

Steve Fever

Countless tiny machines hijack the living, borrowing their hands, eyes, and ears, as the machines strive to resurrect just one man.

By Greg Egan

A few weeks after his 14th birthday, with the soybean harvest fast approaching, Lincoln began having vivid dreams of leaving the farm and heading for the city. Night after night, he pictured himself gathering supplies, trudging down to the highway, and hitching his way to Atlanta. There were problems with the way things got done in the dream, though, and each night in his sleep he struggled to resolve them. The larder would be locked, of course, so he dreamed up a side plot about collecting a stash of suitable tools for breaking in. There were sensors all along the farm's perimeter, so he dreamed about different ways of avoiding or disabling them.

Even when he had a scenario that seemed to make sense, daylight revealed further flaws. The grille that blocked the covered part of the irrigation ditch that ran beneath the fence was too strong to be snipped away with bolt cutters, and the welding torch had a biometric lock.

When the harvest began, Lincoln contrived to get a large stone caught in the combine, and then volunteered to repair the damage. With his father looking on, he did a meticulous job, and when he received the expected praise he replied with what he hoped was a dignified mixture of pride and bemusement, "I'm not a kid anymore. I can handle the torch."

"Yeah." His father seemed embarrassed for a moment. Then he squatted down, put the torch into supervisor mode, and added Lincoln's touch to the authorized list.

Lincoln waited for a moonless night. The dream kept repeating itself, thrashing impatiently against his skull, desperate to be made real.

When the night arrived and he left his room, barefoot in the darkness, he felt he was finally enacting some long-rehearsed performance--less a play than an elaborate dance that had seeped into every muscle in his body. First he carried his boots to the back door and left them by the step. Then he took his backpack to the larder, the borrowed tools in different pockets so they wouldn't clank against each other. The larder door's hinges were attached on the inside, but he'd marked their positions with penknife scratches in the varnish and practiced finding the scratches by touch. His mother had secured the food store years before, after a midnight raid by Lincoln and his younger brother, Sam, but it was still just a larder, not a jewel safe, and the awl bit through the wood easily enough, finally exposing the tip of one of the screws that held the hinges in place. The pliers he tried first couldn't grip the screw tightly enough to get it turning, but Lincoln had dreamed of an alternative. With the awl, he cleared away a little more wood, then jammed a small hexagonal nut onto the screw's thread and used a T-handled socket wrench to turn them together. The screw couldn't move far, but this was enough to loosen it. He removed the nut and used the pliers. With a few firm taps from a hammer, delivered via the socket wrench, the screw broke free of the wood.

He repeated the procedure five more times, freeing the hinges completely, and then strained against the door, keeping a firm grip on the handle, until the tongue of the lock slipped from its groove.

The larder was pitch black, but he didn't risk using his flashlight; he found what he wanted by memory and touch, filling the backpack with enough provisions for a week. *After that?* He'd never wondered, in the dream. Maybe he'd find new friends in Atlanta who'd help him. The idea struck a chord, as if it were a truth he was remembering, not a hopeful speculation.

The toolshed was locked securely, but Lincoln was still skinny enough to crawl through the hole in the

back wall; it had been hidden by junk for so long that it had fallen off the end of his father's repair list. This time he risked the flashlight and walked straight to the welding torch, rather than groping his way across the darkness. He maneuvered it through the hole and didn't bother rearranging the rotting timbers that had concealed the entrance. There was no point covering his tracks. He would be missed within minutes of his parents' rising, no matter what, so the important thing now was speed.

He put on his boots and headed for the irrigation ditch. Their German shepherd, Melville, trotted up and started licking Lincoln's hand. Lincoln stopped and petted him for a few seconds, then firmly ordered him back toward the house. The dog made a soft, wistful sound but complied.

Twenty meters from the perimeter fence, Lincoln climbed into the ditch. The enclosed section was still a few meters away, but he crouched down immediately, practicing the necessary constrained gait and shielding himself from the sensors' gaze. He clutched the torch under one arm, careful to keep it dry. The chill of the water didn't much bother him; his boots grew heavy, but he didn't know what the ditch concealed, and he'd rather have waterlogged boots than a rusty scrap of metal slicing his foot.

He entered the enclosed concrete cylinder; then a few steps brought him to the metal grille. He switched on the torch and oriented himself by the light of its control panel. When he put on the goggles he was blind, but then he squeezed the trigger of the torch, and the arc lit up the tunnel around him.

Each bar took just seconds to cut, but there were a lot of them. In the confined space the heat was oppressive; his T-shirt was soon soaked with sweat. Still, he had fresh clothes in his pack, and he could wash in the ditch once he was through. If he was still not respectable enough to get a ride, he'd walk to Atlanta.

"Young man, get out of there immediately."

Lincoln shut off the arc. The voice, and those words, could only belong to his grandmother. For a few pounding heartbeats, he wondered if he'd imagined it, but then in the same unmistakable tone, ratcheted up a notch, she added, "Don't play games with me--I don't have the patience for it."

Lincoln slumped in the darkness, disbelieving. He'd dreamed his way through every detail, past every obstacle. How could she appear out of nowhere and ruin everything?

There wasn't room to turn around, so he crawled backward to the mouth of the tunnel. His grandmother was standing on the bank of the ditch.

"What exactly do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

He said, "I need to get to Atlanta."

"Atlanta? All by yourself, in the middle of the night? What happened? You got a craving for some special kind of food we're not providing here?"

Lincoln scowled at her sarcasm but knew better than to answer back. "I've been dreaming about it," he said, as if that explained everything. "Night after night. Working out the best way to do it."

His grandmother said nothing for a while, and when Lincoln realized that he'd shocked her into silence he felt a pang of fear himself.

She said, "You have no earthly reason to run away. Is someone beating you? Is someone treating you badly?"

"No, ma'am."

"So *why exactly is it* that you need to go?"

Lincoln felt his face grow hot with shame. How could he have missed it? How could he have fooled himself into believing that the obsession was his own? But even as he berated himself for his stupidity, his longing for the journey remained.

"You've got the fever, haven't you? You know where those kind of dreams come from: nanospam throwing a party in your brain. Ten billion idiot robots playing a game called Steve at Home."

She reached down and helped him out of the ditch. The thought crossed Lincoln's mind that he could probably overpower her, but then he recoiled from the idea in disgust. He sat down on the grass and put his head in his hands.

"Are you going to lock me up?" he asked.

"Nobody's turning anybody into a prisoner. Let's go talk to your parents. They're going to be thrilled."

The four of them sat in the kitchen. Lincoln kept quiet and let the others argue, too ashamed to offer any opinions of his own. How could he have let himself sleepwalk like that? Plotting and scheming for weeks, growing ever prouder of his own ingenuity, but doing it all at the bidding of the world's stupidest, most despised dead man.

He still yearned to go to Atlanta. He itched to bolt from the room, scale the fence, and jog all the way to the highway. He could see the whole sequence in his mind's eye; he was already thinking through the flaws in the plan and hunting for ways to correct them.

He banged his head against the table. "Make it stop! Get them out of me!"

His mother put an arm around his shoulders. "You know we can't wave a magic wand and get rid of them. You've got the latest counterware. All we can do is send a sample to be analyzed, do our bit to speed the process along."

The cure could be months away, or years. Lincoln moaned pitifully. "Then lock me up! Put me in the basement!"

His father wiped a glistening streak of sweat from his forehead. "That's not going to happen. If I have to be beside you everywhere you go, we're still going to treat you like a human being." His voice was strained, caught somewhere between fear and defiance.

Silence descended. Lincoln closed his eyes. Then his grandmother spoke.

"Maybe the best way to deal with this is to let him scratch his damned itch."

"What?" His father was incredulous.

"He wants to go to Atlanta. I can go with him."

"*The Stevelets* want him in Atlanta," his father replied.

"They're not going to harm him--they just want to borrow him. And like it or not, they've already done that. Maybe the quickest way to get them to move on is to satisfy them."

Lincoln's father said, "You know they can't be satisfied."

"Not completely. But every path they take has its dead end, and the sooner they find this one, the sooner

they'll stop bothering him."

His mother said, "If we keep him here, that's a dead end for them too. If they want him in Atlanta, and he's not in Atlanta--"

"They won't give up that easily," his grandmother replied. "If we're not going to lock him up and throw away the key, they're not going to take a few setbacks and delays as some kind of proof that Atlanta's beyond all hope."

Silence again. Lincoln opened his eyes. His father addressed Lincoln's grandmother. "Are you sure you're not infected yourself?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't go all Body Snatchers on me, Carl. I know the two of you can't leave the farm right now. So if you want to let him go, I'll look after him." She shrugged and turned her head away imperiously. "I've said my piece. Now it's your decision."

Lincoln drove the truck as far as the highway, then reluctantly let his grandmother take the wheel. He loved the old machine, which still had the engine his grandfather had installed, years before Lincoln was born, to run on their home-pressed soybean oil.

"I plan to take the most direct route," his grandmother announced. "Through Macon. Assuming your friends have no objection."

Lincoln squirmed. "Don't call them that!"

"I'm sorry." She glanced at him sideways. "But I still need to know."

Reluctantly, Lincoln forced himself to picture the drive ahead, and he felt a surge of *rightness* endorsing the plan. "No problem with that," he muttered. He was under no illusion that he could prevent the Stevelets from influencing his thoughts, but deliberately consulting them, as if there were a third person sitting in the cabin, made him feel much worse.

He turned to look out the window, at the abandoned fields and silos passing by. He had been down this stretch of highway a hundred times, but each piece of blackened machinery now carried a disturbing new poignancy. The Crash had come 30 years ago, but it still wasn't truly over. The Stevelets aspired to do no harm--and supposedly they got better at that year by year--but they were still far too stupid and stubborn to be relied upon to get anything right. They had just robbed his parents of two skilled pairs of hands in the middle of the harvest; how could they imagine that that was harmless? Millions of people around the world had died in the Crash, and that couldn't all be blamed on panic and self-inflicted casualties. The government had been crazy, bombing half the farms in the Southeast; everyone agreed now that it had only made things worse. But many other deaths could not have been avoided, except by the actions of the Stevelets themselves.

You couldn't reason with them, though. You couldn't shame them, or punish them. You just had to hope they got better at noticing when they were screwing things up, while they forged ahead with their impossible task.

"See that old factory?" Lincoln's grandmother gestured at a burned-out metal frame drooping over slabs of cracked concrete, standing in a field of weeds. "There was a conclave there, almost 20 years ago."

Lincoln had been past the spot many times, and no one had ever mentioned this before. "What happened? What did they try?"

"I heard it was meant to be a time machine. Some crackpot had put his plans on the Net, and the

Stevelets decided they had to check it out. About a hundred people were working there, and thousands of animals."

Lincoln shivered. "How long were they at it?"

"Three years." She added quickly, "But they've learned to rotate the workers now. It's rare for them to hang on to any individual for more than a month or two."

A month or two. A part of Lincoln recoiled, but another part thought: that wouldn't be so bad. A break from the farm, doing something different. Meeting new people, learning new skills, working with animals.

Rats, most likely.

Steve Hasluck had been part of a team of scientists developing a new kind of medical nanomachine, refining the tiny surgical instruments so they could make decisions of their own, on the spot. Steve's team had developed an efficient way of sharing computing power across a whole swarm, allowing them to run large, complex programs known as "expert systems" that codified decades of biological and clinical knowledge into pragmatic lists of rules. The nanomachines didn't really "know" anything, but they could churn through a very long list of "If A and B, there's an 80 percent chance of C" at blistering speed, and a good list gave them a good chance of cutting a lot of diseases off short.

Then Steve found out that he had cancer, and that his particular kind wasn't covered by anyone's list of rules.

He took a batch of the nanomachines and injected them into a roomful of caged rats, along with samples of his tumor. The nanomachines could swarm all over the tumor cells, monitoring their actions constantly. The polymer radio antennas they built beneath the rats' skin let them share their observations and hunches from host to host, like their own high-speed wireless Internet, and report their findings back to Steve himself. With that much information being gathered, how hard could it be to understand the problem and fix it? But Steve and his colleagues couldn't make sense of the data. Steve got sicker, and all the gigabytes pouring out of the rats remained as useless as ever.

Steve tried putting new software into the swarms. If nobody knew how to cure his disease, why not let the swarms work it out? He gave them access to vast clinical databases and told them to extract their own rules. When the cure still failed to appear, he bolted on more software, including expert systems seeded with basic knowledge of chemistry and physics. From this starting point, the swarms worked out things about cell membranes and protein folding that no one had ever realized before, but none of it helped Steve.

Steve decided that the swarms still had too narrow a view. He gave them a general-purpose knowledge acquisition engine and let them drink at will from the entire Web. To guide their browsing and their self-refinement, he gave them two clear goals. The first was to do no harm to their hosts. The second was to find a way to save his life or, failing that, to bring him back from the dead.

That last rider might not have been entirely crazy, because Steve had arranged to have his body preserved in liquid nitrogen. If that had happened, maybe the Stevelets would have spent the next 30 years ferry-ing memories out of his frozen brain. Unfortunately, Steve's car hit a tree at high speed just outside of Austin, TX, and his brain ended up as flambé.

This made the news, and the Stevelets were watching. Between their lessons from the Web and whatever instincts their creator had given them, they figured out that they were now likely to be incinerated themselves. That wouldn't have mattered to them if not for the fact that they'd decided the game wasn't over. There'd been nothing about resurrecting charred flesh in the online medical journals, but the Web

embraced a wider range of opinions. The swarms had read the sites of various groups convinced that self-modifying software could find ways to make itself smarter, and then smarter again, until nothing was beyond its reach. Resurrecting the dead was right there on every bullet-pointed menu of miracles.

The Stevelets knew that they couldn't achieve anything as a plume of smoke wafting out of a rat crematorium, so the first thing they engineered was a breakout. From the cages, from the building, from the city. The original nanomachines couldn't replicate themselves, and could be destroyed in an instant by a simple chemical trigger, but somewhere in the sewers or the fields or the silos, they had inspected and dissected each other to the point that they were able to reproduce. They took the opportunity to alter some old traits: the new generation of Stevelets lacked the suicide switch, and they resisted external meddling with their software.

They might have vanished into the woods to build scarecrow Steves out of sticks and leaves, but their software roots gave their task rigor, of a kind. From the Net they had taken ten thousand crazy ideas about the world, and though they lacked the sense to see that they were crazy, they couldn't simply take anything on faith, either. They had to test these claims, one by one, as they groped their way toward -Steve-science. And while the Web had suggested that with their power to self-modify they could achieve anything, they found that in reality there were countless crucial tasks that remained beyond their abilities. Even with the aid of dexterous mutant rats, Steveware Version 2 was never going to reengineer the fabric of space-time, or resurrect Steve in a virtual world.

Within months of their escape, it must have become clear to them that some hurdles could be jumped only with human assistance, because that was when they started borrowing people. Doing them no physical harm, but infesting them with the kinds of ideas and compulsions that turned them into willing recruits.

The panic, the bombings, the Crash, had followed. Lincoln hadn't witnessed the worst of it. He hadn't seen conclaves of harmless sleepwalkers burned to death by mobs, or fields of grain napalmed by the government, lest they feed and shelter nests of rats.

Over the decades, the war had become more subtle. Counterware could keep the Stevelets at bay, for a while. The experts kept trying to subvert the Steveware, spreading modified Stevelets packed with propositions that aimed to cripple the swarms or, more ambitiously, make them believe that their job was done. In response, the Steveware had developed verification and encryption schemes that made it ever harder to corrupt or mislead. Some people still advocated cloning Steve from surviving pathology samples, but most experts doubted that the Steveware would be satisfied with that, or taken in by any misinformation that made the clone look like something more.

The Stevelets aspired to the impossible and would accept no substitutes, while humanity longed to be left unmolested, to get on with more useful tasks. Lincoln had known no other world, but until now he'd viewed the struggle from the sidelines, save shooting the odd rat and queuing up for his counterware shots.

So what was his role now? Traitor? Double agent? Prisoner of war? People talked about sleepwalkers and zombies, but in truth there was still no right word for what he had become.

Late in the afternoon, as they approached Atlanta, Lincoln felt his sense of the city's geography warping, the significance of familiar landmarks shifting. *New information coming through.* He ran one hand over each of his forearms, where he'd heard the antennas often grew, but the polymer was probably too soft to feel beneath the skin. His parents could have wrapped his body in foil to mess with reception, and put him in a tent full of bottled air to keep out any of the chemical signals that the Stevelets also used, but none of that would have rid him of the basic urge.

As they passed the airport, then the tangle of overpasses where the highway from Macon merged with the one from Alabama, Lincoln couldn't stop thinking about the baseball stadium up ahead. Had the Stevelets commandeered the home of the Braves? That would have made the news, surely, and ramped the war up a notch or two.

"Next exit," he said. He gave directions that were half his own, half flowing from an eerie dream logic, until they turned a corner and the place where he knew he had to be came into view. It wasn't the stadium itself; that had merely been the closest landmark in his head, a beacon the Stevelets had used to help guide him. "They booked a whole motel!" his grandmother exclaimed.

"Bought," Lincoln guessed, judging from the amount of visible construction work. The Steveware controlled vast financial assets, some flat-out stolen from sleepwalkers but much of it honestly acquired by trading the products of the rat factories: everything from high-grade pharmaceuticals to immaculately faked designer shoes.

The original parking lot was full, but there were signs showing the way to an overflow area near what had once been the pool. As they headed for reception, Lincoln's thoughts drifted weirdly to the time they'd come to Atlanta for one of Sam's spelling competitions.

There were three uniformed government Stevologists in the lobby, seated at a small table with some equipment. Lincoln went first to the reception desk, where a smiling young woman handed him two room keys before he'd had a chance to say a word. "Enjoy the conclave," she said. He didn't know if she was a zombie like him or a former motel employee who'd been kept on, but she didn't need to ask him anything.

The government people took longer to deal with. His grandmother sighed as they worked their way through a questionnaire, and then a woman called Dana took Lincoln's blood. "They usually try to hide," Dana said, "but sometimes your counterware can bring us useful fragments, even when it can't stop the infection."

As they ate their evening meal in the motel dining room, Lincoln tried to meet the eyes of the people around him. Some looked away nervously; others offered him encouraging smiles. He didn't feel as if he was being inducted into a cult, and it wasn't just the lack of pamphlets or speeches. He hadn't been brainwashed into worshipping Steve; his opinion of the dead man was entirely unchanged. Like the desire to reach Atlanta in the first place, his task here would be far more focused and specific. To the Steveware he was a kind of machine, a machine it could instruct and tinker with the way Lincoln could control and customize his phone, but the Steveware no more expected him to share its final goal than he expected his own machines to enjoy his music, or respect his friends.

Lincoln knew that he dreamed that night, but when he woke he had trouble remembering the dream. He knocked on his grandmother's door; she'd been up for hours. "I can't sleep in this place," she complained. "It's quieter than the farm."

She was right, Lincoln realized. They were close to the highway, but traffic noise, music, sirens, all the usual city sounds, barely reached them.

They went down to breakfast. When they'd eaten, Lincoln was at a loss to know what to do. He went to the reception desk; the same woman was there.

He didn't need to speak. She said, "They're not quite ready for you, sir. Feel free to watch TV, take a walk, use the gym. You'll know when you're needed."

He turned to his grandmother. "Let's take a walk."

They left the motel and walked around the stadium, then headed east away from the highway, ending up in a leafy park a few blocks away. All the people around them were doing ordinary things: pushing their kids on swings, playing with their dogs. -Lincoln's grandmother said, "If you want to change your mind, we can always go home."

As if his mind were his own to change. Still, at this moment the compulsion that had brought him here seemed to have waned. He didn't know whether the Steveware had taken its eyes off him or was deliberately offering him a choice, a chance to back out.

He said, "I'll stay." He dreaded the idea of hitting the road only to find himself summoned back. Part of him was curious, too. He wanted to be brave enough to step inside the jaws of this whale, on the promise that he would be disgorged in the end.

They returned to the motel, ate lunch, watched TV, ate dinner. Lincoln checked his phone; his friends had been calling, wondering why he hadn't been in touch. He hadn't told anyone where he'd gone. He'd left it to his parents to explain everything to Sam.

He dreamed again, and woke clutching at fragments. Good times, an edge of danger, wide blue skies, the company of friends. It seemed more like a dream he could have had on his own than anything that might have come from the Steveware cramming his mind with equations so he could help test another crackpot idea that the swarms had collected 30 years ago by Googling the physics of immortality.

Three more days passed, just as aimlessly. Lincoln began to wonder if he'd failed some test, or if there'd been a miscalculation leading to a glut of zombies.

Early in the morning of their fifth day in Atlanta, as Lincoln splashed water on his face in the bathroom, he felt the change. Shards of his recurrent dream glistened potently in the back of his mind, while a set of directions through the motel complex gelled in the foreground. He was being summoned. It was all he could do to bang on his grandmother's door and shout out a garbled explanation before he set off down the corridor.

She caught up with him. "Are you sleepwalking? Lincoln?"

"I'm still here, but they're taking me soon."

She looked frightened. He grasped her hand and squeezed it. "Don't worry," he said. He'd always imagined that when the time came he'd be the one who was afraid, drawing his courage from her.

He turned a corner and saw the corridor leading into a large space that might once have been a room for conferences or weddings. Half a dozen people were standing around; Lincoln could tell that the three teenagers were fellow zombies, while the adults were just there to look out for them. The room had no furniture but contained an odd collection of items, including four ladders and four bicycles. There was cladding on the walls, *soundproofing*, as if the whole building weren't quiet enough already.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lincoln saw a dark mass of quivering fur: a swarm of rats, huddled against the wall. For a moment his skin crawled, but then a heady sense of exhilaration swept his revulsion away. His own body held only the tiniest fragment of the -Steveware; at last he could confront the thing itself.

He turned toward the rats and spread his arms. "You called, and I came running. So what is it you want?" Disquietingly, memories of the Pied Piper story drifted into his head. Irresistible music lured the rats away. Then it lured away the children.

The rats gave no answer, but the room vanished.

Ty hit a patch of dust on the edge of the road, and it rose up around him. He whooped with joy and pedaled twice as hard, streaking ahead to leave his friends immersed in the cloud.

Errol caught up with him and reached across to punch him on the arm, as if he'd raised the dust on purpose. It was a light blow, not enough to be worth retribution; Ty just grinned at him.

It was a school day, but they'd all sneaked off together before lessons began. They couldn't do anything in town--there were too many people who'd know them--but then Dan had suggested heading for the water tower. His father had some spray paint in the shed. They'd climb the tower and tag it.

There was a barbed-wire fence around the base of the tower, but Dan had already been out here on the weekend and started a tunnel, which didn't take them long to complete. When they were through, Ty looked up and felt his head swimming. Carlos said, "We should have brought a rope."

"We'll be okay."

Chris said, "I'll go first."

"Why?" Dan demanded.

Chris took his fancy new phone from his pocket and waved it at them. "Best camera angle. I don't want to be looking up your ass."

Carlos said, "Just promise you won't put it on the Web. If my parents see this, I'm screwed."

Chris laughed. "Mine, too. I'm not that stupid."

"Yeah, well, you won't be on camera if you're holding the thing."

Chris started up the ladder. Dan went next, with one paint can in the back pocket of his jeans. Ty followed, then Errol and Carlos.

The air had been still down on the ground, but as they went higher a breeze came out of nowhere, cooling the sweat on Ty's back. The ladder started shuddering; he could see where it was bolted securely to the concrete of the tower, but in between it could still flex alarmingly. He'd treat it like a fairground ride, he decided: a little scary, but probably safe.

When Chris reached the top, Dan let go of the ladder with one hand, took the paint can, and reached out sideways into the expanse of white concrete. He quickly shaped a blue background, a distorted diamond, and then called down to Errol, who was carry-ing the red.

When Ty had passed the can up, he looked away, out across the expanse of brown dust. He could see the town in the distance. He glanced up and saw Chris leaning forward, gripping the ladder with one hand behind his back while he aimed the phone down at them.

Ty shouted up at him, "Hey, Scorsese! Make me famous!"

Dan spent five minutes adding finicky details in silver. Ty didn't mind; it was good just being here. He didn't need to mark the tower himself; whenever he saw Dan's tag, he'd remember this feeling.

They clambered down, then sat at the base of the tower and passed the phone around, checking out Chris's movie.

Lincoln had three rest days before he was called again, this time for four days in succession. He fought hard to remember all the scenes he was sleepwalking through, but even with his grandmother adding her

accounts of the "playacting" she'd witnessed, he found it hard to hold on to the details.

Sometimes he hung out with the other actors, shooting pool in the motel's game room, but there seemed to be an unspoken taboo against discussing their roles. Lincoln doubted that the Steveware would punish them even if they managed to overcome the restraint, but it was clear that it didn't want them to piece too much together. It had even gone to the trouble of changing Steve's name (as Lincoln and the other actors heard it, though presumably not Steve himself), as if the anger they felt toward the man in their ordinary lives might have penetrated into their roles. Lincoln couldn't even remember his own mother's face when he was Ty; the farm, the Crash, the whole history of the last 30 years, was gone from his thoughts entirely.

In any case, he had no wish to spoil the charade. Whatever the Steveware thought it was doing, -Lincoln hoped it would believe it was working perfectly, all the way from Steve's small-town childhood to whatever age it needed to reach before it could write this creation into flesh and blood, congratulate itself on a job well done, and then finally, mercifully, dissolve into rat piss and let the world move on.

Without warning, a fortnight after they'd arrived, Lincoln was no longer needed. He knew it when he woke, and after breakfast the woman at reception asked him, politely, to pack his bags and hand back the keys. Lincoln didn't understand, but maybe Ty's family had moved out of Steve's hometown, and the friends hadn't stayed in touch. Lincoln had played his part; now he was free.

When they returned to the lobby with their suitcases, Dana spotted them and asked Lincoln if he was willing to be debriefed. He turned to his grandmother. "Are you worried about the traffic?" He'd already phoned his father and told him they'd be back by dinnertime.

She said, "You should do this. I'll wait in the truck."

They sat at a table in the lobby. Dana asked his permission to record his words, and he told her everything he could remember.

When Lincoln had finished, he said, "You're the Stevologist. You think they'll get there in the end?"

Dana gestured at her phone to stop recording. "One estimate," she said, "is that the Stevelets now comprise a hundred thousand times the computational resources of all the brains of all the human beings who've ever lived."

Lincoln laughed. "And they still need stage props and extras, to do a little VR?"

"They've studied the anatomy of ten million human brains, but I think they know that they still don't fully understand consciousness. They bring in real people for the bit parts, so they can concentrate on the star. If you gave them a particular human brain, I'm sure they could faithfully copy it into software, but anything more complicated starts to get murky. How do they know their Steve is conscious, when they're not conscious themselves? He never gave them a reverse Turing test, a checklist they could apply. All they have is the judgment of people like you."

Lincoln felt a surge of hope. "He seemed real enough to me." His memories were blurred--and he wasn't even absolutely certain which of Ty's four friends was Steve--but none of them had struck him as less than human.

Dana said, "They have his genome. They have movies, they have blogs, they have e-mails: from Steve and a lot of people who knew him. They have a thousand fragments of his life. Like the borders of a giant jigsaw puzzle."

"So that's good, right? A lot of data is good?"

Dana hesitated. "The scenes you described have been played out thousands of times before. They're trying to tweak their Steve to write the right e-mails, pull the right faces for the camera--by himself, without following a script like the extras. A lot of data sets the bar very high."

As Lincoln walked out to the parking lot, he thought about the laughing, carefree boy he'd called Chris. Living for a few days, writing an e-mail--then memory-wiped, re-set, started again. Climbing a water tower, making a movie of his friends, but later turning the camera on himself, saying one wrong word--and wiped again.

A thousand times. A million times. The Steveware was infinitely patient, and infinitely stupid. Each time it failed, it would change the actors, shuffle a few variables, and run the experiment over again. The possibilities were endless, but it would keep on trying until the sun burned out.

Lincoln was tired. He climbed into the truck beside his grandmother, and they headed for home.

Greg Egan's science fiction has received the Hugo Award and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award.

Copyright Technology Review 2007.