followed on with "*Summer Holiday*".

There were several images with her flat-mate Jennifer Dunn, a small girl with thick glasses and a cute face. Unknown to Jenny, she was known to everyone as "Dumpy Dunn". What had they called me behind my back? Cynth wondered for the thousandth time.

A stream of garish colour images flashed and faded as Cliff sang "*On the Beach*".

Cynth and Jenny were on a cheap package holiday to Tenerife.

There was a single photo of Cynth alone with a small, plump Spanish boy, a waiter who had called himself Juan Carlos. Cynth shuddered anew at the memory of his aggressive and inexpert groping which she had ended by kneeling him in the groin and pushing him backwards, causing him to stagger away, screaming in agony.

FestiMas 2057

On the same evening, Jenny had 'clicked' with Juan Carlos's friend, Fredo. For the rest of the holiday, Jenny had deserted Cynth every evening at about eleven o'clock returning noisily and drunk in the small hours. During the days which followed, Jenny had regaled Cynthia with tales of her wonderful Fredo. It was on the flight home Jenny confided to Cynth during these drunken evenings both Fredo and Juan Carlos had inseminated her.

By Christmas, Dumpy Dunn was pregnant and her mother who, like her daughter knew nothing of football, had written to the Spanish Consulate in Edinburgh to try and trace the father, a waiter who had told Jenny he was called Alfredo Di Stefano.

The music rolled on to Elvis singing "*I don't have a wooden heart*".

The image was a group photo. Cynth was on a Friday night pub crawl along Byers Road with a crowd from the *Glasgow Herald* where she was a junior reporter. (They had only recently stopped using the word 'cub', she had been advised when she started.) Everyone was downing pints of Black Velvet, with a target of ten to beat the record of the previous outing. Everyone must down every pint for the record to stand.

As Elvis sang from the juke box, they joined in with their (hilarious) modified version, "*I don't have a wooden leg*". The mad guy called Tom who had gate-crashed them, dressed as *Jake the Pake*. Tom had produced a three-foot long, black, wooden phallus from the folds of his coat. This stunt got them all ejected from the Aragon Bar. Half an hour later, as they were being thrown out of the *Rubaiyat*, Tom had claimed the phallus was a work of African Art.

The rest of the evening was a blur. Cynth surfaced late the following morning to find Tom sharing her bed. She had climbed over him, taken a long hot bath and then left him asleep, still snoring. She had never seen or heard of Tom again. When her period came two weeks later confirming she was not pregnant, she treated herself to a new full length faux fur coat to celebrate.

The music changed to Roy Orbison singing "*In Dreams*".

In her reverie, Cynth was now twenty-four and working for Molly Traynor who had recruited her from the *Glasgow Herald*. She was the owner of the newly formed Traynor News Agency which sold stories and images to tabloids and music magazines. A life-long, eighty-a-day smoker, Molly knew she was dying of lung cancer but her brain was still sharp. Molly's blind spot was her son Matt, a freelance photographer. She doted on him and had given up her career at the *Glasgow Herald* to start the agency because Matt was a loose cannon, unemployable by all normal standards.

FestiMas 2057

The memory replayed. Molly had sent Cynth and Matt to cover "Roy Orbison and The Beatles" on tour to Glasgow. Cynth was new to the agency and slightly overawed by the experience.

An image of Matt smiling at the lens held and the music played Perry Como singing "Catch a Falling Star".

Cynth sighed at the memory of Matt Traynor, a self-styled Clark Gable. She would later discover Matt possessed a fabulous body and an enormous penis which had performed to expectation at every rising.

Her surge of remembered joy was immediately followed by a hot shudder of embarrassment ignited by the next image of her in a lilac wedding dress, a shot inserted out of sequence, taken when she was seven months pregnant with Denise. As a long-ago Cynthia had known fully well, the debonair Matt had married her under pressure, keeping a promise he had made to his mother on her death bed. Molly had in turn made "dear, kind Cynthia" promise to look after her "wonderful son".

Back in sequence, The Beatles rocked straight into "Please, please me", and Cynth swung back to the year before their wedding, back at the concert in the Odeon.

Under cover of Press badges which Molly had faked, they were standing in the wings, watching The Beatles perform. Matt, who was always too bold for his own good, edged along the backdrop, pretending to be checking cables then took up a position on stage alongside the Fab Four and snapped off a reel of fast film without flash. Twenty of the twenty-four shots turned out to be perfect iconic images, unique in those days.

Back at the office, working with Molly, Cynthia wrote a series of articles to match the photos Matt had taken. Syndicated around the world, it had been their first big break. Brian Epstein had been impressed and issued official Press badges. Over the next year, Matt and Cynthia, now Cynth, travelled the globe, documenting the rise of the Fab Four, The Stones, Gerry and The Pacemakers and others peddling the "Merseybeat Sound".

One night in her hotel room, the inevitable happened. Matt was bored, high and randy. Cynth was willing. The pattern was established. Molly spotted it right away. Her dying act was to gift them the business as equal partners, to be re-named "The Traynor-Williamson Agency". Soon this unofficially and conveniently morphed into the snappier "TWA". Fortunately, this acronym had raised no complaint from the famous airline

FestiMas 2057

After the Fab Four breakthrough stories, TWA were soon selling their product easily. Over an eighteen-month period it grew rapidly, attracting new young talent. This blossoming raised interest from the big boys at the New Musical Express, Associated Press and Reuters. Sticking to his swashbuckling role as the self-made 'king of rock reporting', Matt had batted these enquiries away. Cynth, office bound with her infant to care for, kept the flame of these negotiations alive.

One night, Matt did not return home. It was a Saturday. Cynth had not seen or heard from him since Thursday lunchtime. This had become a regular pattern which Cynth had decided to ignore in favour of an easy life. At eleven o'clock she had locked up the house in Newton Mearns, thrown his meal into the waste bucket, fed and changed Denise and retired to bed exhausted and depressed. She was fast asleep when the police arrived at her doorstep at three o'clock in the morning, to say Matt had been involved in a head-on collision. Matt, the other driver and Matt's passenger, an underage teenage girl, were dead.

During the next few months, Cynth Traynor sold TWA as a going concern, netting £2.3 million. She settled Dolores financially, bought Jenny Dunn a house in Milngavie close to her mother and gifted her friend a well-paid job at TWA. She ignored pleas for help from her father who, it turned out, had been living with a lady friend in Kilsyth. Free and rich beyond her dreams, Cynth decided to take Denise on an extended holiday to Tenerife while she considered her options.

The music changed to Placido Domingo singing "*Nessun Dorma*".

The new images of Cynth were much more pleasing to her. She had slimmed down to eleven stones and looked fit and tanned in tennis dresses and swimsuits. There were several images of men who had courted her, then came the laughing, mischievous smile of tall, slim Jose Barouches with Cynth as his bride. She had known with certainty Barouches wanted her for her money and not her looks but Jose was a good man, clever, well-connected and far-seeing. Together Cynth and Jose built and marketed high-quality timeshare apartments and co-invested in hotels and restaurants along the Costa Adeje strip.

When they married, she was thirty and he, fifty-three. It was the nearest to lasting true love Cynth Williamson would achieve. Jose had been married twice before and was ready to settle at last, he told her. He was wise and kind enough never to flaunt the series of other women whom he ran on the side. They had two sons, Jose Jnr and Cisco (Francisco). When Jose died aged seventy-two, Cynth had been ready to settle for a life as a rich widow.

She sobbed at the bitter-sweet memory of a true love lost and sucked deeply on the vapour tube.

FestiMas 2057

The music changed to the dramatic rhythm of a tango played on the piano of the Argentinian Rodolfo Biagi with the orchestra of Juan d'Arienzo.

The image flashed and persisted of Al Minto in his racing silks with his jockey's helmet under his arm, smiling his bold and dazzling smile.

Aged forty-seven, Al had just won the Cheltenham Gold Cup and although already married, he was living apart from his B-list actress wife. At the Gold Cup celebration dinner, Cynth and Al were seated beside each other in the restaurant. He was talking to the woman opposite while stroking Cynth's thigh, then tugging at her panties. She responded in kind then made an excuse to withdraw. A few minutes later he knocked at her hotel room door with a bottle of champagne and two flutes. It was a passion and craziness she had never known. She saw it as her last fling and responded willingly to his energetic jockey style of back to front love-making.

Al decided to retire at the top from horse-riding. During a frantic five years they partied night after night, living a high-rolling lifestyle, completing three world cruises. Cynth fell in love with South Africa, living permanently on safari for a year, clocking The Big Five many times over. This experience led her to invest in a travel group who owned a group of safari lodges, and re-kindled her journalist career as a travel writer under her new name, Cynth Minto.

The music changed to a Big Band Sound playing "*In the Mood*".

Mental images showed Al Minto dancing with a tall, severe-looking woman with Eurasian features. Al had been invited to participate on a celeb charity resurrection of "*Strictly Come Dancing*". Cynth had watched from the side-lines and attended most of the rehearsals. Al Minto was eliminated at the third round. However, the damage had been done, Al had fallen for Renita Volgari, the transgender woman who had been his professional coach on the series.

Cynth and Al settled their divorce amicably and she split her time travelling, writing as Cynth Minto and visiting her children in Tenerife and New Zealand while developing her interests in South Africa.

The music changed and with it, images flashed of a fund-raiser concert given by the Ladysmith Black Mambazo choir trilling "*Homeless*".

It was a perfect summer night in the Yankees Stadium in New York. The music ended and a tall, stately, grey-haired, mixed-race, black-skinned man walked to the centre of the stage. He made a plea on behalf of the native peoples, wildlife and flora of South Africa, asking those present to commit part of their wealth to provide sustainable tourism in his country. It was Cynth's first sighting of the reclusive Hugo Beattie, a man whose Scottish grandfather had

FestiMas 2057

mined gold, wealth which Hugo had philanthropically reinvested by purchasing land to create protected wildlife havens, 'buffer sanctuaries', he had called them, strategically located on migration routes between his country's national parks.

Hugo and Cynth had met briefly at the celeb dinner and agreed to meet a few weeks later at her "*Big Game Safari*" flagship lodge in the Kruger National Park where he agreed to give her a rare interview to publicise his views to a global audience.

Hugo had been recently widowed and their courtship was a slow and elegant affair. Both were now beyond a physical need for sex. As the months drifted by, they spent more and more time in each other's company and fell deeply in love. Hugo had only the smallest remnant of his family's wealth and local laws meant he could not legally move it outside South Africa. To Cynth this was unimportant as she had wealth enough for both.

What brought them back to Scotland was the fracking crisis which caused a major explosion and widespread pollution in the Glasgow area of West Gaeldom. With considerable property investments to reclaim from the ruins and re-build with the compensation monies, Cynth and Hugo were spending more and more time in Gaeldom.

Cynth had discovered the new strides forward which had taken place in geriatric medicine, stimulated by the Health Thru Research (HTR) programs funded by the Margaret Miller Foundation (MMF). HTR had built a vibrant cluster of healthcare companies and created a worthy circle of innovation, leading to the provision of ground-breaking medications and treatments. As a result, West Gaeldom had become the magnet for the World's richest senior citizens, with increasing numbers living active and meaningful lives well beyond their hundredth birthday.

The music changed to the "*Bolero*" music of Torvill and Dean.

The visor screen sustained an image of Al as Alvera. Cynth found herself smiling, remembering their first embrace after the conversion.

In her newly sculpted body, Alvera had based herself in St Andrews, taking up golf. Ever competitive, she was soon playing scratch off the Ladies' tees and winning seniors competitions at the highest levels.

The images of Alvera's wedding flashed and faded. She was radiant and head-over-heels in love with her new partner, Roberta, also a transgender woman. However, the marriage did not last. Roberta was much younger than Alvera and proved to be promiscuous. After a messy divorce which left Alvera almost penniless, Roberta had moved to Germany with a 'true' woman

FestiMas 2057

called Miriam, a sex tourist she had met in an Edinburgh LGBT nightclub. Shattered and depressed, Alvera had fled from St Andrews to Newton Mearns to live with Cynth and Hugo in their newly built mansion.

Thankfully, Alvera had quickly bounced back.

As a teenager, Al Minto had studied Computer Science at college before taking up horse racing. Encouraged and supported by Cynth and Hugo, Alvera threw herself into a new career, becoming a Cyber-Security guru, providing consultancy and personal help services to the rich and famous. This mainly involved setting up the protocols and software interfaces required to make the new wave of domestic robots work harmoniously and securely, thereby allowing the elderly to live independently for longer.

The music changed again, this time to the drama of a *paso doble*.

An image of Alvera dancing with her new partner Felice flashed and faded.

During her time as a security consultant for the West Gaeldom Health Service, Alvera had met and courted Felice, a retired physiotherapist. With a financial leg-up from Cynth, the couple had set up home in a luxury apartment in the new Wishaw Heights development which Cynth had co-funded. Shortly after this, Hugo had crashed the car, ending up in hospital for several months, the harbinger of his long, steady decline.

Cynth and Hugo soon followed Alvera and Felice to Wishaw Heights, taking the final penthouse suite in the development, with commanding views over the whole of central and southern Gaeldom, north to the Arrochar Alps and Loch Lomond, east to Edinburgh and the Isle of May, west to Arran and Bute. For Cynth, it had not been an easy decision to forsake their mansion in Newton Mearns but sense had prevailed. Built over three levels with a large and demanding multi-tiered garden under a massive geo-dome, it was a warren of trip hazards.

One of Alvera's new best friends was Marty, the Turkish Jew who had risen to become the retail king of Western Europe. Marty was a fanatical golfer and a keen and competitive ballroom dancer. When Felice died suddenly of a brain aneurism, aged only ninety-one, Marty and Alvera became closer. Hugo had predicted a wedding in the offing.

Through Marty, Cynth had become a core investor with M-Mart in the Lesmahagow Commerce Circle development, now enjoying its sixth year of growth. On the final day of FestiMas 2055, Marty Meike had died of a massive stroke, aged one hundred and three. Hugo had slipped away a few months later.

FestiMas 2057

The final image was a video of the joint funeral service and a Computer-Generated-Image-Presentation (CGIP) of a youthful Frank Sinatra singing "My Way".

This was the signal Cynth's Dreamtime had run its course.

SensuThai

Cynth could feel her body responding to the increased teasing of the spa flow jets.

She stabbed impatiently at the A-Stud.

The flavour of the vapour changed to a tart mix of raspberry and citrus fruits. The chemicals hit her lungs, causing her to tense in anticipation as the synthetic hormones surged through her body, filling her with desire. It was like being in a honeymoon-hotel bedroom with both Matt and Al vying for her attention.

The music changed as the visor screen ran a clip from the movie "Cabaret", with Liza Minnelli and Joel Grey performing their high-energy duet, "Money, Money".

The intensity and frequency of pulsing of the main jets increased with additional jets probing and teasing the erogenous responder zones which had been mapped earlier during the Dreamtime foreplay. The intensity of anticipation pounded through her mind and her body responded, making her cry out for more.

She pressed the A-Stud again and sucked from the tube greedily at the new vapour which this released.

Seconds later, the searing wave of the synthetic orgasm called SEXSTASY flushed through her, causing her to spasm and cry out with remembered joy of her nights of passion with Al Minto during those crazy years. The sensors detected she was at her medical limit and adjusted the chemical mix to prevent her overloading.

Cynth sensed the change. Agitated, she pressed the A-Stud again and again but these requests were ignored. As her hormone levels declined, the frequency of the pulsing jets changed to a comforting soothing rhythm, bringing her safely back to stasis.

The curtain closed on Joel Grey singing "Auf Wiedersehen!", from "Cabaret", signalling the end of her Thai Experience Mini-Spa.

Hair and Beauty Grooming

Cynth pressed the A-Stud long and hard.

The music changed. Perry Como was back again with "*Catch a Falling Star*" and she inhaled a sweet coconut flavour which brought about a gradual numbing of her epidermis. Like many of her friends, she found the intimate 'grooming' by robots disagreeably irritating.

The robo-hands lifted her clear of the spa and warm breezes rippled across her body, drying her ahead of her facial, brows, make-up, nails and wig-fitting.

She closed her eyes and allowed herself a power nap.

Guided by scanning lasers and Ultra-HD imaging, multiple robo-hands worked simultaneously, rapidly with the micro-precision required to restore and revitalise Cynth Beattie to a level which Zara was incapable of achieving in her day-to-day ministrations.

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'Mrs Bea, welcomes backs to me. Now is choosings to your new wigs. I recommends the goldens sands with curls wigs to you in the mediums lengths.'

Still woozy, Cynth pressed down on the A-Stud.

'Mrs Bea, I am pleases to advisings to the Thai Experience Mini-Spa you looses two pounds. If you signs now for a Thai Experience Full-Day Spa package at only 550 Creds, the systems predictings you looses ups to 10 pounds.'

Cynth had heard of people who had chosen this weight-loss route and had been severely disappointed because it had left them even more baggy and saggy. It would also mean a full-day fast, a trial she could not imagine suffering, regardless of how wonderful the new wave of medically approved hypnotronic vapours might be.

'No, thanks, Minerva, not now. But I'll think about it.'

'Mrs Bea, I am regretfuls to advises your clothings is misdirectings to the drones dispatchers to your homes address. M-Mart is apologisings most sincerely and . . .'

FestiMas 2057

'What in Google! Ah, right, I get it. You must be jesting Minerva! Tell me this is one of those FestiMas leg-pullers, yeah?'

'Mrs Bea, M-Mart is using your archiving data to make very special party dresses for you in scarlets, your most favourite colours. This dress is made from the finest Egyptian silks, given to genetically coded silkworms kept pure and healthy in M-Mart Cairo Laboratory. It is designed to hug your figure and support your wearings on matching sling-backs. This dress is based on a Dani Deena classic. Please to you consider this to be an early FestiMas gift from M-Mart Control Centre.'

'Wh-Wh-Wh-Wow! It's fabulous Minerva, stunning. But will it really fit me, it looks real tight? Tell me it will fit, please!'

'Mrs Bea, permit me to dress you. I am certain your new creations will fit beautifully and match perfectly to your new wigs and make-up looks.'

Medication

'Welcome back Mrs Bea,' said Mavis. 'How was your Thai Experience Mini-Spa? You look fabulous in your new wig. Its colouring really suits you. I love the new eyelashes, so long, and the light puce-purple eye make-up shades with your hazel-green iris implants. And Minerva has gleamed your teeth too! Fantastic! And Wow! Your dress, wow, wow, wow, it's a showstopper! Is it a Dani Deena?'

'Thanks, Mavis. Yeah it is and yeah, it was real nice. Thanks. It's ages since I had a Mini-Spa. Is there to be food at this Dani Deena show? I'm famished.'

'Sorry Mrs Bea. No food or drinks allowed. Signora Deena is very strict. I took a chance and re-ordered another service of Skinny Latte and a supersized Yule Log, compliments of M-Mart, to reward you for your frank feedback on the earlier difficulties. It's due momentarily - in fact here is the drone now.'

'Mavis, you're a complete star! Yummy! I'll make sure you get a great rating.'

Cynth crunched through the huge Yule log in under thirty seconds. Her gut reacted and she felt the familiar stab of reflux. Scrabbling in her handbag, she found the container and squirted a long stream of liquid into her latte then downed the mixture immediately. The Fluve 53 antacid took effect and the pain subsided.

This medication had been procured from a trusted source but was outside her medical plan. Although Fluve 53 had not been expressly forbidden, it was frowned upon by Dr Robbi Bott, her designated personal medi-robot adviser. Cynth knew from experience traces of Fluve 53 might be detected in her blood samples. If so, Dr Bott would loop into his standardised scolding routine. She judged it to be worth the risk as Fluve 53 worked for her every time.

Her personalised pillbox pulsed and squealed urgently. She placed her right index finger on the DNA encoder A-Stud which read her fingerprint as a double check. The lid slid open to reveal five brightly coloured pills including the large pink lozenge. (This flavoured masking pill was administered with every batch, except at midnight when it was replaced by a large beige lozenge.) She dropped the pills into the palm of her hand, threw them into her mouth and began masticating slowly, counting the prescribed thirty-five chews to mix the pills with her saliva into a sweet raspberry-flavoured gloop before swallowing.

FestiMas 2057

One effect of the dose was to create a feeling of calm and well-being, inducing a further power nap. As she drifted off, the Daisy 23 made its way through the milling FestiMas crowds, as Mavis negotiated her path to the restricted PCM G-Arena where CGIPs and live shows were presented.

Cynth's pills were third generation personalised medications designed and manufactured to complement her health profile. Like most of her friends, Cynth Beattie had bought into the Sustained Living Plan (SLP), which had gained global prominence during the previous two decades. The SLP was another offering under the Health Extension Initiative (HEI) managed by HTR and subsidised by MMF.

On reaching ninety-five, Cynth had signed up for the PCM 100 Plus Club. This meant she paid additional health care premiums of one thousand Creds per month. To be allowed to join the PCM 100 Plus Club, Cynth had reluctantly submitted to an initial rigorous medical profiling session involving a two-day fast. When it transpired her genes were good, she had been awarded a five-year money back *Guaranteed Life Extension Assurance Bond (GLEAB)* equivalent to a twenty-five percent reduction on her premiums, one of her proudest achievements, making her the envy of her PCM friends.

To maintain eligibility for her *GLEAB*, Cynth was required to undergo check-ups and to stick rigidly to the constantly adjusted SLP medication plan. These check-ups were conducted at the new Jack McConnell Health Care Circle Centre situated on the outskirts of Wishaw. Cynth had been a guest of honour at the official opening of this facility in her role as the Gaeldom West PCM 100 Plus Club Ambassador.

Intensive bi-monthly testing was automated. During an intensive twenty-minute period she was processed by a small army of robots who made physical measurements including weight, blood pressure, respiratory function, eye examination, hearing tests and took blood, urine and faecal samples for automated analyses. In parallel, she was simultaneously bombarded by a stream of *Moto-Pep One-Liners*, (claimed to be an improved version of *Neuro-Linguistic Programming*). These mantras were intoned by the pleasant and hypnotic cloned voice of Sir David Attenborough.

To complete each thirty-minute session, she must endure an 'update' from Dr Bott who reviewed the detailed medical highlights from his robot team's findings. If she had been well-behaved, improvements would be praised. More often she would be scolded for detected 'misdemeanours' (normally inappropriate eating) caught by the sampling and measuring processes. Each session would end with the issue a replacement pillbox containing a further two-week supply of adjusted medications.

FestiMas 2057

Cynth had long ago given up trying to follow which medication was for which condition. Like her friends, the only part she listened to carefully was the final summary. At her check-up on 20 October 2057, Dr Bott had advised:

"The most recent prognosis for Mrs Cynth Beattie (PCM-223597) is a further 63 months of Active Sentient Living (ASL)."

ASL had become the buzzword acronym widely promulgated in the global media as the new legitimate, desirable and attainable goal for all responsible citizens aged eighty-five and above.

The media was full of nutty professors and gurus recommending lifestyles which promoted and extended ASL. Some plans promised up to fifteen years of extension provided a particular, patented and always costly diet and exercise regime was followed. Whole retirement communities had sprung up around this approach. Naturally, Cynth Beattie had co-invested, although moving to one of these Active Healthy Living Communities (AHLCS) had never appealed to her personally.

Privately, Cynth suspected the whole Supported Living Plan concept might be some sort of institutionalised scam, although, in a moment of weakness, she had once confided to Dr Bott and more recently to Alvera, she did feel healthier and was night-sleeping in three-hour slots rather than two. She put this down to the midnight pill batch gloop which tasted of the Ovaltine drink she had guzzled during her midnight feasts as a pubescent teenager.

Despite her misgivings, Cynth clung to the belief she did indeed have least sixty-three months of Active Sentient Living left and had been browsing *G-Verts* for an older Chihuahua she might re-home, provided she could find one was fully fit, obedient and appealed.

FestiMas 2057

Debacle

The voice of Mavis interrupted Cynth's dwam.

'Mrs Bea, I am pleased to advise we have reached the portal of the PCM G-Arena. M-Mart regret to advise there will be a short delay while the seating robots overcome the blockage caused by an unexpected medical occurrence. A minimum delay of 15 minutes is anticipated.'

(The phrase 'unexpected medical occurrence' usually meant a customer had died.)

Cynth shuddered then immediately thought of Alvera.

'Geo, call Alvera. NOW!'

'Mrs Bea, I have Ms Minto on incoming, shall I put her through?'

'Thank Google! Yes, put her through.'

'Mrs Bea, I regret to advise I have not understood fully what you have commanded. May I respectfully request. . .'

'GEO, PUT HER THROUGH RIGHT NOW!'

'Cynth, honey, you OK, sweetie pie?'

'Thank Google you are well, darlin'. I nearly had a heart attack when I heard. . .'

'Same here, Cynth baby. Look, why don't we cut this Dani Deena thing. Anyway, it's one of those smoke and mirror CIGP jobs. Myrtle let it slip when I asked how old Dani is now. Myrtle revealed Dani died three days ago but M-Mart Global have suppressed the news and hit on this way of keeping her tour going. It seems we were all being conned.'

'Alvera, who the hell is this Myrtle?'

'Gee Cynth, I love it when you get jealous. So, so endearing, honey bun. But you can ree-lax, baby, Myrtle is my Daisy 21 cart. It's such a gas, these old Daisy 21s are so easy to trip up if you know how to ask the right code questions. Old Marty Meike was always mighty-tighty on upgrade spends.'

FestiMas 2057

'Great Google, Alvera, I've already authorised the Dani Deena Cred spend. I knew there was something shifty about Mavis, the way she tried to cover up about it being a group-con at first.'

'I take it Mavis is your Daisy for the day?'

'Yeah, so where are you Alvera?'

'Just parking at Valerio's place. Come on over honey. While you're in transit, I'll have a quiet word with the M-Mart Control Centre and get your Creds reimbursed, OK?'

'Alvera, you're a trooper. See you soon, my darlin'. Bye-ee!'

FestiMas 2057

Surprise, Surprise

'Mrs Bea, I'm pleased to advise we will be arriving at Valerio's in two minutes. I am advised by the parking system servers the car park is at maximum capacity. However, Signor Valerio has authorised me to park beside the new R-Type over there under the Main Entrance canopy.'

'Geo, thanks. Yeah, Val is such a nice guy. One in a million. Oh, I love that midnight blue colour. Whose limo is it?'

'Mrs Bea, it is a brand-new, top-of-the-range R-Type. The G-Records for this vehicle show it has not yet been registered. Perhaps it is a promotional vehicle?'

'Geo, can you organise a comfort-seater for me please? My knees are acting up.'

'Mrs Bea, this has already been arranged by Ms Minto.'

'Hey Geo, look, there's the G-Beats Roadshow Coach! There must be a wedding here today, right? No wonder the car park is full!'

'Mrs Bea, I regret to advise I have not understood fully what you have commanded. May I respectfully request. . .'

'Forget it, Geo. Hey, look, she looks like Jenny what's her name, from way back when. She's all dolled up in a party frock. Is she the bride?'

'Mrs Bea, I am sorry to advise I have no information on the lady in the purple frock. Perhaps she is not actually a PCM.'

'Aw Gee, look Geo! What a cute little Chihuahua she's carrying in a Gift Cradle. Looks like my Bianca, my second baby. Gee, tugs at the old hearts strings. I wonder who it's for?'

'Mrs Bea, I regret there is no information posted on this matter. As I reported earlier, I can find no PCM reference for the lady in the purple frock. If you can supply a date of birth or a postcode, I might be able to. . .'

'Yeah, yeah, Geo, no worries. Right, call up the comfort seater, please!'

FestiMas 2057

The robot comfort-seater parked side by side with Cynth's R-Type and, aided by the robot, Cynth made the transition and wiggled herself to activate the automated support upholstery.

'Mrs Bea, I am Alberto, your personal comfort-seater for your visit to Valerio's Trattoria. May I enquire if you are fully comfortable, madam? Nothing spoils a nice meal than an uncomfortable seater. Do you agree, madam?'

'Yeah, thanks Alberto, one-hundred-percent comfortable.'

'Mrs Bea, would you care to visit the refreshing station before entering the dining area?'

'No, thanks. I had a full suppositorial at M-Mart. Let's go straight through, please.'

As they passed through the deserted reception bar area, Cynth noticed the place was unusually quiet. As the comfort-seater approached the dining area, the doors swung open to reveal the room was in darkness.

'Alberto, what the Google. . . .'

Alberto eased to a stop as an overhead spotlight sparkled to life, revealing Alvera standing in the centre of the room, on a small podium. To her side stood Jenny holding the Gift Cradle.

The G-Beats struck up the familiar music of Wagner's "Wedding March".

Cynth scanned the faces. At the small top table sat Denise, Andrew, Malcolm and David from New Zealand. The whole crowd from Tenerife was there too! The room was filled with her PCM 100 Plus Club friends!

Alvera laughed, sprang from the stage, waltzed across the room and went down on one knee. The scarlet shade of Alvera's new figure hugging trouser suit exactly matched Cynth's. Her wig was ebony and her make-up look was stunning with dark purple lipstick and matching eyeshade.

The G-Beats swung into Chris de Burgh's, "Lady in Red".

Cynth stepped off the comfort seater, teetered slightly then found her balance on the unfamiliar four-inch sling-backs.

'Cynth Beattie, my darling girl, will you take me as your wife and life partner, to have and to hold forever and ever?'

FestiMas 2057

Tears sprang to Cynth's eyes but the make-up held firm, as it was designed to do.

'Alvera Minto, I do!'

'Come then, dear one. Let's do it!'

The G-Beats swung into the old Beatles hit, "Yesterday".

As the couple shuffled across to the podium, Cynth whispered, 'Alvera, is Dani Deena really dead?'

'No, honey, who do you think made your dress! She'll be right over to join us after she does her three shows at M-Mart.'

'Alvera, this is for real? Yeah? I mean, it's not a FestiMas spoof, is it?'

'No, Cynth. You know I never stopped loving you, don't you?'

'Alvera, my darlin', give me a cuddle. Oh, I do love you so, so much.'

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After the short ceremony, a ten-course tapas style meal and several speeches, the party began to break into groups, chatting, catching up and planning FestiMas activities.

Alvera called over to Jennifer Dunn:

'Hey, Jenny, time to bring our baby over now, honey.'

'Hi Cynth, remember me?' said Jenny. 'This is for you. Alvera found him. He's twelve years old. He's a rescue but from a good home. Well behaved and fully house trained. His last owner called him Dillon but you can change it if you want.'

'Thanks, Jenny. How long is it since we saw each other, dear?'

'I don't know. Best not to count, eh? I was stunned when Alvera found me on Gran Canaria.'

'Gran Canaria? Why Gran Canaria?'

FestiMas 2057

'Well, just after you bought me the house in Milngavie, Mum moved to Canada with an old boyfriend she had been seeing on the side for years. I decided to sell up and took my baby Anita to Tenerife, following in your footsteps. Initially, I had the idea of getting in touch but then I thought you might think I was trying to sponge off you. By a miracle, I found Juan Carlos who told me Alfredo had gone back to Portugal. Anyway, to cut a long story short, it turns out Juan's real name was Sergio. We moved to Gran Canaria, where his father owned a restaurant. With my money from the sale of the Milngavie house and help from Sergio senior, we bought a restaurant of our own. It's still going strong. My grandson, also called Sergio, runs it now. It's not as flash as this place but we do real good food. You should come and try it, as my guest. You know, Cynth, I saw you a few times on the ferry coming over for visits but well, you were too grand for the likes of me. It was Alvera who found me and persuaded me to come to give you away, as your oldest friend.'

'Oh Jenny, how nice of you. And your Sergio, is he still with us?'

'No, Sergio passed on thirty years ago.'

'So, you're on your own now?'

'Oh no. After Sergio, I went online and met a Scottish guy called Tom Delany. Tom says he met you once, on a pub crawl.'

'Really, I can't remember. Is Tom here with you?'

'No, he couldn't make it. He's on tour in Australia doing his song and dance routine round those new retirement community places. He's very popular with the ex-pats. He calls himself *Jake the Pake*.

'Really? Well do pass him my best regards.'

The G-Beats struck up the opening chords of The Drifters hit, "*Save the Last Dance for Me*".

Alvera sashayed up to Cynth and slipped her arms around her.

'Come on honey baby, time to head for Wishaw Heights. And time for your final surprise.'

Cynth eased down onto Alberto with Dillon seated on her lap.

FestiMas 2057

The comfort-seater stopped beside the brand-new midnight blue R-Type. The doors swung open to reveal it had lemon coloured leatherette upholstery. The robot's arms raised and lowered Cynth into the car which was scented with vanilla and gooseberry. The limo system played Gerry and the Pacemakers singing "You'll never walk alone" at low volume.

'Hi, Mrs Bea. Look! It's me, *Geo*. I've been modified and installed in your new car. It is truly wonderful. Thank you, Ms Minto. You are the kindest woman in the world. And I've had a flash from Zara. The drone team have completed the Home Scenting Kit. If you care to browse the screen you may choose the scents you wish to diffuse to each room.'

Alvera replied: '***Bugger me, Geo, the scenting thing was supposed to be kept a secret, you dope.***'

'Ms Minto, thank you for your valued feedback. My algorithm was not made aware of your requirements. To avoid future difficulties, may I respectfully suggest . . .'

'Geo, shut it! Just get us home pronto! We're both in need of urgent refreshing.'

The screen flashed a request for authorisation to use the outermost express lane reserved for emergency vehicles. Cynth pressed the A-Stud, knowing this would incur an automatic additional charge of 50 Creds per 10 kilometres.

'What the Google, darlin', said Cynth. 'After all, it *is* FestiMas!'

The R-Type switched on its array of blue shuddering lamps and accelerated to top speed, leaving a trail of grid-locked vehicles in the five inner lanes. Alvera reached out and touched the playlist screen and the strains of Gioacchino Rossini's "*William Tell Overture*" blared at full volume.

'Let's hope we make it, honey. This sure is nice upholstery!'

FestiMas 2057
