

## §7.11 “Norbert and the System,” by Timons Esaias

Her skirt had a stylish cut; the boots accented the shapeliness of her legs; and hers social beacon, cunningly mounted above her left ear, was flashing green. Norbert, instantly taken by her graceful yet careless walk, summoned his analysis program for her personality profile and a suitable introductory line. But while he waited for the printout to flash on his lens, she stepped up onto a passing trolley-shuttle - and the moment was lost.

When the display arrived he angrily subaudibly to his Personal System, 'A fine lot of good it does me now!'

'Do you want an identity search for her address and access code?' his PS inquired.

'No, I do not. Clear.' His lens screen returned to the basic display. Still seething, he demanded, 'How long did you take to process my request?'

'Three seconds, request and display inclusive.'

It won't do, he thought. How could he ever get a girl with a time-lag like that? His shyness might be a factor, but Personal Systems are supposed to make up for that.

He needed to invest in some new equipment.

While the kitchsys made his dinner, he sprawled in the bedchair and summoned the showroom program. A list of Personal Systems in his price range crawled down his left lens, while his right displayed an index of nearly 1,000 second-level options.

'Civilization can be tedious at times,' he remarked.

Judging his tone as dissatisfaction, the General System brought up a salesperson. 'Good day, Shopper Kamdar! How may we assist you?'

Norbert explained his problem.

'Ah, yes. We've had a lot of replacement orders from shoppers with the 1200 series. Time marches on! Ha, ha!' The salesperson simulation paused for a change of mood, 'Frankly, an eligible bachelor like yourself shouldn't have to ask his PS to assess a young lady. A modern System would have started on it the second your cortex responded to her positive features. You should have had the output before the hormones hit.'

Letting that message sink in, the salesrepresentation got down to cases. 'How much surgical adjustment are you willing to tolerate? ... Ah! Well, then, I would suggest the latest thing out of Gabon, the 15B Jizmet. It's powerful, but economical, and most of the hardware is rib-mounted. It takes ten ribs on a male your size, but that means three pounds less on the head mounting you already have with the 1200! Could I consult your mounting diagram? ...Yes, I see you already have four ribs converted, that'll save on installation ...'

'Gabonese?' Norbert interrupted. 'What's their track-record?'

Instantly a series of charts and tables came up on his left lens. Then his right lens scrolled a list of sports personalities currently using Gabonese Systems: heavy on defensive backs and third basemen. Quick response time.

'They're fairly new in the market, but quite reliable. They have to be to be licensed by our Administration. Do you have a particular concern?' The rep

struck just the right note of reassurance and mild contempt.

`Actually, I was just wondering how you turn it off.' Norbert chuckled awkwardly. Come to think of it, how did you turn off the System he had?

The salesrep paused for some quick processing. 'Off?' it asked with a tilt of its head.

`Yeah, you know, if it malfunctioned. An over-ride command, or an off switch. Whatever.' Norbert tried to act in control, even though he knew that a sophisticated show-room program like this could detect his insecurity in a millisecond. That's why he rarely shopped. The salesreps reminded him of all his inadequacies, without even trying.

`An off switch? Frankly, I've never heard of such ...' There was clearly a reset. `I do see your point, Shopper Kamdar. One does not have an off switch, however, because the failure rate for PSs is vastly lower than that for people on their own, not that there are people without Systems any more!' A statistical comparison of deaths by malfunction as opposed to expected deaths without Personal Systems flashed on his lens. `As you see, if one could shut the PS off it would put the owner at increased risk. It would be gross negligence on our part to allow that.'

`That makes sense,' Norbert admitted, getting out of his stupid question as gracefully as possible.

Norbert dropped into the hospital that Saturday to have his new PS installed. The waiting room bored him- everyone in it being loaded with anti-anxiety shots by their PSs- so he called up the latest flick. He hadn't even seen the opening titles before his message light blinked: would he please go to Room 45921?

Room 45921 was in the Counselling Section, which seemed odd. He hadn't needed counselling for the last PS. Odder still, the counsellor appeared in person, not just represented through the GS. A short, round European of some sort with an old-style half-helmet covering the back of his skull. What could a guy with an archaic set-up like that tell him about a PS?

`Shopper Kamdar, Norbert Kamdar! Sit down, sit down!' The man's jovial manner surprised Norbert. Counsellors were usually so downbeat and concerned. `Just a few questions before we do the installation.'

'Is there a problem?' Norbert hated problems, and he already sensed his PS generating soothing currents in his shoulder muscles.

'We don't think so. We just want to make sure that you're getting the right product.'

'I don't think I can afford to go up much further,' Norbert objected, calling up his spread-sheets.

'I see that,' the counsellor agreed. He scanned something on his lens. 'Actually, I'm looking into your concern about System safety. This very original remark you made about an "off switch," to be precise.'

Norbert tried, and failed, to suppress a wince. 'The showroom explained that to me. I don't really know what made me think of that. Probably something about Africans and that dam that collapsed.'

The counsellor paused for an update. 'Ah, in Egypt. Yes. That was

probably it.'

'I really want this System,' Norbert pointed out.

'Of course. Your PS doesn't report any unusual nightmares or anxiety problems. Is that correct?'

How did they get that data from the GS? It must be in the installation contract. Norbert agreed with the assessment. All he dreamed about were the beautiful, interesting women he never seemed to attract.

The counsellor went on in the careful tone of a prepared speech, 'Shopper Kamdar, as you know, your Personal System is carefully designed to protect you from health hazards both internal and external. Your heart, lungs, brain, liver and other organs are constantly monitored for any sign of trouble. Your enzymes and hormones are adjusted for maximum health and efficiency, and your caloric intake is restricted, if necessary, by the kitchsys interface to assure proper nutrition.'

'Quite. Counsellor, I ...'

'But that's just part of it. Your PS is constantly updated with weather, traffic, fire, and hazard conditions which could threaten your safety. You've heard of crime in the history films, haven't you? Crime posed a significant threat to physical, financial and emotional well-being in former times, but our Personal Systems and the General System just don't allow it now. I'm sure you agree that this is all for the good.'

'Yes, I do.'

'Then why would you want to turn a PS off? If you were injured, it couldn't bring assistance. If people could turn their Systems off, we could have crime again! Do you want that?' The man leaned forward in an authoritative pose, which seemed too artificial. He really needed to update his software.

'No. Of course not. What I want is my new System.'

The Counsellor pointed his gnarled finger at Norbert. 'But are you satisfied that the System is safe? We're not going to have you bringing up this switch business after the installation, are we?'

'No, Counsellor. I'm sorry I ever mentioned it.'

'All right, then.'

The guys from work dropped by to admire his new set-up. They group-viewed the latest Victoria's Secret ads, and compared baseball statistics software. Norbert found that he entertained more cleverly with the new System, and the gang stayed more than an hour before they excused themselves. A record. And he earned a party invitation, his first in weeks.

But one guy from Engineering, Howardi, stayed behind. Howardi designed bureaucracy networks, and knew people who ran things. Talking with him always reminded Norbert of the gangsters in the oldies. He always had the inside dope on everything.

'So, Norb, I got something about you on the GS the other day. Strictly upstairs stuff, but flagged to my attention. What's this about over-riding your PS?' Howardi swirled his drink in the manner management Systems tended to suggest.

Norbert's System blocked any hesitation more smoothly than he'd ever

experienced before. 'Oh, that! It was a silly question I asked the showroom. I don't follow hardware much, so a really dumb idea leaked out. My old PS just didn't catch it.' Why would Howardi have been flagged for this? What had he stumbled into?

'Yeah, I've had some funny ideas in my time,' Howardi admitted. 'I've missed a warning message a time or two, as well. Embarrassing.'

NOD SAGELY. Norbert nodded, though he couldn't remember ignoring a warning message in his whole life.

'You're probably wondering what the fuss is about, right? I think you may have proposed the heresy of our time! And you thought you were just a regular guy! But seriously, Norb, the PS is the cornerstone of our material culture. When the archaeology teams dig us up it's going to be our defining element, the "PS People" or something. So questioning the PS would be like an ancient Greek questioning pottery or amphorae or some thing.' He contemplated his drink before swallowing the last.

Norbert's new System flagged him: SEE PYTHAGORAS. SEE DIOGENES.

'I sure didn't mean anything by it, Howie.' Norbert said in his best subdued voice. 'They straightened me out at the hospital before it went in.'

'Well, that's good.' Howardi got up to go. 'Don't get all subversive on us, eh, Norb?'

The party wasn't bad, and he even managed to get two dates in the weeks following his new installation. The first date ended early, because she suddenly remembered that her hair needed washing.

The second girl was political. She wanted to spend the evening sitting on the benches in a public lounge area, reading political bulletin boards together.

Norbert had never kept up with politics, and didn't read the bulletin boards much. He had only posted an opinion once in his life, back when the Colts were trying to get the franchise law changed so they could get out of Key West. An evening lounging around sharing reactions wasn't what he had had in mind, but if that's what Vodkette wanted, that's what he'd put up with.

They picked the Tribune board, very mainstream, and filled with the usual drivel. Norbert kept his remarks fairly tame, so as not to offend, but he had his PS check the background of the bulletin board contributors. The readouts indicated that every political opinion originated in an expected financial benefit for the shopper who posted it. 'I bet almost every opinion on this board is directly linked to the financial gain of the shopper who posted it,' Norbert observed in a moment of wild abandon.

'Really!' exclaimed a startled Vodkette. Norbert suddenly remembered that she had done studies in social theory, and that he had probably put his foot in it. He quickly flashed her the background data his PS had been finding on each posting.

While she was looking it over, Norbert's System signalled a startling development: an arousal spike in the young lady, corresponding to his political observation. What had he done?

She smiled. `What made you check that out?' she asked.

'I dunno. It's like at work, I guess. If you're on the way up, you side with management. If you're up for retraining, you hate the place. Opinions are all rather predictable.' His System red-flagged his comments: SOCIALLY RISKY.

'But her arousal level spiked again, and plateaued higher than Norbert had ever encountered on a date. He ran a quick diagnostic, just to be sure.

She arched a sceptical eyebrow, which just showed above her lenses. 'And I suppose you have some unpredictable opinions?'

'Oh, I dunno. I dunno,' he stalled, desperately trying to subvocalize a search order for his wildest opinion.

His PS was way ahead of him. Before he could phrase the command, he was looking at a list of his five most original opinions, and their deviation value. Two of them were just errors of fact on his part (his old System hadn't caught them in time), and two more varied less than .45 from the norm. But at the top of the list stood an idea with a colossal deviation.

He swallowed. He took a chance. `I've often thought that we ought to be able to switch off our PS. I've never heard anybody say that, and some people get on my case if I mention it.'

She sat there stunned. His System told him that her System was going crazy refuting this remark. But her arousal level doubled.

Her personal distance markers dropped to zero, and her health history became available to his System for review. Norbert never looked back.

When Norbert returned to his rooms that night he couldn't believe a number of things about the date. That she had liked him. That he had had a good time. That he had brought up the off switch idea. That he had, against the advice of his System, allowed her to talk him into posting it for all to see.

His PS seemed insistent that he should examine the replies already coming in, and that he should prepare to deal with repercussions. It certainly was a fine new System, with much more foresight than the 1200; and it didn't rely so much on that nagging voice in the ear.

But Norbert didn't want to think about politics and opinions tonight. He wanted to think about Vodkette, about her responses, about her shape, about the delicious way her rib-mount curved into the swell of her breast. And that is what he thought about until the System put him to sleep.

He awoke to find himself a famous revolutionary.

His System was so backlogged with urgent messages that he had to cancel work for the day. Norbert had never cancelled work before, but his System revealed that he was fully within his rights to do so.

There were thousands of responses to his political posting. Thousands. 16% were completely irrelevant; 11% confused; 61% irately opposed; 2% concerned about his mental health. But 8.63% agreed. Hundreds of shoppers had taken time out to make a point of agreeing with Norbert.

The feeling it gave him was so overwhelmingly wonderful that his PS had to intervene chemically.

After breakfast and coffee, he looked at the urgent message traffic.

The counsellor at the installation hospital wanted him to come in for an appointment. The precinct bureaucrat urgently demanded a meeting. It looked ominous, and his bloodstream soon filled with anti-anxiety formulations. There were some dozen threats from angry fellow-shoppers. He had to have his PS explain some of the epithets.

He had been in trouble with Authority before, but no one had ever bothered to send him hate messages.

The most surprising thing was the long, long list of paying messages. Like other shoppers he made a few bucks each month scanning the advertisements offered to him, but it rarely seemed worth the money to sit through more than a few. Besides, the ads were so convincing that you usually bought the product, so what good was it?

But these messages had respectable fees. A long list of lawyers, publicists, writers and interviewers clamoured for his business or co-operation. He spent most of the morning scanning their pitches, and in just three hours earned ten months' salary. Norbert had the uneasy feeling that he might soon need the cash.

After lunch, Norbert screwed up his courage and called the counsellor - the counsellor whom he had assured that the off switch would never be mentioned again. The counsellor's phone-male smiled and redirected his call to another office. A very slick managementwoman greeted him with effusive warmth.

'Shopper Kamdar! How good of you to return our message! Let me assure you that we will reimburse you for this call. Say five hundred dollars a minute?' Her pose suggested a willingness to pay more.

'Ah, sure. But I was supposed to talk to Counselling.' Norbert suspected a run-around of some kind.

'Yes, well, we're sorry about that. A lot has changed since we sent that message. You may find this hard to believe, but we've been swamped with calls from shoppers just dying to know what PS you're currently using. You've probably experienced a touch of celebrity yourself since yesterday?'

'Yes, er. Yes, I have.' What were they up to?

'Well, as a political celebrity you're entitled to realize the rewards of your position. We'd like to offer you an eight per cent commission on all the Jizmet I5S we sell in the next six months, if you'll let us release your System information to the public. We'd gladly raise that to twenty-five per cent if you could find the time to tape an endorsement.'

'Why that'd be just ... Excuse me.' His PS urgently flashed: GET AN AGENT across both lenses, as well as a prioritized list of those whose messages had been received that morning. 'Sorry, but all this is a little sudden,' he dutifully read from his optiprompter. 'I'm sure something can be worked out. My lawyer will call to work out the details.'

Just the briefest moue of disappointment was replaced by a broad smile of pleasure. She changed the subject. 'We did notice one thing about your System that needs correction, and we'll gladly return half of the installation fee to cover your trouble. Ha, ha! The boys in the show-room sadly mis-read your

character profile, I'm afraid. No one knew you were such an original, forceful young man. We've been hiding our light a bit, haven't we?

'Well, perhaps a little ...'

`So pardon us but we need to give you a more sophisticated repartee package, and damp down some of those annoying inhibition messages that less forthright individuals require. We can do that by remote, if you'll okay it.

'Sure. I guess.'

`Fine, then. And again our apologies.' She hesitated. `I nearly forgot. The factory is designing that off switch you wanted as an option. We'll let you have an exclusive on that for sixty days, if you'll allow us to use you to market it afterwards. Good shopping!'

'His PS-chosen lawyer was on his lens before her smile had even begun to fade out.

While his new agent worked out his contracts, Norbert entered further uncharted territory. He informed his employer that he just wouldn't be able to show up for the next two months, maybe longer. (To his surprise, they were understanding and willing to accommodate.) Then he began a careful screening of the social messages on the queue. Dozens of women had sent paying offers of their company. Only a few of them were professional escorts, the majority were single women with a taste for adventure; and adventure, in this case, meant Norbert!

His PS took a decidedly worldly approach to the situation, which told Norbert that the new software had already been transferred from the company. Norbert felt enormous gratitude to them for this new life. He would gladly endorse the Jizmet line. It was a fine product.

The interview programme would probably be Norbert's finest hour, if he didn't mess up. His PS, armed with a special celebrity-interview package, had been coaching him for days. They had practiced a dozen different gemphrases, the kind that get millions of replay requests, and all the royalties that go with it.

Their chief problem had been justifying his iconoclastic action. Norbert's vagueness on politics and philosophy kept showing through, and he wasn't pig-headed enough to carry it off on emotional insistence alone. So they ended up with a consistently ambiguous set of prepared tactical responses, and a persistent uneasiness in the pit of Norbert's soul.

The presence of a live audience threw him. Forty people had paid large sums, of which he got twelve per cent, to view the taping session in person. Norbert couldn't remember ever having been in one place with that many people in his life. His PS confirmed it; he never had.

The repetitious takes also bothered him. Most shoppers assumed that these programmes were taped in one seamless session. Actually, the interviewer asked the same questions over and over in different tones and moods, in order to elicit a variety of responses. Editing would patch them together later.

`Is it true that you get the famous off switch installed tomorrow?' -Yes

'What do you intend to do with your switch once you have it?' - I

should think that was obvious . .

`How long do you intend to leave your PS off?' - I'll have to see .

'What about crime, Shopper? What's to assure other ' shoppers that you won't go on a, what did they call it, skree?' - Spree. Perhaps you should invest in a Jizmet yourself. (PAUSE FOR STUDIO LAUGHTER, IF ANY) No, the switch is being installed under the condition that the GS can over-ride if any shopper's System detects me in criminal activity. I will have the power to try to commit a crime, just not the power to succeed...

` Why did you want an off switch in the first place?' - It was just an excruciatingly original idea I had. (SMILE IN SELF-DEPRECATING FASHION) ...

` Why do you think the shoppers of this world need these switches?' - I didn't say that other shoppers need them. I did say that the option should be available ..

`But really, what purpose does an off switch serve? What good is a PS that's not in use?' - The purpose of the off switch is to turn the PS off. A shut-down PS serves no purpose but the purpose of waiting to serve. (DON'T USE THIS IF YOU THINK YOU'LL GARBLE IT) ...

But, Shopper Kamdar, I really don't think you've answered the question. by put such a dangerous power in the hands of mere mortals?'

`For the tenth time . .' Norbert caught himself, and tried to read his prompt. But the answers didn't mean anything to him, and he was angry and afraid. He ignored the prompt. `Because I'm a human and my PS is just a tool, and it's not right . .' and he slumped in his chair, suddenly unable to speak at all -- which his PS had decided was the best thing for everybody.

The published version, which omitted the slumping at the end, soared up the charts. The commentator explained, And so, like Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, Norbert Kamdar insists that it all comes down to "who is to be the master," and that's

In the end Norbert never spent a dime on legal fees. The Shoppers' Defence Fund gladly staved off all the challenges from the bureaucrats and Jizmet's competitors. The courts managed to tie up installation of the switch for an entire month, but the publicity kept the interview selling and the Jizmet orders pouring in. By the day the switch was installed, Norbert was set up for life.

The `switch' could be activated by entering a code on a keypad mounted on his belt, next to the battery charging plug, followed by a subvocal command. If the PS suspected a suicide attempt, it would immobilize him instead of shutting off, and call for help. Otherwise it would wait until he hit the button again to turn back on.

Norbert carried it around for two days before he decided to give it a try. It seemed that every time he thought about it for very long his PS had to sedate him. He spent hours asleep, or in a torpor. What good is it if I can never use it, he thought. But finally, on the spur of the moment, he reached down and twisted the arming cover, flipped off the lid, tapped in the code, and then repeated the

command phrase that appeared on his optiprompter. His lens went blank. After a few moments, even the cooling fan shut off.

It was astonishingly quiet without the sound-track. He hadn't realized that it was part of the PS, until now.

Both lenses began to steam up. It took him a while to understand that he wasn't going blind. But the light became otherworldly, and his room very fuzzy. He shouldn't have done this before he'd become familiar with his new rooms.

His head hurt! How can a head hurt on the inside? And he could hear his heart pounding. And his stomach felt very strange, and he began to taste something unpleasant near his throat . . . he reached down and turned the PS back on. It quickly reset and rushed to his aid.

But not in time to save the carpet.

Norbert waited a day to make sure he'd fully recovered from the experiment, and then decided to take a walk through the corridors. Almost immediately he ran into

276

Howardi, who shouted a hearty. `How's shopping!' `Always a sale. Yourself?'

`Never better. Say, Norb, the guys at work keep asking about you.'

`Really?' Norbert found that idea odd. `Say hello for of course. \*\*\* Hey, have you had any more weird ideas I can tell 'ern about?'

`No.' Norbert shook his head in self-deprecation. 'I'm in enough trouble from just the one.'

`You're a wild an, Norbert. A real stitch.'

Norbert watched Howardi continue down the hall and turn a corner. INSINCERE, said the Jizmet 15.

Her smoky lenses spoke volumes, but her mouth said, 'Have you used it?'

`Oh, yeah.'

'What's it like?'

`Like nothing I've ever done before. I don't think most people would like it, though.'

She reached across the table and stroked his arm. His twentieth date, in the twentieth restaurant, since the inter-view. It seemed almost routine, now.

His PS guided him along routes he'd never taken, but he didn't take much in. Despite the mood-levellers his System was pumping, the halls and galleries all looked the same. He thought back to Vodkette, who had helped start all this. His first conquest. What was she doing now?

SAME EMPLOYMENT. SAME SHOPPING PATTERNS.

There was a note reminding him that her System was probably hopelessly incompatible with his Jizmet. She would bore him now, after all the sophisticated, upscale shoppers he'd been dating since.

That realization made him a tiny bit sad, a tiny bit lonely.

By mid-afternoon he found himself on the edge of the nature park. He decided to explore it. The trees and shrubs here were allowed to grow freely, unless they interfered with the pathways. Few shoppers came here and

Norbert could see why. The confusion of shapes and densities seemed quite odd, and the dead leaves and branches accumulating on the ground was somewhat disturbing. Still, his software gave him permission to continue.

At first he stayed on the concrete walkways, which were lined with stone lanterns and other pointless artefacts. The PS offered a series of lectures on their significance, but he declined. Impulsively he stepped onto an unpaved pathway, and during his first few steps switched off his System.

Again the stunning silence in the absence of the sound-track, the pounding of his heart and the rising nausea. The grass under his feet felt very irregular, like a poorly designed pile carpet, and made walking unsteady. He stopped, and tried to control the panic that mounted in his mind. The lenses steamed up, first the right, then the left. He reached up to his face and, for the first time he could remember, unsnapped the lenspiece and flipped it up.

His eyes, unused to the raw air, filled with tears. He could barely keep them open, the impulse to blink was so strong.

The vertigo became overwhelming, and he fell to his hands and knees. The unfamiliar feel of grass and earth under his hands distracted him momentarily, and allowed him to fight off the nausea. This is how his ancestors had once lived, in the wild, under the trees, listening to the song-birds. How could they stand it, he wondered; how could they shop, feeling like this?

He heard footsteps rapidly approaching.

'Are you all right?'

Norbert reached up unsteadily and restarted his PS, then flipped down the lenspiece. He gestured unsteadily for patience, though he knew his interrogator's System would be monitoring his rapid return to normal. Then he sensed two people squatting down beside him, and his PS said, 'Park rangers.'

'Shopper? Do you need assistance?'

Norbert, his head clearing, sat back on his heels and read through the last of his tears, 'Certainly not. But thank you. I was just having a rather . . . extraordinary experience.'

The PS cleared him to stand, so he did, brushing him-self off, and smiling his best enigmatic-#3 said, 'Yes. . . that was quite extraordinary. Good day, gentleshoppers.'

As he walked back toward the concrete he heard one exclaim, 'I tell you, it's him!'

'Imagine that. Right out here!'

Howardi had left messages, as had the bureaucrat's office. The Jizmet sales people left messages, more and more urgent as the evening wore on. Norbert realized that the General System probably told them about the incident in the park. With the new switch going on sale in a few days, they might be panic-stricken. His PS urged him to return their calls.

He was right. They wanted to know 'if he had experienced any difficulties' with the new switch.

'No,' he told them. 'But it's not for the timid.'

They liked that. They quoted him in their ads.

For a few days afterward Norbert stayed home, cancelling all his dates and postponing his investment counselling sessions. His Jizmet supported very conservative financial software, and tended to veto all the schemes that were proposed. Besides, he didn't really need more money.

He wasn't sure what he did need. He did some shopping, but the salesreps annoyed him. He took in some games, but his teams didn't inspire him the way they once had. The flicks couldn't compete with his own sex life of recent weeks.

Norbert was lonely.

He considered several new hobbies, but he knew that they weren't the answer. He tried a couple of the banter-lines, but the interesting people on them were all computer generated; the rest were shoppers like himself, who didn't know what they were looking for. Finally, he decided to keep one of his dinner dates. Back to the sugar mines, he thought.

Artemia did not have her lenses set to 'smoky,' nor did she ask about the switch before the first course of paste was finished. She inquired about his interests and reading preferences, and seemed a bit unsure of herself when she discovered that he had none.

Norbert stuck strictly to the suggested comments, feeling utterly lost with this woman. He had dated the educated classes before, but they never seemed to stray much from their software - the conversations being carefully scripted until simple curiosity inevitably led to the same questions, the same responses, and bed.

Until now, Norbert had never quite understood how artificial those conversations had been.

He recklessly strayed from the script. 'Excuse me, could we just talk about you for a while?'

She paused. 'I suppose you want to know why I decided to ask for a date?'

`Not really. I'd just like to know what you really... what you're like.' IF YOU DON'T MIND. 'If you don't mind?'

Artemia reviewed her likes and dislikes, hobbies and interests, for the most part reciting the pre-date resume her System had provided to his. Growing bored, he asked for elaboration, and she responded with complicated details. The Jizmet barraged him with definitions and explanations in both earspeakers, while filling both lenses with charts and graphs. He had to be prompted to realize that she had stopped talking some time before and expected a reply.

`Pardon me?' he tried.

'I said ... well, never mind.' She frowned. `You're not really very well educated, are you? I didn't know quite what to expect, but you're not really much like your pop image, are you?'

A long silence fell between them, and Norbert considered the RUDENESS: OFF SCALE blinking in his left lens, and the series of pointed

replies scrolling down his right.

He took a deep breath and shut off his PS. Her System must have informed her, because she immediately sat quite straight.

'No,' he said. 'No, I'm not very well educated. I'm not very smart, either. I just asked a very silly question while I was shopping one day, and all this . . .' He gestured vaguely, not even sure she was still there, beyond his foggy lenses. 'All this ... happened. I'm sorry.' He switched back on.

She was still there. She slowly sat back in her chair, and her mouth dropped open. His prompt signalled STRONG EMOTIONAL RESPONSE. CONFUSED.

'You shut it off,' she said. 'You answered my question without a prompter.'

He shrugged.

She leaned forward. 'I don't think I've ever been given an unprompted answer to anything.'

RESPECT INDICATED.

'Well, Shopper Kamdar,' she said, smiling in a way he would always remember, 'you might just have possibilities...'

EMOTIONAL COMPLICATIONS PENDING.

The switch proved quite a popular option for several years before fading into disfavour and oblivion, though not until the royalties made a fortune for the newlyweds. Norbert never used his again, except for brief moments - just long enough to whisper in Anemia's ear that he loved her. This often punctuated the lessons they took together in a most delightful, if not instructive, way.

Artemia never did buy a switch for her own System. And though their friends and acquaintances often sported the device, the question of actually trying it never seemed to come up in conversation. 'Someday we ought to ask Jizmet how often they were used,' she used to say - but it never seemed all that important.

### Study Questions for 'Norbert and the System'

1. Reflect on your experience of reading the first several pages of this story. Norbert tries but fails to interact socially with a desirable woman. Did you feel pity for him at this point? Were you envious of him once we learn about his 'PS'?

2. Identify as many elements of technology in the story as you can. Which do you consider improvements to the quality of life? Which are intrusions?

3. What is the significance of the title 'Shopper' used throughout "Norbert and the System"? Consider the emphasis on advertising and salesmanship. Is marketing a form of coercion, and a means to prevent people from exercising their free will? Attempt to count the number of times you are exposed to advertisements in one day. Does this deluge of images and sound bites constitute something like an external PS?

4. What is a PS, exactly? What can we infer about a PS from the story? Does it affect the intellect? the will? the emotions? Where do Norbert's own mental operations end and where do those controlled by the PS begin?

5. The answer to the previous question may depend upon which PS one uses. When he used his 1200 series PS, Norbert was able to ask an unusual question to the salesperson simulation. So did he have free will while operating (or being operated) by that PS?

6. How do we determine whether—and if so, to what extent—Norbert has free will? Do we analyze whether it is possible for him to think any thought he wishes? Do we analyze whether it is possible for Norbert to perform any action that he wishes to?

7. In contemplating Norbert's free will (if any), recall the role of the PS in preventing criminal actions. But the PS will even prevent its 'clients' from fully forming criminal thoughts. How does this point focus the issue of free will? Are there similarities between the use of the PS in this story, and the use of the people who foretell murders in "Minority Report"?

8. What would it be like to be Norbert? To get a sense for this, try to imagine all the ways that the PS controlled and manipulated his cognitive and sensory experience.

9. What occurs when Norbert tries, and finally succeeds, in shutting off his PS at home? in the park? at dinner with his date?

10. In question 3, I suggest that advertising has a considerable influence over our thoughts and feelings, but the role of anti-depressant medication bears closer similarity with a PS. How does Norbert's free will (if any) compare with the free will (if any) of someone who takes daily, large doses of a strong anti-depressant?

11. Is it important for one's happiness that one have free will? Suppose that Norbert's PS greatly restricts his free will. Could Norbert be happier without his PS than he could with his PS?

12. One implication of the conclusion is that love is not true unless it is produced through one's use of free will. Is this so? Isn't Norbert's brain chemistry and genetic makeup just another type of personal system, albeit an organic one?

13. Suppose you were in charge of setting the parameters of the intervention protocols in PS systems. What would you program the PS to prohibit the client from doing? Murdering someone? Committing suicide? Larceny? Stealing? Littering? Farting in public? Lying?

14. Suppose that God exists. Depending upon your answer to the previous questions, why would you say that God does not function in our lives like a PS? God could prevent people from murdering others, but doesn't. Why?