

# Welcome to the Human Shop

by Zach Polis



I was looking for the Human Shop. It had a reputation for being difficult to find. Tokyo isn't the kind of city to find any place with ease, but the Human Shop...

Well, let's just say some businesses don't want to be found.

*Under the orange light there is an unmarked door. It doesn't look like much. That's what you're after. At the bottom of the stairs there is a corridor. It'll go on for a while. Go through the black door.*

If Keigo's word was worth anything, I'd find out tonight.

I stood under an array of signs that jutted out around each other like a collection of mushrooms spores. The pavement beneath me reflected snatches of purples, blues, and reds.

I continued down the street and followed the bend in the road. It was one of those streets that cars can drive along, but is usually flooded with pedestrians in the day. Up ahead I saw a man in a business suit. He was swatting at the air around his head as if a cloud of flies was swarming him.

There was nothing.

He ducked and flung himself to the ground. He quickly stood up again and swung his fist into the air like a defiant warlord.

"Anunko!" he cried out. "Anunko!" He covered his face with his hands and started to sob.

Another unlucky chip digger. Give any seriously precocious, enterprising fifteen-year-old with a monitor-stained face a few thousand bucks and he'll whip up some muddled, open-sourced, black market entrainment chips for you. If you're stupid enough to take them.

"EE-A-SED! Eeaased!" The man was consoling himself with imagined words.

I slipped past him unnoticed.

Entrainment chips are big business. A team of nanotechnologist found a way to isolate patterns of human consciousness and embed them into miniscule chips that emit electromagnetic waves. These

electromagnetic waves entrain with the natural electromagnetic waves of the chip user and influence those wave frequencies thereby affecting thought patterns.

It's a brilliant hack into human consciousness and the chips are high in demand. The problem is the price is so high only the elite can afford them. But everyone wants their hands on one.

You can find them everywhere now—like Gucci handbag knock-offs.

I turned down an even smaller side street. At the end of the lane I saw another chip digger. He was chasing a cat around. "Furmala! Furmalak!"

The cat leaped onto the top of a vending machine and the man—impressively—scaled up it. But the cat was long gone—darted down the street—by the time the man made it to the top. Seeming to forget about the cat, he started sniffing the vending machine. Then he sniffed his wrists, fingernails, and armpits. What could have aroused his curiosity? It was rather pathetic watching a man with neurons that tumbled inside his head like tiny plastic balls in a pinball machine.

The red sign above him caught his attention next. He reached up with outstretched arms, lost his footing, and hit the ground. He didn't get back up. *Good. I won't have to deal with him,* I thought.

I stepped over the body, paying no mind to the ghost in the shell, and found my light at the end of the street. One tiny bulb perched over an unmarked door was casting the most unremarkable glow of orange light. This was the place. No doubts about it.

I gave the door a go, but it was locked.

I looked for a buzzer or a knocker. Nothing.

I gave a few whacks on the door with my fist and put my ear against the metal. I heard nothing. No movement inside.

Keigo gave me the time of my appointment, and I was on time. I decided to wait. I sat my butt down beside the door.

I dozed off at some point. I was stirred awake by the creak of the heavy door opening. I glanced at my watch. I had waited three hours.

The door was open ajar. Long red fingers clasped themselves around the bottom of the frame and then a head poked itself outside.

I was staring face-to-face with a tiny creature that looked like a monkey without fur and whose skin was completely red in pigment. The creature cocked its head and looked at me with eyes that didn't blink.

The creature flashed its sharp, nasty, little teeth at me and beckoned me inside with curled fingers.

*How much did I trust Keigo again?* I thought about it for a moment before following the creature inside.

The door swung closed behind us and took all the light with it.

In the darkness I could clearly hear wheezing, gasping, and slobbering noises about my knees. The poor guy was asthmatic.

As soon as the creature began to move forward, faint spotlights of orange lit up above him. It was enough to illuminate him, but not enough to see ahead or behind.

He descended down a staircase. I followed the creature and, for me too, personal orange spotlights lit up above me.

The stairs took forever to get to the bottom of and then we walked down a corridor that took even longer.

We came to a black door.

The creature rapped the door with his knuckles and then opened it for me.

Bright light flooded my eyes and I shut them from instinctual protest. As I began to adjust to the light in this new room, a pleasant voice filled the air.

"Welcome to the Human Shop!"

Standing behind a counter was a woman with a bouncy blue bob.

"I see Pytrot has kindly escorted you here. How may we help you?" ■

**PART ONE OF A SERIALIZED NOVELLA INSPIRED BY EXHIBITIONS AT SNAP GALLERY. THIS CHAPTER IS BASED ON *THE HUMAN SHOP* BY EUNKANG KOH.**

**Zach Polis** writes. One dry martini later, truth strips the rest of this biography cool and clean. Cheers, Mr. Hemingway!

# Between the Lines

by Zach Polis

Welcome to the Human Shop! I see Pytrot has kindly escorted you here. How may we help you?”

Her blue bob gave a slight bounce. Her smile was bright. Social. But the gaze she shot at me was strong. It was as if she were trying to overpower me—the weaker animal—without letting on.

“There’s somebody I want to take over the steering wheel for, so to speak,” I said.

“Is that so? For good purposes, I hope. No. That’s impossible. The dark ones always come to us, don’t they Pytrot? I’m surprised Keigo told you about us. He’s not the chatty type. Well. Shall we? Pytrot.”

The red imp walked to the back of the room and picked up a metal cylinder off the counter, and doubled back to us. I had never seen a gait like his. It was like giving a horse clown shoes to wear.

“Pull back your sleeve please. Either arm will do,” the woman said.

“What for?” I said.

“We’re going to implant our own chip into you. Don’t worry. Yes – if you make a mistake that damages us, we’ll make sure you live a miserable life. But, if you act professionally, consider this chip as nothing. It has no effect on your life. This is collateral. Simple risk mitigation.”

She gave a quick, clean smile. I failed to detect any warmth. What could I do? Back out now? Impossible. To hell with the chip!

I rolled up my left sleeve and felt a cold, metallic bite on my skin. The needle struck quick and released slowly, the way a scorpion pierces its stinger into the body of its prey. I wondered which would feel more pleasant, this or the scorpion?

*The scorpion.*

The red mark already began to swell and itch like hell, if hell were constructed solely with a fully body sunburn and a back-cratcher.

I better not piss anyone off now. Especially if I thought this hurt. I was about to do something illegal and there wouldn’t be any law authorities to cry mama to if I didn’t like my new friends.

“Slip this over your face.”

The blue haired woman gave me a visor with a display screen on it.

“It synchs up with the chip we gave you.”

“Virtual reality headset?” I ask.

“Oh. It’s more than virtual. Imagine your body being sent through a teleporter. You come out completely on the other side, yet—simultaneously—you’ve never left your first location.”

“Right.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to understand. It’s more of an intuitive thing once you get going. You’ll be here with us the whole time while you inhabit the body of your target. You’ll get used to managing two realities at once.”

Pytrot walks to a terminal and starts moving through mountains of data on the screen.

“How will you find my target?” I asked the blue bobbed woman.

“Kiego gave us the name. We’re locating him right now. Our technology has impressive range. We can hack any chip within a 500km radius, entrain with it, and pilot the user. Fascinating, isn’t it?”

The headset began to light up and a flurry of geometry and code flashed in front of my eyes. I couldn’t make sense of anything I saw.

“You see things happening in front of your eyes? Good. That means Pytrot has found the target. You’re going to experience some profound changes in your mind and body soon. I can’t tell you what. It’s unique to everyone. You’ll start synching up with your target. Feeling and thinking things the way he does. You’ll still be your own person but heavily under the influence of another.”

“How will I pilot him?”

“It’s like riding a bicycle, really.”

My eyelids got heavy. I felt I was being dragged down a deep well. My flesh was stripping off in thick, heavy clumps. I lost all sense of up and down, any direction. Gravity went bye-bye in a flash. My body was hurled from the heights of a blue mountain, smashing through tiny red clouds in the sky.

“You might get some resistance at first. But that’s how it always goes.”

Where was that voice coming from?

Behind the red clouds there were more red clouds, born again and again. Puff after puff, I fell through them all. And then I hit the surface of black storming waves, and before I knew it I was in the centre of that ocean like a piece of gum in a lollipop.

“Ease into it. If you can move past those emotions, you can find your way into some profitable nervous centers.”

What were these waves singing? Never mind. They are the authority on the matter. Better to just do what I was told then dissect the ocean.

Pop! Next thing I knew there wasn’t anything to see or feel. I was devoid of all senses, all stimuli, except for these thoughts.

“Accessing the target’s retina.”

Pytrot? What a splendid voice you have!

And then the woman said, “In a moment you will be able to see through the target’s eyes. It’s like a one-

way mirror. You can see into his world, but he can’t see into yours. Very handy, isn’t it?”

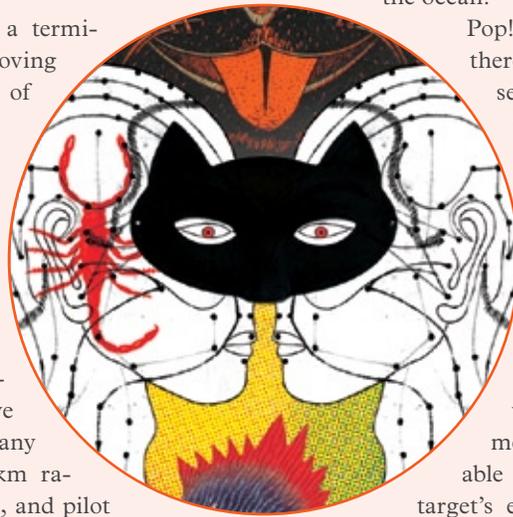
Ah!

So this was Murata Takahashi’s world.

I ran between the lines of his being. I was a cryptic aura, a freakish shadow, a clump left to float and sink through his body at will. My mind was projected into his nervous centre, and ghost synapses meshed together even though we were miles apart. I was beyond the limits of my body, over-firing. I was an intruding secret.

I entered the flash, the white void.

*I’m coming for you, Murata Takahashi. ■*



PART TWO OF A SERIALIZED NOVELLA INSPIRED BY EXHIBITIONS AT SNAP GALLERY.

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# Little Versailles

by Zach Polis

So this was Murata Takahashi's world. I saw photos of this room once in a magazine. The writer had done an extensive profile of Takahashi. Takahashi had called this room his "Little Versailles".

So much of the room was empty corridor with crystal chandeliers, monstrous windows, and gold leaf folding screens depicting tigers, cranes, and cherry blossoms.

Takahashi was clipping along. Rather, we were clipping along. Echoes of a famously empty room.

But then, I heard the crash of brass coming from the end of the hall.

I know this one. But how do I know this one? I hate jazz.

The soundtrack from the film *The Glamorous Blonde* rolled down the hall. The opening trumpet solo bit the air, rapid-fire, busy lips and tight cheekbones busting out that seminal motif. A jewel thief has just been stabbed; the cloaked murderer runs into a busy disco and vanishes. It was a personal obsession of the director Hans Rainer Kelley to never stop the out of control jazz even when a scene conventionally demanded silence. This novel technique cemented his fame among cinephiles the world over.

It seemed improbable to associate memories and information with this song that were mine. By the time we reached the bathroom where the music was coming from, I attributed that bank of cinema-related knowledge to being in Takahashi's head more than me picking up on a long forgotten memory. Sometimes his thoughts and mine would skate together and sometimes they'd drift far away from each other.

The bathroom wasn't so much a bathroom as it was an oasis of fantasy. Every item in this room contained its own flash of brilliance, a curated vision. Reclining or at play, sculptures of cherubs and Buddhist deities in positions of leisure surrounded a grand bath. There was a plump sofa in the corner of the room and ornate chairs carefully scattered around it. We were headed to the hanging mirror beside the chairs and sofa.

Looking in the mirror I saw a man clad in black with a wrinkled but dignified face, soft brown eyes, and snowy hair.

The speakers released a dangerous solo by trumpet player Franz Choi Altoon, scoring the scene where the glamorous blonde is swimming nude (with the exception of a large string of pearls around her neck) in her pool.

Takahashi glanced at the empty bath and gave a sigh.

He pinned a rose corsage neatly on his chest.

The violins and viola crept in like soft daylight, and then a woman's voice:

*I'll go  
But I couldn't help to think  
All was well  
But now I know  
We can't have what we had again  
Our love, a flare of golden light,  
Will be difficult to repeat  
I had beginner's luck  
Which I just couldn't keep*

"Luxury is exhilarating, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Takahashi.

Wait. Who said that?

"But wouldn't you like to do what you came here to do? Or have you grown too comfortable with the lifestyle?"

It was the woman with the blue bob.

"Go on. Tap some of those displays in front of you. Hint: start with the green triangles."

The green triangle flashed then deformed into three red squares connected by their points.

"Spin those around and tap those blue circles on the display. After that, you should get the hang of things."

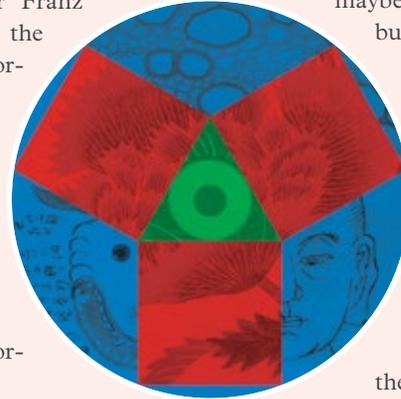
She was right. I wasn't sophisticated by any means, but I could see I was able to influence some control over Takahashi's body. My own little robot. I ran his fingers through his hair. I made him squint at his mirror's reflection and scrunch his nose. Hell, I even got him to flap one of his arms like a weirdo. That surprised him.

We backed away from the mirror.

"Hmm. Liberating. But it's best I get going. I can't be late," said Takahashi.

Yes, that's right. Keigo had said Takahashi would be meeting with Hayashi Toshi today, the man responsible for the tight price regulations on entrainment chips. Perfect.

There would be no evidence for what



I intended for the two of them. Except maybe with the Human Shop, but I wasn't their first customer.

We left the bathroom and started down the hall. I hit a few more symbols to suss out what I could do with him. Takahashi began sprinting down the hall. The sound of his footsteps bounced freely across the marble, crystal, and glass.

It competed with *The Glamorous Blonde* for airspace.

But we weren't headed to wherever Takahashi thought he was going next. We weren't headed to wherever I thought we were going next!

As we were nearing the end of the hall, with the power of an unseen force — my symbol-mashing incompetence — Takahashi took a sudden left and smashed through one of the monstrous windows.

We plunged into the air and the earth was falling quickly to meet us.

Black smeared the senses.

Takahashi was dead.

I was sure of it.

And me?

"Surely, you could've told us what you were planning on doing," said the voice of the blue-haired woman. "We would've hated to see him take a piece of your mind with him when he died. Your great mind tossed into the vapor like watermelon chunks dissipating at volatile speeds into nothingness. Then again, there wouldn't have been much mind to lose to begin with."

"You said it was intuitive."

Just the thought. That's all I had of me that I could sense.

"Am I back?"

"Your body never left the shop. But you mean that brilliant mind of yours? No. It would've taken too long to pull it back. We dumped you into the nearest stream of consciousness we could find."

Which was? ■

PART THREE OF A SERIALIZED NOVELLA INSPIRED BY EXHIBITIONS AT SNAP GALLERY.

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# Revision: Survival Tactics

by Zach Polis

I was up to my eyeballs in grass. Grass. Grass. Grass. I took in the scent. Each blade seemed to offer up something unique. The dirt was alive too. I sensed endless trails to take. Hidden bugs crawling beneath me. Calcium fermenting. And death.

Was this the way a person leaves the world? With your senses dragging you down into the earth?

Death flooded me. Sadness shook me. But I wasn't dying. It was only grief. For Takahashi.

I let out a howl. *'For Takahashi, the greatest man I know!'* was the feeling behind it.

Right... The stream of consciousness dump. I was in a new body now. Which was? "Don't get yourself killed this time," said the blue-haired women.

I heard a rumble far away. It was headed for the house. Tires. An engine at work.

"Hayashi Toshi is on his way," she continued. "If you get inventive, you might be able to intercept him still."

"I haven't figured out who I am yet," I telepathed.

"You're Takahashi's dog. Something simpler to work with."

"Couldn't you have dropped me into another human?"

"No. Takahashi's dog is the only living creature on this estate right now. And lucky for you. A living creature with its own chip. You should be dead right now."

"A dog, huh?"

"You'll figure something out."

The smell of Takahashi's corpse wafted through my nose. I could smell the blood mixing with the grass, the dry cleaning of his suit jacket, the metal from his watch, his sickly clean shoe polish, the lavender in his hair, the traces of mint toothpaste caked in his teeth, his pomegranate breath, the sweat he had built up from running out the window.

When I was a kid my sense of smell was reliable. Not like this though. Not with this kind of precision. But it functioned. Until one day in grade school, when I pissed Keigo off by pilfering some of his lunch. He busted up my nose good. It got

inflamed. Everything realigned and went crooked. Goodbye flowers, goodbye cookies. I'd never know the smell of a woman.

But now I'd know the smell of Takahashi thanks to Keigo. My heart sank. My tail tucked between my legs. My master was dead.

If a dog could laugh, I might have.

I wanted Takahashi dead. Not so prematurely, mind you. He was supposed to meet Hayashi Toshi first. But I did want him dead. Yet, here I was feeling indescribable grief for a man I didn't like. This wasn't the first time I've killed either. I've never cried about it. So this feeling, huh? It was something.

The approaching car pummeled my ears. It was pulling up the driveway. I ran to the front of the house, barking the whole way.

Thankfully, the window Takahashi fell out of was not a front window. Two men stepped out of the black car, the driver and Toshi from the back seat. I barked at them both.

"Hey, little doggy. Looking for trouble?" said the driver. He winked at me. Odd but charming.

"Can you get me inside of Toshi's body?" I telepathed to the woman back at the Human Shop.

"You know better than that. Hayashi Toshi has special encryptions on his entrainment chip. Even we can't hack into that, and that's saying something. He's top dog after all," she said.

"What about the driver?" I said. "Can you get me inside him?"

"Sorry. That body's already in use," she said.

In use already?

Keigo.

"Can you take us to your master?" said Keigo.

How much did Keigo know? He winked at me after all! He must already know how badly I screwed up.

I led them into the house. I would take them to the top floor where the broken window was. That way there would be some element of surprise. No need to approach the body any other way. Keigo would figure out something to do. He was always good at improvising.

Toshi called for Takahashi. There was no response.

Toshi told the driver to wait by the front door while he went upstairs to look for

Takahashi. I led Toshi up the stairs. Being a dog, I could go wherever I wanted.

When Toshi saw the broken glass he let out a long whistle. He looked down at the ground below him. "Takahashi, what have you gotten yourself into today?" The soundtrack for "The Glamorous Blonde" was still playing.

Should I headbutt him out the window too? No. Dumb idea. We needed Toshi alive. *Keigo, this is a good time to act.* He didn't come.

Toshi headed back downstairs. I followed. "Takahashi isn't home. Let's go," he said to the driver.

Keigo opened the back car door for Toshi. But before Toshi stepped inside Keigo hit him hard. Toshi fell to the ground. Keigo pulled out some ties from his pocket and bounded Toshi's wrists and ankles. Then he stuffed plugs into Toshi's ears, and tossed him into the back seat.

"You're coming with us too, doggy," said Keigo.

Keigo opened the passenger door for me and I jumped in.

"Where next?" I said to Keigo. The question only came out as a bark. I guess the Human Shop could read my mind because I was hooked into their data screens.

"You sure got us into trouble today. Bad dog," said Keigo.

I tucked my tail between my legs.

"We should have trained you first. There just wasn't any time. Let's head back to the Human Shop," said Keigo. "We'll bring Toshi with us. We'll ditch the car along the way. If we're lucky, and I do mean if we're lucky, Sachiko will bypass Toshi's encryption codes. Don't count on it though. Toshi's got the best coders. We're gonna need to save our asses some other way. Oh... and little doggy? I think I'll ask Sachiko to keep you this way. You're much cuter as a dog." ■

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LAST PART OF A SERIALIZED NOVELLA INSPIRED BY EXHIBITIONS AT SNAP GALLERY.

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