

# **The van der Rohe Forgery**

**by Raymund Eich**

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Johan stood in the living room, the concrete cool on his bare feet, while the appraiser and her athena worked. The next distiller run could wait. He wanted to be here the moment they finished.

The appraiser sat crosslegged, with ragged blonde hair over bulging vacant eyes, while her athena crawled on its hands and knees around the pieces. The athena, a conscious robot, looked like a cherub mannequin. The heat-shimmer from its cooling wings heralded good news.

The two barcelona chairs faced each other, with the barcelona couch perpendicular to both. All three stood on the Persian rug, under Jazz Age advertising posters and suspended halogen torchières. The athena extended its robot tongue and licked one of the couch's legs. The curved steel legs gleamed. The black leather cushions had aged well; the dye only slightly faded, a few tiny scratches in the hide. The pieces looked almost fresh from the assembly. But they weren't. They had traveled the solar system, with a document trail stretching back to a 1950s American importer. More than a century old. Everyone would talk about them after next weekend's party.

The appraiser's knees and ankles crackled as she stood. "We have bad news. They're fakes." She squirted the data into his mind.

Fakes? They couldn't be! "How?"

"I've tracked down import and export records from the Venus Development Corp. sunshade. It wasn't transshipped through there."

“A smuggler forged the shipment records. That doesn’t make them fakes.” Black marketeers needed a document trail to prove the pieces’ authenticity. Why else smuggle?

The appraiser went on. “As for Armstrong City, its records of the alleged outshipment from Luna were lost in the Second Euro-American War. I know a data archaeologist in Von-Braun-Stadt on Luna, but he’d probably find nothing in Armstrong City’s wrecked servers.”

The data archaeologist would be worth the cost. The pieces couldn’t be fakes! Johan’s software assistant picked out trends from the data, and he clutched at one. “The carbon-14 levels are consistent with 1950s manufacture.”

“Isotope enrichers are cheap.” Wrinkles splayed from her eyes. “I understand you don’t want to believe me,” the appraiser said. “They’re closer to van der Rohe’s original design than many pre-assembly antiques. But, please, look at the carbon deposition errors in the steel lattice.”

The data popped to consciousness, and his software assistant dissected it with accelerated intuition. All random, as it should be; except for three carbons followed by a gap; then one, four, one, five, nine.... all told, the first fifty digits of  $\pi$ .

“That’s from the couch,” the appraiser said. “The chairs repeat the first fifty digits of  $e$ .”

The defects weren’t random. Fakes from someone’s assembler. Johan sagged. Iron cost eleven piastres to the kilo, carbon cost fourteen. The material in the three pieces cost less than six dinar. He’d paid 6000 dinar, and thought it a bargain. What would Andrea say? Their daughter? Their friends? He wished he could burrow through the

floor, out the dozen lower levels and Pallas' half-kilometer-thick skin, and let the asteroid's rotation fling him away.

"No charge this visit," the appraiser said, and more shame washed through Johan. What gave her the right to pity him? He was a distiller—an artisan—not someone who counted leather stains or lattice defects. Had she ever seen barcelona chairs, built to van der Rohe's design during the man's lifetime?

He gasped. What if she lied? She had a high reputation in Pallas' agora, but had she ever had an opportunity like this? The pieces could be real and her report a scam to buy them for a few dinar. Or maybe she'd been infected with an anarchy virus and wanted to derail the free market with false information.... "I want a second opinion."

She shrugged. "Your choice."

The athena stood up. Its doll-face, expressing pity, came to the appraiser's elbow. It spoke from a speaker in its mouth. Its lips moved in time with the words. "Your pardons for bringing such bad news, sir." It bowed, then followed its mistress to the door.

After the door slapped shut, Johan wandered into the distillery to think. The foam walls swallowed his footsteps' sound. On the far wall, next to a Burgundian vineyard in the videowindow, shelves carried lab equipment and reagent bottles. The wheat mash's sick odor mingled with the reagents' acetone scent. Normally he welcomed the aromas, but not now.

Fakes. Six thousand dinar lost to computer error; error in the one-kilo meat computer between his ears. At least no one outside his family would know. Why hadn't he appraised the chairs before he bought them? Because *they won't last at this price*, he'd

thought. He couldn't blame Brüning, the antique dealer. Brüning hadn't pushed the chairs. Johan had jumped.

He poured a drink, hand shaking. The fakes threatened to take more from him than six thousand dinar. If they faked barcelona chairs, they could fake hallucino-gin. The forgers threatened artisans everywhere in the solar system!

Cool off the dramatics, he told himself, and sat in an armchair. He was accredited, certified, bonded, and insured. The cert agency had cameras hardwired around the room. All he had for the chairs were digitized documents whose proofs had vanished in the mid-century wars. *They won't last at this price.* Six thousand dinar was still a lot to lose... if the appraiser had been truthful.

His software assistant called up a list of appraisers and checked it against names dropped by his friends. No sense spreading rumors about faked chairs among his circle. His software assistant reported a suitable appraiser, Esteban Darius from 23<sup>rd</sup> level, could visit in twenty minutes.

Footsteps toddled into the room. Michelle, his daughter, had been swimming; her swimsuit bulged over her belly, and she trailed wet footprints. "Eldi, has the appraiser left?" She ran to him, lifted her arms.

"Yes, child." He raised her to his lap.

"I wanted to meet her athena, but Madame Tsyplakova wouldn't release me from swim class in time."

Johan ran his fingers through her damp blonde curls. "You'll meet other athenas."

“I know,” she said sadly. “Did you hear about the crisis in the Jovian leading Trojans? The moravecs are blockading 659 Nestor.”

“Moravecs?”

“Copies of people’s brains running on computers.”

“I know what they are, child,” Johan said. “Why are they blockading Nestor?”

Michelle shrugged, squirmed. “What did the appraiser say?”

Johan sighed. “She and her athena think the chairs are fakes.”

“Are they?”

“I’ve hired another appraiser. Don’t mention the chairs to your friends, okay?”

Michelle squinted with childish disdain. “Why would I? We all prefer Saarinen’s furniture to van der Rohe’s.” She jumped down from his lap and ran out of the room.

Johan finished his drink a few seconds before the apartment announced Darius the appraiser. Johan met him in the living room.

Darius wore carpenter’s shorts, and had spinach-green skin and no hair. Muscles rippled in his arms and chest when he turned the couch upside down. He squinted at the cushion, sniffed at the steel. He reset the couch and shook his head. “Sir, these are well-made pieces, but....”

The cushion marked out *pi*, this time as darker dye spots. Johan stared for a few seconds, until his software assistant increased his eyes’ resolution and color sensitivity. The spots jumped out like a reversed-color photo of the stars. Damn, how could he tell Andrea? “How much do I owe you?”

“Three dinar 120 piastres. Here’s the account number.” The digits squirted into Johan’s mind. His software assistant reported the account belonged to the St. Bakunin Anarcho-Syndicalist Commune. “May I ask who referred you?” the appraiser asked.

“Referred? No one. My assistant found you in the agora.”

Darius’ forehead wrinkled over his left eye. “I assumed Paula Jastrow had referred you. We both know her.”

Paula? Johan blinked, mouth open; his assistant spoke through it. “She never mentioned you, Monsieur Darius.”

Darius clapped. “That’s it! If she spoke of me to you it must have been before I joined the commune. We renounce our wageslave names when we join, you see.”

Johan backed into a wassily chair. The chair’s thin chrome frame chilled his arms, and the black leather webbing bowed under his weight. “You asked her about me?”

“Yes, I—don’t worry, sir. I’m very discreet.”

So he wouldn’t tell Paula about the fake chairs. No help. What did you have appraised, she’d ask. Even if they recycled them before the party, she’d ask. How would he answer? *Fake barcelona chairs?* Paula’s software assistant would clamp down on her facial muscles while she would use a private channel to tell *everyone* how he’d been taken. Johan sank deeper into the chair, and stared at the floor while Darius left.

He went to the distillery to work, but even so the afternoon crept by. How could he tell Andrea the chairs were fakes? He thought so much he scalded himself while esterifying a neurotransmitter analog.

At half-past-seventeen, he had a hunch Andrea would be late. He puzzled for a moment before he remembered the 659 Nestor crisis: it must mean overtime for her in the Foreign Ministry's Leading Trojan Asteroids Bureau. More time for him to twist in the wind as he grasped for what to say.

Andrea arrived home around nineteen. She hung her tunic and sidearm near the door and loosened her cravat with her long, skinny fingers. "Hello, sweet. Did the appraiser come? Sweet?"

"They're fakes," Johan blurted. "All three pieces."

She blinked her gray-blue eyes, then yanked on the cravat. The silk scraped through her collar, and once through the free end snapped. Her narrow nostrils flared. "Goddammit! We trusted Brüning!"

"I'm sure he didn't know." The antiques dealer had an affable smile and a solid reputation.

"He buys barcelona chairs for a few thousand dinar and assumes they're real?"

"He may have assumed the person he bought them from didn't know their value," Johan said. She hadn't doubted Brüning when they'd bought the chairs.

"They won't ship antique chairs from Earth and not know the value. He played us! Have you talked to him?"

"No. Not yet."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because Paula Jastrow knows we had something appraised."

"Didn't you screen the appraiser?" Andrea clenched her fist around the cravat.

“Yes I did! He’d changed his name.”

Andrea dropped the cravat on one of the barcelona chairs, and rubbed her eyes with her other hand. “At the party, she’ll ask what we had appraised.” She frowned. “Which is better, to say ‘yes, these pieces are fakes’ or ‘they were fakes so we recycled them?’”

“Both sound terrible.”

“Recycle them. We pretend nothing happened and say the second appraiser confused us with another client.” She stroked her long, convex nose. “But first let’s get our money back from Brüning.”

Brüning’s antiques shop lay on a seedy part of 4<sup>th</sup> level, on Avenue Gamma between a mah-jongg parlor and a hydrogen pelleter. The spaceport’s industrial entrance lay a few hundred meters away. They went in Virtual, and their avatars resembled their bodies. Sunlight, piped by fiber optics to the tunnel’s ceiling, cast the avenue in a soft, warm light. Cargo jitneys raced both ways, and swerved around pedestrians and a woman asleep across the port-bound lanes. A government worker leaned against a storefront and sipped whiskey, while his gang of robots pruned a blue fungus from the maples in the median. The fungus smelled like dried blood.

“I never asked about your day,” Johan said. “Moravecs?”

“Right. The ones from 911 Agamemnon, not 624 Hektor or 1404 Ajax. The Nestorians have tungsten export treaties with all three moravec states. Agamemnon wanted to renegotiate its treaty. Nestor disagreed, and the aggie moravecs had to posture.”

“Will it affect Pallas?”

She rolled her eyes. “Nestor’s two billion clicks away.” The mah-jongg parlor lifted its shutters. Within, tiles clacked and a hookah gurgled. Andrea and he reached Brüning’s, and Johan trotted ahead to open the door.

Two centuries’ pieces crowded the antiques dealer’s showroom. A Second Empire armchair sat between a Scandinavian modernist wardrobe and a Brazilian biorganica bed. A lava lamp stood on a Victorian dresser. A spaniel-sized robot with yellow plastic skin licked dust from the dresser’s feet.

Brüning stood behind the counter, muscles rigid and gaze vacant, a pudgy statue in a blue pinstripe suit and thick cologne. Then attention flowed into his body. “Johan, hello.” He squinted. “You are Andrea? How may I help you?”

“Those goddam chairs are fakes,” Andrea said.

The smoothness left Brüning’s body. “What?”

“Here.” Johan squirted over both appraisers’ reports.

Brüning’s mouth drooped. “You’re sure. Oh, my. Fakes? I’m terribly sorry. Fakes.”

“We wish a refund,” Johan said.

“Refund? Of course. Every piastre.” Brüning ran his hands through his gray-streaked hair. “I can’t believe this happened.” Johan winced in sympathy.

“Don’t give us that line,” Andrea said. Brüning’s gaze jerked up. “You thought legit chairs could sell for piastres on the dinar?”

“Good lady, I would never knowingly traffic in forgeries! All I have is my honor! Never in my dealings with Captain Danneman have I...” The muscles round Brüning’s eyes grew tight with fear. “I’ll give a refund and offer you twenty percent off your next purchase. Please, don’t tell anyone. Twenty-five percent off.”

–He’s desperate,– Andrea said privately to Johan.

–How many items has he bought from Danneman?– Johan replied. –How many are fakes?– Brüning had more at stake than they did. If word of the forged barcelona chairs got out, he could lose more than social capital; he could lose his livelihood.

Andrea’s private voice took on a scheming tone. –Would the unborn one like a free biorganica bed?–

–Free? Love, we can’t kick the man when he’s down.–

After a moment, Andrea transmitted a sigh to him through the thoughtspace.

“Thirty percent off,” Johan said.

Brüning strained his head side-to-side before the word came out. “Deal.” Through his software assistant, Johan felt the refund enter their account. “The chairs are yours to keep.”

The Virtual dissolved, and their attention returned from their avatars to their bodies. Back in the flat, they stood in the nursery. The gestator hung on the wall, its bulging belly traced with veins. Johan thought about the nutrient and waste feeds; the lines were clear, and the nutrient mix flowed rich. The splitline down the belly’s center had grown thicker, and the catchbasket below the gestator would reach full growth in a

few weeks. Johan borrowed an imaging feed and looked inside. Luis floated upside down, thumb in his mouth and legs bowed.

“Time to recycle the chairs,” Andrea said.

Johan frowned. “Love?”

“Think! We can’t keep fakes in the living room.”

Johan shook his head. “I know, but maybe Michelle wants them.”

–Eldi, what did I tell you about van der Rohe’s furniture?–

“Then the unborn one–”

“We’ve already picked out biorganica,” Andrea said. “We’ve got our money back, and we’ll get six dinar for recycling the chairs. The end.”

The open door to the living room showed a strip of the chairs. Forgeries, sure, but handsome pieces. He recalled the appraiser’s words: closer to van der Rohe’s design than most antiques. “Some chairs are investments, and others are just a place to sit.”

“We’ve already wasted too much time on these chairs. Dammit.” What did she think he’d done now? Oh, she didn’t swear at him. “I have to go back to the office.”

Had today’s crisis worsened? “You can’t work from here?”

“No.” Her shoulders slumped. “Where’s my cravat?”

“What’s happened?”

“If I could tell you, I wouldn’t have to go in.” She gazed at him. “Two things: go long tungsten futures, and recycle the chairs. See you as soon as I can.”

Johan followed her to the living room, and bought ten March tungsten contracts (one hundred thousand kilos, 17.11 piastres a kilo) while she buckled her holster. She blew a kiss and left. Half his tasks done.

He relaxed onto a barcelona chair. He couldn't recycle the pieces. Yes, yes, assembled furniture—welfare recipients used it—but the barcelona chairs looked much better than the hand-cast methyl methacrylate loveseats with cottonskin upholstery now in Andrea's study. Assembled pieces might be a worse investment, but didn't aesthetics matter more?

Bah. Andrea was right. The chairs carried deceptive intent from the assembler vat. They oozed moral taint. If Brüning hadn't benefited from them, someone else had. His assistant brought the captain's name to mind: Mauricia Danneman Vasquez of the *San Tomé*. Treacherous merchant.

It then occurred to him she hadn't left port.

Confront Captain Danneman? No, no need for that. They had their money back, they could recycle the chairs, they could tell Paula Jastrow and their other party guests that Darius the appraiser had confused them with other clients. They'd gain nothing from confronting Captain Danneman.

Yet Danneman's deceit affected more than his family. How many forgeries had she smuggled into Pallas? She had to be stopped. Even if their purchase of fakes came out? Yes, even if. Andrea wouldn't agree, but she wasn't here to stop him.

Johan entered the port in Virtual, and headed to the *San Tomé*. Robots laden with freight trudged around and through his avatar, and liquid hydrogen knocked through

frosted pipes. He found the right pier, but rather than wait for a Virtual lift to carry him down, he jumped.

He landed at the ship's airlock. At first, the ship refused to let him manifest his avatar on-board, but when Johan mentioned Brüning and a potential police inquiry, it changed its mind. He found his avatar in a corridor deep in the *San Tomé*, facing a woman his software assistant told him was Danneman. She had red hair tied back, and a red halter and black pajamas clad her voluptuous figure.

“Thank you for your welcome, Captain,” Johan said.

Danneman crossed her arms and scowled. “You're polite, for a would-be extortionist.”

“I don't want money; I've made back my losses on the chairs. You should be punished for selling forgeries.”

She waved her hand at an open door. “Sit.”

Through the door stood a cubic room with gray walls. Spongy floor, musty air. One wall showed an external view. The asteroid hung above them, and biosolar cells colored the port's long cylindrical piers gray-green. Docked ships' running lights washed out the stars.

Three chairs, beech and chrome, styled in dot-com age pseudo-Scandinavian, stood in the room's center. Johan sat opposite Danneman and puffed out his chest. “I can petition the port authority to deny you keelage and keyage, and the courts to arraign you under our laws—”

“Señor de Clercq, have you read your laws?” Danneman waved her hand. “Importing assembled articles purported to be handcrafted is a crime only if the importer knows the articles are assembled. The wholesalers I buy them from say the pieces are handcrafted. I’ve never had a reason to doubt them.” She smirked, and intertwined her hands around her knee.

Johan’s outrage stewed. “I may not have enough evidence for a judge to investigate, but I have enough for the public. The insinuation will be enough.”

She jutted her face forward. “To my knowledge, I have never imported forgeries. You say otherwise and I’ll petition the court to arraign you for slander.”

He refused to look away. “You bought three barcelona chairs for a thousand dinar? When authentic pieces sell wholesale for twenty thousand or more? I don’t have to slander you. The facts alone will cloud you.”

The anger in Danneman’s face melted. “You can find those discounts in wholesale. It isn’t a public market, prices can be inefficient. Take your chairs, for example.”

“For example.”

“I’ve bought 22 lots from Señor Jackson over the years. I wondered how all these antiques ended up at 659 Nestor, but his documents authenticate—”

“659 Nestor? There’s no record the chairs went through there.”

“He showed me his documents, and gave me copies for shipment with the pieces. He averred the copies he gave me were true. The documents I saw said the pieces went through Nestor. The ones you saw didn’t?”

“You didn’t look at the copies shipped with the chairs?” Johan asked. Of course not. No gray marketeer would. “Go back. He sold these pieces for very low prices and you didn’t wonder?”

“Most sets cost more.”

“Then how did you get such a low price on the barcelona chairs?”

She grinned. “Jackson needed the money. I could smell it right away, heavy soap over male sweat. He admitted needing passenger tickets for him and his family to leave Nestor.”

Nestorians in the know would have foreseen the crisis. A hunch came to him, and he opened his thoughts to the agora. Avatars and software assistants buzzed with news: the aggie moravecs had bombarded Nestor’s port, and rumor said marines had landed. In the trading corner, tungsten jobbers shouted, eyes wide with fright and excitement. March tungsten climbed past 30 piastres a kilo.

“Did he make it?”

Danneman shrugged. “Passenger manifests from Nestor are public records. The local consulate could tell you.”

If Jackson hadn’t left... the implication made Johan giddy, but he kept his voice cool. “If our judges seek an affidavit from Monsieur Jackson....”

She cleared her throat. “Señor, I have committed no crime, but I see the facts are open to misinterpretation. Could we agree to conceal them from the public eye?”

He couldn’t punish her for importing forgeries; the gray market cloaked her. Plus, if Jackson hadn’t left Nestor... “We could. Do you transport distilled spirits?”

“How much are you selling them for?”

“Two hundred liters of hallucino-gin, 42 dinar per liter.” Wholesale he charged a third of that price.

Danneman’s mouth puckered. “Seventeen dinar 120 piastres.”

The tungsten price came to him: 59.77 piastres. His assistant kept his body calm as he debated whether to sell. At this moment, after commissions, he could make thirty thousand dinar. So why haggle with Danneman over a few hundred, he asked himself? Principle. “Thirty-five dinar 72 piastres.”

Danneman squinted at the ceiling, then ducked her head and extended her hand. He shook her cool damp palm, and he felt the money transfer as he dissolved the Virtual.

Back in his body in his flat, his software assistant laid more knowledge in his mind, and he grinned. Jackson had not left Nestor. He stretched out on the barcelona couch, dangled his feet over the edge and wiggled his toes. The tungsten price climbed higher, then entered a choppy trading range. He sold his contracts at 75.62 piastres per kilo, for a profit of forty thousand dinar.

A few hours later the door whisked apart, and Andrea’s footsteps shuffled to a stop just inside the threshold. “You didn’t recycle the chairs.”

He sat up, looked over the back cushion at his spouse. Her eyes were tight, but he didn’t fear her anger. She wouldn’t be angry long.

“Dammit, Johan, they’re fakes!”

He shook his head and his grin widened. “No. They’re Jacksons.”

#

Marimba notes and cannabis smoke filled the living room. A dozen bodies warmed the air, and chatter diffused off the foam-clad walls. Johan sipped his latest hallucino-gin. The neurotransmitter analog smeared memory and imagination—the same thing, ultimately—over his sensory inputs. The foam evaporated from the walls and revealed stippled rock. He stood and stared for a moment. If he blinked, the foam reappeared, melted again.

“Johan,” Paul Jastrow said. Tall, with firm biceps and a black beard on his sharp jaw, he sat on the barcelona couch. He had a bold baritone voice. Johan couldn’t recall when Paula had gone through the sex change. “Tell me about these pieces. They’re Jacksons?” Paul’s jawline softened, and the beard shrank. Johan blinked to reset the hallucination.

His software assistant beamed over the appraisers’ reports. “Jackson was a furniture assembler from 659 Nestor. His signature lies in the defect pattern—you can see it in the steel and on the leather—”

“An assembler?” Paul’s voice dripped disdain. “Why collect his pieces?”

“First, they’re quality reproductions.” Across the room, someone laughed at another’s joke. “Plus... Jackson is believed to have died when the moravecs invaded Nestor.” He glanced toward Andrea. From the nursery doorway, she smiled back.

Paul's eyes widened. Johan glanced away. No one really knew Jackson's fate, but if Paul thought the worst, all the better. Johan went on. "Jackson has a mere 22 sets known to exist." The marimba notes sounding through the room grew heavy and wooden.

"Twenty-two sets?" Paul asked. The hallucino-gin struck Johan in a wave. Paul's voice sounded tenor, and breasts bulged his Nehru jacket. "How valuable are they?"

Johan shrugged, and sipped more gin to cover the excitement lurking behind his face. "You tell me."

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## About the Author

RAYMUND EICH files patent applications, earned a Ph.D., won a national quiz bowl championship, writes science fiction and fantasy, and affirms Robert Heinlein's dictum that specialization is for insects.

In a typical day, he may talk with university biochemistry and science communication faculty, silicon chip designers, patent attorneys, epileptologists, and rocket scientists. Hundreds of papers cite his graduate research on the reactions of nitric oxide with heme proteins.

His other published works include the first novel in the Confederated Worlds series, TAKE THE SHILLING, as well as evolutionary psychology hard science fiction novel NEW CALIFORNIA, and swashbuckling fantasy novel A PRINCE OF THE BLOOD (writing as "Eric H. Munday"). Find out more about these and his other novels and short stories at CV-2 Books' website, <http://cv2books.com>.

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