

The Millennium Party

Walter Jon Williams

Walter Jon Williams was born in Minnesota and now lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. His short fiction has appeared frequently in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, as well as in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Wheel of Fortune*, *Global Dispatches*, *Alternate Outlaws*, and in other markets, and has been gathered in the collections *Facets and Franksteins* and *Other Foreign Devils*. His novels include *Ambassador of Progress*, *Knight Moves*, *Hardwired*, *The Crown Jewels*, *Voice Of The Whirlwind*, *House Of Shards*, *Days of Atonement*, and *Aristoi*. His novel *Metropolitan* garnered wide critical acclaim in 1996 and was one of the most talked-about books of the year. His most recent books are a sequel to *Metropolitan*, *City on Fire*, a huge disaster thriller, *The Rift*, and a *Star Trek* novel, *Destiny's Way*. He won a long-overdue Nebula Award in 2001 for his story "Daddy's World." His stories have appeared in our Third through Sixth, Ninth, Eleventh, Twelfth, Fourteenth, and Seventeenth Annual Collections.

Here he gives us a short, sharp look at a future where there's a place for everything, and everything's in its place...

Darien was making another annotation to his lengthy commentary on the Tenjou Cycle when his Marshal reminded him that his wedding anniversary would soon be upon him. This was the thousandth anniversary—a full millennium with Clarisse!—and he knew the celebration would have to be a special one.

He finished his annotation and then de-slotted the savant brain that contained the cross-referenced database that allowed him to manage his work. In its place he slotted the brain labeled Clarisse/Passion, the brain that contained memories of his time with his wife. Not all memories, however: the contents had been carefully purged of any of the last thousand years' disagreements, arguments, disappointments, infidelities, and misconnections.... The memories were only those of love, ardor, obsession, passion, and release, all the most intense and glorious moments of their thousand years together, all the times when Darien was drunk on Clarisse, intoxicated with her scent, her brilliance, her wit.

The other moments, the less-than-perfect ones, he had stored elsewhere, in one brain or another, but he rarely reviewed them. Darien saw no reason why his mind should contain anything that was less than perfect.

Flushed with the sensations that now poured through his mind, overwhelmed by the delirium of love, Darien began to work on his present for his wife.

When the day came, Darien and Clarisse met in an environment that she had designed. This was an arrangement that had existed for centuries, ever since they both realized that Clarisse's sense of spacial relationships was better than his. The environment was a masterpiece, an apartment built on several levels, like little terraces, that broke the space up into smaller areas that created intimacy without sacrificing the sense of spaciousness. All of the furniture was designed for no more than two people. Darien recognized on the walls a picture he'd given Clarisse on her four hundredth birthday, an elaborate, antique dial telephone from their honeymoon apartment in Paris, and a Japanese paper doll of a woman in an antique kimono, a present he had given her early in their acquaintance, when they'd haunted antique stores together.

It was Darien's task to complete the arrangement. He added an abstract bronze sculpture of a horse and jockey that Clarisse had given him for his birthday, a puzzle made of wire and butter-smooth old wood, and a view from the terrace, a view of Rio de Janeiro at night. Because his sense of taste and smell were more subtle than Clarisse's, he by standing arrangement populated the apartment with scents, lilac for the

parlor, sweet magnolia and bracing cypress on the terrace, a combination of sandalwood and spice for the bedroom, and a mixture of vanilla and cardamom for the dining room, a scent subtle enough so that it wouldn't interfere with the meal.

When Clarisse entered he was dressed in a tail coat, white tie, waistcoat, and diamond studs. She had matched his period elan with a Worth gown of shining blue satin, tiny boots that buttoned up the ankles, and a dashing fall of silk about her throat. Her tawny hair was pinned up, inviting him to kiss the nape of her neck, an indulgence which he permitted himself almost immediately.

Darien seated Clarisse on the cushions and mixed cocktails. He asked her about her work: a duplicate of one of her brains was on the mission to 55 Cancri, sharing piloting missions with other duplicates: if a habitable planet was discovered, then a new Clarisse would be built on site to pioneer the new world.

Darien had created the meal in consultation with Clarisse's Marshal. They began with mussels steamed open in white wine and herbs, then went on to a salad of fennel, orange, and red cranberry. Next came roasted green beans served alongside a chicken cooked simply in the oven, flamed in cognac, then served in a creamy port wine reduction sauce. At the end was a raspberry Bavarian cream. Each dish was one that Darien had experienced at another time in his long life, considered perfect, stored in one brain or another, and now recreated down to the last scent and sensation.

After coffee and conversation on the terrace, Clarisse led Darien to the bedroom. He enjoyed kneeling at her feet and unlacing every single button of those damned Victorian boots. His heart brimmed with passion and lust, and he rose from his knees to embrace her. Wrapped in the sandalwood-scented silence of their suite, they feasted till dawn on one another's flesh.

Their life together, Darien reflected, was perfection itself: one enchanted jewel after another, hanging side-by-side on a thousand-year string.

After juice and shirred eggs in the morning, Darien kissed the inside of Clarisse's wrist, and saw her to the door. His brain had recorded every single rapturous instant of their time together.

And then, returning to his work, Darien de-slotted Clarisse/Passion, and put it on the shelf for another year.