

Larry Niven



Larry Niven - The Last Days of the Permanent Floating Riot Club In its heyday the Club had numbered around ninety, and it was the most exclusive club in the world. Now a third of its members had quit, and a third were in prison or awaiting trial, and the remaining thirty-odd active members had lost a crucial something: confidence, enthusiasm, esprit de corps, call it what you

will. "We always knew it was coming," said Benny Sherman. He was a thick-set man, short and broad, made mostly of black hair and muscle. He waved a big, stubby-fingered hand at the south wall of the main room, where a commentator was spreading news of the outside world across a wall-sized screen. "It was all over that screen, for years. Central Riot Control in Nebraska. Pictures of the building going up. They told us just how it was gonna work. They gave us a completion date. Twenty of us quit that same day." Nobody said anything. The voice of the commentator came through at low volume, speaking of the rumor that the Soviets had developed a self-teleporting spy cloak. The teevee screen was never off in the Permanent Floating Riot Club. "That spy cloak," James Get-It-All (Goethals) said wistfully. "That'd be nice to have when a flash crowd goes sour. I wonder what are the chances of stealing one." "Sure," said Willie Lordon. He was a featherweight, pinchfaced man, all birdlike bones and acid sarcasm. "Cops coming at you from all directions: What do you do? You roll yourself up in your spy cloak, and as soon as it forms a closed surface it's a displacement booth. Where are you now?" He paused for effect. "In a top secret headquarters in the Kremlin! You idiot." "Better that than Central Riot Control." Willie snorted. "I've been there," said Benny Sherman. "Inside it's like a Rose Bowl without seats. Receiver booths, all around, the lip of the bowl. You try to flick out of a place where the riot control is on, and you wind up dropping out the bottom of the booth. You slide all the way down to the bottom of the bowl, and you wait there with everyone else till the cops get around to you. I got out by the skin of my teeth." "By throwing away your take," said Willie Lordon. Clearly the idea disgusted him. "It hurt, too. I had a diamond the size of an almond, if it was real, and a half dozen good watches...and there wasn't any way to tell we'd gone on riot control. I just had to guess the flash crowd had gone on long enough." "You're a genius," said Willie. "I'm losing my nerve," Benny said mournfully. "Six times this past year we've flicked into flash crowds, and three times I threw away everything I had because it looked like the cops had time to put us under riot control. Once I was right. Twice I was wrong. That's just not good enough." He braced himself, "I think I'll quit." There, he'd said it. "Shh," said Lou Garcia, waving them to silence. He turned the volume control louder. The teevee newscaster was saying, "... flash crowd in downtown Topeka seems to have developed due to a heavily advertised sale at Bloomingdale's..." "Shh, Hell. I quit!" Benny bellowed over the racket. "We made a lot of money the last ten years. I want to stay outside to enjoy it!" Most of the members were on their feet, eyes on the screen. A flash crowd meant business. James Get-It-All was at the computer terminal getting the numbers of displacement booths in the affected area. An endless strip of paper ran from the slot: thirty-odd copies of the list. Lou Garcia favored Benny with a sardonic look. "You're giving up your share of the treasury?" That was a low blow. Benny stood a moment, considering. Then, "You can have it," he said, and walked out. He turned for one last look at the Club before going on. It seemed likely that he would never see it again. The Club was a three story brick building of prestressed concrete made to look like old brick. The brick/concrete was chipped in spots and dark with age: one among several blocks of older buildings. The luxuries were inside: luxuries bought with Club dues. Now other members were filing out the entrance and dividing there, heading for street-corner displacement booths half a block away in each direction. Willie Lordon was flexing his fingers as he walked. He carried a small electric knife that would slice out the bottom of a citizen's lock pocket, without alerting him if there was sufficient noise and jostling to distract him. James Get-It-All jogged along with the tense, serious look of a player who knows that his team depends on him. Lou Garcia stood at the entrance, grinning broadly as he watched them go. They filed into glass cylinders with rounded tops, dialed and disappeared, one by one. Benny watched them wistfully. He had helped to found the Club, and they didn't even know he was gone. He remembered a September night ten years ago, the night Orrie Black had proposed the idea. He and Orrie and Lou Garcia and some others

who had gotten their start when the booths were new. In those days you could get the booth number of a house and just flick into the living room or entrance hall. You could make a strike just by dialing at random until you hit. But the citizens had wised up and started putting their booths outside, and now half a dozen ex-burglars had gathered at a topless beer and pool place. "Think it out," Orrie Black had said. "Any time something interesting happens, anywhere in the country, some newstaper is going to report it. If it's interesting enough, people are going to flick in to see it, from all over the country. Now just think about that. With these long distance booths you can get. from anywhere to anywhere else just by dialing three numbers. "If the crowd gets big enough a lot more people flick in just to see a flash crowd, plus more newstapers, plus any kind of agitator looking to shove his sign in front of a camera, plus looters and pickpockets and cops. Before anyone knows it you've got a riot going, with everypne breaking windows and grabbing what's in them. So why shouldn't we be the ones breaking windows?' "The key, the crucial thing, is for there to be enough of us to help each other out. We should all be flicking in at once . . ." And they'd tried it out in the Third Watts Riot, which had lasted a full day and a half. These days you were lucky if a flash crowd lasted two hours. And Orrie Black was in prison, and the others had gone their ways-all but Benny and Lou Garcia. The Club dues. Not everyone had liked that idea, Benny included. Half your take! But it had paid off, and not just for the Clubhouse. The treasury had paid defense lawyers and hospital fees. Flicking into a riot was dangerous, even for a pro. There must be a lot of it left in Lou Garcia's care. Quitting had cost Benny his share of that. Still-he shuddered, remembering the last one. Despite previous experience, he hadn't expected it to grow so big so fast. Something trivial had started it, as usual. A line of people waiting for tickets to a top game show had gotten out of hand. Too many people, not enough seats, somebody getting pushy, and Wham! A pocket riot, until it hit the news, and then a few hundred more flicked in to see the damn fools fighting. Benny had flicked into the middle of it, already looking around for the stores-and the cops. The cops had learned something in past years. It wasn't that there were so many of them: it was their deployment. They tended to guard the most valuable store windows. Benny had spotted a furrier's, a small jewelry display, a home appliance store-all guarded by cops. He had seen clerks moving within the furrier's window, trying to get the goods out of harm's way. He had pushed his way out into the swarm: newstapers with gyrostabilized cameras, a scattering of hand-lettered signs held high, and a hell of a lot of people caught up in it somehow, unable to flick out because the displacement booths filled with incoming passengers before anyone could get in. A lot of incoming passengers had been Club members. A normal enough crowd, but so thick! The crowd had surged suddenly, downing the cops in front of Van Cleef and Arpel's. Benny had seen the small, wiry man who smashed the window, and scooped, and began pushing his way frantically toward the nearest booth. Toward Benny. And he was not a Club member. As he passed Benny, Benny had hit him in the stomach and rifled the man's pockets while he was still doubled over. He'd had to fight to keep his feet, but the crowding was such that nobody had noticed what he was doing. The crowd had surrounded the booth before he turned around. Benny had glimpsed a pair of cops holding back the crowd, letting them into the booth one at a time. The next nearest booth was a block away, through an incredible sea of feet and elbows. His squat, massive body had been an advantage as he plowed through it. Long before he reached the booth Benny had noticed that nobody was flicking in any more. He had dropped the rings and watches then. Regretfully. He remembered the sickening moment just after dialing, when the hinged bottom dropped out of the booth and he was sliding downhill. Others were sliding after him, all around the rim of the bowl, and there were hundreds at the bottom picking themselves up, some looking relieved, some furious. The cops had been on a raised, railed platform at the center of the bowl. A loudspeaker had been telling the crowd what they already knew: that they were at United States Central Riot Control,

that they would be processed as fast as possible and released. The police had searched him, photographed him, and sent off the photos for comparison with records of previous riots. His face was on record: he had been in other flash crowds. They had held him. They had held quite a lot of people, many of whom weren't even Club members. "Just a coincidence," he had told the police. "It's funny how many flash crowds I run into. Never been hurt in one, though. I guess I'm lucky." They couldn't prove different. They'd had to let him go. But they knew. Benny hunched his big shoulders, remembering the contempt in their eyes. They knew. And his face and fingerprints had been caught in one more flash crowd. They'd get him if he kept it up. It was time to quit. What about the treasury? When most of the members had quit or been caught and sent up, would it be divided by the last few? Lou Garcia must think so. That was why he had gone with the others. That was why he was grinning. Benny couldn't bring himself to like the idea. He had collected his share of the treasury. But what could he do? If he stayed in the Club but avoided the flash crowds, the others would get tired of collecting his share of the dues for him. They'd beat him up and kick him out. It had happened before. Club activities depended tm there being enough members in a flash crowd to help each other. Goldbricks were not tolerated. He stood in a corner booth, coin in hand, wondering where he wanted to go. Where to go, when a career has ended? What difference does it make? The flash crowd at Bloomingdale's was actually in walking distance, and he was tempted to go watch. The police barricades must be up by now. He could look across them, watch the Club in action. No flash crowd had ever happened this close to the Club. A good thing it hadn't happened nearer... The idea came to him that suddenly. For Jerryberry Jansen, home was two rooms knocked together in what had once been a motel on the Pacific Coast Highway. The rooms sold as apartments now. They were cheap, and there was a swimming pool and access to the ocean. The concrete walk between the two rows of doors still had fading white diagonal lines on it. Five o'clock found Jerryberry flopped bonelessly across the double bed. For six years Jerryberry had been one of CBA's wandering newstapers, whose profession it is to flick about Los Angeles without leaving the booths, carrying a hand-held camera in hope of finding something interesting to report. He had developed legs like tree trunks. These days he went out on assignment: a step up, but it still involved legwork. Some day, he thought as he put his feet up on the pillows, JumpShift Inc. would start putting seats in the booths. But first they'd have to figure out how to flick the passenger out without flicking the seats out too. The phone rang. First he cursed. Then he heaved himself upright and put on a smile to answer. The smile sagged when the screen remained blank. A voice said, "Barry Jerome Jansen?" "Speaking." "The newstaper?" "Right again. Who's this?" Jerryberry wondered if it was a crank call. The voice belonged on a bad actor playing the role of a tough. "It doesn't matter who I am. How would you like the address of the Permanent Floating Riot Club?" Jerryberry checked his first response, which would have been, "I'd love it." He said, "There isn't any such thing." That response was justified too. Nobody had ever proved the existence of a Permanent Floating Riot Gang. Every flash crowd attracted a certain proportion of looters. So what? But he flipped a switch to record the call. The voice had said Club, not Gang. "There is too," it said impatiently. "It's at 225 East Lindon, Topeka." "You're not trying to sell it?" "I'm giving it to you, baby. Did you get it? 225 East Lindon Drive, Topeka, Kansas." The caller hung up. Jerryberiy flopped back on the bed. He was tired. It could be a gag. Topeka, Kansas. Who would be telling Jerryberry Jansen about it? Jerryberry's beat was Los Angeles. Oh, well. He heaved himself upright and called the police. The Topeka police were spending all their time answering the phone. "We know," said Detective Sergeant Hirohito. "That's the same address he gave everyone. Thank you for calling; we're already on it." He hung up. "Another one. Los Angeles. He must have called every newscaster in the country." "God, I hope not, They won't all keep their mouths shut. We've got to have time to check this out." Hirohito drummed his fingers on the desk. "There's only one

way to get it. We'll have to put the whole area under riot control." "What? No. If it's a false alarm, we could get sued for obstructing business! There are a lot of mail order houses in the area, not to mention a messenger service-" "Calm down, Jack. Now we both know this is going to hit the news sooner or later, probably about now. What's going to happen then?" Jack Shorter grinned; "Sure. Flash crowd!" "It'll be the first time we ever put the riot control on before the riot started. The newstapers'll probably call it the Riot Club Riot." Most of the news programs reported the incident along with a bulletin from the Topeka Police Force. We have not yet had time to erect barricades, and the suspects could be armed. We strongly advise citizens to stay out of the affected area ... "They always say that," CBA's commentator, Wash Evans, told his audience. "But you never pay any attention. This time they mean it. There's no telling what kind of weaponry a Looters' Club might have picked up in the last ten years. We know they've raided a few sporting goods stores in there, and there have been a few shoot-outs. Do not go to see the riot. You get a better view on teevee." Nobody paid any attention. Central Riot Control. The theory was simple enough. You divided all of the municipal areas in' the United States into areas of approximately four blocks by four blocks. Outside the cities the areas were far bigger, the flash crowds far less likely. When a flash crowd gathered, there were switches at the police stations that would affect all of the displacement booths in one or more riot control areas. With riot control going, the booths in the area would not admit incoming passengers except from the police stations. They would send only to the huge Central Riot Control Building in Nebraska. The Permanent Floating Riot Club kept maps of most of the riot control areas in the country. There were tens of thousands of them, and they were stored in an expensive computer on the third floor of the Club. In simple curiosity, Benny had once looked up the area the Club itself was situated in. He had been amused to find that Lou Garcia-who lived three blocks away-was in the same riot control area. Lou may have done that deliberately. If the Club was ever put under Riot Control, he could simply stroll home. He was going to regret that bit of cleverness. Benny had not called every newscaster in the country. It would have taken too long. He had called about twenty of the most famous. Now he hung up and strolled out into the street. This area hadn't changed much over the past decade. In fact, that was true of most municipal areas. The new buildings were all going up in rural and desert areas, where men could work and live with more elbow room and prettier scenery than their city cousins, without sacrificing anything in the way of mobility. Here in the civic center the buildings just sat there growing older: brick and concrete darkening with smog, small buildings growing grimy. The people were generally older too. Benny had once noticed that you could tell a citizen's age further away than you could tell his sex, by the tenacity with which he hugged the sidewalk instead of strolling down the center of the street, or by whether he looked both ways for phantom cars before crossing. As he crossed an intersection Benny glimpsed the Club building three blocks down. Nothing happening there. And there were no barricades yet. But there were people leaving nearby booths, flicking in at a good rate, it seemed, and they all walked like young men. He entered Lou Garcia's apartment building and rang Garcia's bell in the lobby. It seemed pretty well foolproof at this stage. If Garcia wasn't home, then he was either at the Club or elsewhere. If lie was at the Club, they'd hold him. If he was somewhere else, he wouldn't be able to flick in. The cops must have put this area under riot control by now. In either case, Benny would have time to search his apartment. He had been in Garcia's apartment many times. There was a hall closet that Garcia always kept locked... "Yah?" The intercom. "Benny. Can I see you?" Hesitation. Then, "Sure. Come on up." The main door buzzed open. Well, he was home, and it was going to be a little sticky. It would still work out. Lou couldn't flick out now even if he got past Benny. Benny had a gun in his hand as the elevator opened. There was nobody in the hall. Benny walked down to Lou's door and rapped. "Just a minute," Lou Garcia sang out from inside. Benny's mind

flashed ahead. Suppose the money wasn't in Lou's apartment? Well, that would be that. But Garcia wouldn't keep the money in a bank. He wouldn't dare. And there was that permanently locked closet. And he'd always had the money available when needed. And...well, it was a gamble. He mumbled words under his breath, rehearsing what amounted to a speech. "Someone blew the whistle on us," he would say... "Someone gave the cops the Club address. I'll tell them it was you. Hell, they'll probably figure that out for themselves. You're the only one who had anything to gain. I'll tell them you were running off with the Club treasury. Yost can't flick out," he would say. "Half the Club must have been at the Bloomingdale's flash crowd when the riot control came on. They'll come trickling in looking for you. But if you give me half the treasury-" Better settle for a third. Damn, if Lou had been out he could have searched the apartment and had it all. He could still do that if he were to shoot Garcia. But he'd known Lou too long for that. "A third of the treasury, and we just wait till riot control goes off. Then we flick out in separate directions. Dial at random, settle wherever we land, live on the money the rest of our lives. Who could find us?" It was taking Garcia a long time. Benny kicked at the door. "Open up, Lou!" He kicked harder, and the door flew wide, and Benny ducked to the side just in case. No bullets. He went through fast, but nothing happened. Lou Garcia wasn't in sight. He wasn't in either bathroom. He wasn't in the kitchen or on the balcony. Benny tried the closets last. The one that had always been locked opened easily, and there was nothing inside at all. So. Lou had gotten out. (How? There was only the one door.) Which left Benny to search the apartment in peace. Unless Lou had taken the treasury... Benny peered over the balcony. Lou could have reached the street by now. . . but he wasn't in sight. He might have been hidden by the milling crowd below. The flash crowd was developing nicely. As Benny had expected, they had come flicking in from all over, arriving outside the affected riot control areas and strolling in to see the excitement. If the cops found Benny now, he'd claim he was one of them. He'd flicked in to watch the arrests. But the same went for Lou, unless Lou was carrying the treasury, in which case he might have some explaining to do. So. It might still be here. Benny started his search ... and stopped, bewildered. There were other peculiarities. Things missing. Like: the big reading chair was still here, and the heavy coffee table. But the little fold-up chairs and the water bed were gone, and the tall reading lamp ... Benny looked around, trying to puzzle it out. It was as if Lou were halfway through moving ... as if he had been taking only those things that would fit into a displacement booth. Benny saw it then, and he ran for the closet." The closet that had always been locked. A closet like a cylinder with a rounded top, the curve continued on the inside of the door. And nothing at all inside. It was a displacement booth. Benny started to laugh. Lou had thought of it first. He was planning to disappear with the treasury; but he didn't know the area was under riot control. Of course Benny could search the apartment anyway. But Lou wouldn't have left the money behind, not with Benny standing on the other side of the door. Benny set the gun down on the remaining table. Where he expected to be going, it was a danger to him. He stepped into the closet and closed the door. There was no dial in here. It must have a preset destination. Light flashed in his eyes, and the floor opened beneath him. Benny had been through this before. He took the fall like an amusement park ride, and stood up when it was over. Central Riot Control was crowded today. Citizens milled about the floor of the great bowl, making angry noises, hampered by the attempts of Club members to look inconspicuous among them. There were too many Club members and not enough citizens. It took Benny only a moment to find Lou. Lou was in a clump of people to one side of the big central platform where the cops waited. He was trying to hold onto a sizeable metal attaché case, and four members of the Permanent Floating Riot Club were trying to take it from him. The cops on the platform watched with interest. Benny sighed. It grieved him to see ten years of history ending. But he still had fifty percent of ten years earnings and it had been worth a try. The End

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