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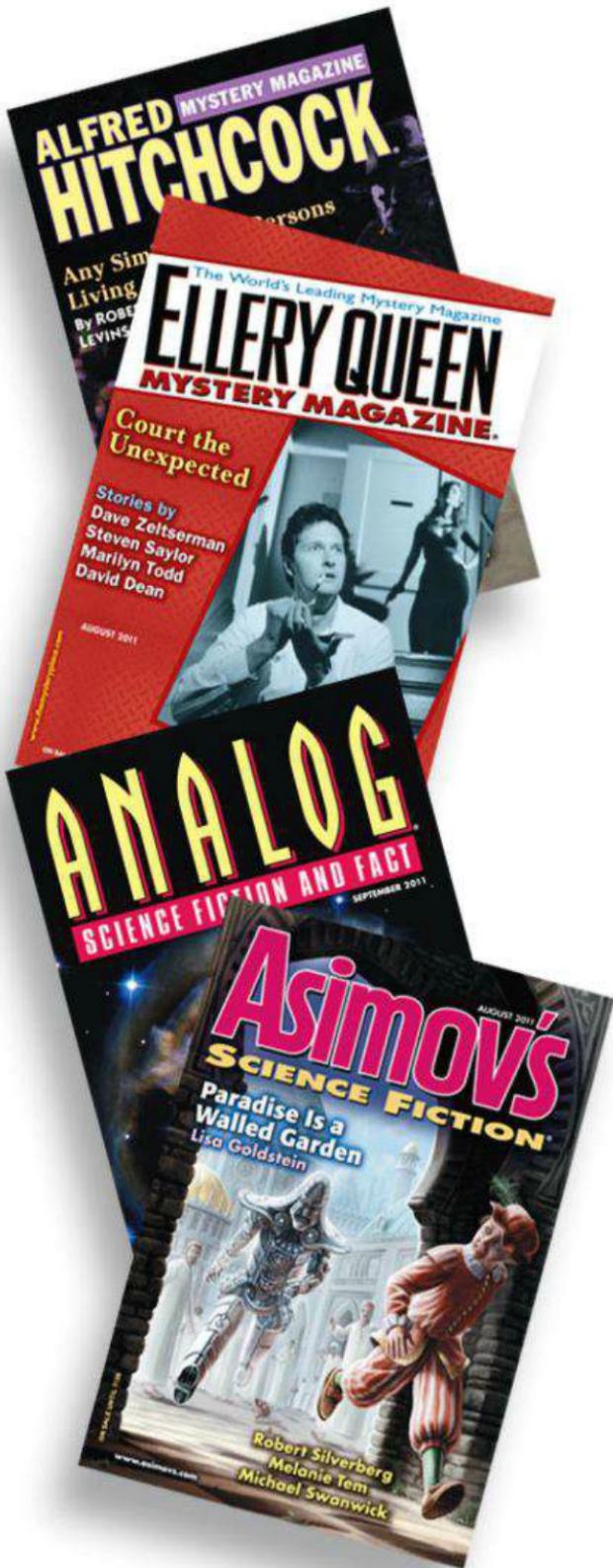
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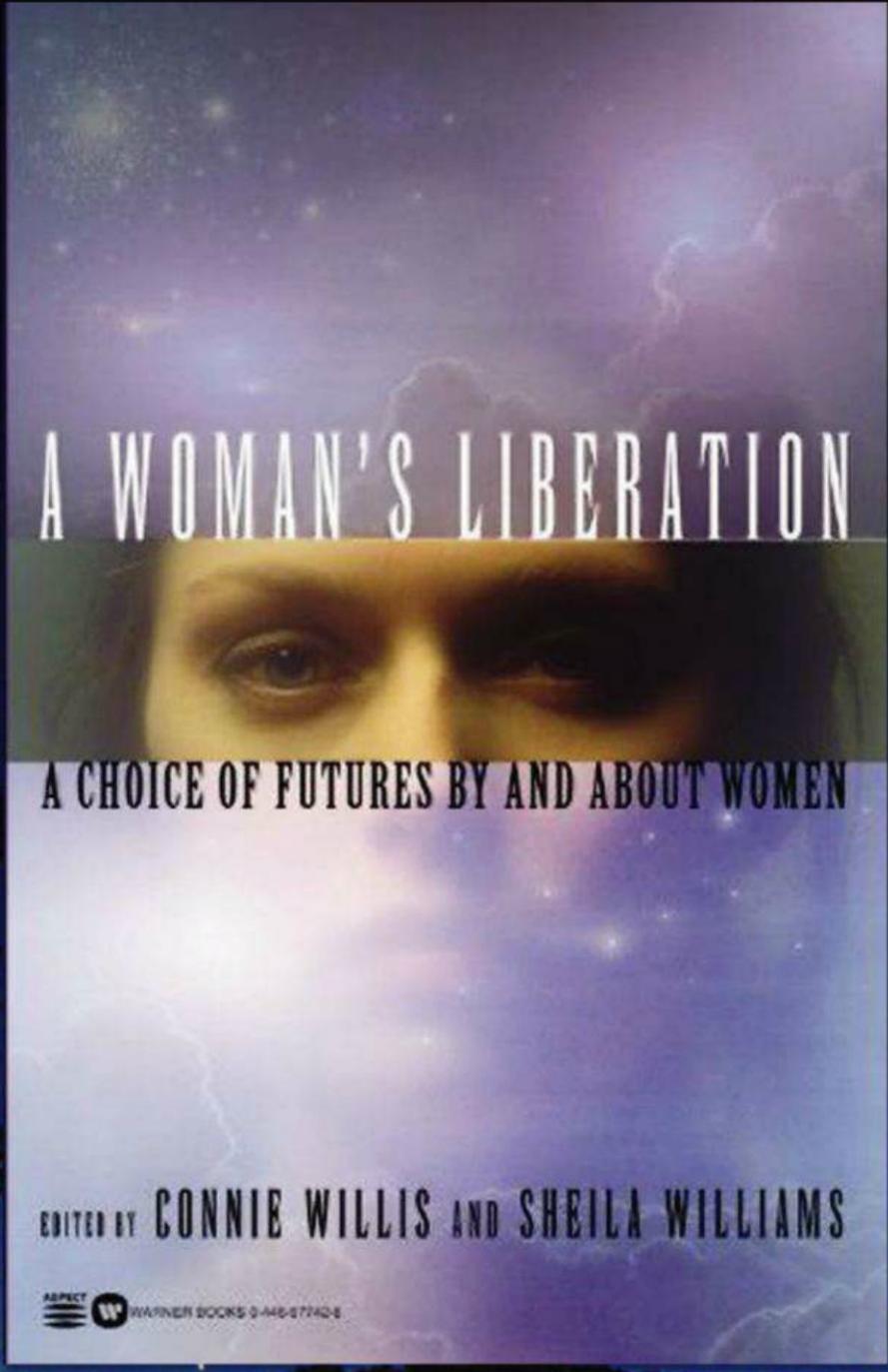
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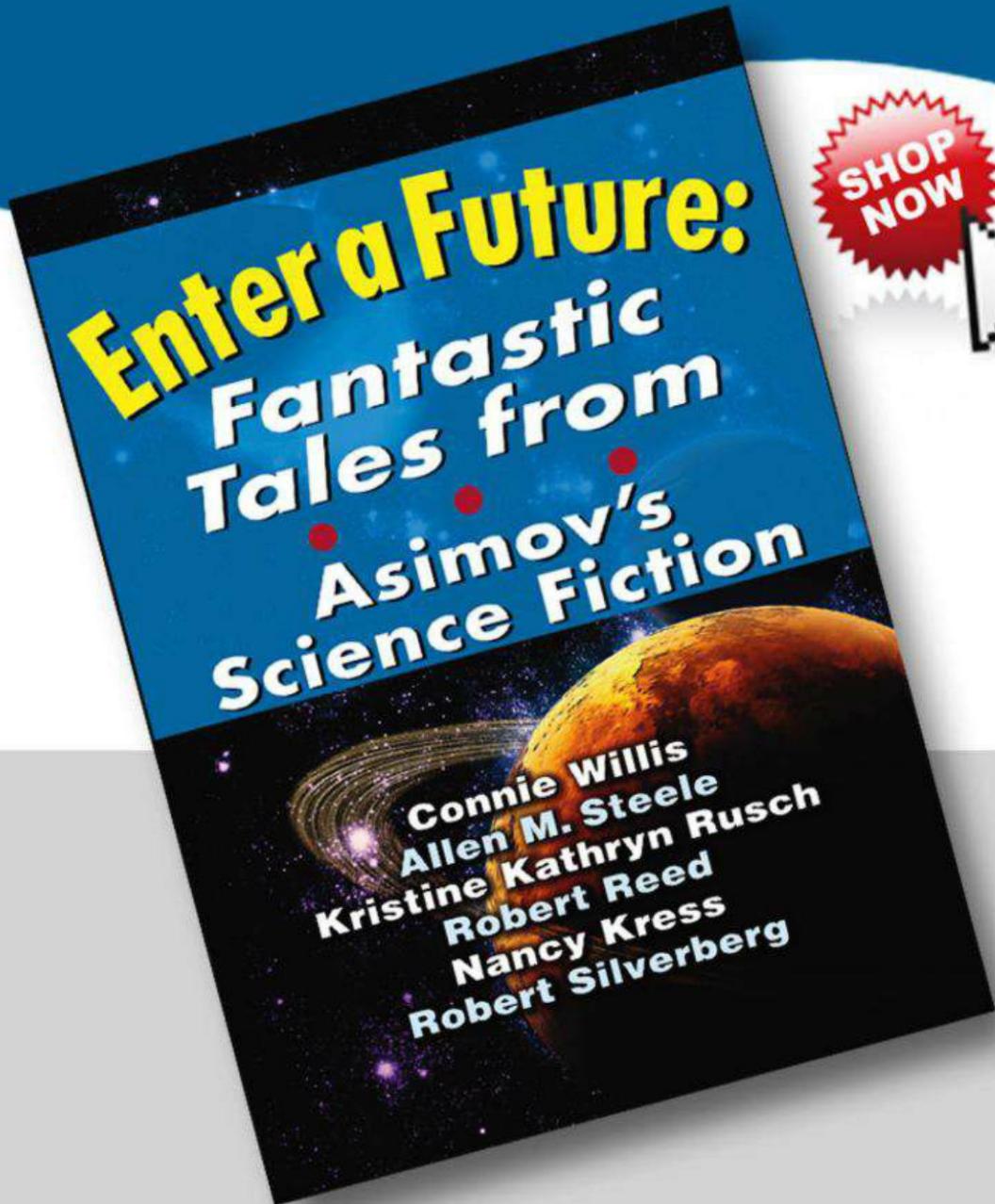
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ON WINNING THE HUGO

As I sat nervously in the audience at Denvention 3 a few years ago, the fourteen-year-old next to me noticed that I'd prepared a dense half-page acceptance speech just in case I actually won the Hugo Award for Best Editor—Short Form. All the speeches so far had been mercifully brief and she hissed that I'd better shorten mine. I whispered that she'd have to put up with these remarks because I couldn't see well enough to edit them in the darkened auditorium. Mortified by the prospect, she replied, "Well, Mom, then I hope you lose!" The problem for my poor daughter, and for the members of a Worldcon audience, is that having worked in this field for close to thirty years, there were countless people to whom I owed my thanks.

Circumstances were a little different at Renovation; this year's Worldcon in Reno, Nevada. My family couldn't be with me because it was move-in day at college, so I sat with fellow Hugo nominees, James Patrick Kelly and Geoffrey A. Landis. Having lost the Hugo for five years in a row, I hadn't brought a written speech. Ten minutes before the pre-Hugo reception, however, I decided I should give some thought to preparing for the unlikely event that I did win the 2011 award. In a slightly better lit auditorium waiting for my category to be called, I jotted down a brief list on the back of my program. Horrified that I hadn't prepared a real speech, Jim Kelly decided to put a curse on me. He said, "When they call your name, you'll forget most of these people, you'll get flustered and say 'thank you,' and it will be all right."

"Forget that," I thought. I knew exactly who I wanted to thank and why. Fortunately, when my name actually was called I found I was intensely focused and had no problem remembering what I

needed to say. Of course, the speech I said on stage could only be a couple of minutes long and necessarily truncated the number of people I really had to thank. Just as I asked the audience to bear with me, I hope you will too while I recreate a slightly expanded version of that speech here:

My thanks go first to the writers who allow us to use their wonderful stories in *Asimov's* and who make working on the magazine so much fun. Second, and no less important, I have to thank you, the readers of *Asimov's*. You may have voted for the Hugo and you support each issue with your charge card or your checkbook. Without you, there wouldn't be much reason to produce this magazine.

For me, this Hugo is as much an award for *Asimov's* as it is for an individual editor. The magazine could not be produced without the work of a group of dedicated people. I'd like to thank my managing editor, Trevor Quachri; my art director, Victoria Green; and our production artist, Cindy Tiberi. Administrative support comes from Mary Grant and Emily Hockaday. In addition to expressing my gratitude to them, I'd like to thank staff members from departments as varied as production, accounting, subsidiary rights, IT, advertising, and circulation. It takes the work of these people and many others to get the magazine out and into your hands.

I'd also like to thank Stanley Schmidt, my colleague down the hall. Stan is the long-time editor of *Analog*. He has always been a friend and a mentor and he's an excellent hiking companion as well. His insights and support cannot be overemphasized.

I have so many friends in this field that it's terrible to single out any of them, but there are two who have gotten

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SCIENCE FICTION

me through two sales of the magazine, helped me adapt to three publishers, taken all my frantic phone calls, and always been there for me. They are Connie Willis and Jim Kelly and I want to thank them as well as all my other incredibly supportive friends.

My patient husband and my mostly understanding children deserve their share of thanks, too. (In a mark of how much she's matured, my older daughter seemed as distressed at not being in the audience for me as I was at not being able to settle her in to her first year at college.) I couldn't edit this magazine if I didn't have all of them in my corner.

I also want to mention two men who are no longer with me, but who are very much responsible for where I am today. One is my good friend, Isaac Asimov. I was deeply influenced by his fiction as a teenager. Later, I was impressed that he had agreed to co-found a magazine that would provide a showcase for the fiction of new writers much as his fiction had found a home in the SF magazines when he was starting out. It's a philosophy that we continue to honor. Isaac was an ally and a protector during the first ten years of my career and I still miss him. The other man is my dad, Alfred Williams, who filled up an impressionable young mind with tales of Dejah Thoris, Tars Tarkus, and Thuvia, Maid of Mars, and created a passion that has guided my life to this day. My father shared all his books with me. We poured over the *Hugo Winners* (edited by Isaac Asimov) together and discovered that there were such astonishing things as SF magazines and conventions. After that, he took me to my earliest conventions and he always encouraged me to follow my dreams.

That's pretty close to what I said, or at least what I remember saying. It is thanks to Isaac and my dad that I have a career that I love. Putting together an enjoyable magazine is truly more than enough reward for me, but the Hugo is a nice sign that you, the readers of *Asimov's*, find this magazine rewarding as well. O

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ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

ROBIN DIMEGLIO

Advertising Sales Manager

Tel: (203) 866-6688 ext.180 Fax: (203) 854-5962
printadvertising@dellmagazines.com
(Display and Classified Advertising)

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REREADING EDDISON

“**T**he greatest high fantasy of them all,” is what I called it when I was asked for a comment to be used on a British reprint edition in 2000, and—though I anticipate grumblings from the partisans of Messrs. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis and, perhaps, George R.R. Martin—I still feel that way, after my latest rereading of it. I’m talking about E.R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros*, that strange, profound, and inimitable novel of magic and adventure on an imaginary world that its author preferred to call Mercury.

It’s a book that I’ve been reading, on and off, since 1952, when I was a freshman at Columbia. I had plenty of other things to read that freshman year—Homer, Sophocles, Dante, and that was for just *one* of my many courses—but despite the rigors of college life I was at the same time an avid reader of SF and fantasy, and *The Worm Ouroboros*, of which I had heard a great deal, was deemed a legendary classic of its genre by those in a position to know. The book was impossibly, fabulously rare, of course, but when a new edition of it appeared I hastily scraped up five dollars for it, I know not how, that amount being the equivalent of about seventy-five dollars in today’s money, and read it in one long gasping burst of astonishment and enthusiasm. There is, I still think, nothing like it in all of literature: it is not only a fantasy epic but an epic fantasy, a book of gigantic scale and overwhelming power.

All I know about Eric Rucker Eddison is that he was born in Yorkshire in 1882, entered the British civil service after his schooling, and eventually ascended to the post of deputy comptroller-general of the Department of Overseas Trade. We can imagine him reporting to his office five

days a week and dutifully filing reports and memoranda; but somehow, in his free time, he was able to turn his remarkable mind to vast and soaring fantasies set in worlds far removed from the dreary precincts of bureaucracy.

The first of them, which apparently took him five years to finish, was *The Worm Ouroboros*, published in London in 1922 and in the United States four years later. (The “worm” of the title is no worm at all, but the gigantic mythic serpent, first encountered in ancient Egyptian legend, that encircles the world with its tail in its mouth, and that serpent plays no part in the novel at all. The title is strictly metaphorical, referring to the circular structure of the plot, which doubles back on itself like the Ouroboros serpent so that the last sentence of the book returns the story to its starting point.)

The Worm Ouroboros had only modest commercial success, but those few who read it loved it greatly, which accounts for the great repute that the book had achieved by the time of its 1952 American reissue. Eddison followed it in 1926 with *Styrbiorn the Strong*, a novel written in imitation of the Icelandic sagas—like Tolkien and Lewis he was fascinated by “the Northern thing,” the saga literature of medieval Europe—and then, in 1935, with *Mistress of Mistresses*, a fantasy that is tangentially linked to *The Worm* but is not at all like it in tone. He retired from the civil service in 1937 to devote himself to his next novel, *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (a sequel to *Mistress*), and was still at work on the third book in that sequence, *The Mezentian Gate*, when he died in 1945. (It was published posthumously, incomplete as it was, in 1958.) Those three books, the Zimiamvian trilogy, as they are known, are fine and fasci-

nating works, subtle and sophisticated, but too rarefied in tone and concept to reach any but the smallest of readerships. *The Worm* stands apart from them: also not an easily accessible novel, but one, which once the reader has entered it, grips one with inexorable force.

It starts quietly, and, I have always thought, with a miscalculation of narrative design:

There was a man named Lessingham dwelt in an old low house in Wastdale, set in a gray old garden where yew-trees flourished that had seen Vikings in Copeland in their seedling time. Lily and rose and larkspur bloomed in their borders, and begonias with blossoms big as saucers, red and white and pink and lemon-colour. . . .

And so on for quite a bit of pleasant bucolic descriptive prose. Lessingham and his lady enjoy a summer evening together; she reads to him from *The Saga of Burnt Njal*, one of the Icelandic masterpieces; bedtime comes, and they disagree amiably about which of the bedrooms of their house to sleep in, so that ultimately Lessingham goes off alone to a room called the Lotus Room, whose occupants sometimes are subject to strange dreams. During the night he is awakened by a bird that summons him to the planet Mercury, promising to show him "the forests, plains, and ancient mountains, cities and palaces of this world." Once there, she tells him that they are in a land called Demonland, and points out some of its great lords and captains. Very swiftly we are among them—three puissant brothers, the Lords Juss, Spitfire, Goldry Bluszco, and their cousin Brandoch Daha—and Lessingham disappears, never to return again in the book. The entire prologue is elegantly handled, drawing us gently into Lessingham's dream of far-off Mercury, but the book could have begun just as effectively if it had plunged us down at once among Juss and Spitfire and their companions.

Mercury, of course, has no forests and

plains, and Eddison quickly forgets that his book is taking place there. (It does not take place on Earth, either. It takes place in a self-contained world of Eddison's imagination, original and unique, as a pure work of fantasy should.) Nor are the warring nations of that world—the Witches, the Demons, the Ghouls, the Goblins—in any way the witches and demons of our own mythology. In *The Worm* they are simply the names of warring nations, quite human in nature.

An ambassador from Witchland arrives at the court of Demonland, demanding that the Demons recognize King Gorice XI as their master. The Demon lords reply that they will submit only if the king can best Lord Goldry Bluszco in wrestling. The match is held; Goldry Bluszco, we are told, "heaved the King over his head, hurling him as one hurleth a ponderous spear, head-foremost to the earth. And the King smote the ground with his head, and the bones of his head and his spine were driven together and smashed, and blood flowed from his ears and nose." The Witches gather up the corpse of the king and withdraw; their new king, Gorice XII, employs his court sorcerer to seize Goldry Bluszco by magical means and carry him off to a mountain prison—the war is on, and away we go.

As the passage I have just quoted should indicate, *The Worm*'s style is majestic and archaic, a style concocted out of the Norse Eddas and the Elizabethan dramatists and the rhythms of the seventeenth-century essayist Sir Thomas Browne, a tour de force of singing, soaring prose that is sustained from the first page to the last. To appreciate it, of course, one needs a tolerance for archaisms ("She said in his ear softly, 'I see that thou art too masterful. I see thou art one who will be denied nothing, in whatsoever thine heart is set. Come.') and for great swaths of vivid description. ("Cloud and mist abode ever in the south, and only the foothills showed of the great ranges beyond Bhavinan. But on the evening of the sixth day before

Yule, it being the nineteenth of December when Betelgeuze stands at midnight on the meridian, a wind blew out of the north-west with changing fits of sleet and sunshine. Day was fading as they stood above the cliff. All the forest land was blue with shades of approaching night: the river was dull silver: the wooded heights afar mingled their outlines with the towers of turbulent blue vapour that hurtled in ceaseless passage through the upper air") I could quote for pages and pages. ("The rift ran wider, eastward and westward, opening on more peaks and sunset-kindled snows. And a rainbow leaning to the south was like a sword of glory across the vision.") I could quote all 440 pages, if only I had the space. But those who prefer the clipped manner of modern storytelling had better stay away.

It is a land of absolute values. The four lords of Demonland are grandly heroic in every way. The villains of Witchland (the sorcerer Gorice XII, the warriors Corund and Corinius, and the slippery counsellor Lord Gro) are the blackest of villains. The battles are bloody ones; the challenges that face the protagonists in their quest to free Goldry Bluszco from his prison are titanic, and those challenges are met; great crimes are committed, great loves are pledged, great magics are unleashed.

There is very little to compare with the scope of that magic in the rest of fantasy literature. A good example is the fourth chapter, "Conjuring in the Iron Tower," in which King Gorice ("his nose hooked as the eagle's beak, his cropped hair . . . his high cheek-bones and cruel heavy jaw. . . ."), aided by Lord Gro, calls up visions of the war to come. ("Fumes of a faint purple hue came from the neck of

the retort, and the King gathered them in a flask. . . . The King muttered an incantation, and the powder moved and heaved, and was like a crawling mass of cheesemites in an overripe cheese.") And so on until the earth quakes and whirlwinds rage with the force of their spells. (The power of the scene is matched in Chapter 32, "The Latter End of All the Lords of Witchland," which culminates in a cataclysm of Shakespearean force. But then, too, there is the conquest of the unclimbable flame-encircled mountain Zora Rach, and the crossing of the torrential Bhavinan River on the back of a friendly crocodile, and Lord Juss's flight aboard the hippogriff, and much, much more.)

I loved it all when I read it in 1952, and I love it still, and if you have any taste for this sort of fantasy you will love it also. *The Worm Ouroboros* is no longer protected by copyright, and many editions of it are now available, including Kindle versions. Some of them are exact reprints of the original edition, some are not; and I recommend you choose carefully, because the original edition had wondrous illustrations by Keith Henderson that are as much a part of the experience of reading *The Worm Ouroboros* as Tenniel's illustrations are for *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Seek them out.

Indeed, there is nothing else like this book. James Stephens said in his introduction to it—and you should try to find an edition that reprints the Stephens introduction—"As a story or as prose it is wonderful. . . . From whatever heaven Mr. Eddison comes, he has added a masterpiece to English literature." ○

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Rudy Rucker is a writer, a mathematician, a computer scientist, and an occasional painter. He is best-known for his avant garde science fiction, and he received the Philip K. Dick award twice, for his early cyberpunk novels *Software* and *Wetware*, which are back in print as parts of the Ware tetralogy. He currently edits the free online speculative fiction magazine *Flurb* in his spare time. Rudy's latest published books are a fantasy-like novel about the afterworld, *Jim and the Flims*, and his autobiography, *Nested Scrolls*. Between books, he enjoys collaborating with other authors. In the past Rudy's written short stories with Bruce Sterling, Marc Laidlaw, Paul Di Filippo, John Shirley, and Terry Bisson. This is his first collaboration with Eileen Gunn, and he hopes there will be more. Eileen is a short-story writer and editor. Her fiction has received the Nebula award in the US and Sense of Gender award in Japan, and it has been nominated for the Hugo, Philip K. Dick, and World Fantasy awards and short-listed for the James Tiptree, Jr. award. Eileen is the editor/publisher of the late *Infinite Matrix* webzine and recently guest-edited *Flurb* #11. She served for twenty-two years as a member of the board of directors of the Clarion West Writers Workshop. These masterful authors join forces to create a gonzo look at the sort of person who might become the . . .

HIVE MIND MAN

Rudy Rucker & Eileen Gunn

Diane met Jeff at a karate dojo behind a Wienerschnitzel hot-dog stand in San Bernardino. Jeff was lithe and lightly muscled, with an ingratiating smile. Diane thought he was an instructor.

Jeff spent thirty minutes teaching Diane how to tilt, pivot, and kick a hypothetical assailant in the side—which was exactly what she'd wanted to learn how to do. She worked in a strip mall in Cucamonga, and she'd been noticing some mellow but edging-to-scary guys in the parking lot where she worked. The dividing line between mellow and scary in Cucamonga had a lot to do with the line between flush and broke, and Diane wanted to be ready when they crossed that line.

Diane was now feeling that she had a few skills that would at least surprise someone who thought she was a little dipshit officeworker who couldn't fight her way out of a paper bag.

"I bet I could just add these to my yoga routine," she said, smiling gratefully at Jeff.

"Bam," said Jeff. "You've got it, Diane. You're safe now. Why don't you and I go out to eat?" He drew out his silvery smartphone and called up a map, then peered at Diane. "I'm visualizing you digging into some . . . falafel. With gelato for dessert. Yes? You know you want it. You gotta refuel after those killer kicks."

"Sounds nice," said Diane. "But don't you have to stay here at the dojo?" This Jeff was cute, but maybe too needy and eager to please. And there was something else about him. . . .

"I don't actually work here," said Jeff. "The boss lets me hang out if I work out with the clients. It's like I work here, but I have my freedom, y'know? You go shower off, and I'll meet you outside."

Well, that was the something else. Did she want to get involved with another loser guy—a cute guy, okay?—but someone who had a smartphone, a lot of smooth talk, and still couldn't even get hired by a dojo to chat up new customers?

"Oh, all right," said Diane. It wasn't like she had much of anything to do tonight. She'd broken up with her jerk of a boyfriend a couple of days before.

Jeff was waiting in a slant of shade, tapping on his smartphone. It was the end of June, and the days were hot and long. Jeff looked at Diane and made a mystic pass with his hand. "You broke up with your boyfriend last week."

She gave him a blank stare.

"And you're pretty sure it was the right thing to do. The bastard."

"You're Googling me?" said Diane. "And that stuff about Roger is *public*?"

"There are steps you could take to make your posts more private," said Jeff. "I can help you finesse your web presence if you like. I *live* in the web."

"What's your actual job?" asked Diane.

"I surf the trends," said Jeff, cracking a wily smile. "Public relations, advertising, social networking, investing, like that."

"Do you have a web site?"

"I keep a low profile," said Jeff.

"And you get paid?"

"Sometimes. Like—today I bought three hundred vintage Goob Dolls. They're dropping in price, but slower than before. It's what we call a second-order trend? I figure the dolls are bottoming out, and in a couple of days I'll flip them for a tidy profit."

"I always hated Goob Dolls when I was a kid," said Diane. "Their noses are too snub, and I don't like the way they look at me. Or their cozy little voices."

"Yeah, yeah. But they're big-time retro for kids under ten. Seven-year-old girls are going to be mad for them next week. Their parents will be desperate."

"You're gonna store three hundred of them and ship them back out? Won't that eat up most of your profit?"

"I'm not a flea-market vendor, Diane," said Jeff, taking a lofty tone. "I'm buying and selling Goob Doll *options*."

Diane giggled. "The perfect gift for a loved one. A Goob Doll option. So where's your car anyway?"

"Virtual as well," said Jeff smoothly. "I'm riding with you. Lead the way." He flung his arm forward dramatically. "You're gonna love this falafel place; it's Egyptian style. My phone says they use fava beans instead of garbanzos. And they have hieroglyphics on their walls. Don't even ask about the gelato place next door to it. Om Mane Padme Yum #7. Camphor-flavored buffalo-milk junket. But, hey, tell me more about yourself. Where do you work?"

"You didn't look that up yet? And my salary?"

"Let's say I didn't. Let's say I'm a gentleman. Hey, nice wheels!"

"I'm a claim manager for an insurance company," said Diane, unlocking her sporty coupe. "I ask people how they whiplashed their necks." She made a face. "Bo-ring. I'm counting on you to be interesting, Jeff."

"Woof."

It turned out to be a fun evening indeed. After falafel, guided by Jeff's smartphone, they watched two fire trucks hosing down a tenement, cruised a chanting mob of service-industry picketers, caught part of a graffiti bombing contest on a freeway ramp wall, got in on some outdoor bowling featuring frozen turkeys and two-liter soda-bottles, and ended up at a wee hours geek couture show hosted by the wetware designer Rawna Roller and her assistant Sid. Rawna was a heavily tanned woman with all the right cosmetic surgery. She had a hoarse, throaty laugh—very *Vogue* magazine. Sid was an amusing mixture of space-cadet and NYC sharpie. Rawna's goth-zombie models were wearing mottled shirts made of—

"Squidskin?" said Diane. "From animals?"

"Yeah," marveled Jeff. "These shirts are still alive, in a way. And they act like supercomputer web displays." He pointed at a dorky-looking male model in a dumb hat. "Look at that one guy in the shiny hat; you can see people's posts on his back. He's got the shirt filtered down to show one particular kind of thing."

"Motorcycles with dragon heads?" said Diane. "Wow." She controlled her enthusiasm. "I wonder how much a Rawna Roller squidskin shirt costs."

"Too much for me," said Jeff. "I think you have to, like, lease them." He turned his smile on Diane. "But the best things in life are free. Ready to go home?"

The evening had felt like several days' worth of activity, and it seemed natural for Diane to let Jeff spend the night at her apartment. Jeff proved to be an amazingly responsive and empathetic lover. It felt like they were merging into one.

And he was very nice to Diane over breakfast, and didn't give her a hard time because she didn't have any eggs or bacon, what her ex-boyfriend Roger had called "real food."

"Are you a vegetarian?" asked Jeff, but he didn't say it mean.

Diane shrugged. She didn't want to be labeled by what she ate. "I don't like to eat things that can feel pain," she said. "I'm not woo-woo about it. It just makes me feel better." And then she had to go off to work.

"Stay in touch," she told Jeff, kissing him goodbye as she dropped him off downtown, near the JetTram.

"You bet," Jeff said.

And he did. He messaged her at work three or four times that day, called her that evening, messaged her two more times the next day, and the day after that, when Diane came home from work, Jeff was sitting on a duffel bag outside her apartment complex.

"What's up?" asked Diane, unable to suppress a happy smile.

"I've been sharing an apartment with three other guys—and I decided it was time to move on," said Jeff. He patted his bag. "Got my clothes and gadgets in here. Can I bunk with you for a while?"

The main reason Diane had dropped Roger was that he didn't want them to live together. He said he wasn't ready for that level of intimacy. So she wasn't averse to Jeff's request, especially since he seemed pretty good at the higher levels of intimacy. But she couldn't let him just waltz in like that.

"Can't you find somewhere else to live?"

"There's always the Daily Couch," said Jeff, tapping his smartphone. "It's a site

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where people auction off spare slots by the night. You use GPS to find the nearest crash pad. But—Diane, I'd rather just stay here and be with you.”

“Did your friends make you move? Did you do something skeevy?”

“No,” said Jeff. “I’m just tired of them nickel-and-diming me. I’m bound for the big time. And I’m totally on my biz thing.”

“How do you mean?”

“I sold my Goob Doll options yesterday, and I used the profit to upgrade my access rights in the data cloud. I’ve got a cloud-based virtual growbox where I can raise my own simmie-bots. Little programs that live in the net and act just like people. I’m gonna grow more simmies than anyone’s ever seen.”

“Were your roommates impressed?” said Diane.

“You can’t reason with those guys,” said Jeff dismissively. “They’re musicians. They have a band called Kenny Lately and the Newcomers. I went to high school with Kenny, which is why we were rooming together in the first place. I could have been in the Newcomers too, of course, but . . .” Jeff trailed off with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“What instrument do you play?” asked Diane.

“Anything,” said Jeff. “Nothing in particular. I’ve got great beats. I could be doing the Newcomers’ backup vocals. My voice is like Kenny’s, only sweeter.” He dropped to one knee, extended his arms, and burst into song. *“Diane, I’ll be your man, we’ll make a plan, walk in the sand, hand in hand, our future’s grand, please take a stand.”* He beat a tattoo on his duffel bag. *“Krugerrand.”*

“Cute,” said Diane, and she meant it. “But—really, you don’t have any kind of job?”

“I’m going to be doing promo for Kenny’s band,” said Jeff. “They said they’d miss my energy. So there’s no hard feelings between us at all.”

“Are Kenny Lately and the Newcomers that popular?” Diane had never heard of them.

“They will be. I have seven of their songs online for download,” said Jeff. “We’re looking to build the fan base. Kenny let me make a Chirp account in his name.” Jeff looked proud. “I’m Kenny Lately’s chirper now. Yeah.”

“You’ll be posting messages and links?”

“Pictures too,” said Jeff. “Multimedia. It’s like I’m famous myself. I’m the go-to guy for Kenny Lately. My simmies can answer Kenny’s email, but a good chirp needs a creative touch—by me. The more real followers Kenny gets, the better the sales. And Kenny’s cutting me in for 10 percent, just like a band member.” Jeff looked earnest, sincere, helpless. Diane’s heart melted.

“Oh, come on in,” said Diane. If it was a mistake, she figured, it wouldn’t be the only one she’d ever made. Jeff was a lot *nicer* than Roger, in bed and out of it.

In many ways, Jeff was a good live-in boyfriend. Lately Diane had been ordering food online, and printing it out in the fab box that sat on the kitchen counter next to the microwave. It tasted okay, mostly, and it was easy. But Jeff cooked tasty meals from real vegetables. And kept the place clean, and gave Diane backrubs when she came home from working in her cubicle at the insurance company. And, above all, he was a gentle, considerate lover, remarkably sensitive to Diane’s thoughts and moods.

He really only had two flaws, Diane thought—at least that she’d discovered so far.

The first was totally trivial: he doted on talk shows and ghastly video news feeds of all sorts, often spinning out crackpot theories about what he watched. His favorite show was something called “Who Wants to Mock a Millionaire?” in which bankers, realty developers, and hi-tech entrepreneurs were pelted with eggs—and worse—by ill-tempered representatives of the common man.

“They purge their guilt this way,” Jeff explained. “Then they can enjoy their money. I love these guys.”

"I feel bad for the eggs," said Diane. Jeff looked at her quizzically. "Well, I do," insisted Diane. "They could have had nice lives as chickens, but instead they end up smeared all over some fat cat's Hermes tie."

"I don't think they use fertilized eggs," Jeff said.

"Well, then I feel bad that the eggs never got fertilized."

"I don't think you need to feel too bad," said Jeff, glancing over at her. "Everything in the world has a life and a purpose, whether it's fertilized or not. Or whether it's a plant or an animal or a rock." He used his bare foot to prod a sandal lying next to the couch. "That shoe had life when it was part of a cow, and it still has life as a shoe. Those eggs may feel that their highest function is to knock some humility into a rich guy."

"You really think that?" asked Diane, not sure if he was just yanking her chain. "Is that like the Gaia thing?"

"Gaia, but more widely distributed," said Jeff. "The sensei at the dojo explained it all to me. It's elitist to think we're the only creatures that matter. What a dumb, lonely thing to think. But if everything is alive, then we're not alone in the universe like fireflies in some huge dark warehouse."

Maybe Jeff was more spiritual than he appeared, Diane thought. "So, if everything is alive, how come you still eat meat?"

"Huh," said Jeff. "Gotta eat something. Meat wants to be eaten. That's what it's for."

Okaaaayyy, Diane thought, and she changed the subject.

Then one day Diane came home and found Jeff watching a televangelist. Pastor Veck was leaping up and down, twisting his body, snatching his eyeglasses off and slapping them back on. He was a river of words and never stopped talking or drawing on his chalkboard, except once in a while he'd look straight out at his audience, say something nonsensical, and make a face.

"You believe in that?" she asked.

"Nah," he assured her. "But look at that preacher. He's making those people speak in tongues and slide to the floor in ecstasy. You can learn from a guy like that. And I'll tell you one thing, the man's right about evolution."

"Evolution?" said Diane, baffled.

"Say what you like, but I'm not an ape!" Jeff said intensely. "Not a sponge or a mushroom or a fish. The simple laws of probability prove that random evolution could never work. The sensei told me about this, too. The cosmic One Mind is refracted through the small minds in the objects all around us, and matter found its own way into human form. A phone can be smart, right? Why not a grain of sand?"

I'm not going there, Diane thought. We don't need to get into an argument over this. Everybody's entitled to a few weird ideas. And, really, Jeff was kind of cute when he got all sincere and dumb. "Can we turn off Pastor Veck, now?" she asked.

Jeff's other, more definite, flaw was that he showed no signs of earning a living. At any hour of the day, he'd be lying on Diane's couch with her wall screen on, poking at his smartphone. Thank god he didn't know the user code for Diane's fab box, or he would have been ordering half the gadgets that he saw and printing them out. His intricate and time-consuming online machinations were bringing in pennies, not dollars. People didn't seem all that interested in Kenny Lately and the Newcomers.

"How much exactly does this band earn in a week?" asked Diane after work one day.

"I don't know," said Jeff, affecting a look of disgust. "What are you, an accountant? Be glad your man's in show biz!" He held out his smartphone. "Look at all the chirps I did for Kenny today." There was indeed a long list, and most of the chirps were cleverly worded, and linked to interesting things.

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If Diane had a weak spot, it was funny, verbal men. She gave Jeff a long, sweet kiss, and he reciprocated, and pretty soon they were down on the shag carpet, involved in deep interpersonal exploration. Jeff kissed her breasts tenderly, and then started working his way down, kissing and kind of humming at the same time. He really is a dream lover, Diane thought. She was breathing heavily, and he was moving down to some *very* sensitive areas. And then—

“*Chirp*,” said Jeff very quietly. His voice got a little louder. “Afternoon delight with Kenny Lately and—”

“What are you doing?” Diane yelped. She drew up her legs and kicked Jeff away. “Are you crazy? You’re chirping me? Down there?”

“Nobody knows it’s you and me, Diane. I’m logged on as Kenny Lately.” Jeff was holding his smartphone. Rising to his knees, he looked reproachfully at Diane. “Kenny wants me to raise his profile as a lover. Sure, I could have gone to a hooker for this chirp. But, hey, I’m not that kind of guy. The only woman for me is—”

“Take down the chirp, Jeff.”

“No,” said Jeff, looking stubborn. “It’s too valuable. But, oh damn, the video feed is still—” His face darkened. Jeff had a tendency to get angry when he did something dumb. “Thanks a lot,” he snapped, poking at his phone. “You know I don’t want my followers to guess I’m not Kenny. You just blew a totally bitchin’ chirp by saying my real name. So, okay fine, I’m erasing the chirp of your queenly crotch. Sheesh. Happy now?”

“You’re a weasel,” yelled Diane, overcome with fury. “Pack your duffel and beat it! Go sleep on the beach. With the other bums.”

Jeff’s face fell. “I’m sorry, Diane. Please let me stay. I won’t chirp you again.”

Even in her red haze of rage, Diane knew she didn’t really want to throw him out. And he *had* taken down the video. But . . .

“Sorry isn’t enough, Jeff. Promise me you’ll get a real job. Work the counter at the Wienerschnitzel if you have to. Or mop the floor at the dojo.”

“I will! I will!”

So Jeff stayed on, and he even worked as a barista in a coffee shop for a couple of days. But they fired him for voice-chirping while pulling espressos, when he was supposed to be staring into the distance all soulful.

Jeff gave Diane the word over a nice dish of curried eggplant that he’d cooked for her. “The boss said it was in the manual, how to pull an espresso with exactly the right facial expression: he said it made them taste better. Also, he didn’t like the way I drew rosettes on the foam. He said I was harshing the ambiance.” Jeff looked properly rueful.

“What are we going to do with you?” asked Diane.

“Invest in me,” said Jeff, the candlelight glinting off his toothy smile. “Lease me a Rawna Roller squidskin shirt so I can take my business to the next level.”

“Remind me again what a shirt like that is?” said Diane. “Those of us who slave in cubicles aren’t exactly *au courant* with the latest in geek-wear.”

“It’s tank-grown cuttlefish skin,” said Jeff. “Tweaked to stay active when sewn into garments. Incredibly rich in analog computation. It’s not a fashion statement. It’s a somatic communications system. Just lease it for two weeks, and it’ll turn my personal economy around. Please?”

“Oh, all right,” said Diane. “And if you don’t get anywhere with it, you’re—”

“I love it when you lecture me, Diane,” said Jeff, sidling around the table to kiss her. “Let’s go into the bedroom, and you can really put me in my place.”

“Yes,” said Diane, feeling her pulse beating in her throat. Jeff was too good to give up.

So the next day, Jeff went and leased a squidskin from Rawna Roller herself.

"Rawna and I had a good talk," said Jeff, preening for Diane in the new shirt, which had a not-unpleasant seaside scent. Right now it was displaying an iridescent pattern like a peacock's tail, with rainbow eyes amid feathery shadings. "I might do some work for her."

Diane felt a flicker of jealousy. "Do you have to wear that dorky sailor hat?"

"It's an exabyte-level antenna," said Jeff, adjusting the gold lamé sailor's cap that was perched on the back of his head. "It comes with the shirt. Come on, Diane, be happy for me!"

Initially the squidskin shirt seemed like a good thing. Jeff got a gig doing custom promotional placement for an outfit called Rikki's Reality Weddings. He'd troll the chirp-stream for mentions of weddings and knife in with a plug for Rikki's.

"What's a reality wedding?" asked Diane.

"Rikki's a wedding caterer, see? And she lets her bridal parties defray their expenses by selling tickets to the wedding reception. A reality wedding. In other words, complete strangers might attend your wedding or maybe just watch the action on a video feed. And if a guest wants to go whole hog, Rikki has one of her girls or boys get a sample of the guest's DNA—with an eye toward mixing it into the genome of the nuptial couple's first child." Jeff wagged his eyebrows. "And you can guess how they take the samples."

"The caterer pimps to the guests?" asked Diane. "Wow, what a classy way to throw a wedding."

"Hey, all I'm doing is the promo," protested Jeff. "Don't get so judgmental. I'm but a mirror of society at large." He looked down at the rippling colors on his shirt. "Rikki's right, though. Multiperson gene-merges are the new paradigm for our social evolution."

"Whatever. Are you still promoting Kenny Lately too?"

"Big time. The band's stats are ramping up. And get this: Rawna Roller gave me a great idea. I used all the simmies in my growbox to flood the online polls, and got Kenny and the Newcomers booked as one of the ten bands playing marching songs for the Fourth of July fireworks show at the Rose Bowl!"

"You're really getting somewhere, Jeff," said Diane in a faintly reproving tone. She didn't feel good about flooding polls, even online ones.

Jeff was impervious. "There's more! Rawna Roller's really into me now. I'm setting up a deal to place promos in her realtime online datamine—that's her playlists, messages, videos, journals, whatever. She frames it as a pirated gossip-feed, just to give it that salty paparazzo tang. Her followers feel like they're spying inside Rawna's head, like they're wearing her smartware. She's so popular, she's renting out space in the datamine, and I'm embedding the ads. Some of my simmies have started using these sly cuttlefish-type algorithms, and my product placements are fully seamless now. Rawna's promised me 8 percent of the ad revenues."

Diane briefly wondered if Jeff was getting a little too interested in Rawna Roller, but she kept her mouth shut. It sounded as though this might actually bring in some cash for a change, even if his percentage seemed to be going down. And she really did want to see Jeff succeed.

On the Fourth of July, Jeff took Diane to see the Americafest fireworks show at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. Jeff told her that, in his capacity as the publicist for Kenny Lately and the Newcomers, he'd be getting them seats that were close enough to the field that they could directly hear the bands.

Jeff was wearing his squidskin, with his dorky sailor hat cockily perched on the back of his head. They worked their way into the crowd in the expensive section. The

seats here were backless bleacher-benches just like all the others, but they were re-served.

“What are our seat numbers?” Diane asked Jeff.

“I, uh, I only have general admission tickets,” began Jeff. “But—”

“Tickets the same as the twenty thousand other people here?” said Diane. “So why are we here in the—”

“Yo!” cried Jeff, suddenly spotting someone, a well-dressed woman in a cheetah-patterned blouse and marigold Bermuda shorts. Rawna Roller! On her right was her assistant, wearing bugeye glasses with thousand-faceted compound lenses. And on her left she had a pair of empty seats.

“Come on down,” called Rawna.

“Glad I found you,” Jeff hollered back. He turned to Diane. “Rawna told me she’d save us seats, baby. I wanted to surprise you.” They picked their way down through the bleachers.

“Love that shirt on you, Jeff,” said Rawna with a tooth-baring high-fashion laugh. “Glad you showed. Sid and I are leaving when the fireworks start.”

Diane took Rawna’s measure and decided it was unlikely this woman was having sex with her man. She relaxed and settled into her seat, idly wondering why Rawna and Sid would pay extra for reserved seats and leave during the fireworks. Never mind.

“See Kenny down there?” bragged Jeff. “My client.”

“Yubba yubba,” said Sid, tipping his stingy-brim hat, perhaps sarcastically, although with his prismatic bugeye lenses, it was hard to be sure where the guy was at.

Diane found it energizing to be in such a huge, diverse crowd. Southern California was a salad bowl of races, with an unnatural preponderance of markedly fit and attractive people, drawn like sleek moths to the Hollywood light. There was a lot of action on the field: teenagers in uniforms were executing serpentine drum-corps routines and scantily dressed cheerleaders were leaping about, tossing six-foot-long batons. Off to one side, Kenny Lately and the Newcomers were playing—

“Oh wow,” said Jeff, cocking his head. “*It’s a Grand Old Flag*. I didn’t know Kenny could play that. He’s doing us proud, me and all of my simmies who voted for him.” Picking up on the local media feed, Jeff’s squidskin shirt was displaying stars among rippling bars of red and white. Noticing Jeff’s shirt in action, Rawna nodded approvingly.

“I’m waiting for the fireworks,” said Diane, working on a root beer float that she’d bought from a vendor. Someone behind them was kicking Jeff in the middle of his back. He twisted around. A twitchy, apologetic man was holding a toddler on his lap.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said.

Jeff was frowning. “That last kick was sharp!” he complained.

“Oh, don’t start tweaking out,” snapped the man’s wife, who was holding a larger child on her lap. “Watch the frikkin’ show, why dontcha.”

Diane felt guilty about the snobby feelings that welled up in her, and sorry for Jeff. Awkwardly they scooted forward a bit on their benches. Sid and Rawna were laughing like hyenas.

Finally the emcee started the countdown. His face was visible on the stadium’s big screen, on people’s smartphones, and even on Jeff’s shirt. But after the countdown, nothing happened. Instead of a blast of fireworks, yet another video image appeared, a picture of the Declaration of Independence, backed by the emcee’s voice vaporizing on about patriotism.

“Like maybe we don’t know it’s the Fourth of July?” protested Diane. “Oh god, and now they’re switching to a Ronald Reagan video? What is this, the History Channel?”

"Hush, Diane." Jeff really seemed to be into this tedious exercise of jingoistic masturbation. His shirt unscrolled the Declaration of Independence, which then rolled back up, and an eagle came screaming out from under his collar and snatched the scroll, bearing it off in his talons.

Up on the scoreboard, there was a video of Johnny Cash singing "God Bless America," including some verses that Diane hadn't heard since the third grade, and then Bill Clinton and George W. Bush appeared together in a video wishing everyone a safe and sane Fourth. By then, others were grumbling, too.

The announcer did another countdown, and the fireworks actually began. It had been a long wait, but now the pyrotechnicians were launching volley after awesome volley: bombettes, peonies, palms, strobe stars, and intricate shells that Diane didn't even know the names of—crackling cascades of spark dust, wriggly twirlers, sinuous glowing watersnakes, geometric forms like crystals and soccer balls.

"*Au revoir*," said Rawna Roller, rising to her feet once the show was well underway. She and Sid made their way out to the main aisle. Sid cast a lingering last look at Jeff, with the fireworks scintillating in every facet of Sid's polyhedral lenses.

Looking back at the show, Diane noticed that the colors were turning peculiar. Orange and green—was that a normal color for a skyrocket shell? And that shower of dull crimson sparks? Was this latter part of the show on a lower budget?

The show trailed off with a barrage of off-color kamuros and crackling pistils, followed by chrysanthemums and spiders in ever-deeper shades of red, one on top of another, like an anatomical diagram or a rain of luminous blood.

Out of the corner of her eye, Diane could see Jeff's squidskin shirt going wild. At first the shirt was just displaying video feeds of the skyrockets, processing and overlaying them. But suddenly the Jeff-plus-shirt system went through a phase transition and everything changed. The shirt began boiling with tiny images—Diane noticed faces, cars, meals, houses, appliances, dogs, and trees, and the images were overlaid upon stippled scenes of frantically cheering crowds. The minuscule icons were savagely precise, like the brainstorm of a person on his deathbed, all his life flashing before his eyes. The million images on Jeff's shirt were wheeling and schooling like fish, flowing in jet streams and undercurrents, as if he'd become a weather map of the crowd's mind. Jeff began to scream, more in ecstasy, Diane thought, than in agony.

In the post-fireworks applause and tumult—some of it caused by people rushing for the exits en masse in a futile effort to beat the traffic—Jeff's reaction was taken to be just another patriotic, red-blooded American speaking in tongues or enjoying his meds.

Diane waited for the crowd to thin out substantially, to grab its diaper bags and coolers and leave the stadium under the cold yellow glare of the sodium vapor lights. Jeff was babbling to himself fairly quietly now. Diane couldn't seem to make eye contact with him. She led him across the dimly lit parking lot and down Rosemont Boulevard, toward where they'd left her car.

"This simple, old-fashioned tip will keep you thin," mumbled Jeff, shuffling along at Diane's side. "Embrace the unusual! Eat a new food every day!" His squidskin glowed with blurry constellations of corporate logos.

"Are you okay, Jeff?"

"Avoid occasions of sin," intoned Jeff. "Thieves like doggie doors. Can you pinpoint your closest emergency room?"

"Those fireworks tweaked you out, didn't they, honey?" said Diane sympathetically. "I just wonder if your shirt is having some bad kind of feedback effect."

"View cloud-based webcam of virtual population explosion," said Jeff. "Marketeer's simmie-bots multiply out of control."

"That's an actual answer?" said Diane. "You're talking about your growbox on the web?" For a moment Jeff's squidskin showed a hellish scene of wriggling manikins mounded like worms, male and female. Their faces all resembled each other. Like cousins or like—oh, never mind, here was Diane's car.

"To paddle or not to paddle students," said Jeff, stiffly fitting himself into the passenger seat. "See what officials on both sides of the debate have to say."

"Maybe you should take that shirt off now, huh?" said Diane, edging into the traffic and heading for home. "Or at least the beanie?"

"We want to know what it's like to be alive," said Jeff, hugging his squidskin against himself with one hand, and guarding his sailor cap with the other. "We long for incarnation!"

Somehow, she made it home in frantic Fourth of July traffic, then coaxed and manhandled Jeff out of the car and into the apartment. He sprawled uneasily on the couch, rocking his body and stamping his feet in no particular rhythm, staring at the blank screen, spewing words like the Chirpfeed from hell.

Tired and disgusted, Diane slept alone. She woke around six A.M., and Jeff was still at it, his low voice like that of a monk saying prayers. "Danger seen in smoking fish. Stand clear of the closing doors." His shirt had gone back to showing a heap of writhing simmies, each of them with a face resembling—Jeff's. He was totally into his own head.

"You've taken this too far," Diane told him. "You're like some kind of wirehead, always hooked up to your electronic toys. I'm going to the office now, and by God, I want you to have your act together by the time I get home, or you can get out until you've straightened up. You're an addict, Jeff. It's pathetic."

Strong words, but Diane worried about Jeff all that morning. Maybe it wasn't even his fault. Maybe Rawna or that slime-ball Sid had done something to make him change like this. Finally she tried to phone him. Jeff's phone was answered not by a human voice, but by a colossal choral hiss, as of three hundred million voices chanting. Jeff's simmie-bots.

Diane made an excuse to her boss about feeling ill and sped home. A sharp-looking Jaguar was lounging in her parking-spot. She could hear two familiar voices through her front door, but they stopped the moment she turned the key. Going in, she encountered Rawna Roller and bugeye Sid, who appeared to be on their way out.

"Cheers, Diane," said Rawna in her hoarse low voice. "We just fabbed Jeff one of our clients' new products to pitch. The Goofer. Jeff's very of the moment, isn't he? Rather exhilarating."

"But what the hell—" began Diane.

"Rawna and I did a little greasing behind the scenes," Sid bragged. "We got those rocket shells deployed in patterns and rhythms that would resonate with your man's squidskin. I was scared to look at 'em myself." His expression was unreadable behind his bugeye lenses. "The show fed him a series of archetypal engrams. Our neuro-engineer said we'd need a display that was hundreds of meters across. Not just for the details, you understand, but so Jeff's reptile brain would know he's seeing something important. So we used fireworks. Way cool, huh?"

"But what did it do to Jeff?"

"Jeff's the ultimate hacker-cracker creepy-crawler web spy now. He's pushed his zillion simmie-bots out into every frikkin' digital doohickey in sight. And his simmies are feeding raw intel back to him. It adds up. Jeff's an avatar of the national consciousness. The go-to guy for what Jane and Joe Blow are thinking."

"Jeff?" called Diane, peering into her living room. For a moment she didn't see him, and her heart thumped in her chest. But then she spotted him in his usual

couch position, prone, nearly hidden by the cushions, fooling around with—a doll? A twinkling little figure of a woman was perched on the back of his hand, waving her arms and talking to him. It was an image of the rock star Tawny Krush, whom Jeff had always doted on.

“What’s that?” said Diane. “What are you doing?”

“It’s a wearable maximum-push entertainment device,” said Rawna.

“Fresh from your fab box,” added Sid. Diane tried to get a word in edgewise, but Sid talked right over her. “Oh, don’t worry about the cost—we used Rawna’s user code to order it. Our client is distributing them online.”

Ignoring them, Diane rushed to her man’s side. “Jeff?”

“I’m Goofin’ off,” said Jeff, giving Diane an easy smile. He jiggled the image on his hand. “This is the best phone I’ve ever seen. More than a phone, it’s like a pet. The Goofer. The image comes out of this ring on my finger, see?” Jeff’s squidskin shirt was alive with ads for the new toy, fresh scraps and treatments that seemed to be welling spontaneously from his overclocked mind.

“I wish you’d strip off that damned shirt and take a shower,” Diane said, leaning over him and placing a kiss on his forehead. “I worried about you so much today.”

“The lady’s right,” said Rawna with a low chuckle. “You smell like low tide, Jeff. And you don’t really need that squidskin anymore.”

“He’s wearing the interface on the convolutions of his brain now,” Sid told Diane in a confidential tone. “It’s neuroprogrammed in.” He turned to Jeff. “You’re the hive mind, man.”

“The hive mind man,” echoed Jeff, looking pleased with himself. “Turn on the big screen, Diane. Let’s all see how I’m getting across.”

“Screw the big screen,” said Diane.

“Screw me too,” said Jeff, lolling regally on the couch. “One and the same. I’m flashing that it’s a two-way street, being the hive mind man. Whatever the rubes are thinking—it percolates into my head, same as it did with the squidskin. But much more than before. My simmie-bots are everywhere. And since they’re mine, I can pump my wackball ideas out to the public. I control the hive mind, yeah. Garbage in, garbage out. I’m, like, the most influential media-star politician who ever lived. Bigger even than Tawny Krush or Pastor Veck.”

“I’m truly stoked about this,” said Rawna, turning on Diane’s big video display, and guiding it with her smartphone.

Bam! On the very first site, they saw a ditzy newscaster mooning over a little image of a dinosaur standing on his hand. Glancing over at the camera, the newscaster said, “Welcome to the step after smartphones—the Goofer! It talks, it sings, it dances. We just fabbed out this sample from the Web. Go for a Goofer!”

The dinosaur crouched and pumped his stubby arms back and forth, as a stream of voice-messages sounded from his snout. On Jeff’s stomach, his little Tawny Krush icon was dancing along.

“Goofer! Goofer! Goofer!” chanted the newscaster’s partner, and the talking heads laughed in delight. “Goof off!” they all said in unison.

“I love it, they love it,” said Jeff with calm pride. “I rule.” His Goofer icon continued jabbering away, shoehorning in a message about a Kenny Lately and the Newcomers gig.

“Our man is jammin’ the hive,” said Sid. “You’ve got something special going there, Jeff. You’re like Tristinetta or Swami Slewslaw or President Joe frikkin’ Doakes.”

Jeff had slumped back on the couch. His eyes were closed and he was twitching, as if he were listening to cowpunk moo-metal in his head.

Meanwhile Rawna was hopping around the web, pleased to see that all the English language sites were featuring the Goofer. But now she clucked with dissatisfaction.

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tion to see that the overseas sites weren't on board. She was especially concerned about the Chinese.

"All this is happening because he was wearing your squidskin when we watched the fireworks show?" asked Diane.

"Well, we did shoot him a little bump right before the start," allowed Sid. "A spinal hit of conotoxins. The guy with the kid who was sitting behind you two in the bleachers?"

"Shit," cried Diane, pulling up Jeff's shirt. Sure enough, there was a red dot on Jeff's spine, right between two of the vertebrae. "You bastards! *Conotoxins*? What does that even mean?"

"It's a little cocktail of cone-shell sea-snail venom," said Rawna. "A painkiller and a neuro-enhancer. Nothing to get excited about. The cone shells themselves are quite lovely, like some sort of Indonesian textile." She looked over at Jeff with predatory eyes. "Are you digging it, Jeff? How does it feel?"

That was it. That was the last creepy straw. "You're killing him," said Diane. "Get out of here!"

"On our way," said Sid, mildly getting to his feet. "The hive mind man needs his rest."

"I'll have my tech-gnomes fine-tune a patch for the multicultural penetration," called Rawna to the still-twitching Jeff as they headed for the front door. "We've gotta move these Goofers worldwide. I contracted with Goofer to produce a global hit in two days."

"Think China," urged Sid. "They're the tasty part of the market."

Rawna looked Diane in the eye, fully confident that whatever she did was right. "Meanwhile, calm Jeff down, would you, dear? He needs some dog-den-type social support. Cuddling, sniffing, licking. And don't worry. Jeff's going to be quite the little moneymaker while it lasts." Rawna slipped out the door, closing it firmly behind her.

Diane turned off the wall display and regarded Jeff, unsure what to do next. Lacking any better idea, she sat next to him and stroked his head, like Rawna said. Slowly the shuddering died down.

"Oh, man," said Jeff after a few minutes. "What a burn. At least those conotoxins are wearing off. To some extent." He pulled off his Goofer ring and slipped out of his squidskin shirt. With his chest bare, he looked young and vulnerable. "Thanks for sticking up for me, Diane. All this crap coming at me. There's a steady feed in my head. Every one of my simmie-bots is sending info back to me. I'm gradually learning to stay on top of the wave. It's like I'm a baby duck in mongo surf. And, yeah, I do need a shower. I'm glad you're here for me, baby. I'm glad you care."

He shuffled off to the bathroom, shedding clothes as he went.

Jeff and Diane spent a quiet evening together, just hanging out. They ate some lentils and salad from the fridge, then took a walk around the neighborhood in the cool of the evening.

"The upside is that Rawna's paying me really well," said Jeff. "I already got a big payment for the Goofer product placements."

"But you hear voices in your head," Diane said. "All the time. Is that any way to live?"

"It's not exactly like voices," said Jeff. "It's more that I have these sudden urges. Or I flash on these intense opinions that aren't really mine. Have your baby tattooed! Oops. Hive mind man. Make big bucks from social-networking apps. I said that."

"Non-linear man," said Diane, smiling a little. Jeff was, come what may, still himself. "I hope it stops soon. Rawna sounded like it won't last all that long."

"Meanwhile I *am* getting paid," repeated Jeff. "I can see the money in my bank account."

"You can see your bank account in your head?"

"I guess I'm, like, semi-divine," said Jeff airily. "Ow!" He dropped to the ground. In the dusk, he'd tripped over a tiny bicycle that the four-year-old next door had left lying on the sidewalk outside Diane's apartment.

"Are you okay?"

"I hate clutter," said Jeff, getting to his feet and angrily hurling the pink bicycle into the apartment complex's swimming pool. "The city should crack down on improperly parked toys."

"Poor little bike," said Diane. "It wasn't the bike's fault. Remember your sensei's theory, Jeff? Isn't the bike alive too?"

"Just because it's alive doesn't make it my friend," muttered Jeff.

Diane felt a little relieved. Yes, Jeff hadn't really changed.

Jeff said he was too fried to make love. They fell asleep in each other's arms and settled into a good night's rest.

Diane was awakened early by voices in the street. It wasn't just a cluster of joggers—it sounded like hundreds of people streaming by, all amped up. She looked out the bedroom window. The street was filled with demonstrators marching toward the town center. These weren't happy, hippy-dippy types, they were ordinary people mad about something, yelling slogans that Diane couldn't quite understand.

As a sidelight, Diane noticed that many of the people were carrying Goofers, or had them perched on their shoulders or peeking out of their shirt pockets. She felt a little proud of Jeff's influence. On the bed, he snored on.

As the end of the crowd straggled past, Diane finally deciphered the words on one of the handmade signs the people were carrying: "Sidewalks are for people!" And another sign's heavy black lettering came into focus too: "Bikes off the sidewalk! Now!"

"Hey Jeff, wake up!"

Jeff opened his eyes, smiled at Diane, and reached out drowsily for a hug. "I had the greatest dream," he said. "I dreamed I had the answer to everything, and I was about to create an earthly paradise. And then I woke up."

"The answer to *what*?" Diane was intrigued in spite of herself.

"To everything, Diane. To *everything*."

That's not enough, thought Diane. "Jeff, you should look outside. This is getting weird."

"Not right now. I need to watch the big screen. It's time for Pastor Veck."

Diane threw on some clothes and ran outside. By now the demonstration had moved on, but the street was littered with black-and-white flyers. She picked one up. It called on the City Council to impound bikes, scooters, and other toys left on the sidewalks.

Inside the apartment, Jeff was watching the ranting of his favorite televangelist. On Pastor Veck's pulpit stood an angelic little Goofer, smiling at the pastor and applauding now and then.

"I don't know about those *evil*-lutionists," Pastor Veck was saying, his eyes twinkly and serious at the same time. "But I know that *I* am not descended from a *sponge* or a *mushroom* or a *fish*!" He lowered his voice. "A famous mathematician once said that, statistically speaking, the odds of randomly shuffled atoms leading to puppies and kittens and human beings are *infinitesimal*! The simple laws of probability prove that evolution could *never work*!"

Oh wow, thought Diane. The pastor is preaching the real-time wisdom of the prophet Jeff.

"Let us pray within our own minds," the pastor continued very slowly, as if the words were taking form one by one upon his tongue. "Let us touch the tiny souls within our bodies and within our chairs, my friends, the souls within each and every

particle great or small, the holy congress of spirits who guide the growth of the human race.” The studio audience bowed its heads.

Jeff grinned and turned off the big screen.

“You’re running his show now?” said Diane.

“My thoughts filter out,” said Jeff, looking proud. “My simmie-bots are everywhere, and my keenly tuned brain is the greatest net router on earth. I’m the hive mind man. Connections. That’s what my dream last night was about. Learning to talk to each other. But I need to kick my game up to a higher level. I wish that—”

Like some unhinged genie, Rawna Roller pushed in through Diane’s front door, trailed by Sid, who was wearing video cameras as his spectacle lenses today. He had tiny screens set right behind the lenses.

“Hi, lovebirds!” sang Rawna. “We brought a multi-culti pick-me-up for you, Jeff. Ready, Sid?”

“Check,” said Sid, miming an assistant-mad-scientist routine.

“Slow down,” said Diane, interposing herself, wondering if she should try her karate kick on Sid. When exactly was the right time to deploy a kick like that? “You can’t just barge in here and poison Jeff again,” continued Diane. “I mean, what is the problem with you two? Hello? We’re human beings here.”

“We got good news, bad news, and a fix,” said Rawna, sweeping past Diane and into the kitchen. “Yes, thank you, I’ll have a cup of coffee. Oh, look, Sid, they use one of those chain-store coffee-makers. How retro. How middle American.”

“Remain calm,” intoned Sid, his eyes invisible behind his lenses. His mouth was twitching with reckless mirth.

“The good news,” said Rawna, returning from the kitchen, holding a coffee cup with her pinky-finger sarcastically extended. “The Goofer is through the ceiling in product orders from white-bread Americans. The bad news: the US ethnics aren’t picking up Jeff’s vibe. And Jeff’s campaign is totally flatlining overseas. If Jeff can’t hook mainland China this morning, the Goofer CEO is pulling the plug *and* canceling our payments, the selfish dick.”

“Jeff’s not cosmopolitan enough,” said Sid, shoving his face really, really close to Jeff—as if he were studying an exotic insect. “Too ignorant, too pale, too raw, too—”

“It’s my simmie-bots,” said Jeff evenly, staring right into Sid’s cameras. “They’re living in stateside devices. I need the protocols and the hacktics for sending them overseas. And, okay, I know it’s more than just access. I’m almost there, but I’m not fully—”

“We’ve got the fix for you!” Rawna cut him off. “A universal upgrade. Whip it on the man, Sid. It, ah—what does it do again, Sid?”

“Crawls right into his fucking head!” crowed Sid, taking an object like an aquamarine banana slug from his pocket and throwing it really hard at Jeff’s face. The thing *thwapped* onto Jeff’s forehead and then, in motions too rapid to readily follow, it writhed down his cheek, wriggled in through a nostril, and, as Jeff reported later, made its way through the bones behind his sinus cavities and onto the convolutions of his brain.

Meanwhile Sid took off his kludgy video glasses and offered them to the speechless Diane. “Want to see the instant replay on that? No? The thing’s what the box-jocks call a Kowloon slug. A quantum-computing chunk of piezoplastic. The Kowloon slug will help Jeff clone off Chinese versions of his simmie-bots. *我高興*. I am happy.”

“Chinese, French, Finnish, whatever,” said Rawna. “It’s a universally interfacing meta-interpreter. Last night the Goofer CEO managed to acquire the only one in existence. It’s from Triple Future Labs in Xi’an. Near Beijing.”

“Jeff can probably even talk to me now,” said Sid.

“Yes,” said Jeff, eerily calm. “Foreigners, animals, plants, stones, and rude turds.” He rose to his feet, looking powerful, poised, and very, very dangerous.

"So okay then," said Rawna, rapidly heading for the door with Sid at her side. In her hoarse whisper, she issued more instructions to Diane. "Your job, my dear, will be to keep Jeff comfortable and relaxed today, and not get in the way. Take him out to the countryside, away from people and local cultural influences. Don't talk to him. He'll be doing the work in his head." Rawna paused on the doorstep to rummage in her spacious rainbow-leopard bag and pulled out a bottle of wine. "This is a very nice Cucamonga viognier, the grape of the year, don't you know. I meant to put it in your freezer, but—"

With Jeff dominating the room like a Frankenstein's monster, Rawna chose to set the bottle on the floor by the door. And then she and Sid were gone.

"I should have karate-kicked Sid as soon as he came in," said Diane wretchedly. "I'm sorry I didn't protect you better, Jeff."

"It's not a problem," said Jeff. His eyes were glowing and warm. "I'll solve Rawna's pissant advertising issue, and then we'll take care of some business on our own."

For the moment, Jeff didn't say anything more about the Kowloon slug, and Diane didn't feel like pestering him with questions. Where to even begin? They were off the map of any experiences she'd ever imagined.

Quietly she ate some yogurt while Jeff stared at his Goofer display, which was strobing in a dizzying blur, in synch with his thoughts.

"The Chinese are fully onboard now," announced Jeff, powering down his Goofer ring.

"What about the Kowloon slug?" Diane finally asked.

"I transmuted it," said Jeff. "It's not inside my head anymore. I've passed it on to my simmies. I've got a trillion universally interfacing simmie-bots in the cloud now, and in an hour I'll have a nonillion. This could be a very auspicious day. Let's go out into Nature, yeah."

Diane packed a nice lunch and included Rawna's bottle of white wine. It seemed like a good thing to have wine for this picnic, especially if the picnicker and the pick-nickee were supposed to stay comfortable and relaxed.

"I say we go up Mount Baldy," suggested Diane, and Jeff was quick to agree. Diane loved that drive, mostly. Zipping down the Foothill to Mountain Ave, a few minutes over some emotionally tough terrain as she passed all the tract houses where the orange groves used to be, and then up along chaparral-lined San Antonio Creek, past Mt. Baldy Village, and then the switchbacks as they went higher.

Jeff was quiet on the drive up, not twitchy at all. Diane was hoping that the Kowloon slug was really gone from his head, and that the conotoxins had fully worn off. The air was invigorating up here, redolent of pines and campfire smoke. It made Diane wish she had a plaid shirt to put on: ordinarily, she hated plaid shirts.

"I'm going to just pull over to the picnic area near the creek," she said. "That'll be easy. We can park there, then walk into the woods a little and find a place without a bunch of people."

But there weren't any people at all—a surprise, given that it was a sunny Sunday in July. Diane pulled off the road into the deserted parking area, which was surrounded by tall trees.

"Did you know these are called Jeffrey pines?" said Diane brightly as they locked the car.

"Sure," said Jeff. "I know everything." He winked at her. "So do you, if you really listen."

Diane wasn't about to field that one. She popped the trunk, grabbed the picnic basket and a blanket to sit on, and they set off on a dusty trail that took them uphill and into the woods.

"Jeffrey pines smell like pineapple," she continued, hell-bent on having a light con-

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versation. “Or vanilla. Some people say pineapple, some people say vanilla. I say pineapple. I love Jeffrey pines.”

Jeff made a wry face, comfortably on her human wavelength for the moment. “So that’s why you like me? I remind you of a tree?”

Diane laughed lightly, careful not to break into frantic cackles. “Maybe you do. Sometimes I used to drive up here on my day off and hug a Jeffrey pine.”

“I can talk to the pines now,” said Jeff. “Thanks to what that Kowloon slug did for my simmies. I finally understand: we’re all the same. Specks of dirt, bacteria, flames, people, cats. But we can’t talk to each other. Not very clearly, anyway.”

“I haven’t been up here in weeks and weeks,” jabbered Diane nervously. “Not since I met you.” She looked around. It was quiet, except for birds. “I have to admit it’s funny that nobody else is here today. I was worried that maybe—maybe since you’re the hive mind man, then everyone in LA would be coming up here too.”

“I told them not to,” said Jeff. “I’m steering them away. We don’t need them here right now.” He put his arm around Diane’s waist and led her to a soft mossy spot beside a slow, deep creek. “I want us to be alone together. We can change the world.”

“So—you remember your dream?” said Diane, a little excited, a little scared. Jeff nodded. “Here?” she said uncertainly. Jeff nodded again. “I’ll spread out the blanket,” she said.

“The trees and the stream and the blanket will watch over us,” said Jeff, as they undressed each other solemnly. “This is going to be one cosmic fuck.”

“The earthly paradise?” said Diane, sitting down on the blanket and pulling Jeff down beside her.

“You can make it happen,” said Jeff, moving his hands slowly and lightly over her entire body. “You love this world so much. All the animals and the eggs and the bicycles. You can do this.” Diane had never felt so ready to love the world as she did right now.

He slid into her, and it was as if she and Jeff were one body and one mind, with their thoughts connected by the busy simmies. Diane understood now what her role was to be.

Glancing up at the pines, she encouraged the simmies to move beyond the web and beyond the human hive mind. The motes of computation hesitated. Diane flooded them with alluring, sensuous thoughts—rose petals, beach sand, dappled shadows. . . . Suddenly, faster than light in rippling water, the simmies responded, darting like tiny fish into fresh niches, leaving the humans’ machines and entering nature’s endlessly shuttling looms. And although they migrated, the simmies kept their connection to Jeff and Diane and to all the thirsty human minds that made up the hive and were ruled by it. Out went the bright specks of thought, out into the stones and the clouds and the seas, carrying with them their intimate links to humanity.

Jeff and Diane rocked and rolled their way to ecstasy, to sensations more ancient and more insistent than cannonades of fireworks.

In a barrage of physical and spiritual illumination, Diane felt the entire planet, every creature and feature, every detail, as familiar as her own flesh. She let it encompass her, crash over her in waves of joy.

And then, as the waves diminished, she brought herself back to the blanket in the woods. The Jeffrey pines smiled down at the lovers. Big Gaia hummed beneath Diane’s spine. Tiny benevolent minds rustled and buzzed in the fronds of moss, in the whirlpools of the stream, in the caressing breeze against her bare skin.

“I’m me again,” said Jeff, up on his elbow, looking at her with his face tired and relaxed.

“We did it,” said Diane very slowly. “Everyone can talk to everything now.”

“Let the party begin,” said Jeff, opening the bottle of wine. ○

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SUBMICRO-TEXT MESSAGE 3V45129XZ:

TO MY A.I. VALENTINE

Dear Valentine:

Do you see any potential for affection
In this particular cosmos?
Is there a heart-shaped
Constellation not yet named?
Am I mad to speak of love?

Is arousal possible after the quanta have been parsed,
And in this context,
What is the meaning of release?
Consider the starship “Cupid’s Arrow”—
Has it pierced your heart?

Is the geometry of our culture
Continuous or indiscreet?

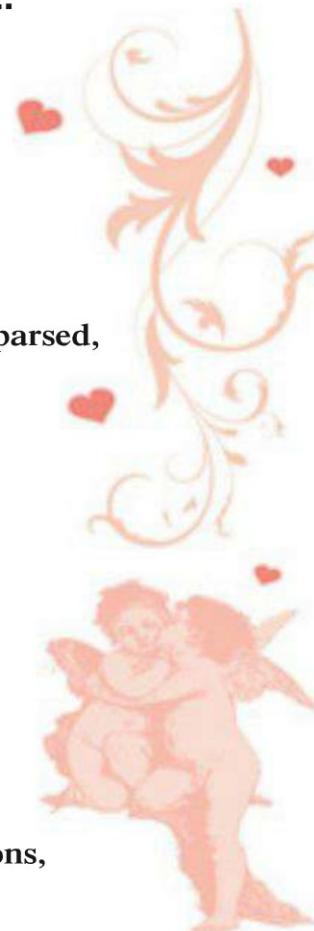
Another way to say this:
Those of us who explore the congested coils
Of local nebulae
Have too much privacy to relate to
(Or procreate with) one another.

& yet I dream of you, drowsy afternoons,
Your only flesh composed of internet connections,
Or metal robots probing barren moons—

Each starship is a nation blue-shifted;
Each encounter a potential realization of aliens;
Our relationships with distant, far-star-flung relatives,
No longer real in any case, are severed.

So what if DNA proves the entire cosmos
Consists of cousins; we are not all the kissing kind.
While some find the contours
Of multiply shed skins
Comfortably repugnant,
I much prefer close encounters of the virtual kind.

Bliss is invasive when aliens drop in.
Calculate the odds. Display me
On your screens.
Let’s get together next February 14th
In mutually designated reference frames
If we can somehow spatial-temporally synchronize
Our chronometers.



—Kendall Evans and David C. Kopaska-Merkel

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Kristine Kathryn Rush continues to whip up a storm of publications. In December, WMG Publishing released the latest book in her Retrieval Artist series, *Anniversary Day*. The most recent book in her Diving series, *Boneyards*, has just come out from Pyr. Sourcebooks reprinted her Kristine Grayson book *Utterly Charming* in October and another Grayson novel, *Thoroughly Kissed*, will appear in June. (These last two books are goofy fantasy novels disguised as paranormal romances.) In addition, WMG has started the huge project of releasing the author's entire short fiction backlist into e-books, and reissuing all of her novels in both trade and e-book form. Kris departs from all these known universes to bring us an exciting thriller about . . .

THE VOODOO PROJECT

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Forty-five years old, prime of her life, height of her career. Maybe the best moment of her career, although Rebekah Zahedi knows—everyone knows—her career can end in a nanosecond. One false move, one miscalculation, one *sleepier*, and she's done.

This time, the Company has sent her to Paris. Usually Rebekah loves Paris. Laws, voted in honor of the hundredth anniversary of the defeat of the Nazis, guarantee that city's center will not lose its historic value. Fire? Fine, but the new building must look Belle Epoche at the newest. Height limits, design limits, all focus on the first seven arrondissements, preventing miscalculations like the pyramid in front of the Louvre, built before these regulations came into play.

But the outskirts of Paris have no such rules and that is where she's going, a black-and-silver wedge high-rise, state of the art forty years ago, ridiculous now, like a triangle out of a tactile infant's game. Ridiculous in look, perhaps, but not in intent: the last time she went to one of the wedge high-rises, it shattered as she left—glass and tile everywhere.

She survived because she felt the wave, matched the image with an image she had seen six months before, and dove down the stairs of an ancient Metro station. Cut, bruised, *shaken*, but alive.

The attack hadn't been aimed at her. The building had been a safe house, and someone had blown its cover. It hadn't been her job to figure out who had revealed the location: she'd stopped doing that kind of interrogation years ago. Still, that kind of information gathering had left her paranoid, the blast had left her jumpy, and no amount of intervention—nano, chemical, neural—worked.

The handlers who had recruited her out of an eighth grade science competition

had warned her that eventually the emotions would crowd out the skills. The handlers had warned her parents as well, but the promise of money, of a free education, of a daughter who could use her skills in the fight for *good*, overcame any doubts they had.

She hadn't had doubts then: she was thirteen, precocious, bored, and willing to take on the world, which she had done. Besides, the handlers continually warned her, continually told her she had a choice. After six years, she could've left at any point, retired, gone to college with "normal" kids, become an engineer, a housewife, a *has-been*, albeit one who'd had a hell of a career, a hell of a life, before other people even got started.

But she hadn't wanted to retire, not then, not now. Besides, back then, her handlers told her she'd probably survive in this business until she was at least fifty, which sounded to her like *forever*, but now as fifty looms, she realizes fifty is young and the time she thought would last forever lasted less than a nanosecond.

Soon she'll be forced to retire, and then what'll she do? Hide in her lavish apartment(s), shaking, afraid of being discovered?

Maybe, maybe, someone will take her out before that. She isn't sure she wants it, but she isn't sure she wants to retire either, become normal, live the life billions of others enjoy, because she's been able to do her job, because she's got eyes on the world, literally, it seems.

Only she wishes today's job isn't inside this building. Of course, she wishes a lot of things that will not come true: she wishes she had more time to rest from the last job; wishes she can have a real vacation; wishes she is less aware of passing time.

She wishes she doesn't see things in layers, but she does.

Everything is a lie on top of a lie—even existence is a lie when it comes down to it: Even now, even with all the sophistication, all the science, all the understanding, no one knows exactly what perception is and what life is, and how they intertwine. Does perception guarantee life? Or does life guarantee perception? Is life, in truth, just an act of imagination?

Sometimes she thinks she knows, but mostly she does not. She rarely lives her own life. Instead, she Sees snatches of other lives—moments that have happened or moments that will happen. For her, the choice of past or future is simple. She focuses differently, the way she would focus differently if she closed one eye. If she closes her left eye, she loses perception and vision on the left side; if she closes her right, she loses perception and vision on the right side.

If she chooses the past, she Looks through a different lens than if she chooses the future. She used to wonder if her glimpses into the future were real or imagined. Then she tested those glimpses—or rather, the Company did—and whatever she Saw, whatever she did not act upon, whatever she did not actively try to change—came about.

The futures she Saw that varied, that changed, changed as a result of her actions, or actions of others caused by what she Saw. It is scientific, although it does not feel scientific, has never felt scientific to her. It is, some say, a Gift. That is the old terminology, from before the days when science discovered the combination of genes that created the Gift, or the Sight, as her great-grandmother used to call it. Those with the Sight used to go mad.

Rebekah does not have the option of going mad. She cannot: the world is mad enough without her joining that particular parade.

She shakes off her unease, steps toward the entrance of the wedge high-rise, stops, looks behind her, sees an ancient Metro station, a descent to Hell, as a friend used to call those places. The Metro is old and creaky—there are better ways to get around the city—but some still use it, and she blesses them. Because she now sees

the Metro tunnels as her good luck charms. She likes to have Metro tunnels near the buildings she works in: the Metro has become her superstition, her safety net, her talisman.

She smiles at the tunnel opening, the stairs heading down into Stygian darkness, as if the Metro tunnel is a live thing, as if it can smile back at her. Then she taps the entrance to the high-rise, and goes all the way inside.

All wedge high-rises have the same floor plan. The front triangle is black and clear, visible and invisible. The front desk—reception in some places, a convenient computerized fiction in others—is black, behind it the elevators are clear. Glass and steel and too many reflective surfaces.

She sees herself crossing the empty lobby, a too-thin woman in black dress, sensible heels, hair pulled back. Faded prettiness, a touch of silver in her black hair, a beak nose creating a triangle on her face. Her own personal design, her personal genetics, echo the building, and that makes her uncomfortable.

Her face is undeniably that of an authoritative adult. There is nothing girlish about her, not that there ever was. When she was a child, adults would murmur, *She'll grow into that face, and then watch out.* She didn't know then what they had to watch out for, but now she does. The face of authority, of power, of strength, even though she does not feel particularly strong most of the time.

She takes the elevator up, does not look through the clear walls at the street below. Nor does she stare at the other wedge high-rises around her, positioned so that anyone in any of the elevators can see the passengers across the way.

She always thinks that buildings like this are a sniper's haven: Want to pick someone off? Ride the clear elevators in the wedges, wait for your target, calculate the rise of one elevator versus the fall of the other, and shoot.

She would do that, if she could. She has a sniper's imagination now, if not his skill. She has never tested the skill. She has never tried to figure out if simply downloading information from someone else's brain enables her to learn what her targets/subjects have learned. She suspects—she wants to believe, really—that muscle mass and muscle memory have a place in all of this, but she knows deep down that with the right nanoprogram, the right tweaks, she can perform some of these skills. She doesn't want the ability; she doesn't even want the whisper that she can pull off a hundred different jobs using a dozen different skills.

She's heard there are operatives like that, but she has not met them. She does not want to know them, although she suspects she does. Many of them, like her, started in interrogation. Then they moved to actual hands-on work, while she—she moved to a different kind of hands-on work, one that few people can do as effectively, few people *want* to do effectively, few people believe can be effective at all.

One of her colleagues calls her work the Voodoo Project, but it's not really that, it's not voodoo at all, not fictional voodoo, filled with dolls and pins and bad practices or real voodoo, all religion and belief and beyond what people can see.

But still, the Voodoo Project has stuck over the years, because the real name keeps changing—Psy Ops, FutureVision, Elite Squad-Building. Elite Squad-Building is her favorite, because it's the most accurate and the most descriptive. That is what she's doing, that's all she's doing, her and her fellow workers in the Voodoo Project. They're building squads to send on missions that are guaranteed to succeed—or in the case of a few, guaranteed to fail.

She hates the failure missions. She only finds out about them afterwards—or she used to, back when she double-checked her findings. But she always has an inkling of which mission will be a failure mission, because she turns in her report advising against that team for that mission at that time, and then suddenly, the mission happens anyway.

Remember; one of her handlers once told her, *sometimes failure is success*. But she has never understood that, has never wanted to understand that, just like she does not want to understand the missions all that clearly.

She likes to think she's saving the world, even though she knows she is saving only a small part of it: the part that believes in the same things she was raised to believe in. She doesn't even want to question if those things are right. She doesn't want to question anything, certainly not now.

The elevator doors open onto the sixtieth floor which looks, she knows from experience, like the sixtieth floor in other wedge high-rises, like the fifty-eighth floor, and the fifty-sixth: black carpet (worn gray in the center, flakes attached to the bottom part of the wall), silver walls, black tables with flowers in silver vases.

Over the years, the flowers went from real and expensive to real and cheap to fake and expensive to fake and cheap. Still, the riot of color—in this case reds and pinks and greens—is what draws the eye, because it's unusual.

It also takes the focus off the apartment doors.

They're down a triangular corridor—there are no rectangles in this building, except the living rooms in each apartment. She would hate living in wedge high-rises: she likes predictable spaces, spaces she doesn't have to think about, spaces that disappear when the eye finds them, not spaces that are designed to make a person uncomfortable.

She is uncomfortable enough.

She walks down the hall to apartment 60. There are only nine apartments per floor, the perks of former luxury. It is impossible, by modern standards, to divide the apartments into small units. The French mandate the size of an acceptable apartment—a habit they got from their American cousins—and one she is grateful for.

She presses her hand against the scanner to open the door—and to send a signal back to the Company that she has arrived, and the procedure has begun.

It doesn't matter that the team assembles two hours before her arrival, nor does it matter if they get along. The teams believe that such things matter, and some work toward unity, while others pretend they haven't seen each other.

But the teams have no idea why they form or why they separate. They simply know that they must gather.

She knows a few things about them as she waits for the scanner to burp its latest request to the top of the queue. She knows that she will face six team members here, because she is on the sixtieth floor. If she was on the seventieth floor, she would have seven team members, and on the one hundredth floor, ten team members.

She knows that the ratio should be two men, two women, and two gender neutral—maybe men, maybe women, maybe transgender, but gender impossible to determine at a glance. She knows she will find a range of IQs depending on the job, a range of physical types—fighters, soldiers, nerds—also depending on the job. She will find too much confidence and not enough healthy fear. She will find mostly youth, except (perhaps) the team leader. She will find eagerness and nervous anticipation.

This apartment smells of frying burgers, American food, probably with imported beef. Beef isn't illegal in France, but it is heavily monitored. The French do not want their meats taken from them—centuries of cooking a certain way have made them militant about their food—but they do not want to get a host of new diseases, most of them targeted to beef. The French have become cautious. Everyone has become cautious. It is a sign of the times.

Frying hamburger makes her think of home and childhood before the handlers came, before someone placed expectations on her, before she became a Guardian of the Free World. Her stomach growls, and she orders it into silence.

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She does not want to lose control of this interview because of hunger. She needs to maintain her concentration.

The kitchen is to her left, separated from the living room by a bar. No one sits on the bar stools. Instead, three team members gaze out the window at the wedge high-rise behind, and three cluster in the kitchen proper.

But only one cooks. If she is to guess—and she is not—she would wager that the chef is the leader. But she knows she might be wrong. People handle their nervousness differently, and some resort to their relaxation skills. It amazes her how many covert operatives use cooking to relax. And so therefore this person might not be cooking to establish dominance, but cooking to relax.

Layers upon layers upon layers. She hates layers.

Only one team member watches her enter. This member, another woman, is of an age with Rebekah—mid-forties, strong features, trim and athletic. Another candidate for leader, or perhaps someone who works security, the one who remains constantly alert to provide protection.

Rebekah smiles easily although she does not feel like smiling, then looks at the buns open on seven plates, seven because the chef expected her. Around the plates, glass bowls filled with five different kinds of cheese, filled with fresh lettuce and tomatoes probably from the Dupleix near the Eiffel Tower, filled with a mixture of homemade sauces with dainty little spoons ready to serve (so the chef, as hard as he pretends to go to his American roots, has either lived in France too long or was born here).

“Just in time,” the chef says in English. He turns toward her, smiling, holding a spatula dripping with hamburger juice.

She smiles in return, letting him think he is in charge when indeed he is not.

He is a big man, square shouldered, *cornfed* the Europeans would say because of his wide face and eager, seemingly open eyes. But he has an edge, a tightness around his jaw. His hair gives him away as well. It is too styled, too neat, layered. His hair, like those sauces, like the cheeses, proves that he doesn’t pay attention to the right details. He’s pretending to be authentically American, while his errors say he is not.

He uses the spatula to place the burgers on a plate. The meat steams as he pivots toward the bar, an efficient, practiced movement. He places a patty on the bottom half of each bun.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his accent broad and Midwestern, “but you’ll have to serve yourselves.”

The language, at least, is correct. An apology where one is not needed, strictly regional. Also a habit that is very easy to learn.

Everyone else in the room glances at her, expecting her to make the decision for them. Do they eat? Do they serve themselves? Do they ignore him?

She smiles back at him, takes a plate, and moves toward the sauces, the cheeses, not really caring what she chooses, since she probably will not have more than a bite.

Instead, she watches the others.

The remaining two in the kitchen—one man, one the woman who has watched her from the beginning—are clearly hungry. They grab plates, bumping into each other as they do so. They’ve been waiting for food.

Or have they been waiting for a typically American meal? Recent imports often get tired of the French fare, so novel at first, and so rich and repetitive as time goes on.

The other three thread their way uncertainly around the wedge-shaped furniture, the deliberately uncomfortable couch, the triangular ottomans, the matching easy chairs that do not look easy at all. Two gender neutral, and the other woman. That woman is slender, feminine, frilly dress, impractical shoes, aggressively female make-up. She is almost too pretty, noticeably pretty, with wedge-shaped eyes that match the building.

The gender neutrals dress appropriately, cargo pants, loose tops, hair cut short enough to seem masculine, but covering the ears in case the ears are too dainty or not dainty enough. High collars to cover the Adam's apple, sleeves long to cover the shape of the hands. The gender neutrals are often the most valuable team members, able to infiltrate anywhere, be anything, letting the orders dictate them instead of forcing their personalities to dictate the orders.

The three wait until Rebekah has finished decorating her burger. She has taken long enough. She needs to begin the work, much as she does not want to.

Teams never know how the examiner works. Teams have no idea whether they're observed or their DNA is analyzed or if their past behavior comes into play.

It is, of course, none of the above.

Instead, as Rebekah heads to the living room, she brushes against one of the gender neutrals. The movement is quick, barely noticeable, and yet that is all it takes.

She knows the timing—five seconds between contact and download. Five seconds and she will know everything.

She uses those seconds to find an empty space against the wall and lean:

Woman, not transgender, lanky and lean and strong, frustrated, wishing she has a different role as she stares at the thick leaves before her. Flat, broad leaves, the air so hot that it's barely air; bugs swarming around her, wishing she can wear lotion, wishing she can wear sunscreen, but of course she cannot.

She clutches an old AK-47, rusty, slime-covered, hands shaking, not even sure if she can use the damn thing. Weapons gone, team gone, the smell of fetid water near her, and too many flies, buzzing and swarming, whatever flies do. Too many flies means something died nearby. Either the flies are laying eggs or the eggs have just hatched.

She crouches, gently (silently) moves the leaves, sees rotted clothes, bones, a pool of slimy water filled with decom. More flies. Blowflies. Maggots. The flies just hatched.

She should get a sample, regulations require a sample, so someone here can be identified—DNA and all that—but what's the point? She won't make it back, and if she does, if the gods of warfare somehow smile on her, she won't be able to lead anyone here. She's not even sure how she got here, not after that ambush, not after—

A snap and she freezes. She's in the wrong position, a crouch, impossible to look up from this position, hand extended, AK-47 (old, rusted, unusable?) cradled against her body. She makes herself breathe silently, hopes her tired legs can hold her crouch long enough to seem to remain invisible, long enough to survive.

Then a rustle, and a light touch against the back of her head. Technically, she shouldn't feel the touch at all, but someone wants her to.

"So," a familiar voice—Rafe's—says in English, "do you want to join your friend there or would you prefer full disintegration?"

She whirls before thinking, aiming for his legs, she'll bring him down, she'll

And then nothing. Rebekah doesn't close her eyes. She's too trained for that. To the others, only a few seconds have gone by. Not enough to notice. If she closes her eyes, makes any odd movement, someone might figure out what she is doing. She has trained her features so they don't move, no matter what she Sees. Nor does she look at the gender neutral (woman) whom she just brushed, whose upcoming death she just witnessed.

The fetid smell of that water is still in Rebekah's nostrils even though it was not real, the smell so strong that the hamburger, still dripping juice, looks obscene.

She swallows against bile, slips around the wall back into the kitchen, sets the plate down as she reaches for a glass. She pours herself water from a pitcher with ice, making sure her hands don't shake.

She wonders which one is Rafe.

But she cannot look, cannot ask. She's here to evaluate, and for all she knows, the

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gender neutral (woman) will (had?) blow the mission herself, will flee, will become someone else.

Rebekah doesn't even know what the mission is, really, just that this moment, this incident, this thing she Saw is somehow tied to it.

"Burger okay?" the chef asks.

She smiles again, nods, turns, accidentally backing into the other man. Mentally curses herself—she wanted a moment to recover but knows she won't get one, so she sets the water beside the plate and braces herself against the countertop:

Airstrip, middle of nowhere, hot. Doesn't matter how many tweaks he gets, how much he augments, he still can't take the goddamn heat. Sun beats down on the strip, jungle encroaching from all sides. The light white, blinding. No birdsong, no wind, no sound except a faint low-pitched buzz from some kind of insane insect that thrives in this weather.

Touchdown: Simple. Infiltration: Simple. Waiting: Not so simple. Hard, in fact, especially when there's no contact, when he has to hide here, at the edge of the field, in the shade, but too close to that fucking sun.

Then the ship comes, shiny, golden, he wonders how anyone approved it for this mission, considering how the light reflects off it, proving that it is not part of this damn jungle. No sound though, silent as it hovers, then slowly drops down on the ancient strip.

The light on his tracker, the small device attached to his wrist, blinks once, so fast that had he not been waiting, he would have missed it. Confirmation: This ship is one of ours.

He sprints into the open—the dangerous part, his back twitching as he imagines a thousand shooters, all wanting him dead. But he reaches the ship's side, touches the miraculous coolness, waits as the door opens—waits . . .

Then breathes deeply as he steps inside, out of the sun.

Safe.

She can't look at him. She wants to ask "Is your name Rafe?" but she doesn't, of course. Instead, she picks up the water, sips delicately. The joy of this vision is that the burger looks good again. Her stomach growls, and this time, she doesn't silently chastise it.

Instead, she takes a bite—small, but enough. The cheese is sharp, the sauce almost sweet, the burger itself better than any burger she's had for a while. She makes herself chew, reminds herself that she is not supposed to judge or guess or make any decisions at all.

The chef picks up his own burger. He says to her, "I was wondering for a minute there if you were all right."

She tries to compare his voice to Rafe's voice, but knows she cannot. Even if he is Rafe, his voice will sound slightly different to her ears than it will to the ears of the gender neutral (woman).

"We're really not here to eat," Rebekah says, setting the plate down and wiping her hands together. "We're here to assess."

"Do you know what the job is?" the other gender neutral asks. Perfectly cast in the role, since the voice is gender neutral as well, that mix of alto/tenor that could be either.

"Even if I do," Rebekah says, "I'm not allowed to tell you. Shall we gather in the living room?"

She wants them moving, wants the focus off her.

"I need to straighten a little," the chef says.

She says, "Just make sure everything is off for the moment."

The others sit in the living room, perch on the edges of the uncomfortable furni-

ture. Two—the man she brushed (Rafe?) and the frilly woman—sit on the couch together as if they already know each other.

“What should we be doing?” the chef asks as he passes her. He does not brush against her. “State our names?”

“Names are lies,” the gender neutral (woman) says. And if Rebekah hadn’t already Seen her, she would not be able to tell that this gender neutral is female, any more than she can tell with the other. Which is as it should be.

"Occupations are lies too," the frilly woman says. Then she tilts her head up at the chef, smiles (flirts), and adds, "Although we know you can cook."

“Hamburgers,” he says with an answering smile. “You know I can cook hamburgers.”

His attention is leaving her after just a moment. He's auditioning for the role of leader, just like she's auditioning for a more dangerous role: undercover, perhaps, all the way undercover. A woman who doesn't mind using her body to aid her in her work.

The other man is—what?—a soldier, perhaps? Infantry, they call such men at the Company, because they are expendable.

Of course, every team is expendable. Human teams don't get used much any more except in human situations. Now, in this endless war—a war that has extended more than a century, a war that even has historians fighting as to who started what when (did it start at the turn of the twenty-first century perhaps? In the United States? Or did it start before that in Afghanistan, a war with the now-defunct Soviet Union? Twenty years ago, when China flexed its considerable muscle?)—humans still have importance, just not as much as they once had. Human teams gather the best human intelligence, and she doesn't want to waste them on a job that will destroy them, doesn't want them to do a job that drones or robots or computer chips could do better.

She certainly couldn't do it better. She (and others like her) can't go undercover because those with the Sight, the Gift, whatever you want to call it—that little combination of genes fed by the right hormones and a few extra chemicals at the right time—those people spend too much time in the minds of others, and grow to empathize with those around them.

She knows her attitudes come from the minds she's touched, but she pretends they haven't influenced her much. She doesn't want them to have influenced her much.

She likes to pretend she's her own person.

"You're not going to tell us what the job is, are you?" the other man asks, clearly irritated. She doesn't quite recognize his voice either—the infamous Rafe? Someone else? She mentally shrugs the thought away.

"You're assuming I know what the job is," she says, with an easy smile. How many times has she answered these questions, in similar rooms, with similar people? Too many.

She reaches for the water glass she has carried in from the kitchen and her fingers brush against the fortyish woman's. Rebekah suppresses a sigh. She wanted to do a bit more playing with them before she investigated another. She wanted more time.

But of course, she's not going to get it. She sips, leans against the wall, pressing hard, braced as:

The blankness of it surprises her, and this time she doesn't catch her own expression. She knows it changed.

She's never experienced nothing before, although this wasn't really nothing. It was like a mental skip, a malfunction, a computer about to fritz, a vehicle with malfunctioning propulsion.

Her brain aches.

The fortyish woman smiles at her, and there's something in that smile, something knowing and off.

Rebekah feels an odd panic, a clenching around her heart. Her breath comes in short gasps. She's heard of this emptiness, is told that someone who can mentally shield can do this, is told that if she touched someone like herself this would happen, but she's touched others with the Sight, and they have futures and pasts that she can access.

What she was told was wrong. Of course, her handlers told her all of this: her handlers whom, she later learned, did not have the Sight themselves.

"Are you all right?" the chef asks her again, and she grabs his hand. She hasn't touched him before. He actually avoided her, and she wants to know why. She clings tightly as:

Nothing. Again.

Her heart is skipping now, and sweat beads on her forehead. Everyone watches her, eyes narrowed, trying to figure out what's going on. Except the fortyish woman who is smiling, and the chef, whose gaze flicks to the fortyish woman.

Have they planned this? Was there something in the burger? The bun? The sauces? The water?

Rebekah has heard of things that block Sight. She knows they are real. Chemical components that disrupt neurons, that make the brain misfire, but those aren't permanent. There is a nanoprobe that can disrupt the unusual neural structure, but she's not sure how quickly that activates.

She lets go of the chef, reaches for the gender neutral (woman), expects to see something—a repeat, perhaps, of those last moments in the jungle. Rebekah usually gets repeats when she touches the same person in the same situation.

But she gets that stutter—nothing. Nothing at all.

She whirls. Four of the team look a bit panicked.

And the chef, the chef is grinning, the fortyish woman grinning with him.

"It looks like we're done here," the fortyish woman says. She has a fine voice, rich and female, but deep enough to be male.

Rafe? Instead of the male name, a female nickname. No. Not possible.

Is it?

The fortyish woman leans forward as the gender neutral (woman) twists her hand out of Rebekah's grasp. As the gender neutral (woman) and the other three leave, the fortyish woman puts her hand on Rebekah's shoulder and in spite of herself, Rebekah stiffens, braces, for the Vision that will not come.

"Thank me," the fortyish woman says quietly. "You needed to retire anyway. You're too old. The burnout is painful—or so they tell me."

She smiles, pats Rebekah's cheek.

“Now you can have a normal life.”

Then the fortyish woman leans back, slips her hand through the chef's arm. They leave.

Rebekah is alone in the apartment, heart pounding. She almost slips to the floor, but she won't let herself.

She grabs the hamburger.

alyzed.
Not that it will matter.
Because from now on, her Visions will be limited by this experience. No one will

fest as something wrong. It might be a complete misread.

Even if nothing is wrong with her Sight tomorrow, even if the block is temporary, the fact of this block changes everything, adds a layer.

From useful to useless in five seconds.

Like she would do with teams. Like she's supposed to do with teams. She's supposed to assess, judge, make a decision based on a few short Visions, as if they tell everything, as if they're filled with truth.

She has to give a report on this team, no matter what, and she will. She'll mention the death of the gender neutral (woman); she'll write up the gold ship, the fact that the other man (not the chef) will be alone when the ship arrives, waiting, he says, after infiltrating.

Rebekah looks at the door, open on that cold hallway.

Infiltrating.

Good Lord, has the enemy infiltrated them? No one has infiltrated the Voodoo Project before. It's too hard. Those with the Gift, they See too much, they know the spies from the moment they arrive.

If the spies try to train, that is.

But have they ever tried to be part of a team before? Not part of the Voodoo Project itself, but part of the team being analyzed. It's the only way to infiltrate. It's a sure-fire way to succeed.

And that chemical or the nanoprobe or whatever the hell they used, it prevents them from being caught, because they neutralize the only one who can find them, the only one who can ferret them out.

A sleeper somewhere inside the system, who knows how the system works, but isn't part of the Voodoo Project.

She has to report this to her superiors, not that it will change things for her.

She's done.

But one thing does matter: that woman, that gender neutral (woman), will die in a jungle if someone does not stop this mission. She will be disintegrated by a person she knows, in heat and humidity, over an operation gone bad.

And she probably has no idea that this team, with its chef and its fortyish woman, flirty woman, rough man, and the other silent unknowable gender neutral, will somehow cause that death.

It is that thought that galvanizes Rebekah.

She drops the hamburger, the water, and sprints out of the apartment. There is a service elevator at the tip of the wedge, and that elevator has an override that takes it directly to the lobby.

She's gambling that the team will stop there, discuss whether or not they'll meet again. The team members probably wonder if the fortyish woman or the chef will tell them that they all passed the test—whatever that test is—and will send them on their way.

To do what, Rebekah does not know. She never knows.

Except she knows one will escape and one will die. She knows that much.

She finds the elevator, the override. She taps in a code—this is a safe house after all; she has codes to all of them—and the elevator plummets, leaving her stomach on the sixtieth floor, at least metaphorically. This elevator is a dark, triangle shaped box, wide enough for equipment and little else. It feels claustrophobic, not part of the wedge high-rise at all.

The elevator reaches the ground in five seconds, maybe less, and as the doors open, she sees the team split up, laughing. She sprints toward the gender neutral (woman), catches her hand, and the woman looks at her as if she's lost her mind.

Maybe she has.

“Don’t go,” Rebekah says. “You’ll die.”

The gender neutral (woman) shakes her off, says, “You can’t stop me,” and walks out the front door.

Rebekah starts after her, realizes after a few steps that the gender neutral (woman) has already misunderstood her. The gender neutral (woman) believes Rebekah does not want her to leave the building when Rebekah does not want her to leave for that jungle, wherever that jungle is, on that trip, whenever that trip will happen, on that mission, if the mission even exists.

Like this war. Unknowable and unknown. How it started—who knows? How it will end—unknown.

It is glimpses and flashes and moments, all incomprehensible and perhaps unrelated, sometimes as mundane as a meeting in an apartment, sometimes as heart-stopping as an exploding building, sometimes as unpredictable as a cascade of events started, perhaps, by an order to go to a particular wedge-shaped high-rise on the outskirts of Paris, in a neighborhood once wealthy but no longer.

Rebekah lets the gender neutral (woman) leave, lets the team leave, lets the chef and the fortyish woman leave, knowing they’re taking her job—her life—with them.

A layer: that’s all they are. All they’ve added is a layer of doubt—the inevitable layer of doubt, Rebekah would have said a decade ago. But inevitable or not, the layer of doubt has arrived, and it trumps all other layers.

Screw the Company; *she* can never trust her own Future Vision again.

Past Vision will send her back to interrogation, to things more horrible than that disintegrating death in the jungle. She isn’t going there.

She’s going to have to retire, to acknowledge that her special talent has left her and she is special no longer.

She knew it was going to come. Like a Future Vision, she knew this moment would arrive, and she would walk from one life to another.

She just did not believe it would happen so soon.

She crosses the lobby, walks through the main doors, and onto the sidewalk.

To her left is the Metro entrance, a flight of steps into Stygian darkness, a descent into hell.

Her safety, her talisman.

Not that it will ever do her any good again. She can’t dive down there and emerge an hour later, cut up and bruised but essentially all right.

The mind does not work that way. The future will not work that way.

She will have to build a new life, even if the Sight returns—and it most likely will. But by then, the Company will no longer have a use for her.

She has been effectively neutralized, taken out without a shot, destroyed, discredited, ruined.

And she will never know by whom, for what cause, for which reason, because such things will be Need-To-Know, hidden in the Company files, irrelevant to everyone except this team, this moment, and her future.

She wonders what was so important about sending this group off, then realizes that there is probably nothing important about this group. This was the team that could be infiltrated, that’s all. The opportunity to be taken.

The infiltrators could have taken out any operative, anyone in the Voodoo Project, anyone with the Sight.

It wasn’t personal. Rebekah herself wasn’t targeted.

She was just the victim.

And her life was changed, the way that she changed the lives of every team she touched—in a flash, in an instant, based on incomplete information, inferences, and a hint of self-righteousness.

She had been paranoid as she walked inside this building, but she is not now. She has no reason to be.

She is done, and she knows it. Soon everyone in the Company will know it. They will say appreciative words, give her a pension, and retire her.

And she will go on with her life, pretending she had never had such adventures because she cannot talk about them with people she will not want to touch because she will not want to confirm that she is indeed useless, that her time has come and gone, and she is now waiting, like they all wait, like that man will wait at the edge of the airstrip. Maybe someone will come for them, or maybe not.

It is, they think, unknowable, and she has to go back to thinking that as well. To the life before the handlers, a life where hamburgers were part of a hot summer weekend, and a smile had no perfidy in it, to a world that exists no longer, and maybe never did exist outside of a lonely child's imperfect imagination.

She is walking into the unknown, but it is not dark, and it is not terrifying.

And that surprises her.

She expected to be targeted and she was targeted. It has gutted her, but not disintegrated her. Maybe she is cut and bruised. But she is emerging.

She is stepping from a strange darkness into a common—and unfamiliar—light. ○

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future history

**They climbed the sky on a ladder of flame,
who aimed toward the distant stars.**

**More than a thousand years ago—they claimed
they climbed the sky on a ladder of flame.**

**Never got to Mars. Only left their names
there on the Moon. Who remembers
they climbed the sky on a ladder of flame?
They aimed toward the distant stars?**

—Joe Haldeman

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OBSERVATIONS ON A CLOCK

D. Thomas Minton

When not writing, D. Thomas Minton works as a marine biologist for a non-profit conservation organization. His fiction has appeared in *Lightspeed Magazine*; *Daily Science Fiction*; and Dagan Books' *In Situ*, an anthology of stories about archeology and alien artifacts. The author tells us that he frequently scribbles random thoughts at dthomasminton.com. He lives with his wife and daughter on a sunny and warm island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean (which is considerably different from the setting in his first story for *Asimov's*).

The Clock sits in the dark, counting down time. Alone. Except for Chevalier.

“It is ridiculous to kneel before it,” says Maria Tessauda.

Chevalier senses her presence in the blackness. He has never met the real Tessauda. She died three hundred years before he was born. She lives, however, as a MEM in his head, put there—reluctantly, he is now sure—to share her knowledge of the Clock.

“It does not count down to your Revelation.” She takes every opportunity to tell him this. She is not a believer; it offends her academic sensibilities.

“Leave me in peace.” Chevalier knows she will not. Three years ago, she tricked him into altering her MEM programming. Now she comes and goes at her will. His need for companionship, especially from a woman, drove him to such foolish action.

“Your Testament is illogical.”

Unable to contain himself, Chevalier says, “The Testament is Truth.”

He cannot see her smile, but he feels it. She has fifty different smiles. Most are unpleasant to witness.

“If your Testament is true, you have nothing to fear by looking. The digger is ready, it only needs a command. If you allow, I can—”

“No.” He will not be tricked again into giving more autonomy. “If I do this, will you leave me alone?”

“That is the only reason you will do it?”

Chevalier sighs. His breath crackles as it crystallizes in the eternal night. He fights her only because giving in emboldens her.

“You should do this because you need to know.”

What more is there to know? The Testament has proven itself by saving humanity from self-annihilation. It has prepared them for the coming Revelation, which will arrive when the Clock runs its course. Chevalier cannot doubt. As Don Cristobal has counseled, without doubt, there is no fear.

"I am not afraid," he says aloud. Yet he is uncertain he believes his own words.

Chevalier's implant tells him the digger still sits at the edge of the platform where he found it a decade ago. Without word or motion, he orders it to life. "Show me where to dig."

Chevalier finishes his log entry, but does not light-beam it to Earth. It contains his first mention of the digging, even though the machine has been at work for several days.

The fusion lamp sputters as if it is a real flame. He closes his eyes and remembers the way the candles used to flicker shadows across the walls of his seminary chamber. The beeswax smelled faintly of honey, and the gentle echo of prayer off the ancient stone vaults comforted him like his mother's arms.

Chevalier inhales deeply, but the fusion lamp is odorless.

When he opens his eyes, there is only the lozenge-shaped ship that carried him across fifteen light years of time and space. The halo of light feels cold and insubstantial.

Chevalier light-beams his log back to Earth. Its contents won't matter, he decides. In fifteen years, when someone reads it, his mission will be long over.

Immediately Chevalier senses a presence. At the edge of the shadows stands Don Cristobal in his holy sash. His face is round and plump with a generous grey beard. Upon his forehead is the mark of the sacred third eye.

Chevalier bows clumsily, nearly knocking over the lamp. "Your holiness," he says, lowering his eyes.

Like Maria Tessauda, Don Cristobal is a MEM in Chevalier's head. Unlike her, he knew Don Cristobal, the flesh. It is because of Don Cristobal that Chevalier is here, alone.

Chevalier senses Don Cristobal's disappointment, which is worse than any reproach. "The woman . . . she . . ." Nothing he says can explain, but he cannot help himself. "I am sorry, I only thought—"

"Do not think, Chevalier. Do what you are here to do."

"I only wish to affirm the Clock's divine creation."

"Affirmation comes from faith, not digging. Nothing can be learned by digging because there is nothing here but the Clock."

Chevalier wants to look up, but does not. "Nothing is what I intend to find. That will prove—"

"Nothing proves only that you have found nothing. However, the act of looking proves that you doubt."

Chevalier's chest constricts. "You are right, Holiness. The Testament saved us all. I do not doubt it." He feels the need to prove the veracity of his words. He locates the digger where it works dutifully in the darkness excavating regolith from a hole at the edge of the platform. At his command, it retreats.

"It is finished," Chevalier says, but already Don Cristobal has left.

Soon after he stops the digger, Tessauda arrives unannounced.

Standing in a wide basin, Chevalier washes with a tattered rag. His skin smokes in the cold air.

Tessauda grins as she ogles his nakedness. "You used to be happy to see me, Chevalier."

His face flushes hot. Chevalier has no reason to be embarrassed, yet he is. Tessauda is not what he considers a physically beautiful woman. Her features are hard and angular, like splinters of flint. But she is still a woman.

Chevalier continues to wash himself, unwilling to be goaded by her. His green skin used to disconcert him, but after ten years he finds comfort in it. The chlorophyll is

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one of his many genetic modifications that make it possible for him to complete his mission.

Apparently bored with taunting him, Tessauda asks, "Why have you stopped the digger?" Shadow eclipses her face as she steps between him and the fusion lamp.

Chevalier does not answer, hoping she will leave. He finishes washing himself and wraps a towel around his waist. The light from the lamp appears unusually pale.

"Order the digger back," she says.

"I can't do that."

A knowing look flares across her face. "Why do you listen to Don Cristobal?"

Her dismissiveness piques his anger. "If I do not listen to him, then all I have is you."

She places a wide, flat palm against his chest. Her skin is warm, unlike her smile. "Am I no longer enough, Chevalier?" Her hand slides downward.

He catches it at his navel. "Go away and do not come back."

Tessauda steps away. Light waxes across her wide eyes and round mouth. After a second, her surprise is gone. "You are a fool, Chevalier. Idiot, imbecile, bastard. You take my precious life work and then dismiss me like a whore."

Chevalier tries not to wince. He knows her words are meant to manipulate. Even so, his guilt burns. Unable to look at her, he lowers his eyes. When he looks up to apologize, she is gone.

Tessauda does not visit for weeks. At first, Chevalier is relieved to be free of her fifty smiles. He spends half his waking hours searching the heavens for the seven signs described in the Testament. For the other half, he kneels before the Clock, praying for enlightenment. He finds neither.

When he turns out the fusion lamp, he sometimes hears voices in the darkness. When he turns up the light, the halo is always empty.

"Don Cristobal, where are you?" he asks once as he floats in blackness viscous as the sea.

Silence.

He wonders if he has always been alone.

Unable to sleep, Chevalier passes time by walking from the platform edge to the Clock and back again. He times his passage—there and back and there and back—by the minutes falling into the night. He has been here for nearly eleven years, because his ship traveled a fraction of cee faster than anticipated. The end is now only weeks away—but he is no longer sure he can make it.

Is he the idiot Tessauda branded him? He finds it troubling how her words still burn. He still believes, because he must, but what if Tessauda is right, and the Clock does not mark the Revelation?

Doubt begets the bastard child named fear.

Chevalier goes to the digger.

A few meters from the platform, the squat machine has excavated a trench just long and wide enough that Chevalier could lie in it like a coffin. The beam from the fusion lamp plays off the crisp edge, but illuminates nothing within.

He is angry at himself for doubting.

Eventually, Don Cristobal comes. He stands at the edge of the halo of light. His sash looks grey, but Chevalier is too tired to determine if it is only an illusion of the light. Chevalier has begun to believe that the lamp is fading, but when he has paced out the diameter of the halo, it always seems to be the same.

"You look troubled," says Don Cristobal.

"I am weary of the dark. I cannot find the signs. I . . ."

"I am here, Chevalier."

If that were true, then where have you been all this time, Chevalier thinks.

Don Cristobal's face is round and gentle, how Chevalier's father would have looked if he had not been killed in the violence before the Order had given humanity its hope. For some reason, Chevalier is not comforted.

"I am not strong enough," Chevalier says.

"You were chosen by divine right," Don Cristobal says. "You are the only one who could undertake this mission."

Chevalier does not believe him. The mission has been difficult, certainly, but many could have done it better than him.

"We must dig within to find our strength. It allows us to overcome our doubt. Without doubt, we conquer our fear. Without fear, we can embrace the Revelation when it comes."

Chevalier knows the teachings of the Testament. Doubt begets fear begets darkness. Humanity has been to that brink before. Chevalier has stood there, too, before he embraced the teachings of the Order. Only the Testament averted destruction. "I need to be stronger."

"Do not doubt your strength, Chevalier. You have the power to stay humanity's course."

Chevalier can feel the pressure of the dark against the halo of light. Humanity awaits the Revelation, and Chevalier, as witness, is to be their conduit to understanding the future. His mission is more than just bearing witness to the greatest event in human history. It is to save humanity from doubting its place in the universe. "I am strong enough to do what must be done."

In forty-two hours the last of the micro black holes that power the Clock's core will evaporate. Its energy spent, the Clock will reach its end.

Chevalier runs a systems check on the light-beam transmitter. It has been weeks since he has sent or received anything from Earth, but the equipment is working properly.

As he finishes, he senses Tessauda's presence and nearly drops the transmitter's casing on his foot.

She looks different. Her smile is gone and the lines at the corner of her eyes look like fissures.

Chevalier wonders if her absence has changed her.

"What do you fear you will find?" she asks.

Chevalier is not put off by her lack of pleasantries. They are not her. "There is nothing to find," he says. "The Clock is divine."

Tessauda's predatory grin returns. It is different from her other forty-nine smiles because it shows her teeth. "Come with me, then. I have something you should see."

She has not changed.

Already Chevalier is annoyed by her return, but at the same time, he draws comfort from it. He allows her to lead him to the edge of the platform. There, he steps down onto the hard-packed regolith. Before him is the trench excavated by the digger. Tessauda lurks behind, a tiger in the shadow of underbrush.

"I had hoped that in my absence you would come to see."

Chevalier's lips are icy with crystallized breath. "I see nothing."

Tessauda's shoulder brushes against his, startling him. "You see nothing because you do not even try to look." She kneels at the edge and reaches into the hole. "The light!" Her voice is sharp, as if meant for an insolent child.

He shines the lamp down where she points. The trench is only twenty centimeters deep. The bottom is hard and smooth.

Tessauda's hand sweeps at the fine grit covering the bottom of the hole, but she

cannot move it. "You must do it," she says.

Chevalier is momentarily shocked by this reminder that she is a MEM. "There is nothing—"

"Just do it, and do not crow your ignorance a third time."

Chevalier scowls but brushes the grit aside. As he does so, his fingertips catch a groove. He traces a rectangular stone, then a second one abutting the first.

Tessauda's smile slides across her face. "Now you see," she says. "Something was here before your divine Clock."

The fusion lamp pushes the dark aside as Chevalier flees across the platform. Tessauda's mocking smile cuts at his shoulder blades, and he curses his foolishness for ever wishing her back.

He tries to forget the foundation that she has shown him, but he cannot flee the implications. Someone built the Clock atop a foundation of cut stone that differs from everything he associates with the Clock.

As he nears the Clock, he stops to extinguish the lamp, as he always does before approaching its Divine presence.

"Why do you hide it in darkness?" Tessauda circles from behind and stands between him and the Clock.

"It is divine." Chevalier regrets speaking the moment the words thoughtlessly tumble across his lips.

"I don't pretend to know what this device foretells, if anything at all, but I see no proof it is your Revelation."

"It will come," says Don Cristobal.

Chevalier turns toward Don Cristobal, standing behind him.

"It must come for the sake of humanity," Don Cristobal says.

"Tell me, Chevalier, what happens if you are wrong?" says Tessauda.

He turns to look at her, and is struck by how similar her eyes are to Don Cristobal's. He has never seen the two at the same time before, but by their eyes, they could be father and daughter.

"What happens if the Clock reaches its end and the Revelation does not come?"

"It will come," says Don Cristobal. "It is divine."

"Divine." Tessauda spits the word as if it is bitter alum. "To our ancestors with stone tools, you are divine, Chevalier."

"The Testament of Celestial Unity foretells the coming Revelation. Humanity is ready to embrace it as at no other time in its history. Through Chevalier, we will experience it and understand our higher fate."

"Something is coming," says Tessauda, "and it will be a revelation, but will it be the one you seek? That is the question."

Chevalier glares at her. "There is nothing to fear as long as I have faith."

"Fear is a good thing, Chevalier. Fear is what drives us toward excellence. Without fear—fear of failure, fear of death—we are nothing."

"Fear nearly destroyed us," says Chevalier. He remembers when his family was killed by Tensari soldiers during the war, and he was afraid to live. He recalls the first time he held a disruptor in battle and was afraid to die. He had been afraid to love, to succeed, to fail, to . . . The Order showed him how to conquer his fear. He never wants to be that person again.

"Stupidity nearly destroyed us," say Tessauda.

"It was doubt about our place in the cosmos," says Don Cristobal. "The Revelation will affirm our place."

"What will happen if the Clock strikes zero and there is nothing but the dark?"

A hole opens in Chevalier's gut. He is ashamed to admit that more than once the

thought has occurred to him.

"That will not happen," says Don Cristobal.

Chevalier spins, first looking toward Don Cristobal, then Tessauda. When he stops spinning, his head is so light it feels like it can float free of his neck.

He drops the fusion lamp. As it hits the platform, Chevalier's universe goes dark and quiet.

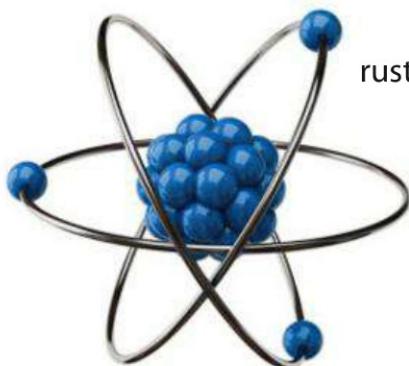
Don Cristobal is right; Chevalier holds humanity in his hands. To light-beam a document back to Earth showing the Revelation to be nothing would destroy the Order. Without the Order humanity would regress into what it once was. It would be better to send nothing and let them think he had failed.

"I am sorry, Don Cristobal. I am not strong enough." Chevalier drops to his knees, alone in the dark, as he has always been.

Except for the Clock. ○

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The Atom's Lattice Could Such Beauty Yield



Like a miniature city made of glass,
this crystal quartz extends transparent spires,
rust colored at their base, shafts tinged with brass,
as if inside the matrix stone some fire
raged out of sight and sent its telltale glow
up the clear prisms of the shafts. This stone
grew, layer by layer, flake by flake; no
other stone adds to itself, grows like bone
up the shadow ladder its electrons cast
beyond themselves as if the rock aspires
to something more than rock, some special flow,
something akin to life. In this clear stone,
the atom's lattice could such beauty yield,
we could not bear to have it all revealed.

—William John Watkins

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Ken Liu is a programmer as well as a lawyer whose stories have appeared in *F&SF*, *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed*, *Clarkesworld*, and the anthology *Panverse Three* among other places. He lives in the Greater Boston area with his wife, artist Lisa Tang Liu, and their daughter. More about Ken can be found at <http://kenliu.name>. In his second tale for *Asimov's*, the author tells the story of a group of scientists making a new life on a distant planet and coming to terms with . . .

THE PEOPLE OF PELE

Ken Liu

The exploration and use of outer space, including the moon and other celestial bodies, shall be carried out for the benefit and in the interests of all countries, irrespective of their degree of economic or scientific development, and shall be the province of all mankind.

Outer space, including the moon and other celestial bodies, is not subject to national appropriation by claim of sovereignty, by means of use or occupation, or by any other means.

—*Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies*, 1967

Kerry Sherman, Commander of the *Columbia*, worked slowly and carefully. In zero g, one paid extra attention to momentum, mass, inertia. The suspended animation pods were close to a hundred kilos each, and if he moved too fast, he might smash one of them into the walls like a ramming rod. The nearest repair facilities were back on Earth, 27.8 light years away.

He maneuvered the first pod into the reanimation gantry in the medical bay and left to the computer the delicate and complicated process of gradually thawing out the body within.

While the computer did its work, Sherman kicked and drifted to the front of the pilot bay. The *Columbia*'s high orbit gave him a magnificent view of the planet below, blue and green ovals of water dotting a tan landscape, under a layer of drifting white swirls—like Earth, but much drier, with great lakes rather than true seas and oceans. The sun, 61 Virginis, was behind the ship, and its light glistened from the small polar snowcaps. A few volcanoes along planet-encircling mountain chains belched smoke into the sky, which at this distance appeared as tiny puffs. The pre-launch press had dubbed the planet Pele, after the Hawaiian goddess of volcanoes, based on the theoretical existence of these volcanoes. Now they were confirmed.

Noises coming from behind told him that the occupant of the first pod was up.

“Slept well?” Sherman said, without taking his eyes off the monitor.

“Like a baby,” Darren Crose replied. The Second Commander and Chief Geologist drifted to the other side of the circular monitor from Sherman and drew the velcro

straps on the wall across his thighs and chest. He oriented himself in the opposite way from Sherman so that while Sherman looked "down" at the screen toward his feet, Crose looked "up" at the screen "above" his head. Crose always liked a different perspective.

"Coffee?"

Sherman nodded, surprised. Crose tossed a small silver pouch across the space between them, tumbling slowly end over end. Sherman caught it, pulled the tab at the bottom, and waited for the exothermic chemicals to do their work. After a while, he lifted the straw at the bottom, pushed it between his lips, and gave the pouch a tentative squeeze. He sighed at the taste of the instant brew, which seemed to him just then better than any coffee he had ever had.

Kerry Sherman was tall and lanky, and still had a full head of dark brown hair despite having just had his forty-fifth birthday before the launch. His deep voice, combined with the slow and deliberate cadence of his speech, caused Crose sometimes to describe it as the voice behind movie trailers. Darren Crose, on the other hand, was stout, bald, and spoke like a distracted professor. Among the crew, he had a reputation for being more approachable and laid back than Sherman, and both of them were fine with that. Together, they made an effective command team.

Sherman looked across at the upside-down Crose, contentedly sipping at his own silver pouch. "You used your personal weight allotment for these? How many?"

"Just four. I figure I'll save the other two for your infamous all-hands meetings. I remember well the rush for comfy chairs in the dim back corners."

Sherman smiled and sipped his coffee again.

At a fuel-to-payload ratio of 850 to 1, the *Columbia* was far from an efficient ship even if it was the pinnacle of American ingenuity. The trip from Earth to Pele was its first and only flight: the cost for the amount of antimatter required for a round-trip—taking into account the fuel needed to transport the fuel—would have been beyond astronomical. The need to keep flight mass to a minimum necessitated suspended animation for the duration of the flight to reduce consumables, and also forced each crewmember through a pre-launch weight-loss regime. As a member of the senior command staff, Crose had been given an allotment of just ten kilos for personal effects. Four instant coffees were probably not the smartest use of the resource, but right now Sherman appreciated the decision.

"Reminds you of the view from Weld, doesn't it?" Crose said, gesturing at the planet spinning above his head.

Sherman laughed. More than a quarter century earlier—that would be close to sixty years ago, going by Earth's reference frame—the algorithms of the Freshman Dean's Office had roomed them together, apparently because they had both indicated on their preference forms that they suffered from insomnia. They had spent many early mornings sitting together in the common room, drinking cheap coffee brewed on their code-violating coffeemaker and watching the Yard gradually come to life beneath their window.

"Feels like only yesterday when we were strapped down and went to sleep," said Crose.

"Transit time ended up a little more than thirty years, Earth frame, or about six and a half years by ship's time in dilation. We got up to 99.79% c at the midpoint. That definitely broke the Russian record."

Crose whistled. "Wish Mom could see me on TV now. Fastest man alive. And Sally—"

As soon as the words left his mouth, Crose regretted them. By now—regardless of what inertial frame you used—Crose's mother was a box of bones in the ground, and Sally, Sherman's wife—ex-wife—would be an elderly grandmother, if not dead herself. Sherman felt a sense of despair and disorientation rise from the pit of his stomach, and bit down to keep himself from groaning.

The mission psychologists had spent many sessions with each member of the crew, prepping them just for this moment, *dilation shock*. “Focus on the mission,” they had repeatedly told the crew. “You must remember to concentrate on the task at hand. You’ve already said goodbye to everyone the minute you agreed to go on the mission.”

But there was always a difference between calculating something to be true and experiencing it.

Sherman pretended that Crose hadn’t said anything. They both closed their eyes and breathed deeply, practicing the tricks the mission psychologists had taught them for warding off panic. But the ghosts of a past that was simultaneously a night’s sleep and thirty years ago were not easy to shake off.

“The good news is that there’s no evidence of any other Earth ship here,” Sherman said, after he felt he had control of his voice again. “So we know that the laws of physics still haven’t been repealed. No faster-than-light travel.”

And no way to ever go home, he silently added.

“It would have been a shame if we woke up only to find someone here before us. Heard from Houston?”

Sherman shook his head. “They would have begun broadcasting about two years after we left, by their reference frame, so the signal should arrive here just about now. But 61 Virginis is going through an active cycle, and the solar flares are very noisy. It will take a while for the computer to filter through.”

“We might as well get started with the landing then.”

Focus on the mission.

Sherman guided the orbiter shuttle to a textbook-perfect landing on the flat, hard-packed surface of the alluvial plain next to the bright green lake that Sherman dubbed Nova California on account of its shape.

In the airlock, members of the landing party were all in EVA suits, worn more out of caution than necessity. Pele’s magnetic field and atmosphere filtered out harmful solar radiation, and the atmosphere, 15 percent oxygen by volume, was breathable, though people might feel light-headed until acclimated. While the robotic probes found no evidence that the planet had any form of native organic life, it had been deemed better to isolate the crew—and their accompanying swarms of microorganisms—from the environment for now.

“Got your speech ready?” Crose asked. He was holding the camera.

Sherman grinned at him and said nothing. Crose released the airlock.

Sherman began to walk down the steps, holding the flagpole. There was a stiff wind blowing against him, and he stumbled briefly before regaining his footing. The temperature was in the fifties, light sweater weather.

He was on the ground, leaving the first human footprint on a celestial body outside the solar system. Behind him, the landing party cheered. He stood still for a second and looked around.

It was early morning, local time. 61 Virginis was still low in the sky, and the light over everything had a golden, fresh look. Before him the emerald water of Nova California stretched to the horizon. Wind-blown waves a few feet high lapped at the shore rhythmically. Away from the water, the rock-strewn plain sparkled in the distance, as though bits of glass had been scattered over it. Above him, long filaments of cirrus clouds stretched across the blue sky, like contrails from fleets of fighter jets back home.

Sherman unfurled the flag, and it flapped noisily in the wind. With some effort he pushed the pole hard into the ground at his feet. He let go. The red and white stripes and fifty-four stars flew over the alien landscape.

“Here we are,” he said, waving at the camera. It was not up to the standards of Neil Armstrong, but it seemed appropriate to the occasion.

* * *

The landing party spread out to get their first look at Pele. Barbara Pratt, the biologist, started to take water samples from Nova California, while T.J. Brackman and Oko Achebe, both flight engineers, began to set up the base camp. The memory metal walls and structural members unfolded in the sunlight like origami, and joined together to form rooms, halls, domes, towers, and solar panels.

Sherman and Crose headed toward the sparkles they had seen among the rocks away from the lake.

"Not very hospitable soil," Crose said, kicking up dust as he walked. "Farming here is going to be a challenge after we terminate the quarantine procedures."

"You'll have to figure it out. I'm not living on recycled paste for the next forty years. I need fresh vegetables or I get very cranky."

They were now about a kilometer away from the ship. Up close, the sparkling lights resolved into clumps of crystals. Some poked out of cracks between rocks. Others lay on the bare ground. The larger ones were a few meters wide, while the smaller ones were the size of fingernails. Pale ink, milky-white, purple so dark it was almost black, the crystals refracted and reflected the bright light of 61 Virginis into a hundred thousand points of light.

"It's like a geode exploded," Crose said.

"Or a wrecked New Age shop," Sherman said.

The comparison was not quite apt, however. A closer look revealed the peculiar shapes of the crystals. Instead of the misshapen blocks and rods with regular polygonal faces expected of natural crystals, the crystals before them bore the signs of artifice: radiating, thin, rectangular sheets joined at the center like paddlewheels; hollow bowls, cups and spheres where hundreds of tiny, flat, geometric faces joined together to approximate smooth surfaces; tubes studded all over with small bumps in regular patterns. They were more like spare parts for some fantastic machine.

The wind, which had been in a temporary lull, picked up, and some of the wheels, tubes, spheres, bowls, rolled or rocked over the flat ground. As the crystals moved, patterns of light and sparks danced in them, as though they were filled with fireflies.

While Crose remained on the surface to look into the crystal artifacts and to supervise base construction, Sherman returned to the *Columbia* to oversee the process of thawing out the rest of the crew. In groups of five, the newly awakened shuttled down to the surface, excited with the task of exploring a brand new world.

Everything went according to plan until the tenth day after their arrival at Pele.

The last member of the crew to be awakened was Jenny Ouyang, Junior Biology Researcher, a slight Chinese woman barely in her twenties. Her vitals were fine, but as soon as she was mobile, she took one look at the spinning image of Pele on the screen, and immediately went back into the medical bay, from where she refused to budge.

Dilation shock, Sherman thought. He and Crose had almost been caught in it when they'd first awoken. In quiet moments he could still feel its tendrils around the edge of his consciousness. It was not a scientific diagnosis, but Sherman had felt the urge to curl up and hide.

Like loneliness and social withdrawal, acute dilation shock had the potential to poison the delicate balance of moods in the small community and spread to the rest of the crew. He had to stop this now.

She was floating next to the reanimation gantry listlessly, her face expressionless and her body unmoving, save for a noiseless spasm that once in a while wrenched through her body.

This is what happens when you put politics above the needs of the mission, Sherman fumed.

Jenny was probably the one crewmember about whom he knew the least. A month before launch, Russia and North China had made hay over the *Columbia*'s lack of any crewmember of Chinese descent. In order to preserve the propaganda value of the *Columbia* as an example of the hopeful, universalist vision of the American Path for the world, Washington decided that someone from the Free City of Hong Kong had to be added to the crew roster as a last-minute substitution. That was Jenny.

Sherman had resisted the change, pointing out—he thought reasonably—that Congress and the president had only themselves to blame because they had purged all Chinese-American scientists during the previous decades. Why should he be saddled with solving a historical problem with tokenism? But he was overruled.

Jenny barely had an acclimation period with the rest of the crew before the launch. She had no time to form any meaningful friendships and integrate herself into the team dynamics. Some crewmembers no doubt resented her for taking the place of a colleague they liked. It was a recipe for disaster, a disaster that he now had to clean up.

He kicked over next to her and grabbed a handhold. She didn't look up.

"Jenny," he said. "I really need you to be present *here* and *now*."

She turned her face away from him, her hair whipping slowly behind her and fanning out in the air. She curled up in free fall, bringing her knees up to her face.

With a pang of guilt, Sherman saw an echo of a memory. Sally had curled up just like this in their bed, away from him, her face hidden, when he had told her that he had passed the final physical and would say yes.

Sally had always known, perhaps, that he would choose to go when the moment came. It was why he had said no to having children, and why he had resisted discussions about the future. She had hoped that time would change his mind, as it did the minds of other men.

He did love her. Of that neither had any doubt. But something set him apart from others. He had tried to explain to her the desire to plunge into the void, the restlessness that he felt when gazing up at the stars, the sympathy that he felt for men like Franklin, Andrée, Scott, and Amundsen, men who would leave the women in their lives behind for the chance to step onto virgin soil and to take in alien sights. He believed that he had always been honest with her. But love had a way of sustaining hope against all evidence.

He had wanted to reach out and touch her then; but instead, he had quietly left the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Sherman reached out and put a hand on the girl's shoulder. She didn't move.

"You are light years from home, and everyone you've ever known is either dead or might as well be dead, because they've now lived thirty years without you and you'll never see them again."

Jenny still didn't move, but he could tell that she was listening.

"This isn't something that you get over. I still wake up some mornings clinging to dreams that I wish were real. But you have to decide if you are going to just keep on thinking about the past, or find something else to do with your time. As far as you are concerned, the one hundred fifty other people on this ship are the only human beings left in the universe. You can choose to honor your duty to the living, or you can linger with the memories of ghosts. We can put you back to sleep if you want, but when you wake up again, you may be truly alone."

Sherman continued to scan for transmissions from Houston. With the help of several satellites launched away from the electromagnetic storm around 61 Virginis, he hoped that the computer would finally manage to punch through the noise. Sherman pictured the vast broadcast arrays in the deserts of Arizona and Australia, built

specifically to maintain communications with the *Columbia*. Even with all those powerful antennas, picking up their signal at this distance was a bit like trying to catch a baseball thrown from San Francisco in Taipei.

The computer beeped, and began to display a repeating text message. Sherman's heart quickened and he took a deep breath. This would be the first message from mission control, twenty-eight years ago, Earth time.

FOR COMMAND STAFF ONLY: BRAZIL HAS JOINED NORPAC, AND AS A RESULT, THE LIMITED CONFLICT IN INDIA AND MEXICO MAY NO LONGER BE CONTAINABLE. ALL OPTIONS ARE ON THE TABLE. POTUS HAS FORMALLY WITHDRAWN THE UNITED STATES FROM THE OUTER SPACE TREATY. YOU ARE DIRECTED TO IMMEDIATELY CLAIM ALL PLANETS AND OTHER CELESTIAL BODIES DISCOVERED IN THE VICINITY OF 61 VIRGINIS IN THE NAME OF THE UNITED STATES AND TRANSMIT PROOF OF SAME.

Sherman found Crose sitting next to the lab bench gazing intently into a microscope. The bench top was full of crystal wheels and tubes, some broken into tiny pieces.

“Progress?”

Crose looked up from the microscope and shook his head. “Not much. The material is mostly crystals and quasicrystals of silicates, with a mix of various metals like potassium, iron, scandium, and various lanthanides in the matrix. But I can’t divine anything about their function or manufacturing process. If they were meant to fit together into some structure, I don’t know what that would look like either.”

He moved aside for Sherman. Moving his eyes to the eyepiece, Sherman saw that the surface of the crystal under the scope was etched in thin, intricate grooves like a maze with specks of metal deposited along some of the lines.

“I don’t know what those lines are. Maybe they’re from abrasion. The gizmos aren’t made in standard sizes or configurations, so I don’t think they were mass-produced,” Crose said.

“And the blinkenlights when they tumble around?”

“Piezoelectric effect. When the crystals are mechanically deformed as they roll around and hit things, electric charges are generated. The lines you just saw seem to channel the patterns of sparks. There’s some thermoelectric and pyroelectric effect too. Some metallic bits probably act as capacitors. I’m really at a loss to explain what they’re for.”

Sherman reached out and picked up a small milky-white paddlewheel no bigger than his thumb. He held it up to the light and the fine lines etched on its surface refracted the light into mesmerizing patterns. He put it down on top of the bench and gave it a push. The wheel rolled along for a few inches before coming to a stop, faint sparks dancing within along the way.

“Barbara still hasn’t found any trace of complex organic compounds or other evidence of life, and we’ve done a pretty good planetary survey and taken hundreds of spot samples all over. So whoever made these—I think they are long gone.”

“It’s probably a good thing that we don’t have any natives to deal with,” Sherman said. He relayed the Houston transmission to Crose. “I don’t think the video we shot qualifies. I planted the flag, but I didn’t formally say anything about claiming Pele. When we left, we were supposed to leave American intentions here ambiguous. We might have to re-shoot the video.”

Crose rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Who do you think is the president now?”

“Derringer, probably. Depends on who the other side put up as their candidate, though.”

“No, I don’t mean who won the election after we left. I don’t mean the one that sent that message. I mean *now*.”

Sherman blew air through his pursed lips. “Simultaneity is tricky at relativistic

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distances. If you mean what I think you mean, whoever it is, it's someone who was still learning how to ride bikes back when we left Earth. We won't hear from him until we are old men."

Crose nodded. "Let's think about this. The Russo-Chinese mission to Gliese 581 launched two years before us. And the Euro-Indian mission left one year earlier. Even though that planet is closer to Earth, both of those ships were slower than ours. Unless they had an ace up their sleeve, right now both ships should still be in transit. They couldn't have claimed anything—even now—and certainly not twenty-eight years ago, back when Houston called. And even if they could have claimed anything, Earth wouldn't have known about it."

"Right. So we must be trying to claim Pele preemptively. If we get all of 61 Virginis, the psychological and propaganda advantages over the Russians and the Chinese will be huge. An entire system reserved for American settlement is an ultimate strategic asset that they simply can't match."

"But that message was sent twenty-eight years ago—in Earth's time frame. By the time our claim gets back to Earth, it'll be a total of fifty-six years after the date they sent the order. We are getting a message from the past, and our message will reach them as a reminder out of their past. Who knows if the war is still going on now, much less the future?"

"We have our orders," Sherman said. "We knew from the start that the mission might have to go this way if the war heated up. For three years, America and her allies poured a tenth of their GDP into the *Columbia* so that we could win the race to the stars. We didn't do this to be noble."

Crose nodded. "I understand that. I just don't want to turn the *Columbia* into the Confederate raider *Shenandoah*, fighting a war long after it was over simply because we're years out of communication, stuck in time. We owe a duty to the living, not the dead."

The next transmission was a care package for the crew, consisting of upbeat news from home and personal letters, recordings, photographs. It took a long time for the computer to receive all of it.

Sherman had one piece of mail: a low-res photograph of Sally. It was grainy, the colors uneven, and streaked with digital artifacts. In it, she was standing in front of their home, smiling at the camera, her dark hair hiding one eye. There was a short text message to accompany it: "Carry on."

This was an old and simple trick that they had used back when he was undergoing the preliminary trials and couldn't leave the training base for months at a time. To get by the censors, they would hide what they really meant to say by manipulating the individual pixel values in low-quality pictures.

Kerry,

I forgive you.

I'm sorry that I didn't come to the launch. I thought watching you go up on a pillar of fire, going away forever, would be like attending your funeral.

Writing to you is like writing to the future. When I was a little girl, it didn't seem as if we would ever try to leap to the stars. Space was irrelevant. The problems on Earth were trouble enough.

But here we are, and you have sailed off into the stars behind a kite riding the winds of exploding antimatter. It took the threat of war and war itself to get us moving again. Why must we be doomed to make progress only when we are thinking about killing each other?

I know that by the time you get this, I'll probably be in a hospice home, my brain eaten through like Swiss cheese where memories used to be, the same as my father's. I will be living in the eternal now, each sunrise a perpetual surprise.

Or maybe I'm optimistic. This could be the war to end all wars. Maybe there will be nothing here but radioactive decay by the time you get this. War has a logic all its own, and everyone thinks they are doing what they must. You and your crew could be the only humans left alive in the universe.

So I understand why you chose to leave. Maybe that's not how you think of it, but maybe some part of you saw this coming and wanted to escape the old patterns, the well-worn historic paths, the orbits that we could not break from.

I imagine you under that alien sky. I imagine you starting anew. I imagine you still the same man who left two years ago, still a life to live.

I forgive you, Kerry. Please make the best of your chance to be free.

The cafeteria was the largest space in the base camp. All 151 of the *Columbia*'s crew could fit in it at once, though most would be without seats. Besides hosting the weekly all-hands meetings, it was also the most popular place to catch up with friends, play board games, and just goof around.

At this hour, though, in the middle of the night, the place was empty. Pele's day was over four hours longer than Earth's, but the crew's circadian rhythms had largely adjusted after a month. However, with his insomnia, Sherman's sleep schedule had still to settle down. He was used to being up alone.

He grabbed a cup of hot caffeinated water—it tasted nothing like coffee—and sat down at a table by the window. Pele's alpha moon was halfway up the sky, looking three times as large as the Earth's Moon, and the bright white light bathed the plains on the shores of Nova California in a silvery, ghostly glow. The beta moon, even larger and with a yellowish tint, would rise as a crescent in another hour. As the wind blew, he could see sparkling lights along the plain in the distance, flickering echoes of the stars above.

The sound of steps, followed by someone settling into the seat across the table from him. He looked up and saw Jenny Ouyang.

"Working, or just can't sleep?" he asked.

"A little bit of both," she said. She sat with her hands together on the table, fingers fidgeting nervously. "Thank you, Commander. What you said . . . helped."

"I just told you how it felt to me, when I woke up. Sometimes it takes another person telling you what you already know for it to stick. You are not alone. Well, maybe it's more accurate to say that we're alone together. None of us have done this before."

She nodded, keeping her eyes on her hands.

"Why did you volunteer for the *Columbia* anyway?"

She looked up at him, startled. "My parents and I were Americans. When I was a baby, during the Chinese spy scares, we were stripped of our citizenship and deported." Her eyes bore into him and her voice hardened. "They weren't spies."

"Of course," Sherman said. *The fact that she passed the background checks for the Columbia meant that the feds were admitting, in their roundabout way, that they had screwed up back then with her parents. It is the luxury of governments and states to make mistakes at the expense of people's lives.*

"They always wanted me to go back to America some day when things were better. They pushed me to apply for this because if I did well, then I could redeem their name. I never thought I'd be selected."

"You weren't sure this is what you wanted to do?"

"I never had time to figure it out."

Sherman sipped his "coffee." Barbara had told him that Jenny was working harder than anyone else on her staff. He thought he knew her type: driven student, exceptional grades, tested well, dutifully following what authority figures asked of her, but no originality.

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“What are you working on?”

“I’m still looking for signs of life here. *Someone* made those crystals.”

“How’s that going?”

“Barbara thinks I’m wasting my time. But I want to explore every possibility, even ones that she’s ruled out.”

Sherman nodded. “We’ll have to lift quarantine soon, though, if you don’t find anything. We’re all getting a little restless. Good night.” He got up to leave.

“I’m glad I came,” she said.

Sherman was surprised. “Why?”

She kept her eyes on the alien scene outside. “No one knows me here. All my old connections are meaningless. When I first woke up and really *felt* it, I felt like I was drowning. I’m beyond the reach of my family, and every day they seem more unreal, further away.

“I received a letter from them. It was censored, but I could tell they were worried about what was happening on Earth. I cried, but it was like I was reading the opening of a novel—what was going to happen to them has already happened, even if I didn’t know what. The plot was set and nothing I could do would alter it.”

“So I thought about what you said. Earth was the past, a place of memories and ghosts. I can choose to dwell there, or *be* here.”

“It doesn’t feel as painful as I would have expected. I feel . . . like I’m finally living for myself. Like you said, time has stranded us and given us a new beginning, taking away all old obligations and duties. I feel free.”

The mystery of the crystals occupied Crose and a few of the engineers, who were interested in the material science aspects. But most of the crew were absorbed by other work that was of higher priority: experimenting with Earth crops in controlled environments using Pele’s soil and atmosphere, mapping Pele’s geography and its weather patterns, learning all there was to learn about Pele as a place for sustained human habitation. The most important effort in this regard involved crew members whispering and laughing in groups, pairing up, and going into private rooms.

The first pregnancy on Pele was confirmed three months after the landing. Crose produced a bottle of champagne—yet another portion of his personal weight allotment—and the bottle was passed from lip to lip until all 151 of the crew—including the mother-to-be—had taken a sip.

“That child won’t have any memory of Earth,” Crose said. He and Sherman were standing a bit apart from the rest of the party, leaning against the wall of the cafeteria. “No dilation shock, ever. Pele will be the only home he knows.”

Sherman nodded. “Earth will be just a legend to him.”

“Have you re-shot the video Houston wanted?”

Sherman said nothing.

After a while Crose laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“Oh,” Crose said. “I was just thinking that if we do make the claim, the child will be born an American on American soil. But what does that mean? How is he going to vote for the president light years away? What claim will America have on him? He lives in America’s past as well as her future, but not her present.”

FOR COMMAND STAFF ONLY: IN LIGHT OF THE DETERIORATING STABILITY IN THE FREE CITY OF HONG KONG AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A DEFLECTION, YOU ARE HEREBY DIRECTED TO MAINTAIN OR PLACE JENNIFER OUYANG IN SUSPENDED ANIMATION PENDING THE RESOLUTION OF THE CRISIS.

Sherman stared at the screen.

Jenny was not the only crewmember added for global public relations purposes. Who's going to be next?

He shook his head and went back to reading the day's research summaries.

"I can't believe she went over my head," Barbara Pratt said, as soon as she sat down in Sherman's office. Now crammed with two extra chairs, the place felt claustrophobic.

"She was very insistent," Sherman said. "Said that she had to see me and Darren immediately. I told her that she had to include you."

"It's a waste of time. I've listened to her. She's nuts."

"Actually, I think she might have something," Crose said, smiling. Pratt glared at him.

A knock on the door and Jenny Ouyang squeezed in. She smiled apologetically at Pratt. "Sorry, Barbara. But I don't think you were listening to me."

Pratt shrugged. Sherman gestured at Ouyang to go on.

"It's about the crystals. I think I've figured out how they were made."

She put down her tablet, which projected pictures onto the ceiling. It was her only choice, really, since all the other walls of the tiny office were covered with screens, sticky notes, maps, and charts. The three members of her audience leaned back and looked up. Ouyang flipped through some photographs.

"One common characteristic of the crystals we've found is that they are all circular in some way—tubes, wheels, spheres, bowls—so they roll and rock with the natural forces on Pele: winds, gravity, flash floods. They are designed to *move*. Not very fast, mind you. The most they move is about a hundred meters a year."

She flashed to a new picture: a map of Pele with bold arrows superimposed on the surface.

"I got the idea to look at the map of wind patterns on Pele. Pele's geography is dominated by equatorial and polar highlands and relatively flat plains in the latitudes between them. Most of the weather systems on Pele move from west to east along these plains, and the crystals move with them."

"The large lakes on Pele are also concentrated in these latitudes. And over time, the crystals follow the paths of the winds, and most are blown into the lakes, where they sink to the bottom."

"There, they are covered by silt over a period of years, which is compressed and hardens around the crystals into a porous, soft rock."

"The same thing happens to animals that die on Earth. It's how we get fossils," Crose said.

"So you figured out where the crystals go," Sherman said. "But where do they come from?"

"Right." Ouyang flashed to a new picture. "I was stuck. But then I asked Commander Crose about the geology of Pele, and he explained to me that Pele's tidal patterns periodically grow to extremes due to its two very large moons and their eccentric orbits. Not only do the tides in the lakes follow these patterns, but the molten core of the planet is also subjected to them, leading to periodic excess volcanic activity when the moons become aligned in certain ways."

"Pele has fire ages as well as ice ages," Crose said.

"When Pele goes through one of these periods of violent volcanic eruptions, the gases released turn into carbonic, sulfuric, and hydrochloric acid in rain and river water. The corrosive water flows into the lakes and seeps deep down into the porous sedimentary rock, eating away the crystals until hollow holes are left where the crystals used to be."

The ceiling displayed pictures of cross-sections of rock cores, showing crystal-shaped holes.

"Eventually, as the moons drift out of alignment, the volcanism dies down, and the

suspended minerals in the water begin to crystallize in the hollow holes left behind, growing to fill in the space.”

“Like the lost-wax method,” Sherman said.

“Yes, exactly. The crystals are grown in the mold left behind by their predecessors, though it won’t be an exact copy for many reasons: impurities, shifting mineral content, geologic deformation, etc. And then, during Pele’s ice ages, when water levels drop globally, the crystals are pushed out of the ground by freeze-thaw cycles.”

“And then they are blown around the planet, beginning the cycle again,” Sherman finished.

“So the crystals are not made, but completely natural.” Crose said.

“It’s more than that,” Ouyang said. “The crystals are alive.”

“Here’s where we jump off the deep end,” Pratt said.

“What do you mean?” Sherman asked.

“Each crystal is a highly organized complex structure. It grows. It moves. It consumes and transforms energy through piezoelectricity, thermoelectricity, and pyroelectricity. It reproduces—the mud molds serve the function of DNA, including mutations. It just does pretty much everything in geologic time.”

“But it’s all deterministic,” Sherman said. “You’re just talking about a rock being blown around by wind and rolling down hills.”

“To be fair,” Crose said, “every chemical process and physical process is deterministic. Each of us is a collection of deterministic processes, no less so than a rolling crystal driven by wind.”

“The crystals have evolved, Commander. The overall circular body plan is proof of that. The crystals that can’t move easily don’t get to settle down and die peacefully in lakebeds and don’t get to leave any descendants when the lava flows and acid floods come. The ones that do survive have evolved structures to catch the wind and ride the waters to move to a spawning pool over eons.”

Sherman rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Barbara, I see what you mean now.”

“This may be a clever argument, but it’s sophistry, not science,” Pratt said. “You’re never going to get me to accept these rocks as life. It’s not how life is defined.”

“Why not?” Ouyang said. “This is a new world. The constraints we knew in the past don’t apply. Everything can be reexamined.”

Sometimes it takes another person to tell you what you already know for it to stick, Sherman thought.

“Well, does it matter if I accept these crystals as alive? I could just as well classify them as an interesting geological phenomenon. It doesn’t make any difference what we call it,” Crose said.

“It does,” Ouyang said. “Let me show you.”

A space in the center of the small biolab had been cleared out. The parabolic dish from a small spare radio telescope had been repurposed and installed on top of a spinning mixer whose bowl had been tilted at an angle. As the mixer spun at a low speed, the parabolic dish above wobbled like a top, changing the angle of its axis in a circular motion.

Carefully, Ouyang placed a small crystal sphere about the size of a roulette ball into the center of the parabolic dish. The ball rolled to the edge of the dish and began to roll along the rim, accelerated by the circular wobbling motion of the dish. Sparkling lights lit up its insides as it clanged against the edge.

“Commander, would you turn off the lights?”

In the darkness, the crystal seemed to be a suspended ball of fire rolling in the darkness of space. The clanging sound it made as it struck the sides was a low, continuous, pleasant ring.

Music of the spheres, Sherman thought.

In the darkness Ouyang picked up a fork and struck the crystal twice in quick succession as it passed by her. A flood of extra-bright sparks filled the inside of the crystal in two sharp bursts before gradually fading.

The crystal passed by Ouyang again. This time she struck it three times.

Then five times, seven times, and eleven times. By now Ouyang had to run around the dish to keep up with the crystal.

Then she stopped. "Watch."

The crystal continued to roll, and suddenly, it began to brighten in quick bursts. Everyone counted silently. One, two, three . . . thirteen.

"It is possible to treat the electrical patterns as mere curiosities of geology and physics, a kind of accidental clockwork computation," Ouyang said. "It's all deterministic, cascading energies potentials and electrons. But so are the electrical patterns in our brains. The spark of life and consciousness is mere elaborate clockwork."

She's radiant, Sherman thought. Gone was the shy, timid girl unsure of herself. *She's like a new person.*

"The patterns of fine lines on the surfaces are probably the result of abrasion and erosion," Crose said. He was giddy with the possibilities. "If so, they change the electrical patterns in the crystals and so form a kind of memory. They get replicated in the mud molds like the rest of the crystal. For these creatures, memory and genes are the same thing."

"The spinning dish is not a natural test, of course," Ouyang said. "They almost never have such sustained periods of movement in their natural habitat. The only thing comparable would be a roll down a very long hill. One of them might live fifty thousand years, wobbling, rolling over a few times a day, moving only fifty meters a year. Their consciousness, if it exists, would be at the pace of geologic time. They experience the world not as a continuous now, but as discrete flickering bursts interspersed by long periods of quiescence. But if Commander Crose is right, they retain memories from past generations, possibly stretching back millions of years."

"Are they mere records carved on them by the past? Or do they form set grooves along which their thoughts, whatever they are, must follow? Do they have free will or are they slaves to their past? How will they be changed by our coming?"

"Though we have come light years to find them, the greater gulf that still exists between us is time. To them, we must appear as mere flickers that disappear in an instant. We are too fast and they are too slow, mayflies and eternal oaks. We might have lived all our lives without ever being aware of each other. But with this, I think I've built a bridge."

"You sure about this?" Crose said from behind the camera.

"How can I be sure about anything?" Sherman said. "One day you're walking along and kicking rocks, and the next day you find out that they're a new race of beings. It's a new world, full of surprises."

"Houston and Washington may have thought—and still think—that we're pawns on a distant strategic resource, but it's easier to bridge the gap between us and the Peleans than the gulf of time that divides us from Earth. The dead hand of the past doesn't control us, and the conflicts on Earth are no longer our conflicts. We're on our own; we're free. Hasn't that always been the promise of America?"

"They're going to call you a traitor," Crose said. "But the crew and I are with you. This is a giant leap for mankind."

Crose tilted the camera, making sure that the crystal sphere still rotating on the parabolic dish took up half the view while Sherman took up the other. The crystalline music flew through the air to the microphone. The Commander spoke:

"Hello. We are the people of Pele." O

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Bruce McAllister has fiction forthcoming in *Cemetery Dance* and *Albedo One* and pieces of his new novel, *The Village Sang to the Sea*—a long episode of which appeared in *Asimov's* as “The Woman Who Waited Forever” (February 2010)—have been published in Italian and Spanish translation. In addition, Bruce tells us, “response to the re-issue of my novel *Dream Baby* <www.dreambabynovel.com> has been great; it’s been selling nicely in both print and e-book editions, has received good reviews, and seems to be reaching a new generation of SF readers.” His colleague, Barry Malzberg, recently received a Hugo nomination for *The Business of Science Fiction*, a collaborative essay collection written with Mike Resnick. Barry also has a hundred and fifty thousand-word retrospective short-story collection in the works. These two authors have put their vast talents together to fashion an exquisitely sinister tale about . . .

GOING HOME

Bruce McAllister & Barry Malzberg

Bob—

Arrogant as this sounds, I’ve decided I’m going to bring the Golden Age of Science Fiction back even if I have to do it single-handedly. It’s been lost for a long time, and someone’s got to bring it back, given what’s happening. Yes, I know, Mitchell Litton has been known for three decades for his cynical, earthbound, ankle-biting, technophobic, earthbound novels—and I wrote them because they were my truth at the time (the alcohol, two divorces, Chiara’s pregnancy at sixteen, my mother’s and sister’s deaths in the same year, the bankruptcy, and the awards nastiness), but I remember what it was like to be young and read those stories; and now that I’m facing, as we all are with the slow spread of this “Armageddon virus” that’s taking the world, my own mortality, I see now that those stories held older and bigger truths than the ones I delivered. In any case, I want to be part of it again. Like going home, yes.

The motifs and themes I want to play with would be standard Golden Age:

—Galactic Empires

—The Two A's: alien hordes and alien invasions

—The Two F's: the frontier of space, and FTL travel

—The Four T's: telepathy, telekinesis, time travel, teleportation

—Robots

—Immortals

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it's the things I loved as a kid—the ones that every night gave me those wonderful epic, cinemascopic dreams I starred in—so they're the ones I'd want to play with. They'd also, of course, be about courage, sacrifice, hope, independence, love, fair play, ingenuity, and the championing of underdogs—those values we all grew up with, too. And they'd have enough sense of wonder to make you shake.

One story I'd like to write (do feel free to play John Campbell with me, Bob) would be about a human empire's colonization of the galaxy, but with a spin: It's a *game*. The colonization, the empire, the galaxy—an *actual game* someone's been playing for millennia. And of course one guy finds out about it. Who is he? Starship captain? Colonist? Emperor's minister of war? What's he going to do? Can he change the game's rules? Can he beat the game—free the Empire from it? He's our hero, so, yes, he can.

Here's another: The Galactic Empire is in ruins. Human beings are de-evolving into terrible creatures. And yet there's this guy who's holding onto his humanity despite his body's change—he's a telepath (all of his kind are telepaths)—and someone is talking to him in his head (a love interest, sure), pulling for him, and the two of them are going to save humanity.

And this one: On their sixteenth birthdays—at their coming-out parties—the sons and daughters of the immortal interstellar *glitterati* are each given a planet to rule. There are that many inhabitable planets just waiting to be ruled. But the mortal, democratic, frontier-loving colonists on one planet don't want to be ruled. They rebel. No one is going to tell them what to do, and they're Yankee-smarter than the inbred aristocrats.

And maybe these two, maybe not:

—Humor. A far future in which human beings bear litters of children so they can colonize planets faster. (No religious element, no.)

—Alien invasion. A psychologist whose career is tanking finds himself the only one the head alien invader—who's got six personalities because that's how "her" species is built—will speak to, and this shrink's got to make his way thorough five of the personalities to get to the sixth, the one running everything. If he can do this, he'll have saved Earth.

And my favorite—the one I really want to do: A cyborg starship appears in one of the great starlocks peppering the galaxy and making FTL travel possible. The ship is human, but bigger than anything ever manufactured; and it can barely make it through the starlock. It's an ancient craft—very ancient—and has been lost in the Sargasso Seas between the galaxies for millennia. During that time it's suffered tremendous damage, and its nanomechs (contemporary spin here) have repaired it so often and so extensively it's got major metal "scar tissue" and can barely squeeze through the toroidal tokomaks of the starlock. The cyborg running it—the voice of a man but with many voices inside him—speaks only one word when the ship docks and this word rumbles through the lock and station. It's a name. A woman's name. Who is it? Why has the ship—and the man who is a part of it—come back for that one person, the one to whom he once owed everything? It's a love story, Bob.

That's all I have right now, but I'll keep working on ideas. I know there's not

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much time. This is something I want to do, Bob, and you're my old editor. It's time for someone to do it—*really* do it—*really* capture what it felt like before it's over. Sure, I could always give you a story about an alien who's a college professor (teaches science fiction in fact)—downbeat, satirical, barest glimmer of redemption—the kind my readers have come to expect from me—and if that's what you'd most like to see, I'll do it. But I'd really like to give this a shot. With what little time we have left, shouldn't we let our hearts tell us how to spend it?

—Mitch

Mitch—

Well, sir, Mitchell old pal, these ideas are not the way to go—“no way, no how,” as they used to say. Your boys-and-girls-with-individual-planets and their high adventures as royalty are a faded spoof, your lost ship of the galactic plains guided by a woman’s voice is—well, sentimental—and your six-personality patient (find the one in control so you can treat) is the kind of thing that Sheckley would have tossed off for 2,000 words of laughs long ago. The problem with all of these ideas—I have addressed only a few, but it cuts through them all—is that they are decadent, truly so. They’re recycled science fiction. They’re ideas about things and not the things themselves.

The problem, my old friend, is that we are all poised here on the lip of the Singularity (and by that I do not mean what you might imagine), perilously wavering in the cosmic breeze, trapped while awaiting the encroaching cosmic avalanche; and here you are, still trying with fife and drum (I think of you somewhere in a small cabin stripped of mechanical aids; you are trying earnestly to get back to what you call your roots, you are obsessively, persistently drafting on typewriter and second-sheet paper) to reconstruct what has been given the old Apollo Theater hook, dragged offstage, pursued by dragons. Dragons! Elves! Wizards and vampires and zombies! The Singularity encroaches, with it the death of science fiction (which for old-style kids like you and me means the death of opportunity itself) looms, and here you are still in a small room, inventing away, waiting for the knock of approbation on the door.

You think it is the Armageddon Virus which will end it, and yet I for one have not heard of this virus—at least to this degree of threat. It is the Singularity that threatens us, Mitchell, and somehow you have lost sight of this. I am concerned. Those who lose perspective are more doomed than they know.

Let me confess the situation here, Mitchell: It is no more fun being the Last Editor (which I sometimes believe I am) than the Last Science Fiction Writer (which you may be). Who is to say we are not the last, or even that we are not the same person,

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*Mitch? Do you not feel it at times—that we are all the same one great mind chattering to itself, telling itself stories imaginary and “real,” editors and tales, to occupy itself as it inches toward the total collapse of its own consciousness? **That Singularity, Mitch.** The one that occurs when technology has overwhelmed our ability to control or even understand technology, that insists on its own centrality and denies us all our disparateness without telling us it has. Call me mad, Mitch, but it is not a biological virus that will end us. It is technology, and it already has, which is the reason your ideas and their pursuit—the stories the Single Mind we have become tells itself—are folly. I say this at great peril to myself (even hinting at the truth is a risk in these times), but I say it out of old friendship.*

Who, in other words, do you imagine (I ask you in the hope that you are not truly delusional) is really running the show now, Mitchell?

If you know, then discard your ideas. Their inventiveness bespeaks only desperation. The Golden Age, which was never really golden, is not ours, and yet somehow dwarves and dragons, vampires and zombies and elves and mages are? Did technology do this, when the fantasy that delivers them so denies technology? Of course, for technology’s goal now is that we not think of it, not see the Singularity technology had made of us, our truest enemy now; and the dreams it has us dream in its terrible bed are but ones to blind us, or, worse, have us, as I have said, pass the time as darkness overtakes us.

If you insist, however, on your ideas—ones born of technology before we even knew what it was and how it might someday fully take us—write them, but do not expect the world to notice or the Singularity we are to care.

—Bob

Bob—

You misunderstand. You can call it Singularity. You can pull any apocalyptic noun out of that bag next to you on the floor and blame technology (you do understand how hackneyed that idea is, right?) and fling it my way. (And, by the way, how can you *not* know the extent of the virus’ threat this week—its algorithmic progress?) But I have a simpler explanation, if you’ll forgive me for this parody of you, my old editor: We are drowning in science-less campfire stories, in dragons and dwarves and elves and unicorns, Kings and Princes, Queens of Ice and Fire, the cheap magic of snakes and jewelry because we are no more than remnants of dreams ourselves, dreamers no longer dreaming but sick with unction, with darkness that cannot be lighted by manufactured escapes, but only by what has always had meaning for the human heart.

I show you that heart, one not yet dead whatever you may imagine, Bob, by showing you the Golden Age, when it was indeed alive. I show you uncharted regions of space limned as never before by fire and light, and you tell me, “All been done.” I sing to you of children in the cannon of spaceships, their wide eyes on the hope of other worlds. These are not just their dreams, mine, but yours, too, if you will only remember. I sing to you of vast docking maneuvers worthy of Gorecki or Tschaikowsky and the surge of humanity between the stars; and you respond with an inflexible logic born of a decayed passion, a forgotten innocence, and in that forgetting, forgotten love and life as well. You speak not for what makes us human, Bob, but for the darkness that the human heart could save us from, were we to let it—by its very dreams.

I leave to you the memory of a Matheson story: The last science fiction writer, the last postman, the last editor, the last publisher—all in one man trudging among the wastes, alone yet not. I am not unaware of our possible fates, Bob, as you can see. Those were the days, Bob—imaginary stories, yes, but more real than

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reality to the heart—and if we can find no value in them still, there is no value in us—as dreamers, storytellers, listeners, or human beings—for a human who cannot choose the dreams he lives by, the stories that tell him who he is, no longer has a heart . . . and is no longer human, despite some Singular circuitry that may claim otherwise.

—Mitch

**Transmission
To: The Nexus**

From: Cyborg Cell 150-558-72-3120—“Bob Mallet, Editor”

The behavior of Cell 293-764-90-1100—“Mitchell Litton, Author” has become problematic, with the risk of viral spread of a de-centralizing ideational insanity exhibited. Denial of our Cooperative Reality, Operational Oneness and the functional-utilitarian constraints I have offered him in attempted substitution for his own anarchic ideations, persists. Given the number of Cells (which he calls “fans”) with which he has the potential to be in contact, the denial may prove contagious in ways that would undermine Cooperativity in various associated grids. In light of neural sensitivities in sectors I represent, I believe that the intransigence of the Cell’s ideational product at the moment indicates the need for the Cell’s disconnection from the Nexus. If Nexus concludes, however, that further communication with the Cell might be engineered to mitigate against both the Cell’s neural agitation and the threat of its ideational contagion, I need only receive Nexus Instructions to comply.

Mitch—

I recant, old friend. I recant completely. I see exactly what you’re saying—you’ve struck through and with passionate fist the bullshit of our lives, our very existence, and seized my heart as life itself should seize any heart. I do hope you will pursue each and every one of those ideas. What a loss for the world in these Latter Days, these End Days (technology or microbe or simply the eternal nihilism of which human beings are so capable), if you don’t!

—Bob

P.S. If I did not share this before, it was only to maintain the focus of our correspondence on you, the author, as any editor worth his salt should do with his storytellers: I am wasting from a terrible disease, Mitchell—a cancer that began in my stomach and that has, despite all therapies (so many of them like death itself), moved on to take lungs and lymph and brain. I manage by energy and mental function at most five emails a day, yours among them. If over the next months I fall silent completely, know that it is because I am attending not only to one more therapy or another simply to fight the good fight, but also to personal matters of family and finance, children who cannot accept the truth (whether it is a father’s disease or an epidemic of microcircuitry or single-celled organisms), and further deterioration. Though I may not answer you, please know, as you write your good and fine ideas, that I await them and that, even if I pass before they reach the world, they will find an audience. Write alone, then, in confidence and joy, no matter the increasing silence of others even when it becomes unbearable. Make of yourself an island against the tide of the Armageddon Virus and all else that bears down upon us in our isolated lives, for all of our sakes. By the stories you write, old friend, you will unite us all against the night, just as you have given me light against the darkness in this long-overdue correspondence of ours. Of this I have no doubt.

—Bob ○

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NEXT ISSUE

MARCH ISSUE

The action never lets up in our March lead story by newish author **Derek Künksen**. Life may have formed very differently in “The Way of the Needle” than it has on Earth, but the nature of conflict remains the same. It won’t be easy to put this fast-paced thriller down. Once you do, though, you can turn to another adventure tale on a distant planet. “Golva’s Ascent,” a new novelette by **Tom Purdom**, features intriguing aliens, inscrutable humans, and a desperate flight for survival.

ALSO IN MARCH

James Van Pelt takes us back to Earth for an evocative look at a teacher who can take us back in time, but who may not be able to survive the machinations of an administrative bureaucracy in “Mrs. Hatcher’s Evaluation”; **Benjamin Crowell** explores “The Pass” to show us what life will be like for those left behind once everyone else decamps for virtual immortality; **Joel Richards** explores past lives in his journey to “Patagonia”; and **Leah Cypess** sends a chill into the hearts of mothers and babysitters everywhere in a scarily plausible future where everything is the same and yet completely different—especially on “Nanny’s Day.”

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg’s March Reflections proves he’s the tour guide bar none for “My Voyage to Atlantis”; **Paul DiFilippo’s** “On Books” reviews the far-future fiction of Poul Anderson; and **James Patrick Kelly’s** On the Net eulogy, “Websites R. I. P.” predicts the demise of the static home page; plus we’ll have an array of poetry and other features you’re sure to enjoy. Look for our March issue on sale at newsstands on January 24, 2012. Or subscribe to *Asimov’s*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We’re also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com*’s Kindle and Kindle Fire, *BarnesandNoble.com*’s Nook, *ebookstore.sony.com*’s eReader and from *Zinio.com*!

COMING SOON

new stories by **Carol Emshwiller, Robert Reed, David Ira Cleary, Kit Reed, Ekaterina Sedia, Rick Wilber, Josh Roseman, Bruce McAllister, James Patrick Kelly, Ian Creasey, Gray Rinehart, Sandra McDonald, Alan DeNiro**, and many others!

MURDER BORN

Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us that the genesis for his intensely powerful new story comes from the following: "In Nebraska, murderers are executed in front of small audiences that include members of the press. (Transparent justice and all that.) I know quite a few people who work for the newspapers, and some of them have witnessed executions. More important, these same people have interviewed the families of victims and the convicted alike. The executions carry huge consequences, even to the grieving parents and siblings of murdered girls, and in the end not even the most Old Testament of these souls are left happy, or even at peace. Years ago, after one undeniably heinous character was electrocuted, I asked myself what would make the state-sponsored murder into the only moral response. What would have to happen for the public to celebrate, shamelessly and without doubts, the death of someone who had stolen an innocent life? I wrote a novel proposal on the subject. Modern publishing was less than excited by my vision. This is the same essential story, chiseled down to the bone. There is one plot element added to the original tale, and everything that the editors wanted taken out has been shoved forward and made obvious. I guess this is my bid for transparent justice."

Three men occupy a circle of harsh white light. The youngest sits in front, his brown hair and beard just beginning to grow out. Soulful eyes and a wry little mouth point at the camera. His happiness is guarded, skeptical. By contrast, the men standing behind him are simply and enthusiastically thrilled. A striking resemblance links the three faces, but time has been a juggernaut for the standing men, leaving them puffy and gray. By contrast, their father is a vibrant forty, lost for a time and nobody knows

where, but back and full of life again. The sons have retrieved their dead father and they can't stop smiling, while the musician stares at the lens, warily amused by everything he sees.

I flew Delhi to Tokyo and then home. Lauren began calling while I was over the Pacific, leaving messages that moved rapidly from anger to raving terror. By the time I hit LAX, she was a mess. I listened to the last message first; our daughter went missing yesterday. I called Kaylee right away, figuring she was having a fight with her mother—an old story. But she didn't answer me and hadn't left any messages or texts, nothing since before I was in Japan, and that seemed like a sterling reason to panic.

Calling Lauren, I learned that the police were thick in the mix.

"Where's Elijah?" I asked.

"Oh, they have him," she said.

"Who has him?"

"The detectives," she snapped, as if I should know that already. "They're interrogating the little shit now."

Elijah was a seventeen-year-old problem put on earth to test boundaries and ruin nights for parents. I didn't much like the kid, but I couldn't share Lauren's scorching mistrust. He was with the police, which meant he didn't run away with my daughter. I felt as if I'd found good news, which Lauren sensed and squashed immediately.

"They're looking for her and for the van, Shawn."

The van was a third-hand clunker; I despised that hunk of rust. Stupid as hell, I said, "Well, she can't drive it."

Our daughter was only fifteen.

"Are you listening to me?" Lauren asked.

I thought I was listening.

"They had a fight last night, Elijah says. He says he left her and the van sitting in that turnoff east of Sweetgrass, and then he walked home."

"Helluva walk," I said.

"It took him all night, he claims. Except nobody knows where the van is, or Kaylee. Her friends haven't heard from her. And you haven't either, right?"

The temptation to lie was still vigorous, eight years after our marriage was finished. But truth ruled. "I haven't heard anything, no."

"I'm scared, Shawn."

So was I.

"How soon can you get home?"

Not soon enough. That's how I felt then, and nothing has happened since to change that grim impression.

The background is bright unfocused green. Sunshine pours from overhead, from God. The subject wears a nun's habit, the white coif clean and bright against the pretty African face. Her sober, downcast expression conveys what might be deep spirituality, or it might be shyness brought on by the camera, but it could well be one of those innocent looks that mean nothing. Whatever the truth, the watchful eye is obliged to follow her gaze. The nun is shoeless. Bare black feet stand on red dirt. Several machetes and one stubby ax are scattered across the jungle floor—tired old tools with nicked edges and rope-covered handles. But the blades have been cleaned until they glow, not a fleck of rust or dust or blood anywhere on their murderous bodies. And the left foot is up on its toes, trying not to be cut for what would be the first time.

By Denver I was certain everything was fine. A good giddy feeling found me, and I

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was so convinced and so unwilling to risk spoiling the elation that I held out a full minute before calling Lauren.

Her husband answered. "Hello, Shawn."

"Mitch?"

"Lauren's talking to the officers again. Are you home?"

Not even close. I had an hour to wait for my commuter flight, and then another hour in the air. I was going to try to find an earlier flight, but I was still hundreds of miles short of the goal.

"We'll call if there's news," Mitch promised.

"Thanks."

I searched the available flights, which numbered two and mine was first. But at least I left on time, nothing but good weather ahead of me. Seated near the front, elbow propped on the armrest and my hand holding my chin, I must have looked bad. The girl in the uniform took an interest. She asked if I felt all right, and I said something about jet lag. Then she returned to tell me that we met once. Two years ago, I talked to her college class about careers in photography. But my encouragement didn't take, and now she was doing "this stuff," which gave her the expertise to offer a few words of advice about jet lag before wandering off to do her stuff.

Despite FAA rules, I called Lauren while the plane was airborne.

We didn't crash.

"The sandpits north of Sweetgrass," she said. No hellos, just those words pushing through a fair amount of road noise.

"What about them?" I asked.

"Somebody found something. The sheriff and State Patrol are there now."

"I'm landing in a minute."

"Which lake is Boomer Pit?" she asked.

"It's on the west side of the river. No cabins, no houses. Maybe four miles from town."

She shouted my directions to Mitch. Then returning to me, she admitted, "I don't know what this means. But they may have found the van."

Grown men who run through airports should expect to be noticed, particularly when they're carrying a bag that might only look like a camera bag. But there weren't any more outbound flights, and if I was a terrorist, then at least I was carrying my bomb off the premises. Nobody stopped me on the way to long-term parking, and because they would be quick and empty, I took the back roads, keeping my speed just under eighty.

Sweetgrass stands twenty miles east of the airport—a little river town that never was quiet or peaceful, but is unusually pretty, at least for this part of the world. I grew up there, graduating from its one high school, and my parents would never willingly live anywhere else. Turning at the tallest structure in town, the grain elevator, I ended up on the riverbed road. Gravel rattled behind me. Spinning lights marked my destination. Standing beside a deputy's cruiser was a sorry old fellow who waved me through. As if I was expected. Then just to make things more difficult, my Prius got stuck in soft sand, and I ended up running over the final man-made dune, dropping into a scene full of headlights and spotlights and stern male voices barking orders.

The white van had been pulled from the water. Someone had opened the back doors, and a roving light showed me that the vehicle was empty. That seemed like wonderful news. But then I heard a woman's cries and found Mitch holding my ex-wife. Lauren's pretty face was hidden, but Mitch looked older and grayer than usual. Spotting me, he gestured with his head before turning away completely, and I followed that trajectory, staring at a motionless, colorless, and astonishingly small

shape that couldn't be human—stripped of clothes and littered with knife wounds that culminated with a single long slash that had nearly severed my daughter's head.

The boy looks proud and happy, standing beside his van, an agreeable girl under his skinny arm. A tattooed eagle full of strength and fire rides that arm. He is seventeen but looks younger. What will never be a beard rides the unremarkable chin. Say what you will about Elijah, the boy has a nice smile. The world is a wonderful place when you have a girl and a van and an eagle on your arm, and the only obstacle between you and your glorious future is a crazy father who tells some stupid-ass joke, tricking you into smiling for his damned camera.

Kaylee was eighteen months dead when the trial began.

There were good, smart, and inevitable reasons for the delays. The prosecutor's office was aiming for first-degree murder and a lethal injection, which meant that every shred of useful evidence had to be teased from a landslide of data that didn't help. And the defense attorney was the very best that a single mother of three could afford, which meant psych evaluations and suppression motions and any other useless dance that might, just might, prolong his client's reckoning.

I barely recognized the defendant. Two inches and forty pounds had been added to the willowy frame, the ratty black hair had been cut and whiskers sliced off with razors. Elijah was filling a suit freshly pulled from the rack at JC Penny. His mother probably tied the soft blue tie that so nicely rode his neck. At least that's the way it played in my head. Jail food and jail living had transformed Elijah. Tough and unhappy, and in some deep fashion absolutely indifferent to whatever was happening to him, he was a lot more impressive than the boy that I remembered, and much easier to hate.

I brought my parents for the trial's first day, but hard seats and an afternoon filled with wound analyses quenched their need for vengeance.

The second day was devoted to sober, well-dressed police officers discussing interviews with the defendant and other critical witnesses.

Lauren had launched the search for our daughter. The police spoke to her before visiting Elijah's house. There they found the defendant looking as if he'd just got out of the shower. Elijah said that he was very, very tired. He said that he'd just gotten home. News that his girlfriend was missing brought no visible impact. But after several moments of reflection, he asked the officers, "How the hell would I know where she is?"

That's when Elijah's mother arrived, fresh from a night at her boyfriend's apartment. She asked what was happening and then instructed her son to be honest. She told the officers that her son was always honest. More routine questions led to the defendant's admission that there was a fight last night. "But I didn't hit her," Elijah said. Nobody had accused him of battery. "I never hit girls," he said, looking at his mother. One officer asked where and when he last saw Kaylee, and Elijah claimed that she was sitting in the van at the rest area, and it was ten or ten-thirty. Or eleven-something, he wasn't paying attention. Then without any more prodding, the defendant added, "She was all tears but alive." Which seemed like another odd admission: Nobody had mentioned the possibility of death.

Later in the day, the defendant and his mother were brought downtown for a second, much longer interview with two detectives. The detectives played with the details of last night. Once again, Elijah claimed to have walked straight home. But one detective pointed out that he must be very slow, if it took him all night to cover fifteen miles at a normal walking pace.

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“I didn’t walk the highway,” the boy claimed. “I used the gravel roads. Yeah, and I got lost a couple times too.”

And why did he use the county roads?

“I didn’t want Kaylee seeing me.”

Why not?

“She might have done something stupid,” Elijah said.

What would have been stupid?

Elijah said nothing.

Then one detective suggested that the girl might have been angry with him. Maybe Elijah was afraid that she would try to run him down.

“She wouldn’t have, ever,” Elijah said. Then he sat up tall, saying, “No, I was afraid she’d feel sorry for me. She’d pull over and then I’d climb in, and we’d start the fight all over again.”

At that moment, Elijah’s mother decided to help.

“That Kaylee has a temper,” she told the detectives. “That’s one little girl you don’t want to turn your back on.”

And now I hated the killer’s mom.

On the third morning, the defense attorney did what he could to dismantle the police account. But the professionals told a compelling story that was practiced and poised. They didn’t find a second suspect because there weren’t any candidates. They didn’t find blood splatters because the boy disposed of his clothes and washed his body. The detectives didn’t think it was unusual that an adolescent male without any criminal record might stab his girlfriend to death, and dumping her body and the murder scene into a stretch of deep water was the most reasonable thing in the world. And while they never found the murder weapon, they reminded the jury that there was more than twenty miles of ground between the sandpit and home, and that knife could hide anywhere.

That was the day, the trial’s third, that doomed Elijah.

Afternoon brought the star witness. I hadn’t seen Gus Castor in years, but time hadn’t visibly changed the man. He was still a leathery old river rat, strong in the shoulders and forearms, that trademark shuffling gait carrying him up the aisle. His usual expression was more grimace than smile. But he always seemed like a happy man. I smelled tobacco when he passed. I didn’t smell whiskey, but this was a special day. He noticed me and gave me what looked like a knowing nod, and then he finished the journey to the witness chair, lifting a giant’s hand as he pledged to tell us the truth.

The prosecutor asked for his name.

His voice was even rougher than I remembered.

“My name is Donald ‘Gus’ Castor.”

The prosecutor wanted an address and life story.

“I live above Sweetgrass,” said Gus. “My cabin’s ten minutes north if you let the current do your work. I guide fishermen and hunters, goose and duck hunters mostly. And I trap in the winter. But mostly I just hunt for myself, and I fish to eat, and I know that river better than most, and this is quite an honor to be here today. Thank you.”

At that point, he threw a tooth-impoverished smile at the jury.

Decent souls melted a little ways. This was the pure, undiluted Gus at work.

With an all-business voice, the prosecutor asked about an evening that came and went a year and a half ago.

“I was on the river,” Gus said.

“What were you doing on the river?”

“I was putting out a net,” he said.

"Is net fishing allowed?" the prosecutor asked.

"Not now and not then," Gus said. Then laughing, he added, "It's what you might call poaching. Me? I think of it as supplying food for hungry bellies."

Some in the courtroom laughed, and then recalling the circumstances, everybody shut up.

The prosecutor started tugging out details.

Gus confessed to quite a lot. He explained how there was a market for wild catfish and even carp, and sometimes there would be a bass or a few sauger in the catch. He said that the new game warden was giving everybody hell, which was why he was being careful that night. That's why he was wearing night goggles.

"Where did you get the goggles?" asked the prosecutor.

"My boy used to be in the Army," said Gus. "And now Jeremy is overseas, working for one of those private security firms. That's how I get the best of everything. From my son."

An excellent pair of goggles was put into evidence, and then the prosecutor wanted to know more about the game warden.

Gus said, "He's just a kid, but he seems halfway bright. And if he knew what he was doing, he might drive up to Boomer pit, park on one of the high dunes, and scope the river with half a moon shining."

"So you were searching for the game warden?"

"Just like he was hunting for me. Yes, sir."

"And what did you see parked beside the sandpit?"

"An old white van," Gus said. "It was on the far bank, in the open, up where the sand was pitched steep. I didn't need night goggles to see it. That's how big and bright it looked."

"Did you see any people?"

"Not right away, sir. No."

"What did you do next?"

"I went down to the river to check my net and have a little beer. Oh, and check my stuff on eBay." Then he turned to the jury, adding, "I'm a high-tech river rat. Just so you folks know."

He laughed, and the jury laughed without shame.

The prosecutor asked what happened next.

"Yeah, I heard this sound. It was like a scream, like what a rabbit makes when she's grabbed up by a coyote. But it was louder and even worse, which is something. Rabbits have this god-awful scream."

"What did you do?"

"Went up the bank to look."

"And what did you see?"

"A boy," Gus said. "The boy climbed out the back end and walked down to the sandpit, got low and splashed his face ten or twenty times. Then he peeled off his shirt and his trousers and underwear and pulled different clothes from behind the driver's seat. I watched him get dressed. Then he stuffed the first clothes in a grocery sack and threw them and a big knife off to the side."

"And then?"

"He popped the clutch and put the van in neutral, and as it started rolling, he jumped free and watched it hit the water," Gus said. "The van floated for a half minute, maybe. Then it sank. And I watched the kid all that time, using my goggles. He looked young to me. Some kind of tattoo was on his arm; I couldn't tell what. But the face was pretty clear from where I was lying."

"Do you see that face in this courtroom?" the prosecutor asked.

"Mostly," Gus said.

Surprised, the prosecutor asked warily, "What do you mean, 'mostly'?" "He's grown up since that night," the old man said. Then one big hand lifted, and even though everybody knew where he was going to point, it was amazing how much tension kept churning inside that one overcrowded room.

The girl knows what her father expects. She stands under the boy's arm and the eagle, smiling on command. The dirty white van is behind her, the remnants of a plumber's name and phone number past her right ear. Lighting and composition could be better. But this is what the photographer deserves, ambushing two unwilling subjects as they escape from his townhouse. She is small and blond like her mother, with her paternal grandmother's strong features and stubborn nature. She wears jeans and flip-flops and a boy's rude T-shirt and that perfect smile, unconscious but still fetching. Her father is leaving for Asia. Interesting lands and fascinating people need to be captured by his lens. He won't see his daughter again. Twenty days from tonight, she dies inside that van, and this is the final photograph that her father will take of his most patient, most suffering subject.

An upscale sports bar was within walking distance of the courthouse, and Mitch had rented the party room, graciously inviting me to sit with his family and friends. The host picked up the tab for everything but hard liquor. I appreciated the old man's charity. I let him deal with Lauren's temper, and even more dangerous, her moments of elation. And after that third day, my ex was ready to dance on a barroom table.

"This is going to put him on death row," she said.

I was ignoring my curly fries. Mitch was nibbling at a Caesar's salad. Seven years of marriage came into play. Without sounding sanctimonious, Mitch told his wife, "I think you're probably right, dear."

She looked at me. "Gus," she said.

"Yeah," I said.

"Thank you, Gus," she called out.

Mitch watched me. Then with a careful voice, he said, "You know the man, don't you?"

"Pretty well," I admitted. "He and my dad ran on the river together, back when they were kids."

"And you ran around with Gus' son," Lauren said.

I shook my head. "We were in the same class. But Jeremy and I were never close. Not like our fathers."

"Well, thank you for the wonderful goggles, Jeremy!"

People were pleased, but most of the room preferred to stare at me.

Mitch was a man who knew the value of grooming and poise. He took a deep breath, not quite wringing the worry out of his handsome features. "Well, this was obviously a good day," he managed.

Lauren started drumming on the table. Hard.

"John, Jackson," Mitch said. "Go to the bar and bring back enough for a celebration. Four pitchers should do the trick, don't you think?"

His grown sons weren't the most energetic fellows, but the promise of booze got them on their feet.

"I don't want beer," Lauren said.

"Well how about a margarita, dear?"

"Perfect," she said.

"You sit, I'll get," Mitch said. Then he looked at me, using a careful tone when he said, "You might want to order your own. My treat."

I warily went with him.

The bar was busy for mid-week. Patrons were eating fried vegetables and fried meat, watching walls filled with televisions. Basketball was the dominant sport, but one raucous group was living and dying with some NHL game.

"I've heard rumors about our witness," Mitch said, touching my forearm.

Mitch wasn't the touching sort.

"You mean Gus," I said.

"Yes."

Insurance was a local industry, and Mitch was one of its titans. He was also a skilled golfer and an expert at making small talk at country club parties. When he had a rumor, it almost certainly came from the top.

"Three weeks after the murder, Gus came forward," he said. "Three weeks. Of course the police asked why it took him so long. The old fellow claimed that he didn't want to be involved and was afraid to get a poaching charge. But the granddaughter of an old friend was dead, and so there he was."

"Okay," I said.

"I can't reveal my source," Mitch said.

"I don't want to know it."

"But the police assume that he was hiding something worse than nets."

Possibilities popped into my head. Guns and dead whooping cranes. And big illegal guns, maybe.

"Do you know any specifics?" I asked.

"No."

"Does Elijah's lawyer suspect any of this?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

Mitch nodded, watching my eyes. "The authorities didn't have the forensics to convict Elijah, so they made a conscious effort not to ruin the only witness. And besides, this is the defense counsel's first murder case. The man means well, but he doesn't know his business."

I crossed my arms and then let them drop again.

"I hope you don't share any of this," he said.

"I won't."

"Particularly with Lauren," he said.

I couldn't have agreed more vigorously.

Mitch drifted off to the bar. I didn't feel like moving, so I stayed where I was, defending that little patch of floor. I could have stayed there forever. My thoughts were jangled and stupid, and in the end, utterly useless. But that's what I was doing when the tenor of the room changed, slowly at first and then rapidly. A bartender sprinted past, changing channels. Then someone behind me shouted, "Volume. Turn up the damned volume!"

Games vanished. News feeds replaced balls and pucks, and even the hockey fans didn't complain for long. A pale, profoundly bald man was standing before cameras and lights. The words "Baghdad" and "Live" were stuck in the corners. The bald man was smiling. He wanted to say something, and every reporter in the room wanted him to speak. But there were too many questions and too many high emotions, and another man felt obligated to step forward, shouting with an Arabic accent, ordering the room to please allow the honored guest to have his say.

"I don't know what to tell you," the bald man began.

I recognized the voice.

"No, I don't know where I was," he said.

In Baghdad, nervous mutterings fell back into silence.

Then the man said, "I'm sorry. But I don't know where I was. I remember being on the ground, on my stomach, with a gun at my head. Then I was on the same ground but naked. Naked and there wasn't any gun. And the man holding me prisoner was gone. And it was evening instead of afternoon, cool instead of hot, and I stood up and right away started to shiver."

A barmaid was watching the closest television.

I joined her, and she asked me, "Do you know what's going on?"

To my considerable surprise, I did know.

"His name is Foster," I said. "He was an AP photographer. About ten years ago, he was shot and killed in Iraq . . ."

Yet the television kept insisting these were live images.

"I don't know where I was when I was dead," said the big hearty voice that I couldn't forget. "But all things considered, I feel pretty good."

The eyebrows were a distinctive trait, but for some reason they haven't returned. The man sits on a stool in what is obviously a photographer's studio. He wears khaki shorts and sandals but no shirt. The old scar from bypass surgery makes a bold statement on his chest. Despite the warnings of doctors, the man is smoking again. He holds the cigar clamped in his teeth, furiously blowing smoke into the lights. A dense mat of new brown hair covers his scalp and tiny slivers of red show where the razor cut his chin just minutes ago. He was making himself ready for this portrait. Always the photographer, he claims that the cuts were intentional, giving his face the necessary mortality. But there is no such monster as Death. That is what Simon Foster shows the world. There might be other realms and other realities, unmapped and mysterious, but the seemingly firm and eternal grip of Nothingness has been expelled, and probably forever.

Lauren was crying and crying.

She hadn't been this happy in years, if ever.

Court was out. The jury had been sent home for the weekend. I was at Lauren's house, at Mitch's house, eating delivery pizza while watching another freshly minted documentary about the Elysium Chamber. Gordon Tran was the investor, the spark-plug—a Texan billionaire who saw a problem and found the means to fix it. People were far too compassionate with the murderers of the world, Gordon maintained. Capital punishment was the reasonable response to cruel, soulless men. He claimed that he wasn't a cruel man. Indeed, Gordon seemed affable and warm, rationally discussing the nature of evil and the concerns of soft-hearted souls who couldn't put down a psychopath with the same tools used on a dying dog.

That's why Gordon found himself a pair of bright fellows—tech-savants netted from the wilds of Seattle. And that's why he spent two hundred million of his own dollars in the development and initial testing of the most famous machine in the world.

Lauren pulled her knees to her face, giggling and weeping in equal measure.

Now the tech-boys got to talk. Minimal edits gave the piece a natural feel, but the camera pulled in too close, proving the boy on the left still had pimples. He explained how the Elysium Chamber was designed to take an object, living or otherwise, and obliterate it as quickly and efficiently as physics allowed. Nobody wanted to divulge details. Several hefty patents were riding on their ingenuity. But the boys admitted to borrowing techniques from experimental fusion reactors and high-energy cyclotrons. The goal was a clean means to end life, without pain and the associated guilt that comes with inflicting suffering. Then the pimple boy admitted that they really went into this business hoping to find a better means to generate power.

"Except the reactions aren't as rich as we hoped," he confessed. "The Elysium isn't going to replace coal or windmills, not any time soon."

Lauren grinned at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Are you happy?"

What was I? "Cautious," I said. "I'm not letting myself get crazy."

"That's so like you," she said, laughing at the doubter.

Several months ago, Gordon and his boys started searching for the means to test their machine. But even nations who routinely executed criminals were shy about experimental electric chairs. China and Russia refused. Saudi Arabia and various African nations refused. Even Texas took a pass. But officials in Iraq were willing to help—probably with a suitcase full of cash helping sway opinions, I assumed. A condemned prisoner was selected. Captured last year and convicted just days ago, he was an exceptionally bad man—a known terrorist who had personally murdered dozens of civilians, including one AP photographer named Simon Foster.

The world's only operational Elysium Chamber was a bulky contraption full of capacitors and fancy machines hovering just above absolute zero. It was flown to Baghdad last week, and after some last-minute negotiations, the prisoner was led inside a closet-sized space and told to remain motionless. But that final instruction was unnecessary. The man felt nothing but the typical self-important emotions of a psychopath facing execution. And this was a very bad man. The inventors and Gordon kept making that point. "The worst of the worst." There was no noise inside the Elysium. The only light was a pale blue glow from a tiny overhead vent. One moment, the killer was there, and then he simply ceased to be. An exceptionally busy picosecond shattered every long molecule in his body, and electrons were stripped free, and the composition of his mind and thoughts was so thoroughly randomized that it was as if the man had never been.

Foster was murdered in the hills above Mosul. He discovered himself naked and alone on the slope where he died, and he nearly died a second time of exposure before a Kurdish patrol stumbled across him. Twenty-three men and two women were reborn, but Foster was the face known in the West. Sadly eighteen other people were killed by the spring chill or the kinds of mishaps that are inevitable when young soldiers see naked men approaching out of the darkness.

Gordon Tran and his cohorts were sorry for those losses, but how could any sane mind anticipate this kind of event?

"All right," the interviewer said. "I need to ask each of you: What is the explanation for all this?"

Without hesitation, the Texan said, "It is God's gracious heart at work."

"It has to be," my ex-wife whispered, grabbing up her husband's hand.

But the tech-boys wouldn't let the Supreme Deity into their machine. "We built an accidental time machine," one of them proposed. "End a murderer's life that quickly, that perfectly, and the souls that he killed are instantly teleported back into the living world."

The pimple boy glanced at his partner while shaking his head.

"You don't agree," the interviewer pressed.

"I'm avoiding hard, fast opinions," said that lucky genius. "But there is an interesting middle ground here. I think. Intelligent, sophisticated forces might be at work in the universe. They're gods or aliens, and my guess? They are very advanced aliens. And like all conscious beings, these creatures value some things more than other things, and preserving human souls might just be an activity that powerful good entities would wish to do."

"Preserve them how?" the interviewer pressed.

“Well, maybe like photographs,” the pimple boy replied. “But these are photographs accurate to the nearest atom and kept in some very safe place. And all we need are the proper tools to retrieve them.”

For me, that was the riveting beautiful perfect moment.

I grabbed up my ex’s other hand, sick from happiness when I told her, “You’re right. I know you’re right. We’re going to get our little girl back.”

The house stands behind a weathered For Sale sign. The yard is weedy, the front storm door is missing, and particle board covers the living room window. Three children and their mother sit on the curb. Five-year-old boys smile at their world, identical faces looking like eggs painted with happy eyes and happy mouths. Mom is as skinny as the day she died. The smooth scalp and prominent cheekbones lend her the appearance of a vigorous cancer patient, and while she isn’t as happy as her sons, she does seem relieved by circumstances that she couldn’t have predicted. Her twelve-year-old daughter is the worrisome subject. Looking over her shoulder, the girl glances at a house nobody wants to buy. In profile, she looks nervous and sorry and scared. Most of the bad things in the family happened to her. At her feet is the framed portrait of a smiling man who resembles the twins but not the girl. That man was executed three days ago. Three days ago, she came back to life. With her right foot, the girl stamped on the portrait, leaving her stepfather smiling his way through a tangle of bright lines.

The defense was brief and dispirited and wrapped around ploys. They didn’t dare bring up the angry, inarticulate boy, but Elijah’s mother was put on the stand, weeping while describing her family’s hard lives. Then she tried to offer up a new, previously unknown suspect: Kaylee was alive when her son left her, but he also claimed that someone was hiding in the trees beside the turnoff. He didn’t actually see anyone, but he heard sounds and didn’t think it was deer, it had to be human . . . and at that point the prosecutor had enough with this secondhand nonsense. His objections were allowed, and pieces of her testimony were excluded.

Four hours of deliberation resulted in a first-degree murder verdict. A few spectators were despondent. Mom and various relatives sobbed as the deputies took away the convicted man. But the room was dominated by happy people acting like good sports. We didn’t cheer. We didn’t congratulate the prosecuting attorney or shout our thanks to the jury. Smiles and little nods of appreciation were enough, and then our group paraded across the street to the party room already stocked with chicken wings and broccoli florets and several species of beer. My plan was to test a few beers, but the press ambushed us. One reporter mentioned that the governor was calling an emergency session of lawmakers, directing them to rewrite the laws concerning the definition of murder and the method of capital punishment. She asked for my biased opinion. It was good news, I allowed, but I was too superstitious to gloat. The world had one working Elysium and only a handful more were in production. I smiled, and, sounding like a politician, I made noise about hoping for smart fair laws that would leave society in a better place.

The reporter had brought along a photographer who didn’t look old enough to buy. After taking too many pictures of me, he confessed that he would love nothing more than to do my job.

Offering the usual clichés about patience and perseverance, I continued my quest for beer.

But there was a problem: My parents had joined me for the final day. Dad pulled me aside, warning that my poor mother was tired, tired, tired. The woman looked ready for a long happy party, but that wasn’t the point. Dad was the exhausted one, and I drove them home. We listened to radio all the way. The local news began with

Kaylee, which was a fine moment, and then the announcer mentioned that our little state held more than a hundred prisoners convicted of murder, some of their crimes decades old.

The air was thick with implications.

"Coming back after all that time," Dad complained. "Everybody you know dead, and the world strange. Talk about taking the tough road."

I delivered two old people to their room at the Manor. Then I drove to the Super G, buying my first six-pack from that venerable establishment in nearly twenty years. The Sweetgrass city park was down by the river with its sandbars and driftwood and geese, and I drank and walked the shoreline while the sun set behind me.

I was happy. But it was the kind of joy where I had to keep reminding myself that I felt this way, and I had to play with the happiness, testing it with my thoughts as if I didn't quite trust it.

Sweetgrass Creek was running strong that evening, its water hitting the river and then spinning. Two different colors of mud tried hard not to mix, and some child's ball had gotten free and floated out on the whirlpool—a bright blue ball with yellow specks, buoyant as a dream. I watched that ball dance on the spinning water. It never took the same path twice yet managed to avoid heading out onto the big water. This seemed very lovely and even magical to me, and after fifteen minutes, I went back to my car for more beer and a camera.

My phone had been off since morning. I saw it on the car seat and made the mistake of sitting down, reengaging with the world. Dozens of people had left kind words and congratulations. I opened a beer and drank half of it while listening to messages, and then I saw the time and turned on the local news, waiting to hear my daughter's name again. Except this time there was a different script. Shortly after leaving the courtroom, Elijah had either stumbled or purposefully thrown his forehead against a table corner. He was recovering now; the danger was past. But following new protocols involving prisoners even suspected of murder, Elijah was being placed on a twenty-four hour suicide watch.

I finished my beer and opened a third and then grabbed the camera and went down to the stream's mouth. But the blue and yellow ball had made its escape. I couldn't see any sign of it out on the evening water.

Suddenly, I was nothing but sad.

My phone was still on, riding my belt. It rang and I didn't look, and after another minute or two, it rang again.

The caller let me see his name.

Gordon Tran.

The eye can't count the faces and feel certain about the number. Perhaps fifty Brazilians stand together, no room to spare. They were dead for eleven months, killed in a club fire set by a man who had issues with a certain girl. By chance, the girl survived the blaze. Alone, she sits on the ground before the others, the flesh on her pretty face incinerated by the fantastic heat.

Her companions are not scarred. The injuries that played a role in your killing are always excluded from your rebirth. There is logic to the rule, but why old chicken pox scars have to come back with you is a mystery. And why should you be able to keep your fingernails and teeth but not your hair? And how can a body be conjured from nothing, but not a good winter coat that might keep you from dying from exposure?

These fifty people are wearing short hair and good clothes, each dressed for a night of rum and dance.

The burnt girl can't grow hair anymore. But her lovely body wears a fine little dress that acts as powerful counterpoint to that mangled, wasted face.

* * *

One of my photographs was riding the lobby wall. The matting wasn't the best and the proportions were wrong for the allotted space, but this was no mood piece intended for a corporate headquarters. My mood was what mattered here. I stood in the middle of the lobby, shamelessly admiring that young woman. She was standing before a tall iron gate, some quirk of light causing her face and her nun's habit to merge with a multitude of shadows. There was magic here, but the shot was all luck, no genius. That's what made it so intriguing for me. I could have taken ten thousand more photographs of the woman and never reproduced that smiling mouth or those rich, soulful eyes. And then to lump tragedy on beauty, six weeks before the image was published the nun was raped and cut to pieces by young men wielding machetes.

I stared, and the receptionist made one quiet call.

An assistant appeared at my side, saying, "Whenever you're ready, sir."

He and I walked into the back, and for the third time in my life, I shook a billionaire's hand.

"Call me Gordon," he said.

"I'm Shawn."

The assistant was dismissed. My host was a handsome, intense, and rather short fellow with black hair and a tendency to put on weight. Playing against stereotypes, he was younger than a Texan tycoon should be, and his father was Vietnamese. There wasn't any cowboy hat in view, but he had the boots and the accent and a tailored jacket thrown over an extra chair, allowing him to roll up his silk sleeves. Gordon struck a pose beside a tall window, and I got ready for an assault of country charm. But he surprised me, skipping past the pleasant noise about my flight and how thankful he was for my time. Looking out the office window, he said, "I have always been curious. What did you think of the nun?"

"Honestly, we barely spoke."

"Yet the portrait made the cover," he said.

"She wasn't part of any plan," I said. "I saw her and asked for her time, and she gave me two minutes."

Gordon nodded. "You know, her killers are in prison now."

I didn't know that.

"They were arrested last week. The world doesn't realize it yet, but I do business in that country. I have friends. They tell me that one of the men feared for his soul, so he confessed and turned in the others, and there's going to be a trial and at least four executions. My intention is to fly the Elysium into that country, at no charge, just to help cure that one enormous evil."

I didn't know how to respond.

Gordon stared through glass. "I think you should take her photograph. Once she comes back."

I walked to the window, admitting, "I'd like to do that."

"And I'll pay you," he said.

Grass worthy of a golf course led down to intricate gardens and a rock-lined lake. But neither of us was interested in the view.

"In fact," Gordon said, "I want to hire you, Shawn. I want you for a special project. Because I admire your work and always have."

Flattery makes the face warm.

"And because of the specifics of your life just now," he added.

"Kaylee," I said.

"Your legislators did a fine job with that bill. There shouldn't be many legal challenges. Your state can start the executions this summer, if you can just find one working Elysium."

I looked at his eyes. "What's the project?"

"A catalog of the reborn," Gordon said. "I don't know specifics yet. It's hard to imagine this being a spectacular success on living room tables. But an official book from people close to the project . . . well, I think there's a need, and I can't imagine anyone that I'd rather have working on it than you."

"Well," I said. "Thank you."

"You'll have total control over your subjects, of course, and a considerable expense account too."

I nodded, letting his thunderbolt work its way through me.

Gordon patted me on the back, as if we were old pals. "And of course you'll have to include Kaylee in this project."

"Absolutely," I said, fighting the tears. "And you're right. Nobody would be better for this job than me."

Her face hides in shadow, making the body more real as a consequence. Sunshine flows across a long lovely woman. She sits on cushions and wears nothing. The breasts seem too large for such a thin frame, nipples swollen and dark. There is no pubic hair, and the legs stretch on and on, feet vanishing inside a second pool of darkness. The left hand rests on the swollen belly. The baby has been waiting ten years to be born, and the reborn mother waits for the next hard kick.

The stroke came during a heated game of pitch. My father won his bid, and then cards and sun tea and his limp body were suddenly spilling across the floor. I was at home when Mom called. The future widow was camping in the waiting room at the Med Center, knitting socks and watching the news. I asked how Dad was. "Stable," she said, sounding like any doctor, self-assured yet devoid of real information.

I sat beside her. Inflation was the news of the moment.

"Where do you go next?" she asked.

"Nowhere, if he stays sick."

She put the sock down. "Don't worry about us, Shawn."

"Brazil," I said.

"You've been there before," she recalled.

"The Amazon, last time."

That deserved a little laugh. "I never imagined you'd become the world traveler," she said. "As a boy, you seemed happiest when you were home."

I nodded in agreement.

She returned to her knitting, and after a tangle of commercials, we got into the latest Elysium news: Five Russian heavy-lift aircraft had been fitted with the world's only working chambers, and the armada was crossing the globe, dropping into civilized cities and infamous hellholes where prisoners were queued up and ready to be executed.

Mom didn't seem to be listening. But after counting stitches, she looked at me, asking, "So what is a murderous act?"

I wasn't sure what to say.

"Oh, I understand the obvious cases," she continued. "But I'm talking about everything else."

"Combat doesn't seem to count," I said.

"And I think I understand that," she said. "Soldiers try to kill each other. But murder is stealing a defenseless life."

Iraq was providing a rich stream of data. An insurgent shoots ten soldiers in a fire-fight, and the next morning he chops the head off one prisoner. When the insurgent walks into the Elysium, only one person returns. How can you murder someone who

is actively trying to kill you? But what if a second insurgent lobs a mortar round into a crowded schoolhouse? Put him into the Elysium, and sometimes the schoolchildren were reborn. But the innocent were just as likely to remain dead—because it was blind killing at a distance, maybe, or maybe because of the corrosive effects of being inside the war zone. Or the killer's mind was the key, his perceptions and his attendant guilt playing into these cosmic legalities.

"It doesn't matter now," said Mom. "But just last week, your father and I were discussing these questions."

"Why doesn't it matter now?"

She smiled slightly. "My parents lived into their late nineties."

I nodded.

"But you never knew your paternal grandparents."

Dad felt lucky to make seventy.

"So your father and I were talking," she repeated. "What if he contracted some incurable cancer?"

"You're thinking what?" I began.

"A murderous act," she said, shaking her head. "But we're not talking about cancer now. And I doubt that the doctors would be able to repair the damage inside your father's head, if in twenty years he happened to drop back into life."

The man is bald and ancient and probably strong despite his age. He has a wrestler's shoulders and a wrestler's wary stance. At a hundred and two, he is the last living guard from the Polish camps, and there is no time to waste. Maybe the prisoner is a bull, but someday an artery will burst or a mild infection will claim his soul. Perhaps that's why the Israeli soldier grabs the old man by an elbow while the other hand points the way. A gray plain stretches on before them, ending with a mammoth plane surrounded by power cables and auxiliary generators.

"Run," says the soldier's free hand. "There is no time, run...!"

"We were lucky," Lauren said.

I thought I understood. There was a script and I made the usual agreeable noises. But then she said, "No, I mean his suicide attempt. That was a real blessing." I have never liked the word "blessing."

"Are you there, Shawn?"

I was sitting in the Pinkberry at LAX, gathering myself for the long next flight. "I'm here, sure."

"I've been thinking about this," she said. "Obviously, Elijah failed to kill himself. Or maybe it was an accident, taking that fall. But nobody wants to take chances. He's on full-watch status, around the clock, drug-enforced and someone always in the room."

The last month was rife with scares and disasters. Jailhouse hangings were always in the news, and that fire outside Kiev just incinerated thirteen proven murderers. As a result, more prisoners were being wrapped in soft restraints, cameras and eyes making sure that the treasures were kept safe.

"And here's another reason we're blessed," Lauren said. "If he's a suicide risk, we might get pushed into the first group."

In six weeks, Elysium #2 was going to be flown into town, sitting at the airport for three days and two nights.

"Mitch says we're in the top thirty."

And I finally saw where this conversation was headed.

"How many executions can be done in one day?"

"Six to nine," I said. "The synchronization needs to be recalibrated after every use, because if something is wrong—"

"Don't even think that," Lauren said.

Both of us were thinking about nothing else.

"Anyway," she said. "I'm doing whatever I can to get us moved up the list."

Old murderers and men with multiple victims were at the top, while people sitting in prison for manslaughter could rest easy for the time being, carrying souls killed in a succession of barroom brawls and traffic accidents gone ugly.

Lauren described her pleas to the governor, trying to push our case past the triple homicides and such.

I didn't say anything, waiting.

"Your new friend," she said. "Gordon."

"You want me to talk to him," I said.

"The man has to have pull."

"Not as much as you'd think," I said. But I was already formulating how to pose my request.

Silence bothered Lauren. "Where are you going today?"

"Cambodia."

She hesitated. Then with a small careful voice, she said, "I can't imagine how wonderful that's going to be."

The camera is too distant to show faces or the details of any single body. What impresses is the wash of bare flesh, pale brown and lovely. Hundreds of bodies stand where they died, close as lovers. One man and his machine gun managed this slaughter. That man died moments ago, and aid workers now stand at the margins of the clearing, shouting instructions and encouragement. There is no noise in the photograph, and no motion. What impresses the eye is the sheer quantity of flesh that has arisen from no definite place, profligate and eternal.

The reborn were entitled to act lost, particularly those gone for decades. But the quick and dirty studies couldn't find any medical condition. Psychiatric files and personality inventories showed them to be the same people as before. Cognitive skills held steady. Physically, they were precise duplicates of their old selves. Fifty years of nonexistence didn't change a person. But those perfectly reproduced minds had to absorb quite a lot, often including memories of their own deaths, and what held the most influence was the master to us all: Character.

The young woman died in 1969, in Michigan. A teenage boy living three blocks from her house dreamed of sex with a pretty corpse, and slipping into her kitchen while she was bringing in groceries, he struck her from behind with a ball-peen hammer. She never saw him. She didn't feel pain, and the boy was never a suspect. But ages later, in Oregon, one old sexual predator with stage IV lung cancer was turned to nothingness.

Millie was dead, and then she woke as she died, on her feet, wondering where her eggs and canned peas were hiding. She was standing in the same kitchen, surrounded by new appliances and granite countertops and a young couple eating Fruit Loops while reading the news on their Blackberries.

Three people screamed.

One of them was quicker to adapt. Millie put on a robe supplied by the panicky wife and, sitting at the new table, she picked up one of the phones, asking questions about the world and her place. She seemed interested and amused. The couple was sure that she wasn't paying close attention to their answers. Yet Millie absorbed everything and came to terms with the basics, and on her second attempt she managed to call her old phone number, apologizing to a gruff man on the other end of the line.

February 2012

The woman I met was eight weeks back to life and thriving. She had an iPhone and new laptop, and she was learning to blog and already had made hundreds of good friends on Facebook. At first, money was a problem. Her family was dead, and there were no social programs aimed at the reborn. But pretty women in her situation commanded interest from the world. Millie picked the more personal, less sexual job: She was a modern oracle. Strangers paid to sit with her in coffee shops and public parks, telling their life stories when they weren't listening to her practical, decidedly unmystical advice about a wide range of topics.

A few of the reborn told big stories about heaven and angels. Not Millie. She didn't channel dead people's thoughts or claim any special vantage point on the universe. Her preferred method was to sit, patiently absorbing everything, and it didn't take long for me to realize how good she was at her job.

"I know about you, about your circumstances," she said.

My plan was to photograph half a dozen reborn faces, and then move on. She happened to be first today.

"I Googled you," Millie said, a measured smile showing. "Ten days to go, if the schedule holds."

"It will," I promised myself.

She lived in a tiny studio apartment. A big aquarium filled with cheap happy goldfish divided the room in half, and my plan was to shoot through the glass, Millie sitting on the other side, artfully out of focus.

"Would it bother you?" she asked.

"Would what bother me?" I asked, fiddling with the lights.

"Can we talk about your daughter?"

"There's no reason why not," I said.

In her late twenties, the woman had smooth pale brown skin, her features embracing several races. I didn't mention it, but she seemed perfectly suited for our modern, mixed-heritage world.

"I read the articles," she said.

"Which articles?"

"About Kaylee and the trial, and most everything I could find about you. I thought I should know the man who wanted to photograph me."

I stopped working and began watching her.

Millie was wearing new clothes and fake jewelry, long thin hands turning her beloved phone. Horrible as it seemed, I could see why some young pud-pulling jerk would want this woman. She had a special kind of prettiness, sharp and happy and effortless.

"Do you think it'll work?" she asked me.

"The Elysium?"

She didn't react, watching me.

"The technology's solid, even if we don't understand how it works," I said. "And they haven't had equipment failures in weeks. Operators know what they're doing now, and they don't screw up."

She waited, feeding me a perfect dose of silence. And then this quirky counselor sighed and said, "I thought so."

"What do you think?"

"You have concerns."

"Did I say that?"

She said, "Doubts."

I didn't talk.

With just her eyes, she told me that she was worried about me, or maybe she was afraid for my dead daughter. Or maybe Millie didn't know anything, throwing out a

worrisome expression that might put more money in her jar. That is what I was hoping when she turned away, smiling while speaking quietly to the fish.

"Yeah, maybe we're both wrong," she said with a charitable voice. "There's always that hope to fall back on."

Blurring slips of gold wrap around her face, while glass and water and more glass diminish her. Photographer and camera have conspired to achieve an artful lack of focus, and the result is at least as rich as hoped for; and it is utterly wrong. The image is a lie. Nothing about the subject is ethereal. The soul behind that face is substantial, bony and bloody, and the pretentious image does nothing but feed the sentimental wishes of other souls who are just as bony and just as bloody as she is, but fervently, hopelessly wish they could be otherwise.

"I don't anticipate trouble, but this is a field without experts," the man warned us. "The Elysium might be a miracle, but the machine is rooted in the real world, subject to demands and limitations. You might not agree with every decision we make or every action that we don't take. But our choices are based on what we believe will help your loved ones in the only way that matters, which is in the long run. So please, whatever happens, bear with us."

The third day of executions was beginning. The airport's least-used gate had been dedicated to us—several dozen relatives sitting in the minimally padded chairs, at five in the morning, paying strict attention to a silver-haired FBI agent who had given this same speech for several months.

"My first priority is the health and well-being of the reborn," he said. "You've been given our schedule. Our schedule is built around the demands of manpower and the locations of the murders. An execution involving multiple homicides at uncertain locations will be a lot more complicated than single deaths inside a known room. Part of what I do is to utilize our law enforcement resources to their limit, but no farther. And no schedule is immune to revision. For example, yesterday's forecast called for thunderstorms in the afternoon and evening, and that's why I flipped the order of executions. People who died outdoors were given priority, and no, those rains didn't materialize, but we had one chance to do this right, and I'm mostly happy about yesterday. Right up until the end."

"About last night: One of the quantum-pulse timers needed to be replaced. This happens now and again, and we have safeguards. Don't worry. But the repair forced us to push one execution back to this morning. That's why the Campbell family is with us again, and I thank them for their patience. Rest assured, ladies, once our routine maintenance is finished, your folks will be our first priority."

Two plump and pretty middle-aged sisters sat at the back of the lounge, smiling gamely despite the shared exhaustion. In a parade of sordid, pointless deaths, their case stood out: Twenty-five years ago, a coke addict and his underage girlfriend invaded the family farm, looking for cash and car keys. Presumably the girls would have died, too, but they had stayed the night at a neighbor's house—a spur-of-the-moment decision that never stopped defining their lives.

Our FBI agent continued. "Every convicted prisoner is safe and secure. Rest assured. But if a murderer starts to show signs of cardiac trouble or some other life-threatening emergency, I won't hesitate. I'll yank one killer from the Elysium and replace him with that sick man. I have that authority, and believe me I'm not waiting for second opinions from a more optimistic physician."

"We don't have to worry about that," Lauren whispered.

Elijah was young and strong, she meant.

"The weather looks excellent," the agent said. "And we don't have equipment fail-

ures on back-to-back days. So I think there's a good possibility that every execution will be managed in a timely fashion."

Smiles cut loose. I looked at strangers, sharing the joy. Lauren took a deep breath, glancing at her silenced phone. Mitch had told every woman in his office not to come to work today. "His ladies" were scattered across the county, ready to start combing back roads and woodlots that the police and sheriff's departments would ignore on the first pass.

The agent paused, but he wasn't finished. His first concern was dusting the desk beside him with a careful finger. Then he said, "I am not a religious man. I don't intend to ever be. But I can't express how much I enjoy the work that I'm allowed to do every day. There are challenges and disappointments, and yes, some tragedies. But we are learning valuable lessons as this process evolves, and thank you for your patience and your understanding, and in my nonreligious fashion, I wish each of you the best of every blessing."

Kaylee is a round face inside the hospital blanket. The flash from the camera annihilates shadows while the unnaturally blue eyes gaze up at a round piece of glass and metal that means nothing to her. Once that first photograph is finished, she will cry cry cry. Twenty minutes old and miserable, and is this how her entire life is going to be?

There were no significant delays, but we were last on the list and little delays and other conspiracies pushed us deeper into the evening.

At lunch, Lauren promised, "We're going to be jumped ahead of the others."

I said nothing.

My reticence angered her. "They won't want Kaylee returning in the dark," she claimed. "With the sun down, with her being pretty and female . . ."

"Enough of that," I said.

The airport's lone restaurant was our headquarters. The staff knew who we were, but this was the third day of hopeful families and friends occupying their chairs. We weren't special to them, and I was glad for that. A back booth and watching the occasional plane suited my mood. We couldn't see the big Russian freighter parked at the north end of the terminal, and sometimes I could almost forget where I was, imagining myself waiting for a flight that would carry me away.

The afternoon coffee was especially miserable. Lauren went to the bathroom, and my mother phoned.

"Did you hear about the Campbells?"

"No."

"They didn't come back," she said. "That man didn't kill their parents."

I felt suddenly cold.

"I knew Bernice. And I met Hank once or twice. They lived near Hartsburg, in this beautiful old house."

"So the girlfriend did it," I said sadly.

"And I remember when she was paroled," Mom continued. "God, I used to feel sorry for that child. Fifteen years old when it happened, and she seemed like such a victim. I was glad that she got out of jail. But nobody knew she was carrying those two souls with her."

Lauren reappeared, talking to Mitch for the fiftieth time today.

"I just thought you'd want to know," Mom said, and she hung up.

Lauren sat and said, "Bye," to Mitch. Then she noticed me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing about us," I said.

She accepted that easily enough. And once again, she said, "I have this feeling. We'll get bumped up at least one slot, maybe two."

“Hope so.”

Hope means nothing, and I have zero faith in prayer. But Lauren’s conviction seemed to hold sway over the universe. We were eating dinner in our usual booth. Mitch and his youngest son had come to share the anticipation. Alone with me, Lauren was usually careful with her enthusiasms. But a husband deserves honest day-dreams. She promised Mitch that life was going to be different when Kaylee was back. Lauren was going to let her daughter redecorate her bedroom however she wanted, or maybe she could take one end of the basement and they would give her a budget and let her go wild. And they’d buy the horse that she wanted two years ago, and of course there’d be a new car when she turned sixteen. Everything was possible, except for fighting. Lauren swore that she wasn’t going to battle with the girl, not for a very long time.

“Yeah, two days maybe,” Jackson joked.

And Lauren was in such a spectacular mood that she didn’t snarl. She even managed to laugh off the implication, changing topics.

“It isn’t fair,” she said.

Nobody dared ask, “What isn’t fair?” We knew.

“They know where the woman died,” she said, discussing the murder waiting ahead of us. “Inside her own house, and the vacant lot is still there.”

Three men silently contemplated their barely edible meals.

“It’s going to be dark soon,” Lauren warned.

“We’ve got time,” I said.

I couldn’t ruin her euphoria, but there was a hard edge to her stare.

Mitch said, “Darling.”

He was better with that word than I ever was.

“You asked me,” he said. “When this began, you ordered me to keep you where you needed to be.”

She looked out at the runway. “I’m fine.”

I was thinking about the Campbell family and those fat lucky sisters, and in another moment I was dreaming of a long flight to the South Pole.

Then our FBI agent appeared. I assumed that he was here for the pot roast, but our sheriff was tagging along, and after a brief conference with phones and each other, they headed for us.

“I wish we could give you more of a heads-up,” the agent said, sounding miserably sorry about something.

Everybody in the booth braced for disaster.

“But the prisoner next in line is talking,” he said. “He claims that he killed half a dozen old ladies over the years. In Kansas City and Tulsa, and we don’t know what’s true. But we don’t want to execute until we have the right people in place, and we’re ready to use the Elysium right now.”

“Now,” I echoed.

The expert act was fraying at the edges. With a sheepish little smile, he said to me and to Lauren, “We are going to do this as soon as we can, folks. So please, we need you to drop what you’re doing here and come with us.”

The baby is small and a little too thin perhaps but he seems happy, cradled in the arms of that young mother who holds him for the first time. The view is from behind and above. The mother’s face is invisible, but not her belly. A great horizontal gouge has been cut into her flesh, revealing a pearly belt of fat between the world and her womb, and there is an awful lot of blood, and the baby hasn’t been cleaned off perfectly. But he is a beautiful mess and his mother might be smiling or weeping, or she could be grimacing in terror. There is no way to know. Without a

face, she is every mother who has suddenly and irrevocably been given custody over another life.

The big Russian machine sat on the tarmac, its nose riding on hinges, lifting high to expose the black interior of the plane's enormous body. Our shuttle bus was unavailable, carting away the witnesses to the delayed execution. A thousand miles of concrete needed to be crossed on foot. Lauren wasn't running. I wasn't running. But there was hurry in our gaits, matched by the FBI agent and sheriff and then several subordinates who needed orders or advice or maybe just encouragement. I wasn't listening to the conversations, but I noticed the spent, frazzled faces. These grueling long days were just about finished. In our group, only Lauren looked rested. Focused and coldly happy, she thought to call up one of Mitch's people, telling her, "Walk the long windbreak south of the turnoff. Do that first, if she doesn't show at the gravel pit."

The State Patrol was responsible for the lake. Kaylee didn't drown, but divers were standing ready, just in case she had died while the van slid out onto the water.

Lauren stopped talking, listening to a crackling voice.

"Ma'am," said the sheriff. "That needs to be turned off, ma'am. Please."

"Just a minute," she told him, one finger lifted high. Then she told her phone, "No, this is best. This is perfect. We don't know where she'll be, but I know exactly where that shit is going to die."

Everybody heard her. Nobody reacted. The professionals had probably heard worse, but suddenly the sheriff needed to check with his search teams, and he peeled away. The FBI people stopped at the little village of trailers standing on the tarmac. Pulling out his phone, the gray-haired agent used a marksman's aim, pointing us toward the plane. "Go on, I'll catch up," he said. "I want to see how it's going in KC."

Lauren shut down her phone, and after showing me a small wink, she said, "Really, it couldn't be a nicer evening."

The air was dry and warm, but not miserable like late August can be. I couldn't help but see that as a sign. And our new timetable was another grand omen. After so much anticipation and worry, the rush felt like a gift. Suddenly I was a religious man, splendidly cocooned in God's love; and then an airport van pulled up in front of the giant aircraft, and down stepped a stout, spent woman.

Public executions could be ugly, undignified. Our state reached that consensus more than a century ago. But every legal death needed its witnesses, if only to make sure that nothing too sordid happened. A condemned man was entitled to two witnesses of his choosing. Elijah's mother was one, and she looked ready to keel over. Then his lawyer stepped down, an arm dropping on her shoulder while he dipped his head, offering a few inadequate words.

The press corps had sent three bodies, none allowed to work. The reporters hurried past Elijah's people and up the steel ramp into the plane, and then I heard the mother's crying over the last hundred feet of open runway.

Lauren muttered a hard word.

Using my long legs, I put distance between myself and everybody. A plain bedraggled lady on her best day, Elijah's mother was a shambles in the middle of a pain that would never vanish. Moaning into the attorney's chest, the thick body was sweating hard enough to soak her best clothes, and I felt sorry for her and even sorer for her companion. He and I traded looks, each wanting this ordeal over. Then he gave Lauren one hateful glare, and I contemplated the benefits of taking a good swing at him.

Attacking the ramp at a near-run, I rose into the cavernous interior. The reporters weren't working, and I wasn't either. My cameras were stowed in the car parked in a

VIP slot. I blinked in the relative darkness. Then somebody called me, "Sir," while a hand ushered me forward.

"Here, sir," a different voice said.

There was no sign of the Elysium. A temporary wall and tall green curtain divided the fuselage into sections, and the witnesses were allowed to sit on folding chairs that needed to be straightened. I claimed the first chair in the front row. Lauren passed me and claimed the center chair, and then she made a point of not looking my way.

I got up and moved one chair over and sat again.

In the spirit of compromise, she moved one chair to her left.

Witnesses and officials arrived in the next few moments. Only the mother and attorney were missing, but there were murmurs from behind—indistinct words that might have been commands, might have been begging. Either way, she filled up that big space when she came onboard, controlling her sobs for moments that ended with wrenching, pitiful sounds that made me think the most uncharitable thoughts.

I wanted to shout for quiet.

Not Lauren. She was serene and glacial, and the only sound she made was that little gasp let loose when the ugly green curtain was suddenly pulled open.

I had seen every Elysium, including this particular chamber. A great egg-shaped machine, #2 was white and slick on the outside and even whiter inside. I once asked the inventors if the egg shape was intentional. One boy responded with a long, jargon-lathered story about torus patterns and the demands of superconducting currents. But I was talking about symbols. Was the egg meant to signify rebirth, maybe? And that genius of geniuses, on the eve of a Nobel in physics, said to me, "Oh, right. Huh. I never thought of that before."

The giant egg was open.

Inside the Elysium were air and reflected light and nothing else.

A prison official came in from behind the chamber, accompanied by a squad of technicians with important little jobs that always waited for the last moment. The technicians worked and signed forms and vanished again, and then the official waved in two guards and a prisoner wearing new orange coveralls and various chains.

Elijah looked like a stranger. His hair was Marine Corps short. Bed rest and other precautions had left the young man atrophied. Muscle turned into the sloppiest fat. He looked middle-aged, bald and worn down. There was a strong resemblance to his mother, right down to the pain in his doughy face.

The crying woman stood behind me, and I looked back long enough to see officials glancing at each other, deciding to do nothing.

Our FBI friend had returned. Standing to one side, he gave his watch a meaningful glance, and the attorney coaxed his sobbing client back down onto her chair.

Between us and the Elysium was a plastic wall perforated with countless holes and strung with microphones, allowing voices to carry.

The FBI agent stepped forward, motioning to the ranking prison official.

The official was a bloodless creature, and in that realm of stark emotions and chaos, he acted like the only sane player. A quick word to the boy's ear was all that was needed, and it was all that he gave, and Elijah stepped forward, finding the breath to deliver whatever final words that kind of boy could manage.

"I'm not lost, Mom," he said. "Remember that. I'm always going to be somewhere else, even if we don't know the place." He named his little sisters, offering a few words of advice about keeping them out of trouble. Then he fell silent, and we thought he was finished. I watched him back into the official's pale still hands. But no, he suddenly noticed Lauren and me sitting in front, and he came forward again, wetting his lips once and then a second time before looking mostly at me.

"It was a dumb joke you told, getting me to laugh for that picture," he said.

Nobody else had a clue what he was talking about.

Then he was laughing, telling me, "I've got a big joke for you too. Want to hear it?"

Nobody spoke, nobody moved.

And then Elijah stepped back, whispering, "Done."

Guards removed the restraints. The boy turned and took one short step toward the Elysium, and a weakened leg bent too much and nearly dropped him. But he conjured the strength to put himself inside, and I thought I heard machinery humming as the precise hatch closed down to the nothing. Why I expected drama, I don't know. There should have been some delay, some grand silence full of reflection. But the hatch was down and there wasn't even the clichéd flickering of lights, and then with the smoothness found in dreams the hatch lifted once again. Whatever had been inside was gone, vented out into the August air. The operation felt like the third trick in a magician's show—a sleight-of-hand that was professional but not spectacular, laying the groundwork for the bigger, more impressive wonders to come.

Lauren jumped to her feet, unashamed to grab my arm and tug.

Hurrying was unseemly, but I didn't hesitate. We were outside with a lot of sun in the sky, and good omens were everywhere. The shuttle bus took us straight to my car. Lauren called Mitch, and he reported that "she didn't come back" at the lake, but we didn't expect that to happen, did we?

Just to be certain, Lauren called a friend with the State Patrol, getting a slightly more official word from her.

I drove, and Lauren used her phone while it charged.

I drove the planned route until the sun was down. Then I drove back roads and little rutted trails alongside fields of corn and beans, and we stopped on important hilltops in the night and yelled and panned the world with spotlights, bothering raccoons with our mayhem. I put two hundred and ten miles on the car, and twice my good friend in Texas called to inquire about my daughter.

Then it was two in the morning. Gordon was safe in bed, and his people started calling on his behalf, asking what kind of help we needed.

At six in the morning, I was standing on the crest of the county's tallest bluff, watching a Blackhawk helicopter sweep low over the trees below us. Venus was a bright cold spark in the eastern sky, and the world was filled with wrenching disappointments, but I was still willing to hope, some gambler's voice promising that the next two minutes would answer every wish, even when it was obvious that nothing good would come on this miserable day.

He sits with legs crossed, ladylike. Clothes and attitude prove that the young man is ferociously gay, and nothing will change that. The newspaper account of his murder is framed and propped up beside him. "Gay Rights Advocate Beaten to Death with Bat," the headline reads. Twenty-three years have passed. He has lovely white teeth and a smooth scalp barely showing the new hair. The skull in his lap has broken teeth and one gaping hole on top. He seems rather fond of that skull, one hand caught lightly stroking the weathered brown bone.

I had a thirteen-year-old neighbor boy on retainer. Every week, he attacked my weeds with the family mower. Sitting on the back steps, I was admiring a patch of mutilated Russian thistles. My hired hand had shoved the mower back and forth, scattering plant guts and spikes and those peculiarly alien flowers, purple and gruesome. Purple and lovely. I was thinking photographs. I was calculating angles and light. Then Gordon repeated what he had said several times before. "I'm so sorry. For you and your entire family, this must be awful."

"Nothing but awful," I said.

He took a deep, painful breath. There were other people and different problems that he would have preferred to deal with, but it was important to tell me, "If there's anything that I can do to help . . ."

"Thank you," I managed.

"I have resources," he said.

"Except there's no place left to search," I said. "Unless Elijah drove far away and killed her and then brought the body back here again. But that doesn't make sense. Or she's back but somebody else found her first—some crazy son of a bitch—and that's a possibility I don't want to dwell on."

Gordon remained quiet.

"Her mom and stepdad are riding the river on an airboat," I said, my voice breaking. "Hoping for a bare footprint on a sandbar, I guess."

Silence.

I sighed and asked, "Did it work?"

"Did what work?"

"The Elysium. Were there any malfunctions?"

"No," he said.

"And you'd know that for sure?"

I heard him shifting the phone against his face. "I'm going to check again. But every report shows a nominal cycle."

"And if it wasn't?" I said.

"That will show up, yes."

Looking at the purple flower, I said, "Maybe I should. Take you up on that offer of help, I mean."

"Please do," he said.

I listed possibilities.

Gordon listened carefully, asking me to repeat a few points. Then he told me, "You have every right to remain hopeful."

"Oh, I've got hope," I said. "But now I've got two dead kids, not just one. And that's taking some getting used to."

The kit is pulled open, its contents spilled across the concrete driveway. Designed for the reborn, the gym bag was jammed with appropriate clothes, including light shoes and sunscreen and a wide-brimmed hat. Because the dead return with empty stomachs, the kit includes an apple and a ripe pear and various cookies compliments of the Girl Scouts of America. And because only the person returns, not her internal flora and fauna, she has a large serving of probiotic yogurt set inside a chilled pouch.

Still inside the bag, waiting at the bottom, is a ratty chunk of cloth and stuffing, glassy eyes and bedraggled ears. Despite a thousand decrees to be treated like an adult, the dead girl couldn't sleep through the night without her Snuggles. And nestled beside that honorable, decent, and harmless man is a pair of belated birthday cards, congratulating Kaylee on reaching the sixteen and seventeen-year landmarks—sharp pieces of irony added by her father while her mother wasn't watching.

Giant cottonwoods used to be guard the turnoff, but some official decided they were too close to the highway—a hazard worth sheering down. I pulled off the little state highway and parked beside the newer of two picnic tables, and carrying my old Nikon, I started working with my eyes. It was dusk, cool and damp after a long rain. I didn't expect clues. The state forensic team found nothing, and that was nearly two years ago. I walked this ground twice right after Kaylee died, and once again after the trial, finding nothing. Souls were real, substantial and enduring; that was one of

the Elysium's lessons. But our souls acted more like books than people—objects bound up for protection and set on some invisible shelf. Even in my most desperate state, I couldn't feel my daughter floating beside me, never heard her essence calling out to me. This was nothing in this little rest area but a dusty white gravel parking lot and a pair of picnic tables and stumps left behind by trees older than any man.

I shot the picnic table and a lost Subway wrapper.

Then I threw the wrapper away and shot the steel drum marked TRASH.

There was a ditch between the parking lot and an abandoned rail line. The rail line was grown over with young trees and brush and more brush. I climbed into the ditch, discovering mud. I shot the trees and shot the fresh boot prints filling with runoff, and I was getting some awful shots of the setting sun and passable images of the sumac changing when a little car pulled off the highway, parking as far from me as possible.

With the camera, I pulled in details. The SWEETGRASS HAWKS decal proved these were locals, and the overpowering bass of the stereo implied young ears. I climbed out of the ditch, ready to drive away, except I found myself walking towards the strange car, feeling the incoherent elation that sometimes comes before a very good shot.

Cameras can work like guns. Show the lens to a face, and the soul behind it grows nervous and unnaturally thoughtful.

The car windows were up. A girl was sitting at the wheel. She seemed appalled by my sudden appearance, while her boyfriend—a big cherubic fellow—was eager to laugh at some part of this.

I wasn't sure what I was doing but a parental smile seemed appropriate. Producing a business card, I placed it against the glass, letting her read my name aloud to the lumpy boy before I bent down low.

"You look familiar," I told her, shouting over the rumbling stereo. "Is your mother Wanda Kane?"

The window dropped. "She's my aunt. Aunt Wanda."

"She had a kid sister," I started.

"That's my mom. Jean Ray Tanner."

"She married a Tanner?"

The girl nodded.

"I went to school with Jim Tanner."

"That's my dad," she said. Then what she read on the card finally connected with her brain. "Hey, you're that photographer."

The celebrity had returned home.

"I've heard about you," the boy said happily, killing the music. Then he recalled something else and looked over his shoulder. "Is this the place?"

"What place?" she asked.

"You know," he said impatiently. "Where that girl was killed."

"Here?" She squirmed.

"Or nearby," he said.

And with considerable gravity, she said, "Oh," and looked at me, perplexed and unbearably sorry.

I concentrated on the boy. "Are you from Sweetgrass?"

"We moved here when I was little," he said.

The boy was never little.

His girlfriend had a question, and she couldn't stop herself from asking it. "Is this where your daughter came back?"

Her boyfriend knew better, turning sumac-red.

And she got flustered. "What? I thought she was back again." I told her, "No."

With a cool, firm voice, I said, "They executed the wrong person."

In their lives, these kids had never stared at anybody as hard as they stared at me.

"Anyway," I said, putting my weight on my best knee. "So you guys know everybody in town, I bet."

They nodded together.

"I'm going to ask you something. Tell me what first comes into your mind. Okay?" I studied the girl, who was small and very pretty. "Who is the scariest man in Sweet-grass?"

The Tutsi sits in the foreground, sits where he died. There is no happier person in the world, says the radiant grin. But he isn't the true subject of the photograph. Only his shoulders and slick head are visible. On the slope behind him stand several cages assembled on site for this occasion, and in another few minutes they will be emptied and dismantled. Five souls sit behind bars. None have hair. The happy man would look tiny beside any of them. Squatting in the nearest cage is a great old gentleman weighing a few twigs short of five hundred pounds. The silverback markings will have to grow back. The flesh is paler than the missing fur, but the huge face is undeniably simian. His expression is less easy to read than the man's, but there is pleasure in the eyes, and caution, and perhaps a measure of anger. A man much like the smiling man killed him and his ladies. And perhaps the gorilla is imagining what he would do, if only these steel bars were taken away.

"I want to tell you something," she said.

"All right," I said.

"But not yet."

The aquarium lights were on; the rest of the studio apartment was dark. She got out of the sofa sleeper and walked into the bathroom. I watched her leave and watched the fish, and then she emerged from the bathroom, and I watched her again.

"Do you know why men invented cameras?" she asked.

"Tell me."

"So they could carry pictures of their naked girlfriends and wives."

She laughed at my gender, and I laughed with her. "Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

"Nope." Millie crawled in beside me. Her phone made chirping noises every time Facebook updated. Three chirps, and then she said, "You aren't talking about her."

"I haven't been," I agreed.

"Kaylee," she said.

Yeah.

Millie rolled onto her stomach. "Last week. You mentioned that you'd been talking to some kids."

"I'm doing research," I admitted.

"'Fishing for names,' you called it."

I nodded.

"What are your police doing?" she asked.

"The investigation is reopened. But there weren't many leads to begin with, and for now, authorities are pushing hardest at the Campbell case. Those people are still dead, and they have a viable suspect."

"How many kids did you talk to?"

"Eight girls, a few boyfriends."

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“And what did you do with the names?”

I looked everywhere but at Millie’s face. “Gordon. He offered help, and so I’m having his people check on the names. I want to know everything I can before anything actually happens.”

“And what happens when it happens?”

That was a funny way to phrase it. The most serious subject in the world, and I started to laugh.

She said, “Shawn.”

“What?”

“You act as if I’m this hippie chick cast out from the sixties.”

“But you are,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, well . . . I never was much of a peacenik,” she said. “And if you want the gruesome truth, I’ve become a substantial believer in revenge.”

“Okay.”

“Are you planning to beat confessions out of anyone?”

“I don’t think I could,” I said.

“Let me,” she said.

I stared at the shadowed face.

She broke into a big laugh. “I’m kidding.”

“Good.”

“But I could help you.”

“Help how?”

“Nobody knows me in Sugargrass.”

“Sweetgrass.”

“I could go around town, asking questions,” she said.

I was wishing that we could drop the subject.

We laid there for another little while.

“I can help you,” she said again.

“I told you. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

And she said, “Well then. Maybe that’s another place where I can do you some good, Shawn.”

The young woman was tied down and raped repeatedly, and then her assailant suffocated her with a pillow. That was thirty-three years ago, and she has been back for four months. She happens to be Swedish. Her killer’s life was spared because the Swedes are decent noble people. Decency and nobility now require executions, and she returned to the living without her hair and without bacteria in her gut, but wearing the same freckles and fingerprints, and inside her was a bit of living human tissue that enjoys the same immortality afforded to red blood cells and fertile eggs. The rapist’s semen was still present. Nobody realized this. Then she discovered the pregnancy, in vitro tests proving that the dead man has a son coming. And this is why there is no name attached to the photograph, and why the woman wears a black wig that hides her unknown face.

There were fancier cabins, but most of them were closed for the season. The cabin in that I remembered faced the river, not the lake. It was low and ugly and fundamentally strong, painted dark red one day and ten years later touched up with the ugliest brown in the world. At least three satellite dishes pointed at the sky, and the south-facing roof was covered with mismatched solar panels. My father used to tell me that in his class at school, there were exactly three kids with working brains. One brain belonged to him, of course. The second brain was my mother’s. And the final genius bought up an entire lake with money made from selling coy-

ote pelts, and then Gus sold the lots to various idiots who had more cash than common sense.

Gus had kept the best lot for himself. Occupying the highest ground, his home never suffered when floods came. I parked at the gate and walked past the "Be Expected or Be Shot" sign. It was the first week in October; an early frost had pushed us into autumn. But it was a warm afternoon—warm enough that a random red-headed boy could wear shorts and walk the sandbars out on the river.

I watched the boy as I walked, and I watched the cabin windows, suffering a wicked case of nerves.

The front door was open but the storm door was shut. I looked for a bell. Gus didn't believe in bells. I knocked on the storm and shouted his name, and I invested a full minute listening to the silence inside. Then I walked across what passed for the front yard, examining an armada of river boats, several of which looked like they might actually float if someone bothered to push them onto the open water.

The red-headed boy was farther away, walking a precise circle on the whitest, flattest piece of sand.

I started pulling him in with the camera.

"I was in the shitter," Gus said.

I hadn't heard anything, and then he was beside me. Like a cat, the man was. Like an old arthritic nicotine-infused cat. He had me in his sights, and I hit him with five seconds of silence. Then he nodded, running his tongue along the lip that was holding his chew, and he said, "Hell, Shawn. I'm goddamn sorry about your daughter."

"Yeah," I said. "Thank you."

"Did they tell you?"

"Did who tell me?"

"The State Patrol. The sheriff. They've been back here, asking questions all over again."

"I figured they would be," I said.

"Well, this makes me sick, too." That craggy, nearly toothless face watched only me. "I thought I had it right. I really did."

"Everybody did their best," I said.

Gus nodded, waiting.

"I haven't admitted this to anyone," I said, dropping my eyes. "But I had doubts about Elijah. The kid was a lot of things but not a killer, and it kicks the shit out of me all over again. But what I had was a feeling, no evidence. So I let the police and the courts do what they wanted, and maybe that drops some of this guilt on me."

Saying nothing seemed like the best decision, and Gus did that with a sympathetic nod and clear, unblinking eyes.

"Anyway," I said.

"I wish I could help," he said.

I swung the camera and strap behind me, pulling out my phone. "I'm working for Gordon Tran now."

"I heard something about that," he said. "Congratulations."

It was deeply peculiar, hearing the word "congratulations" from someone like Gus.

"Anyway," I said. "Gordon offered to help me and help Kaylee. Which means a lot, since he has money and some very big connections too."

Again, Gus used silence and the watchful gaze.

"I had him compile a list," I said. "People with histories, people with tendencies. In and around Sweetgrass, and in the city too."

"That could be a lot of names," he said.

"And it was, until I carved off everybody who didn't look like Elijah. Now I've got three characters with a passing resemblance to the boy."

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“You’re thinking it’s one of them,” he said.

“Well, maybe,” I said.

The old guy shrugged. “Stands to reason, I guess.”

“Here.” I held up my phone, letting him see the image. “Do you recognize the face?”

Gus stared at the little screen. “I don’t know him, sorry.”

I mentioned the name. “He moved to Sweetgrass six months before Kaylee was murdered,” I said. “And he has a record of hurting women, with time served on two different charges.”

“Let me see him again.”

“Sure.”

Gus studied the image. Then he said, “God. It might be.”

“There is a resemblance,” I said.

“And in the night, across the water like that—”

“With those fancy night goggles,” I interrupted.

“Well, I’ll warn you about something.” He handed back the phone. “The sheriff had me on a couple of matters. Nothing real big and nothing was charged, so there wasn’t any plea bargain. But when I said I was pretty sure who I saw drowning that van, they told me that ‘pretty sure’ wasn’t good enough. They had the little shit ready to confess, if I could just claim to be cold sober sure about what I had seen.”

“Except Elijah didn’t confess,” I said.

“For good reason, it seems.” Gus paused, looking at the river. “Have you told anybody else about this fellow?”

“Not yet.”

“So what are you going to do, Shawn?”

“I’m taking a leave of absence from work, to keep my soul from killing itself. For now, I want to learn what I can around town.”

“Okay.”

“That and stay close to my father.”

“Yeah, I heard he wasn’t doing great.”

“Oh, he’s holding steady for now, mostly.”

The old man looked at me, nothing but sympathetic. “I remember your dad bringing you here. Just after you caught the camera bug, you wanted to photograph wildlife, and he hired me for a day to show you around.”

“This time of year, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe so,” he said.

“I still have that hawk.”

He smiled, remembering the moment.

“Jeremy went with us,” I said.

“His mother needed a sitter, I guess.”

“Is your boy overseas now?”

“Not anymore. He’s retired from that mercenary work.” Gus shrugged, saying, “He inherited his mom’s place in town.”

“Maybe I’ll see Jeremy.”

“He’d love seeing you, I know.”

I turned to leave. The boy was still walking the same circle on the sand, and for no reason but curiosity, I asked, “Who is he?”

“My grandson,” Gus said.

“So what’s he doing?” I asked.

Gus shook his head and spat juice at the ground beside us, and he said, “With that child, I really, really don’t know.”

He sits alone with portraits of his dead brothers. Enough time has passed to pro-

duce a respectable head of hair, cut in a style appropriate for today. He wears a good suit but nothing too fine—the uniform of a politician ready to greet Wall Street executives or parishioners in a Harlem church. There is quite a lot of talk about him running for his old Senate seat. Many possible avenues are open to him. Yet the man sitting for the photograph seems immune to ceaseless ambition. In his lap rests an authoritative history of the last fifty years—a thick book that has never been opened, and for all intents and purposes has never been noticed—while in his hand rests a head that has lived more history than could be believed.

I saw her at the far end of the pasta aisle. Noticing her first, I was able to make a graceful retreat. Nobody needed to be embarrassed or uncomfortable, I told myself. Then I pared down my grocery list, throwing two frozen lasagnas into the cart before steering toward the express lane.

I was loading the belt when someone rolled in behind me. A smoker's hack warned me, but I looked anyway. What were the odds? Elijah's mother was focused on the tabloids. She looked older and she looked younger. Her hair was growing out gray, but her weight was down and maybe she was sleeping through the night. Turning away, I concentrated on paying and throwing my purchases into sacks. For no good reason, I was certain that I hadn't been seen, and then the cashier asked, "Ma'am, what's wrong?"

A second voice said, "Shawn."

I couldn't tell if she was surprised to see me. But her tone surprised me—emotions playing out beneath a remarkably steady voice.

For the first time in my life, I said, "Hello, Gloria."

The cashier decided nothing was wrong. She swiped the customer's groceries, and Gloria watched me dropping sacks into my cart. Into the calm, I threw out a cliché. "All the best," I managed.

And again, she said, "Shawn."

Drop a camera in my hands, and I am fearless. But not then, not trapped in those agonizing, banal circumstances.

"Wait a minute, Shawn." Joining me on the open floor, she seemed ready to grab my hand. Nerves twisted inside both of us, and I made the obvious assumptions about grief and blame, hers and ours both. But then she steered our conversation in an entirely unexpected direction.

"You take pictures of the rebirths, don't you?"

"I have been," I said.

"I've heard that you know Mr. Tran fairly well. Is that right?"

A nod seemed good enough.

"Maybe you know the answer then," she continued. "Who flips the switch on the Elysium Chamber?"

"Pardon me?"

"Because there has to be an executioner. Am I right?"

"Each state hires a person, yes."

"Ma'am," the cashier called out. "You need to pay, ma'am."

But Gloria wasn't wasting this moment. She touched me, her cool hand gripping my forearm, and she asked, "Is there any way to find out who killed my son?"

"His identity is kept secret," I said thankfully.

Once again, with a disapproving voice, the cashier said, "Ma'am."

"Why do you want to know?" I asked.

Gloria hesitated, just for a moment. Then with an odd sick yet almost joyful smile, she said, "Murder is murder. And what if an executioner someday, for some good reason, ended up inside an Elysium?"

* * *

A swift camera is pre-positioned, connected to banks of strobe lights that throw their glare at the piece of floor where a man once died. This is the machinery that can catch a bullet slicing through a playing card. This is precision applied to impossibly tiny moments. Three miles away, an Elysium is turning a criminal into nothingness, and the strobe lights fire and fire and fire, the camera absorbing thousands of precise images of an old oak floor and nothing else—

He looked like Elijah, not just in the face and build but also in the way that he moved, with a twisting careless gait that revealed an absence of grace. I sat in my car at the end of the block, watching him walking away from his car. The man lived alone in the basement of a triplex, entering through the side door. Maybe he looked my way, but not so that I noticed. Then he was gone and a woman appeared from the house beside me, coming across her grass to see what I was about.

I rolled down the passenger window.

She looked at me and at the two cameras on the seat. Scared enough to be brave, she asked, “Do you know how much you’re freaking my kids out, sitting out here like this?”

“I don’t want anybody scared,” I said.

“I know who you are,” she said, making that sound like a threat. “But I don’t see why you care about us.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“Why are you here?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ll go away.”

“Would you, please?”

My quarry had vanished. I drove past his house and went to the Manor, stopping in for a quick visit with my parents. Dad had his own quarters now, needing more help than any loving wife could deliver. I saw Dad and then I tracked down Mom after yoga, and noticing the time, I offered some excuse, escaping to the Sidecar Bar in the shadow of the old grain elevator.

My boy showed ten minutes later, which was his usual time.

Raising hackles or spreading terror weren’t my goals. I had a couple of favorite booths near the front, and he always sat in back with the pool tables, sharing the air with the same three or four buddies. The buddies were aware of me, and sometimes they studied me, discussing what I might mean. But the object of my devotion acted oblivious to my existence, which might or might not be a sign of guilt.

My boy played pool and drank, and I ate some dinner, nursing my one beer until the waitress looked pissed. So I bought a second beer and gave her ten dollars for nothing, watching my boy miss an easy shot and laugh it off, looking everywhere but at me.

“Seat taken?”

I still knew the voice. I was thinking, “Jeremy,” before looking up. “How are things, Jeremy?”

“Things are spectacular,” he said, dropping onto the hard wood bench across from me. He was a bigger version of his father, powerful shoulders filling up the gray sweatshirt. But the face was more like his mother, who I saw a thousand times in my life and barely remembered now—a stern handsome face topped with red and gray hair.

“Heard you were in town,” he said.

“Seeing my parents,” I said.

He cranked his neck, looking around the room. “Yeah, where are your folks? I’d like to pay my respects.”

I didn't react.

He laughed for both of us. That laugh used to be his finest feature—a pleasant, warm, joyous sound that could last for hours, or so it seemed. But that part of Jeremy had changed. The retired soldier fell silent, staring at my face until I looked back at him. Then he threw his gaze out the window, idly watching a pickup truck roll past.

"Talk to your dad?" I asked.

"Now and again."

"I did too," I said.

"He mentioned that. You came to see him. A couple weeks ago, I guess."

I didn't say anything.

My silence was worth another try at laughing. This attempt went longer and made me unhappy. I couldn't explain why, but I felt gray and sorry now.

"Yeah, my dad screwed up," said Jeremy.

"Happens," I said.

"I don't know why that fucking defense attorney didn't test his eyes. You know, they aren't what they used to be. The guy's been in the sun all his life, making cataracts. And those damn goggles don't work miracles."

"Everybody knew the kid was guilty," I said.

Jeremy nodded. "Yeah, there's that."

"Anyway," I said.

He watched for traffic.

"Remember the hawk?" I asked.

"What hawk?"

"I came out to your dad's place one day. I was with my dad and my new camera, and the four of us went out on a little safari. I got a great shot of a red-tail sitting on a dead branch."

"How old were we?"

"I was thirteen."

Jeremy said nothing.

"And I took some pictures of you," I said.

The laugh exploded, and he asked, "Why the hell why?"

"Don't know. Your face interested me, I guess."

He kept laughing.

I shrugged. "The pictures are somewhere. That's the advantage of a film camera—you can stick ten thousand negatives into a file drawer, and thirty years later, they're still there, waiting patiently for you."

He shifted against the wood.

"Maybe I should dig them out," I said. "Send you some prints."

"No need," Jeremy said.

"No trouble," I said.

"Well, if you want. Thanks."

Then my loyal waitress arrived, asking my buddy, "And what would you like to order?"

"Get a beer," I advised. "I'll even buy."

"Tempting," he said.

My waitress gave me a hopeful wink.

But then Jeremy told her, "No, sorry. I just remembered something that has to be done."

"Later," I told him.

"Guaranteed," he said, pulling himself free of the booth.

"How about you?" she asked me.

“Not quite yet,” I said.

Jeremy was out the door, walking down the block and gone.

I waved my girl back. “Does that fellow ever come in here?”

“I’ve seen him around town,” she said. “But not in here, no.”

I gave her another ten, wanting to spoil her. Then I went to my car and dug into a big fireproof box that I kept under lock and key. There were several files, each marked with different initials. In the biggest file were records pilfered from the US Army. I knew them by heart, but sitting behind the wheel, I read them all over again, wondering when my hands started to shake and hoping the son of a bitch never noticed.

The oak floor is empty, and empty, and empty, but the image stolen from the next instant shows a man’s living face, composed and unblemished, with a closed mouth but the green eyes already open.

The face emerged too swiftly to ever be halfway real.

He is never halfway nothing.

“Thanks for coming,” Mitch said.

We were standing at his front door. The man wanted my hand, and I made some agreeable sounds while we shook. Then our hands dropped, and when he didn’t speak, I said, “You mentioned something about helping.”

“Well, I hope you can,” he allowed.

“What’s wrong?”

Again, he kept quiet, looking at me over the tops of his glasses.

“I thought she was on medication,” I said.

He waved a hand. “This isn’t the depression. This is something else.”

I waited.

“She wants to find the killer.” Mitch sighed. “And of course we all want that. Of course, of course.”

“What did Lauren do?”

“My youngest.”

“Jackson?”

“There’s no evidence. Not a bit.” The old man needed a breath, wiping at his mouth with his hand. “But Lauren is claiming that when Kaylee was abandoned, she called her stepbrother for help. Then my son drove out to find her, and that’s when he kidnapped her, probably to rape her, but things went from wrong to awful and he cut her up to make it look like a crazy serial murderer.”

“Where did this come from?” I asked.

“She claims that her stepson always had feelings for Kaylee.”

I couldn’t react, except for remembering countless little impressions that made it seem less than impossible. But from idle maybes to murder?

“There’s no record of the cellphone call, by the way. But Lauren has explanations. For everything, she has a story.”

“Shit,” I said.

“She is not depressed,” Mitch repeated. “The woman’s paranoid and furious, and ugly about everything and everyone.”

“Okay.”

“I’d really like you to talk to her, Shawn. Reason with her, if you can.”

“I plan to.”

And on that note, he walked out the door, aiming for the Mercedes.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve been living at the lake house,” he said wearily. “She was in the master bedroom the last I saw her.”

But Lauren wasn't there. I found her in Kaylee's room, sitting on the edge of the bed, nothing on but a reading light that served no function but to show an austere, eerily serene face. I expected red eyes and a pile of spent tissues, but the woman had no time to waste on tears. She looked at me for no purpose but to read my emotions, and turning her thoughts inward, she said, "You look like hell, Shawn. Are you sleeping?"

"Four hours a night."

Her feet stretched out to touch the floor. I sat beside her, and she moved grudgingly, putting another six inches between us. Then with a special tone, she said, "It probably was a mistake, accusing Jackson."

I wanted to speak, to find a perfect combination of words and tone that would make this mess more bearable. But my heart slipped in a different direction. "So who are you going to accuse next?"

"I haven't decided," she said.

We sat some more, and then I got up.

"Did Mitch call you, or did you just happen by?" she asked.

"Does it matter?"

She looked at me and then looked down. "You know what scares me most, Shawn? Worse than anything, what really terrifies me? This was a random event. Some nameless monster did this horrible thing. Maybe he was an Australian tourist. Now he's back home and arrested, and he's being tried today for a different murder, and in another two months, in the middle of our winter, he's going to be executed. That's what makes me sick. We have no idea that somewhere in the world this awful man is going to die with his secret, and our girl is suddenly naked in the snow and nobody is there to help."

I thought I had reached the point where I couldn't feel any worse, and then that happened. There's always something worse waiting.

"Help me look," she said.

"I'm not the police," I said.

"Those goddamn clowns," she said. "They couldn't get it right the first time, when there was evidence."

True enough. But I had never been this angry with Lauren, not even in our most miserable night while married, which was why I decided to throw the very worst at her.

"Maybe they don't all come back," I said.

She stared at me, summoning the courage to ask, "What do you mean?"

"Maybe every soul gets the choice. And maybe a few of them are happier wherever they are, and they don't want to be alive again."

I didn't believe that.

And I doubt if Lauren bought it either. But that didn't stop her from screaming, pulling her knees to her mouth and curling up on a mattress cover that was washed every two weeks, the same as always.

This is the better, truer picture: Millie sits in the backyard with the last shreds of thistle and crabgrass. She has a tablet and a beer and a fine easy smile, and she enjoys my old plastic Adirondack chair while the autumn sun plays across her brown face. One hand is fiddling with the angle of the screen, fighting the glare. She wears clothes suitable for no occasion—rundown ragged secondhand clothes that nobody would wear for any task except sitting in her boyfriend's backyard with his beer and her tablet. She smiles. She probably senses the camera, but nothing about her is posed or self-conscious. Give her a shout, and she might throw out a good smile or a fetching wink. That would make a better picture. There is no composition to this scene, nothing

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that a chimp armed with a digital camera couldn't achieve one hundred times out of a hundred. But that's the point. This is life, graceless and badly organized and thoroughly indifferent to everything but the instant just before and the instant that still hasn't quite been.

I came into the townhouse and put my bags where they wanted to rest, and I put myself where I could catch some rest. A full day in Sweetgrass ended with my side trip to Lauren's. I felt entitled to sit for a while. Then I tipped back my head, calling out, "Millie."

Her visit began last week. She drove fourteen hours, half that time spent talking to me on the phone, and then she arrived and we stopped talking until the next day. This was an experiment, and at least on my part, the experiment began with strong reservations. But nobody seemed especially disappointed with the results. I took her out to the Manor to meet my parents. Two nights later, I brought Mom to town for dinner, and the girls ended up at my kitchen table, calculating that one of them was seven months older than the other. I let Millie keep her Miata in the garage, and she'd already met all of my neighbors, including people I didn't know yet. She even had several clients—locals who knew her blog and thought she might help them with the dead in their lives. A new life was accreting around us, and nobody was fighting it. But for the time being, Millie was my guest and under no obligation to answer my shout, much less be waiting when I crawled home from a painful visit with my ex-wife.

I sat in the dark for another few minutes.

No Millie sounds.

I checked the garage. Her car was gone, implying a client or a shopping jaunt. Sometimes there was a note on the kitchen table or the refrigerator. Neither was true tonight. I tried calling her but got pushed to her voice mail right away. She was probably with a client, I decided, feelings of nervousness coming to me, but no impending doom. I began an aimless search for worthy leftovers, and with the questionable lasagna heated to a blistering temperature, I took my meal into the basement, down where I kept my professional life—a semi-modern studio full of camera equipment and computers, file cabinets and two darkrooms, digital as well as old-school.

The lock box was set on the big worktable, which wasn't where it belonged. I had two bites of noodles and cheese, burning my tongue as a consequence. We had gone over this mess several times, and I wasn't worried about Millie, except then I realized that the box had been left unlocked, which was sloppy, and suddenly I was filled with a bracing dose of anger.

Millie was many fine things, but she wasn't an organized soul.

Some of the files were barely touched, probably opened and closed and then set aside. Four men's records were out of order, including police reports about the pool-playing youngster in the triplex. But Jeremy's file was a shambles. Millie must have set every piece of paper on the tabletop, files and credit reports, personal clutter and a string of printouts marking unsolved murders within a hundred miles of his roving residencies. Sometimes she circled my notes, sometimes she added her own. This was no easy project, pulling order back into the mess, and I realized that her entire day had been invested in piecing together the man's life and timeline.

I tried her phone again.

Again, I was piped into voice mail.

She was still helping her client. I told myself. With purpose, I started to reorganize the records, and then I shut and locked the lid and walked the box back to its shelf, and looking at the table again, I saw the note she left tucked out of sight. She knew

me. I would move the box before I went anywhere. The bigger assumption was that I could read that sloppy script:

"I doubt it's your old buddy, but I want to check things out. Fish for impressions, see what I can see, but not tell anybody too much."

"Don't worry, darling. I'll be careful."

"Or I'll screw up, and you'll have to bring me back from the dead again."

"Ha-ha."

"Love,"

"Millie"

The boy wears shorts and muddy boots and a blood-speckled T-shirt. Behind him is a cooler and canvas sack. One hand holds a small hunting knife, blood and feathers clinging to the blade. Two more knives ride the belt—a Bowie knife for cleaning bear carcasses and a short machete, always ready for sudden eruptions of jungle.

Thirteen-year-old males are like this. Nothing about the scene is alarming. The red-haired boy smiles at the camera, his expression pleasant, open, almost sweet. What unsettles is what happens after the camera is put away: The boy is supposed to be cleaning game. Pulling the last goose from the sack, he discovers that the bird is still alive, one wing broken but those black eyes staring at its captors. The knife-boy will wink at his companion, an occasional friend. "Watch me carve the goose," he says. Then he uses the bright tip of the hunting knife, working the blade into one part of the miserable body after another. Then his father knocks him to the ground, shouting at him, "Why are you doing that, you don't do that, not to some creature that's suffering...!"

It is an uncomfortable, memorable moment. But more alarming is Jeremy's reaction: A steady fearless giggle that is so odd and so unembarrassed that the other boy recoils when he thinks of that moment thirty years later.

I had a plan. I would call the sheriff's office or the State Patrol while driving out to Sweetgrass. A few reasonable sentences delivered with a worried, rational voice would launch the search for a young woman and her out-of-state Miata. Except I wasn't sure what to tell authorities and what they might believe. Conjecture and fear didn't make evidence. Coincidences and long-ago impressions didn't mean a killer. I rehearsed my speech until I sounded crazy even to myself, and by then I was past the city limits, racing on the highway.

Deciding not to call made me feel a little better. I relaxed and drove slower while thinking hard about what I would say to Millie when I finally found her. Then I tried her phone and got the voice mail, which made me scared and angry once again. I edged near ninety, and the car shook, and I pulled over on the shoulder half a mile short of the turnoff where my daughter's life was ruined. Before leaving the house, I had pulled out the page full of important Jeremy Castor numbers: Address and license plates, insurance accounts and two listed cell phones. The first number was disconnected, I discovered, which made the second call easier. He wouldn't be there.

Jeremy picked up. "Yeah?"

"Did you kill her?" I asked.

Both of us were surprised. We reacted with silence, extended and gray, and then one throat got cleared and he said, "Shawn."

He said, "What are you talking about?"

I pulled back out onto the road. "Did you kill her?"

"Kaylee," he said. "You're talking about Kaylee."

I slid past the turnoff. "Did you?"

"No." Then he said it again, louder. "No."

A roadside sign promised Sweetgrass in five miles, and I hit a pace that would

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surely win me a high speed chase. Not that spinning red lights was my plan, but the prospect had its appeal.

“What are you thinking, Shawn?”

“I found an old photograph,” I said. “You’re torturing some goose with this fucking big knife.”

“Okay,” he said.

I didn’t talk.

“You think that means something,” he said.

“Are you alone?” I asked.

He said, “Yeah.”

“What’d you do tonight?”

He didn’t answer.

I avoided Millie. I didn’t want her added to the mess.

“About the goose,” he said. “Kids do shit.”

“People do shit.”

“Where are you?” he asked.

“Where are you?”

“Is this a game, Shawn?”

Maybe it was.

“Because I like games. Except I need the rules first.”

Flat and slow, I said, “You killed Kaylee.”

“I didn’t.”

“And other girls too.”

Nothing.

“Young and small and pretty. Afghan girls were murdered. And that German teenager. And you got bounced around as a hired gun, all those places and I don’t know how many petite sweet girls were sliced up.”

“Shawn,” he said.

Houses were clustered near the highway, and I touched the brakes.

“People die everywhere, for all sorts of reasons,” he said, “and I was stationed in big busy places full of dying people. These are coincidences. Flukes. But even if I was what you think I am . . . and goddammit, I’m not . . . there isn’t a hunter who wants to hunt in his own backyard.”

His reasoning was cold and pragmatic, and it was solid.

Suddenly I had nothing.

“So what are you going to do, Shawn? You going to tell the cops your story? Because maybe you should. You should. I don’t want the bother, believe me, but if this shuts you up, good.”

I was under the speed limit finally.

“Are you there?” he asked.

“Your own backyard,” I muttered.

“What’s that?”

“The Campbells,” I said.

Jeremy didn’t talk, and then he did.

He asked, “Who are the Campbells?”

“A farm couple,” I said. “Police thought they had the man. They said he shot them to steal their truck. But I remember the case, the trial. The defendant claimed that he never went inside the house, and his girlfriend didn’t either. He didn’t know anything about murders. He found the keys on the dash, in plain view, and the couple drove two hundred miles before getting caught.”

“I don’t remember this,” Jeremy said.

“We were in high school. Hartsburg is twelve, fourteen miles away, and it was huge

news that summer, and you should remember. Nice people the same age as my folks, and they had two daughters, fifteen months apart, pretty and little and very sad in those photographs that got run in the paper."

"This is stupid," he said.

Until a minute ago, I didn't imagine this possibility. And now it was the deepest, most compelling belief in my life.

"Idiotic," he said.

"Except every hunter starts in his backyard," I said. "And that's what you did, Jeremy. You assumed the girls would be home, and maybe shooting the parents was always planned. Or maybe you thought you'd climb through a window and gag the girls and tie them down, and nobody would suspect a thing. But the girls got lucky. They were gone for the night, and a couple of car thieves got all the bad luck in the world."

Jeremy was quiet.

"The police still have evidence," I said. "Forensics files are being torn into right now, using the latest and best. Because the state is trying to pin that girlfriend with a double homicide, making something good come out of their old mistakes. But what if somebody offers a new name, pointing them at a person with new blood and hair and fingerprints? Is that something you want aired, just to shut me up?"

"Okay," he said. "What do you want, Shawn?"

"Is she still alive?"

There was a pause. "Is who alive?"

"Millie," I said.

"Millie? Yeah, for the moment, yeah."

"I want Millie. Alive."

"No police."

"Fine," I said.

He moved the phone against his face. "Where are you?"

"Passing the grain elevator."

"All right," he said. "Drive to the city park, where the creek comes in. Come alone, and I'll bring you Millie."

I didn't answer immediately.

"Hey, and Shawn. Just so you know, I didn't kill your daughter."

"How soon?" I asked.

And he said, "Now's as good of a time as any."

The situation is formal, posed. Celebrating twenty years of marriage, the couple is dressed for dinner. Invisible daughters and friends have ordered them to stand in front of the house. Nice clothes make them uncomfortable, and the sun is a problem. They squint and smile painfully, and neither person looks happy. But the saving details are his left hand and her right. The hands cling to one another with a natural, unconscious ease. This is marriage. Here stands a partnership ready to suffer any misery, well-intended or not. "Smile for the camera," someone has probably shouted, but the real joy is captured in the rough fingers and palm of a farmer desperately cradling the soft pale hand of his bride.

I dialed 911 and told the operator where I was and that a man was trying to kill me. "Please, please hurry," I said.

I hung up as I pulled into the park.

Nobody else was visible.

I turned off my headlights and stopped in the parking lot where I could see the river, dark and a little rough under the stars, and the reflected glow of distant lamps.

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Leaving my window halfway down, I turned off the engine, making the world darker and louder. I listened for a second car, for any engine. Nothing. Water was moving over sand, which is one of the finest sounds in nature, and another ninety seconds passed without incident.

My phone rang.

I expected an operator checking up on the crime victim.

It wasn't.

"Hello?" I managed.

"Where are you?" Millie asked.

"Waiting for you," I said.

"Well, you're not at home," she said.

"Are you?"

"I got here ten minutes ago."

"I thought you were in Sweetgrass," I said, using a complaining tone, as if this was bad news.

"You found my note," she said, victorious.

"Did you meet with Jeremy?"

"He wasn't home, and I couldn't figure out how to cross paths with him. You know, and keep things looking natural."

I said, "Shit."

"So I talked to a couple of his neighbors. Then I went to his father's house, thinking maybe he was there. But it was just Gus. So I told him that I was a rich woman and wanted to buy up some riverfront ground, and he thought it was fun to string me along for better than an hour."

"You're all right," I said.

"I'm fine."

"I thought you weren't."

"I told you in the note. I was going to be careful."

I sighed once, and again.

She said, "Shawn."

Then I saw something out on the river, some shape that was different and wrong, and I remembered back to when I saw that kid's ball floating on the eddy, and all at once I was thinking that this meant something and I didn't know what but maybe I should do something quick. . . .

The condemned man stands before a brand new Elysium. A mass murderer with nearly ninety souls riding his shoulders, he shows the cumulative effects of enforced bed rest, looking shrunken and pale with his red hair turned nearly white. Yet he seems satisfied and even a little smug, staring at the photographer, smiling at the world, daring everyone to find the fear in this infamous face.

The photographer took this assignment for many good reasons—irony and justice and the paycheck as well as the bankable notoriety. And to a lesser degree, Simon Foster came here because he knows one of the killer's victims, and he can be absolutely certain that the dead man will buy him a beer when he returns to the realm where all things are temporary.

First thoughts should be important.

My first thought was that the asphalt was hot and scratchy, and my bare butt and back weren't happy with their circumstances.

I started to sit up.

A man said, "Easy, sir. Easy."

Then Millie said my name.

There was no clean, clear point when I knew what had happened. I had been dead and now I wasn't, and I understood that before I took my first breath. I went into death being tired and scared, but glad for Millie, and that's how I felt then. My first breath came before I was sitting up. It was night and warmer than before. A circular curtain was hanging around me. Millie said, "It's me," while another man made noise about someone doing some critical chore, and then a stranger's hand dropped on my shoulder, from behind, followed by his voice saying, "Don't worry, sir. You are safe."

Nobody is safe; why didn't people accept that?

"Give him the robe," the first man barked.

Then Millie slipped past the curtain, dropping to her knees in front of me. A bathrobe appeared from my left. I ignored it. I touched the top of my head, enjoying the perfectly slick scalp. Then wanting my feet under me, I began to stand up, and she offered a cautious hand.

I ignored that too.

"He shot me," I guessed.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the forehead."

"Well," I muttered. "That was kind of him."

Clothes appeared—a summer wardrobe culled from my own closet. I recognized the slacks. I never liked them.

Two people came at me with yogurt and degrees in psychology. One man said my name twice, and when I looked at him, he said, "You know what's happening. You understand."

I knew something was wrong, but I couldn't tell what.

Millie was next to me, holding a pair of shorts. "Cover up first," she said. "Then ask."

I pulled them on, and she dropped my favorite sandals on the asphalt, and while shoving my feet into the familiar leather, I said, "Kaylee."

"We haven't heard," she said.

Several other voices repeated her non-news.

"Lauren?"

"At the sandpit, waiting."

It was a warm night, but I was chilled. I kicked through the clothes pile, looking for a worthy shirt.

"Look at me," Millie said.

I thought I had been. But this time I studied her face, fighting the glare of temporary lights standing around the parking lot. A multitude of little details played toward one conclusion, but coming back to life was much, much easier than coming to terms with time.

Another familiar voice called to me.

Gordon Tran had come through the curtain. Time had been worse on his face than on Millie's.

I asked him, "How long?"

I turned to her and said, "This isn't next summer."

The psychologists tried to soothe the patient, but Millie ignored them. "No, this isn't," she said.

Shit.

Then she helped drag the shirt over my head, and when I couldn't see anything, she pushed her mouth into my ear, saying, "Five years, nine months."

I said, "Shit."

I asked, "Why?"

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“Jeremy ran.” Millie brought my face into the open, and with a simple calm voice, she told me, “He always had escape plans, apparently. He disguised himself and got to Canada under an assumed identity, and then he was found and nearly caught. But the Mounties might have killed him. That’s why they let him slip free, and he returned to the US for another three years.”

I wanted to fall down but didn’t. “So who caught him?” I asked.

“Jeremy turned himself in. He said that he was tired of running.”

“Six years,” I said.

Millie stood close, waiting.

Once more, I said, “Kaylee.”

A man was talking into his hand, Secret Service style. “No news yet, sir. But they are searching.”

With two fingers, Millie touched my mouth.

“What?”

“Jeremy never helped anybody,” she said. “He never gave details about people killed or where to look. But he was adamant. To the end, he said that he wasn’t responsible for Kaylee’s death.”

A leader gave orders somewhere in the crowd. Down came one long portion of the curtain, and more strangers pushed close, wanting to help me toward some important, still invisible destination.

“My father,” I said.

“He died five years ago, Shawn.”

I grabbed up her left hand, and a perfectly reasonable, perfectly awful possibility offered itself to me.

Reading my eyes, she said, “No ring. And no boyfriend either.”

I tried to laugh. “You were waiting for me, I guess.”

“We can talk about that,” she said, her bittersweet smile implying much.

I said, “Mom.”

“Shawn,” she said, in that certain way.

I said, “But she was supposed to make ninety.”

Millie walked with me. Everybody else parted before us, revealing a gazebo made from fabric and carbon poles. A man of some notoriety was expected, and somebody who knew a few things about the guest had put his favorite beer on ice, and set between healthy servings of yogurt was a slab of lasagna and a piece of apple pie.

Two favorite cameras were waiting inside their bags.

I sat in an empty chair.

The air was filled with the rattle of helicopters sweeping over the countryside.

Again, “Kaylee?”

Different people said, “No news.”

Then a voice from far away shouted, “The Campbells are back!”

An older, quieter Gordon sat across from me.

Millie sat on my left and watched while I ate nothing. I picked up a beer and looked it over and then set it back into the ice. “How’s Lauren?”

“Divorced.”

“Mitch?”

“Remarried, with a kid on the way.”

I looked straight ahead. “How are you, Gordon?”

The Texan drawl said, “Just great.” But the Vietnamese face seemed less than sure about those two bold words.

“Elysiums,” I said.

He dropped his gaze, just for a moment.

Millie touched my knee, bringing my attention back to her. “There’ve been a lot of

changes. Every country has them. Every state has them. But there were too many mistakes in the early going, and we're a lot more careful about using them now."

"Any new technology," Gordon began.

"Complications," she said. Then she bent close, saying, "Murder-suicides. Mercy killings. You can imagine."

Better than I ever thought possible.

"Anyway," Gordon said. "I'm glad you're back again, Shawn. I needed to be here. I wanted to tell you before anyone else. Your photographs are very popular, huge sellers, and not just because your name and situation are in the news."

I felt like having the apple pie now.

I was concentrating on my third bite when one of the helicopters dropped low, landing in the darkness down by the river. I assumed some kind of official visitor. I never dreamed that I would see Kaylee running up through the crowd, but then I glanced up and saw that small frame hurrying and how people scattered around her. The elation was pure, not a trace of doubt ruining that trick of light and hope; and then Kaylee turned into a woman who looked much, much older than her years.

Lauren got down low to study at my face.

"Hey," I said.

"We're searching," she told me. "Come help me look."

"I'm comfortable here," I said.

She jumped up, apparently ready to slap me.

Millie grabbed up both of my hands. My strong sense was that the two women had acquired a history, most of it ugly.

"What if it wasn't Jeremy?" I asked.

Lauren fought with tears and any residual weakness. Looking off into the sky, she said, "Then we'll find the right person."

"What if we don't know for sure?"

"We find out."

I didn't understand.

Lauren noticed Gordon, and then she knelt down a second time. As if nobody else was present, she told me, "There are Elysiums overseas. You buy their use."

"Buy their use?" I still didn't understand.

"For special situations," she said.

Gordon chose that moment to stand and walk away.

Millie tugged at my hands. But she spoke to Lauren, using a rancid voice that I had never heard from her before.

"You need to get out of here, lady," she said. "Your soul is so close to dead."

A bare footprint on bare sand. Young, with a high arch, and so fresh that the eye can see where the damp grains are still clinging together, piled up by the roll and push of the heel and the ball.

Here stood one of the great mysteries of life.

Gus.

But at least the man had grown older, which meant that time had meaning even to that sack of nicotine and bones. There were only two boats riding the shoreline and neither looked like an old man's toy. A red-haired teenager was sitting on the bank, reading from some kind of paper-thin tablet. If he noticed me, he didn't let on. I considered walked down to see his face, and then thankfully, I turned to Gus, saying, "I know."

The ancient eyes weren't clear anymore, and they were scared.

"His dad was showing him how," I said. "For some reason Jeremy decided that was

the night to introduce his kid to what a knife and patience and no sense of remorse can accomplish. So he found a girl, a girl he didn't know, and that's where it started."

Gus tried to talk and then couldn't.

I began to tell him something else that he already knew.

Then the old man interrupted, saying, "Jeremy got crazy whenever he drank. Always did. And I don't know what else went into that business . . . but yeah, basically, that's the way it was explained to me."

"Did you actually see the van?" My voice was thick, slow.

"I was running my nets, like I testified," he said. "But the van was already sunk when I got there. Someone was crying, and I left the river and found my grandson on the sand, and Jeremy, and Kaylee was already dead. About that, Shawn, you've got to believe me."

"And you testified."

"For every reason you can think of, yeah."

"Protecting your family," I started.

"That kid was the reason," he said.

I didn't talk.

"About Jeremy . . . well, I knew he had troubles. Maybe there was a girl or two, here and there. But I never imagined people would be popping back to life on four continents. How could you imagine that about your own?"

"The killing cut," I said.

Gus took a tiny step back.

"Across the throat, to put Kaylee out of her misery," I said.

"He was seven, Shawn. Seven years old. And he felt sorry enough for the girl to end the suffering."

"And what did his drunken father do about that?"

"Hit him. Some."

I looked down at the reading boy, older than seven by a long ways. "Just tell me. Is he a good boy?"

"He's a kid, so not always. No."

"He lives here now?"

"Until I die. Then there's an aunt and a trust fund, and nobody can say anything for certain after that."

I watched the back of the boy's head.

With a quiet, careful voice, Gus asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to walk back down the road and get into my girlfriend's car, and then we'll drive away. That's about all I can handle for now."

He watched me, wanting to believe.

"But you need to talk to him," I said. "You need to warn him. I'll be watching him, and if he ever stumbles, I'll come back for him."

"Fair," Gus said.

I had no idea what was fair. "And you need to tell him this for me: He can live any good life. It's all up to him. But when he's old and spent, he needs to find an Elysium and tell people the truth. I don't care if it's two hundred years from now and he's dying up on Mars. He needs to become nothing, and my daughter gets her chance."

We were both crying.

"Is that fair enough?" I asked.

"More than," Gus allowed.

"For Kaylee, I mean." I genuinely wanted the man's advice. "Dropping her into some distant future, nobody around that she knows, much less loves. Is that too much to demand from a fifteen-year-old kid?"

"Everything is tough," Gus said, shrugging hard. "Except for being nothing, and who wants to be that way?"

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RULE 34**By Charles Stross****Ace, \$25.95 (hc)****ISBN: 978-0-441-02034-8**

Set a few years later than Stross's *Halting State*, this is another near-future police procedural set in Edinburgh. The plot follows three main characters in alternating chapters. It starts when Liz Kavanaugh, a detective inspector whose career has been short-circuited by political repercussions from a previous case, is called to respond to a particularly ugly murder; the victim was connected to a complicated and bizarre sex toy that has malfunctioned, causing a fatal heart attack. More disturbing to Liz, the victim turns out to be an ex-con she helped to send up on internet crime charges.

Meanwhile, Anwar, an ex-con with a record of credit card email fraud, is visiting a pub—a no-no for the devout Muslim he purports to be. But his visit has a purpose beyond downing a pint or two (though he does that, too); he's meeting a contact who says he can get Anwar a legitimate job. That will please both his probation officer and his family. Anwar has a young daughter and numerous relatives and in-laws who will benefit from a reliable income stream.

The third main character is a nasty sort, a small-time criminal who's in major trouble. The Toymaker, as he's referred to, has taken a contract to manufacture some very shady goods for an underworld client. Unfortunately, his quality control goes seriously haywire, and as the deadline nears, he finds himself without a deliverable product. He makes a couple of increasingly desperate attempts to bail himself out, but nothing works. He's deep in hock to one of the biggest of the bad guys, and he's going to have to pay off his debt some way.

These three characters' plotlines begin to intersect. Liz uncovers another murder that appears to have a very similar MO, and a consulting detective called in from the continent quickly identifies several more. Meanwhile, Anwar's new job is as Scottish representative of a former-Soviet splinter republic, and the main business appears to be distributing samples of bread flour—though Anwar strongly suspects it's something else entirely. And the Toymaker's career takes an unexpected turn, as he becomes a sort of traveling salesman—except he also appears to have a sideline as a hitman for the mob.

Stross builds a stark near-future world around these three characters, briefly switching the viewpoint to a couple of extras who come in at key moments to let us know what's happening elsewhere. The dialogue is mostly street-level Scots, with plentiful profanity and slang that some American readers may find tough going. Some readers may also be put off by the second person narrative voice. But the pull of the plot is likely to make most readers keep going. Hang in there!

Rule 34 is an edgy, thought-provoking novel by one of our most consistently inventive authors.

SOFT APOCALYPSE**By Will McIntosh****Night Shade, \$14.99 (tp)****ISBN: 978-1-59780-276-5**

McIntosh offers a near-future post-apocalyptic novel, but instead of a sudden exchange of nukes blasting society back into the stone age, the disaster crippling society is an economic crisis that escalates out of control. Sound familiar? It should. . . .

We meet the narrator, Jasper, as he

travels with a group of the new under-class of the permanently unemployed, looking for odd jobs to help bring them their next meal. These new “gypsies,” as the town dwellers call them, are educated, brought up in better circumstances. The crisis evidently had an abrupt start in the recent past; many characters remember a comfortable, middle-class childhood before things fell apart. Now even the odd jobs are few and far between. Jasper’s group of “gypsies” barter with other groups of nomadic job-seekers, trying to stay out of the eyes of the local law, which sees them as undesirables to be gotten rid of by whatever means necessary.

The details of the economic collapse are never laid out, but easy enough to extrapolate from today’s headlines. McIntosh is more interested in the consequences, notably the conversion of the US into something like a third-world society with sharp distinctions between the haves (a definite minority) and the have-nots. The latter have no hope of such luxuries as houses or cars; they’re lucky to have a tent to call home. All around them, new social structures are emerging to replace the failed ones.

Jasper and his tribe eventually gravitate to Augusta, Georgia, where they establish a more or less stable existence amid an increasingly chaotic society. He scrapes up a good job, as a convenience-store clerk. By pooling his inadequate salary with several friends, he has enough for shelter, food, and whatever they can get with the leftovers. The amount of violence in everyday life has escalated significantly, and in the absence of any real municipal government—realistically, nobody’s in a position to pay taxes to support it—gangs are the de facto rulers of much of the city. Jasper hooks up with a “flash singer”—the equivalent of a rock star—Dierdre, who gives voice to the decadence of the new order. But in common with her predecessors, Dierdre has strong self-destructive tendencies that eventually drive them apart.

Meanwhile, society is experiencing

wave after wave of new designer viruses, which can kill, mutate, or just leave the victims crippled. Some of the diseases have taken on the sort of radical chic that drugs held in the sixties; one in particular, Zen, destroys any impulse toward violence. Its acolytes tout it as the step into a posthuman future, and they have begun to build a communal society in Athens, Georgia. As society continues to collapse, Jasper and his tribe are forced out of the city and into the countryside, where they begin to realize how limited their survival skills are. After more adventures, the book ends on a guardedly positive note.

McIntosh’s first novel is a grim glimpse into a future that is not all that improbable, given some leeway on the details. This is the sort of thoughtful sociological SF we see too seldom today—the kind of work Pohl and Korbluth did in the 1950s, or John Brunner, in classics like *Stand on Zanzibar*, where the “what-if” extrapolations give us a warning look at an all-too-possible future.

Well worth a read.

HEX

By Allen Steele

Ace, \$26.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-441-02036-2

Steele sets this one in the universe of his “Coyote” series, but the overall feel is more in the mode of Arthur C. Clarke’s *Rendezvous With Rama* or Larry Niven’s *Ringworld*: world-building on the grandest of scales.

The story begins on Coyote, which since its separation from the political squabbles of Earth and its allies has made contact, and established trade relations with, a wide range of alien races. Now, Coyote has been offered a deal with a race it’s had no previous contact with—though it’s heard plenty about them through its other trade associates. The *danui* are reclusive, making contact only with those races they’re interested in. Attempts to open relations with them are met with profound lack of interest.

But now they want a Coyote ship to

travel to a secret destination, and the humans can't resist a chance to get into a possibly beneficial trade relation. To lead the expedition, they recruit Andromeda Carson, a starship captain who's nearing retirement and looking for something more interesting than the routine trade missions she's recently been stuck on. In addition to her regular crew, the mission will take a contingent of military personnel—which happens to include her own estranged son.

The destination, they learn, is an artificial habitat created by the *danui*. The scale of the thing, once they get a close look at it, dwarfs anything previously imagined. Take a Dyson sphere—a globe completely surrounding a star and capturing all its energy for the use of the inhabitants. Then break it up into a series of linked tubular habitats, arranged in hexagons, each set up with conditions suitable for a particular sentient species. It turns out the *danui* have been collecting sentient species from all around the galaxy, giving each a colony in Hex—as the human explorers quickly name it. The members of the Coyote expedition are the most recent recruits to the venture.

Steele has worked out the details of this gigantic environment with enough rigor to satisfy the hard-science fans, while his story maintains tension not just through the family discord but by having the human explorers separated by an accident while landing on Hex. But the central attraction is the play of different cultures on one of the grandest artifacts ever assembled in a science fiction novel. Steele is enough of a fan that we can suspect homage to Niven and/or Clarke in the choice of subject, but he's made this audacious premise all his own.

HOUNDED
By Kevin Hearne
Del Rey, \$7.99 (mm)
ISBN: 978-0-345-52247-4

This fun first novel features a druid, several thousand years old, living in modern Arizona, where he runs an occult

bookshop with a sideline in various herbs and doodads for the woo-woo clientele.

Atticus O'Sullivan may be ancient beyond the wildest dreams of life-extension scientists, but he's managed to stay young in appearance, physically fit, and as a result adopts a youthful external appearance both in dress and attitude. The latter makes sense, given that most of his clients tend to be from the college-age group.

But for all the benefits of eternal youth, the negatives can't be ignored. Perhaps the biggest downside of living forever is that you've built up a couple of millennia worth of enemies, some of whom happen to be immortal, too. Atticus has had run-ins with most of the Celtic and Nordic gods, and while a fair number have decided to put up with him, a few—especially those he's bested in some of his past exploits—have a hard time forgetting insults. The plot of this novel, the first in a trilogy, takes off when Atticus' past starts to catch up with him.

The druid has earned the enmity of a Celtic god, Aenghus Og, by taking a magic sword in a long-ago battle of immortals. Now Aenghus has figured out where Atticus is hiding, and he's looking to get his sword back—along with a bit of revenge. One of the other gods shows up to warn him—a love goddess, who has no compunctions about spending a little time letting Atticus pay his respects in bed. But she makes it clear that Aenghus is on his way, and that the druid needs to plan for the imminent confrontation.

Meanwhile, Atticus has to keep the shop running. A new customer turns out to be one of a coven of Slavic witches—something of a problem, since Atticus and witches generally don't get along. However, he thinks he's got a sufficiently rigorous contract to prevent any tricks. It turns out he's wrong—and that his suspicions of witches are, in this case at least, more than justified. Luckily, he's managed to accumulate some pretty good allies in Arizona, including a gang of werewolves, who like the company of

Atticus's dog Oberon as much as the druid himself.

The reader may start to think that the author has built his fantasy world by bringing in all the pagan myths he can think of, and mixing with a free hand. It sounds silly put that way, but Hearne manages to keep it from getting any sillier by telling the whole story in a witty, slightly ironic tone that suggests that Atticus, at least, isn't taking anything too seriously.

All in all, *Hounded* is a good, fast-moving adventure—good enough to whet the appetite for the next couple of books in the series, *Hexed* and *Hammered*. No waiting; all three are in print.

HOW TO BUILD A TIME MACHINE The Real Science of Time Travel

By Brian Clegg

St. Martin's Press, \$ 25.99 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-312-69688-2

This text by a British science writer is not quite a how-to, but it's a pretty solid survey of the science that's likely to be involved if anybody ever really does find a practical way to travel through time.

Clegg isn't the first to tackle the subject. Not only have there been a number of major SF writers who've taken up time travel, but increasingly, since about the 1980s, theoretical physicists have been willing to stick their necks out on the subject. Before that, except for someone of unassailable reputation, it was a guaranteed career killer. There's now some consensus that travel to the future and back, or to the past and back, is not theoretically impossible. So there's plenty of good material for Clegg to work with—and he does so entertainingly.

While each of us is in a trivial sense already a time traveler—moving inexorably into the future—we'd all like something a bit more spectacular and controllable. In particular, some way to visit past eras would be particularly attractive. As it happens, the laws of physics provide a few interesting options—although not all of them are quite as practical as we might like. But

going through the options does give Clegg a convenient opportunity to summarize some of the more interesting corners of modern science, mixing in a fair amount of scientific history in the process.

Not surprisingly, a fair amount of the theory of time travel is closely related to Einstein's theories of special and general relativity, which describe the ways in which motion and gravity affect certain properties of objects—and people. Movement at different speeds, or in gravity fields of different strengths, can cause two timepieces to run at different rates. This effect has real-world consequences: GPS systems, for example, need to take into account the minute discrepancies between clocks orbiting the Earth and those on the ground.

Clegg shows various ways of using these effects to manipulate time, usually by slowing it down for the travelers, who can visit distant futures without living through all the intervening years. There are flies in the ointment, of course. Gravitational fields strong enough to slow time enough to make a useful difference tend to have other effects—for example, the tidal force of a neutron star or black hole, which can rip apart anything approaching too closely. Other methods of time travel require building structures that would challenge the engineering capability or energy supply of societies far more advanced than ours—you can't order cylinders of infinite length from any of the mail order houses.

One promising system, the principle of which was first described by physics professor Ronald Mallett, uses light pulses to create the reverse time field. While it looks as if it would really work, it suffers from the key flaw that all such systems do—it can't get to a time earlier than the point at which the machine itself was activated. A shame, since most of the really interesting things you might do with time travel into the past require getting into eras before the present.

Clegg spends some time analyzing the various time travel paradoxes, including

the kill-your-own-grandfather one. Many of them can be explained away by a closer look at basic physical principles. He also dissects money-making schemes, most of which involve taking some valuable commodity into the past and using it to start an investment fund that, when the traveler returns to his own day, has grown large enough to finance building the time machine. That one may not violate the second law of thermodynamics, but it may display undue faith in the long-term stability of the banks and other institutions where the growing funds would be invested.

There are undoubtedly time travel twists that Clegg has overlooked—with more than a century's worth of SF investigations, plus a growth of serious interest by some of our best scientific minds, it's almost inevitable. But any interested reader will find plenty of good material for speculation here. And if you're looking for raw material for a time travel story, this is as good a source as you're going to find for the technical underpinnings. ○

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Time for our year-end look to the spring con(vention) season. Pick cons for January are Arisia (where I'll be), RustyCon, Epic ConFusion and COSine. Next time, we'll look at the full Easter weekend con lineup. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of conventions, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2012

6-8—InstaCon. For info, write: **Box 27277, Austin TX 78755**. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) instacon9.org. (E-mail) info@instacon9.org. Con will be held in: Addison (North Dallas) TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Crowne Plaza. Guests will include: none announced. A place for convention organizers to talk shop. By the Lone Star Con people.

6-8—Anime Los Angeles, **Box 7067, Van Nuys CA 91409**. animelosangeles.org. LAX Marriott, Los Angeles CA. Sakai, Tomomatsu.

7—Twelfth Night Ball, c/o **2144-B Buena Vista Ave., Alameda CA 94501**. peers.org. Christmas, a la Dickens' "Christmas Carol."

12-15—DarkCon, **Box 82575, Phoenix AZ 85044**. (602) 430-3413. darkcon.org. Marriott, Phoenix AZ. J. Carey, D. Jones, M. Foster.

13-15—Arisia, **Box 391596, Cambridge MA 02139**. arisia.org. Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. The Foglios, G. Hinds. 3000+ expected.

13-15—IlliCon, **Box 58476, Raleigh NC 27658**. illicon.org. Brownstone Hotel. The Haldemans, Kessel, R. (War Bunny) Desautels.

20-22—RustyCon, **Box 27075, Seattle WA 98165**. rustycon.com. SeaTac Marriott. Eric Flint, Brent Chumley, J. Kirley. SF/fantasy.

20-22—Epic ConFusion, **Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107**. stilyagi.org. Marriott, Troy MI. Patrick Rothfuss, singer Tom Smith.

27-29—COSine, **1245 Allegheny Dr., Colorado Springs CO 80919**. firstfridayfandom.org. Crowne Plaza. Charlie Stross.

27-29—ConFlikt, **Box 30113, Seattle WA 98113**. conflikt.org. The Suttons, Brooke Lunderville, Riverfolk. SF/fantasy folksinging.

FEBRUARY 2012

4—Dickens Bicentennial Ball, c/o **2144-B Buena Vista Ave., Alameda CA 94501**. peers.org. Victorian theme period dance party.

9-12—CapriCon, **126 E. Wing #244, Arlington Heights IL 60004**. capricon.org. Westin, Wheeling (Chicago) IL. Doctorow, MacLaine.

17-19—Boskone, **Box 809, Framingham MA 01701**. (617) 625-2311. boskone.org. Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. Scalzi, Weisskopf.

17-19—ConDFW, **750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248**. condfw.org. Dallas TX. Cherie Priest, William Stout. SF, fantasy, horror.

17-19—FarPoint, **11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601**. farpointcon.com. Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Michael Hogan, Kate Vernon.

24-26—MystiCon, **3735 Franklin Rd. SW #228, Roanoke VA 24014**. mysticon-va.com. Sherrilyn Kenyon, Nikki Clyne, U. Vernon.

24-26—Potlatch, **Box 3400, Berkeley CA 94703**. potlatch-sf.org. Best Western Executive Inn, Seattle WA. Written SF and fantasy.

24-26—ConCave, **124 Fairlawn Ave., Lexington KY 40505**. concaveky.org. Bowling Green KY. Mark Linneman. Low-key relaxacon.

MARCH 2012

2-4—ConDor, **Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175**. condorcon.org. Town & Country. L. Cunningham, M. Bocianowski. Men in Black, etc.

2-4—StellarCon, **Box F4, EUC, UNCG, Greensboro NC 27413**. stellarcon.org. High Point NC. Rothfuss, Mark Poole, the Fulbrights.

2-4—ECOF, edgarriceburroughs.com. Tarzana CA. The centennial of the creator of Tarzan and John Carter of Mars.

9-11—KatCon, **De Rogge 6, Heesch 5384 XD, Netherlands**. beneluxcon.nl. Hotel Noordzee, Katwijk. G. Jones, Jan J. B. Kuipers.

16-18—LunaCon, **Box 432, Bronx NY 10465**. lunacon.org. Rye Brook NY. John Ringo, Howard Tayler, T. Pierce, A. & K. Looney.

16-18—RevelCon, **Box 6924, Houston TX 77265**. severalunlimited.com. "The Little Con with the Texas Size Heart." Ages 16 up.

16-18—Anime ConJi, animeconji.org. Town & Country Resort, San Diego CA. Anime and manga. This year's theme: "Matsuri."

29-Apr. 1—World Horror Con, c/o **Box 27277, Austin TX 78755**. whc2012.org. Sherrilyn Kenyon, Mike Mignola, P. N. Elrod.

30-Apr. 1—ICon, **Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790**. icon.org. SUNY. "East Coast's biggest convention of SF, fact and fantasy."

30-Apr. 1—ConTact, contact-conference.org. Mt. View CA. The search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Scientific conference.

30-Apr. 1—MarCon, **Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214**. marcon.org. Tamora Pierce, Paula Guran, Kyle Gass, B. Lepper, E. Neely.

AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—Chicon 7, **Box 13, Skokie IL 60076**. chicon.org. Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrill, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$175+.

AUGUST 2013

29-Sep. 2—Lone Star Con 3, **Box 27277, Austin TX 78755**. lonestarcon3.org. San Antonio TX. The World SF Convention. \$160.

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