

## **Wild Minds by Michael Swanwick This story first appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction, May 1998. Nominated for Best Short Story.**

I met her at a businesspersons' orgy in London. The room was in the back of a pub that was all brass and beveled glass, nostalgia and dark oak. The doorkeeper hesitated when it saw how many times I'd attended in the last month. But then I suggested it scroll up my travel schedule, and it saw that I wasn't acting out a sex-addiction script, but properly maintaining my forebrain and hindbrain balances. So it let me in.

Inside, the light was dimly textured and occasionally mirrored. Friendly hands helped me off with my clothing. "I'm Thom," I murmured, and "Annalouise . . . Enoch . . . Abdul . . . Magdalena . . . Claire," those nearest quietly replied. Time passed.

I noticed Hellene not because she was beautiful—who pays attention to beauty, after the first hour?—but because it took her so long to find release. By the time she was done, there was a whole new crowd; only she and I remained of all who had been in the room when I entered.

In the halfway room, we talked.

"My assemblers and sorters got into a hierarchic conflict," I told her. "Too many new faces, too many interchangeable cities."

She nodded. "I've been under a lot of stress myself. My neural mediator has become unreliable. And since I'm scheduled for an upgrade, it's not worth it running a purge. I had to off-line the mediator, and take the week off from work."

"What do you do?" I asked. I'd already spotted her as being optimized.

She worked in human resources, she said. When I heard that, I asked, "Is there any hope for people like me? Those who won't accept optimization, I mean."

"Wild minds?" Hellene looked thoughtful. "Five years ago I'd've said no, open-and-shut, end of story. Period. Zero rez. Today, though . . ."

"Yes?"

"I don't know," she said in an anguished voice. "I simply don't know."

I could sense something significant occurring within myself, intuit some emotional sea-change organizing itself deep on the unseen levels—the planners building new concept-language, the shunts and blocks being rearranged. Of course I had no way of knowing what it was. I hadn't been optimized. Still—

"Can I walk you home?" I asked.

She looked at me for a long and silent second. "I live in Prague."

"Oh."

"We could go to your place, if it's not too far."

We took the hypermetro to Glasgow. Got off at the Queen Street Station and walked up to my flat in Renfrew Street. We talked a little on the train, but Hellene fell silent when we hit the street.

They don't like the old places, the new people, cluttered with seedy pubs and street corner hang-outs, the niches where shabby men sit slumped over their whisky in paper bags, the balconies from which old women watch over the street. It unnerves them, this stench of accommodation and human dirt. It frightens them that it works so well, when it so obviously shouldn't. "You're a Catholic," she said.

She was looking at my icon, a molecular reproduction of Ad Reinhardt's "For

T.M." It's one of his black paintings, his first, and modestly small. At first it seems unvaryingly colorless; you have to stare at it for some time to see the subtle differences in the black, the thick cross that quarters and dominates that small lightless universe. He painted it for Thomas Merton, who was a monk.

My copy is a duplicate as exact as human technology can make it; more exact than human perception can distinguish. I use it as a focus for meditation. Opposite it is a Charles Rennie MacIntosh chair, high-backed. An original because it was made to his directions. Sometimes I'll sit in the one and stare at the other, thinking about distinctions, authenticity, and duplicity.

"You wouldn't need meditation if you were optimized."

"No. But the Church considers it a mortal sin, you see."

"The Church can't possibly approve of your attending orgies."

"Oh. Well. It's winked at." I shrugged. "As long as you go to confession before you take Communion. . . ."

"What do you see when you meditate?"

"Sometimes I see comfort there; other times I see suffering."

"I don't like ambiguity. It's an artifact of the old world." She turned away from the picture. She had those chill Scandinavian features that don't show emotions well. She was beautiful, I realized with a mental start. And, almost at the same instant but twice as startling, I realized that she reminded me of Sophia.

Out of nowhere, without transition, Hellene said, "I must return to Prague. I haven't seen my children in two weeks."

"They'll be glad to see you."

"Glad? I doubt it. No more than I will be to see them," she said in the manner of

one totally unable to lie to herself. "I've spun off three partials that they like considerably more than they do me. And I signed them up with Sterling International for full optimization when they were eight."

I said nothing.

"Do you think that makes me a bad mother?"

"I wanted children, too," I said. "But it didn't work out."

"You're evading the question."

I thought for a second. Then, because there was no way around it short of a lie, I said, "Yes. Yes, I do." And, "I'm going to put a kettle on. Would you like a cup?"

My grandfather used to talk about the value of a good education. His generation was obsessed with the idea. But when the workings of the human brain were finally and completely understood—largely as a result of the NAFTA "virtual genome" project—mere learning became so easy that most corporations simply educated their workforce themselves to whatever standards were currently needed. Anybody could become a doctor, a lawyer, a physicist, provided they could spare the month it took to absorb the technical skills.

With knowledge so cheap, the only thing workers had to sell was their character: Their integrity, prudence, willingness to work, and hard-headed lack of sentiment. Which is when it was discovered that a dozen spiderweb-thin wires and a neural mediator the size of a pinhead would make anybody as disciplined and thrifty as they desired. Fifty cents' worth of materials and an hour on the operating table would render anybody eminently employable.

The ambitious latched onto optimization as if it were a kite string that could snatch them right up into the sky. Which, in practical terms, it was. Acquiring a neural mediator was as good as a Harvard degree used to be. And—because it was new, and most people were afraid of it—optimization created a new elite.

Sophia and I used to argue about this all the time. She wanted to climb that kite string right into the future. I pointed out that it was the road to excommunication. Which shows just what a hypocrite I was. Back then I was not at all a religious man. I didn't need the comfort of religion the way I do now.

But you take your arguments where you can get them. Wild minds don't know from rational discourse. They only care about winning. Sophia was the same. We yelled at each other for hour upon hour, evening after evening. Sometimes we broke things.

Hellene drank her tea unsweetened, with milk.

We talked through the night. Hellene, of course, didn't need sleep. Normally I did, but not tonight. Something was happening within me; I could feel my components buzzing and spinning. The secondary chemical effects were enough to keep me alert. Those, and the tea.

"You seem an intelligent enough man," she said at one point, and then, gesturing at the wooden floors and glass windows, added, "How can you live in such primitive squalor? Why reject what science has revealed about the workings of the brain?"

"I have no complaints about the knowledge per se." I used to have a terrible temper. I was a violent, intemperate man. Or so it seems to me now. "Learning the structural basis of emotions, and how to master them before they flush the body with adrenaline, has been a great benefit to me."

"So why haven't you been optimized?"

"I was afraid of losing myself."

"Self is an illusion. The single unified ego you mistake for your 'self' is just a fairy-tale that your assemblers, sorters, and functional transients tell each other."

"I know that. But still . . ."

She put her cup down. "Let me show you something."

From her purse she took out a box of old-fashioned wooden matches. She removed five, aligned them all together in a bundle, and then clenched them in her hand, sulfur side down, with just the tips of the wood ends sticking out.

"Control over involuntary functions, including localized body heat," she said.

There was a gout of flame between her fingers. She opened her hand. The matches were ablaze.

"The ability to block pain."

This wasn't a trick. I could smell her flesh burning.

When the matches had burned out, she dumped them in her saucer, and showed me the blackened skin where they had been. The flesh by its edges was red and puffy, already starting to blister.

"Accelerated regenerative ability."

For five minutes, she held her hand out, flat and steady. For five minutes, I watched. And at the end of that five minutes, it was pink and healed. Unblackened. Unblistered.

Hellene spooned sugar into her teacup, returning to the sugar bowl at least six times before she was done. She drank down the sweet, syrupy mess with a small moue of distaste. "These are only the crude physical manifestations of what optimization makes possible. Mentally—there are hardly the words. Absolute clarity of thought, even during emergencies. Freedom from prejudice and superstition. Freedom from the tyranny of emotion."

There was a smooth, practiced quality to her words. She'd said she was in human

resources—now I knew she was a corporate recruiter. One salesman can always recognize another.

"Sometimes," I said carefully, "I enjoy my emotions."

"So do I—when I have them under control," Hellene said with a touch of asperity. "You mustn't judge the experience by a malfunctioning mediator."

"I don't."

"It would be like judging ecological restoration by the Sitnikov Tundra incident."

"Of course."

"Or seeing a junked suborbital and deciding that rocket flight was impossible."

"I understand completely."

Abruptly, Hellene burst into tears.

"Oh God—no. Please," she said when I tried to hold her and comfort her. "It's just that I'm not used to functioning without the mediator, and so I get these damned emotional transients. All my chemical balances are out of whack."

"When will your new mediator be—?"

"Tuesday."

"Less than three days, then. That's not so bad."

"It wouldn't be, if I didn't need to see my children."

I waited while she got herself under control again. Then, because the question had been nagging at me for hours, I said, "I don't understand why you had children in the first place."

"Blame it on Berne. The Bureau des Normalisations et Habitudes was afraid that not enough people were signing up for optimization. It was discovered that optimized people weren't having children, so they crafted a regulation giving serious career preference to those who did."

"Why?"

"Because people like me are necessary. Do you have any idea how complicated the world has gotten? Unaugmented minds couldn't begin to run it. There'd be famines, wars . . ."

She was crying again. This time when I put my arms around her, she did not protest. Her face turned to bury itself in my shoulder. Her tears soaked a damp rectangle through my shirt. I could feel their moisture on my skin.

Holding her like that, stroking her infinitely fine hair, thinking of her austere face, those pale, pale eyes, I felt the shunts and blocks shifting within me. All my emotional components wheeled about the still instant, ready to collapse into a new paradigmatic state at the least provocation. The touch of a hand, the merest ghost of a smile, the right word. I could have fallen in love with her then and there.

Which is the price one pays for having a wild mind. You're constantly at the mercy of forces you don't fully understand. For the moment, I felt like a feral child standing on the twilight lands between the cultivated fields and the wolf-haunted forests, unable to choose between them.

Then, as quickly as it began, it was over. Hellene pushed herself away from me, once again in control of her emotions. "Let me show you something," she said. "Have you got home virtual?"

"I don't use it much."

She took a small device out of her purse. "This is an adapter for your set. Very



simple, very safe. Give it a try."

"What does it do?"

"It's a prototype recruitment device, and it's intended for people like you. For the space of fifteen seconds, you'll know how it feels to be optimized. Just so you can see there's nothing to be afraid of."

"Will it change me?"

"All experience changes you. But this is only a magnetic resonance simulacrum. When the show's over, the lights come up and the curtains go down. There you are in your seat, just as before."

"I'll do it," I said, "if you'll agree to try out something for me afterward."

Wordlessly, she handed me the adapter.

I put on the wraparounds. At my nod, Hellene flicked the switch. I sucked in my breath.

It was as if I had shrugged off an enormous burden. I felt myself straighten. My pulse strengthened and I breathed in deep, savoring the smells of my apartment; they were a symphony of minor and major keys, information that a second ago I had ignored or repressed. Wood polish and hair mousse. A hint of machine-oil from the robot floor-cleaner hiding under my bed, which only came out while I was away. Boiled cabbage from a hundred bachelor dinners. And underneath it all, near-microscopic traces of lilac soap and herbal shampoo, of Ambrosie and Pas de Regret, of ginger candies and Trinidadian rum, the olfactory ghost of Sophia that no amount of scrubbing could exorcise.

The visuals were minimal. I was standing in an empty room.

Everything—windows, doorknob, floor, had been painted a uniform white. But mentally, the experience was wonderful. Like standing upon a mountain top facing into a thin, chill wind. Like diving naked into an ice-cold lake at dawn. I

closed my eyes and savored the blessed clarity that filled my being.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt just fine.

There were any number of mental exercises I could try out. The adapter presented me with a menu of them. But I dismissed it out of hand. Forget that nonsense.

I just wanted to stand there, not feeling guilty about Sophia. Not missing her. Not regretting a thing. I knew it wasn't my fault. Nothing was my fault, and if it had been, that wouldn't have bothered me either. If I'd been told that the entire human race would be killed five seconds after I died a natural death, I would've found it vaguely interesting, like something you see on a nature program. But it wouldn't have troubled me.

Then it was over.

For a long instant, I just sat there. All I could think was that if this thing had been around four years ago, Sophia would be here with me now. She'd never have chosen optimization knowing it would be like that. Then I took off the wraparounds.

Hellene was smiling. "Well?" she said. She just didn't get it.

"Now it's your turn to do something for me."

For a flicker of an instant, she looked disappointed. But it didn't last.

"What is it?"

"It'll be morning soon," I said. "I want you to come to Mass with me."

Hellene looked at me as if I'd invited her to wallow in feces. Then she laughed. "Will I have to eat human flesh?"

It was like a breath of wind on a playing-card castle. All the emotional structures

my assemblers had been putting together collapsed into nothingness. I didn't know whether I should be glad or sad. But I knew now that I would never—could never—love this woman.

Something of this must have showed in my expression, for Hellene quickly said, "Forgive me, that was unspeakably rude." One hand fluttered by the side of her skull. "I've grown so used to having a mediator that without it I simply blurt out whatever enters my head." She unplugged the adapter and put it back in her purse. "But I don't indulge in superstitions. Good God, what would be the point?"

"So you think religion is just a superstition?"

"It was the first thing to go, after I was optimized."

Sophia had said much the same thing, the day of her optimization. It was an outpatient operation, in by three, out by six, no more complicated than getting your kidneys regrown. So she was still working things out when she came home. By seven, she'd seen through God, prayer, and the Catholic Church. By eight, she had discarded her plans to have children, as well as a lifelong love of music. By nine, she'd outgrown me.

Hellene cocked her head to the side in that mannered little gesture optimized businesspeople use to let you know they've just accessed the time. "It's been lovely," she said. "Thank you, you've been so very kind. But now if you'll excuse me, I really must go. My children?"

"I understand."

"I face a severe fine if I don't see them at least twice a month. It's happened three times so far this year, and quite frankly, my bank account can't take it."

On the way out, Hellene noticed the portrait of Sophia by the door. "Your wife?" she asked.

"Yes."

"She's exquisite."

"Yes," I said. "She is." I didn't add that I'd killed her. Nor that a panel of neuroanalysts had found me innocent by virtue of a faulty transition function, and, after minor chemical adjustments and a two-day course on anger control techniques, had released me onto the street without prejudice.

Or hope.

That was when I discovered the consolation of religion. Catholics do not believe in faulty transition functions. According to the Church, I had sinned. I had sinned, and therefore I must repent, confess, and atone.

I performed an act of true contrition, and received absolution. God has forgiven me.

Mind you, I have not forgiven myself. Still, I have hope.

Which is why I'll never be optimized. The thought that a silicon-doped biochip could make me accept Sophia's death as an unfortunate accident of neurochemistry and nothing more, turns my stomach.

"Goodbye," I said.

Hellene waved a hand in the air without turning around. She disappeared in the direction of Queen Street Station. I shut the door.

From Hill Street, which runs the height of Glasgow's Old City, you can stand at an intersection and look down on one side upon Charing Cross and on the other upon Cowcaddens. The logic of the city is laid clear there, and although the buildings are largely Victorian (save for those areas cleared by enemy bombings in World War II, which are old modern), the logic is essentially medieval: The streets have grown as they will, in a rough sort of grid, and narrow enough that most are now fit for one-way traffic only.

But if you look beyond Cowcaddens, the ruins of the M8 Motorway cut through the city, wide and out of scale, long unused but still fringed by derelict buildings, still blighting the neighborhoods it was meant to serve. A dead road, fringed by the dead flesh of abandoned buildings.

Beyond, by the horizon, were the shimmering planes and uncertain surfaces of the buildings where the new people lived, buildings that could never have been designed without mental optimization, all tensengricity and interactive film. I'd been in those bright and fast habitats. The air sings within their perfect corridors. Nobody could deny this.

Still, I preferred the terraces and too-narrow streets and obsolete people you find in the old city. The new people don't claim to be human, and I don't claim that being human is any longer essential. But I cling to the human condition anyway, out of nostalgia perhaps, but also, possibly, because it contains something of genuine value.

I sat in the straight-back Charles Rennie MacIntosh and stared at the icon. It was all there, if only I could comprehend it: the dark dimensions of the human mind. Such depths it holds!

Such riches.