

WASTE INVADERS

by Ernst Glibcure

WAKE UP AND SMELL
THE EFFLUENT:
SEWERGATE IS THE
HIGH-TECH SCANDAL
OF THE YEAR



PHOTO-ILLUSTRATIONS
BY JAMES PORTO
FOR TIME DIGITAL



"O.K., FINE, SO I'M THE PRESIDENT'S PREGNANT

DON'T CONSIDER MYSELF A PRIVACY FREAK. I DON'T CARE HOW many Department of Health nanofluorobots I swallow every time I brush my teeth. I don't need extra-crispy 2x10¹¹-bit encryption to keep my vidphone safe from eavesdropping. But I draw the line at breaking and entering, and when the avenue of entry is my personal commode, my private throne—well, that's where the Sewergate scandal hits a little too close to home.

But what really happened? Did Singing Frog president Bart Farabee really take amnesia pills? What went on in the Lincoln Bedroom between the President of the United States and Warm 'n' Cuddly Chief Financial Officer Pamela Kirkwarden? And most important of all, could cyborganic sewage-eating JellyBots really crawl out of my toilet at any moment?

Even in the high-stakes atmosphere of the Sewage Frontier, the bitter feud between rival waste-processing corporations Singing Frog and Warm 'n' Cuddly took the nation by surprise. Sewage processing used to be considered a service-level market, and a rather degrading one, but the Vermont-based Singing Frog Corp. changed all that. Singing Frog turned sewage processing into a growth industry by figuring out how to mine the effluvia of major cities for information. Who's eating what? Who's popping what pills? What key nutrients are missing from the city's diet? With its advanced sewage-analysis tools, Singing Frog could datamine the medical health of whole cities with its patented Mass Urinalysis technology, reaping a stupendous fortune in pharmaceuticals, not to mention service and consultancy fees. Its market cap soared. Huge sewage franchises sprang up across the major cities of the Sunbelt and the Midwest as fast as gourmet mushrooms.

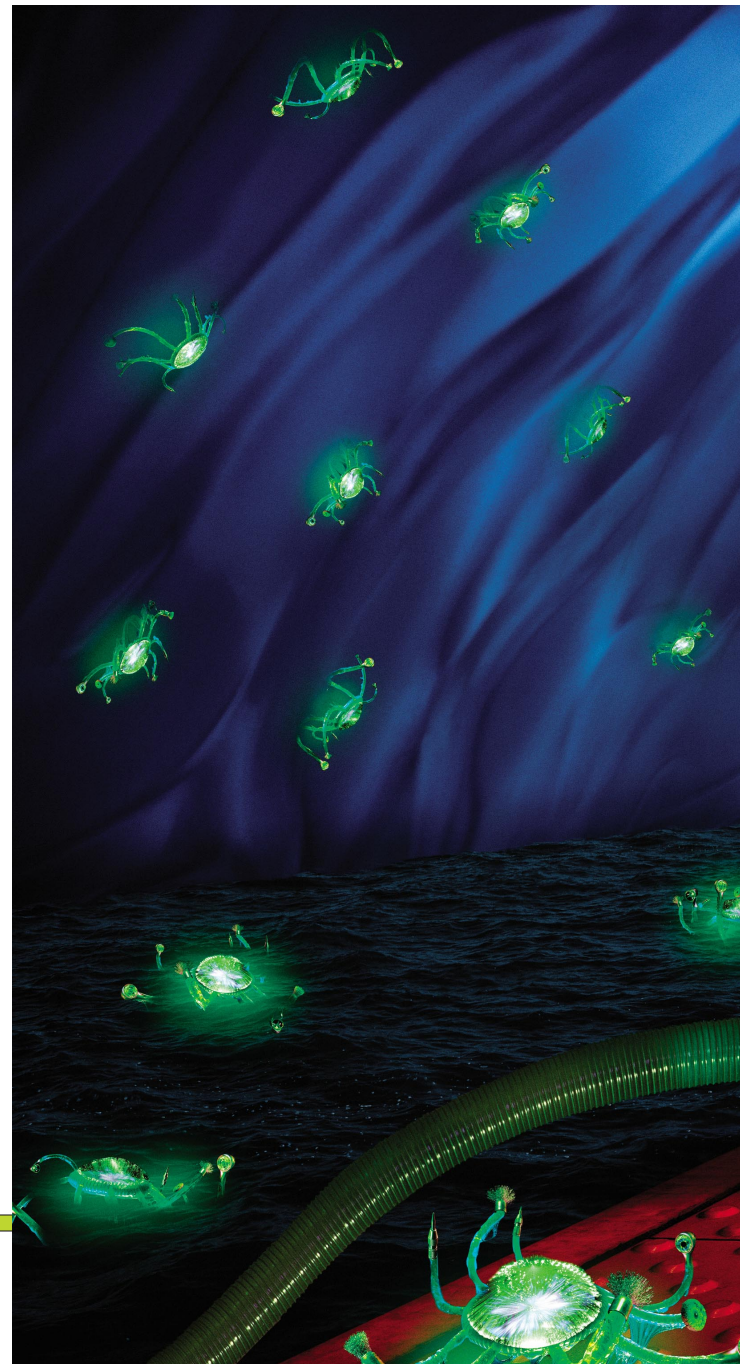
A market that rich couldn't remain uncontested for long. In 2022, Delaware-based Warm 'n' Cuddly jumped into the market, and the race was on to leverage the incredible potential of urban effluent. The rival firms won praise from Congress and a host of ardent investors. Warm 'n' Cuddly and Singing Frog were shining examples of today's friendly, whimsical megacorporations, taking proper pride in their high Environment and Employee Morale ratings. The sky was the limit.

Then everything started to go wrong. Warm 'n' Cuddly's engineers may have lacked the originality of their competitors, but they were determined to take the Sewage Revolution to new extremes. Not content to monitor sewage through random samples, Warm 'n' Cuddly deployed its infamous JellyBots, a new generation of neural-network robots that took over sewer systems wholesale, patrolling them 24 hours a day, seeking out information-rich strata in the sludge and following the trails of certain trace contaminants back to their sources.

Had they pushed the envelope too far? Whatever their value as gatherers of data, the JellyBots gave Warm 'n' Cuddly a direct conduit into every government office, every private home and every corporate headquarters—including that of its archrival, Singing Frog. According to sources within the Federal Trade Commission, investigators are now trying to determine

just how far and fast those JellyBots can penetrate. "I keep telling the Justice Department, the FTC and the American people: just follow the JellyBots," says Singing Frog attorney Kelly Howe. "Weeks of our disks have gone missing, our cell phones keep disappearing, car keys and palmtops are vanishing. It all adds up, and it all smells to high heaven!"

If this were just a straightforward case of corporate espionage, the Warm 'n' Cuddly story would have stayed in the BioTech section of the paper. But when your company's chief financial officer is sleeping with the President, your business isn't just your business anymore. Last spring Pamela Kirkwarden, Cuddly's gifted and ambitious CFO, hooked up with President



MISTRESS. BIG DEAL. WHAT IS THIS, THE 1990s?"

—PAMELA KIRKWARDEN, CFO, WARM 'N' CUDDLY

Raul Stafford at a glamorous Washington fundraiser for the Pokémon Cultural Center. It was mere months after he lost his wife, and the gossip columnists were instantly abuzz. The move netted Warm 'n' Cuddly quadrillions in free publicity, but when the Feds started looking into the company's business practices, what had once seemed a PR coup—getting a corporate officer to date the widowed President—began to turn sour.

This reporter recently met with the comely 35-year-old finance whiz at Warm 'n' Cuddly's Wilmington, Del., headquarters, and she had this to say in defense of the JellyBots. "Look at the bottom line. Our sweet little robots save our urban clients hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in water leaks and put a swift end to

toxic pollution. In 95 cases out of a hundred, when a JellyBot involuntarily climbs out of a commode, it is following an illegal trail of toxic or genetic contamination—*especially* at Singing Frog."

Fair enough. But given Kirkwarden's relationship with the President, can the American people be confident that the investigation of Warm 'n' Cuddly will proceed in a timely and vigorous fashion? "O.K., fine, so I'm the President's pregnant mistress," she responds. "Big deal. What is this, the 1990s?" Kirkwarden throws open her exquisite Alexander McQueen jacket, exposing her rounded midriff. "I'm keeping my baby no matter what you say. Remember, I could buy and sell you without opening my wallet, you pathetic little gossip hound."



PHOTOILLUSTRATION BY JAMES PORTO FOR TIME DIGITAL; STYLIST: LORI SELIGER; MAKEUP/BODY PAINTING: EFRAI ACHARKAN; WARDROBE: MARC JACOBS

As for President Stafford, he continues to maintain a calm above-the-fray attitude toward the whole donnybrook, but it's hard to believe that America's charismatic chief executive can recuse himself much longer—especially given Attorney General Daniel “Thundershock” Yates’ interest in the case. Yet another in America’s long dynasty of wrestler-politicians, Yates has become a one-man investigative tag team bent on uncovering the truth about Warm ’n’ Cuddly’s dubious business practices. And he’s never one to miss a camera cue.

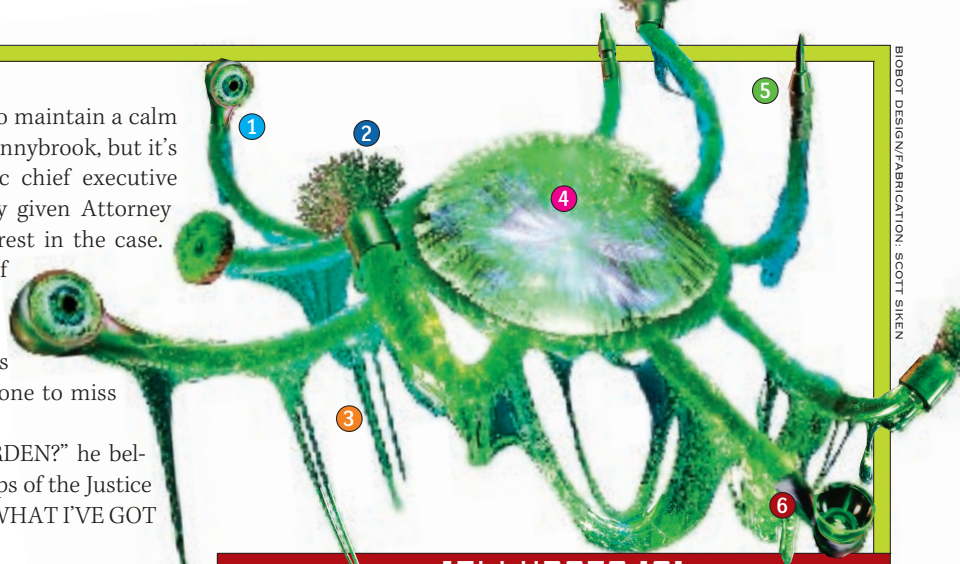
“ARE YOU READY FOR ME, KIRKWARDEN?” he bel-lowed at a recent press conference on the steps of the Justice Department. “DO YOU WANT A TASTE OF WHAT I’VE GOT COOKIN’? IT WON’T GO DOWN EASY!”

Turning away from the microphones, Yates is more soft-spoken. “It’s bad enough that Singing Frog can track a whiff of your private DNA down five miles of cast-iron pipe. Warm ’n’ Cuddly’s got an army of oozing pocket Big Brothers that can slither right up out of the can and sit on the bathroom floor blinking at you. That kind of technology is well beyond our nation’s already sufficiently relaxed privacy standards.” Turning back to the microphones, he added, “AND THAT’S NOT A THREAT, KIRKWARDEN! THAT’S A PROMISE!”

ALTHOUGH THE WARM ’N’ CUDDLY INVESTIGATION IS HOT and heavy, the company’s rivals at Singing Frog are far from off the hook. Though the precise capabilities of its Mass Urinalysis technology are not public knowledge, analysts agree that engineers at Singing Frog may well be capable of picking a single person’s DNA traces out of a city sewer and gathering detailed biochemical data on that individual. An invasion of privacy on that scale brings back bad memories of the Wal-Amazon antitrust hearings of the early 2010s.

Complicating matters are the bizarre psychopharmaceutical antics of Singing Frog founder Bartholomew Farabee. Several months ago, the reclusive Farabee began exhibiting increasingly eccentric behavior, culminating in the now infamous *Louie, Louie* incident on *Live with Regis and SimKathieLee*. The first shocking accusations—that Farabee had somehow been neurally poisoned by operatives from Warm ’n’ Cuddly—have been dismissed. Instead, Singing Frog’s embarrassed board of directors has been forced to admit that their CEO has been abusing amnesiacs for years—and in questionable circumstances.

“God knows, I’m not one to be judgmental about a healthy man’s sexual needs,” drawls Kirkwarden, “but when I heard that Bart Farabee was picking up cheap call girls, carrying on like a goat on Viagra and then eating these illegal pills so he would literally forget what he’d just done, I had to ask the American people: Who is this man? Why is he running a multiquadrillion-dollar FORTUNE 500 enterprise? Is this the kind of person we can trust with our sewage?” And yet, thanks to Farabee’s bad habits, Singing Frog is legally almost invulnerable. When questioned by Justice Department lawyers, Farabee protests that he simply cannot remember anything at all



BIOBOT DESIGN/FABRICATION: SCOTT SIKEN

JELLYBOTS 101

- 1 Multispectral optical sensors
- 2 Microtubule sample intake
- 3 External gel matrix, aka “slime”
- 4 Primary sensor array
- 5 Cold chisel/antirodent taser
- 6 Mössbauer spectrometer

Compact and versatile, the JellyBot can run for two weeks on power generated from free sewer methane. There’s no radio reception underground, so it’s programmed to react autonomously to anything from storm surges to rat attacks

beyond his junior year at M.I.T., and his physical inability to testify is a serious stumbling block for federal investigators.

Public policy experts are just about ready to throw up their hands at the whole mess. I met with Professor Dennis Miller, America’s senior soundbyte statesman, in his book-lined studio at Columbia University. “I gave up counting the ironies six months ago,” said Miller. “No sane person minded that this foxy upscale chick was doing the President. To judge by the look on the President’s face, he obviously needed some action. But now, just six months later, Pam’s both pregnant and indicted five ways from Sunday. The whole city of Atlanta wants her hung from the yardarm for privacy violations. What the hell have we gotten ourselves into here? Can’t this wacky Georgia peach just climb back onto her broomstick?”

Chris Rock, former Republican mayor of Washington, D.C., and currently Distinguished Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University, could only shake his head. “I told you so! As a conservative, I have no use for President Stafford, but that guy is a political genius. For years he’s used his zany personal life to grab the headlines and turn attention away from his policies. Now his billionaire golf buddies from Warm ’n’ Cuddly have created a major scandal. So check it out: he uses his rich-creep girlfriend to jam the country’s head straight down the bidet! It’s time America woke up and confronted the critical issues.”

Where will it end? Have Warm ’n’ Cuddly JellyBots really been pilfering from Singing Frog’s offices? Have they been peeking in your medicine cabinet? Will Bart Farabee recover his memory? Will Attorney General Yates emerge victorious in this prosecutorial steel-cage death match? One thing is clear: Sewer-gate is far from over, and it’s unlikely that anybody’s going to come out of it smelling like roses. ■