



BETA TEST

ERIC GRIFFITH

HADLEY
RILLE
BOOKS

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Cover art © by Kerry Barnes and Brett Bossard.

ISBN-13 978-0-9839531-1-1

Published by

Hadley Rille Books

Eric T. Reynolds, Editor/Publisher

PO Box 25466

Overland Park, KS 66225

USA

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To Judy and Gerry Griffith.
You made me a reader, and that made me a writer.

Acknowledgments

No book is written in a vacuum. So I have to thank some people who helped make this all possible.

Thanks. . .

To Lt. Col. William Kays of the U.S. Army for his advice, pictures, and background about flying in C-17s and more.

To my dad, Gerald Griffith, who—despite having a memory like a rusty sieve—recalled enough about his days as an EMT in the city of Hornell, New York, to tell me about ambulances (and taking me down to the HFD to look at a current rig).

To the wondrous people of Viable Paradise, class XI from October 2007, who read the first chapters of *Beta Test* and who unanimously liked and disliked the same things enough to give me solid footing, in particular Elizabeth Bear, Cory Doctorow, and Laura Mixon.

To my favorite first reader, Josh “The Dread Pirate” Roberts, who better finish his own damn book soon.

To online crit group, Second Breakfasts—Kim!, Julia!, Marta!, Jean!, Joan!, Pam!, and Rose!, and later, Heather!—for forcing yourselves to read it all. I miss you guys. Well, some of you. The rest I can’t get rid of. Especially Kim Vandervort, who I wouldn’t get rid of even if she wanted me to.

To my friends Dan and Polly for lending me their likenesses for Sam and Molly, even if I did it entirely without their knowledge until it was too late. Thanks to Kerry and Brett for the best cover ever. Also, the great Sunday night crew including Dan, Polly, Brett, Kerry, Mike, Christen, and my lady-love Lindsay.

To the companionship of my pups: Caper the monkey boy, Kylie the cooter, and the dearly departed poop-dog, Siren.

To Eric T. Reynolds and Hadley Rille Books for taking a chance on this book. Here’s to drunkenly pitching novels to editors as you walk the mean streets of downtown Montréal on a summer night.

And to you, the readers. If you feel gypped by what you read, remember: there’s no better revenge than passing the book on to someone else with a glowing review so they’ll take it off your hands.

Eric Griffith
Ithaca, NY
July 2011

Part I: CNTRL

. . .and they vanish . . . like a virgin on prom night. I mean they vanish, swish.

—Pappas (Gary Busey), *“Point Break”*

ONE: Gone, Baby, Gone

Sam Terra had no idea Molly loved him until the day she disappeared.

Still, it was nice to know.

Even if he would never get a chance to enjoy it.

9:30: *Conference room*, flashed a pop-up message on Sam's screen. The clock below read 9:25am.

Sam pushed back the once overpriced mesh chair he'd taken from his last job (his "severance") and looked into the sparse cubicle next to him. Molly wasn't there. He glanced on the other side for Melvin. He wasn't there either, just row after row of action figures posed above an original, framed *X-Files* poster.

Sam swiveled and saw only grey cube dividers in every direction. Not a single other head popped up. Somewhere, a keyboard clacked. Elsewhere, a phone rang unanswered.

He sat down and waited for his ALLYN handheld pad to finish synchronizing with his computer while simultaneously running a compile on code he'd written the night before.

At 9:30, he unplugged the handheld, which held his entire life's contacts and entertainment, ready for the meeting. That's when both Molly and Melvin returned.

"Uh, meeting time." Melvin, tapped his watch.

"I don't have time for this bullshit today," Molly said.

"Sad for you. Make time." Melvin winked at Sam, conspiratorially. Sam tried to give him a look to say *Leave her alone*, but Melvin didn't notice. He was already strutting to the conference room.

“You okay?” Sam asked Molly. She stared at an atomic clock, the lone item mounted on the fabric wall of her cube.

“I just . . . nothing. Forget it.”

“I can take the meeting,” Sam said. “If you’ve got something to do.”

“No. I’ll be in the stupid meeting.” She stalked toward the bathroom at the far end of the cube farm.

Sam hoped he hadn’t pissed her off.

And not for the first time, he couldn’t help but watch her walk away.

Sam Terra was a big guy. A mountain on legs, a squashed giant, a sumo wrestler minus the diaper. He wore Hawaiian shirts and called them “Aloha” shirts as if he grew up on Maui. He didn’t. He was raised in upstate New York, though he didn’t call it upstate. He called his home the “central southern tier” because that’s what they called it on the TV news there. He had a patchy red beard and a pasty balding head covered with a baseball cap with an embroidered penguin on the front. The hat hid secret pockets; it doubled as his wallet.

Molly Maddox, on the other hand, was as diminutive as Sam was massive. She was not quite five feet, not quite curvy, not quite beautiful. She looked and dressed like a boy of twelve from the 1980s including thin sock ties and, once, parachute pants, and wore her light hair streaked with bright blue highlights in an especially unflattering bowl-cut, ala Moe of *The Three Stooges*.

Sam considered her the embodiment of feminine perfection.

The office of EverLife, Inc., was on the seventh floor of a building in San Francisco, a stone’s throw from Candlestick Park. Sam refused to call it “Monster Park” because the one time he got a job through a Monster.com listing it lasted only four weeks before the company went under. He’d seen his share of Internet ventures formed

* He looked like an Irish version of Kris Kringle on a beach vacation. But he lacked Santa’s sartorial sense.

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with a reach-exceeding-grasp mentality written right into the business plan. Assuming they had a business plan at all.

He wasn't sure if his current gig was any different.

Despite the name, EverLife wasn't a biogen company that wanted to find the secret to immortality. It created virtual worlds, suitable for running on all operating systems, assuming the computer had the right horsepower. The goal: recreate mundane, everyday life in a virtual reality environment; a massively multiplayer online world, but without weapons or goals or fun. Just better looking bodies than reality usually furnished. The most disgusting human could have an Adonis-like three-dimensional avatar in EverLife.

EverLife was far from the only company trying this approach, but so far they'd been successful. The idea got the company moving, the execution kept the company popular, and the popularity kept the funding rolling in from the venture capitalists. So far.

It was the most successful place Sam had ever worked, and they paid him well.

The company had yet to make a dime.

Sam arrived two minutes late for the meeting in the glass-enclosed conference room they called the fish bowl, replete with decals of sea creatures on the door. There were only two chairs left out of ten. Five men and three women filled the seats. None of the chairs in the room matched. Sam took one that sagged under him and smelled like Cheeze Puffs.

Sam wiped some crumbs from the table and placed his unfolded ALLYN^{*} before him to take notes.

* The All You Need (ALLYN) was at that point the only successful product lunch from Google, the result of the merger of Google and Apple. The ALLYN had built in Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, GPS, LTE, and WiMAX provided by VeriSprint-Mobile. Folded, the device was a mobile phone. Unfolded, it offered an eight-inch multi-touch screen with a Linux-based ultra-simplified OS. It played remote or local video and audio, displayed e-books, surfed the Web, and served as a portable, pocket DVR—all the usual apps. It cost \$3,300 (plus \$60 a month) and Sam had stood in line for 29 hours to be the third person in San Francisco to get one.

No one made a sound as he did this, and eventually Sam, lost in thought, looked up. Molly and Melvin stood at either end, hands down on the table, locked in a silent battle of wills.

“Oh. Are we still on that topic?” Sam said.

Mr. Kock,¹ the mustachioed CEO who always dressed in an EverLife embroidered polo shirt, nodded the affirmative. He smiled like it was perfectly natural.

The argument, which began last Friday and was again underway that Wednesday morning, boiled down to this: The Arcadia module inside EverLife would be built based on the belief by some in the room that users would want to play video games while already inside the virtual world—and would pay extra for the privilege. Others felt this was foolish—the users were already on their computers or consoles to use EverLife. Why would they pay a second time for games they already owned when they’re already in a game?

Whenever anyone made such a statement, Mr. Kock would recite: “It’s not a game—It’s a reality!”² He would then pause, glance around, and display disappointment that no one recited the trademarked product tagline with him.

The anti-Arcadia leader was Molly. Sam sided with her, mostly because he saw Arcadia as just another sneaky way to get advertising into the game. It might help pay the bills, but that kind of obvious product placement in games—or in realities, virtual or not—drove him nuts.

On the other side was Melvin Dutta. He was a squat guy, thick through the middle and both ends, with a head resembling a pumpkin stacked on top of other, bigger pumpkins—a pumpkin Michelin Man. Melvin dressed for a real office setting, wearing a white shirt and green tie. His dark hair popped out in rows along the top like a doll’s. Most people thought he had plugs, but Melvin swore any weirdness was perfectly natural.

¹ He had the unfortunate first and middle names of Brandon James, which lead to his staff constantly buying him items like desk signs and name tags emblazoned “BJ Kock,” which he wore with pride.

Somehow, Melvin and Sam were friends. Melvin helped Sam get his last two jobs. Melvin believed in Sam, trusted Sam, and considered Sam his best friend. He also tended to treat Sam like shit. Sam didn't (usually) take it personally. He knew that Melvin thrived on the serial antagonism of his peers. He had since the second grade, the year he'd dressed as the Joker for Halloween and threw dog shit from his neighbor's lawn at any kid he saw dressed as Batman.

It was the most fun Melvin ever had in his life.

Sam figured Melvin had been trying to recreate that fun ever since. Usually, it just got him punched in the face by total strangers. Simply going to lunch with Melvin could end up as a contact sport. More often than not, he used Sam as a shield.

"Step off your short high-horse," Melvin told Molly. He had a bag of pretzels in front of him, which he crunched as he spoke. "The Arcadia expansion is going forward, so you may as well get on board."

Molly glanced at her watch.

"Please, just once, could we have a meeting without the eff-ing drama," said Mr. Kock, his ever-present smile strained.

Molly began her rant: "A game within EverLife is asinine. It's short-sighted mental midgetry. EverLifers have gaming systems at home. They're *not* going to pay to play the same games in world!" Molly tossed a pen, and it bounced almost the length of the table, landing a foot from Melvin.

Mr. Kock's smile drooped. "Sales seems to think it can get the console guys on board."

"That from the geniuses that brought you virtual beer sales."

The reminder of last year's fiasco silenced the room.*

Melvin waved a hand. "Why is it so hard to contemplate? People pay for clothes and jewelry and all else in EverLife. Why wouldn't they pay to play?"

* Sales had extended a deal with Anheuser-Busch—which began with activating a "drunk mode" for avatars who bought virtual suds—by offering real-world coupons for six-packs. They were used in droves by under-aged EverLifers with fake IDs. Lawsuits were pending.

“They can keep that stuff in their inventory. A game is. . .”

“Fleeting,” Sam volunteered.

“Yeah.” Molly nodded at him, smiling enough to make his heart quicken. “It doesn’t last. And don’t tell me game developers are going to allow saved games for users in EverLife.”

All eyes in the fishbowl gravitated to Mr. Kock. His tongue briefly caressed his moustache. “That does seem to be a bone of contention,” he said.

Groans from some. Molly gave Sam a satisfied nod.

Melvin wagged both hands, as if waving off parched mosquitoes. “We could make our own.”

Silence.

Sam asked, “Our own what?”

“Games, you blasted clod!”

Sam almost grinned. Melvin cursed as if he were a Stan Lee comic-book villain.

Molly didn’t find it funny. She flew out of her chair like a greyhound after an electronic rabbit and rounded the table. Before Melvin knew what was happening, Molly ground his face into his salty pretzel crumbs.

“Yalp,” was all he could say.

“You piece of lemon-scented dog shit,” Molly said.

Sam’s mouth fell open. He didn’t know what shocked him more, her display of speed and strength, or that Melvin had managed to piss someone off enough to get assaulted right in the office.*

Those nearest, including the CEO, pushed their chairs back, rolling away from the small lady filled with the crazy, in case she turned on them.

Sam felt pity for Melvin, who never won a single fight. But at the same time it pleased him that Molly, a woman a quarter of his size, had forced Melvin into a submissive position in Sam’s defense. Erotically pleasing, even.

* The latter was actually no shock at all.

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“You’re what I’m going to miss the least around here,” Molly said, sneering. “I—”

Going to miss? Sam’s entire upper body, from sphincter to scalp, tightened, waiting for her next word.

Molly caught his eye through her dangling blue hair. Sorrow crossed her face and in that instant Sam Terra knew.

Molly loved him back.

Melvin groaned as his molars were forced against the inside of his cheek on the veneer tabletop. Molly released her grip.

Would she apologize? Beg forgiveness? Sam was sure she wouldn’t. She never backed down, never surrendered, never retreated.

Molly retreated. She dashed out of the fish bowl, eyes on her watch.

Melvin, snot streaming from his nose, screamed in the high-pitched voice he got when manhandled. “I want that bitch fired!”

“Molly!” Sam juggled his handheld into his pocket. He hurried after Molly while the rest of the group stared.

“Sam, leave her, she’s not worth it!” Melvin yelled at Sam’s back. “Aww. . .”

When Sam got outside the glass door, Molly was gone.

Almost gone. . .

A familiar sounding *ka-thunk*, barely audible even over the hushed office noises, hit his ear: The fire door to the stairwell. Most people used the elevator, but Sam heard that door open with a whine and close with that *ka-thunk* several times a day. The closer he got, the more nervous he got, sweat popping out all over his forehead, neck and back.

Sam did not shout. He said, “Molly. Molly. Molly.” Over and over again, speed-walking to the stairwell.

The fire door opened with its usual high-pitched complaint. Below him, a couple of floors down: footsteps.

“Molly?”

He looked over the railing in time to see her blue/blond mop. She paused, looked up. She shook her head quickly, telling him not to follow, and continued down.

Sam didn't bother calling her. He sprinted down the stairs, taking some two at a time, occasionally by accident, carefully gripping the inside railing at each landing to spin his large body to the next set of stairs. He concentrated on the steady rhythm of his sneakers slapping each step, preparing for the next spin, knowing one miscalculated stride, or worse, a trip, might prevent him ever seeing Molly again. He knew that was true, deep in his deep gut.

It was a surprise when he almost ran right into her on the landing between the second and third floor.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Molly stood, arms crossed over her chest.

"I . . ." Sam had to huff a couple of times to catch his breath. "Worried . . . about you."

She didn't say anything for a moment, let her arms drop. "I know, big guy. Thanks."

"Are you . . . quitting? Cuz if you are . . ." He wanted to say, *I'll go with you*, but settled for, "Then I quit, too."

"Oh, Sam." She reached up and put a hand on his hairy jowl.

"This place wouldn't be . . . right without you."

"What's right about it now?" Molly grinned.

"I mean it."

"I know you mean it. That's part of what makes it all so hard."

"What's hard? Quitting? Seemed pretty easy when you mushed Melvin's face."

"That part was just plain fun." Her smile dropped and her face darkened. "I'm leaving, Sam."

"The company?"

"Not only the company."

"The industry?"

"Stop being dense," Molly said.

Sam put a hand self-consciously on his abdomen.

"I'm leaving . . . the city. California. The country."

"Why? How? When?"

"All great questions, Sammer. I'll answer the last one and say, 'soon.'" Molly looked again at the vintage Mickey Mouse watch on her wrist.

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“You’re leaving for good?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Is someone coming to pick you up?” *A boyfriend?* She’d never mentioned one before. “Are you moving away with someone?” Sam didn’t even know he’d backed up, staggered really, until his back hit the wall of the grey stairwell, next to a coiled fire hose in a glassed-in cabinet.

“Sam.” She went to him, put her hand on his chest. “It’s nothing like that.”

Sam clasped her hand, his fingers swallowing hers whole. He leaned down and she stood on her tip toes. Their lips met in the middle. It was a kiss Sam wanted to last the rest of his lifetime.

It didn’t. Molly took back her hand and said, “I’m all out of time.”

“What are you talking about? Are you sick? I can help. I mean . . . I can take care of you.”

Molly bit her lip in a way he found utterly adorable. She wiped at her eye with a sleeve. “That, right there, is why I don’t want to go. But it’s out of my hands.” Another glance at the watch. “As it is, I’m breaking the biggest rule there is, letting you see this. But you know what? Fuck it. I don’t care.”

“What are you talking about? See what? You make it sound like you’re being forced out.”

Molly tapped the side of her nose a couple of times, and pointed at him, Charades-speak for, *You got it, big guy.*

She did something that really scared him—for a moment her eyes rolled into the back of her head. He thought she was having some kind of pre-predicted stroke. A moment later, she was fine. She said, “I left you something.”

“Left me what?”

She took another look at her watch. Perfect woman or not, that was starting to annoy him. But it was contagious. He looked at his own: 9:45am.

“Good-bye, Sam. Take care of yourself.” Molly turned away.

Sam moved to grab her arm, to hold her and not let her go. He touched her shirt for a split second and then nothing.

She didn't step. She didn't jump. She never moved. There was no sound.

Molly flickered like a bad TV screen and ceased to exist.