MY LAST WEEK ON THE JOB STARTED (as usual) with a crisis. “Code Four, Gail,” Carl said, throwing me my cap. He never could pronounce my name. “It’s the Barbers, out in Whispering Woods subdivision, south of New Brunswick, just off Route One.” He backed the pickup to the shed end of the greenhouse and quizzed me while I threw equipment into the back. “Got the drip nozzles? Got the 4 plus 6? Got the Sylovan, the Di50Si? The lawn injectors? The Thumper, just in case? Oh, and a Dutch Elm chip for the mall. We might make it by there today.”

It was a bright, mournful June day. The traffic was colorful and hard. The roadsides were brilliant green; newly-painted for spring.

“Here we are, Gail. Whispering Woods.” We pulled past the wrought-iron gates between the two big laser maples with Dolby rustling leaves, and around the curved drive lined with big houses set on wide pseudolawns. It was all “nerf and turf” (that’s what Carl calls verdachip and astrolawn) until the Barbers’ house, at the turnaround.

Their lawn was not green but yellow-green. It was the only organic lawn in the sub. We put it in for them four years ago, and for two years it almost made it; then last summer we had to put it on twenty-four-hour IV, and now this looked like the end of the line.

Mrs. Barber was standing at the door looking worried. Her husband pulled in the drive just as we did. She must have called us both at the same time.

“Jesus,” Mr. Barber said as he got out of his Chrysler Iacocca and looked at his yellowing hundred thousand dollars ($104,066.29 to be precise; I sometimes watched Carl do the books). “It’s not too late, is it, Carl?”

“It’s never too late, Mr. Barber,” Carl said. The greenest part of the lawn made a crisscross pattern like an X-ray showing the underground grid where the drip saturators were buried; the rest of the grass was jaundiced-yellow. A darker brown edge ran all around the yard, like paper just before it bursts into flame.

“Code Six, Gail,” Carl said, revising his original assessment. “Give me 4.5 liters of straight Biuloformicaine on a speed inject. And be quick about it. I’ll load up the ambulofogger.”

The nutritank was built onto the side of the ranch-style home, disguised as a shed. I

spilled in a four-can of Bi, added some Phishphlakes for good measure, and set the underpumps whining on Super. Out front, Carl trotted up and down the lawn with a Diprothemytaline sprayer, while the Barbers looked on, worried, from the doorway. A few neighbors had gathered at the curb, a mixture of concern and poorly disguised pleasure on their faces. I could tell that the Barbers and their organic lawn were not popular.

The quick Dipro fix gives a green flush to the skinny little leaves of the grass. I could hear them sigh with relief through the soles of my feet. But unless the saturasolution coming up from the IV grid found living roots, the whole thing would be a waste.

Carl looked grave as he put the sprayer back into the truck. “If it’s not looking better by Wednesday, call me,” he said to the Barbers. “You have my home phone number. We’ll stop by on Friday to adjust the IV solution, and I’ll check it then.”

“How much is this—going to cost?” Mr. Barber whispered, so his wife and the neighbors couldn’t hear. Carl gave him a mournful, disapproving look, and Mr. Barber turned away, ashamed.

“Hell, I understand where he’s coming from, though,” Carl told me when we were back on the road. “It used to be that when you bought a lawn you could get insurance, especially with a new house, but these days nobody is insured. You can insure a tree, a potted one, anyway, or a cybershrub, and of course any kind of holo. But a living lawn? Jesus, Gail, no wonder the guy’s worried.”

Carl’s empathy is his best quality.

* * *

We stopped for lunch at Lord Byron’s on the Princeton bypass; it’s the only place that’ll allow a girl with no shoes. Lord Byron was a cook at a veterans’ hospital for twenty years before he saved enough to start his own place. Because of this medical background, he thinks he’s a doctor.

“The usual,” said Carl. Two beers and a sloppy joe on a hard roll.

Lord Byron lifted my cap and his huge warm black hand covered the top of my head. “Just as I thought,” he said. “Cold as ice. Sure you can’t find something on the menu you can eat, Gay?”

He never could say my name right either.

* * *

After lunch we changed the motherboard on a flower bed at a funeral home on Route 303. The display was one of those cheap, sixteen-bit jobs that you can't walk through, that only looks right from a hundred yards or so. Carl had sold it to them last fall. It was supposedly upgradeable, but in fact the company that made it had gone out of business over the winter, and now the chip was an orphan; you couldn't change the variety or even the colors of the flowers without a whole new unit.

Carl explained this hesitantly, expecting an argument, but the funeral home manager signed for the new chip, a Hallmark clone, in a minute. "It's one of these franchise operations, Gail," Carl said on the way back to the shop. "They don't care what they spend. Hell, why should they? It's all tax deductible under the Environmental Upgrade Act. I never liked flowers much anyway. Even organic ones."

* * *

Tuesday was a better day because we got to dig. We put in ten meters of Patagonian Civet Hedge at Johnson, Johnson, & Johnson. Pat is not really Patagonian; the name is supposed to suggest some kind of hardy stock. It's actually cyberhedge, a fert-saturated plastate lattice with dri-gro bud lodgements at 20 mm intervals on a 3-D grid. But the tiny leaves that grow out of it are as real as I am. They bask in the sun and wave in the wind. The bugs, if there were any, would be fooled.

Carl was in a good mood. Ten meters of pat at $325 a meter is a nice piece of change. And since the roots themselves are not alive, you can put them directly into untreated ground. There's something about the sliding of a shovel into the dirt that stirs the blood of a nurseryman.

"This is the life, right, Gail?" Carl said.

I nodded and grinned back at him. Even though something about the dirt didn't smell right. It didn't smell wrong. It just didn't smell at all.

* * *

After lunch at Lord Byron's, Carl sold two electric trees at the Garden State Mall. The manager wanted the trees for a display at the main entrance, and Carl had to talk him out of organics. Carl doesn't like the electrics any better than I do, but sometimes they are the only alternative.

"I sort of wanted real trees," the manager said.

"Not outdoors you don't," Carl said. "Look, organic trees are too frail. Even if you could afford them—and you can't—they get weird diseases, they fall over. You've got to feed them day and night. Let me show you these new Dutch Elms from Microsoft."

He threw the switch on the holoprojector while I started piecing together the sensofence. “See how great they look?” Carl said. “Go ahead, walk all the way around them. We call them The Immortals. Bugs don’t eat on them, they never get sick, and all you have to feed them is 110. We can set this projector up on the roof, so you don’t have to worry about cars running over it.”

“I sort of wanted something that cast a shadow,” the manager said.

“You don’t want shadows here at the mall anyway,” said Carl, who had an answer for everything when he was selling. “And you won’t have to worry about shoppers walking through the trees”—he passed his hand through the trunk—“and spoiling the image, either. That’s what this fence is for, which my lovely assistant is setting up. Ready, Gail?”

I set two sections of white picket fence next to the tree and snapped them together.

“That’s not a holo,” said the manager.

“No sir. Solid plastic,” Carl said. “And it does a lot more than just keep people from walking or driving though the trees. The pickets themselves are sophisticated envirosensors. Made in Singapore. Watch.”

I turned on the fence, and since there was no wind, Carl blew on a picket. The leaves on the trees waved and wiggled. He covered a picket with his hand and a shadow fell over the treetops. “They respond to actual wind and sun conditions, for the utmost in total realism. Now let’s suppose it looks like rain . . .”

That was my cue. I handed Carl a paper cup and he sprinkled water on the pickets with his fingertips, like a priest giving a blessing. The leaves of the trees shimmered and looked wet. “We call them the Immortals,” Carl said again, proudly.

“What about birds?”

“Birds?”

“I read somewhere that birds get confused and try to land in the branches or something,” the manager said. “I forget exactly.”

Carl’s laugh was suddenly sad. “How long since you’ve seen a bird?”

* * *

Wednesday was the day we had set aside to service Carl’s masterpiece, the Oak Grove at Princeton University. These were not ailanth-oaks or composite red “woods”; these

were full-sized white oaks of solid wood that grew, not out of pots, but straight out of the “ground”—a .09-acre ecotrap colloid reservoir saturated with a high electrolyte forced-drip solution of Arborpryzinamine Plus, the most effective (and expensive) IV arbo-stabilizer ever developed. The ground colloid was so firm that the trees stood without cables, fully forty-four feet tall. They were grand. The Grove was seven oaks in all, only two less than the state forest in Windham. Princeton was the only private institution in New Jersey that could afford so many organic trees.

But something was wrong. There wasn’t a leaf on any of them.

“Code Seven, Gail,” said Carl with an undertone of panic in his voice. I limped up the hill as fast as I could and checked the vats under the Humanities Building, but they were almost full and the solution was correct, so I left them. Trees aren’t like grass; there was no point in cranking up the IV pump pressure.

Carl was honking the horn, so I got back in the truck and we left to look for the Dean of Grounds. He wasn’t in his office. We found him at Knowledge Hall, watching an outfit from Bucks County do a scan-in on the north wall ivy. The ivy wasn’t quite dead yet; I could hear its faint brown moaning as the software scanned and replicated each dying tendril, replacing it with a vivid green image. Then the old stuff was pulled down with a long wall rake and bagged. I was getting a headache.

“I just came from the Grove,” Carl demanded. “How long have the oaks been bare like that? Why didn’t you call me?”

“I figured they were automatic,” said the Grounds Dean. “Besides, nobody’s blaming you.”

The image-ivy came complete with butterflies, hovering tirelessly.

“It’s not a question of blame,” said Carl. Exasperated with the Grounds Dean, he put the pickup into gear. “Jump in, Gail,” he said. “Let’s head back to the Grove. I think we’ve got a Code Seven here. It’s time for the Thumper.”

The Thumper is a gasoline-powered induction coil the size of the “salamander” we used to warm the greenhouse back when the winters were cold. While Carl cranked it up, I pulled the two cables attached to it out of the truck bed and started dragging them toward the trees; they grew heavier as they grew longer.

“We haven’t got all day!” Carl yelled. I clipped the red cable to a low branch on the farthest tree, and clipped the black one to a steel rod driven into the ground-colloid. Then I got back in the truck.

The Grounds Dean pulled up on his three-wheeler just as Carl hit the switch. A few

students hurrying to class stopped and looked around, bewildered, as the current ripped through the pavement under them. Carl hit it twice more. I could see the topmost twigs of the trees flutter, but there was no feeling there, and hardly any far below where the taproots were curled in on themselves in dark and silent misery.

“That oughta wake ’em up!” the Grounds Dean called out cheerily.

Carl ignored him. He was in the Grove, kneeling at the base of one of the oaks, and he motioned for me to come over. “Volunteer,” he whispered, brushing four tiny blades of fescue with his fingertips. “I haven’t seen that in years.” I felt it with my fingertips, an incredibly delicate green filigree, eagerly and shamelessly alive. It was feeding on the nutrients that should have gone to the tree roots, which had somehow lost their will to live.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you, Gail,” Carl said, brushing his knees off as we stood up; awkwardly, he leaned over and brushed mine off too. “I don’t know what’s getting into me.” And it was true: It was the first time he had yelled at me since I had sought refuge in his nursery six springs before.

Carl told the Grounds Dean that we would check on the Oak Grove tomorrow, and we left. But we both knew the electroshock was too little, too late. On the way back to the nursery, Carl didn’t talk about his beloved oaks at all. Instead, he talked about the volunteer. “Remember when grass just grew, Gail?” he said. “It was everywhere. You didn’t have to feed it, or force it, or plant it, or anything. Kids made money cutting it. Hell, you couldn’t stop it! It grew on the roadsides, grew in the medians, grew up through the cracks in the sidewalk. Trees, too. Trees grew wild. Leave a field alone and it turned into a forest in a few years. Life was in the air, like wild yeast; the whole damn world was like sourdough bread. Remember, Gail? Those were the good old days.”

I nodded and looked away, but not before tears of self-pity sprang unbidden to my eyes. How could I forget the good old days?

* * *

By noon on Wednesday the Barbers hadn’t called, so we swung by their place on the way to lunch. The ominous brown edge was still there, but the grass toward the center of the lawn was a brighter green, almost feverish-looking in spots. “At least it’s still alive,” Carl said, but a little uncertainly. I shrugged. I didn’t feel good.

“That girl doesn’t look right to me,” said Lord Byron at lunch. I had to find a chair because I couldn’t balance on a counter stool.

“She’ll be all right,” said Carl. Next to empathy, optimism is his best quality. “And I’ll

have the usual."

Carl spent the afternoon doing the books while I dozed on a cot at the office end of the greenhouse. "What I lose in plants I make up in cybers," he said. "I'm the only nurseryman in the state who still services organics—but you know that. Funny how it all balances out, Gail. First I make money poisoning or cutting the grass; then I make more trying to keep it alive. When that goes, there's a fortune in greenlawn. Paint it every spring. Same with trees. First it was sales. Then it was maintenance, life supports. Now it's electrics. Hell, I don't know what I'm complaining about, Gail. I'm making more money than ever, yet somehow I can't help feeling like I'm going out of business . . ."

He talked on and on all afternoon, while I tossed and turned, trying to sleep.

* * *

Thursday morning we approached the University with a mounting sense of dread. I had known it all along; Carl knew it as soon as he pulled up beside the trees and shut off the engine. I didn't even have to get out of the truck to feel the silence through the soles of my feet. There was no life in the Oak Grove. Carl's pride and joy was dead forever.

The volunteer fescue was gone, too. We got out to look, but it had dried up overnight and only brown blades were left, withering in the network shadows of the bare branches. Maybe the Thumper had killed it; or maybe it had just run out of life, like everything else seemed to be doing these days.

"Nobody's blaming you," said the Grounds Dean. He had come up behind us unnoticed and put his hand on Carl's shoulder. "To tell the truth, Carl, we've been having funding problems. I'm not sure how long we could have afforded to keep the ground feed going anyway. What would you think of going to videoleaf? Or we could even try silicyberbud branch implants, at least for a season or two. But don't worry, we're not going to take out these stately oaks until we absolutely have to. They're like old friends to the students, Carl. Do you know what they call the Grove?" The Dean looked at me and winked; I guess because he thought I was young. "The students call it the Kissing Grove!"

"It's not a question of blame," Carl said. I'd never seen him so depressed. I wasn't feeling so hot myself.

* * *

"You should send this girl home, Carl," Lord Byron said when we stopped for lunch. "How long has she worked for you? Gay, honey, have you ever taken a sick day?"

“She lives in the greenhouse,” Carl said. “She doesn’t exactly work for me. And leave her cap alone; nobody wants to look at a bald head.”

* * *

We spent the afternoon pulling IV fittings. The Delaware Valley Golf Club is one of the fanciest clubs in the Garden State, and the fairways as well as the greens had been organic not so many years ago. This year we had finally lost the battle on the greens. Thursday was the deadline for us to get our hardware out so they could lay the permaturf.

Carl drove the pickup straight up the fairways, ignoring the angry shouts and curses of the golfers. The greens looked like the moon. Carl angrily unscrewed the nozzles and the fittings and threw them into the back of the pickup, but left the pipes under the ground; they weren’t worth the trouble it would take to get them out, at least for one person working alone. I was too dizzy to do much more than watch.

“Every spring it gets worse,” Carl muttered as he bounced across the last fairway, through the ditch, and onto the county road. “Are you okay? Do you want me to pull over?”

I tried to throw up but nothing would come.

* * *

Friday I could barely get up. My once dark skin looked pale reflected in the windows of the greenhouse. Carl was tapping on the glass with the truck key. It was already ten o’clock.

“Code Eight, Gail!” he said. “I’m getting the truck.”

It was the Barbers. “I couldn’t understand what she was saying,” Carl said as he pulled out into traffic. He gave me the emergency flasher to plug in and set up on the dash. “But it must be bad. Hell, she was screaming.”

It was a bright, hard, spring day; the sky was cruel blue. Route One was jammed and Carl turned on the siren as well as the light. He drove on the shoulder, with one wheel on the asphalt and the other on the green-painted rocks.

By the time we got to Whispering Woods I could see it was already too late.

The neighbors were standing around the edges of the Barbers’ front yard, watching the grass turn yellow, then yellow-green, then yellow again, flickering like an alcohol

fire in sickening waves. There was a faint crackling noise and a thin dying smell.

“Sounds like cereal when you pour the milk on!” said one of the kids.

Carl knelt down and pulled up a clump of grass and smelled the roots; then he sniffed the air and looked over at me as if for the first time. “Code Ten,” he said in a curiously flat voice. Hadn’t we both known this day had to come?

* * *

“Look out!” one of the neighbors shouted. “Get back!”

The brown at the edges of the yard was starting to darken and spread inward. The crackling grew louder as it closed on the still-green center; it pulled back once, then again, each wave leaving the yellow-green grass a little paler. Then the grass all darkened at once like an eye closing, and there was silence. I felt my knees give out, so I leaned back against the truck.

“It’s not too late, is it, Carl?” asked Mr. Barber, coming to the end of the walk. His wife followed him, sniffling with fear, keeping her feet on the center of the walk, away from the dead ground. The thin dying smell had given way to a foul, wet, loathsome ugly stench as if some great grave had yawned open.

“What’s that smell?” a neighbor asked.

“Hey, mister, your boy is falling over,” said one of the kids, tugging at Carl’s sleeve. “His hat came off.”

“She’s not a boy,” said Carl. “And her name is Gaea.”

I’d never heard him get it right before.

“What’s that smell?” asked another neighbor. She was sniffing not the lawn but the wind, the long one, the one that blows all the way around the world.

“Excuse me,” Carl said to the Barbers. He ran over and tried to pick me up, but I was too far gone.

“It is too late, isn’t it, Carl?” said Mr. Barber, and Carl, nodding, began to cry, and so would I if I could have anymore.