

Science Fiction

Uncoupling

By Barry Malzberg


fictionwise *contemporary*

Uncoupling by Barry Malzberg



Fictionwise Publications

www.fictionwise.com

This ebook is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright ©1976 Barry Malzberg

First published by Pocket Books, 1976

NOTICE: This ebook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means to a person other than the original purchaser is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to fines and/or imprisonment. Fictionwise Publications offers a \$500 reward to anyone who provides information leading to the conviction of a person infringing on any Fictionwise ebook copyright.

COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

This ebook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.

I came to the Towers fuming. The walk across town had bent my breath, shaken the substance, broken the spirit (too often I tend to think in expletives, but pardon: it is an old trait), but the flesh unmortified quivered, reaching for its own purposes. At the unoccupied desk I stood there for a while, inhaling great mouthfuls of hydrogenated O₂ (one of the chief lures of the Towers is that it offers an atmosphere of pure oxygen, no small thing in these difficult, crumpling times) and screaming for service. "Come here!" I shouted to the gleaming walls, the spick-and-span corridors, the aerated passageways of the

fluorescenced. "I need attention. *Je bien attendu. Je desiree a fornication.*"

An attendant appeared, neutered in flowing robes. Everything in the Towers is done for effect; go one inch under the surface and the substance disappears. Nevertheless, one must persevere. The world is plastic. The world is corrupt. Still, in or out of it there is no alternative.

"*Je suis au pardonne, monsieur,*" the attendant said in execrable French. "*Je desire a' service mais je non comprendre votre desiree*"

"Speak English!" I snarled, hitting the counter, a tall, bitter man in my late thirties, the snakes of purpose wending their way through his shattered but wise features. (I often tend to depersonalize, sometimes lapsing even into the third person in my desperate attempts to scrape free of the trap of self: *au*

pardonniere.) "Speak English!" the tall, bitter man shouted, his voice echoing through the amplifiers in the walls of the Towers, and the attendant trembled, adjusted his/her robes more tightly about himself/herself.

"Yes," he/her said. "I am here to help you, all of us are here to help you, but you must understand, you must simply understand that in order to achieve you must modulate ... "

"I will not modulate!" I screamed, slamming a bitter fist into the gleaming and refractive surfaces of the desk '. "There is no need for modulation. I am entitled to service, service and understanding—don't you clowns understand this?—and furthermore," I added more quietly as several threatening robot policemen, noiseless on their canisters, glided into the reception area holding cans of Mace at ready, "anyway," I whispered to the attendant, the gentlest and most winsome of expressions

chasing all the snakes from the panels of the features, "this is one of my prescribed days for heterosex and I want to make the most of it. Time is money, after all, money is the barter of existence and without time and money where would any of us be? I wish to engage in normative heterosex during this, my relaxative period." I perched an elbow on the desk, turned a non-threatening blink upon the attendant. "Pardon me for my haste," I added, "*pardonniere moi au mon haste, je suis so needful.*"

The attendant foraged under the desk, produced a standard application form, passed it across to me. The robot policemen chattered to one another, their tentacles flicking in a consultative manner, and then as noiselessly as they emerged, withdrew, leaving the reception area blank and impermeable once again. I respect the means by which they maintain security

here. Really, the Towers is in a difficult position, catering as it must to the full range of human desire and perversity, and if I were administering it, which I happily do not (the Government itself administers everything nowadays; the projections of the mid-1900s were absolutely correct), I would be even more forceful than they. People must learn to accept their condition. People must realize that in a world of poison, overpopulation and enormous international tensions, where five people occupy the space biology would have reserved for only one, tensions accumulate and the only way that the world can be prevented 'from complete destruction is a firm administrative hand at the top. People must fall into place. (I wrote my thesis on neo-Fascism and have in my cubicle a handy collection of whips' that I am apt at jocular moments to lay merrily about myself and all visitors.)

“Fill out this form, sir,” the attendant said to the tall, bitter fascist standing at the desk, “name, address, locality zone, authorization, desire and credit voucher.” It gestured behind itself meaningfully to a small machine perched on a lower shelf. “We will then feed the application through into the bank and everything checking out satisfactorily . . .” It paused, cocked an eyebrow, looking surprisingly desirous in its pale, pink robes, its catatonic lack of affect, “*Je suis attendre,*” it said.

Hastily I filled out the form: name (irrelevant), age (I have already conceded this), housing (lower domicile in the Blood District), authorization (Condition F-51: Perversities and heterosex) and desire (fornicative). Credit information entered in. I passed the form hurriedly to the attendant, feeling the swift, cool slash of its fingers as it appropriated the form, sending renewed surges of desire through me. “I wonder,” I

said, leaning across the counter, "I wonder if you yourself might well be ... uh ... "

That is impossible, sir," the attendant said. A modest blush seemed to steal over its features much as embitterment is known to tear over mine. "We are not available for any purpose other than reception, and in any case, you are here seeking heterosex; is that not correct?"

"That has nothing to do with it," the man said in a keening shriek, once again causing the canisters of invisible robot policemen to brush against the floor, "that has absolutely nothing to do with it, and furthermore ... "

"Je suis ne heterosex pas," the attendant said and turned, fed the application into the machine that seized it angrily, yanking off strips of paper as it ingested. *"Je suis neuter and therefore would not be satisfactory for your requirements."*

“You do not understand,” the man said. “In the Blood District we do not, we absolutely do not, put up with insubordination from functionaries.” He put his hand against the concealed weapon at his belt. “It is insufferable for you to address me in this way ”

Abruptly I stopped. The robot policemen were back in full force and also the lights in the Towers were beating now like little hearts: *wicker, wicker*, sending darts of greenish sensation into the deeper centers of the cerebrum. Abruptly I understood everything. Deprivation of heterosex in my program leads to an accumulation of tension: disassociation reaction, abusiveness to attendants, flickers of bad French. Disturbances of vision. Abrupt dissociation reaction, lapses into the third person. Understanding this, I felt a perilous calm being restored and was able to look at the attendant with neither fear nor desire. “*Je votre au*

pardonne," the bitter man said to the attendant, "*je suis tres excite.*"

"*Est rien, est maintenant rien,*" the attendant said, making a signal to the robot policemen. They had closed in on me during this latest insight and were now, twenty or fifty of them in their Government Issue and insigniaed uniforms, staring balefully. The nearest of them, apparently a supervisor, clapped its tungsten club from hand to hand meaningfully and turned its circuits to orange.

"*Est rien,*" I said and reached a hand toward the supervisor, a hand of comity and understanding. I have always believed that man and machine can co-exist in a technocracy. My fascism has a certain overlay of perversity, but that perversity has never included fear or loathing toward machines. I get along with

machines very well. Without them the world would have fallen into the sea long ago. Control. Absolute control.

"Est rien," the supervisor said in a metallic gurgle, and, retracting its club, spun away. Tentacles waved. The troops, having finished their consultation once again, disappeared. I shuddered with relaxation, realizing that my clothes were drenched and warned myself to bring no further disgrace. There are no tolerance levels for scenes in this world. Confrontation must be avoided at all costs. The world is five times overpopulated.

"You are adjudged competent for heterosex," the attendant said. The rosy blush had returned; now it seemed heightened and darkened by some information it had picked up on my printout, which was still whirring slyly out of the machine. All of my horrid little secrets being displayed to the attendant, but

who am I to, complain? With my newfound grip on sanity I smiled back implacably, imagining a daffodil in one corner of my jacket from which I might take absent sniffs. "According to the information you have not had heterosex for two months and therefore may engage in it freely. Your credit rating is also satisfactory."

Two months. Two months! Understanding lying under me like a gray pool filled with the winking fish of knowledge, I plunged into that pool wholeheartedly, splashing around, spouting little sprays of abysmal French while I did so. Two months without heterosex! No wonder the disassociation reaction was so advanced; no wonder that not once, but twice, I had caused the robot-policemen to be summoned. "Two months!" I said. "But under the medical profile entered in my twenty-third year I am to engage in heterosex once a month. Once every month.

Recherche du las temps perdu. I must have forgotten to make my obligatory last month. Of course," I confided to the attendant, "I have been terribly busy." This happens to be absolutely true. I have been engaged in a massive research project on the induction of pain and my concentration has been fervid. Even food and drink evade me when I get deeply into a project.

"You must have forgotten," the attendant agreed. Its eyes became wistful as it put the printout into the shredder and reluctantly demolished it. "But that's perfectly all right now. The Towers are here to serve you. Your Government is here to serve you. You will be well taken care of."

The tall man turned from the counter and found himself in the grip of another attendant, a somewhat burlier one who put two

incisive fingers into a forearm. "Just go along," the attendant at the desk said, "and you will be *bien service, je vous assure.*"

"Certainly," the tall man said, feeling his balance momentarily flicker as the burly attendant made a seizing jerk, then readjusting himself to new sights, new sounds as he was carried beyond the swinging gates of the rear and into the deeper mysteries of the Towers. "This must be a very dull job for you," he said to the attendant, "conveying people from the reception desk into the fornication rooms. Undoubtedly you must feel some resentment, too, no? To realize that these people are engaging almost routinely in acts that are permanently denied to you must be quite painful, and, also, your job must be quite delimited. But I don't mean to pry," the man finished, "I don't mean to pry."

“Forget it,” the attendant said, “my speech organs are engaged only for simple commands.” And it carried me deeper into the corridors and hallways of the Towers: now I could see the various rooms on my right and left moving deeper into the Towers, the doors of the rooms open (why not? who would interfere?) in which however dimly I could see forms struggling, some in pairs, others in multiples, elaborate equipment, gleaming utensils, the cries and unwinding shrieks of copulation. Carried ever further I went past the section marked SADOMASOCHISM into a somewhat lighter area stamped BESTIALITY in flickering letters, from which now and then from the doors (closed this time: certain things must be forever sacrosanct) I could hear vagrant moos and cackles, crow cries and the barking of dogs, squealing of pigs and the sound of milk cans toppling. Out of bestiality then and into an aseptic corridor

in which the word Homosex had been embroidered in swinging tapestry that hung in strands from the ceiling', the attendant's grip ever more devastating on my arm and well it might be since the tall man found his legs beginning to give out from the excitement of this journey, his needful persuasion, his extreme disassociation, and needed all the help that he could get from the attendant in order to make his rapid, scuttling journey. They always rush one through the Towers, but this is to be expected; the Government has many things on its mind and schedules must be obeyed. Finally, the tall man found himself, gasping, and with a bad, purpling bruise on his left forearm, in the section marked HETEROSEX, the doors once again open, a clean, light, bright area much like coming into the concentration camp must have been like after a long, difficult train journey, and there the burly attendant pushed me into a tiny room where

a female sat waiting, her hands clasped and folded, quite naked as well the tall man noticed, since by this time he had obtained a stunning tumescence. These kinds of things will happen under panic and stress; one must accept them.

"You have five minutes," the attendant said and went to the door, folded its arms, turned its back. From the rear I could see the small, deadly extrudance of wires coming from the black hair and realized that it was a robot. Of course. Inevitably, the pressure of work and inventory would cause the Towers to convert, but I had hoped (nostalgically, of course) that somehow this would not happen in my time. "Five minutes," the robot said, "is all that you are permitted on your allotment."

"That's ridiculous," the tall man said, already springing out of his clothing, exposing his limbs lustrous and well oiled to the heavy, penetrating light, "I've always been authorized for ten."

"New conditions," the attendant said. The wires seemed to glow beneath the hair, turning orange. "If you don't like it," it said, "you're free to terminate now."

"Oh, no," the tall man said, "oh, no, no, no" And naked, he turned to the female, extending his arms, walking toward her with some difficulty. "Do you speak?" he said.

"Non."

"You should speak," the tall man said. "You always have spoken in the past; I mean, it isn't much to ask, just a few words here or there "

"You are no longer permitted communication," the attendant said. The tall man looked at the female as if in sad confirmation of this and slowly, bleakly, the female nodded. Pain appeared in her eyes and then disappeared. She rose, extended her own

arms. Impassively, one time, she gestured and the tall man came against her.

Hump and jump. Huff and puff. Knead and seed. Pump and rump. The less said about all of this the better, pornographic fantasia was outlawed by the magnificent act of 2010, and I am no one to dispute the Governmental wisdom. Also, about this part there is very little to say. It is a sameness, a grinding grayness under the lights, but the Government has deemed it necessary on an individually analyzed personality profile, and I am not going to dispute the Government in that area, either. I will not dispute the Government in any area. The less said about all of this the better, then, other than to point out that the disassociation reaction ceased at once and I no longer had the desire to speak French. Not even two particles of that miserable

language—the language of love they call it remained within me when I was done.

I got off the female slowly and donned my garments. From her position on the floor she regarded me with an admiration that might have been boredom, a boredom that might have been sympathy. "*Je suis satisfée,*" she said.

"Forget that," I said, "I don't want to hear any of that now." Dressed, I went to the attendant, who took my hand once again in that seizing grip. "Must you do that?" I said to him.

"I'm afraid that it must," it said almost regretfully. "Clientele must be escorted."

"I would follow you on my own."

"I know you would follow me on your own," the attendant said, "but according to your profile the infliction of brutality is part of the general satisfaction here. Don't talk to me any

further; I told you that I was not programmed." It seized me once again in that terrible grip and led me through the hallway.

A different route this time. HETEROSEX gave way to NECROPHILIA, a solemn, rather funereal area in which the doors were secured by gravestones on which, like graffiti, epitaphs had been ascribed; past NECROPHILIA it was MASTURBATION, an area not composed like the others of separate rooms but rather a communal, almost dormitory kind of arrangement in which the clientele lay in rows stretched on cots, regarding obscenities and photographs projected on the ceiling and did what they must, depressively; past masturbation was ASEPSIS, and here, in the most solemn area of all,, men in rumpled or flowing priestly garb passed among the benches in what was a hastily reconstructed synagogue, passing out small words of cheer and advice to the penitents who, clamped on the benches, gripped

themselves and studied the simulated stained glass. There is no end to the range of the Towers. At last, back again to the reception area where the supervisor of the robot policemen (I was able to recognize him by the shape of his tentacles) was engaged in absent banter and joshing with the reception attendant.

“He's here,” the burly attendant said and released me from his grip. Abruptly I collapsed, a spreading bruise like a stain lurching across my forearm, sending enormous shooting pains into the scalp. I hit the floor and it must have been the shock of this that revived me, but when I returned to consciousness the burly attendant was alone, the robot policemen standing over with a look of concern.

“Are you all right?” it said.

"I am quite all right," I said with dignity and slowly picked myself off the floor, wiping little scabs of dirt and excrement (the Towers is all front, the actual maintenance of the area quite poor) from my clothing. "I had a minor fall."

"If you do not leave at once," the supervisor said intensely, "it will be necessary to arrest you."

"I'm quite aware of that," I said. Residence in the Towers beyond immediate utility is impermissible, of course. Everyone knows that. The world is five times overpopulated and if people who used the Towers did not leave promptly, where, I would like to know, where would we all be? Cooperation is the key to survival in the technocracy; we are a species who must cooperate or die, and I am quite willing to fulfill my obligations. "I'm going to leave," I said, drawing my clothing around me and

summoning dignity like a little nimbus over my head, "just as soon as I have recovered my breath."

"Would you like to program in another appointment now?" the attendant said. It winked at me encouragingly. Always, underneath this efficiency, is a hint of scatology, lure of the deeps, and if someone tells you that this is not one of the basic appeals of the Towers he is crazy. Crazy! "You are entitled to one extra appointment because of, your, ah, deprivation."

"That is not necessary," I said. The robot policeman gave me suddenly a stunning blow on the head; then as I wavered to the floor, it held me up and looked at me intensely. "You were ordered to leave," it said.

"This is ridiculous. I am a citizen; you are simply machinery and I cannot be dominated."

"I think we'll have to get rid of him," the policeman said to the attendant, and slowly, sadly, the neuter gave a nod of agreement. Once again I felt myself seized with enormous, clutching force and was conveyed through all the spaces of the reception room toward an exit hatch. "This is disgraceful," I burred. "You can't do this to me.

"Yes we can," said the policeman, "*oui, nous avons le autoritee.*" And then I was shoved through the hatch. I landed street-side, gasping, a drop of only three feet to the rubberized conveyor, but still, in my rather damaged condition, rather shocking. Citizens looked at me quickly, appraisingly, and then their eyes turned inward toward private considerations, the conveyor belt whisking all of us along in silence. In a world five times overpopulated it is necessary to function personally only in terms of one's amity group and never elsewhere. The Towers,

for example, would be completely impossible if clients were to essay personal relationships with that personnel.

The conveyor carried me swiftly through Wilbur, past Marseilles and into the Blood District. Even after so short and dramatic an absence, it was good to see the familiar outlines of the slaughtering houses appear on the horizon, see the guillotines and little nooses on the tracts, hear the screams, sniff the odors from the abattoirs. At my own slot I stepped off the conveyor belt quickly, feeling my detumescence swinging within my garments like a credit voucher in the pocket: ease, power. I adjusted myself to the slot and carried myself in, then up ninety-six levels and into my own humble quarters, which now, since I have been so absorbed in the research project, look something like an abattoir themselves. It was good to be home. It is always good to be home. I loosened my garments,

examined myself for scars from burns or inference, syphilitic infestation (this is impossible, but I am in many ways an obsessive, compulsive), gonococcal traces, sighed and sat on my one chair, feeling little puffs of dust whisk up around me. I inhaled them, at peace for the first time in many days, the pressures of heterosex deprivation removed. Then I noticed that sitting in the room across from me, half-hidden in the dimness, shielded by the light of the window was the female with whom I had fornicated at the Towers some forty-five minutes before.

I was not shocked. This kind of thing happens quite often. It has never happened to me, but I was prepared. Sometimes these employees, depressed and made unhappy by the rather turgid and ritualistic nature of their employment, will sneak out of the Towers and follow clients home, attempting to establish

some kind of relationship. There is only one thing to do, of course. I would want it done for me. It is in their best interests.

"Please," she said, "listen to me. *Je vous attendre, vous je attendre.*"

"Impossible," I said, "I'm no longer interested in French. It only happens when I'm neurasthenic."

"You must listen to me," she said intensely, "we can't go on this way. We must truly communicate and get to know one another."

I already had the communicator in operation. She stopped, looked at me bleakly. I hit the buttons for the Towers and the robot supervisor who I already knew so well appeared on the screen, and recognized me. "Yes?" he said impassively. I will give them much credit. There is nothing personal in their

machinery; they simply do what must be done. As should we all. It is possible to envy the machines, to aspire to their condition.

I stepped away from the screen, allowed the policeman to see the female behind me. "You see what's happened?" I said.

"Yes."

"I refuse to speak with her and I am cooperating."

"Yes," the policeman said. Even in the monochrome viewer I could see the little green light of approval coming from its eyes. "We will have personnel there within fifteen seconds to affect re-entry."

It killed the televiewer. I turned back toward the female. With retrieval coming there was no longer need to fear her. "We must feel." she said. "We must be humans. We must share our common humanity. *Vous et moi, nous etes humanite.*"

I shrugged. The door, which I never lock (there is safety in accessibility), opened and the burly attendant came in. He must have followed me home. This is standard procedure to make sure that Towers attendance does not result in abnormal excitation. There have been occasional massacres; now the attendant's pursuit is mandatory. "You," he said to the female, "come here."

He went to her, took her by the arm. I knew that grip. It caused me, against my will, to smile. She saw the smile, looked up at me, her eyes already beginning to dull. "You don't understand," she said as the attendant took her out.

But I did.

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this story by going back to your bookshelf: [Click Here](#)