



scenes from a marriage

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Bek and Mara knew how to keep the spark of romance alive. Their marriage was the longest-running show in entertainment history, still going strong after a millennium on the air.

The secret was they stayed abreast of trends. When the multiple-birth craze swept the planet, Mara and Bek had sextuplets. That was good for twenty years of live shows, and two of the children got spinoffs. They knew how to attract sponsors as well. Cryodreams, Inc., paid for ten years of frozen sleep, and the ratings soared as Mara and Bek played out dramas from their unconscious minds.

Their marriage counselor and media consultant, always filterfeeding on the info sea, suggested they try a surgical mod for the next iteration of their marriage, Version 237. They were approaching one of their scheduled separation periods — differentiation training they took every seven years to keep their marriage fresh — so there was a built-in end to the version if they didn't like it.

Version 237 started out as a crowdpleaser, despite Bek's diminished oncam time. Bek was surgically attached to his wife's back, his body reduced to a brain, a face that included eyes, ears, and nose but no mouth, a penis long, muscular, and agile enough to pleasure them both and excite the viewers, and four slender, supple arms with a reach that extended all the way to Mara's toes. His new arms were so flexible he could wrap them around her waist twice, and tickle her with his many-jointed fingers anywhere he liked. His digestive system hooked into hers parasitically. She ate for two with gusto.

Mara could speak to Bek without sound; his brain translated the movements of

her lips, throat, and tongue. Bek emitted shaped bursts of electricity that Mara's brain decoded as language. As Version 237 progressed, their sensitivity to each other increased.

It was the closest they had come to being one person in their thousand years of marriage.

Bek liked it better than he had expected to. He wore a wristscreen; he watched the MaraBek channel. He hated the way he came across oncam, but he loved other things about Version 237: his closeness with Mara, her cheer, the things he could do to excite and satisfy her, the ways she could satisfy him.

Their conversations had changed, since the pinbot cameras that followed them everywhere couldn't hear Bek. Mara often spoke aloud, sometimes repeating Bek's answers; sponsors and viewers were hungry for dialogue, so she satisfied their longings. At other times, they had a new level of privacy.

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When Mara and Bek went on an unscheduled visit to their mod doc, the number of pinbot cameras that accompanied them increased.

Mara told the doctor, "I'm having trouble breathing, and my chest hurts. I don't know why I have this complaint now. We've been Version 237 for more than a year with no previous physical problems."

"Let me check your vital signs," said the doc.

Mara removed her dress. The cloud of pinbot cameras zoomed closer to Bek's face and Mara's breasts.

The doc scanned them together and separately. "Most people ditch this mod after a month," it said. "They find it impossible to live with. I'm surprised you've stuck with it this long." It scanned Mara's chest again. "Nothing physically wrong here. Can you describe your pain?"

Mara stared at it, then stumbled to a stool and sat. Bek found himself faced with a wall of active medgraphics. He knew from Mara's breathing that she was going to cry. He checked his wristscreen, tuned to their channel. One of the screenspots showed him Mara's face, and he tapped it to bring it up, shrinking all the other views. Her eyes shimmered.

He reached behind him to touch her cheek. She placed her hand over his, then lifted his hand, pressed a kiss on the back, released him, and hunched forward, stretching him along her spine. She clutched her arms over her stomach and wept.

<Mara.> He stroked her head. She bent her neck forward. Did she want to get away from him?

She rocked them, her ribs shuddering, her system flooding with the hormones of sorrow.

<Mara, what is it?>

<I don't want to lose you.>

<After all we've been through together, how can you imagine you'll lose me?>

<I don't want this mod to end. I love how you are with me.>

With his other arms, he hugged her around her stomach, imagined that she looked like a Hindu goddess in an unlikely position. <Let's not change, then. We've been giving in to sponsors and viewers most of our lives, love. Wouldn't you like to try living a while according to what we want?>

She rested her hands on his at her stomach. Her sobs slowed, stopped. She reached over her shoulder to touch the top of his head.

<I can't hug you in Version 237,> she said.

<Never mind,> he said, sensitive to the new hormones coming from her. <I know how you feel.>

Bek checked his wristscreen. Other people's lives would be playing on it. He unstuck the strap and set the wristscreen on the floor. Though his bare wrist looked fine, he felt somehow that he'd slit it.

N.K. Hoffman "has been selling fiction for twenty years," says the bio modestly. Wonderful, quirky, funny, trickstery fiction, the editor adds. Nina has stories coming up in the Martin H. Greenberg anthologies **Villains Repentent**, **Pharaoh Fantastic**, and **Vengeance Fantastic**, in *Weird Tales* , and in a new, as yet untitled, fairytale anthology edited by Terri Windling & Ellen Datlow. Nina's next novel, **A Fistful Of Sky**, will be published in hardcover in November, 2002, by Ace Books.