

LOVE IS A SLIPPERY THING

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Despite being a proud resident of the lawless, anarcho-capitalist haven of Noland, Anika was not, as far as such a thing could be said of anyone, a depraved pervert. She deserved no better or worse than the rest of us sinners but was nevertheless struck down at one of the happiest moments of her life by the actions of four thoughtless young men she never, ever, got to know.

The scene may be set at a local restaurant which was part of Noland's famous reputation as a place where anything could be had at the right price. Anika was not there to enjoy the chef's selection of pan-fried dolphin placentae or to nasally ingest orphanage ashes; she was simply a young professional looking for companionship.

When she arrived for her double-date with her friends Simon and Sasha, she had been understandably disappointed with Ki-tae's unprepossessing looks. He was at best cute, if kept under dim lighting. Her taste in men tended towards the hard-bodied and pretty, the disposable sort whose warranty lasted at best three weeks of good fun. This was less to do with an inherent flightiness in Anika's character and rather a lot to do with the fact that three weeks was as much as she could go on pretending to work with AI. It was a lie sensibly picked as no one actually understood anything about the subject meaning she could usually say any old gibberish, and a lie necessary because strangers, particularly men, thought she was a depraved pervert when she told them what she really did for a living.

Anika produced organic superlubricant. She was even quite good at it; the best on the island.

Oh, she'd tried explaining what it was, that it was a real thing and actually very clever, but this inevitably required her to explain to men's wagging eyebrows that *no*, it was never used for *that*. Factory workers had tried during lunch breaks, to sinister results. It was all very insulting to her PhD. And so she constructed her love life around a lie, quite enjoying a little harmless imposture.

Anika had already been a little nervous about the AI cover story after Sasha, as part of her week-long talking

up of Ki-tae, had mentioned his work in machine learning. Her spirits were also low after a freak disease in the superlube population and her neighbour test-driving a recently-purchased recreational tank over her flowerbeds. Discovering Ki-rae too unattractive to be worth hoodwinking even if she'd felt up to a challenge, Anika answered him truthfully when he asked her what she did: his attempt to fill the awkward silence she had been carefully crafting while Simon and Sasha were fooling about.

At this point two things happened. Anika was used to men's eyes lighting up when she revealed her true identity – but never with *intellectual* interest. Ki-tae leaned forward eagerly and asked, making Anika's heart go pitter-patter,

meant they would be going home together. Out of the corner of her eye Sasha noticed a curious sight: a waiter in a haz-mat setting up a transparent quarantine tent around a booth, whose four occupants sat with the eager faces of boys about to get a treat. The waiter gave each of them a gas mask fitted with a straw, and left.

Previous girlfriends had censured Ki-tae's enthusiasm for apparently mundane things; he knew none of them would have found organic superlube interesting. The idea of *a living substance* that understood how to spread itself reactively over machine parts, allowing virtually frictionless movement... well! And to not only meet, but to be on a date with a woman who actually made these miracle creatures was beyond his

to allow a safety-masked waiter to run through while holding the open bottle of Fu Manc – at arm's length and with a pair of tongs. It was shaking violently and coughing up stench like a fissure opening through the Earth's tremulous crust and into her bowels. The four young men who'd carelessly set the bottle off were nowhere to be seen. Simon and Sasha later attended their funeral.

Fu Manc was Manchuria's national drink, having famously won the country its independence. Barrels of the stuff were buried along the newly-marked border and set alight at strategic intervals, the smell driving even Chinese infantry mad and rendering bomb crews flying under radar mentally incompetent. Its performance had impressed separatists on a budget worldwide, with initial export sales propping up the Manchu regime, but after causing the Texan Great Plains Fire it became universal contraband.

As the Fu Manc was rushed past their nostrils Simon, Sasha, Anika and Ki-tae might have reflected that this was one of the dangers of life in an unregulated capitalist state if they weren't respectively crying, fainting, trembling in animal fear or throwing up over their date.

Realizing how short on time he was the waiter took a chance and chucked the bottle out the window, whereupon it flatulently exploded over the carpark with a smell that lasted weeks. Drops of Class 6 Manchurian Beverage were slowly eating into the pavement and several cars exploded in apparent self-defence.

Anika and Ki-tae made attempts to see each other again, but they found that coming into proximity triggered PTSD flashbacks. The phantom smell haunted them. They tried a text-based thing but agreed to just see other people after too many tears and caps-locked fights. Last I heard he's moved back to Korea, where he's developing computer simulations for the military's contingency plans for pre-emptive war with Manchuria. She designed a self-replicating strain of superlube – the resultant awards got her on all the news channels, which collectively presented her to the public as the Lube Lady. Too many men ask her out these days.

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"Do you use nanobots or microorganism colonies?" Meanwhile, at the other side of the bar, four young men made the mistake of ordering a bottle of Manchurian Class 6 Domestic Beverage – Fu Manc, as it was colloquially known.

Simon and Sasha smirked covertly at each other when they returned to find Anika and Ki-tae in animated discussion. Simon had himself met Ki-rae through Sasha, and had been wary of him as a proposed partner for Anika – until he'd actually spoken to the man. He kissed his wife's cheek and whispered, "You're a genius."

Sasha accepted the compliment as her due. Anika and Ki-tae's conversation had already crossed the threshold of her understanding, which certainly

wildest dreams.

Anika felt a warm giddiness in her tummy she hadn't known since her teens, suggestive of love. Ki-tae, in a wild flight of inspiration had already sketched out on a napkin an algorithm to improve the superlube's ability to procreate itself. Where had they kept such men during her twenties? Warehoused, in packing cases stuffed with straw?

Simon and Sasha loudly declared that the evening had been lovely but they were dead tired, whereupon Ki-tae responded to Anika's unspoken invitation to walk her home. As they got up they became aware of shouts from the back of the bar and a strange, dizzying smell that was rapidly strengthening.

The crowd at the bar parted hastily