

John Sladek

Love Among the Xoids

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LOVE AMONG THE XOIDS

by John Sladek

Syd and Mercy got off the bus in the middle of a little flock of old people. They knew exactly how to blend in and totter down the steps with the old people, so no one saw them. The old people didn't notice any young strangers among them, either. They were concentrating on their own tottering, and their eyes would be running, because of the cold wind, you see. Syd and Mercy could always calculate things like that, a cold October wind.

They knew just when to slide into the doorway of a bookstore nobody ever visits, how long to wait there, and how to vanish around a corner just when the wind was flinging dead leaves in everybody's face. No one saw them move along to a house that suited them. They walked right in and went straight down to the laundry room in the basement—always a safe bet.

"Here goes," said Mercy. She opened the door of the dryer, ran her hand around inside and came up with something. A sock.

"Blue," said Syd in disgust. "I don't need blue. Why can't they ever leave a pair? I've had one of every kind of sock they've ever dreamed of." At the moment, he showed her, he was wearing a brown dream on his left foot and a yellow-and-green argyle nightmare on his right. "It's not fair."

"Fair?" She laughed. His face tried laughing back, but it was too thin. You could see knots of muscle and cords tying it all up so laughter was impossible. All a thin face like that could do was complain about unfairness.

"Let's go get some breakfast," Mercy said. Silently they flowed up the stairs to the kitchen. There was no one there but a black-and-white cat that immediately sat down and waited to be fed. Yet, even while it licked its chops and cast significant looks at the cupboard door, the cat couldn't help noticing how *different* these humans were. The way they moved, sliding along walls and peering around corners, was not entirely human. They reminded the cat of cats.

There was stale bread in the breadbox, being saved for stuffing, a trace of butter on a butter-paper being saved for baking, and the coffee filter was full of good, reusable grounds. Mercy and Syd insinuated themselves into chairs and started breakfast.

Mercy hated to watch him eat. Two years she'd been with him now, and never had been able to get used to the sight of his jaws working, the anatomy lesson of cords snapping and muscles knotting in his face. Why did he have to be so thin?

Of course thinness helped him be inconspicuous, just as it helped her or any of their friends except Rollo. Nothing like thinness if you're spending lots of time flattened against walls or hiding behind lampposts, staying out of sight.

That's how they all lived, perpetually out of sight. They owned nothing, not houses or cars or even clothes. All they had were castoffs from ordinary society, from "real-people". Realpeople were unaware of these invisible guests, who lived unseen all over the city—all over the world, she'd heard.

Thinness was fine, but Syd was too thin. He hated his meals and took them grudgingly, scowling at the plate. To him, the word "food" was an epithet. He would never speak of having breakfast or lunch, only "Let's grab some food."

Syd liked to watch Mercy eat. She was nearly as skinny as him, but she was beautiful. Syd was all too aware of his own ugliness, the nose like a big axeblade, the Adam's apple genuflecting every time he swallowed. Chop, gulp, chop, gulp, God he hated eating. But he had to put on some weight. He had to become somehow more solid and substantial. Otherwise, he knew, Mercy was going to leave him.

If only they were able to have a kid, that would fix everything. She wanted one, but there was something wrong. She never had to borrow any tampons anywhere, that meant something was wrong. The want was there all the same, and it was growing, turning everything sour. *If you were a realwoman, he wanted to say to her, you'd have six kids. We'd all sit at the breakfast table, my wife, my kids, my*

table. I'd have a big car and maybe an airplane...

"Be winter soon," he said.

"You want to stay here a few days?"

"If you do."

She scratched the cat under the chin. "I don't know. We don't know what they're like here. Might be hard to keep out of their way."

They looked at the floor, as though trying to deduce from it what kind of people lived here. There was little to be deduced from the tile pattern in brown, gold and white. Looked at one way, the brown snakes vanished, replaced by gold, G-shaped plants. Life is like that, they both were thinking. Always something missing.

A face with bulging eyes and bushy hair peered around the doorframe.

"Rollo!" they both exclaimed, though not loud. Never loud.

"Thought I saw you two popping in here. I was at the drugstore, reading magazines." He sat down with them, a slightly plump presence at the table of gauntness. "Nice place you got here. Is that coffee?"

They complimented Rollo on his new suit, a crisp plaid item that had probably been the height of fashion, a few years ago.

"I like to keep my eyes open for stuff," he said, his bulging eyes bulging a little more. "I could pick you up a dress, Mercy. What's your size?"

She looked at Syd, who was frowning at the floor tiles. "Oh, uh, thanks anyway, Rollo. What were you reading?"

None of the people they knew, except Rollo, bothered reading anything. Many were illiterate. They themselves, though they could read street signs and bus names, never had time for any serious reading. Rollo, however, read everything: magazines in stores, old piles of papers left out for the Boy Scouts, the labels on foods at the supermarket. He was a walking encyclopedia of information, and if any of it was a little distorted, shopworn or out of date, no one noticed.

"Fascinating the stuff you can glean, a page here, a page there," he said. "For instance, Syd, I would say

that you are suffering from a disease called *anorexia nervosa*, did you know that?"

Syd looked alarmed. "A disease?"

"A nervous nisease, it keeps you from eating square meals. Is there some marmalade to go with this bread, by the way?"

"But how would I get cured?"

Rollo helped himself to jam. "I didn't get that part. But I saw another article for you, Mercy. It talked about the problems of women in the upper echelons of the corporate pyramid."

Syd and Mercy, who had never heard of corporate pyramids or echelons, said nothing. Rollo continued: "Oh, by the way, IBM stock holds steady. Thousands die in Iranian earthquake. Local philanthropist honored. Air disaster blamed on faulty maintenance."

Mercy said, "Rollo, you're so well-informed!"

"I try to keep up. The man who knows what's going on in the world is the man who's going to get someplace. After all, world events affect everybody—even us."

"But how?" Mercy put the lid back on the jam, and tried to make it look as though several spoonfuls had not been removed.

"Well for instance, there are these superpowers, and they apparently have a lot of warheads, and they plan to use them to blow up the whole world!"

Syd tried to laugh again. "Come on, now, Rollo. That's a lot of gobbledegook from television. I'm not that ignorant, I've seen a little television myself, you know. Clowns eating hamburgers, cars crashing in flames, *superpowers*, *warheads*, agreements about salt, I've seen it too."

Mercy said, "Anyway these superheroes or whoever they are wouldn't use their warheads if they had them. It doesn't make sense."

"I'm only telling you what I read," said Rollo. "I'm not saying it's all true." Some of the bulge went out of his eyes, as Rollo seemed to sag a bit. "I guess sometimes I just wish we lived in their world, the realpeople world."

"Who doesn't?" Syd said, looking at his socks.

"I mean, I get so tired sometimes, sneaking around,

hiding like some kind of wild animal—I mean, we're as much people as they are. We've got a right to be seen. We could live right out in the open, have houses of our own."

"Work jobs," said Syd.

"Raise children," said Mercy.

"I saw an expression in a magazine the other day that just summed it up. It spoke of coming out of the closet. Well that's what we ought to do, gosh darn it, come out of the closet!" Rollo banged his fist very lightly on the kitchen table.

There was a noise upstairs, of a heavy piece of furniture being moved. Without making a sound, the three cleaned up their crumbs, collected their dishes and ran to the hall closet.

In a moment, a woman came clumping down the stairs, carrying a load of bedlinen. The cat gave up pawing at the closet door and bounded into the kitchen with her, almost tripping her.

"Out of the way, Midnight," she said, using the loud voice realpeople used. "It's not dinnertime."

They could hear her clumping down the basement stairs, clanging the washing machine, singing over the racket of washing. Then back up to the kitchen, where sounds told them she was making coffee, drinking it, listening to the radio, cleaning the stove top, talking on the phone, loud.

"Mother it's okay, I'll *drive* you there... I *said* I would, didn't I?... Okay, but I have to be back by two, to pick up Donnie from school."

There were the sounds of a coat being slipped on, a nose blown, keys jingled. The back door slammed, and outside a car started. The three, who'd been holding themselves perfectly rigid for an hour, glided out in time to see the woman drive away.

In the silence of the house, Rollo said, "I've got to go myself. See you both at the party tonight?"

The house seemed even quieter with Rollo gone. Mercy walked through the living room, touching things. Realpeople had roomfuls of stuff like this: an onyx cigarette lighter, a dolphin-shaped ashtray, whiskey decanters marked *His* and *Hers*, an electronic organ, a glass cabinet full of tiny

glass animals, a shelf of cacti, a painting of a clown on black velvet, a carriage clock, a tank of beautiful fish. On the desk was a pen-and-pencil set in something like gold, and a box of name labels. A plaster shepherd and shepherdess simpered at one another from opposite ends of the mantel, in the middle of which stood a large photo, a family portrait. Mommy, Daddy and Donnie. She began to sniffle.

"Don't start that again," said Syd. He was digging down the back of a sofa for loose change. "You know you can't have a kid, so why keep thinking about it? And even if you could, I'm not so sure we could raise it. We gotta travel light."

"I could raise it," she said hoarsely. "I could raise it."

Travel light, that was the rule. The rule was, no children, no pets, vacate the room by ten. It was the eternal rule, graven on tablets at the dawn of time for everyone who had to keep moving and travel light.

Well, she didn't want to travel light. She didn't want to keep moving, keep hiding. She wanted to grow thick and heavy and settle down in one place, while possessions piled up around her. Then one day she could squat down and pop out a nice, rosy baby. A baby girl. She could name it "Portia". They would settle down together, with possessions piling up around them. It wasn't having things, that wasn't what was so important. It was having memories to go with them. This carriage clock we bought at that funny place in New Hampshire, remember? And the dolphin ashtray Portia brought back from camp, remember how tan she got? And wasn't that the year...

If I was realpeople, Syd thought, I'd just slap her in the mouth when she gets like this. Realpeople do what the hell they want. They talk out loud. They get in their cars and drive like hell, blasting the horn. Out of the way, Midnight. Out of the way, everybody. I'm real, out of my way!

When she'd finished crying, Mercy helped Syd search for coins. Then they slid up to the attic, where they found some old clothes in a trunk, just right for Letty's party. There was a blue chalkstripe suit for Syd, and a red-and-

white floral dress for Mercy. They both looked good.

A yellow cab pulled up at a big house on Sumac Street at two a.m. The driver walked up to the front door to pick up his fare—someone leaving a party. While he was away from his empty cab, its back door opened and two shadows slipped out in silence. They moved so quickly that the blue chalkstripes and the red-and-white floral patterns were just blurs. As a realperson came out of the front door of the big house, Mercy and Syd were sliding around to come in the back way.

Letty liked to throw her parties in the wake of real-people's parties. She would start letting in her guests before all the realpeople guests had left. Then she and her friends would spend some time keeping out of the way of the last, drunken realpeople—who were usually too busy singing, dozing, feeling sick or trying to remember the ending of some story, to notice Letty's friends.

Then when all the reals had been packed off in cars and taxis, or upstairs to bed, the second party would begin. There might be some chipdip and liquor left, or her guests would have visited other parties—drifting through them like cigarette smoke—and from them brought food or bottles. One way or another, there was always some cheer, often a little discreet music—and always, the company of friends.

There was Chauncey, who make the rounds of garage sales to collect anything he knew his friends might need. Though of course he did not pay for the stuff he collected, it was never missed. There was Rollo, the news-gatherer. There was Letty herself, who on Sundays took over an empty dentist's office to work on her friend's teeth. Ethel, a tall woman in pince-nez (one lens missing) likewise acted as a doctor, and was as adept at slipping her patients into empty hospital rooms as Ham was at making funeral arrangements, two bodies to a coffin. Mercy and Syd, like many others, were just providers of supermarket food and abandoned clothing. Finally there was Uncle Darb, now retired and living in a seldom-used darkroom, but still the

patriarch and final arbiter on all matters of law.

Uncle Darb was sitting in a corner, telling a small, not very attentive group that their envy of realpeople was sinful.

"We are not meant to be like them," he kept saying. "We are meant to be apart, to live in their shadow, unseen, a secret tribe. We may use only what they won't miss, and only enough for our own survival. I don't say it's sinful to have a little party like this now and then. We do after all need to gather, to see one another and to talk about the rules."

The rules. Mercy took a glass of gin in four big swallows, gagged, and turned to hear what Chauncey was saying.

"These realpeople I'm with keep leaving the television on and going to sleep in front of it. So I drift in and watch all the late-night movies. *Invasion of the Xoids*, it was called. The Xoids looked just like real people, but if you shone a certain ray on them, they'd go pffft like flat tires, and just collapse."

His audience laughed, Mercy hardest of all. But even now, even in drink, she found herself unable to let go and shriek, really shriek the way realpeople did at parties.

"Call this a party?" she said to the nearest man. "I call it a meeting of the ghosts. Of the Xoids."

"Hello, Mercy," he said. "Long time no see. Remember me? Jasper." He was a short, balding man with a thin moustache.

"Jasper, hello. Haven't seen you since—funeral, was it?"

He nodded, emphasizing the baldness. "Aunt Portia's funeral. I, ah, still visit the grave a lot." It sounded like some kind of invitation.

"I keep meaning to visit, myself," she lied. "Only I can never remember the name. On the stone."

"Weiler," he said. "Maxine Weiler. I could, ah, take you out there tomorrow, if you like."

"Poor Aunt Portia," said Mercy. "Since we had to bury her with somebody, the least we could have done would be to put her in with a man. I don't suppose she had so much as a cuddle in her whole life, and now it's too late. I'll

never have one."

"You'll never have one? I don't understand." His moustache understood, though. It was twitching comically.

She laughed. "I meant *she'll* never have one. A *cuddle*, I meant. Not a baby. O God, I don't feel so well. Jasper, do you think we could get some air?"

As they went out the door, Syd came in the other door with two glasses of wine. He looked for Mercy. Finally he said, "Okay, hell with her. Hell with her." He emptied her glass in one gulp, not minding at all how his Adam's apple genuflected. Hell with everything. He didn't mind anything anymore.

"I don't," he explained to Rollo. "I don't even mind you."

Rollo clapped him on the shoulder. "And I don't mind you, either, Syd old buddy. Let's get drunk. They say the alcohol content of wine—"

"Right," said Syd. Behind him he could hear Chauncey still going on about *Invasion of the Xoids*. "That's us, you know? Xoids. We're the fuckin' Xoids—oh, excuse me," he said to Uncle Darb.

The old man waved a hand. His blind eyes seemed focused on Syd. "Go on, my son. We're Xoids?"

"We're not even alive, we're not even real. We just go around faking everything. Borrowing everything. *Their* houses, *their* food, *their* damned socks. We're nothing, we're nobody!"

"What and whom do you want to be?" asked the patriarch.

"I want to drive a car and honk the horn. I want to be real and solid and important. I want to live in a world where I belong. Maybe in the country, with no realpeople—"

"Realpeople are everywhere," the old man warned. "They are the madness of this world, as it is their asylum. We, thank God, are outside their madness."

"Don't give me all that, I don't buy it anymore. You always end up with the same story, how we've been living like we do since the Dark Ages, how we never take last names because we're not families, we're individuals—I'm sick of all that."

"You want to join the realpeople? Nothing easier,

my son. Just stop hiding. Let the realpeople see you. Course they'll probably put you in jail. Or the hospital."

"You're just saying that."

"Nope. There you'll be, a man with no identification cards, no job, no past and no last name. You never had any kind of job, never went to school, never lived at any address. You can't give your parents' full names, you don't know how old you are—"

"Stop! Just stop!" Syd's facial muscles were writhing. He turned and stalked away, out the kitchen door and into the back yard where he almost stumbled over two figures on the ground. He recognized the red-and-white of Mercy's dress, even though it was up around her waist.

Back inside the borrowed house, Syd found a downstairs borrowed bathroom. He went in, turned the borrowed lock, stripped off his borrowed clothes and looked at himself in the borrowed mirror. He borrowed a razor blade and cut both his wrists, then climbed in the borrowed bathtub to keep from messing up the floor. Xoids weren't even allowed to bleed out loud, he thought, as he went to sleep.

Screened by a gang of orderlies going to lunch, Ethel and Mercy slipped along the corridor to Syd's room. He was sitting up in bed, looking cheerful and relaxed—for the first time in years.

"I've made a decision," he said. "I'm joining the real world."

Ethel began changing the dressings on his wrists.

"I hope you'll be all right," said Mercy.

"I will. It doesn't have to be the way Uncle Darb says. I can work into it gradually, travelling and doing odd jobs, meeting just a few realpeople at a time—until I'm real, myself."

To Mercy, though she could not say so, the whole idea of being real included a home and family, pictures on the mantel and a cat in the kitchen. A realperson who travelled and did odd jobs sounded like "the worst of both worlds", as Rollo would say.

"I know what you're thinking," Syd said. "I thought so too."

"Really?"

"It's what everybody thinks, but I can't help it. I'm going."

Ethel nodded. Light danced on her pince-nez, on the single lens. "You can go home today, if you like," she said. "Home or wherever."

"What are you going to do?" he asked Mercy.

"I don't know. I still want a child," she said, looking out of the window. Buses moved along the street, carrying crowds of old people. Snow was making up its mind to fall, or rain. "I don't think I could ever make it as a real person, though. So unless I can get pregnant—"

"Maybe you and Jasper could have a child," he suggested, already bored with her problems. He wanted to get out of here, get away from ghostly women complaining about their periods. He wanted to hit the street, walk tall, wear a hard hat, be somebody.

"I don't think I want to raise a child, not the way we have to live," she said. "Hiding, hiding, hiding, hiding, hiding." She wiped her eyes. "I'd better go."

Stifling a yawn, Syd said goodbye. Ethel took her arm and steered her along corridors, slipping like smoke past receptionists.

"Is this the way out?"

"No, I wanted to show you something." They glided on to a room with a glass door. Inside, they could see a nurse leaning over a glass crib. She was holding up a string of bright discs. The baby in the crib laughed and reached for them with one arm. The other arm was in a cast. They ducked back as the nurse looked up.

"Do you want that baby?"

Mercy said, "What? That baby? I mean, yes of course, but—but I mean—"

"I've checked her records," said Ethel. "Her name is Rae-Sue Fridley, daughter of Earl and Mae-Rae Fridley. They broke her arm."

Mercy gasped.

"It happens, among real people. They go ahead and have

children they don't want, and end up hurting them. Now they're putting Rae-Sue into state care. Unless you and I take her first."

No children, no pets. Mercy thought about her own childhood. Folded up in a sofabed every day. Taken along quietly to the playground only late in the afternoon, when all the realkids had gone home to supper. The old rusty bike with rotten tires, on which she'd been allowed to ride around and around the deserted parts of town: weed-grown vacant lots, weed-grown railroad tracks, the grain-elevator part of town where weeds were allowed to show themselves. Folded away in the sofabed during school hours.

"Ethel, I just wouldn't want to make a mistake. I'd want to take good care of her."

"I know you would, that's why I brought you here."

"No but I mean I wouldn't want to make the mistakes my mother—"

"If you know they're mistakes, don't make them," said Ethel. "Anyway, you didn't turn out too badly, for all those mistakes. You know, she named you Mercy after the hospital where she found you."

"What? You mean I was abandoned, too?"

"Most of us are," said Ethel. "For centuries back, very few of our women could ever conceive. It may be our unusual sleep pattern—the fact that we have to be able to jump up and vanish at a second's notice, that we're never very deeply asleep. Whatever the cause, not many of us menstruate. So there's only one way to carry on the tribe."

"Kidnapping." She and Ethel ducked back as the nurse left the room.

"We only take children the realpeople don't want," said Ethel. "The rule still applies. And we only give them names the realpeople don't want." She looked at the clock down the corridor. "You have fifteen minutes to decide."

T, thought Mercy. *Theresa. Thomasina. Terry. Tina. Thea. Thora.* I can teach her myself. Rollo could give her reading lessons. Letty could teach her painting and sculpture. *Toots. Tess.* No folding sofabed for my little—*Tiffany?*

"Titania," she said aloud.

A moment later, they bundled up Titania and slipped out a side door of the hospital. No one saw them sliding along the sidewalk today, because everyone else was running in the other direction, hurrying to see the accident. Ethel and Mercy and Titania sped on their way unnoticed; they were gone like breath vapor on this cold October day.

The man who'd been struck down by a bus was still breathing. Everyone could see the vapor, white as the bandages on his wrists. As the paramedics tried to lift him, he said "I'm real." The vapor stopped.

"I just never saw him," said the bus driver. "He came at me out of nowhere."

The policeman said, "Don't worry. Your witnesses here all agree the guy jumped in front of you. Like he was daring you to hit him, somebody said."

"That's right," said an old man. "And he shouted, I heard him shout. He shouted, 'Get out of my way.' Can I have a transfer?"

Wiping his eyes, the bus driver tore a colored piece of paper from a pad and handed it to the old man. The old man joined a crowd of other old people, tottering from this bus to the next one, waving their transfers like little flags of victory.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Sladek has mostly kept out of trouble for over forty years. His science fiction novels began with *The Reproductive System (Mechasm)* in 1968, and continued intermittently, while he wrote mysteries, invented the 13th sign of the zodiac, and led a (not successful, alas) expedition to search for the East Pole. He lived in London for many years. Now he lives in Minneapolis, where he is at work on a new novel, *Zamithu*. Watch for *A John Sladek Checklist*, coming soon from Chris Drumm.