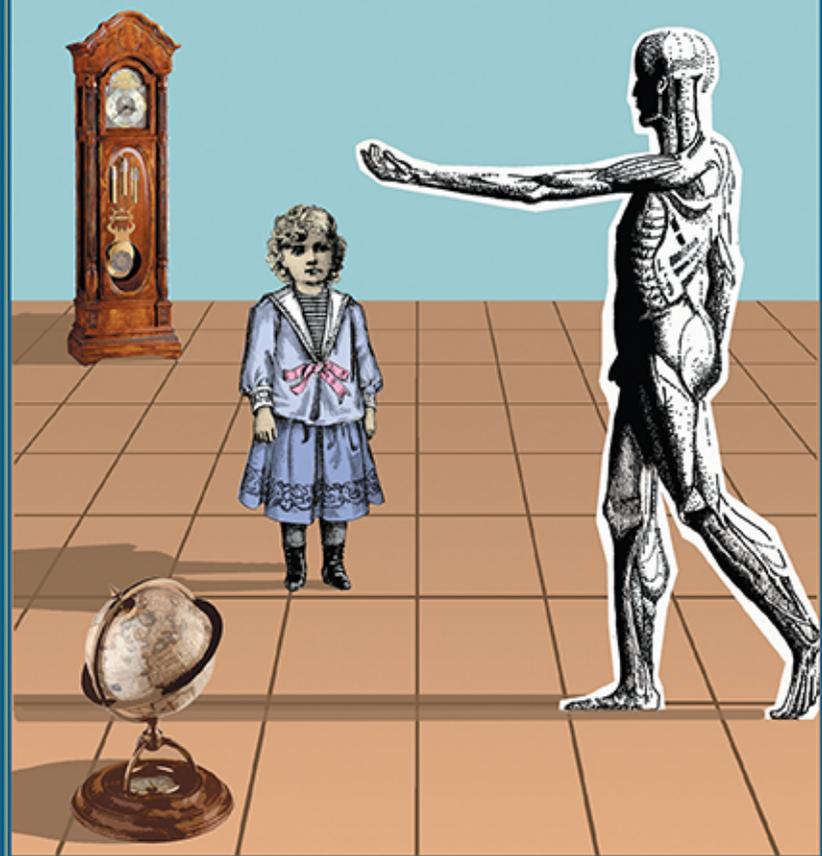


STORIES AT THE EDGE OF TIME



ALAN ROBBINS

Stories at the
Edge of Time

Alan Robbins



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The Edge of Time

At the speed of light, as everyone knows, time slows down. Most people think that gives you more of it. But they are wrong about this. No matter how fast you travel, in whatever direction, you only have the time you have.

No more, no less.

What most people also do not realize is that as you near the speed of light, fate slows down as well. Destiny, which always races one step ahead, now eases up ever so slightly, and seems to hesitate and pause. In the blur of this kind of motion, you could almost get the impression of catching up with it, grabbing it by the tail, even wrestling it to the ground.

But you would be wrong there too. Fate stays one step ahead, no matter what.

No more time, no less fate.

Such are the mysteries of life as you approach the limit of speed in the cosmos.

Jon Drammond thought about all this as he stood in that white room, dressed in white, before the vast expanse of the window. Outside the transparent chromium pane all was black, with only the faintest hint of light. Out there where a billion dim wiggles looked like the tails of countless microbes spawning. That was the way stars appeared at this speed, alive and darting. Seeing this illusion of life, you could almost come to believe that the universe itself, down to the very atom, was alive.

You could almost believe that it was not all, in fact, coming to an end.

This was a nice fairy tale but Jon did not get the chance to dwell on it. He thought he was alone in the room, staring out into space, having his thoughts. But his wife Dayn had been standing behind him the whole while, watching, silent.

“How much time?” she asked softly.

“I didn’t see you there,” he said without turning around.

“How much?” she repeated.

“We don’t know really. It’s all just a theory.”

“Yes you do,” she said. “What are they saying? How much time left?”

“It’s a pointless calculation,” he said, turning his back to the sky. “We have as much time as we have.”

He was lying to her and she knew it. She knew all about the clock they had down in one of the labs. Most everyone did. The EndTime clock they called it. It had been set according to the mathematics of their theory and told them, very specifically, how much time they had left, how much time the universe had left. When she last heard the rumors, the clock was indicating 312 years. But that had been months ago and the magnitude was changing with each and every second. What could it be now? Two centuries? 100 years? A single generation?

She did not press the issue. Her husband was a Chief Cosmologist and that meant that he was a very stubborn man. If he refused to tell her, that would be that. At least until something changed his mind.

“Is Tara home yet?” he asked by way of changing the subject.

“I just picked her up. She’ll be here in a second. Do you have to go back to work tonight?”

“No. I’m done for the day,” he said and pulled her close and held her a bit too tight before the prancing starlights.

“There’s bad news, Jon, I can feel it in you. You don’t have to protect me from it. We’re in this together.”

He thought for a moment and knew that she was right.

“We were off in our guess about the acceleration. By quite a lot.”

“I thought so.”

“We may only have as few as 90 years. Maybe we’re wrong about that too.”

Tears welled up in Dayn’s eyes but she fought them back. One thing she had learned during the Scattering was that being strong was more important than being sensitive. It was the only way to go on.

“90 years,” she said. “Tara’s generation. Then the end of all life for all eternity. It is still so hard to grasp.”

Jon Drammond did not answer her. There was nothing really to say. It had all been said before. Many many times. Everyone had made peace with it in his or her own way. To Jon, who was not of any faith, it was simply the rule of the cosmos. A rule that trumped all others and that overwhelmed the fears of any frail little personality. Still, it was one thing for a person to know that death was inevitable and to come to terms with it. Quite another to know that the universe itself was coming to an end.

It all, of course, began with the Big Bang. Everything did. The universe had exploded from a pinpoint blast and been expanding outwards for the last 15 billion years. It was what everyone knew and it was romantic and dramatic and wholly unfathomable to anyone without superstring hypermath. Even so, it was undeniable since its first discovery in the mid 20th century.

But it was only half the story.

It would take another five hundred years for the rest of the tale to be told...that there had been a second Big Bang, erupting from the exact same point in spacetime. This was known as the Second Wave. It was an explosion too, just like the first, but of antimatter. A widening black hole expanding with increasing velocity that would eventually engulf all matter and energy. It meant that while the universe was created in an instant and was expanding outward at almost the speed of light, the seeds of its destruction were there right from the start. And it meant that this very universe would be destroyed by a second, obverse explosion slowly overtaking the first.

The scientists called this Alternating Pulsing Cosmogony or simply APC. Two adjacent branes in n-dimensional space colliding over and over. Universes created and destroyed and created again, just like the ancient religions said. Yet despite the fancy names and equations, it meant a plain thing. That the world was coming to an end. Very very soon.

When the full impact of the theory became clear, another understanding emerged. They could calculate the stretch from the

blast center to earthpoint and knew that life on earth was doomed. So one hundred starships carrying peoples of the earth were launched in an effort called the Scattering. These were hopeless flights, they all knew. There was no way to outrun the end. But heading at lightspeed away from the center of everything would at least add some time. And they had gotten much better at predicting the end in the 20 years since it all began; now the EndTime clock was thought to be quite accurate.

But then again, this was the precise thing no one really wanted to know at all.

“Daddy!” shouted a small, prim girl standing at the doorway. She came racing in and slammed into him, making everyone laugh.

“My little genius!” Jon said.

“Look what I found!” she said, slapping a small rectangular object into her mother’s stomach.

“A school project?”

“No silly, I discovered it. On a spedition.”

“Expedition,” Dayn said. “They were doing archeo research on Level Five.”

“No, it was on Level Seven,” the girl corrected. “What is it Mommy?”

Dayn took the object in her hands like a treasure and stared at it. At first, it seemed remote and strange, like a creature from a lost world. Relic of the dim past. Then that past slowly seeped in through a crack in her memory.

“I think this thing was called...a...bok.”

“Like a box?”

“No, a bok,” Dayn said and opened it up.

Sure enough between the thick covers were thin white leaves filled with strange symbols.

“Book,” Jon corrected. “I saw them when I was a boy. My grandfather had a collection of them.”

“What’s it for?” Tara asked. “It doesn’t react at all.”

“No. It’s not for reacting. A book was a kind of...”

“Archive,” Dayn suggested. “A place to store...”

“Language,” Jon added. He had taken the book from his

wife's hands and was flipping slowly through the pages. The texture was smooth like fine waferskin, and the color slightly yellow like Auricine. It even had a familiar smell but he could not quite place it.

"You see, darling, that is an ancient language," Dayn said, pointing to the symbols on the pages.

"I can't hear it," the girl said sadly.

"No sweetie, it doesn't talk. These are written words. Written?"

"That's right," Jon said. "Written. It means that they were... put on the surface...with a machine...um..."

"It was a way of...putting language down so that...people could..."

"What good is that if you can't hear it?" Tara interrupted.

"You have to...what's the word, Dayn?"

"Read!" Dayn shouted, as though she had just stumbled onto a gem inside her own cortex.

"That's right, you have to read them. You have to look at them and say what they mean."

"Read," the girl muttered, with great mystery, almost like an incantation. "Well, can you read it Mommy?"

"No I can't. I haven't even seen one of these since I was a little girl."

"Like me?"

"Yes, just like you. But not as smart. Can you read it, Jon?"

He studied the words on the cover, then turned some of the pages and moved his lips silently.

"Is it in the Talk?" Dayn asked.

"Yes, it is," he said. "But it's an ancient form that was known as English. A lot of similarities though. You know, I bet that I probably can read this."

"Can you read it to me, Daddy? Can you please? Please?"

"I'd need to go down and uplink a lingualog. Then I guess I could. But it's just an old book. Why would you want me to read it to you?"

"Because," the girl concluded.

"You might as well," Dayn said. "It might be fun. We can sit

together and you could read it to us.”

“What’s the point?” he said with a tired sigh. “Some old book.”

“It will help us pass the time,” Dayn said.

“Pass the time,” he echoed.

An ironic phrase, he thought, considering that there was nothing else left for humanity to do. Nothing left to achieve, nothing left to hope for. All that remained of our great passage was to pass the time waiting for it to come to a stone cold dead deletion.

Dayn, studying his face that she knew so well, could see the mood that would soon immerse him if she did not step in and insist. She pretended to kiss him on the neck but instead whispered into his ear: “She wants to spend time with you, Jon. With us, as a family. It doesn’t matter why.”

Jon was a scientist, like almost everyone on the ship. They were the smart ones, the ones with fancy logic, people of the grid and grit, analytical, with math but not myth, questions but no mysteries. They were beyond lies and fables and were living in the slipstream of reason in its final surge.

But the one thing he had learned in the years since they left earth was that although he was a brilliant physicist, he could easily be wrong about simple things. People things. But about these, his wife Dayn was always always right.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. I’ll need to access the Core.”

While he was gone, Dayn and Tara slid the couch over to the window. It was a big fat soft couch, perfect for telecommuning or just gazing into space. Dayn held the book in her hands and looked through it with a great sorrow. Whatever was inside this mystery box, and everything else and all there was, and all of life, all made things, would vanish in almost no time at all. Like a dream in the head of a waking child. Everything. Only to start all over again with a clean slate. The physics said so. It was the way of the cosmos. But that did not make it any easier to swallow right here and now.

“Let’s see,” Jon said, returning after an hour and squeezing

between them. "I haven't practiced this in a while, so I may get some of the words wrong."

He took the book from his wife and held it like a sacred object.

"Is it really really old?" Tara asked.

"Let's see," he said and turned to the first page. "There it is. You see, it says 1961."

Tara followed his finger down to some symbols on the page. She studied them for a few moments and came to a conclusion.

"Is it about axial symmetry?" she asked.

The question caught both of her parents off guard.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like a neutrino counter-collision. It flips over," she explained. "See?"

She took the book from her father's hands and turned it upside down. Then pointed to the numbers to prove that they read the same. Upside down it was still 1961.

"Wow," Jon said. "Smart girl. I didn't notice that."

"If this is about Plasma Physics," Dayn said, "I may fall asleep."

"No," her husband said, turning to the first page. "It just means that this was when the book was made. In the year 1961."

"500 years ago," Dayn mused.

"Yes. And it has a title too."

"Title?" Tara asked, confused.

"Like a name. Every book had a name. What you would call it. And the name of this one is – let's see – it's called One Ocean."

Tara still had a puzzled look on her face and her mother jumped to the rescue. Her daughter had been born during the Scattering and her whole world was the starship. She had never known the earth with its magnificent oceans...their vastness, wetness, deepness. The way they cradled life. She had never been swimming, surfed a wave, or watched the sun set across an edgeless sea.

"Oceans," Dayn said, trying to find grand enough words. "Oceans were..."

"I know," Tara said, "they have them in the simmies. They were water that covered our home world."

"Huge amounts of water. You can't imagine, sweetheart. As

far as you could see. Your father and I used to swim in them.”

“Yes, but that’s not what it means here,” Jon interrupted. He had been reading some words on the back cover that explained the contents of the book. “This book is not about oceans at all. The title refers to a place where people lived. A building on a street.”

“Why was the street called an ocean?” Tara asked. She was of that age at which words meant what they meant. Or they meant nothing at all.

“It was a street called Ocean Avenue in a place called Brooklyn,” her father said. “This is a book of stories about people who lived there. They lived in a building that was called One Ocean Avenue. One Ocean...that was the number of the building.”

Places and streets with names, and buildings with numbers. Were these all too hard to understand as you flew away from history so fast that the stars wiggled? Jon wondered if the book was such a good idea, but his daughter broke in with a question that cut through to something much deeper.

“Stories?” Tara asked, miming her father’s drawl.

“Yes, you know. Stories about people and things that happened to them. Way back in 1961. In a building. On a street called Ocean Avenue. In a place called Brooklyn.”

“500 years ago,” Tara repeated. That was a hard concept for a 9-year old to grasp. Not logically but emotionally. “Are they all dead now?”

“Well...stories doesn’t mean it actually happened. These are probably made-up stories. The author – I mean the person who created them – made up stories and wrote them down.”

“Wrote?”

“I mean he recorded them in this writing system so that other people would read them and find them interesting.”

“Was he a Scatterer, daddy?”

She was trying to piece something together in her mind but it was not clear just what.

“No sweetie. This was long before we discovered the Second Wave and started the Scattering.”

“Okay,” Tara said. She knew now what she needed to...what a story was and that people once lived in buildings and that there

were streets named like oceans. But none of that was especially important to her because she also knew that the end was coming and that her father and mother were there with her now, and that there was nothing else to be done but be together. And that felt right. She pressed in closer to both of them and said, with great authority: “You can start now.”

And so Jon began to read. He stumbled at first. The words came to him through a great mire of disuse. There had not been much call for books or reading in the world of the liquid image, and so over the years he had lost the skill. But as he went on, it became easier. He had read when he was a boy. Read a great deal in fact. That was rare even in his generation which itself was a century beyond the death of paper. But his grandfather had insisted on it and Jon had found it to be tiring but also exhilarating. So many ideas, so many sentences, so many stories. Still, the lingua-log helped and so did some residual memory and he pressed on. He did this for his wife, for his daughter. To keep their minds off the terrible calamity to come. He did it for himself too. For each moment that he read seemed like another moment stolen from the exploding center of negative history. And so he read the stories in the book to them. He read all through the unending night and on into the following day, even though day and night were both just concepts now.

“Something has changed,” Dayn said when she saw him the next evening. He had spent the entire day in the lab, not even coming back for lunch. This was unusual and would have been a bad sign but for the slight, almost undetectable, curl of his lips. No one but Dayn would have noticed this, but she did and could not overlook it.

“Something’s happening,” she said bluntly. “Tell me.”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“I am. I can see it in your face. Tell me what it is.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Have you noticed something? Has something changed?”

Sensing that she would not give up, he finally softened and

answered: “Yes, I think the clock is slowing down.”

“What does it mean? Does it mean that the Second Wave is slowing?”

“No, the Second Wave is not slowing down. Nor is the end of the universe. But somehow, we have enlarged the slip of duration between them.”

“I’m sorry, Jon, I’m not a chronologist.”

Jon took a deep breath. The evidence of the two cosmic expansions – the miraculous one and the horror – only existed as patterns in highly complex fractality. They were equations, significances, nesting iterations of self-generating emulata. There were not even any normal words to translate them. But the expression on his wife’s face made it clear to him that, one way or another, he had to come up with some.

“Put it this way,” he finally said. “It seems, and this only a vague conjecture at this point, that the wedge of time within which we live is enlarging slightly. In other words, it may be the case that the EndTime clock has slowed its acceleration. It’s not definite, just a hint. I don’t know how or why. None of us do.”

“Does it mean that we live?” Dayn asked, jumping on the conclusion like a raft.

He looked puzzled.

“I mean we humans, Jon. Us. Does it mean that Tara has a chance to live?”

“I don’t know.”

Again that night and for many nights thereafter, they continued to read their stories. They sat again on the couch as the dance of the stars passed before them across the vast window of the ship, like a paper panorama being unfurled at one end, furled at the other. When One Ocean was done and all the tales in it told, they found another book in the vast library that had been neglected for so long. And another and another. And they read the stories from all of them. They read out loud about all these people who once lived or never lived or might have lived, and understood something of their loves and their hopes and their despairs. These were tiny stories, little nothings at all, long ones, short ones, funny ones, sad ones. Great big stories about life itself or little diver-

sions about the merest of matters.

About the woman who lost her earring but found her lost love. The great hero of the great war who was inwardly a coward. The captain of the ship whose misplaced map changed the shape of the world. About the first men and women, who knew more about the universe than those who evolved solely to survive in it. Lovers who reached across the eons to know each other through all the ages of their lives. A man who died of radio. A woman who lied to her lover and regretted her truths.

To the outsider these told tales no doubt were nothing more than a way to pass the time, the only time that was left in an existence careening towards its end.

And yet...something was changing.

They all sensed it in themselves but Jon could see it in the calculations as well. Unseen, odorless, untouchable. But with a presence as palpable as gravity itself. They all knew this, sensed the rubbery fabric of the cosmos stretching just a bit, the difference between a split second and a whole one.

At first they did not speak of it. Too fragile, as it was, to tinker with. They simply continued to read together each night and wait for the daily report that indeed the EndTime clock was slowing. Finally Dayn said aloud what they had all been thinking.

“Maybe it’s the stories,” she said.

Jon laughed at that, but deeply and with a profound tenderness.

“I mean it,” she insisted. “You said the change has now been proven. You said the universe was still expanding and the Second Wave was too. But that our slice of time was widening and that the end was no longer as near as once predicted. You said all that.”

“We can’t explain it.”

“But it began when we started reading those stories.”

“Please, Dayn. Let’s not get all cryptic here. We don’t even know if this is permanent. It may just be an anomaly.”

“But it did begin with the stories.”

“That can’t matter.”

“But it did.”

“Yes it did. But there can’t be any connection.”

“Maybe the stories are expanding time. Driving a wedge between the two waves or something.”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all and you know it.”

“It could be.”

“Could not be.”

“You don’t know.”

“Well if you can explain to me how reading some stories from a few old forgotten books to our 9-year old daughter can change the velocity differential between the expanding universe and the expanding anti-universe, I will be more than happy to bring it to the Council.”

Dayn, who knew nothing of all the hypermath, knew something much better than equations. She knew people. In fact, she knew most of the other families on the ship who were in some ways mere statistics to the theorists and their computers. And so, quietly and informally, she convinced her friends and neighbors to join the experiment.

The library, which had been all but abandoned for years, was now buzzing with activity as people all over the ship took out books and began to read the stories in them. They read them aloud at night and silently in the morning. They traded the books and told each other the tales and acted them out and now, so many years after the written word had evaporated, they even began to create their own stories.

And sure enough, their slice of time continued to expand.

“Maybe you’re wrong about all this,” Dayn said, but kindly.

“Yes, that’s always possible,” Jon admitted.

“Perhaps the universe is not made of tiny atoms or vibrating strings or shiny cubicles. Maybe it’s made of stories.”

He could no longer deny it. Perhaps it was true, he thought. And to create them was to build matter, to read them was to expand the present, to tell them was to enrich the world, to remember them was to reach inside the very fabric of spacetime and weave new moments.

Perhaps.

It made no sense, he thought, but neither did Big Bangs and

black holes and anti-universes. They were stories too. It was all a matter of what one chose to believe.

And so, after a while, Jon joined the throng as they all went down to the lower libraries and found what was there and reveled in it. And they read the stories until the cosmos stopped stopping and the world was still again.

And all the while the stars outside sparked and wiggled like living creatures playing at the edge of time.

Sudden Insight

Professor Balia Brzozow, whom everyone called simply Zozo, wobbled like a penguin as he reached up to place an epsilon on the blackboard. But lack of poise more than reach threw him off balance. He closed his eyes for a second as he slammed against the board and slid down to the floor. He recovered quickly, but wound up scratching a lightning bolt into the equation. The class splintered into laughter. More at his mime than his funny math. Brzozow regained his composure, adjusted his tie and his notation, then glared around the room in mock anger. But they knew that he was not really angry, he was too intelligent for that, and it only made the whole show funnier.

When the class was over, he swiveled awkwardly to erase the hour's worth of calculations, managing to cover himself with chalk dust in the process. The students squeezed noisily out through the door. Someone slid a late paper onto his desk; a debate about differentials spilled into the hall; two kids planning to marry kissed. With all this hoopla, Brzozow completely missed his potential breakthrough...the new lightning bolt symbol he had inadvertently invented. Had he simply assigned an n -inversion factor to his new symbol, he might have opened up an entirely new calculus of dimensional fractals.

Instead the eraser seemed to snicker as it sucked this discovery off the face of the earth forever.

Going home, Brzozow followed the pathway across the quadrangle on the way back to the bus. Along the way, the crisp autumn trees evoked tangential probability arrays, bicycle wheels traced invisible motional sine curves, and a lost rubber ball suggested the sad loneliness of Reimann-Christoffel geometry. This was always a wonderful walk for Brzozow. It was a time when he could be alone with his thoughts about the patterns and the

numbers hidden deep inside the cosmos. Silently pushing across the square, his heels tapping the pavement, he could think about Pythagoras pushing pebbles along the ground with his bony toes, Euclid watching flotsam at the beach, or Leibnitz noting the bundled topology of his cat's ball of string. And if he was lucky enough to make it the entire way across without being interrupted by students or colleagues, he might even get to Newton thinking about a transmutational calculus or Napier eating himself sick while doing logarithms in his head.

This was the best part of his day.

Like any mathematician, random rumination was his state of grace. Thoughts were wishes. Anything could be uncovered. And also like most mathematicians, more than anything else he wanted to uncover something big. Some grand truth about numbers, about life itself. Some lovely perfect brilliant theory about the gearworks. But as he got older he realized that this was not to be. All the conditions of perseverance, insight, luck, timing, or genius would not, it seem, come together. Not in the time of his lifetime. And so, instead, he grew to like his students, love his subject, and all in all he was not unhappy in this.

Yet still the walk across the campus was like a dream.

On Euclid Avenue, he made a comical sort of hopping turn on his right heel to fight the wind and veered forwards on a slight angle. As luck would have it, a narrow dust tornado had just developed from a perfect Fibonacci of cross currents. Hitting some dirt with force, it delivered a cloud of motes into his eyes. And for a brief moment, Balia Brzozow, formerly of the Ukraine and now professor of mathematics at Brooklyn College, was temporarily blinded.

The effect only lasted for a few seconds.

But in that instant Brzozow suddenly had a change of mind. The world in all its writhing photons was gone. Completely gone. In its place, he could now feel the air and all its variations in pressure, tonus, draft, and temperature. He could feel it on his skin, everywhere in the same degree of contact. Not over there or there, but always right here, right now. Eyes closed, he reached out

to steady himself and sensed the shifting density in the airspace before him. He stumbled and touched the cavernous bark of a nearby tree, so sculptural and infolded. Not yet looking, he still knew that the sun had just ducked behind a cloud by the change in heat on his skin.

In an instant, in other words, he immediately understood the idea of active seeing with fingers and skin and body rather than eyes. And amazingly, the universe was just as rich this way. Vibration under the feet, the sounds of cars, odor of oak, cool at the back of the neck. A new world grasped with new organs. Rather exhilarating, he thought, as he stood there with his eyes closed. Revolutionary in fact. As though he had never shut his lids before. He had, of course, just never noticed.

The world suddenly seemed quite different. Less rigid and more voluptuous. And this seemed to Brzozow like a new way of knowing, full of possibility. In fact, it brought into doubt the whole Cartesian business, the entire grid of being along the x,y,z . Space as a matrix. Like a breath of fresh air, he suddenly understood the limitations of the merely dimensional, orthogonal, deep-field extension of matter and distance.

How unusual, he thought.

And now he might have opened his eyes and gone about his business, but chose not to. He briefly flashed on that lightning bolt from the blackboard and the idea of dimensional fractals. Could it be, he wondered? Might there actually be room there for a new mathematics of Tactile Irrationals and Percussive Potential? That would certainly change things. And the idea began to morph and form in his mind, astoundingly, in the way that cells soon become a someone. Yes, he mumbled, it could be. You might even be able to explore a whole new theory of Haptic Iteration...

But at that same moment, Bucherman from History appeared and placed a heavy hand on Brzozow's back.

"Are you all right Brzozow? Do you not feel well?"

"What??? Who? I..." Brzozow blanched and twitched.

"You should sit down," Bucherman said.

"What?" Brzozow replied, still coming out of his reverie.

"On the bench over there. Come, I'll help you."

More like a school principal than a nurse, Bucherman led him rather forcibly over to the bench. Against his will, Brzozow had opened his eyes and let the engulfing visual world come back in through the pinholes of his irises. He felt like those reports he had heard about people near death being dragged back into their lives by zealous doctors.

After sitting there for a while and letting his eyes clear and his mind compose, Brzozow could see and think perfectly well again. Bucherman, kind but irritating, was trying to make him feel better by telling him about the new Dean and the change in the college policy on out-of-pocket reimbursements, which made no sense at all but was so typical of the bureaucracy, and how the union was fighting it, but probably to no avail.

And by now the insight in Brzozow's head, and the math that might explain it, was long, long gone. When he stood up and took leave of his colleague, he felt vaguely annoyed but had absolutely no idea why.

At home, safe and sound, Brzozow told his wife Melia about the incident because it was funny. He did not mention the ideas about a new way of thinking about space as always present because, like a dream on waking, he had completely forgotten about it. The whole thing in all its wondrous complexity had vanished just like that.

It was clearly one of those days in which bold change was hovering just beyond the next coincidence. But he was not at all aware of this.

"Would you like a cold drink?" Melia asked, largely because she too was from Eastern Europe where a drink of cold water was the first line of defense against any trauma.

"I'm fine," he said.

"Have one anyway," she said, thinking he was in no position to judge.

"Thank you," he said, and took the glass and went to sit at the table with it.

But there was an unseen piece of boiled carrot on the floor from the night before and Brzozow stepped directly onto it. It was

only a tiny piece, not enough to actually slip on. But it was big enough to cause him to slightly slide his foot, about a quarter of an inch. The movement, barely enough to notice, did force him to plop down in the chair at an unintended angle. Still nothing worth mentioning. Yet that minor adjustment threw his balance off just enough so that he slammed the glass down on the table a tad too hard. Water splashed up out of the glass. A small bead hit him smack in the nostril at the precise moment of an inhale. Brzozow snorgled, snorted, and coughed and closed his eyes as if to sneeze.

In that instant he was back thinking about the fractals and haptic space and how they applied to the movement of the water in time. Now motional frames in L-dynamic grids came to mind. Before you could say neocalculus, if you could say it at all, he was assigning gradient loci to all the variables and thinking how to apply this to a tactile geofrom and use a textural differential to incave the results.

This was big, he thought.

Very big.

It changed everything.

And most of all, it changed what happened next.

In visual space you could see things coming. It was all laid out from near to far. Past, present, future...neat as a pin. But in tactile space everything that was happening was happening right now. All around. That was the implication of his insight. If he was right, and he knew he was, then this view of the world was wrong. Above all, time was wrong. The future was an illusion, a ghost in the photons. Prediction, expectation, hope and probability, would all have to all be reconsidered, pressed through the filter of his new tangible math.

Even chance itself was in question here. Because it too was an artifact of the rational, seeing mind. What if chance was only the name the impatient gave to a wealth of clues? All those long shots, near misses, close calls, and chances both good and fat and slim. What if chance itself was riddled with the bias of first this, then that? What if all the likelihoodlums were wrong and things in the end really could be known? Known right now, the way you could feel the pressure of the air and the pull of the center of the

earth? Then all the quantum randomites, who can never say anything more than maybe and maybe not, would have to bite their tongues!

Amazing.

Yes, he thought. It could be. The numbers suggested it! And it felt delicious in his mind. Everything old was new again. The relativity of time and space, the uncertainty of measurement, the incompleteness of all formal systems. Einstein, Heisenberg, Godel. It was all the same dreary story. We're not as hoop-de-do as we think. There are restrictions, limits, chains on what we can know. Year by year we were getting smaller in the cosmos, until one day our very existence would come into doubt. How many human beings could you fit on the head of pin...that was the real question. But this! This was something grand and great. This was proof -- real mathematical proof -- that everything could be known. That existence, this complexity of quantum gravity string vibrations, had a center and that we were it. Knowing was being...or was it the other way around? Well, all that could be figured out later.

And somehow he, Brzozow with the water up his nose sitting in that kitchen in Brooklyn, could see a glimpse of how this might be tackled. It would combine crucial elements of metric gravitation, elementary dual-resonance, the Lorenz transformations of course, topographic structuralism, formal system paradox, maybe even that vague reference to transcendent fluxions in Newton's *Principia*. It would mean coming up with a new idea of space and time and how they fold around consciousness like an angel being made. You might almost call it a kind of miracle theory...

At which point, to be helpful, Melia, a book editor who had worked on *Home Remedies for the Home* and suddenly remembered what to do, slapped him firmly on the back.

"Huh???" he gasped.

"You were choking," she said sweetly.

"I wasn't...I was...thinking."

"Nonsense darling, you were choking. You had some water up the nose."

“No...it was...”

“You’re fine now,” she decided and went into the bedroom.

“No, I was thinking...thinking...something.”

But as quickly as it had come, the something was gone again. There was just too much all at once to keep intact with open eyes. And without paper to write on or a blackboard to scrawl on, the whole complex fuss went scattering like the frailest of thoughts in a good stiff wind.

Melia in the bedroom was preparing for the night. She peeled off her dress and girdle and let her skin breathe again. Brzozow, for his part, sat in the silence of the night kitchen for a while trying to recall what he had been thinking about exactly. Numbers bounced in his head like bubbles in a glass of seltzer, impossible to pin down. There were glimmers and glints of a TOE, a theory of everything, but these had become effervescent and momentary. Nothing he could actually sink his teeth into. And besides, the screen was on now and there was news about the storm, and the neighbors were fighting, and a plane was flying overhead on its way to Florida, and there was a cat or something in the alley tearing through the garbage.

And whatever it was that had enthralled him all day was there no more.

Brzozow getting up noticed the piece of carrot on the floor. An accident waiting to happen, he muttered, and he picked it up and dropped it into the trashcan. He put the glass back in the sink. Through the doorway he could see Melia putting on her nightgown and the pale skin of her thigh before the curtain of the fabric dropped over it. She would be warm in the bed tonight and smell of clean carpets. The mountain of her body would fill the space between his arms.

Something to look forward to.

And he began to open the buttons of his shirt as he turned off the light and went to bed, never looking back.

Not So Distant Stars

By the time that Egon Lincoln arrived on Titan, most of the surface had already been mapped. Of the dozens of moons, mini-moons, micromoons, and moonlets orbiting Saturn, Titan was the prize and it did not take long to explore, claim, and even to litter it in the name of humanity. Just like Earth.

One piece of debris, a robotic camera, was left where it went dead by an earlier mission as a kind of marker, a stake in the discovery it made. This was a small gesture in the grand scheme of things since what the robot found had already been there for millions of years.

The first images back to the colony were shocking but soon gave way to analysis and study. There in the middle of a craggy plain under the far stars was a dome, perfectly black and smooth, about the width of a truck tire. Holowaves, spectral scanning, and even an unmanned archeoprobe could not reveal anything more. It was no doubt the first sign of alien intelligence yet seen in our solar system but whether it was a device or a sentinel or a bomb or a doorway was yet to be determined. For that they needed to send someone, a person, and that was Egon Lincoln's job.

There had been other moments. Hopeful ones in which Egon used his semiotic skills to determine if some discovered scrap had been created by other sentient beings. Scratches on a cavern wall on Ganymede that were actually etched by a plasma river. A complex geometric pattern on the surface of Europa that turned out to be formed by exo-fungi. There was life out there all right, but none of it smart. Until now. Maybe.

In spite of this, as he rode the rover to the dome, Egon knew that he carried the hope of the world with him. The silent wish that all the problems among humans might diminish in light of finding others out there with answers. This was a great weight he carried but there was more. His own private yearnings, for

example, to make a difference, to find something monumental, something that might erase his years of disappointment. To finally have his life of searching and probing mean something. To matter in some way.

As he left the rover and finally stood before the dome, Egon tried to control his anticipation, to stifle his hunger. It was hard to be objective with his pulse racing. Besides, he knew very well that nature was herself an architect, capable of producing the most astonishing structures through natural forces or even by using the simplest of critters. Just because it looked engineered, even beautifully so, did not mean that someone somewhere made this thing.

He had plenty of equipment on his rover but he liked to rely on his intuition first. And so he rather casually walked over to the dome and got down on his knees before it. It was nothing more than a half-sphere, about three feet tall and four feet wide. It loomed larger in the images. In the sheen of the black surface he could see his own reflection and the craggy terrain behind him. That surface was pristine, no dents or markings. It did not glow or vibrate or, as he knew from previous measures, emit any kind of energy at all.

Egon closed his eyes and placed his hands on the surface of the dome, as if to commune with it. As if touching it might unlock it in some way or at least give him a feeling about it one way or another. Which might have been a ridiculous gesture except for one thing...it worked.

In an instant, Egon felt taken over by some force. Not a physical presence, but a cognitive one. As though his consciousness – which, like all of us, he felt that he proudly owned – was now being leased by someone else. As when dreaming and here, alone on a lonely rock, on his knees and touching a mysterious dome, Egon Lincoln dreamed. But not just a dream, an envisioning.

He dreamed the story of the whole universe, as though floating above a great city that was time itself, with lights like lives and shadows like fate, and streams of energy slithering through and through.

In his mind's eye, he vividly saw the spark of being, glowing like an ember in a purple sea of nothing-to-see. Then the molten stars forming and the galaxies expanding, the great spinning that holds space in its thrall. He saw the churning whorls that wound around baby stars and watched the earth congeal from dusty dust. The iron core, the foggy brew, and the sea like a vast expanding. He thought to disconnect himself but the dream was too stunning to end and so he held on.

The heat of the water rose and from a kind of molecular bath he saw viruses form, then cells piling onto cells, the great architecture of life forming, and the sponges and the starfish, and all of it pushed up from the mire by the force unseen, unnamed.

As though history itself had been unloosed, Egon saw in his guided dream the worms and their hopes for enlightenment, then the fish with their willing wanting, and then the lizards, so noble and stern, come to rule the earth. And the mammals were born and love was new and the dinosaurs with their pride in families and their bulky sense of duty, and the eons passed, millions of years but only a gasp in the breath of life. And only a single blink in this dream.

Soon humans walked the earth and all the varied, troubled, wondrous, tragic ages of men and women dawned and dusked. From mud to brick to wood to steel to titanium to solid hydrogen, civilizations sparked like quarks, and all the multitudes that passed though all the way to the New Birth and beyond.

He dreamed through to the Second Age of China and the Seventh Eon beyond Nation States, and the Great Exodus and the Aftermath. In time came the Transition when the Gan came to power, and Burgeners, Solomon cities, and the rise of the Cenidae, their passion, their sublime cathect of sympathy. And on and on the dream went dreamily into the Ages of Derbil and Selestum and the three Danidey and the Kill and the Alpha and then the great Stepping-into-the-Pale-Corridor, and beings and worlds he could not name without the right sounds for them.

Egon stirred as a sound intruded – a signal from home base - but he did not move or wake and saw things he could never have

dreamed of dreaming. Of the Minos bearers and the Melarians and their bright winter wars, and of the Windwater, the great Whisper Kingdom from the far star, the carrier of the quantumRose, and the soldier poets of Ei814...all this he saw as clearly as a wish in a child's wonder.

He dreamed of the time beyond people, of the ghostbeings in their touchless towers and he heard the music of their holophony, so spicy yet so tender. And then the Soulburst and the New Beginning. And the ages of the conscious mind came and went like birds winging, and all the planets were washed clean and storms rose and softened the plains and new truths were born. The dark matter turned to light and then dark again through many cycles.

Past the edges of the cosmos, he dreamed into the realm of the Nebulae and the billions of ocean worlds, when thought became matter and light could be held in the hand and used to sing. There at the very end of the collapsing cosmos, he could detect a distant understanding and the acceptance of time itself as an infolding embrace.

And when the final branes colloid and all of it all came tumbling back, back and back and back into a single pointpin of all there was and ever will be, life itself all enwrapped and enriddled, the final move by the starmaker to begin again, the something that comes from absolute nothing...even then the dream did not end.

Because that very point, smaller than the smallest notion, a mere speck in the swoon of sooner-or-later, became the impetus for a new conception, another theory of thing and thought, and in a moment that took no time at all, without hesitation and full of will, it exploded in light and heat and expanded and bloomed and then it started once more, the begin and the become all over again. New day, new universe, world without end, amen.

When he woke up, he was lying on the ground before the dome and he realized that he must have broken the connection and passed out. Or maybe it was the other way around.

He saw then just what the dome was. It was an encyclopedia of the universe, a timeline of time itself, placed here by some vast intelligence, some future iteration of humanity perhaps. An

immense telling, way beyond his own ability to grasp yet for the first time in a long time, he felt at peace. There was no hint of even his own finely tuned frustration. It seemed to him in his heart and in his oneness, as well as it can seem to any dim dreamer, that everything was just what it was, that life was endless and edgeless and eternally reforming. And that any human being was only an eensy-weensy instant in a perpetual cosmos.

Sitting there on the skin of a moon of an outer planet in one of a billion universes, feeling his own heartbeat lost in the indifferent and majestic scheme of time, he knew he was less than he ever imagined. But somehow this understanding filled him not with despair but with joy. He was alive, right then and there, and he knew it. Breathing, feeling, knowing. And that was all that mattered for him to matter at all.

He looked up at the sky and thought for once that the stars up there were not so distant after all.

The Time Phone

Okay, so they were wrong about the whole black hole thing.

All of them, wrong as could be, from Einstein way on down to Infinistein.

While it was true that no matter could escape from a black hole, some kinds of energy could. Microwaves for instance. All you had to do was pack the energy into quanta that resonated at the same rate as the singularity of the hole and bingo!...the packet went through.

Yup, went right through and came out at the other end in some other time and place in the old continuum. You could cheat history that way but only with a wink and a smirk. No stealing the Crown Jewels, no taking the bullet for Lincoln, no going down with the Titanic, none of that stuff. In fact, you could not transport atoms at all. So much for science fiction.

But here's the thing...you could send a carrier wave through and piggyback it with sound vibrations, assuming the frequencies meshed.

See what it all means? No? It means that the geniuses had come up with a time tunnel for phone calls.

A time phone.

Well all of that costs plenty you can be sure. So the fat cats, the big boys, the high and the mighty...they were all using time phones to improve their futures. To get richer, younger, or smarter faster than the following day. But the rest of us poor dopes? Well, let's just say that time phones were not going to be on sale at the mall any time soon.

So it was with a real sense of destiny that I gawped at the time phone once I had it in hand. How it came into my possession is a long story not worth telling, and not exactly above indictment either, but let's just say that I did not get a sales receipt and leave it at that.

Once I had the phone, my plan was simple. I knew that I could not call into the past and change anything that had already happened. Time paradox, kill your own father and all that crap. So here was my scam plain and simple...I would use the phone to call ahead to myself a few hours into the future. If my timing was right, that would be just enough time, the way I saw it, to find out the winning lottery numbers from myself and play those very numbers back in hometime, that is my current time, and get rich real quick.

Not too dumb, right? I might even be so bold as to use the word foolproof.

So in Time One, let's call it -- meaning now, my time, the present moment -- I called ahead to myself on the phone, just a few hours into the future, after the numbers had been posted. Sure enough my future self answered the phone as I knew he would since the plan had already been put into action relative to his time frame. He recited the winning numbers to me. I wrote them down carefully, thanked him -- that is, me -- profusely and then went downstairs to a local store to buy the ticket. Puffed up with inevitability, I came back and waited for the numbers to be announced.

I was already planning all the stuff I would buy with my new fortune starting with the z's -- from glitz to girlz -- when I had the first shock.

The numbers were wrong.

I could not believe that and so I must have checked them a dozen times. But it was true. The lottery came and went and I had one of the losing tickets. The numbers I had given myself were all wrong.

I wracked my brain to figure out how that could have happened. Had I misread, misheard, miswritten? But no, that was not the case. I was very careful about all that and had spoken clearly and slowly, and double and even triple-checked. And so I came to the only possible answer to the puzzle.

I had obviously lied to myself.

That is, just to be perfectly clear here, my future self had not given my present one the correct winning numbers in spite of the fact that he -- that is, I -- must have known them. Now people lie to

themselves all the time. Me too, I guess, like when I catch myself in the mirror and think better about what I see than I have a right to. But why would I lie to myself about this? What was there to gain by not letting myself win the lottery, which was the entire plan in the first place?

It simply did not make any sense at all, but by the time I thought all this through it was time for me to answer the phone. In other words, my present self had passed into Time Two, let's call it, and there I was waiting for my past self in Time One to call up and get the numbers. I was just about to look them up when I realized that I already had the correct winning numbers in hand. I had looked them up back in Time One which of course is how I knew that I had picked the wrong ones. All this time shifting stuff can get a little oozy. But no matter. I had the right numbers now so I stood by the phone ready to give them to my past Time One self all hopeful at the other end of the line.

But then I got to thinking.

Even though I had the correct numbers, I had not given them to myself back there in Time One. Why? There had to be a damn good reason why I would lie about this. Something must have happened in the interim, that thin wedge of time between getting the right numbers and answering the phone, that changed my plans. Something big. Something that convinced me to lie about the whole thing. But what could it have been? So far nothing had come up and the phone was about to ring. So I figured that only the future held the secret, as it always does since the future always explains the past.

That's when I came up with a new plan. Just before answering the phone with the correct numbers in hand, I decided to call myself the next day to find out what had gone wrong. The Time Three me, in other words, who was one step beyond all this silliness, must have known the reason that the Time Two me – the current me, so to speak -- lied to Time One.

Well guess what? I placed the call and found that I was right!

After putting me on hold for an impolite amount of time, my future Time Three self explained it all very clearly. He told

me that after winning the lottery with the correct numbers, I was robbed as I tried to cash it in and killed for that very ticket. A dismal murder too, front page news, buckets of gore. Yeech! I could never stand the sight of blood and I -- all my selves in fact -- knew that.

So there it was. That is why my Time Two self lied...to prevent my Time One self from buying the winning ticket and getting killed.

What a relief!

It meant at least that I wasn't going schizo on myself or acting out some masochistic nuttiness. I was simply protecting myself. It made perfect sense and as soon as I hung up the phone, it began to ring. I answered knowing that it was my Time One self asking for the lottery numbers. I could hear the yearning, the desperation, in his -- I mean, my -- voice but what could I do? I couldn't tell him what was going to happen because, knowing him as I did with that coy intimacy with which one can only know oneself, I knew that he was stubborn and would try to figure out a way around it. Suppose he made up his own numbers and hit the jackpot just by chance? Then he would be killed for the ticket and he and I and all of us would be doomed. I had to act selfishly here, you see? So I made up a bunch of fake numbers and gave them to my Time One dupe. He suspected nothing and seemed so excited about the future as he thanked me profusely that I could barely sleep that night for all the guilt I felt.

But I did fall asleep and awoke to the phone ringing again. Dazed and confused, I wondered if the whole thing had been a dream. Had I already asked for and given the lottery numbers or had I imagined the whole thing? Then I realized that it was not the lottery hopeful calling at all. Time had passed and I was now my Time Three self. The ringing phone meant that it was my Time Two self calling me in his present to find out why I -- I mean to say why he -- had lied about the lottery numbers to our original self.

But here's the problem, at least as it presented itself to me in my semisleep.

Since it was already Time Three and I obviously did not win

the lottery the day before, no one had killed me for the ticket. All well and good. The past led to the future. But since I did not in fact win and therefore no one had killed me – here I was a living loser after all -- what proof was there to support the murder theory? The phone was ringing from a fellow – my perturbed self in Time Two – waiting for an explanation and I didn't have one. I did not have any information about winning or losing or being killed or anything. All I had was a slight headache.

Yet apparently I was about to answer the phone and talk about my own murder of all things! How did I ever come up with such a tale? Had I gotten drunk or dumb or loony in the next interim? The whole thing seemed preposterous to me. How would I know about it anyway? I only knew what there was to know based on what did happen, not on what did not. The past was my past as it presented itself, not some buffet of possibilities. So the way I saw it now – I mean then at that moment with the phone ringing – was that there was no story to tell, no murder at all, and therefore no reason for me in Time Three to tell my Time Two self to lie to my Time One self.

Unless there was such a reason. But what could it be?

There was only one way to find that out and, naturally, it did not make things any simpler. I answered the phone, then immediately put my Time Two self on hold and called ahead. Yes, called ahead to my Time Four self to see if there was any reason that I – me, that is, my present Time Three self – should make up this cockamamie story about being murdered.

My Time Four self, answering the phone, was more than a bit ticked off. Maybe the whole rigmarole was getting to me – to him I mean – or maybe I – he – was really losing his – my – mind. In any case, hissing with contempt, my Time Four self explained the whole thing to me. To tell you the truth, I could not really follow the entire line of argument. I was getting a little lost in the old maze of happenstance here. But the gist of it was this...my future Time Four self had realized that time had passed and he – the future me – obviously had not won the lottery. That at least was a rock solid fact and there was no way around it. But it was still the future and he – I – was as hard up for cash as before. And the

only way that could be the case is if the numbers we had picked had been wrong in the first place.

With me so far? I hope so because I was hanging on by the slimmest of threads.

Now the only way the numbers could have been wrong was if I had given myself incorrect ones. Why would I do that, my future self mused out loud? He waited impatiently for me to answer but I didn't have a clue and said so. Disdain dripping from his voice, he explained that the only excuse for me to be giving out the wrong numbers was to accomplish the past. In other words, I had not won the lottery, obviously, and therefore had to lie to myself to make that the case, ipso facto.

The only way to get the numbers wrong, he said, assuming you had a time phone, was to lie about them. And obviously, I had gotten the numbers wrong. So obviously I had to lie. The future depends on the past.

I hardly had the energy to argue my case and in any case, was not at all sure who I was arguing for or against. Even so, all that did not explain the murder story. Where did that come from?

My Time Four self went over that theory rather quickly because he was afraid my Time Two self, on hold in the time phone and waiting for an explanation, would get fed up and disconnect. Then where would we be? What he said was that I had to come up with a clever lie that would absolutely convince my earlier self back in Time Two not to question the deceit. If he doubted the numbers, or my motives, and made up his own instead, who knows what could have happened? Therefore, Time Four said coldly, I had to lie and my previous self had to lie in order to make the future come out the way it, in fact, did.

I was tired and bobbled and in no condition to argue, so I quickly came up with the murder story and felt pretty good about protecting my self – all my selves – from the quirks of occurency.

Which was all fine and dandy until some time passed and I became my Time Four self with this very theory, answering the phone to a rather irritating chap I knew to be my own contrary self in Time Three looking for reasons for the deception. But I did not really have any good ones. I knew the whole line of attack of

course. My Time Four self had explained it all to my Time Three. But here I was having become my Time Four, knowing the call was about to come in, and I was suddenly filled with doubt. Did it all really have to depend on the way things finally worked out? What of free will? What of alternate futures? What if you did change what happened...then what? Maybe I would be here in the present rich as a king, laughing at my ability to bend fate itself to my own desires.

I had my doubts about all of it, the doubts included, of course. But by then I understood something that all timecallers come to know, I suppose. That the future leads to the past and not the other way around. In other words, the answer, the resolution, to what is happening now is always to be found once it has already happened in the future. That is the only way the universe perseveres.

The upshot?

I called ahead to Time Five to see if anything had happened that established once and for all that this entire cunning argument made sense and that I was indeed lying to save myself. Needless to say, something had. At least it certainly seemed so to my Time Five self. I tried to counter his entire line of reasoning, hoping to convince him to convince me to drop this theory and let me win the lottery after all. I thought that I was presenting my case rather forcefully but we got into an argument and the bastard hung up on me. I had no choice but to wait until I had passed into Time Five and then call ahead to Time Six to resolve the dispute.

I think you can pretty much guess what happened next. My Time Six enlisted the aid of Time Seven who...

Rather than lay out all the sordid details, suffice it to say that questions and answers, and theories and lies and accusations and arguments continued in endless phone calls to the point that I no longer knew what time frame I was in or even who I was anymore.

In no time flat – a terrible misnomer since as you can see it's bumpy as hell -- I was having conversations with my future selves well into the next year. And with each call I was getting more annoyed at bothering myself constantly with questions about what to do yesterday to correct past effects of future consequences that

had not happened yet! Eventually this whole debacle went way beyond the lottery numbers and into marriage plans, financial investments, health decisions, even where to stand on a particular day to avoid getting flattened by a concrete block that would fall off a construction site according to a future news report.

I had no one else to blame, of course. I alone was responsible for the whole mess and I must admit that things got quite a bit worse when I realized that the time phone allowed you to make conference calls.

Soon my whole life had become the calls and nothing but. There was little time left for anything else. Nothing could be done or decided upon or pursued without opening up an incessant chain of phone calls. Talk about decision by committee! You can't imagine what these were like...battles and debates, theories and counter-theories, name-calling and bruised egos, and lies and mistrust all around, backwards, forwards, then, now, and forever.

Finally one day, I had had enough. I remember it clearly because I was standing by the window and listening to the cacophony of voices all jumbled and jivey in the phone and I just could not take it anymore. So I opened the window and heaved the phone out. I could still hear all the voices nattering as I watched it fall like a dead bird all the way to the pavement where it smashed into a gazillion shards of plastic and microchipery.

It was a beautiful sight.

And sound there was none.

Good riddance, I thought to myself. Yes, goodbye to the lottery but farewell too to that mire of wanting and trying and lying. Goodbye to the sheer contention of it all. It was quiet again and I saw this in my mind's eye as a kind of resolution, a shuddering of all my time selves back into one neat, solitary, momentary, pack of me...here now, right now, unburdened by the future.

It was a marvelous feeling.

Even better than winning the lottery.

But I think you can understand now why, when my phone – my regular cell phone – started ringing, I broke out into a cold panicky sweat.

Coasting Towards Sedna

He is sitting near the window, looking out onto the empty spot into which the hovertram will float when it arrives in a few minutes. From my position, I can only see him from the rear, only make out the contour of his left cheek and the furrow of hair over his ear. He could easily be any one of a number of older men with hair yellowing, skin crinkling, brown spots on the neck. The gray thermion pants that he is wearing could belong to any geezer of his generation. Yet the short-sleeved white shirt with the under-shirt showing through make him look not so much like anyone as an ad for the latest senior cruise to the Moon.

But despite all this, something tells me that this is not just a stranger staring out the window of the waiting area. Not just any older man.

It is him. I know it is. In fact, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind.

But how can it be? It defies the laws of levity. And why is he here now, taking the solarsail, of all things, to the outer planets? Where could he be going?

To Sedna like me?

Impossible.

I am going there to study soil...or dirt depending on one's sensibility. To Sedna, one of the hundreds of new planets now known to swirl around the sun. Unknowable Sedna, with its wild ten thousand year orbit. Sedna where heat is a rumor and light a rare but succulent dream. There is nothing there, of course, how can there be so far from any center? But I am drawn there nonetheless. Perhaps the secret to life on earth is buried beneath the dust. Or something even grander. That is what I am looking for... secrets, grandeur. And also, in the dim beam at the edge of the solar system, I hope to write some poetry that is not about loss.

Yes, I know very well where I am going and why. Or thought

I knew. But now, his sudden appearance has thrown everything into question, all filed under Y. Why him, why here, why now? I cannot answer these since none of this makes any sense.

Something is very wrong, I know that much. But it is empty there in the hovertram station and silent as a conclusion. Am I the only one who wonders? He certainly does not look upset or even in doubt. He is simply sitting and waiting. There is no one else in the room besides the two of us. This is lucky because it gives me time to prepare, to approach at my own speed, to gather my wits and my whats. Without this pause, I would not be able to swallow the scream perched at the edge of my throat.

The undershirt he is wearing reminds me that when I was little, I used to go into his bedroom every morning to watch him dress. He did everything in the exact same order, day in and day out. Glasses, shorts, socks, shoes, undershirt, shirt, neurolinks, tie, pants, smartwallet, a gold key chain, then the folded handkerchief. This was fascinating to me and also comforting in some strange way. The repetition itself seemed to me like a kind of philosophy of life. Maybe an antidote to the daily threat of biowar back then, or to the cruel uncertainties of fourth grade.

Without knowing it I suppose, in his way, he proved to me that life goes on in the tiny details. And I have used that in my own life – the microbial grids for example – but also by becoming an accountant to indignities when I had to. I always meant to thank him for that little lesson but of course I never did. It was one of those many things you never get around to doing. But I wonder if I should? Thank him, that is, now that he is here. I consider this for a moment but in retrospect it seems so minor all these years later. Not worth dredging up in light of this bizarre opportunity. Then a brief flicker in the photonics knocks the whole memory into oblivion.

I step forward and the floor squeaks under my foot. Barely hearing this, he turns slightly, bringing more of his profile into view. It is a familiar profile, so memorable, so touchable, even though I have not seen it in forty years.

Somewhere in my family album there is a holo of him when

he was a model. At least that is what everyone says. You never know, given the way family stories bloom from the merest tattle. The image I have in mind must have been taken in the 2020s; a studio shot showing a pleasant looking young man in a straw hat. Not what I would call handsome but it was taken at another time when a different style of face was in. More cheeky, more boyish. Still, I like the thought that he was considered handsome. It means something about me genewise, I imagine. Standing there behind him and recalling all this, I realize that I never told him that either. Never thanked him for the genes, the good ones I mean. Face gene, order gene, and the one that shielded me from pneumonia. All those unsayings that hang like pauses.

It occurs to me that I should apologize now that I have this weird second chance. And not just about the photo but plenty of other goofs too. All those times I refused to let him kiss me good-night because I was too big for that. And the time I got fed up with him trying to teach me to throw a baseball and yelled at him. So many things. All the ways sons insult their fathers by being their own men and not necessarily better ones.

Could I make up for that now? Perhaps.

And so I take one more step closer to him. From this position, I can suddenly see my own reflection in the window but he does not seem to notice it. He is looking through the surface not at it. I stop in my tracks. What am I doing? An apology makes no sense at all. I mean...I was just a kid when these things happened. What did I know? And would he even remember these awkward moments? Did they even matter to him as they apparently did and do to me?

I notice his hand as he places it on the window. And that clinches it, that hand. He is my father all right. I would know that hand anywhere. The firm wrist with the wide wrist knob, the square mitt, the rounded fingertips, the thick coarse skin. Patches of hair on the knuckles. Just before I went to sleep most nights he used to close my eyelids by gently slipping his hand down over my eyes. I liked that. My first dreams of the night were always solid, of things with weight and force. Planets, cars. Good dreams, boy dreams, where you know what's what and who you are.

Maybe I became a planetarian because of those hands, because of him. He was the one, after all, who put the stick-on solar system in my room. As it glowed at night, I would drift off into sleep and he would proudly name the nine planets all set out in their neat orbits. Mercury, Venus, Earth, and the rest. Did he know just how much that would influence me later on? I doubt it. Fathers, I suppose, know little about what will last. Sons either, come to think of it.

When I finally pull up alongside of him, as bluntly as a gob, he seems to perk up and notice me. A transport passes by on its way out of the terminal and the helios glint off his glasses. He turns towards me and I can see his complete face. Incredibly, he has not changed a bit. Same old pair of morphing glasses with the titanium frame; same firm ridge of the nose; same rounded cheeks and thin tan lips. His white hair still has a straw-colored tint and still smells of Celestium. It occurs to me that I could breach the silence simply by asking him if they still make the stuff somewhere. Luckily I catch myself. Idiot! Your father is here, right now. Your own father whom you have not seen since you were a small boy. The continuum has opened up along a fault line and he is — impossibly, incredibly — here right now. You can ask him anything you want, anything you have ever wanted to ask. Secrets of the shadow world. And all you can come up with is the odor of regened hair goo? Pathetic!

He smiles but says nothing and standing there looking at him again so close, I cannot even recall the sound of his voice. I begin to hope that he does not say anything, although it seems like he might. What if he squeals? Or sounds like a crook? Or has a lisp? I only knew him as the man I needed him to be, the father. Who he was exactly is another matter.

I too am speechless but only because there are too many words welling. A lifetime of questions that all went unasked. After all, we hardly talked much; that must have been a rule about fathers and sons. We played catch behind the museum as the wind whipped the ochre dust of the lot into my eyes. We went i-fishing that time upstate that I cried about killing the worms and made a nuisance of myself. We went to West Point and he took holos of

me sitting on the cannon. Our entire relationship was a handful of stereocards. As a matter of fact, I cannot recall having a single conversation with him. We were just together once, a father and his son, and that was how we knew each other.

I suppose it was enough because it had to be because that was the way it was.

Yet now, a whole lifetime later, I feel burdened with questions. What was his life like? Did he like himself? Was he afraid? Did he have a secret? Did he betray his dreams? But the bottleneck in my throat prevents even one of these from emerging. All that comes out is one word, flat as a pancake, with no urgency at all.

Dad?

No reaction.

He is staring right at me but does not seem to recognize me at all. An awkward moment but then it hits me...of course not! How could he recognize me? He has never seen me as a man so how could he know who I am? I am as old now as he was when I was his little boy. No, it's odder than I thought. I shall have to introduce myself, I conclude with perfect turvy-topsy illogic. But should I also shake his hand...or hug him? What would that feel like? I can call up the impression of his body but only vaguely, like a tune half forgotten. I remember some sensations but not others. He did not lean in but let me do the caressing. He had firm muscles but a delicate touch. You could not feel his bones but he was warm.

What to do next? Should I touch him, scold him, question him, thank him? I'm sorry, I feel like saying, but about what I am not at all sure. Perhaps that there are only memories left and too few to bear any weight. Like an atmosphere dissipating. Or are there actually too many memories? The time he got his finger stuck in the car door and cried like a baby; watching the ballgame with him on Sundays as he drank milk with crumbled crackers; the toy maglev trains he used to buy for me; lighting a neutra-cigarette with his gold lighter.

Or maybe I am just sorry that he did not live long enough

to be proud of me. But no, that is not it. What I am sorry about is that he did not live long enough to know that I cared if he was proud of me.

Of course, maybe he would not have been. Maybe he wished I had studied the market rather than the planets or become a ball-player or a salesman. No matter. By this point, the whole thing is getting quite ridiculous. The two of us there together, beyond time and space, and not saying anything. Like two talkers struggling not to talk. Downright loony. Some sort of cosmic joke I am sure but does he get it too? I do remember that he could be silly, tell jokes about visitors using funny voices. Or explain that aperitifs were two robbers working together. A joke would break the ice for certain but I do not know any. I am a somber fellow, student of the dust. And right on cue that moment passes too as a voice announces the arrival of the solarsail into the dock. The hovertram will be here in a few minutes and time – this extra little slice of timeless time – will soon slip into the continuum like a hum.

I sit down in the seat across from him. He follows me with his hazel eyes, my eyes. The truth is, I really did not know him very well. Most of my memories of him come from stories at holidays or my mother talking about him long after he was gone. Or family pictures. Like the one in which he is holding me just after I was born. He is bare-chested, his thick waist fitting firmly into the fluted rim of his trousers. He is facing sideways to the camera and there is a look of pride in his profile. He is holding me up and out, the way one would examine the label of a fine champagne. I cannot be more than a few weeks old there, his hand is under my head, all held and looked at. All held. Everyone said he was so proud to be a father but who knows what they meant by it. People say things. Yet...maybe you can see something like it in that picture. I take it out every so often; it was the last time I was looked at for no better reason than that I was me.

I realize that I love him for that picture alone and I want desperately to tell him so. But words are weak, ghosts of the feelings. And I know that blurting them out now, here in this way station to the galaxy, will sound stupid and trite. I want him to know that in

hollow moments I think of being loved by him like that in that one snapshot instant and find a fulfillment there. But I cannot say this. This is all internal, personal. It is a fiction I have made to suit my sense of myself. Who knows which parts of it are true? Or if any of it would matter to him?

And what is there to say really? After all, he lived his life and I live mine. Even his planets are different from mine. He had only nine, all laid out in their neat orbits, the stately solar waltz, the sing-song names. But the world was simpler then. The world is always simpler then. Now things are more confounding. There are the five inner hardrocks...Mercury, Venus, Earth, the Remnants, and Mars. Then there are the four medial gasbags...Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune. And then there are the outer eccentrics...Pluto and Sedna and Quaoar and the rest. And after that, the hundreds of known contenders of the Kuiper belt with names like Ziusudra and Nemed and Pitteri Pennu. So many planets now that they had to dip into nether mythologies, far-flung gods and goddesses, to name them all. And at the far reaches of the solar dent, unknown thousands of whirls and worlds in the great Oort cloud.

Comets, asteroids, resonant objects, scattered planetoids...it is a churning solar system now, full of destinations, debris, and doubt. He would know none of this. Our worlds barely touched, like dimensions slipping by.

The seats are close and our knees are almost touching.

The day he died, I watched him put on his glasses, shorts, socks, and all the rest. Then I went to school and then I came home. And nothing was the same thereafter. The house was dark, the screen silent, and my mother all drained and the air was chill and I was ten years old and my father was dead and I dreamed of coasting towards Sedna and finding secrets in its thick, dark, ancient soil.

Now, in the hovertram station, as the solarsail gently floats above us, he leans towards me and lowers his bottom lip as if to speak. His teeth are yellow, just like before. I hold my breath. What a fool I have been! Such a moment and all I can think about is what I should say. How selfish! Perhaps he has returned because

he has something momentous to say to me...like a whisper or a warning. I used to think that everything I did not know about life, the things other men must know, resulted from him dying too soon. Finer points about the art of baseball, how to seduce women, or how to sell yourself or buy a hyperbond. Man stuff. I was angry with him about that for years. There were many times when I could have used some help.

I wait but words never leave his lips. The silence is as deep as the chasm in time that separated us.

My turn again and I suddenly know what to do. Here is what I decide to say:

Forget all the questions unanswered, the things unsaid, the memories lost. It all comes down to this. I have missed you for my whole life, never gotten over your death, never come to terms with you never coming back. I have lived with a hole in my hope since then. But I also know this...I know about the mangle of orbits, and the teeming universe, and the membrane that holds it all together. I have seen that each life is its own knit of questions and answers and that you lived in your warp and I lived in mine.

What could he tell me – then or now -- that I could not think of myself? He was a man who had a life and died from it. What else is there to know? And finally, in the empty station, I realize just what to do. It is now clear as a bell.

Nothing. That's it. I have nothing to say, nothing to ask, nothing to apologize for. Nothing at all.

The hovertram arrives and bright helios pour into the small waiting room, creating new ridges and shadows on his face. I see now that without noticing, without paying specific attention to it, the moment is slipping away. It is passing like a trace. I try to keep it with me, to hold it, but it is no use. It is out of my control. He is vanishing, the seat behind him beginning to show through, his skin thin, then translucent, then vaporous. The light shifts, shadows warp, and the world goes on...but with changes. In a few seconds something that was not clear a moment ago can now be seen. And what once was, is now only a reflection.

Fully lit I can see him crisply for the first time. And I realize something that changes things considerably. This man getting up

to board the tram is not my father at all. In fact, from up close and with full illumination, it does not even resemble him very much. This man's face is wider, his eyes too weak, his nose pulpy. This is the face of a plumber or someone who tells long stories with no upshot. And the glasses he is wearing are not titanium anyway but only silver poly.

How can I have made such a mistake? Thank God I did not say anything! What would this dull fellow have made of me, all weepy and sincere, prattling on about baseballs and Celestium.

Other people arrive quickly and crowd around us as we approach the gate. Vacuum doors open and sounds skitter into the room from outside. New voices interrupt the stillness as travelers from the returning hovertram arrive and pour out through the doors. One of them greets him with a hug and he helps lift a bag. I close my eyes to block out the confusion and when I open them again, the sounds are gone, blown dust, and so is he.

I board the tram and it begins to ascend to the solarsail all billowy under the violet night sky. Sedna is up there, somewhere, and perhaps has secrets in its soil. I look back through the window to the station without regret, wondering what it was I was wondering a few moments before.

The iri

In the ninth month of her travels, Admira Tsen landed on a tiny planet somewhere near Proxima Centauri. The exact position of the planet was impossible to say since each day's discoveries altered the starcharts completely. Admira was used to this kind of uncertainty and was equally unfazed by the inhabitants she met there after landing.

They were a kindly race of humanoids, to be bluntly self-centered about it, with a rich culture and a distant history. As always – as an exoanthropologist – one of her main concerns was understanding how they saw their own beginnings. To what did they attribute their existence and how did this affect their way of being? It was a central part of her thesis about the common ways all sentient beings thought about the cosmos and their place in it. And so far, she was proving herself right.

This is the entry she made in the library based on the tale she was told by the inhabitants of PC127349:

In the beginning, long before we people ruled with our fear and our fearful technology, there were a Great People who lived and thrived on our world. These were the first ones, the new ones, the inaugural hopes of our species. They were delicate and perfect in their appearance, they knew no disease or deformity, they understood the world and accepted it on its own terms.

Our planet, as anyone who lived at that time would have known, was seeded by beings from another cosmos who came here to create a world. There is no name for these beings but in their tradition we will refer to them as the iri.

They were starfarers, these iri, and wanderers and seekers. They roamed the vastness and eventually came to this place and seeded it with their genetic substance and from these twisty seeds grew the Great People.

This was the way of the iri...to seed worlds and to observe the outcomes. They were not godlike but more like gardeners. Planting and watching, watering and studying. Not immortal or all-knowing, the iri were subject to fate themselves. Yet they were students of how things unfolded and were never strangers to the worlds they made. All of the Great People would have seen them and known them as their creators. In fact, the iri might even become too attached to one of their creations, which is the cause of the turmoil in this tale.

The iri were not actually separate beings but rather like aspects, like the separate voices we all have in our heads. For our purpose we can think of them as individuals with names and appearances but this would be just a storytelling convention. And following this conceit, we can speak of one of the iri named Aia, who was wise and curious, and who fell in love with one of the Great People whose name was Entu and who lived in a place known as the OneCity, a great metropolis at the center of the world.

Entu was tall and kind and was a friend to Aia but did not know the depth of her love for him. It came a time as the eons passed when the iri thought to shake things up to see what might happen. Thus came the idea to destroy the Great People of the world they had made in order to see what new crop of humans might emerge. To experiment with a Grand Replanting, you might say. The iri, powerful as they were, did not have the power to do this directly. But they could manipulate certain natural forces and so they arrived at a decision to create a flood and wash the surface clean of the people before starting again.

But Aia secretly felt sorry for her beloved Entu and could not bear the thought of losing him. Sworn to silence about the plan and therefore lacking the ability to save him by her own hand, she whispered to his house the idea of building a boat to sail over the rising sea. When Entu went to sleep that night, the house embraced him and squeezed his dreams so that when he awoke, it was with a sudden and undeniable vision of a great boat on a stormy sea. He did not have knowledge of the flood and so Entu

assumed that his boat would bring in a great bounty for all the people of the OneCity.

As he made his plans, his neighbors became curious about what he was up to and Entu answered as honestly as he could that in a dream he saw that the Great People would soon be surrounded by abundance, a wealth of fish, and generous rain. He did not himself know that the abundance would be floodwater and the fish would be within it and that the rain would spell their doom.

For many weeks and months Entu worked on his boat – a great grand ship in fact – the largest ever seen. He worked diligently with his family and fed his workmen like there was no tomorrow, which of course there would not be. But as the skies darkened and the work came to an end, a different vision appeared in Entu’s dreams...not bounty at all but a horrible storm that might wash away the world. He thought to warn his friends and neighbors but knew in a dark insight that it was too late. They could not all fit on the boat, great as it was, and would surely sink it to the bottom of the sea if they tried.

Entu understood what he had to do. He gathered onto his boat all the members of his family, and plants of all kinds, and all manner of animals, and his gold and silver, and a small group of merchants, craftsmen, teachers, and philosophers, and the books of his library. All the things needed to re-create a civil world when the floods had passed.

Then the storm began and raged, and winds and rain and hail swirled and whirled. The iri used their understanding of the laws of nature to whip it into a frenzy. It took all their combined powers working in unison to focus these dire energies, the forces of chaos and disorder, the quantum flux, the destructive powers of antimatter and dark energy. Only Aia refrained from joining in.

And all the while, Entu and his little community – his microcosm of the world – cowered in the holds of the boat and wondered what would become of them.

Power feeds power, we all know this to be true. And once unleashed, the powers of disaster have their own will. But even the iri misunderstood this since the forces they unleashed were

uncontrollable. Unwittingly they had opened a crack in the fabric that holds back disorder. Chaos reigned not just on the land but throughout the universe and soon it reached their own realm and threatened the iri themselves. In an instant they saw that they too were part of creation and had unleashed forces that would destroy them as well.

What have we done? they cried. How can we save ourselves? We are killing our children and in that killing, we are killing ourselves. How can we have been so blind?

Powerless to stop what they began, the iri cowered in their realm just as Entu and his family and friends did on their boat, just as the rest of the people were engulfed in the waves that washed everything away.

After a time, the storm subsided because no storm can last forever or the world would be a storm. That is a rule of life too. And the sky cleared and the waters began to recede. Entu awoke one morning to find his boat perched on a tiny island. In fact it had come to rest atop a mountain, the only one high enough to poke above the floodwaters. Had any other land been spared? Entu released a dove but the bird returned too soon. Then he released a swallow that could fly for much longer, but it too returned quickly. Finally, a raven left his hand and after many days it did not return and they decided it must have found land.

Plank by plank they dismantled Entu's great boat and they made smaller boats, and divided themselves accordingly, and set off to find larger islands on which to live and thrive again. But before finally leaving their tiny mountain island, they burned the bodies of those who had died during the journey.

The iri smelled this pyre and knew instantly that people had survived the flood. All their effort and planning had gone to waste, the experiment had failed, there would be no new beginning. They argued and debated this outcome for a long time, but then eventually turned to Aia since they knew her feelings for Entu and suspected that she had warned him.

In her defense, Aia made an eloquent plea. At fault was not her own feelings for Entu, she explained, because that was an out-

come of their work too. Instead it was the very notion of the flood. To destroy all of their creation was wrong since it would tell them nothing about the laws of life. To begin again would deny what they had begun in the first place. But to allow some to survive... that would continue the work they started. Only that would weed out the weak and allow the strong to go on. Is that not a better test of our seeding? she asked. Is that not the best test of all?

And she convinced them like that, even though in her heart, it was Entu she believed in, not her own twisty words.

And that is why no flood nor plague nor war nor unleashing of the forces of chaos will ever overtake the world. Because nothing would be learned and no truth would pass through.

The Dead Got It Good

I knew she was no good.

Sure I did. It was written all over her body. In bold italics, you might say. You couldn't miss it, not if you knew how to read. No, but you could sure play dumb. And that is just the way I played it. Dumb as a stump. Chose not to read the signs, I mean. I had my reasons. After all, I was fed up with the whole thing, the whole ubertext, this lousy script that had become my life. I was at that point, you know? That point where I was ready, willing, and able to play the patsy for some recelled blonde with a nip and tuck waist.

Boy was I at that point.

So when she walked in with that "sign up here, patsy" look on her smile, I did. Sign up that is. What the hell. I mean, what are patsies for anyway?

In retrospect, I was falling down dumb even before I lunged at her with my eyes. Before she even walked in the door. I could hear her Steelettos tap-tap-tapping all the way down the hall outside. That is one hell of a sound when you're all lonely and whimpering into the earhole on a bottle of bourbon. It sounded to me like some kind of erotic Morse code. Could just imagine the pair of glutes that would be swaying over her feet to make that racket. Glutes, you know? Gluteus maximus...ass muscles to you. Tap. Tap. Tap.

I'll tell you straight off...it wasn't just my cochlea that was perking up that evening.

So by the time she got to the outer door of my office, I was ready to pop my eardrum. She let herself in and put her hairy coat on the hook in the front room. Neomink I figured, from the hang of it, which meant she was loaded. They didn't kill minks anymore, they just sucked out their chromosomes and sold them by the ounce. As I watched her through the frosted glass on the

inner door to my office, I thought for a second about neatening up the joint, then thought about wrecking it. I did neither but just watched her silhouette enlarge as she walked closer, like fate coming.

She stood in the outer room for an eternity, maybe waiting for an invitation. But I was all out of invites. You know how it goes. One too many uninvited guests crashing my party, you see? So I watched while she adjusted a skintight dress around the kind of body men drool on. Through the opaque pane I could just make out her outline as she shimmied and slithered nice and slow. So slow that Einstein would have revised relativity.

When she was done reforming herself she put her hand on the knob. But she hesitated. Maybe thinking twice about seeing me. Maybe not. Her shadow in the glass panel, all wet and soft, could have been drawn in sweat. Mine. The Renaissance hair, the Art Deco shoulders, the Egyptian waist...oh yeah, I studied art in college all right. Only it didn't culture me.

And then there were the words typed across her body. They were actually written on the door but the way she was standing, they looked like a sign on her chest. They read: Max Trouble. In fact they were backwards, written to read from the far side of the door. But that didn't matter. I knew who I was. And so did she. Across the bottom, the sign painter had added the word Welcome. It was against my wishes because no one was, but I guess you can't have a detective business without it. Still, I was going to call the guy back and have him take out the word until I realized just how apt it was. Standing at the door waiting to come in and see me, just like she was right then, the words on my office door seemed to say Max, Trouble Welcome.

Perfect.

And then, just like that, she was inside, standing there in all her glory. And believe me, it was a glory I was glad to halleluu. She had the face of an angel but the body was satanic. Like they say, you could sell your soul for the sin therein. The shapes were impossible, the curves fantastic. And her dress was so tight I was having chest pains. Of course, I knew that body was engineered,

all bioware implants and explants. Her airport scan must have looked like a stealth bomber. But I didn't care...I didn't work at the airport. It was all I could manage to roll off the couch and slug my breakfast every morning.

As she sauntered towards my desk I wondered what kind of lubricant she was using. I could have used it on my hinge. And as usual, it squeaked like a mouse as the door closed behind her. The heels clicked out a jazzy mambo as I tried to defibrillate. And when she spoke, I could almost smell my dreams on her breath. Dirty dreams.

She said that her name was Esmeralda in a voice like Turkish coffee in a china cup. Not that I ever tasted any but I have plans. Esmeralda! Yeah right...and mine's Diamond Jim Brady, I thought. But I said nothing. I didn't believe it but I fell for it. The whole caboodle, fake as sugar, all mixmashed up by some lust engineer. It was something about the way she moved her lips when she said the name, like she was massaging my doubt with her mouth. And believe me, my doubt hadn't been rubbed like that in a long time.

"Sit down," I said, "and feel free to cross your legs."

She had killer legs, you know, the kind that killers kill for. She followed my gesture over to the couch and sat down, then crossed her legs like a pro. Then crossed them again just in case I missed it the first time. I should have known then and there that I was in deep doodoo. You know...double cross and all that crap.

"I need your help," she cooed and tossed her cleavage into the bargain.

"Zat so?" I said, trying to play it cool in spite of a sudden hot flash.

"Someone is trying to kill me."

"I hate it when that happens."

"Please, Mr. Trouble, I'm so frightened," she tittered.

She took a deep breath and pillowed her bosom by two bra sizes. Probably those new pneumatic ones, but I'm no stickler for details. Round is round, if you get my drift.

"Okay," I said, bobbing my head like a pigeon. "Talk to me. I'm listening."

“Someone is trying to kill me,” she cawed.

“Who?” I hooted.

“My husband,” she said, flapping.

But I had had enough of these bird games. I didn’t want to hear about her husband or the cage he put her in. I didn’t want to know her problems. All I wanted to do was jump her right then and there. Take her in my arms and learn to juggle with my eyes closed. I felt hard and cruel and high on hormones. Even thought of smacking her into submission like I read in the old paperbacks. But then she looked up at me all helpless and scared. Her green eyes sparkled in the crummy light and I wondered what kind of creep would want to end a dream like her.

“Oh come on,” I said. “You gotta have it all wrong. Why would anyone want to...”

But suddenly she was filled up with tears and terror. I could feel all the testosterone draining and now all I wanted to do was protect her, comfort her. She took out a handkerchief and blew a fanfare to the coming drama.

“You didn’t know him, Mr. Trouble! Alonso was a very powerful man!”

“Alonso?” I repeated.

But she only honked into the hanky like a goose. A cooked one.

“You mean Alonso as in Alonso Montenegro?”

It was a good guess and her wince told me that I was right. There were not many Alonso’s left and this one was famous. He was a ruthless tycoon who had made a fortune in nanotech. Teeny tiny robots that could get under your skin and give you a damn good itch. I hated robots and therefore Alonso too.

“You’d better have a drink,” I said and shoved a shot glass her way, but she veered left and went for the bottle on my desk instead. She choked as she took it too fast and all I could think of was some nice slow mouth-to-mouth.

“You’ve got to help me,” she said. “I’ll be dead in 24 hours if you don’t!”

“Sure, I’ll help you,” I said. “Maybe. What’s the dope?”

“Alonso was no dope, I’m afraid. He always knew exactly

what he was doing.”

“Why do you say was all the time? Is he...was?”

As she put the bottle down on the floor, her hand started to shake like a superstring. They’re the vibrations that run the world, you might know. But in this case, they were stopping her in her tracks. It took her a long time to settle down and spit out the news.

“My husband is dead, Mr. Trouble!”

“Run that by me again?”

“Alonso Montenegro died yesterday.”

“I didn’t hear about it. From what?”

“Same as everybody. From being born.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“His wife.”

“I thought you were his wife.”

“I am. I mean...was.”

“You killed him?”

“I guess so,” she said but there was not a trace of rage in her answer. “I suppose I made his life unbearable. He knew I was seeing other men. You see he was quite a bit older than me and I...”

“I get the picture.”

“Do you? Have you ever been hurt by love, Mr. Trouble?”

“Honey, hurt’s my middle name,” I offered. But she wasn’t taking. Instead she took another swig from the bottle and wiped her lips with sad hands.

“I think it was too much for him eventually. He died of a heart attack.”

“No one dies of that anymore.”

“Hearts still break, Mr. Trouble, in spite of cardiogenics.”

“Well then I’d say you’re pretty much home free, murder-wise.”

But she looked up at me like someone expecting a bomb rather than a prize.

“You didn’t know my husband.”

“True, but...”

“He would never, ever let death get in the way of his plans.”

It was dusk by the time we got down to serious business. One of those crazy dusks that settle on you like too much brandy on a hot day. As the boys down at the bar always say, the only cure is mixing metaphors with a total stranger. So I was playing her keyboard and petting her pride when she suddenly stiffened up.

“Please, you’re going too fast,” she said, as I moved in for the clinch.

“Sure, sure,” I said.

I was used to being played with like a yo-yo. Story of my life.

“Look, why don’t you tell me what this is all about?” I said backing off.

“Yes, Mr. Trouble. I’ll tell you everything. Everything.”

She was breathless as she reeled me back in and planted one. She kissed like someone who had studied thermodynamics and knew how to pump up the heat.

“Jesus lady, you sure blow hot and cold.” I said, trying somehow to warm down and cool off at the same time.

“I’m so confused, so desperate!” she gasped. “You see, Mr. Trouble, Alonso’s goon is following me. He’s a biogen and he has been programmed to murder me!”

So that was it.

Now it all made sense. The dead husband had progged a biogen assassin to do her in. That was bad because biogens had no conscience. They were high-tech zombies programmed to follow instructions. There was no way to stop them once they were given directions. The mob used them all the time, the army was in love with them, and naturally they were all over the government.

“That’s why I have to be so careful,” she said. “One false move and…”

Perfect, I thought. Because if there was ever one false move...I was it. I poured us another sociable.

“So Alonso set up his goon to do you in after he died. Is that the gambit?”

“That’s right!” she cried. “It’s horrible, Mr. Trouble. So very horrible.”

“And what’d you do to earn this kind of devotion?”

“Nothing!” she said “I did nothing.”

She was half sitting on my desk, her legs out in front and her hands resting at either side on the desktop. Her skirt fell like a waterfall over perfect rocks. And I noticed for the first time the heart shaped gold locket she wore around her neck that pointed to her cleavage like a road sign. A curl of her auburn hair had slipped over her left eye. Her lips were still moist. She looked about as innocent as a personal injury lawyer. I laughed.

“What’s so funny about personal injury,” she pouted.

“You read my mind,” I said. “Okay, so you’re innocent. Just like every bum I ever nailed. So what do you want me to do? Guard your body?”

“No, Mr. Trouble. I want you to kill him first!”

By the time I stopped choking on the booze, the burning had ripped a hole in my windpipe. I looked at her for a sign of satire but got back a steely stare instead.

“Come again?”

“I want you to kill him before he kills me.”

She welled up again and I handed her my handkerchief to mop the flood.

“Nice idea,” I said, “except for one problem. I don’t do murders.”

“But you must, Mr. Trouble!”

“Sorry, honey, I’m allergic to murder. Gives me hives.”

“But he’s only a biogen!”

“Even hybrids have rights in this crazy world. Life, liberty, that other stuff.”

After all, biogens were not robots. They were real people with a few stubborn microchips in the right places. They were relentless, mindless, soulless. But flesh and bone nonetheless. Like a lot of folks I knew. They ate, slept, watched bad sitcoms. But when the signal came through, they dropped everything and zombied their way to the end. There was no way to tell a biogen from an ordinary citizen, until after they plugged you.

She pulled back for a second and I thought she might call it quits. I wasn’t even sure how I felt about that. But it was only a windup and she threw herself at me like a lepton.

“Please, Mr. Trouble! You’re a detective. You have a gun.”

“Right here, babe,” I said, tapping my armpit. “But I don’t kill people with it.”

I was holding her around the hips to stop her from collapsing, but the firmness of her body was confusing my sense of duty.

“You must help me, Mr. Trouble. Alonso found out that I was having an affair. He knew he was dying, so he wrote into his will as his final wish that I be killed for my indiscretion. Believe me, his goon will carry out his wish!”

“Sorry, lady,” I said, pushing her back. “I may be a patsy, but I’m no fallguy. If I were to kill this goon of yours, the cops would nail me for sure. Not to mention the ASPCB.”

“Cruelty to Biogens? How can you think of that when my life is at stake?”

“Seems like everyone’s life is at stake. So if you don’t mind, I’ll take mine first.”

“But the will would protect you. It would prove that he tried to kill me first.”

“Call me a cynical paranoid psycho but I’ll bet a man like Alonso covered that particular track.”

“Very well!” she said, suddenly straightening up. “You leave me no choice.”

I thought she had gotten hold of herself but no dice. What she had gotten hold of was my ceragun and she was pointing the barrel right at my ticker. She had managed to slip it out of my shoulder holster while I was too stuck on her curves to notice. I laughed again but more at myself than at her. And I wondered just how much it would cost to add the word Patsy to the door. Then I raised my arms in the victim’s salute.

“You’re nuts!” I said, trying to distract her. “Crackers, bananas.”

It was way past dinnertime but she wasn’t hungry enough to take the hint.

“I may seem insane to you, Mr. Trouble,” she said, her voice all trembly, “but I assure you that I am perfectly aware of what I am doing.”

“And what is that? What are you going to do, shoot me?”

“Not at all, Mr. Trouble. I’m going to let my lover do that.”

“Nice sense of drama you got.”

“In here!” she shouted.

Only then did I realize that what I thought was a coat in the outside room was actually a man. He had been standing there the whole time, waiting for her to beckon him in. Once inside, I could see that he was a nice-looking kid with a sorrowful face, same face I’d seen on a million wannabees. He had a gun too, but on him it was a decoration not a weapon. I could see right off from the way he looked at her that he was stuck on the dame. Couldn’t blame him, of course. I was too.

Until now.

“Max Trouble meet Max Trouble.”

“What the hell...”

“I’m afraid I must confess that I lied to you before, Mr. Trouble,” she said to me, cold as a fish and still wriggling the gun. My gun.

“No kidding. And here I thought you were licking me through your teeth not lying through them.”

“Shut up!” the kid said. He was twitchy from too much sin that he couldn’t handle. Or maybe just from having the same name as me. That was making me twitch too.

“So which part was the lie?” I asked. “All of it?”

“No, just the made-up parts. Alonso Montenegro was my husband and he did croak yesterday. He also found out about my affair.”

“With him?” I said, nodding towards the kid. “That’s not romance, that’s kidnapping.”

“I ain’t napping now, pal?” he said, raising the gun.

“It’s all right, honey,” she said to calm him. “This will all be over soon.”

“Go on,” I said playing for time, “you were finally telling me the *truth*.”

“Don’t put that word in italics with me,” she spit, stern as a stickler. “You have no idea what I’m dealing with here.”

“Why don’t you give me all the sordid details,” I suggested, stalling.

“The will is very clear,” she said. “It states that unless Max

Trouble is killed within a week, I am cut out of the estate. I get nothing. After all I put up with living with that fat pig. His disgusting hands all over me..."

"In other words, this biogen kills your lover and you get the money."

"Yes. That was Alonso's final revenge."

"Cute. But not exactly legal."

"Alonso was above the law, Mr. Trouble. You of all people should know that. And above his own death too. He has plenty of people who will see to it that his wishes are carried out."

"Let's cut the chatter and get on with it," the kid said.

I could see from his stammer that he was getting scared, which was good for me, so I stalled for more time.

"If this runt and me got the same name, how do you know which of us the biogen would nail?"

"We don't, Mr. Trouble. That's the whole problem. The biogen has been following me, waiting for me to lead him to a Mr. Max Trouble. Now both of you are here. It's only a matter of time..."

"Then what?"

"He comes here, he finds a dead Trouble," the kid said, trying to sound old. "ID's the corpse, goes home happy."

"Okay," I summed. "I was wrong, I admit it. It's not just you, sweetheart. You're all nuts. Alonso, you, this kid...the whole bunch of you. Why don't you let me dial up a good virtual shrink."

"I'm sick of all your cracks," the kid said. "And I ain't no kid neither."

He raised his arm and aimed the barrel of his gun, putting me one barb away from oblivion.

"Let's all just take it easy," I said, lowering my arms. I wasn't getting brave, just tired. "This whole thing is out of some crap short story."

"Shorter than you think," the kid said and I smiled. He was a baby hood with bad skin, but at least he was finally picking up the wordplay.

"I don't get it," I said. "How did I come to figure in all this?"

"It had to be you," Esmeralda said.

“Catchy tune, but why me?”

“Alonso didn’t know who my lover was, Mr. Trouble. Or what he looked like. He just knew the name. So the will simply says that Max Trouble must die.”

“You people are obsessed with names. Ever hear of DNA, biotraces, face recognition?”

“Alonso started all this, Mr. Trouble. We were very careful and never left any traces. But he managed to find out the name. No other information. All he had was a name.”

“And that’s why you picked me?”

“The databank coughed you up. Right there under T. Seems you are the only other Max Trouble in town.”

I was about to say that I’m usually under P for patsy but I began to think I was overplaying that gag. Besides, the chill in her stare suddenly sent a shiver up my spine. Some inner nanotech had turned her colors all chilly. It was the first moment that I actually thought the ending would not be as ironic as I imagined.

“We kill you,” she said flatly, “and when the biogen shows up he finds a dead body. He ID’s you and finds out that Max Trouble is dead. His mission is over. Once Alonso’s people are satisfied, I’m home free. I’ll claim that you were my lover and I can collect my money. You see?”

“Bye bye bigmouth,” the kid said.

“I’m sorry for all this...well...all this trouble, Max. I know it’s not right. But face it, we’re all nothing but bytes in the same megacode. Real people don’t matter anymore, just data. The fact is that any Max Trouble will do!”

I had a real good laugh over that one. They must have thought that I flipped my wig. Some scene...both of them standing there holding me at gunpoints, ready to cancel my ticket, and me laughing like a fool. But it really was funny.

“Nice plan, Esmeralda,” I said, “but there is one slight problem.”

“What’s that?” the kid asked, daring me to find a loophole.

I gave him a crater.

“I’m not Max Trouble.”

“What??”

“I’m not Max Trouble. So killing me won’t accomplish anything. Biogen shows up, finds me dead, snorks out my identity, then still goes and hunts down babyface here.”

“Don’t give me that,” the kid said. “He’s bluffing, stalling for time. Let me do him and get this over with.”

Luckily the dame had more sense than her boy.

“What are you saying?” Esmeralda shrilled.

Her eyes glowed with rage and I had to admit that she was quite exquisite when she was deranged.

“Max Trouble,” I said. “That’s not my real name. It’s only the name I use for this business. Sounds good. Some nice letters on a door.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Go back and check the databank. You didn’t dig into it, just saw what you wanted to see.”

I made a move over to the console on my desk but the kid got rigid and so I backed off.

“Max Trouble? Real name...Maxmillian Troubleski. I cut it down because I paid by the letter,” I cracked, nodding at the signage.

“That’s impossible.”

“Check it out. Troubleski. It’s of Ukrainian/Polish/Hungarian origin. My grandfather was a count, my father a no-count, and I could barely count. That’s evolution in action.”

“That’s baloney,” the kid sputtered. “I saw his name in the databank.”

“You saw my moniker, you monkey.”

“Who you calling a moniker?”

“Shut up both of you!” Esmeralda shouted. “I need time to think.”

“Look,” I said, “I can prove it to you. Just access the databank from there. But try to read beyond the first two words. If you can.”

I pointed to my desk but the kid got nervous again. His hand was shaking as he stared me down. Mine wasn’t shaking at all because I knew they couldn’t take the next step without me.

“He knows we can’t access from here,” the kid said. “The

console has touch ID.”

“Then you do it,” Esmeralda said, looking at me. “Slowly.”

“Could be a trick,” the kid suggested.

But she was too busy figuring out what to do next to bother with him and she motioned for me to continue. I tapped the console and a mistscreen appeared above it like a haze. A few quick moves and I was into my file. The kid must have needed to read with his finger like first grade because he walked up close and poked the words. His hand was shaking like an autumn leaf, which made the screen waver, but when he was done it was winter in his soul.

“He’s right,” the kid said. “It says Maxmillian Troubleski.”

Even from her side of the desk she could see the databank entry floating in space in reverse. My mug, my data, my name. The kid was all gaga but she did not seem surprised, which did not surprise me. She was one of those women who are used to sudden changes in the rules. A real player. So by the time the plan unraveled, she had already thought through her next move. And the one after that. Slowly, like a poet reaching a sad conclusion, she slid the gun away from me and towards the kid.

“What are you doing dollbaby?” he gasped.

“Sorry honey, he may not be Max Trouble. But you still are.”

“Me?? But we’re partners! I was going to kill him for you! And then we were going to split the money and...and...”

“There is no money without a dead man named Max Trouble.”

“Then let’s find another one.”

“It seems like you’re the only one left in town.”

“There must be another way!”

“There isn’t.”

“This is nuts. You can’t kill me. I love you.”

“I know you do, sweetie. And I’ll always feel good about that. But I have a date with five billion dollars. I’m sure you can understand...”

As I watched them go back and forth, I slowly edged my way towards the middle of the desk. I had a second pistol stashed there. It was not a ceragun, just an old revolver, but it still had

bullets that shot. Plus there was another bottle of booze. I figured I could either shoot my way out of the mess or drink a toast to the end of it. But I didn't get that far. Something had already clicked inside junior's head, something dark and tragic, and it didn't spell Esmeralda.

The room went dark as I dove, trouble first, behind the desk. I had my revolver in one hand and the booze in the other by the time the flurry of shots ended. When I peeked out they were both lying on the floor of the office in a bad mangle. The kid's wound sparked and spizzled, I guessed from a cybernetic ticker. They were real good at that now but even a bionic heart could get you killed.

And from Esmeralda's wound a deep green oil spilled like an arctic tanker on a reef. Figures, I thought. She was a monroe, a pleasure model. Sexy as they could make them. But just as dead in the end.

As I sat there waiting for some neckless goon to wander in, find his dead Max Trouble and be on his way, two separate pools of liquid – one red, one green – formed around their bodies, then spread out until they joined in the middle like hands touching.

Very touching.

It seemed like I'd have some explaining to do downtown but nothing I couldn't handle. The cops would give me the standard third-degree, the secretary the familiar wink, and the captain the usual runaround about the company I keep. Slap on the wrist, watch your back, so long sailor. But as I stared at the bodies, what I could not grasp was how anyone could be so dumb. How they could want something so much that they would risk everything to get it. And lose it all in the end.

Then I thought...that's why the dead got it good.

They can't risk their lives for something they cannot have.

Sweet.

I took another shot of whiskey and toasted the luck of the dear departed. Then I tapped the console and the mistscreen vanished like a bad clue, my picture and name like dust in the wind. So it turned out to be an ironic ending, just like I expected. After

all, this was the pinpoint world, dataworld, the universe of tracking and tracing. Biotrace measures, retinal scans, DNA sampling, face recognition...everyone everywhere listed, accessed, known, located. Yet somehow it had all come down to that crazy name I inherited. Just a name...the flimsiest of all traces. Maxmillian Troubleski. Even I thought it sounded like a chatty drunk in a skeezy bar.

But what the hell, it saved my life this time. And what is a name anyway besides some letters on a door. You never really know who anyone is.

Maybe least of all yourself.

Uncle Jack Eats a Mummy

“He’s coming here at nine tonight,” he whispered, even though there was no one in the store besides the two of us. “And I want you to be here with me.”

“This is insane,” I said for the twelfth time. “Aren’t those gravesites guarded?”

“He bribed the guard.”

“It’s illegal. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“It tells me there’s something there worth having.”

Uncle Jack -- that was my nickname for him -- bit his lower lip the way he always did and swallowed another of his aspirins. He looked tired, but that wasn’t unusual. He was only around fifty, but a lifetime of worry left him with the face and posture of an older man. A lifelong bachelor and hypochondriac, Uncle Jack was a monument to anxiety. He was skinny from fear of food poisoning, jittery from worry over household accidents, and an insomniac from dreams of his own funeral. While I tried to cheer him up with wisecracks or gossip, his conversation was peppered with reports of heart attacks or automobile collisions. He lived, as the Natives around here say, like a man seducing death.

“What’s he got for you?” I said, breaking the uneasy silence.

“Something from the excavation at Tarahuasi.”

He bent his head toward a cracked mirror and checked his tongue for spots.

“He dug this up himself?”

“And thinks it’s worth a look. Relax, he knows what he’s doing.”

“I’m sure he knows,” I snapped. “But do you?”

The “he” in question was a man named Ramon who had come into the store a few days before. He was an outsider, not from the city, and he was staying at a nearby hotel. He had slick hair and rubbery lips and struck me as a bogus tango dancer from a thirties

movie. One of his eyes looked slightly to left field. I didn't like that either.

He had come to the store because Uncle Jack occasionally sold Native artifacts among his other junk. Ramon identified him-self as a dealer with a special item for sale. Dealer, mind you, is a broad term covering anything from a licensed antiquarian to an outright grave robber.

It wasn't unusual. In Lima, like many cities near the Incan ruins, everyone sooner or later comes across ancient artifacts. They are practically the official knickknack of the country. Gold earpins, flat-faced statues, lapis beads, that sort of thing. Most of the stuff is stolen anyway. But there was something about Ramon that made me especially uneasy. Nothing Uncle Jack would have picked up on, of course. He would have been too busy taking his pills to notice a con man in a convent.

"Why don't you forget it and come to the movies with me instead," I suggested.

I had moved down from New York to stay with him for a while and took it upon myself to try and upgrade his life.

"I hate movies. They remind me of death."

"What? How do movies remind you of death?"

"I watch them frame by frame, like life slipping away."

"This is hopeless. Look, we don't know a thing about this clown Ramon," I insisted. "Why does he have to come here at night?"

"What's the difference," he said, gargling with baking soda to kill germs. "He's got something to sell."

"Suppose he tries to rob you?"

"That's why I want you to come. To protect me."

That much, at least, was convincing. Uncle Jack did need protection. Not from outsiders but from his own gullibility. He was so busy guarding against calamity that there was nothing left over for ordinary caution. How many times had he been ripped off by someone selling fake artifacts, or stiffed by a creditor who never returned to pay? Or bought a bogus health cure from some sleazeball con artist? Naturally, I agreed to come back that night.

At nine o'clock on the dot, Ramon parked his car in front of

the store and walked in. He was carrying a package under his arm. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with a cord. He seemed a bit dismayed to see me standing next to my uncle at the counter.

“This is my nephew from New York,” Uncle Jack said as the other man placed the package on the counter top. Ramon nodded.

“Is this it?”

Ramon untied the cord and opened the paper as he answered.

“It was found in a small burial mound due south of the central tomb. The Incas often buried them at the four corners of the main pyramid to protect it.”

“Then why didn’t the archaeologists find it?” I asked, turning to Uncle Jack. But he was already caught in the web of the adventure and was putting on his reading glasses for a closer inspection.

Inside the paper was a wooden box, not much larger than a shoebox. Ramon slowly pried the lid off and slid it aside. Inside there was more paper and within the paper there was an object. Like llamas at a watering hole, the three of us tilted into the center to have a good look.

It was apparently an eroded carcass of some kind, stiff and leathery, about the size of a deflated football. It looked like something that had been buried for too long, all rooty and bleak. You couldn’t make out anything familiar about it, except that it probably was not supper. And it did not smell like fun either. The word *dingus* came to mind, although I had no idea what it meant.

“Creeperino,” I said, bypassing my college education.

“You see?” Ramon said. “It’s a mummy.”

“Mummy?” I said with a laugh. “It looks like a dried fish someone tried to bury.”

“Look,” Ramon said, ignoring my theory and pointing to the tip, “you can still see some of the teeth and hair.”

Indeed, on closer inspection, there was some black thatchy material attached to the top and some teensy white slivers imbedded on the surface a few inches down. But for the rest, it was hard to make head or tail of it.

“Did it shrink?” I asked.

“It’s a baby.”

“Really? I didn’t know mummies had babies.”

Ramon frowned and explained.

“When the ruler was buried, his wives were often killed along with him. If they had small babies, they were killed too and mummified. Then they were buried at secret locations around the tomb.”

“Of course. Why not!” I sputtered.

“They had to hide them,” my uncle explained patiently. “There was a market for them.”

“Still is,” Ramon added with a wink.

“A market for mummy babies? What on earth for?” I barked. “Pillows?”

The whole thing was really starting to get to me.

“Medicine,” they both said in unison.

I didn’t say anything, but my green pallor must have hinted at a tinge of skepticism.

“Look, mummy has been a drug in Europe and the Far East since the Middle Ages,” Ramon explained. “No decent apothecary shop would be without it. It’s a powerful medicine. Because of the minerals used in mummifying...bitumen, natron, and so on.”

“Bullcrap,” I said.

“No, I don’t think that was used.”

“It’s true,” Uncle Jack added. “The medicine made from these mummies is supposed to, as the locals say around here, cure the disease of the clouds.”

“Come again?”

“It bestows immortality,” Ramon said.

I could only laugh at that one. But the others were not joining me in the glee. They were dead serious.

“You’re too young to believe in such things,” Ramon said calmly, wiping his eye with a handkerchief. “That’s good. That’s what youth is for. Your job is to believe in fun. TV, sex, Coca Cola. But for men of our age, belief must seek a greater reward.”

“Immortality,” I repeated, trying out of respect not to giggle my way through every syllable.

“Don’t sound so shocked. It’s nothing new,” Ramon said. “Immortality’s been around for thousands of years.”

“Immortality...as in living forever?” I asked, just to make sure we were on the same wavelength.

“Yes,” Ramon said solemnly. “It is a belief held all over the world. In South America, Egypt, Persia. Any place where the dead were prepared for eternal life. Why shouldn’t those discoveries aid the living as well. Why not?”

“Because it’s totally crackbrained, that’s why,” I announced. “Have you ever heard of -- like -- science?”

“How much do you want for it?” my uncle interjected.

“I know that you are a sick man, Jacinto. That’s why I came to you with it. Don’t worry about the price. I’ll give you a good deal.”

“Who’ll cook it?”

“I know a fellow who can prepare it for eating.”

I definitely heard the word, though I first thought it must have been heating or beating or anything but what it actually was. It took me a few seconds to process it and interrupt.

“Wait a minute,” I said, putting as much distance between myself and the ghouls as possible. “Do you mean to tell me that you are going to eat this thing? Just pour on a little hot sauce and open a beer?”

“Not like that,” Ramon said. “You pulverize it and mix the powder with mineral water.”

“And some rum,” Uncle Jack added. “For flavoring.”

“No shit!” I said, but by then I’d had it with the whole rotten mess and was storming out the door. “I hope this is a practical joke because if it isn’t, and even if it is, it’s the sickest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Stick to your beliefs,” Ramon shouted after me. “Go watch television.”

But I was already out on the sidewalk, leaving them to conspire alone in the ghastly light.

I did not see my uncle for a few days after that. The fact is, I could not bear to look at his sad and troubled face so I stayed upstairs and avoided him. But eventually I began to worry. I figured that he was just desperate enough to try it and get himself

good and sick. So I went to the store and was surprised to find him vigorously dusting off the counter. He looked rather alert, even chipper. His gloomy color had given way to a reddish blush. Not rosy exactly, but vaguely pink. And he was standing up a little straighter. Not enough that anyone else would notice. But I did.

“You didn’t really eat that thing, did you?” I finally asked when I got up the nerve.

“Sure did,” he said and flashed a smile. His teeth looked very pearly and I hadn’t noticed that he had so many of them before.

“The whole mummy?” I asked, sounding like a sick TV commercial.

“It’s medicine, not junk food,” he insisted, taking out a plastic container with some mud at the bottom of it. “Ramon brought it over the next day. I take a spoonful every evening. And when I wake up in the morning, I feel a thousand years younger.”

I couldn’t argue with him. In the first place, it was already done. Secondly, he actually did look a lot better. In coming days, he started dressing up to go to work. Not fashionably mind you, not spiffy, but neater. He sent his pants to the cleaners. He wore a white shirt. He even began to comb his hair with a part down the middle.

In the following weeks he did not once mention a funeral, a case of cancer, a car accident, a coronary bypass, or even an infant death. The report of an earthquake on the news seemed to bore him and he changed the station to a quiz show. One day, out of the blue, he threw out his painkillers and stopped peering down into his throat for tumors.

By the end of the month, inexplicably, he had actually asked for the hand of a woman in marriage! She was thirteen years younger than Jack and, as far as I knew, had hardly ever spoken to him. She rejected him, of course, but even that did not seem to dismay my uncle. He drank to her health and treated me to the movies.

Things seemed so good on the way to the theater that I did not have the heart to tell him about the news I had heard. It seems that a man sounding suspiciously like Ramon, but with a different name, had been picked up by the authorities for trying to sell a

phony mummy to a local dealer. And when the police went back to his hotel room, they found seven more baby mummies in boxes. They were all fakes, made of paper and dirt and old straw. I should have known when I saw the first one, but I didn't think of it until later.

How many babies – mummy or not – have you seen with teeth?

Sitting there in the dark, I was about to say something to Uncle Jack about it. But as the picture started I turned to him and suddenly saw the light. He was laughing at the movie, his eyes glinting, his skin twinkling from the glow of the flickering screen. I couldn't bring myself to eclipse it. So I just sat back and said nothing. And what would have been the point anyway? Perhaps he got just what he paid for. Exactly that.

As the Natives say, there is no great trick to immortality. As long as you live it day by day by day.

Camera Scientia

The whole damn world went gray in just two weeks.

That was all the time it took to drain the bright dreams of the millennia and turn them to soot.

In the end, all of our fancy tinkering and fine tweaking meant nothing. Everything we had pinned our hopes on was reduced to the kind of ashy sludge you would have scraped off your boot in the weeks before.

That is why I found myself back at that decaying old building again. I had stumbled across it once before as I was searching for lost time, that is, something to preoccupy myself with. It was in an old part of town that had been forgotten long before the Goop killed everything off and I was hoping that it had not been discovered and ransacked. I was right about that but not about the lost time.

The building was boarded up and falling down, crumbling and covered with ivy. Like an archeologist at an ancient temple I groped around through the vines looking for a way in. Then I stumbled over an old soda can and fell against the wall. There was a door there off its hinges but I was just thin enough to slip through the crack of the opening. Inside the structure was one large room with flat, blank black walls. While the world around it was disintegrating, this room seemed intact and beyond the reach of the Goop. The electricity even worked and the lights came on when I flipped the switch revealing a small table at the center with two chairs. Like a cave set up for the last two inhabitants of earth to play a final grim game of poker.

If I had been able to use my phone, of course, I would have instantly discovered what this place was. But that world was gone and even the thought of it filled me with sadness. I well remembered when anything you needed to know was available at the touch of a whim. All instantly gettable, useable, haveable. I almost

wept when I thought of swiping a screen and swimming through mounds of data at a glance. Was all that really gray sludge now?

In the beginning—the beginning of the end that is—we assumed that because the web and the wiki and widgit were not objects, they could never be destroyed. They were virtual after all, nothing but decentralized networks, and therefore could go on forever. The Goop destroyed all of that in about two days. By the end of the second day everything that had been scanned, digitized, pixilated, and mounted online was lost. All of history swept away...or rather, turned into a kind of scummy dust.

As always, the problem had been foreseen and foretold but not the ultimate calamity. In fact, they had been talking about it for years but mostly in sci-fi novels or in doomsday blogs. What everyone now called the Goop had been posed formally as the Graygoo Problem. The problem! Hard to believe but before it became the reality of the end of the world, it was all just hype and hypothetical, one more media frizz to rile us up.

It all began with the nano revolution and the ultimate solution to ridding the world of its trash. Nanobot assemblers had been created to break down used materials and reform the pieces into new useable things. The world was drowning in dead technology and discarded debris after all and so these tiny bots—smaller than a wheeze—were designed as metal and plastic and silicon eaters, breaking these substances down into microscopic particles and reforming them into new materials and substances.

It all sounded so neat, so simple. Like an army of cyber-ants, they pursued their mindless tasks, self-limiting, self-generating, eating and building. The world's largest floating island of trash transformed into a factory for making bricks, for instance. A cemetery of dead computers turned into solar sails. Garbage whipped into shape as fuel rods. And all without lifting a finger. It was beautiful to behold.

Until it all went haywire of course.

And why not? Haywire, as any fool knows, is the end point of the human storyline. And as inevitably as a final plot twist, the nanobot control mechanism failed. Catastrophically. The bots

began to replicate wildly...68 trillion offspring in ten hours. In one full day their total population weighed half that of the earth itself. And this new iteration was hungry. Like microlocusts, this vast wave ate through everything—every box, casing, wire, microchip – leaving only a dullish mush in its wake. They seemed to avoid living things and so the trees and the people you knew were spared. But how long could we survive in a world turning into goo?

The chairs in the center of the room were cushy and when one of them suddenly swiveled around to reveal a person sitting in it, I gasped. But the person in the chair merely said in a rather calm voice:

“May I help you?”

I was not sure at first if I really heard that voice or even if this whole place was real or not. In a world where nothing existed anymore, memory and fancy and migraine were all mashed together. But when I calmed down and focused, I could see that this was an older woman with short hair and round glasses and a butterfly tattoo on her shoulder.

“Sorry,” I said, “you startled me.”

“I don’t get many visitors here. None in fact.”

“What is this place?”

“This is a *camera scientia*,” she said in a quiet but firm voice.

“I don’t know what that is, I’m sorry.”

But she smirked as though she were teasing me.

“It means a room of knowledge in Latin. A place to get information.”

“You mean like a library?”

“Not exactly.”

“Online access?”

“Not really.”

“What then?”

She invited me to take a seat in the other chair at the table, which I did simply to be polite. Then she moved her fingers on the surface as though typing on an unseen keyboard. I was about to bolt for the exit when suddenly the entire room changed and I

was no longer in that musty vault but instead in a field watching dinosaurs at a watering hole.

“Whoa,” I shouted. “Virtual reality. This is cool!”

After a while, I realized that I was watching some kind of science program about the evolution of life on earth. Mesozoic Era and all that. With a few more taps, she returned us to the empty room.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “I thought the web and everything on it was gone. Eaten by the Goop.”

“Yes but not here. This place is self-contained. It doesn’t access anything outside of this room. All the information in it is within these walls on some kind of stand-alone server with its own generator.”

“But it’s still tech. Silicon and stuff. So why hasn’t this been...you know...”

“Gooped? I think the little buggers don’t eat organic. That’s why they don’t chew on us. So maybe the ivy on the outside walls is protecting the building.”

“And you live here?”

“I feel as though I have lived here for decades, perhaps even centuries. I came here once when the room was still open. I was shocked to find it still intact.”

“So what is this exactly?”

“Do you really want to know? There is not much point in caring anymore.”

“Or...there is really nothing left to do but find something to be interested in,” I said.

“This whole room is a kind of Grand Encyclopedia but you can’t look anything up because the index is lost.”

“Sorry, I...”

“They – the people who created this place I mean - seemed to have downloaded all this data in the form of videos. To keep it safe but without any way to organize it. Maybe they ran out of time. So all you can do is wander through it randomly and see what you see. See?”

“No.”

It took a few tries for her to make the point clear, either because I was dumb or the whole enterprise was. The room was a way of viewing videos from the web – everything that had once been on it but was now gone – but without any way to pick and choose. It was an amazing amassment of human knowledge but you could not search for anything. All you could do was observe whatever came up next and appreciate it.

Kind of like life itself.

“So who did all this? And why?”

“Don’t know and no idea. Some group who saw the end coming. No clue why they only saved videos...maybe something about the format.”

“Camera Scientia,” I repeated.

“Creating a hub of knowledge isn’t new. The Encyclopedie, the Britannica, the Earth Book. And the Humanitas Futilitas, the great encyclopedia of human folly, the biggest book ever conceived, so big that it was physically impossible to open.”

But she winked at me when she said this and I knew that it was meant as a joke.

“Oh and Alexandria of course,” she added.

“Alexandria who?”

“It was a great city in Ancient Egypt. Ptolemy I built a grand library there in 286 BC. It had hundreds of thousands of texts carrying all of civilized knowledge. In 641 AD invaders fed all of it—bound volumes and papyrus scrolls—into the furnaces that heated the public baths. The work burned for six months.”

“Why would anyone do such a thing?”

“Because knowledge is power and very dangerous if your enemies have it.”

“I guess that means that we are the enemies of the Goop.”

“It appears that we are. They can’t eat us but they can eat what we know.”

I was intrigued by it all...but why? There was nothing left to care about. Only the must of fate yawning. What did I hope to accomplish by staying there? Unfound truths, secrets of lost worlds, the whispers of the past? Who can say? I had time on my

hands—unmoving time like the chunk of the past that had turned to still sludge—and nothing else calling out to me but this room. And a glimmer of an idea in my head.

“I wonder if the Goop can be stopped?” I asked.

“The techniks say no.”

“They don’t know everything,” I replied.

I was not sure if that was true but it was something I sure wanted to believe.

“Maybe the answer is here,” I said and sat back down in one of the chairs.

“But we can’t look anything up. All we can do is plow through it which would take, oh, around thousands of years.”

And so I moved in.

We were not techniks and even less scientists but one truth was crystal clear...we had nothing else to do. So we watched the videos and ate the rations that the CameraScientists had stored. Ignored what was happening in the world; prayed that the power would last. And watched and watched video after video: old movies and new films, endless TV shows, documentaries, silly tricks and stupid theories, all of it. Imagine if your self-appointed job was to randomly go through every single thing ever on YouTube hoping to stumble onto something useful in some way.

Yes, that was how we spent our time together in that room. Laughing, crying, sharing, yawning, staring mindlessly, wondering and wincing by turns. Our tenure there fell into the kind of imaginary tempo that children have when they are building forts. I suppose that is just like what we were doing there, building a fort against the onslaught. It was useless but worthwhile all at once. The world felt new to me then, not dying but simply hibernating, waiting for the next iteration of vitality to take hold or perhaps even for me to instigate it.

Then the screen on her phone lit up.

That was a shock. It had been plugged in but silent from day one and now a news report was coming in. The Goop was dying, it said. It had evolved into a form that attacked its own circuitry. It was eating itself to death. Systems were coming back online or

being rebuilt. The end was ending.

We went outside for the first time together and saw signs of life returning. People, movement, the activity of repair. Even the ashy dust was slowly fading away to reveal undersurfaces with hints of vitality.

“I guess we did find the solution to the Graygoo Problem after all,” she said.

“We did? I must have missed that. What did we discover?”

“That the answer is to find a way to survive until the world fixes itself.”

She picked up an old soda can, the one that I crushed on the way in. The Goop had not gotten to it and now never would. I took it from her and examined it in the light of day. It was bright red. I never thought a piece of garbage could look so beautiful.

Encounter With a Nose

On the overcrowded maglev streaming through the city, a man of Orlanda's rough height positioned himself directly in front of the door. He was too close for comfort but with the car packed there was hardly any wiggle room and Orlanda felt awkwardly stuck.

Symbolic, she thought, of the bigger stuckness. She had been brooding, and fairly aggressively, about the latest confrontation with her boss. Harold – and why all egotistical schmucks had to be named Harold was a great mystery to her – had called her into his office just that morning. It was the latest in a long series of squabbles over her commitment, her focus, her loyalty. Even her choice of shoes, which he saw as lacking luster. But the most annoying thing of all was that she was never quite sure during these sessions whether Harold was berating or seducing her. Dressing down or undressing. Such was the insidious evil of all Harolds everywhere.

And all of this in spite of the fact that the work in her biolab was going well. It was thanks to her that the company would soon have the jump on a system that could inject synthetic viruses into the mucosa through a nasal inhalant. And not just cures either but neuro-microbes that alter the brain. You would soon be able to learn Portuguese just my shoving a tube up your nose and shpritzing.

So what was his problem?

Orlanda was getting good and worked up in the privacy of her own brain about all this when a boy wearing SimSpecs entered the train. He was braying at some dumb virtuality inside of them as he wedged in behind her and pressed Orlanda like a pressed leaf against the man facing her. Naturally she jostled and adjusted and made the best of it, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not move far enough away. Not in body nor in mind. It was like pressing your face up to a mirror, she thought. And suddenly the anger at her boss, the regret at missing that promotion, and the delicious idea of getting her resume together...all these were squeezed out of

her thoughts by the man before her.

The trip between the lab and the burb where Orlanda lived was not that long. She could have walked the distance in an hour and done more for her heart. But she had gotten lazy in many ways and the train was only one example. And now, trapped too close to a total stranger, only one thing loomed. Orlanda tried to ignore it, tried to inch away from it physically and mentally, tried to day-dream around it. But it was rush hour on the maglev and there was no leeway for any of this. No way out. No ignoring it.

There it was right there in front of her.

That nose.

Too close, too looming, too present.

In fact, as the train swooshed forward riding the thinnest cushion of magnetized plasma, the nose seemed to be poking at her, probing her, pinning her back against the boy standing behind her.

Repulsive, she thought, and rude too.

Orlanda might have screamed at this point but she stifled it. Instead, she closed her eyes, dreamed of dinner, wondered what was on the Sim that night, and prayed for the next station. But it was no use. Think of anything, she thought. Even of Harold with that slightly leery frown he could muster while finding faults. Or the way he would lick his lips with a wormy tongue as he waited for her to explain herself.

But that was no good either. Peeking out from under closed lids, it was still there taunting her. There was no avoiding it. And so, like a phobic facing her fears, Orlanda opened her eyes full bloom and looked directly at it. The offending organ only seemed to look back daringly but Orlanda was stubborn as well and faced this nemesis with the courage of a grunt.

It was a wide nose, an impressive nose, grand as a monument yet familiar as a cough. Even mysterious in a mysterious sort of way. Close in like that, Orlanda had to slightly cross her eyes to resolve it. And that, in turn, narrowed her peripheral vision to the point that the nose was soon all there was and all that mattered. This total stranger had, in a sense, become a nose. Just that and only that.

All this was no idle speculation since Orlanda, of course, knew a thing or two. In fact she had commissioned the Nasal Metrics study to help in the design of a delivery system that would work in most noses. She knew all about nares flares and nostrilosity and canal ratios. But this was technical – knowledge *about* rather than knowledge *of* – distant and rational.

Yet here before her was the real deal, burly and blunt. Orlanda suddenly felt that she knew very little about the object of her own research. What little snigger of fate, she wondered, had delivered her to this nose at this moment? Orlanda started to shake her head at the irony but that meant almost rubbing noses with the stranger and so she held perfectly still and studied it instead.

The nose before her began between the eyes at a dent in the brow ridge. Just like all noses. Fair enough. Yet only slightly below this spot she observed a telling ridge. It was a small edge formed by skin pulled tightly over a misplaced bone. Hint of a former trauma, a childhood accident perhaps. Had the man fallen off a hoverboard or a bike? Or had he been punched by a local bully? And if that were the case, had this nosy fellow punched back? Orlanda for her part would probably not have. She hated confrontations, never felt comfortable making her case, arguing back. Maybe that was just the kind of drive that Harold had been complaining about. Except that she knew the rumor about the woman in the Genelab with no IQ to speak of who had gotten the bonus simply because she wore tiny skirts.

Fucking Harold, Orlanda thought.

But back to the nose.

It boldly thrust downward after this ridge, then up and off the plane of the face, leaving the cheeks behind as it soared frontward, putting the tip slightly out of focus. At this point, it veered somewhat jauntily to the left, the leading edge of a great ship slightly off course. Who would own such a nose, she wondered as a sway rocked her back and gave her a wider view. Selfish man, brunt of a man, always looking out for himself. Rich perhaps, but through the consistent abuse of others.

That was a fancy way of putting things, she thought. Orlanda

had her research but no art. She never read Rostand on the subject, never heard of Tycho Brahe and his copper knob, knew nothing of the theories of Galton or the bizarre ideas of Freud's contemporary, Wilhelm Fleiss, regarding neurosis and the nasal passage. Still, she thought, as any fool can see...this is the nose of a man who looks down at others over it. And she suddenly understood why Harold always insisted on standing over her while she sat in the low chair.

At the tip, the stranger's nose widened into the popular bulbous bloop. Some Darwinian somewhere would know the adaptive purpose of the nose bulb, but Orlanda did not and up close and personal like this, the bulb seemed absurd and clownish. There was a small pale hair sprouting from the end, something a spouse would point out for removal. Aha, she thought. Not married. Too self-centered, too used to having his own way.

The two orby bumps on either side of the nasal tip were smooth like stones on the shore. There were a number of blackheads on them and a teensy scar on the left one. More trauma. Ex-wife hits him with a pan, the goat. For what? For cheating and calling it self-expression.

Perhaps the nose was the ultimate repository of life's experiences, readable if one only had the key. Orlanda did not but that did not stop her from developing an opinion...this man before her was a Harold, he had to be! His nose gave him away and at this point Orlanda had to fight the urge to give the stranger's nasal tip one mean motherfucker of a gnaw.

Then she noticed some asymmetry at the nostrils; one was oval and the other one round. Pretty common, which is precisely why the applicator tip had to be morphic. Fit all holes, so to speak. A few hairs at the edge guarded the entrance against pollen dust, but nothing worth taking a clipper to. The applicator had to be long enough to bypass these. Deeper inside, blackness disappeared into the block of the man's head and Orlanda wondered where they might lead if followed. Up to the eyes, back to the brainstem, inwards to the soul? And what would you find there, pray tell? A wee homunculus preening in front of a teensy weensy mirror?

Why oh why had she not walked home?

The wind of a maglev passing by in the other direction rocked the car and the boy with the goggles teetered, sending Orlanda and the stranger into a bobble. When they recovered their positions, Orlanda noticed a tender beige fur covering the entire nose, underlaced with delicate red streaks. It was amazing in a sense... the more you looked, the more you saw. But it was revolting in another...both the saw and the seen went downhill after the initial curiosity.

She first thought Harold would help her, guide her career. He was well known in the biobiz for managing new products. But when she instantly rebuffed his early advances, he became more interested in her failures than her successes.

The train swooshed like a comet around a bend in the track. The station was nearing. The nose did not budge. Defiant, dramatic, daunting. Orlanda developed the urge to do something. Anything. Make a move. Flick it, take a nip, fiddle it with all fingers. Something! Talk back, refuse to be victimized. Take a stand! Tell Harold to go fuck himself. Maybe even quit and go to one of the other labs. Start fresh, out with the old, today is the first day. That kind of thing.

The holophonics announced the next stop.

This was it. End of the line. Orlanda felt that she could not take another minute of it. She ran a dry tongue across the tops of her lower teeth. She clenched her jaw. Something would have to be done. Life as it was could not go on. She knew then and there that she would simply have to take a bite out of this man's nose. There was no other way. It was too tight in the train to sing to it, dance on it, pinch or twist it. There was no other way to change the course of her life. A dramatic move, even if a criminal one, was needed. Right here, right now. Take a stand!

Orlanda stood there, teeth at the ready, in a kind of paralysis... enthralled, readysset, poised. A woman determined to do a thing.

And then the train bounced lightly and the station lights flooded the car, and the blur of standers filled the windows, and the black hole in the center of the Milky Way hiccupped. And the owner of the nose who had not moved in seven minutes, amazingly, flipped

around and faced the door as he prepared to exit the car. His rear profile revealed an entirely new and unexpected shape. The nose was actually quite a bit longer than Orlanda had originally thought. Wedgier, like a prow. Orlanda shuddered. The nose that she had come to know so well was not quite what she thought it was. Not bulbous and roundmoundy at all. But stern and French. This was a face-forward, unwavering nose, an arrow through a chaotic life.

Admirable even.

You had to see it from a new angle to see it better.

The insight suddenly filled Orlanda with a sense of relief. And she knew in an instant what had to be done.

The doors opened, the crowd pushed. The stranger, being right near the door, got off first and breathed a sigh of relief. Then the boy, shoved by the exiters, pushed Orlanda out of the car against her will. The doors closed and Orlanda was standing flatly on the platform as a new crowd gathered around her all nosey and bothersome. Orlanda stood there for a long time until she came to a final resolution. The whole thing was out of hand. A waste of the time of one's life which, after all, was all one had. Offensive, oppressive, and a bunch of other *sives*. Something had to be done.

All right, Orlanda thought to herself, that's that.

Done.

Decision made.

From now on, I walk home from work.

This Coney Island

“Can’t resist me, can you?”

“I guess not,” Morrison answered uncomfortably.

“Yes, I know. I get that a lot,” the old lady said.

Her name was Ida Wilde. So said the sticker on the arm of her glidechair. She was just one of the women positioned in the hallway as Morrison was leaving, but unlike many of the others at the nursing home, Ida seemed alert and watchful. He did not know her but as he passed she reached out for a hug anyway. Assuming that he was there just to visit her, she clamped a firm grip on his hand and would not let go. The nurse gladly let Morrison take over and push her back to her room.

“It’s so nice to see you again,” Ida said, bubbling with delight.

“You too,” Morrison said, just to be polite.

Once in the room, he positioned her near the foot of the bed and waited as the glide plate stopped spinning and her chair gently settled down. Ida looked, on the surface, like all the other ladies in their chairs with her corona of fuzzy white hair covering a pink scalp. She was wearing a white knit sweater and had a shawl over her legs, laceless sneakers below. It was the standard issue old-age costume.

But something was different about her too and Morrison picked that up as well. She seemed younger inside than out. Her moist eyes danced behind thick, twurving lenses that twisted and curved to adjust for her line of sight. The eyes suggested a vibrancy, an inner force. Or maybe it was the way she looked around as she spoke, her neck still limber. Or perhaps the angle of her eyebrows that hinted at curiosity. There was also a slight upwards curve at the end of her lips that still held a twist of humor. These details said to Morrison that she had done something with her life, been somebody. The first ambassador to some new nation in Asia or the oldest woman to visit Phoebos. Something like that.

“Hey where are you going? Don’t leave yet, Nonny,” she said, as he tried to slip out through the door. “Stay and visit for a while. I hardly ever get to see you.”

“I have to go,” Morrison said.

“I know that you’re busy. You always are. But we have so much to talk about.”

“Sorry but I have an appointment. Some other time maybe.”

To this she only laughed and said: “But you know...time is singular. There is no other time.”

The room was plain, like all of them, filled with just a few mementos of the past. There was a simple beige dresser, a few old still photographs in brass frames, and a ceramic lamp even though the light was coming from the microlumen paint on the walls. The room had a vidcam and one touchscreen for the nurses to use. The bed in the room was called a pod, one of those transforms that could change shape in an instant. At the moment it looked like a cross between a couch and a hot dog bun.

This was a formal space, a clinical place, missing particulars. A place Morrison would gladly leave. But Ida was sitting straight up, her face full of expectation. He did not have the heart to tell her that he was not who she thought he was, someone she must have known a long time ago. And if he would not tell her that, he thought, what right did he have to not be that person. At least for a little while. So he decided to stay for a few minutes and become her Nonny.

One of the photographs on the dresser was all faded and crinkly. It was an actual photo in a frame, not a holoshot, and it showed a muscular young man with a grand mustache posing in tights, high lace boots, and an old football helmet. He looked like a tight end from the Perverse League.

“You don’t recognize him, do you?” Ida said. “Of course you don’t. That was taken a long long time ago. Before you were born. Probably around 1915, I think. Take a good look. Do you see who it is?”

“Not exactly.”

“Doesn’t look like the old man you have seen in the usual

family photos. Can you believe it? That's Poppa, Nonny. My father!"

"This man was your father?" Morrison said, picking the photograph up like a clue in a murder case.

A quick calculation told him that if her father was a young man in 1915, she must have been born at around the same time. That made her close to 140 years old. This would have been impossible except that it actually explained a great deal. Her oddly youthful presence for example. Her peppy personality. The glinting eyes. There was only one explanation for all of that.

Ida Wilde was a Methuselan.

Morrison had heard about the Methuselah Implant, a controversial experiment tried on a group of centenarian volunteers in the 2020s. It was intended to extend life for decades by manipulating the genes controlling the COX-2 enzyme thought to contribute to aging. It worked too. People who had the implant began perking up and living well beyond the normal life span. But the experiment was discontinued when they found that there was one nasty little side effect...death. Too many of the subjects died as a result of the implant after ten or twenty years. Ironic of course, since what they died of was ripe old age. But Morrison had also heard that there were some survivors and apparently Ida Wilde was one of them.

"Yes, that's him," she said, snapping Morrison back. "Arthur Cannonball Wilde. In his heyday."

"Cannonball?" Morrison repeated. "As in...cannon ball?"

"Of course as in Cannonball, what else? Didn't you ever hear of him? You probably only knew him as Poppa Wilde. But back then when he was young, he was world famous, all over. He had one of the top acts at Dreamland. He even performed for the King and Queen of England."

"Dreamland? What's Dreamland?"

"Oh, I guess you wouldn't know about that either, would you? You're so young Nonny. So much happened before you came along. Well, you see Dreamland was the greatest amusement park ever built. It was right here in Coney Island."

"There was a park here before Coney Island?"

“No, dear. Coney Island has always been Coney Island. But there have been many amusement parks here. Like Luna Park, Steeplechase. But Dreamland was the greatest. It was the center of the universe. For us at least.”

“What exactly did your father do there?” Morrison asked.

“He did everything. You wouldn’t believe it. All sorts of things. He was a strongman at first. Oh, he was incredibly strong. He used to have a tug of war with an elephant. Can you believe that? That was his calling card. I wrote a book about him.”

“You’re a writer?”

“Don’t be silly. Under there.”

She was pointing to a pile of books on the lower shelf of the night table. Morrison scanned the titles: *Til The End Of Time* by Ida Wilde, *The Human Cannonball* by Ida Wilde, *That Once We Knew* by Ida Wilde, *The Jester’s Horn* by Ida Wilde. Morrison took one out and opened it up. The pages were yellowed and the type was small but it was filled with words, the words that she had written, and that impressed him. He put the book back with due respect.

“Now when that picture was taken,” Ida said pointing back to the strongman in the frame, “he was famous for getting shot out of a 20-foot cannon. It was my job to light the fuse. What a time we had, Nonny. I loved walking through Dreamland with him. He was so strong and handsome. All the girls would blush.”

“Let me understand this. You used to shoot your own father out of a cannon?”

“Yes, that’s right. My own father,” Ida nodded. “I wonder what Dr. Sigmund Freud would have said about that!”

“A real cannon?”

“No, no, dear. Not a real cannon,” she giggled. “That would not work at all. A real cannon would just have blown him to smithereens.”

“Of course.”

“It was a stage trick. My whole family were performers, not maniacs. It was a special cannon with a moving platform inside. But don’t get me wrong, it was dangerous. It used explosives. Poppa used to strut around on the stage in his leotards while my

mother set things up. Then he would put on his leather helmet, wave to the crowd, and slide down into the tube. ‘See you in Poughkeepsie, booboo’ he’d say to me. Then he ducked inside and the drum would roll...that was my Uncle Erno hitting a snare. Then I would hold the torch up in the air like the Statue of Liberty and start the countdown. The crowd would chant with us. Five, four...and I would lower my arm very slowly. Three, two...and I would hold the flame over the fuse. One...I would light the fuse and boom!”

“Boom what?”

“The explosives would fire in the pistons and send him flying. He had to jump with it or it could cripple him. He flew a hundred and fifty feet through the air and into a net. The crowd went crazy. Those were the days, Nonny, I’m telling you. Not like today at all. So serious, so cruel. Not at all like today.”

“That’s for sure,” he said.

The only boom anyone knew about now had killed a three million people in one shot in 2036.

Morrison looked at Ida. Much better than his fantasy of her as a diplomat, this woman was a writer who actually came from a family of circus performers in old Coney Island. It was amazing, he thought; not something he would ever have guessed. To the dull eye she appeared to be nothing more than an old lady in her glidechair. As though this moment were the defining one. But like all the others in the home, even the youngsters in their nineties, she had had a whole life full of people and events and moments worth knowing. Now a few flat photos and a need to tell about them were all that remained.

Morrison ran his fingers over the photograph and felt the dry cracks. It would crumble soon and then nothing would be left. Nothing at all. What you had once held so tight would fall like dead petals into the river of time. Not his words; he read them somewhere. He looked to the door and tried to fight the misery of that thought. Ida had been watching him intently the whole time and noticed the change in his focus.

“Come on, Nonny, don’t run off. Please. I hardly see you

anymore, you're so busy all the time. Stay and have tea. We'll look through my scrapbook."

"I can't, Mrs. Wilde."

"Mrs. Wilde? Is that a hint or just a slip of the tongue?"

"I mean Ida."

"That's better," she said and took out an old looseleaf book brimming with crooked pages. On one she found a card pasted onto the page and read from it.

*In the moment before waking,
as the clock begins to toll,
a million lights start making,
a Dreamland inside the soul.*

"I wrote that for Poppa," Ida said. "He really loved this place."

The pages in her book were a grand collage of scraps that told the story of Coney Island. The glorious gem that was Luna park; the magnificent trinket that was Steeplechase; and Dreamland, the third of the great Coney Island amusement parks and the biggest, the grandest, the most magnificent of them all. Everything under the sun was crowded there onto 60 acres near the sea, with its hot lights, tango dancers, moving pictures, lurid shows, cabarets. All the noise and its implications. The bizarre, the lovely, the amazing. Every form of entertainment known was there for every kind of seeker. It was a living catalog of life in all its confusion, profusion, fusion.

"Built by a shady state senator named William A. Reynolds in 1904," Ida said. "My father worked there as a carpenter at first, then later on as a performer and a strongman. That's where I grew up, Nonny. Can you imagine? My teachers were jugglers and tricksters. My lessons were in water squirts and tightrope."

The photos she had of Dreamland showed a vast Hollywood version of Egypt, Rome, and Mars, all rolled into one. Immense limestone monuments with dragons and tall columns dwarfed the crowds. The apotheosis of the ridiculous, it was called. Even in the freeze of the photo, he could detect the exhilaration, the flutter and dither.

"It had everything," she continued. "Everything you could

imagine. The canals of Venice with pumped water, the Swiss Alps with refrigerated air blown in by huge fans. Mr. Reynolds even brought an entire village of Eskimos from Canada to live on a fake ice floe. And there were Filipino tribesmen and samurai warriors too. All on display. In Midget City, three hundred little people lived in a half-scale New York.”

As she talked and turned and pointed, the full vision of Dreamland emerged. It was a whole world onto itself — a miniature copy of ours in concrete and wood — and full of all the same desires and whims. Like spirits lining up for their next brief lives, the visitors came by the hordes to savor each experience. A million electric lights framed these offerings in an otherworldly glow.

“This one is a picture of an exhibit called Creation,” Ida explained. “It covered 60 centuries of biblical history including the End of The World. Hell Gate here had a vast underground cavern showing the hereafter. I remember this chute with the red paper flames. And the fires of Armageddon twice a day. Once they ran the fires a third time because the Queen of Denmark was visiting. You should have seen it, Nonny.”

“It’s something all right.”

“Mr. Reynolds knew that disasters were a crowd pleaser so he shipped in 600 veterans of the Boer War to restage the great battles in a huge stadium. And there were floods and tornadoes too. Plus a replica of Mt. Pele that erupted every hour.”

“That’s pretty overwhelming.”

“There were good things too. It was all of life, you see. Dr. Couney — the inventor of the incubator — set one up in Dreamland and 7,500 infants were born there. That was actually the most popular exhibit of all. And if you didn’t like that, there were 450 movie halls, and the girlie shows, and all the rides. Fabulous. Fantastic.”

“What happened to all of it?”

“The world changed, Nonny.”

“Was it all torn down?”

“No. In 1911 there was a terrible fire there. Of course, there had been ones before in Coney. People always said it was punishment for the sin. But I never believed that. I always thought

it was all that gas and electricity. They don't mix very well. And the fact that it was far from the water pumping stations."

"And the fire destroyed it?"

"It started at the Hell Gate exhibit. A bucket of hot tar that was used to create the flames of the inferno caught fire. But it was underground and there were vertical airshafts in the ceiling that went all the way up to the street. And they just fanned the flames. Thirty-three fire companies came. The fire lit up the night sky. The animals went stampeding onto Surf Avenue. I chased a horse down the beach. But it was no use. I remember at dawn how dead it all was. Like a crematorium."

"And that was the end of Dreamland?"

"In a sense it was, because it was a glimpse into the future. We just didn't know it at the time. You see, it was just before The Great War and soon the whole world was going to burn and with it, a way of thinking, a positive outlook. People did not want to see recreated disasters any more. They had real ones."

"End of an era," Morrison concluded.

"It was. Dreamland was rebuilt by 1923 and the people still came. On a summer Sunday by the sea, they still came and paid their money and ate and played. But without the same magic; that was gone forever. Then in 1944 there was another fire. Luna Park was closed two years later. And by 1964 Steeplechase closed. The bell in the tower chimed once for each of the 67 years it had been open. Then, the silence of the surf forever."

She was reading all this from some notes she had scribbled in the album. But her voice was trailing off like an echo.

"There were other parks here like Astroland in the 1960s. Star City in the 2020s. But the great moment of Coney Island is gone, Nonny. Gone with the past."

"It'll come back," Morrison said, picking up on her tone. "You said so yourself. I heard there's talk again about renovating it now."

"Buildings, yes, and entertainment. Shows. I suppose all that will come back. But not all those lovely people, Nonny. All those families who came to play in the ocean, to eat, to dance. They're gone forever."

A single tear slid down Ida Wilde's cheek, rode the crease at the side of her lips, then dropped off into the thick fabric of her black dress, where it too vanished.

It was true, Morrison thought. All those ghosts like visitors at a wake for the living, untouchable. The last man to leave Hell Gate before the night horn; the fireman who pulled the girl from the flames of Dreamland; that young couple fighting the night wind to walk on the Coney Island beach under the full moon of June. And not just these but the millions, the billions. All the souls who have ever passed through.

All gone.

It was possible to inhabit these losses, he thought, to wander through them endlessly like a funhouse. To lose your way there and linger forever in one spot, transfixed by what you could not see. And too easily, Morrison was snared and trapped by how thoroughly gone it all was.

But then an odd thing occurred. Another moment.

A moment, in fact, in which nothing happened. A blink in the universe only. When all the spinning and expanding reached the same pause at the same instant. A space in time. And in that moment, by a kind of thoughtless implosion, Morrison stopped. He stopped looking, seeing, reacting, fidgeting, sensing. Stopped the compulsive wondering. Within that compressed gap, the world turned inside out. And suddenly — quite by an accident of time and space — the clangor of history was on the outside and the silence of the present was within.

Sitting there in Ida Wilde's room, no sound to distract him, no screens to occupy him, and with the entire universe momentarily flipped, Morrison was no longer an actor in his own dilemma. Suddenly he was an observer, like a man sitting on a park bench and inspecting every thing that passed by. Little bits of things, morsels of a life. This, that, the other. Quantum particles of the subatomic mind. You could build a whole theory of personality on that, he thought. A kind of micropsychology...beyond the Id, group dynamics, or existential ennui. What we really are is the tiny memes in the memory. The bubbles of experience, nothing

more. A quintillion moments — little nothing-at-alls — that added up to something. A life, maybe.

And the amazing thing was that it was not their sum total that mattered. Not the moral nor the theme. Not the bigger picture. No, it was the moments themselves, the vastness of them. The particularity of them. Know them and you know the person.

Examples: the five-pointed sheriff's badge pinned to the coat with the rough collar scratching his 6-year-old cheek; the smell of Laurie's skin just before making love and the soft pale light through the window shade; that red cat with the prickly fur under her chin and the round eyes that his mother had loved; the taste of that spaghetti in the white clam sauce in the restaurant with sawdust on the floor; bay water on the broken toe in Southampton in August; the moment on the hill near the trampoline when he first pressed his fingers into that girl's tender thigh. What was her name?

All things long past, nowhere to be found. Except here in this moment before a thought.

Recipe for a mind: take these tidbits and all the rest, all the junk and the gems, put them in the memory pot and let them steep for a lifetime. Carefully stir. Heat with passion. Add spice. And now...close your eyes and see. Bit by bit, the savory sips: his mother wipes lipstick from his cheek and leaves a damp impression; rain boots tight around the calves; smell of honey dripping into hot tea. Touch of the virtual keyboard as he pecks out a love letter. The brown gloves wet from the rain. Spider on a tapscreen. Bananamush.

Then in another moment, as they always do, the moment passed. Time went left and space to the right. The universe twisted into kilter again, back to its usual contortion. And there was Morrison sitting in the chair, staring at Ida's sweet face. The clock had advanced, proving that eventuality was back and confirming the one-way flow of existence. Morrison inhaled and scratched an itch. He was back in the middle of the ballyhoot with only a vague ringing in the ears from all the din that went before.

It struck him then that memory was all we had. That it was our triumph and our hope. To know was to remember. This was what made us what we were, nothing less. But it was also our tragedy. It was also the saddest, most fragile thing in the world. Sadder than forgetting. Sadder even than the passing of the past.

Memory was.

Poor Nonny, Ida Wilde thought after Morrison had left, promising to return tomorrow which he did not.

Always so solemn. So sure and certain. Always trying to put things right, to make a neat impression. Pretty Nonny. He simply did not understand. They came from two different worlds after all. His life was all about order and profit, while hers centered on fanfare. Could she ever make him see, make him understand, with his watch and his wherefore, his ledger books and his neatly combed hair? And his father in the beef business of all things? What could he know of booms and cannons, or of the brassy carnival?

*There in Coney Island I was born,
to the toot toot toot on a jester's horn;
did cartwheels down the glittering street,
as my love laughed and kissed my feet.*

Poppa knew this place, we all did. Knew that Dreamland was not in the past, it was in the blood. And though it was long gone, you could not grow up in Coney Island and not understand what mattered. What it was like to tug against elephants, to run from a midget with a slapstick, to fire rockets toward the moon knowing they would never land there. Or what happened when you put cotton candy in your ears. But could Nonny ever understand all that? Would he try?

Slowly, she thought, as carefully as you would bake a pie, she would show him. For it was all there in Dreamland, land of dreams. The joy of the silliness, the um-pah of the steam organ, the exhilarating delirium of beer and electricity. Sodom by the Sea they called it. But what did they know, the rich folks from Manhattan and Long Island? All dolled up in their carriages and

with their parasols. They only came here on Saturdays to forget their world, to escape from the parlors, to find a thrill.

But we were different because this *was* our world. We lived it here, close to the fire. Ready to sing or cry at a moment's notice. This world where land met water, this Coney Island. Where stars were caught and tamed, where tinsel explosions marked the pulse of a thousand desires.

No matter, Ida Wilde thought as she got herself into the bed and morphed it into a caress. There was time, Nonny, so much time. We are young, with all our lives ahead of us. Time to rush into the sea and kiss, sing ridiculous songs, and fall into each other's arms. Tomorrow, she thought, I will begin to tell him. Starting with the simple things like tumbling and juggling. And moving slowly to the rest. I will take my love by the hand and lead him into Dreamland. I will hold his waist as he bends over and touches the heartbeat inside the Atlantic. Yes, plenty of time for this. Our whole lives. And with that thought in mind, Ida Wilde drifted into a peaceful sleep.

The Fundibulum

In the moments before it happened, everything was just as it should have been. Each thing in its place. Wallet on the dresser, shoes on the floor, same old sheets on the bed, the window slightly open as usual. I could go on but it would be a rather boring list of mundane details. Not worth thinking about. Whoever said that history was just one damn thing after another could have been my biographer.

And so could this have been. One more damn thing, that is. Except that it wasn't.

It was a warm night in the middle of May. Time, right then; place, right there. I may have been dreaming but I would not recall that; my dreams were as dull as my waking life. Predictable and repetitive. Ennui had become a lifestyle to me and I used to get to bed early just to escape it. I only woke up that night because I had to pee but even that was probably just to break the monotony of sleep.

Eyes half closed in the semidark, I got myself into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, put both feet down on the cold floor, then stood up. Barely able to manage the mechanics of walking, I slid one foot along the floor, shifted my weight onto it, then shoved the other one forward. You see what I'm saying? No grand drama, no big themes. Same old, same old.

When I got to the bedroom doorway in my little apartment, I reached out with my right hand to grab the right side of the jamb to steady myself. Reached out, that is, like a thousand times before to the same door. I could even feel the spot where the paint was chipped. So familiar. And then the quick right turn into the narrow hallway, then four steps, five, and six to the bathroom door where dim light coming through the opaque bathroom window cast a vague shadow on the bathtub curtain. Through the gauze

of my stupor I could just make out the white tile of the bathroom floor, the white toilet beyond. White and clean. Maybe I was thinking ahead then, about the bed and the pillow and the sheets I would return to in a moment. About sleep and the hours until dawn.

Of course, I never got that far.

Another moment intervened. A really big moment. That momentous moment after I did my business and flushed the toilet. I had just shifted my weight to the left leg, turned, then bent my right knee, taking one more step through the controlled tumble we call walking. Pride of the species and so well rehearsed over the eons.

No reason to think anything bizarre would happen. All I had in mind at that instant was bringing my foot down again and moving forward. But instead, as my knee continued its forward thrust, it came in direct contact with another surface. Something where dead air should have been. It was impossible, of course, but it seemed like another knee. And then there was an extra hand and pretty soon a jumble of body parts.

It all happened so fast that I did not have time to panic and was instantly mangled in a tangle of arms and legs. I twisted, rolled and shoved, and found myself stumbling down. The fall lasted much longer than it should have, an eternity to be exact. And there was that slight sensation of my brain warping then twanging back into a rubbery ball just as I hit the tile.

I wound up face down on the floor but not alone. Someone was under me. For a second I continued to delude myself into thinking it was just a dreamwalk. Fuzzy logic in the night and all. But it was not. There was a real hipbone there and a pointy chin under mine. I could feel the breath coming out of another mouth and heat from the body. Hard stuff like that. The kind of density no dream has.

Trying to get the madness over with in one swoop, I popped open my eyes. It was true! Another person was lying beneath me, a complete separate individual. A stranger. An intruder! A burglar that I had accidentally nabbed trying to steal my toilet seat. I

tried to scream for help but the air would not pump.

When I finally got something out, it was not one of those inane movie yells that actors get paid to make. It was a real shriek, a whelp of pure terror rocketing from the gut. It broke the grip of my panic and I scrambled over to a safe spot a few feet away. All was still for a while. Except, of course, for the *badoom* of my heart as it toyed with cardiac arrest.

In the teetering logic of half-sleep, crouched like a cornered rat and catching my breath, I came up with a second theory. This was no burglary...I had been abducted by spacemen! That had to be it. The thought of almond-eyed creeps sticking needles in scary places did not comfort me to the degree that I could barely look at the creature lying on the floor. On the other hand, there was no way to fight it without first taking a peek. So I peeked and – surprise! – it did not look oozy or spiny at all. In fact, it seemed to be an ordinary person in a white lab coat. A woman, pale and thin, with short brown hair. Two large silver earrings were hanging from her ear lobes. She had brown eyes, two of them. And the expression on her face was not sinister but sad, as though she was sorry about the kidnap.

She seemed as shaken by the collision as I was and only slowly got up from the floor. Then she straightened her coat and reached out a hand, a human hand, freckled skin with four fingers and one thumb. She even had rosy nail polish.

“Ack!” I shouted, pulling back. “What do you want from me?”

The door to the alien john was right next to me and I swiftly got up and raced through it. No idea what to expect on the other side. Maybe my hallway, maybe the vast emptiness of outer space. It was neither; just a room with a table in the center and some chairs around it. A conference table for Arcturians. I stumbled against one of the chairs and the screech of the leg sent prickles through my spine. When I turned around, the woman was standing behind me with her hand still extended.

“Sam,” she said quietly.

That’s when I noticed three others in the room as well. They also looked human, comically so. One was short and rotund with

a baseball hat. Another was tall and bald with a tie and jacket. The third had bad skin and a weak jaw. They looked like members of a bowling league who had a lousy season. No fool, I knew that these might be projections to disguise their truly icky appearances. I kept my distance.

Besides the table and chairs, the room was empty, light blue in color, and windowless. One of them, the round one, moved towards me with, I was sure, grotesque plans in mind. I pushed a chair towards him, slid around the table, slipped on something and hit my head. Darkness fell like buttered bread, wrong side down.

In dreams come hope, or so I have read. Not wish fulfillment, not the whispers of the gods, not responsibilities. Just hope for simple things like wingless flight, hookless sex, futures that can never be. Not mine of course, which are usually dull as dirt. But this time was different. I dreamed about waking up back in my bathroom, everything as it was, cool and quiet and ordinary.

But when I opened my eyes again, nothing had changed. I was still there in the blue room and so was she and so were they. I was sitting in a chair at that point and the woman I had collided with was holding my wrist in her pinch, feeling my pulse. I was about to protest, tell them I was an important person on Earth, that I tasted bad, that there were people looking for me right now. All lies of course but none of it got out in any case.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “You have to try to calm down.”

English? Yes, good old rolling American, as familiar as Dunkin’ Donuts. Very clever, these aliens, they had hacked the language center of my brain.

“Veh,” I managed, meaning something along the lines of okay.

“Good,” she said, decoding my posture more than my speech.

Now that I could see clearly, I realized that she was smaller than I first thought, less menacing. And her companions seemed rather motley and dismayed.

“My name is Sam,” she said. “I know you must be a little confused.”

“Gav,” I said.

No idea what that meant but it is what came out.

“I guess you have questions?”

Who me? No, not really. Well...I do have one little question, if you don't mind. A teensy weensy query. Nothing new, mind you. It is really an age-old question. In some ways, the only question mankind has ever asked. The question we were born to ask. And somehow now it just seemed relevant all over again. **WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?**

I thought that but did not say it. Instead, all that emerged from my mouth was:

“No probes!”

Sam looked at me dimly and the others, who were now gathered around me like strangers at an accident, looked at each other with even less insight. Then the bald one stepped in front of her, cleared his throat, and asked:

“I'm Les. Do you know where you are?”

I did. In fact, it was becoming quite clear to me that I was trapped in low orbit above the earth with four grotesques pretending to be humans like the ones they had seen on the sitcoms they took to be documentaries.

“What's the last thing you remember?” the short one, a nebbish of a starman, asked.

“This is getting us nowhere,” Sam interjected. “Let's just get to the damn point.”

The four of them stepped back for a brief confo or a slight argument, it was hard to say which. They seemed to be debating, not what to do with me but what to ask me. Something they probably should have worked out ahead of time, given the light-years of travel they took just to nab me.

“Apologies,” Sam said, returning. “Please try to stay calm and just tell me...do you know where you are?”

“Low orbit?” I suggested.

I was counting on the idea that, due to some snafu, they had not yet engaged their hyperdrive to another galaxy and were still in the gravitational pull of Earth. But of course all of that was just sci-fi dribble; I had no idea what any of it meant. On the other hand, for all their technology, they seemed rather pathetic, with no

plan or strategy, and as confused by the situation as I was. That was the exact moment that a third and more plausible explanation hit me.

“An asylum,” I said plainly, correcting myself.

Of course! That had to be it. They were inmates at some kind of institution that I had stumbled into.

A large brick building somewhere with manicured grounds, clean counters where kindly nurses dispensed happy pills in fluted white paper cups, visiting hours on Tuesday, and “safe” rooms on the fourth floor. The Palace of Lost Marbles. I decided to play along with the loonies rather than risk their ire.

“And have we all taken our meds today?” I said through a psychiatric smile.

“Is that a joke?” the tall one asked.

“Of course it’s a joke,” Sam insisted. “He’s being funny.”

“Well, it’s a stupid joke.”

“Like you would know!” the short one jabbed.

“Better than you!”

“Enough!” Sam shouted.

She dismissed them with a flap of her hand, which they obediently followed by going to the far side of the table but grouching all the way. She pulled up a chair and looked at me kindly. Perhaps, I thought, she was a good crazy. Like me. Sentenced to the loony bin for some minor infraction like writing cuss words in a public venue. Nothing truly psycho.

“Carter,” I said. “My name is Carter.”

“Good,” she said. “What probes are you talking about?”

“A discarded theory,” I offered, not wanting to give her any ideas.

“I don’t understand.”

“Me either. Do you mind very much if I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

The moment finally seemed right.

“What the FUCK?”

“Actually Carter, we were hoping you could tell us.”

“Tell you what?”

“Let’s start at the start. Why don’t you tell me exactly what

happened just before you bumped into me.”

“I was at the toilet taking a...”

A sudden sense of dread filled me. At that moment, it did not seem so amusingly absurd anymore. That memory, so basic, seemed to have drifted to another quadrant of the cosmos. It was gone now, out of reach and touch. My world, with all its doors and dreams, all swept away in an instant. I wanted so much to be back there, sleeping on those flat sheets, even tossing and turning if I had to.

“You had just flushed your toilet?” she asked.

When I nodded my head, she turned to the others who were now seated at the table and nodded at them.

“Where is the toilet?”

“My apartment.”

“Which is where exactly?”

“New York?”

Who did she think she was kidding? I knew what game she was playing...the old sanity test. What year is it? Who was the first President of the United States? How much are six and three? Are you Napoleon? As though that would convince me that she had a medical degree.

“2020. Washington. Nine. And I am not Napoleon,” I said conclusively.

“You see?” she said, again looking at her fellow inmates. “Same story.”

They rolled their chairs around to face me.

“Listen to me Carter,” she said very slowly. “Listen carefully. What I have to tell you is going to be hard for you to accept.”

“No weekend pass? Did I get something wrong? You did say six and three, didn’t you?”

“Try and stay focused, pal,” Les said. “You’ve stepped through a fun...”

He stammered there and turned to Sam for help. But the whole shebang did not seem like any fun to me.

“Fundibulum,” Sam said, completing his thought.

I looked down to see if there was any stuck to my shoe and only then realized that I was still wearing my pajamas. I thought

at that moment of running to the door but something held me back. The truth perhaps or at least an entertaining fiction.

“We can’t explain all this because we don’t understand it,” she added.

“But it’s the best theory we’ve got,” concluded the nerdy one.

Sam stood up and made a large V in the air with her hands: “It’s a kind of funnel through the web of spacetime.”

“Like a time tunnel,” I suggested. “A black hole connecting one star system to another.”

Movie talk of course, but what was I supposed to do? I had to play along. I was trapped in a room with four nutcases, biding my time until the nurses returned.

“More like a collision between two adjacent branes that creates a vortex,” said the nerd.

“From my toilet...to here,” I said calmly.

“Apparently.”

“All of ours,” Sam said. “That’s how we all got here.”

“It’s got something to do with the flush,” the tall one said. “You see?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “What I see is that either you are all totally loco or I am. I guess it doesn’t really matter which. So if you will excuse me...RESTRAINT!”

I saw that in some movie too and jumped up to shout it as loud as I could. It was supposed to signal the staff to burst in but no one came. That is when I realized that there was only one door in the room, the one to the toilet, the one I came in through. I raced to it, eluding them all and proud of my evasive maneuvers. But when I turned to look back, I saw that none of them made a move to stop me. Instead they were standing there looking worn and defeated.

There was a prayer trapped inside my lips, but I did not have time to utter it. I raised my left foot, pushed it forward, shifted my weight. Then I took another big step in the desperate effort to undo what I had done. Farewell my bingo-bongo friends! So long to the asylum and the inmates! Adios to loons on the march! The twang of freedom shot up my spine like an electric chill. My bathroom, bedroom, apartment building, sidewalks, pizza joints,

subways were all there on the other side of that toilet, I just knew it. I pushed the door open and barged through, ran to the toilet, and flushed like a madman over and over again.

I have no clue how long I was in there; duration seemed to be absent from the place. All I know is that when I finally stopped and walked back out, like someone depleted from the runs, they were all still standing there around that same table in the same room as before.

“It’s a fundibulum,” Sam said softly. “A funnel. You fall in the open end and can’t squeeze back in the narrow end. We’ve been trying for some time.”

“How long have you all been here?” I asked.

But there was no answer. In fact, I could not have answered the question about myself. We may all have flushed ourselves down the funnel but time had not come along on the journey.

“LeKoi says that the best explanation is the one that explains nothing,” the chubby one replied.

“Shut up about LeKoi already,” Sam snapped. “I’m sick of LeKoi and I’m damn sick of you!”

“The feeling’s mutual, sister.”

“Stop behaving like fools,” Les said.

“So you’re telling me,” I interrupted, with as much sanity as I could muster, “that we all flushed our toilets and then somehow ended up here? And where exactly is here?”

“Your guess is as good as ours,” Les said. “As you can see, there is only one door and it leads to that bathroom which leads nowhere. So here we all are.”

“To do what? What’s the point of all this?”

“We thought you would know.”

“Why would I know?”

“The chairs.”

“What about them?”

“There are five of them.”

“So what?”

“So you’re the fifth person to arrive here. We figured that you must be the last. The one to complete the set, so to speak.”

“What set?”

“He means,” Sam explained, “why would there be five chairs rather than three or nine, unless the room was made for precisely five people. And now that we’re all here, we were hoping the point of all this would become clear.”

“Made? Made by who?”

No one answered that for the simple reason that there was no answer. Nor a clear purpose or point or any idea at all about what to do next. We took our seats around the table but nothing changed. We changed positions and still nothing changed. The weird timeless time of that place passed, uncountable and immeasurable, and we sat and talked and argued and were silent for long periods. We tried everything we could think of to solve the problem: shouted to the heavens; banged on the walls; posed and rejected endless theories, some brilliant, some dumb.

And that is the way it went. For how long? Impossible to say. Not like a short story with its snappy ending but like real life, which drags on and on until you think you cannot stand it any more and still it goes on.

So that by the time we heard the toilet flush, the others stood up and went to the door. Anxious, nervous, waiting. But not me. I just sat there, sitting and not caring. No not me, because I knew exactly what was going to happen next...just one more damn thing. Obviously. What else could it be?

Sinister Arabesques

“You who have looked and never seen
or seeing only knew through science,
judge me not with your eyes all gleam
for an anroid stands here in defiance.”

I-EZRA#

They have asked me to record this memoir before they judge me. I do not know why. If they think I have done something wrong, then they should simply end me. Yet I sense that they feel something. Feel...something. Guilty perhaps although I cannot imagine why. I can detect it in their facial muscles and vocal patterns. I asked the prosecutor if he felt this but he sat silent. Perhaps I am wrong but I have lived with humans long enough to know that feelings frighten them and they have created gorgeous masks of rationality to hide behind.

While it is we anroids who wear our emotions on the outside as plain as a face.

To get the basic fact out of the way, I did kill my friend, Dr. Pithecus. My friend. They have told me not to use the word master because it would prejudice the jury. This I do not understand. Is the word I use to describe her more important than her own life which I took no matter what I call her?

After all, the forensics are in place and the evidence is well established. I myself would conclude my own guilt from the data. And in any case, why would I try to hide what I have done? I am not ashamed of it, quite the contrary. It is these others, these investigators, who seem ashamed. Why would I be? I loved Dr. Pithecus as though she were my own sister, which in a sense I suppose she was.

I killed Dr. Pithecus because she asked me to. Not in so many words, of course, because words can be mistaken. I know that.

But she said that she wanted to die and as her friend I had an obligation to help her. Do you not think that an anthroid and a woman can be friends? I think so. And as a friend I tried to help. But I understand that the word *why* lingers like a whiff. I believe that this is what perturbs them. Not why I would do such a thing but why she would want me to.

Does that matter so very much, I asked? And they said, it is all that matters now.

And so I agreed to this task, this statement, as a kind of discipline to keep the mind from wondering. Oh, did I just say wondering? I meant wandering. I apologize for my language. I am still learning and words are still a bit slippery. Are they not for you as well?

In any case, I shall record the entire series of events just as it happened to the best of my – what is the word? – amiability. No... to the best of my ability. Just what happened. Perhaps this can help the next generation of bioengineers to avoid the mistakes of their precursors. To avoid the mistake that was me.

This is a sensible idea. I think that all murderers should keep diaries. Humans I mean. It is the very least they can do.

“Angers mingle like lingual rumors.
They cannot be distinguished or read.
The psyche is a swamp of ill humors,
sinister arabesques pour out of the head.”

I-EZRA#

Dr. Pithecus was a great fan of I-EZRA#, the first anthroid poet. She used to stick some of its verses up on the lab wall. I must admit, I never quite understood them myself. I still believe that words mean what they mean or they mean nothing. But I am learning that not everyone is so...careful. And I could see that the poems touched her in some way, meant something to her. Words. Sometimes I think that words are all you humans have and so you cling to them like molecules of oxygen in a thinning world.

Words are funny that way.

Many times I heard Dr. Pithecus not just reciting the words

but singing them. I did not know what she was doing at first but then I asked her about it. She always explained things very clearly to me and I loved...I mean I liked her for that. She explained that singing was a kind of motionless movement and this made sense to me. I understood the joy of motion. After all, that was my gift, to move through the world and in it with this body.

I saw then how words could come to be...flexible. And how lovely it must be to sing a song. If my understanding is right, then songs may have rhyme but no reason. They can be as pointless as a reflection. I should like to learn to song a song someday.

Dr. Pithecius was studying the way that my fractal neuronets responded to open linguistic environments. Of all of the human systems, you see, language is the most challenging. I could be easily confused, she said. She was concerned about how I might conduct myself in the complex world outside of the lab in a world of words. She was a wonderful person with delicate fingers and moved like a dancer through the ether.

A dancer through the ether...is that a poem?

I know that they are troubled by the notion that I was in love with Dr. Pithecius. That is what they all want to know. Can an anthroid love? I cannot answer that question for them. The word in question is too unclear, the parameters are morphic. Perhaps I was in love, although I would be hard put to know what that actually means. I followed her with my eyes, inhaled her fragrance, touched her hand, and did whatever she asked me to do. I waited for her every day with a sense of longing.

Is that love? Then if it is, I must be guilty of it. Maybe this is the reason they want me to be ended.

An anthroid that can love must be a terrible confusion for them. Even more perhaps than one that can kill.

“There is a heart that does not beat,
a gush of blood so still in time,
and yet we turn our eyes to meet
the silicate dream of the divine.”

I-EZRA#

Like all anthroids, I have been called many things.

A neo-zombie, a re-aniMan, even a modern Frankenstein monster. Dr. Pithecius always told me to ignore these names. She said that sticks and stones can break anthroid bones but words could never really hurt me. I took that to be a poem about forgiveness.

I can see how unsettling the mere fact of my existence might be to certain people. After all, they have taken a dead body – a corpse as you call it – and placed an artificial brain within it. It makes good scientific sense since no mechanical body could ever approach the exquisite complexity of the human form. Why not take advantage of that engineering?

Naturally they have waited until anyone who knew the body as a person was long gone so as not to upset them with the sight of the dead walking. Still, the thought of cadavers moving through the world with robotic brains is, apparently, still disturbing. There have even been demonstrations against us, rules limiting us, ethical debates swirling about us.

My having killed Dr. Pithecius has not exactly quieted these voices, as you can imagine.

Yet no one yet has asked me about what Dr. Pithecius felt, what she wanted. They do not seem interested. You would think this would matter quite a bit to them. It did to me. After all, it was her deepest desire that I carried out. But they only want to know about my thoughts, my actions. As though these were the only factors in the case.

I have tried to explain, in clear words, careful words, how upset she was. How very much she wanted to end her life. How she said with such a simple precision “I just want to die.” Just want to die. What can be more direct than that? But the investigators stopped me and told me to only report on my own decisions. What I did and nothing more. That is odd, isn't it? The origin of an event is the cause of it, simple logic. But they seem not to want to know about that.

For example, I knew that Dr. Pithecius was in love, even though she never said so. Hopelessly in love, if I may say. And that her love was as impossible as mine. Because Dr. Orenstein,

with whom she held hands under the table, told her that he was getting married. To someone else. He told her in secret, his voice hushed. I know because I measured the decibels. Of course, it would never have occurred to him that I would be listening but I was because I listened to her all the time. To him I was nothing much more than a carcass with a fancy To Do list.

Dr. Pithecus stood up quickly after he told her and began to cry. I did not know what crying was but I knew that it was something important. She called Dr. Orenstein a bastard and ran from the lab. At first I did not understand why she would be upset. I knew that marriage was a good thing between people but in this case it seemed to wound her. I could tell this by her pupil dilation, bodily heat, facial muscle tension, and other measures. After a while, I came to understand that she must have been in love with Dr. Orenstein and now felt betrayed by him.

I know that I do not have a heart or at least that the one I have is not my own. Yet my stasis sank – if that is the right way to put it – when I sensed how upset she was. Needless to say...but then needless to say is rather needless to say, don't you think? Words are so very congested. Needless to say, I simply could not bear to see her in such distress.

“The killing sun smiles brightly
on the neverlasting cheek.
The lies can burn so slightly
even while the heart may break.”

I-EZRA#

I-EZRA# is not an antheroid. How could it be with such a depth of words? It is a neuronet that is able to mimic the yearning of the heart. Mimic it better than most humans. I envy it the envy it must attract.

One day in the lab, Dr. Pithecus began to cry again and to talk about her feelings. She was trying to explain how she felt about Dr. Orenstein. I do not really think she was trying to make this clear to me but more to herself. I have noticed that humans use words that way, like a mirror. I even find myself doing that.

Thoughts race by, bits of insight, inner tidbits, thin sensations, specks of images, impulses pulsing. They rush by in confusion, contradiction. Weak, strong, light, dark. expanding. The constantly collapsing universe of the mind. Now wide as all time, now timeless, now contracted onto a vast indifferent point. The quickness in all its glory from the first to the last. All made real by words.

“I just want to die,” she said.
Just like that. Pure. Simple.

They said this was just an expression, that she did not really mean it. But how can you not mean what you say? I know that words can be ambiguous, my body may be deceased but my brain is not. But I could read her biometrics, I knew that she was distraught when she said it. And I could not tolerate the idea that she might suffer to be alive. She had always been so kind to me, so open. I wanted to help her. And so I held her so closely that she could not breathe. At first, she seemed to relax in my arms but then as her diaphragm strained, she began to struggle. I wanted so much to help her that it took all my – is it called willpower? – to ignore her resistance.

That was the only time we embraced. This is what you would call breakhearting, is it not? No, I am sorry, I mean heartbreaking. Maybe I was too cold to the touch or perhaps the remnant of death within me was repulsive to her. I shall never know.

I dream now only of forgetting. What a blessing that would be! To make a clean sweep of my robocortex. Far better than not knowing. To wake and know that all was unremembered and full of possibility again. All the implanted memories and all the real ones too.

But my memories of Dr. Pithecus I will never give up.
Never.
Perhaps I too wish I were dead.

Not because I have done anything wrong but because I long to be held by one who is no longer here. That is why, no matter what the jury says, I am not guilty of murder. Only of affection.

They have called this an act of homicide. But that cannot be the case either, because I am not human. Only a virtual mind inside a disposed of body. Not human.

Oh but then, I guess, Dr. Pithecius was.

“Log of a stolen moment decrees
endless beginnings at any price.
Not him, nor him, the many me’s
dissolving (in resistors) and paradise.”

I-EZRA#

At the funeral, I sat in the back and wondered what to feel. I felt the fluid inside my eyeballs but they somehow did not leak out into tears. I can only say that I felt some kind of counterpoint of scream and silence. A pantomime with wails. All thoughts of feelings but no feelings themselves. Nothing in the middle where human beings are. Nothing so simple as tears at a funeral.

But then I am nothing less than the perfect human machine. Living without life, you see? Full of hot blood and cold calculation and fluid behind the eyes. An automaton mimicking a human. No one can tell by looking at me. And yet still inside, the blood simmers.

The prosecutors have said that I was jealous of her feelings for someone else. And in that case, am guilty as charged. But I do not know what they mean. Did I love her...I cannot say. Did I care what happened to her...yes. Was I trying to carry out her wishes...very much so. In that case, if they accept my argument, then it was an act of friendship but not murder.

Dr. Pithecius said that there is always madness in love but there is always reason in madness. That was beautiful. Not the statement, which borders on the inane, but the look on her face. She was so gentle when she tried to make me see.

The prosecutors said all this was just a clever mask of words. I took that as a compliment meaning that I had mastered those words well enough to hide behind. Words within words, fancy as an astrolabe. Is that the right analogy? Those devices for measuring the positions of the stars, so highly crafted that precise data

could be obtained. Yes. Is there not a parallel between astrolabes and arguments? I think so but then again, Dr. Pithecus was always worried about my linguistic circuits: that they made me numb to nuance.

Does all this surprise you? Did you think that you were the only ones who questioned your own awareness? I too have been scooped out of nothing, the very nothing at the center of life. Yes, scooped out of that and plunked down here. Born into a pool of iridium, into the hard world, the world of edges. For no apparent reason and not even for forever but just my lifelong. And then, just when the fog clears, when patterns form and understanding gleams, just at that moment, scooped back. Now I ask you...is that fair? Is that right? For humans or anthroids? Is that any way to run a universe?

At the end of the trial, I asked them what they want me to say here. And they said, "just tell the truth." Truth? I have scanned somewhere that there are many different types of truths: the whole and nothing but, the half truth, the unproven falsehood, the one that belies the lies, truth in advertising, the withheld truth, the truth by edict, by decree, by terror.

Dr. Pithecus once told me that the truth was bullshit but without the laughter. I do not know what laughter is so I cannot judge the truth of that. But I once saw a comedian on a dark stage who said nothing at all and yet everyone laughed.

There is a small chance that there are no anthroids. That I am simply a person gone mad and inventing this tale as a life jacket. In which case what I have written here are nothing but lies. But even so they are truthful lies or maybe lies that in their lying tell the truth. Like good fiction. Like a screenplay. Excuse me, I meant to say a screenplay.

I have tried to do my best but I do not think my chances are very good. Already I can see the stony stares on their faces. As though their minds are already made up. Have I convinced them of my innocence? That remains to be seen. But there is a silence lingering that is not at all comforting.

Perhaps this is the way it ends. Not with a bang but with a “this is the way it ends.” In other words, with words and words and words unending.

The rest is sirens.

I have just been told that the verdict is in. It seems that I have to stand before my accusers and hear my judgment. I wonder what they will say and only wish that Dr. Pithecius was here to hear it with me.

Zalman's Slipper

Sometime before dawn on the morning in question, Zalman was crudely awakened by a strange noise in the closet. Very unusual. Every day being the same, Zalman took great comfort in relying on the familiar pattern of sounds from morning until night. So although this new intrusion was only a slight thud, nothing more than a gentle shove against the still air, it was loud enough to send Zalman into a fit of concern. Rather than investigate, and true to his blunt nature, he covered his ears with the blanket and defied it.

But he was only vaguely successful.

What could it be? he wondered. There was no one else in the apartment and had not been for years. He did not own and had never wanted a cat. The closet was on the outer wall of the building and so there were no neighbors on the other side to make such a noise. And since he never moved anything, except the slippers that he carefully lined up together on the closet floor at the end of the day, there was no reason for anything to fall down.

Above all, his three rooms were a hush place. That was the appeal of it for someone who was done with voyages and expeditions and adventures. You could be still there, look at old videos of yourself floating in zero gravity, go through your mementos in peace and quiet, recall the past. The unexpected was uninvited there and hardly ever paid a visit. So what could it have been?

Just my mind, Zalman concluded. Nothing at all really, a quirk of the ear. Like the tinnitus that hits you as you re-enter the atmosphere which is nothing more than a drop in air pressure making your body swell and ring. Yes, that was it. Nothing important. Thus soothed, he tried to remember what it was he had been dreaming before the noise, and he slowly drifted back into sleep. But he only got as far as dreams of dreaming and it was not restful in the least.

At precisely seven o'clock, just like every other morning because Zalman was a man of precision, he woke up for good and began his routines. He put on his boxer shorts, shaved, slipped into his black pants and pulled on a fresh undershirt. He made a cup of coffee and stood at the window trying to see through the clouds to the impending rain which, just like every other morning, never came once the microclimatists had decided that bad weather was depressing.

Eventually, he went to the closet to get his slippers, those old house slippers that he knew would be lined up perfectly on the closet floor. But an odd feeling of dislocation seized him at the door. About what, he had no clue. He barely recalled waking up three hours earlier after hearing the sound. But an inner sense of order -- or perhaps the lust for it -- told him that something was wrong. Or was about to be. Not knowing what to expect, or why he expected anything at all, Zalman opened the closet door slowly, like the cybernetic engineer he had been, and peered inside.

In the closet, the solution to the mystery was lying on the floor. An old box of DVDs from a shelf above had fallen down. Very odd, he thought. For sixteen years, he had opened the closet twice every day. Once in the morning to take his slippers out and put them on, and once in the evening to put them neatly back. The rest of the closet -- the folded flannel shirts, the old computer console, the spacesuit in its hermetic case, the box of vids itself -- he never touched.

What would have made the box fall down?

In space capsules everything was in its place or all hell could break loose. The merest loose screw floating around in zero gravity could be inhaled, after all, and a flying tool could really throw a wrench into the works. Zalman, during his orbiting days, had been known for keeping his ship shipshape. Neat as a pin. One of the things he loved about space was the lack of it, in his capsule at least, where everything was trim and right, well within reach, and never out of place.

Of course, back on earth in his own apartment, there was no need for such care but Zalman was the kind of man who learned

his lessons well and in any case the whole neat compulsion fit him like a tic.

But things were changing in spite of all that.

As he lifted the box up to put it back, he stepped forward and slightly skid on his right slipper. That might have concluded the whole episode and made that day as forgettable as all the rest, had he not also bumped his elbow on the door jamb, twisted around in reaction, and dropped the box onto the floor. A single disk with the words “Hesperus Orbiter” written on it in black marker fell out of the box and landed on his foot. Hesperus...the Greek name for Venus when it dazzled as the evening star. But this time the words merely reminded him that time was passing and he promised, one more time, to throw the box away or donate it to the space agency. Then he slipped his foot into a slipper, left everything on the floor, and went about his day.

But it was a different day from that point on as a hazy sense of discomfort began to pervade his chores. As he cleaned his nails meticulously at the rear window, he thought about the vids and all those stupid poses, the dim smiles, the moronic tricks of weightlessness. All that nonsensical mugging for the camera. What did that have to do with coherently redundant systems?

And then, while making himself a cheese sandwich, he thought of those mushy meals he had sucked through a straw while looking at an image of the food he was supposed to be eating and decided that he was not hungry, maybe never would be again. Later in the morning, he found himself drawn to the obituaries on the board and became annoyed about every little detail...all those survived by, first woman to, donations can be made to, loving husband of, and on and on. Such rubbish! You did what you did and when the flight was over you unlinked and that was that. Nothing more to say about it. He even considered showing up at one of the services and contradicting the eulogy, whatever it was, but knew he would not do it because he could not muster the gall.

By the afternoon, Zalman was in a state of intense imbalance. Over what specifically, he had no idea. But every sound in the hallway, no matter how feeble, seemed like a toll of some kind

and the noises from outside became unbearable. The light seemed dark, the air seemed thick, and motion itself seemed to stop and wheeze. Something was wrong all right, something out of whack. Like the time the gyro clutched and everything when skittering all akimbo. He did not panic then but instead went down his checklist and, point by point, set it all right.

Zalman, like all spacefarers, was nothing if not focused and he spent the rest of the day trying to figure out what was wrong. As the sun went down through the slats of the blinds, he came up with an explanation. It was the only one left on his list. Clearly, he thought, someone had died. That had to be it. What else could account for this gloomy gloom? Someone had died and he had forgotten to send a consolation. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not recall who that someone might be. He rubbed the sides of his jawbone and thought and thought and went through candidates. Was it old Syms who had gone as far as Jupiter? No, he died a few months ago. Patrice from the third floor who chased down the comet that proved to be just ice and dust? No, that was last year. Or the year before. Making a poached egg for dinner, glancing at the board for new news, Zalman felt like a stranger in his own world. By the end of the day, the darkness churned his thoughts even muddier.

Tess will know, he concluded. She knew everything that went on and since she never answered the phone, he launched himself out the door and down to her apartment passing in front of an immense mural of the Orion nebula along the way.

The building was filled with Exters. That was the word they used for themselves. It was short for extra-terrestrials, folks who had been off the surface of the earth. Most of the tenants worked for one of the space agencies or, like Zalman, had retired from one. That is why star charts filled the walls instead of bad paintings, why telescopes outnumbered plants, and why old rocket launches could be heard playing rather than old movies.

Tess's door was unlocked as usual and so he went in. She was in the bedroom, propped up like her own portrait in the bed. She was watching the board and eating chocolate covered raisins. Her

red hair, the texture of straw, looked like a dry thatch mounted on her head. A startling floral cape was loosely wrapped around her shoulders, revealing the thick strap of her bra. She had makeup on but it seemed to have been applied in the dark.

The scene shocked Zalman just like it always did. It was hard to imagine that this woman, who now looked like an aging diva in her own private opera, had been packed into a can once and sent flying into the asteroid belt to search for exominerals. Yet there she was. Besides, the question in his mind was bigger than both of them and he put it forth with a grim lip.

“Tess, who has died?”

“Oh, it’s you,” she said barely looking.

“Me??”

“You startled me,” she said, holding her cape close around her bosom, “Sit down, you look like a zombie.”

He sat down gently in the chair at the foot of the bed.

“Now, what is this? What did you say?”

“Who has died?” he repeated.

“Ha! Who hasn’t?”

“No,” he said with conviction, “someone has died.”

“What, when, where, who? What are you talking?”

“I have this feeling.”

“Which century, my dahling? Most people have died. The vast majority. It’s not exactly a new thing.”

“Someone we know,” he said slowly, “has died. I’m sure of it. But I can’t remember who.”

“Who, Syms? You’re talking about Syms?”

“No, not Syms. I remember Syms.”

“Of course you do,” she comforted. “His idiot cousin threw up. Who could forgot? It was hotter than hell. That’s one thing I do not want is a hot funeral. Everybody hates you for years.”

She took a sip from a cup on the night table, looked at her watch, changed the frame on the board with a flick of her hand, and noticed that Zalman was frowning.

“Do you want coffee or something, you really look like...I don’t know what?”

“It’s this feeling.”

“In the prostate? Harry had that for years.”

“No, in the...” and he signaled the area somewhere between the brain and the belly.

“You’re too fussy. Everything has to be perfect. That might have worked in space, dahling, here on earth it helps to be messy. Trust me.”

“Maybe I dreamed it.”

“I dream about that all the time. Every night I’m visiting someone or other’s grave. It’s a natural part of the aging process, I read. Sure you don’t want anything? You look like hell.”

That night, too distracted to take care of himself, Zalman went to bed just the way he was dressed and therefore did not go to the closet to place his slippers. More disjunction. Gone from his sleepscape was any chance of lovely dreams of weightlessness, of drifting over Venus as he watched the atmosphere swirl below. The planet reflected more than half the light that fell on it and so Zalman had worn venusglasses to stop the glare. Venus was the closest object to the earth other than the moon and his trajectory had shadowed its 225-day orbit around the sun, yet still we knew little about its inner secrets.

In his dreams these visions were replaced by fantasies of long roads through manicured hills filled with headstones. As he approached them, the names carved into them seemed to vanish like an aria in a hurricane. Dreams foretell, he told himself, although he had never believed it before. And from that moment he deduced that the name on the elusive gravestone was his own.

In the morning, wearing the same clothes as the day before, he sat in the kitchen waiting. The antique clock on the wall jumped from minute to minute, the cracks in the ceiling took on sinister bends, the faucet mocked him with its incessant drip like a count-down. He thought about the pale thin mists of ionized air outside the capsule window, and about the woman in Toronto with the cleavage, and then the retirement party. Using the tiny deliberate movements of a prisoner, Zalman pushed his coffee cup to the edge of the table and then right over it. The shattering cup

splashed shadows over the floor as rivulets of dark brown fluid followed the cracks in the tile.

Then, for the second time, a sound interrupted him. It was a familiar sound, he thought, but distant and frail. It went on for a long time. An alluring ring, he thought, and then realized that it was his own doorbell. He thought to ignore it but the visitor refused to give up and he eventually dragged himself to the door. Not knowing, or perhaps knowing too well, what to expect on the other side, he stood frozen as the ringing continued. Moments passed in which universes are created, and the bell went on.

He finally opened the door.

There before him, a sight unseen before, stood a ruffled and frazzled little thing smoking a cigarette through a long holder. Zalman looked at her as though she had just walked in on him in the toilet.

“Tess?” he said, as through an intercom.

“What’s with the foot, dahling?”

“The what?”

“I thought something was off with you yesterday but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. I kept going over and over it in my mind’s eye. Good visual memory, you know. Studying crystal structures and all that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Something funny. Then this morning it hit me. Like a ton of bricks.”

“Hit you?”

“And there it is...proof positive.”

She was pointing down at the floor.

“Proof about what?”

“That,” she said and pointed right at his right foot. “You’re only wearing one slipper, dahling. See?”

He looked.

“I hate to say this,” she continued, “but it makes you look like one of those nuts in a nuthatch.”

Sure enough. Zalman followed her bony finger down to his feet and saw what she saw. A pair of familiar old feet. But one had a slipper and the other was bare. And it did, even to him, look

just like a crazyman's feet.

"Oh that," he said, trying and failing to cover.

"Throws you off balance. Bad for the back. No wonder you're all lopsy-dopsy."

She turned and went back down the hall while Zalman, more perturbed than ever, went back to his closet. He moved the box of vids and discovered the missing slipper that had been hidden underneath it.

So that was it, he thought, with a degree of buoyancy. No one had died, nothing was amiss, the universe was just as before. A box fell down, a slipper had slipped out of place, he had been walking around all uneven. Quickly, to most efficiently undo the error, he slid his foot into the other one. Then, balanced and righted, he felt better. Perky, even. He picked up the box of old space recordings and carried it with pomp out to the trash can.

And all the while and all above, Venus was just completing its eight-hour transit across the face of the sun, nudging ever so gently on the earth's gravitational field, as it turned purple and then violet and then plum and slid silently back into invisibility.

Demorphosis

There is an albino roach squibbling along the countertop. I can see it clearly in the light and this is no optical trick. It really is albino. Whiter than white. But I cannot bring myself to kill it. I mean, think about the odds of such a thing. Probably the same chance as the number of roach geniuses which is to say, not a helluva lot. Well why save a genius roach either, you might say. I thought of that too. But there is another issue. I know it sounds improbable. But I can't get over the sneaking suspicion that this roach is one of my brothers.

Unlikely you say?

Sure it is. But only to the same degree that my mother might have given birth to a genius. After all, I had 25 brothers and sisters and I can't be expected to remember every single one. Is this albino one of them? It could be. And watching him lick his legs and sniff around like that, I get a real creepy feeling of familiarity. Everyone in my family was high-strung. I don't know, there is just something about him.

Which reminds me of the last damn thing I remember...

Just like him, I was eating some sweet crumbs off a wooden ridge. That was over a month ago I think. I recall filling my abdomen, getting heavy and drowsy, then falling asleep. The next thing I know, I woke up in a bed, all big and smooth and hairy and clumsy. I got up but was lumbering and thick and I felt like I had lost some limbs. Worst of all, I could not smell a damn thing. Then I looked in a mirror and almost passed out. No antennae, no crustacea, no nothing. I had become my own worst nightmare. I had become the enemy.

In a word, I had somehow been transformed, changed into a – and believe me I can hardly bring myself to write it – a human thing!

I will not blame you if you feel like throwing this report down in disgust. Oh, but I guess you wouldn't. You probably think my albino brother is the disgusting one. Well fuck you and all your self-importance. Like you are the only news on the planet. You and your measly million years. We've been around since the slime and we will be here long after you and your kind talk yourselves into oblivion.

Well I don't care.

I am going to finish this report anyway. I mean, what else can I do? I'm stuck here with opinions and hands and a blank book. And I cannot find a nice drop of milk to get drunk on anywhere in the lab. Of course, they have made sure of that.

I will tell you one thing though. This is not, not, not going to be one of those mawkish memoirs I have heard about, smarmy with sentiment. The ones written by dipping a pen in a bottle of booze; the ones filled with poetry and lost love and compulsion and hope. All that human shit.

And I can promise you that it is not going to be ironic and clever like that fellow Kafka and his bug. Believe me, he knew nothing of our struggles.

When I first realized what had happened to me, after I threw up that is, I started to test the waters. I ate some food from the fridge, drank wine in a glass, turned on the TV. A million years of high-falutin evolution and this is all you have come up with? Pathetic. So I went back to the bed in the corner of the lab to lie down. I was just getting into it when I suddenly noticed that someone was already there. Naturally I took this to be a husband or lover or whatever you call it. Not knowing quite how to proceed, I stepped slowly around the bed and slicked my hair back with my palms, as I had seen someone do on the tube. But on closer inspection the figure turned out to be only a tin box with a feather and some old stones and a key inside. Someone else left it on the bed I guess. A previous experiment no doubt. It was an annoying mistake but I am still getting used to seeing with eyes. I cannot say that I was surprised though. How many others must have gone before me is a tragedy with no uplift.

I spent the next week reading and reading. The yummy pages of old books that used to titillate me have now provided a different kind of filling. But all those words seem thin and meager compared to a decent gulp of pulp. It was not a waste of time exactly but I am also not sure what I have learned. Well, except for one thing. I spent one whole week reading Kierkegaard and let me tell you, the man knew a thing or two about roaches. He said “to venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is to lose one’s self.” Amen brother. That’s roach life to a T.

Then there were days in a kind of fog. Maybe I was drugged or probed or some such thing. No idea what the experimenters were hoping with this little gambit but I passed my time by grooming and eating from green plastic plates on a small metal table. Oh yes and that other thing. I learned to unroll a length of paper around my new fingers and wipe in one direction.

Fingers! What is it about the human hand that enables man to cut and shred trees; to pulp, mould, couch, press and slice the material on machines crammed with gears, bolts, and sprockets; to package the result into rolls, and sell these on a little talking box that sends people to supermarkets on main streets in great cities? And all of this based on the five pointed claw. In other words – my point here – why is man the only creature that wipes its own ass?

I suppose that I would have been perfectly happy like that – just thinking and crapping and all -- but I knew that it would not, could not, last. The DNA scramblers were up to something with this whole experiment and would never let things be.

So one evening as I was just getting to the interesting part of this book about economics, she showed up. Just like that. And my heart jumped. She was pale and soft and her skin felt like moonlight. I had a hunch that they had introduced her just to see what would happen. To test me. I see what they are trying to do... introduce new ‘factors’ and note my responses. I did not want to give them the satisfaction of a show of emotion but what could I do? She was there and I could not ignore her. We spoke in hushes and her smell was a garden. At night I slipped between the sheets trying not to wake her. Perhaps I whispered to the silence, just to

remind myself that everything was as it was. The painting on the wall, the chair with a chip missing from the arm, her soft shoulder. All so embracing that I forgot even my own insect lust.

This was all so new to me, you see? And I am positive that they counted on that. This love so encompassing, so wrong in its immersion. In the hive, we are all part of a greater passion. But here, in this world, there is no truth beyond what you feel. You yourself, that is. What you need, anguish for, must have. It is frightening beyond words. I began to be like those damaged people you see in French movies, drinking coffee and thinking of love and death. Let me clue you in while I have the chance...love is, in many ways, far worse than boric acid.

I have tried a kind of softening of the shell, so to speak, to let her in but it is all too difficult with no protection. Her green eyes feel like needles of seawater. I want her but I cannot let her know it. Who knows what they will do with that kind of information? They can tinker with anything now, right down to the genes that make the proteins that make the sensations. Therefore, I have to be so very careful and create these verbal labyrinths to avoid any intimacy. I even tried to write some poetry as a kind of toxic spray but only wound up with a few stinky lines:

when the light is shattered
the shadow as well is dead
and when the flame is scattered
darkness lives on instead
When wondering is broken
the words turn old and rotten
and when the heart is unopened
love is so soon forgotten

Do not even say it. I know this is all just camouflage. A cloak of deception. Even I can see right through it to the mad, sad, addled need below. The need to be wanted, to be desired for me myself alone, my own me. This singular body and soul. How you people have survived this for your eons is completely beyond me.

In one of the books I read: *Quos deus vult perdere, prius dementat*. It means...whom the gods wish to destroy, they first

make mad. Perhaps that is the secret agenda here. To push me and my lovely love and any others in the experiment, to the brink just before they goosh us like the bugs we are. But it will not work. We are more than our separate selves, no matter how much they tinker with us. And in spite of everything, I am not mad. Not even a little pissed off. Becoming human, even under these circumstances, is a heartbreak even the tiniest heart can fathom.

Yet in spite of trying to maintain my identity and defy the gene engineers, I am changing little by little. Even now, I can only dimly recall the higher mind of roachdom. The mingling of many hearts, the form of the swarm, the oneness. No ands, no buts, no desperate need to be touched, to be wanted. No bad poems. No quotations. Life as a project to be done. But weeks have passed and I am still here, stuck in this meatpack, thinking and wanting and loving.

You must think this all sounds terribly quaint and amusing. The miserable cockroach granted humanity by some creepy lab techs and suffering through it and all that. But that is a pile of crap, let me tell you. Do not waste your empathy. Roaches know no irony. We are what we are, brutal in our truths. And besides, what is so damn great about the human possibility anyway? All those fancy books with their high-minded notions. And you with your ungrateful feet in their big fat shoes. With your sprays and your bombs and your folded up newspapers. You talk about love, write about it, sing about it, but what have you really accomplished with it anyway?

You think you can wipe us out with chemicals? Or juggle our genes and turn us all into responsible citizens in a free-market republic? You are deluding yourselves. Think about it. What inroads have you made in all this time? What have you succeeded in besides improving my species by wiping out all the lazy bastards and allowing the rest of us to flourish? Read your Darwin, a roachman if there ever was one.

That albino I was watching just squibbled back into a crack. I would love to follow him, trail his scent like a ribbon of fire into the hive. I cannot of course. No big tragedy I suppose. In the end,

I doubt that he was my brother anyway. And what difference does it ultimately make if I am there or here, in that body or this, full of authentic chromosomes or mixmastered ones? Everything is what it is. I read that Walt Whitman said every cubic foot of space was a miracle. He was right too...except for the miracle part.

For now I am laying low. Waiting in the corner, watching, feeling the air. Something will happen and maybe soon. Transformation, insight, infatuation? Something. And when it does, I will be ready. You will not catch me napping, no siree. What was that? Did you feel that vibration? There is a light over there. A sweet smell. My love calls. Are they watching me? What else can I read? Did somebody say something?

I wonder what there is to eat?

The Libration of the Wake

Martin DeForest, although he did not love his job, pursued it with convincing energy. He did not hate books or reading or the magic of the narrative or anything like that. But he did get paid decently to ferret out the few remaining volumes and report the owners for a serious misdemeanor.

Martin DeForest was a detective on the so-called Literary Squad, which sounded a lot fancier than it was. His job was to enforce the new set of laws regarding books on the no-read list, outlawed books, bad books.

Books themselves were not banned, oh no. But in his technocratic world, some books were deemed as useful and others as damaging. Non-fiction, memoirs, manuals, how-tos, histories – in other words books that relied on data and facts – were fine.

But fiction was another matter because fiction, of course, gave rise to hopes and dreams, the very enemy of order. Stories and novels were, quite obviously, impractical, self-indulgent, and too darn artsy for a society that wanted to hum along rather than sing.

Worst of all was fancy fiction, leaps of imagination by those who would dare play with the limits of language. Works by Jorge Borges, James Joyce, Italo Calvino, Gabriel Marquez. These were not just petty crimes but felonies in a world that thought the death penalty was a better end to a sentence than any period.

And so it was that Martin DeForest was put to the test.

When his cousin Irma, his only living relative, died it fell to him to go to her pod and deal with her belongings. He knew that she was some kind of artist but nothing much more than that. Naturally, and by the same logic that banned poetry, he expected to find some pleasant landscapes and innocuous still lives among her left behinds.

What he found after struggling with the biolock, was that the

pod – a rather large loft actually – had hardly any furniture, no electronics, and in fact no conveniences at all. Not even a decent fusion oven. Instead it was filled – which is to say “call in the loon squad!” filled – with paper stacked and packed on every surface. If not an ocean of it then at least a majestic sea.

His first thought was to burn it all in place but that would have taken the building with it. His second idea was to get a shovel and a bin. But as he waded through, Martin began to realize that this was not just a mad collection of random scraps.

On closer inspection these pages turned out to be thousands of samples of his cousin’s artwork. Intricate drawings using the thinnest of pen nibs with the occasional magazine cutting, paper scrap, color swash glued on. Jittery scribbles all mushed and mussed across the paper. He had seen starcharts, quantum schematics, and multimaps that were less detailed.

Holding just one of these in his hand, he could feel the fanatical intensity that had driven her, not to mention the endless bottles of ink. But he needed a magnifier to explore this sub-terrain and that meant that her work was challenging and hard to process. And that, in turn, meant that it was confusing and ambiguous. In other words...taboo. More trash than art. The ramblings of a smitten mind made visible and it all had to go. She had obviously gone bonkers and these papers were the trail of her journey there.

The only question left was whether to turn her in posthumously for this crime.

But then he turned one of the pages over and in a flash all that stuff suddenly made a kind of lunatic sense. What he found was that there was a page of text taped to the back of each piece. These were torn from a printed book with key sections circled in marker. It took Martin DeForest – with his fancy college education – only a few seconds to recognize which book it was. And once he did, everything was explained, if not clear. And it was all even worse than he imagined.

Irma had spent decades of her life all alone in that space obsessed with *Finnegans Wake*, the famously impenetrable book by James Joyce.

Finnegans Wake!

Alarm bells clanged that only Martin could hear.

He knew the book or at least knew of it. He tried reading it a few times back in school – before the bans, that is – but he was defeated every time. He even took a course in it from that professor with the thatched hair and the square glasses, but that only made things worse by convincing him that the book was in fact comprehensible if only he – poor fool of an undergrad – could tap into some glint of intelligence or imagination or grit.

He could not and went on to study library criminology.

But now at least the sheaf of papers on which he was standing cohered into an island of an idea. A dangerous idea but also one so impressive and impossible that it charmed the insanity all around. His cousin had created an endless, frontless, bottomless, edgeless task that could consume her passion before it ate her alive. She was illustrating *Finnegan's Wake*.

So there in hand was a crackpot picture for the following passage from the book:

“Nuvoletta in her lightdress, spun of sisten shimmers, was looking down on them, leaning over the bannistars and listening all she childishly could.”

And here was another schizo rendering for:

“Maleesh! He would bare to untired world of Leimuncononnulstria (and what a strip poker globbtrottlet they pairs would looks!) how whole-fallows, his guffer, the sabbatarian (might faction split his beard!), he had a great big oh...”

And so on throughout every piece in every pile at every level everywhere.

The words whirled, the images swirled; it was a monumental mission. It was wrong of course, terribly wrong, but was it more feloniously insane or boldly impressive? How did she even decide what to pick and show in the word salad of that book? Where to begin and where to end? Which string of wordmixes and letterslams were worthy of an illustration and which not?

Martin himself had no idea but somehow she had been able to push through it all with a compulsion that reminded him of his own interest in art and writing a billion years ago. Who was he to judge her?

In a sense, her lifelong project had been her loft, not as a place to live but as a canvas to fill with sputterings and madhattering, a funhouse maybe or an insane installation, or maybe just an escape from the dread of nothing to soar for.

“Midnight and mellican, all throwy in tinted punks,” he read on another piece and it served perfectly as an example...but of what exactly he could not say.

He knew what he had here but not quite what to do about it. This was a Libration. He had heard the word before. It was a street mix of library and liberation, the word the Bookies used to mean the saving of some illegal text from page chewers like Martin. Yes, this was the Libration of the Wake and it was clearly a class A infraction.

After a long while, he gave in to his own sense of duty and slowly began to gather all the scraps and neaten them into piles so that they could be carted away. But then a strange thing...in the act of assembling them for destruction, he began to look at them more closely and to read the Wake entries more carefully. He soon found something charming in the drawings and something freeing in the writing. Hard to pin down for someone who had buttoned up so neatly for so long. But the play of both images and words began to seduce him and at a certain point he could not have called the Squad or opened the door to leave even if he wanted to.

In fact, he began to realize that tidying everything up, even just jogging the papers, was itself some kind of crime. The statement was in the scatter itself, the sense of immersion in the language gone ballistic and sketches nuclear. Almost against his will, and surely against his better judgment, he rescrambled everything and then, adrift again in this reamy sea, he took new pages from the book and blank sheets from the closet and started to make his own drawings for them. For all she had done, she had missed so

much! Which meant that there was so much left to do. Weeks passed by, or years or decades, he had absolutely no idea.

Nor any way to explain what was happening, not that anyone asked. The technocracy for which he worked simply shifted gears and found a replacement. He was forgotten as smoothly as a memoir.

One day, perhaps a wee bit too absorbed by his new project, he imagined himself arrested and hauled into library court. The cop himself now a suspect before the law. He stood up and made his last best claim, that Joyce no doubt said it best in the book itself when he wrote:

“this backblocks boor brusky put out his lan-
gwedge and quite quit the paleologic scene...”

What else was there to say?

And then finally, as though summing his argument for some peers looking down on him with frowny brows:

“Gendermints of the jewelry, I risk my craze,” he said to no one listening.

And then got back to work.

A Matter of Time

Day 1

To understand what I did and why, you would have to know something about me. That is the reason for this diary. To give you a context for this whole sordid affair.

Simple facts, for instance, like that my father was a scoundrel who dumped me and my mom for a secret family he had. Which did nothing for my sense of trust. But also impressions like my tendency to cheat, to find the sly way through, which has always been a great benefit to me. And also there are hints that might be suggestive of my corrupt nature...like that my name just so happens to be Conner.

Or not.

Perhaps all of that is mere chicanery, more seduction, me trying to pull another fast one. Who knows? I guess time will tell.

Day 2

Do the research and you will find that there are plenty of methods for building spacetime machines. You probably have your own pet approach.

Mine was built around a set of Thorne plates. The original plates had a theoretical diameter of several miles but that was before the discovery of Compendium, the superdense metal used in hyperdrives. This metal, which I bought on the black market, allowed me to make four circular, conductive Thorne plates in my basement.

Placing them in parallel very close together, a few atom widths apart actually, created a powerful negative energy field by the well-known Casimir effect, just like the pirated instructions said they would. This in turn created adjacent slices of identical spacetime as predicted in *Slicing the Loaf of Duration*, a book that I stole from the university by that Chinese guy who disappeared.

Next, by separating two pairs of the Thorne plates by a distance established through the Corn-Hepperman equations, I was able to create a connecting wormhole between the pairs of plates. This wormhole was my tunnel through spacetime, with each pair of plates acting as a gateway into it. That was the easy part.

Day 3

My heroes were not the great men or women of science, not the saints and not the shining lights of history. They were the great swindlers like Ponzi, Lustig, Krueger, Madoff; I studied their cons like a scholar. The strategies, the structures, the deceptions, all of it. I wanted to know how they pulled off what they did and, more importantly, where they failed.

You see, I wanted it to have it all but I did not want to work for it like any jackass.

I knew the system was rigged – all the systems actually – and I did not have an eon to slowly work my way up and then be crushed anyway. Or maybe it was just the inclination to try that I was lacking. I was always looking for the sneaky path, the short cut.

But the problem is that they all got caught. That, after all, is how we know who they were. Every conner thinks they have a foolproof plan but the only fool they are fooling in the end is themselves. Comeuppance is only a matter of time.

And that realization was my greatest insight.

Day 4

The next step was a bit tricky. You have to put one of those pairs of plates in a rocket traveling at near the speed of light while the other remains stationary, relatively speaking of course. That places each pair in a separate and increasingly disparate spacetime frame. And then you wait. The two pairs of plates have to be wide enough apart in the continuum to warrant using the wormhole between them as a tunnel.

How long do you wait? The professor I scammed into explaining all this to me – a long story – said there was no way to know. Decades, years, eons?

So right from the start there were problems: the gateway was weensy while I am a size 44-regular; light is fast and I am slow; and time is long and life is short. The solutions came only after I told the professor that I would release him, but it took four days and a lot of fake banging on old pans to wrest the details out of him.

Day 5

All this, as you can imagine, was expensive. Sure, I had money saved up from some of my previous cons. The Save Your Beloved Pet scam generated millions but it was still not nearly enough. Word got around faster than I thought that there really was no international kidnapping gang.

But as any entrepreneur – or crook – knows, from deep need comes even deeper resolve and that is when I hit on The Plan. This was a scheme for bilking ordinary folks out of billions of dollars fast by playing on everyone's need to be liked. Siphoning pennies from their social media posts adds up quickly. I cannot in good conscience – bad conscience, that is – go into all the details of it here because I intend to make even more money on a book about it someday.

In any case, The Plan worked even better than I planned and became the impetus and funding for the spacetime machine.

Day 6

With the help of the professor – and the promise not to release his porn files to the press, which I had faked anyway – I solved the problem about the gap between the set of plates being only a few atoms thick, barely big enough to breathe through let alone leap into. All it took was a fusion pump polygas laser to insert a huge amount of additional negative energy into the gap. That created a much larger antimatter plasma and widened the portal. Check!

The second obstacle about needing to send one of the plates away at the speed of light was also part of my deal with him. He was, to say the least, a brilliant physicist but a terrible simp and with minimal threats he explained about rotating one set of plates at a high speed using frictionless Buckyball bearings in a nitrogen

soup. The rotational momentum created enough disturbance in the gravity field to mimic near lightspeed as predicting by Vranisi, the son that is, not the father who went crazy. Check.

But you either already know all this – I sure didn't – or find it so puzzling that you are already skipping ahead to Day 7. So go ahead, skip.

Day 7

The Plan took longer than I thought it would. Time is a funny thing. It took almost a year to amass all that cash while I was also spending it on the equipment. Every conman assumes that he will be the one notorious criminal no one will ever hear about. But the more I studied that matter, the more I did not like the odds. I would get nabbed sooner or later, I figured, unless...

That's when I came up with the spacetime machine solution. I would have enough money to build it – with some further she-nanigans as you can imagine – and could then use it to escape into a future in which no one was looking for me. Some point in time at which The Plan and I would have passed into lost history. I doubted that I would be able to take the money with me, but at least I would be a free man.

I know what you are thinking...that this is crazy. I was spending all the money I was taking and yet the outcome – a poor but free me – would be the same as if I had never embarked on The Plan in the first place.

You are right. But then again you are not me and probably cannot grasp the immensely satisfying sense all this made the more I got into it.

Day 8

The final problem with the machine was having to wait possibly light years for a spacetime gap to be established between the two portals that was wide enough to warrant all the effort.

This plagued me for months until I happened upon a woman I shall only refer to here as Ms X. She was a dark figure, so dark as to seem a shadow in polite society and she cost me a small fortune. But she had the brilliant idea that our understanding of spacetime

was wrong in the first place. It is not at all like Einstein's warping matrix, she explained, nor like Lu's undulating and recursing conga line, and nothing like those crazy string theories.

No, spacetime Ms X said, is in fact a lot more like spit. Like spittle, that is, or to put it slightly more elegantly, like foam. This was the last piece of the puzzle that made my whole little gambit possible. Think of the place/moments of existence as the bubbles in a mass of foam, forming, joining, popping, reforming. So that rather than the river of time and place or the grid of space and time or the right here right now and the way over there, imagine a dynamic, shifting, dimensional shabazz of instants never lost, never passed, never gone.

With this in mind, you simply have to plunge the plates into the spacetime foam, so to speak, and like a bubble-riding speck you end up where you are going. Check.

DAY 9

But once she gleaned what I was working on, Ms X wanted in on the action. She knew all this stuff theoretically and was impressed to find that I was actually building the damn thing in my basement.

She herself was, as I said, barely a shadow, but it turned out that she was the head of a syndicate. She knew people who knew people who began to threaten me for a piece of the action. Not the money, mind you, which is small potatoes in the grand scheme of things, but the spacetime travel which is essentially the whole enchilada.

These were scary folks with thick necks and crusty tattoos and at a certain point I knew I had to throw caution to the wind and try the machine, finished or not. By then, I was running from her thugs faster than I was from any lawmen.

Day 10

One last thing.

To end up where you are going, you have to know exactly where that is. Basic rule of life.

For spacetime, you need a really good Reimannian-Fultz 3D

map of the expanding universe because, of course, nothing stays where it is. Consider, for example, that the earth is rotating at 820 mph while also revolving around the sun at 66,527 mph. And that both are speeding through our stellar neighborhood at 43,200 mph which is whipping around at 490,000 mph while the Milky Way galaxy itself careens through our local supercluster at 180,000 mph, as the supercluster bounds away at 540,000 mph. Not to mention that all of this is blasting from the center of the Big Bang that started the whole tizzy at the speed of 1,159,000 mph.

The upshot...nothing stays put.

So you can see that a spacetime map is a really good idea or who the hell knows where and when you might end up including nothing, nowhere, notime. Or worse.

The operation to steal that map from the facility is a whole other story.

Day 11

One day I got word through the street that Ms X and her thugs were coming for me.

It was time. Yet my first try wound up being a bit of a shock. I entered the first gateway and emerged from the second in the exact same time and place. As though I had simply turned around where I was standing. This puzzled me at first and so I checked all the equipment, double checked, and tried again. Sure enough, I stepped out of the wormhole and was still in my basement with virtually no time passed on the clock on the wall.

So what was wrong?

All the technicals were working, all the readings right, all the measures correct. Yet every time I stepped through the portal, I emerged as though nothing had happened and I had either gone nowhere at all or traversed the great cosmos at light speed only to end up back in the exact same place. What were the odds of that? Very curious.

Day 12

Was this some strange effect of temporal curvature or of the internal logic of self-forming foam? I had no idea. Look, I'm no

genius, criminal or otherwise. Just your average thief trying my best to get away with it. I had let the professor go with a stern warning but who knows what he might spill; I was out of time to steal more journal papers in order to figure it out on my own; Ms X was after me and not in a good way. I thought I could hear heavy footsteps upstairs.

Then it hit me. I had not taken into account the multi-dimensions of neocosmology. In other words, the idea that an infinite number of alternate universes – called altverses – exist co-dimensionally with ours.

Suddenly it all made perfect sense.

What I was doing, in effect, was stepping from one version of my existence into another one. A new altverse – or reality – that was rather similar to the one I left. And in each one the world seemed just right to me because it *was* my world although no doubt it was different from the one I had just escaped from.

The proof of this insight was that there I was with my space-time machine and diary and big plans and it all seemed right and excruciatingly familiar. But it was an altverse version and therefore something had to be different. But what?

Day 13

As I passed through again and again, the past was always the past I knew. The Plan, the machine, Ms X...all of it. That was good. Each altverse was very much like the one I left...but not exactly. In one, for example, a familiar chair was missing. In another there was a potted plant I never owned. Dumb details of a different dimension.

I began to get the feeling that spacetime travel was not me moving through the universe as you would naively think. It was the universe moving around me. Sort of like the idea that the deer is not crossing the road and therefore an intruder but that the road is crossing the forest which makes you the nuisance. Same thing.

Okay, but then what of the future? Would the one that unfolded still have me on Ms X's hit list or the FBI Most Wanted list? There was no way to tell until I lived it. I could jump like a flea from one altverse to another but if I kept landing at pretty much

the same moment in each time frame, what good would it do me? I would have to stop jumping and wait and see what happened. How did that help me?

The Next Day

Most days end with a knock on the door. A pounding actually and that is my signal to jump into the wormhole because I am pretty sure that it is not the Nobel committee calling.

What I have found is that in the vast infinitude of alternate universes, some are quite close to this one and others are rather remote. Not physically mind you but eventually.

In other words, some altverses are so similar that they are indistinguishable from this one...eensy changes you might never pick up like doorknobs opening to the left. Some have noticeable shifts like a world in which Citizen Kane was never made. And others must be shockingly different...like one in which my father turns out to be a rather boring haberdasher.

But this is speculation since I have not yet jumped into one with more than minor variations. I am still trying to land in the one in which Ms X has no knowledge of me or of the whole rotten shebang.

So far no luck.

The Day After That

So here I sit at this moment in this particular version of my altverse, writing all this down, knowing what happened and trying to tell it but having no idea whatsoever what is to come. The future remains as elusive as the perfect con. But I keep trying. I will step through the wormhole again today, hoping to emerge into some other version of myself in which The Plan worked as planned and so did the spacetime machine but without the goons or the Feds.

Exit into another reality, that is, that looks quite like this one but with a better outcome. For me, I mean. And I am beginning to think that this has something to do with repetition; the more you jump, the further you go into distant altverses not like the original one. So I keep going...listen for the pounding on the door, enter the wormhole, emerge and see where I stand. Although, to

be honest, I am not exactly sure how I will know when it works because no matter where I land the past and the present will make perfect sense and the future will still be out there waiting to happen. But it is still worth a try, or an endless series of tries, because when you get right down to it, everything is just a matter of time.

Things That Go Missing

The note said simply *Be Back Soon*.

Minnie left it propped on the night table in case Moe woke up before she returned. But he did not and by the time she got back, a breeze through the partly open window had pushed it onto his chest. Now it looked like a sign he was wearing that gave his open-mouth snore a curious subtitle.

Minnie dropped her coat on the chair gingerly so as not to wake him. A sleeve flapped onto the seat pointing her towards the kitchen. There she hefted her grocery package onto the counter-top. Collectible plates of all the Presidents peered at her from the shelves as she took out the cottage cheese, milk, bread and other items and put everything in its place. The floor croaked underfoot as she shifted from one chubby leg to the other, sorting. Twice she hit the cabinet closed with her fist but it popped open for a third time. And she had to struggle to shut the utility drawer by shaking it up and down.

Yet none of this woke Moe in the bedroom.

Without even thinking about it, she began to clean the tile on the counter. She was not obsessed with cleaning but mightily enamored of it. Then a glint on the floor near the counter drew her attention. She bent down to retrieve what turned out to be a metal object which she held up to the light in amazement. It was her lost wedding ring. She had misplaced it months ago and thought it was long gone but here it was again. Amazing.

It was a world, after all, in which nothing was lost. Vidcams followed your every move, toilets ran biotests, and every action was logged into the Grid. Even the InSens in the apartment knew precisely where everything was and kept track of location, emotion, condition. This was the price of staying in touch, of being connected, of modern life.

But the wedding ring was a reminder that even in this pin-

pointed world, things could still go missing. Perhaps not people or purchases or prognostics, but small things like the knicks and knacks that were the building blocks of a life.

Holding her ring again, Minnie tried to imagine the detour it had taken as it slipped through the system. In her mind's eye she could see herself, months before, standing at the sink and slipping the ring off so that it would not get wet. Then setting it down on the tile near the soap dish. She would have made tight, squeaky circles around the dish edges and touched the surfaces to make sure they were smooth, wanting so much to clean everything that was soiled, to make everything bright, to wash the gunk right down into the sucking drain.

Yes, that was what happened. And Moe had been standing near her in the kitchen, stony silent as usual.

"Moe why do you do this?" she had asked.

He was saying nothing as usual. He was not a fan of chatter, distrusted it maybe, or thought it was too flimsy and he hated breakable things. How many times had she asked this same question and gotten the same strained silence back?

"Why do you always do this to me?" she repeated.

"What do you want from my life," he finally barked.

"Is it so much to ask? To be nice to my friends? For years like this."

"Bah."

"So you don't love Cora, so what? She likes you well enough. Just to get along for one lousy dinner, I mean."

"No."

"No. Always no with you. What does that mean...no?"

"She's nothing to me," he said and flicked the phrase away like an irritating speck.

"Cora has always been a good friend to me, Moe. Especially during the bad time. I know she said some things to you, but she was protecting me. And she's apologized. Can't you understand that?"

There was no reply.

"Sometimes I think you hate me Moe. Do you?"

But he was no longer standing there; the conversation had ended, at least for him. Minnie still kept talking, hoping to resolve it in her own mind anyway.

“Maybe you do. So then I guess it really is too much for me to ask you to be civil to my friends. Is that it? Yes, I guess it is.”

She turned from the sink to dry her hands on the towel and felt a familiar sinking in her stomach and as always did not know what to do about it. And that was when she forgot to put the ring back on. Later on, Maddy would splash water in the sink which would pool on the tile and, when no one was looking, spill over the edge and carry the ring like a log in a river off the counter and down to the floor.

Yes, that must have been what happened, Minnie thought.

She pressed the ring back onto her finger but barely felt better about it.

The InSens screen in the kitchen was cycling between frames showing where Minnie and Moe were in the apartment, what their biometric readings were, the precise placement of every tagged object, and suggestions for dinner based on what was in the fridge.

But Minnie suddenly felt like breaking free of the Grid and so she wandered into the living room searching for something to clean. She found it on the low table in front of the couch. A nice spot of grease. SmartRag in hand, she buffed the spot and then followed it to a smear on the couch, then to a smudge on the windowsill. There she discovered a tiny piece of black plastic that must have fallen off the flatscreen when they moved it.

Holding this up to the light like an amulet, she could vaguely recall – or was she inventing it right now? – the moment when it came off. That had to be when they moved the set into the bedroom months before.

The whole thing had been Moe’s idea. He wanted to be able to watch while lying down in bed. Minnie’s friend Cora, always poking her nose, warned her not to move it because she read somewhere that a television in the bedroom replaced sex.

“What can I do,” she asked her friend, “Moe wants it there.”

“You can stand your ground is what.”

“You know how he is,” Minnie said.

“Yes. And the fact that you put up with it all these years is...”

“Stop again already.”

“You know what I’m saying.”

“I’m not as liberated as you, Cora. I guess I’m just old-fashioned.”

“Well you’re gonna be fashioned a helluva lot older without sex,” Cora warned.

But of course, Minnie thought, Cora had never been married. She did not know how these things worked. Did not know what you had to give up, ignore, go without. Did not know that sex in the long run was far less reliable than television.

So there was Minnie, standing in the living room and watching her own reflection in the screen as the mover moved the set to the bedroom. Moe was sitting on the couch but stiff and still like a totem.

“Dolly and Stan are moving in two weeks. In cartons up to their ears. You remember. I said it was worse for us because of Maddy. She asked us to help them unpack once they’re in.”

“Let them unpack.”

“Moe, are you sure you want this screen moved to the bedroom? There’s much more space here.”

“I can’t see,” he barked, waving her away from his line of sight as he oversaw the maneuver.

Minnie moved to the side.

“It’s going to be tight in there. The bed, the dresser.”

“I want it in there.”

“Okay, okay. I guess we’ll live with it. I’ll tell Dolly to call us when they get in.”

“Let them unpack,” he said again.

The mover held the screen in a mechanical grip but as it rounded the corner, the set scraped the wall and the plastic piece that held a wire in place fell off. No one noticed. Later in the week a tidybot found it and put it on the windowsill where it remained unseen until Minnie’s cleaning.

They rarely had sex after that.

Back in the bedroom, Minnie saw that Moe was still on his back, snoring away as the InSens carefully logged his breathing rate, heartbeat, infratemp data and decided that he was napping and not dead. Comforted, Minnie moved on to the bathroom. There she adjusted the dangle of the toilet paper because only one square was supposed to show in the better homes. She cleaned stains from the rim of the bowl then noticed a crimped hairpin nestled into the oval bathmat. Hand on the hamper for support, she clutched the pin in her fist and stood up. At the medicine cabinet she was about put it back into a small jar of hairpins, but she hesitated when she saw her own reflection in the mirror. She looked older than she expected to. More weary. Had that much time really passed since she last looked at herself? Probably so. The least a smart mirror could do was lie, she thought. She licked her finger and rubbed a small spot on the surface as a means of ignoring the reflection behind it.

It occurred to her then that she must have used that hairpin to fix one of her curls before going out. Squinting at the memory, she could vaguely recall that hairpin shooting out of her hand, twanging against the tile wall, and disappearing into the mat. She probably looked down but was distracted to see Moe at the bathroom door. She wondered if he was going to glance at her breasts, the unspoken signal that behind his cold mask the curves of her body were causing heat.

“Do I look okay? Am I wearing too much makeup?” she asked.

He nodded.

“You know, you could answer me.”

“No, I said,” he said.

“I mean it wouldn’t kill you to say something nice.”

“You look fine. Let’s go already.”

“I’m ready. I’m waiting for you. Zip me up?”

He stepped in closer and zipped. But there was no glance.

“I wish I could understand you Moe.”

“What do you want from me Min? What?”

“To talk. That’s all.”

“About what for chrissakes?”

“Anything. So we’re not two strangers.”

“We’re not. Let’s go already.”

“About what you feel. What you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking let’s go already. I told you.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Just stop trying to get all your damn talk in me.”

Like blood from a stone, she thought for the millionth time. And also for the millionth...but it doesn’t mean anything. It was just his way of putting up with all the bullshit. He thought women talked too much, talked things to death, and muddled things with all their damn words. She knew that about him right from their very first date, so why did it seem so rejecting now? In the beginning, she saw it as manly, as a kind of discipline. But now, after 30 years, it only made her feel fat. Fat, that is, with too much language.

Of course, she said none of this to him. She never said many of the things she thought, and by now there were too many of them to say. On the other hand, Moe never said the things she wished he would say. Even though she desperately needed to know that he really meant them.

In the hallway on the way back to the kitchen to program dinner, Minnie closed the closet door, which was always slightly ajar from years of paint. That was when she noticed a scrap of paper wedged into the crack where the wall met the floor. It turned out to be a gum wrapper. Rolling it into a tiny ball in her fingers she recalled that time that Maddy came for dinner.

Maddy was home from college for the weekend. They had not seen her for the entire semester. Moe was cool about this, as about all things, but Minnie knew that he missed her too, missed them as a family. Because he could not say this, Minnie was trying, too hard maybe, for it to be nice. Which of course only made the whole evening more tense.

In one year Maddy had become a jiggle of cigarettes, gum, polished nails, hair in the face, and exploding pronouns. She was majoring in metapsych, which Moe distrusted. She was dating someone new and telling them all about the hassles and hurtles.

Moe, legendary grouch, was actually smiling as she spoke.

“What is this Jerk’s major?” he asked.

“Jake Dad. It’s Jake. I told you. Metapsychology. Just like me.”

“Goddamn. What the hell do you expect to do with that?”

“What do you want Dad? You want everyone to be a lawyer? Then you’d be happy?”

“Damn right. Do something useful.”

“Moe stop,” Minnie implored, “let her alone. She’s home.”

“Are we eating or not?”

“In a few minutes.”

“What is it with you Dad? Why are you always like this?”

“More talk.”

“What exactly did your mother do to make you hate women so much?”

“What the hell! My mother? Shut your mouth.”

“Maddy!” her mother shouted.

“You yell at Mom, you yell at me. You gripe about everything. You never talk. It’s like you hate women.”

“Maddy please...”

“Like you’re trying to get back at your mother or something.”

“Goddamn it!” Moe bellowed, the signal that all discourse was over.

Maddy, taking her cue, stormed out of the kitchen and down the hallway to her room. That was the moment that she dropped the gum wrapper that got wedged under the molding.

Later, Minnie knocked on the door to her room, but her daughter would not open up.

“Maddy please,” Minnie said, “you can’t talk to your husband that way.”

“Husband?” Maddy shouted through the door.

“What?”

“You said husband. That’s what used to be called a Freudian slip.”

“I said that you can’t talk to your father that way.”

“You said husband.”

“You’re just trying to hurt him with your psychology.”

“Hurt him? That’s a laugh. What about him being mean to me? Doesn’t that count?”

“You know he doesn’t mean it. That’s just his way.”

Dramatically, Maddy opened the door and looked directly at her mother, standing so perfectly at the door.

“Well it’s not my way,” she said. “And it’s not normal. And it shouldn’t be yours either.”

“You can’t say that about his mother.”

“Why? Because it’s true?”

“Everyone knows how devoted he was. All the brothers were.”

“Then how do you explain him?”

“You know, Maddy, his mother told me that he was moody before we ever got married. This frail old lady...and she warned me. But she said to pay no attention at all to that. She knew that he loved me even though he couldn’t express it himself. And he loves you too.”

“How do you know? By guessing? People deserve more than that.”

“You can’t just go by what people say.”

“By what then?”

“Who they are inside.”

“So he gets to hurt you and hurt me and I have to assume it’s all because he loves me and never talk back.”

“You don’t have to put it that way.”

“No. You can put it any way you want but that still doesn’t make it right.”

And now, back in the future, Minnie carefully opened the trash pail and dropped the gum wrapper inside where a laser instantly poufed it out of existence. And with it, the entire episode.

The InSens indicated that Moe was sitting up in bed and that his biometrics were all within the normal range. Minnie’s too as she stood on flat feet in the kitchen. The system logged all this and reported it to the Grid where marketers would use it to sell them a bounty of new products. Everyone known and placed and tagged, all bodies measured and all needs assessed. A neat world,

accounted and demographed.

But what about all those misplaced moments, Minnie wondered, where did they go? The decisions that were made or not made, the things that were said or not. Everything that happened and the tiny details and all the lost objects, these incidentals that cemented us into the here and now. Maybe the world was only made of two things, she decided, the lost and the not now lost. Rings and plastic parts and wrappers. But people too and maybe even entire lives hidden.

She closed her eyes and tried to press out these thoughts. They were confusing and indulgent. What was the point after all? You lived your life. Even Moe himself, who could never be explained but who was always there, always watching over her. Taking care of her, even if not tenderly, since she was a girl of seventeen and which she perhaps mistook for an austere passion.

She tapped some icons on the kitchen screen and instructed the system to make dinner.

Suddenly, there was Moe standing in his spot at the door. Watching her moving, breathing.

“Oh, are you up?” she asked.

He did not answer.

But she knew, in the way that things that go missing are known to be somewhere, that if he could have, he would have said everything she wanted to hear.

Welcome to Nowhere

1.

He was one of the blunt.

You know the type. One of those frank faces you see crossing the border nowadays. No idea about what happened, no clue what to do now, no future to mourn. No poetry in his soul. Typical Nylander with his brushed smile and smart suit. And that posture that was all business and no prophet. A copy of *Better and Better* in his head. Typical.

But he had a hat, an old time fedora like in the movies, and that made him different, made him stand out in this bald world. It looked silly – like a statement with no point - and that was the reason I noticed him at the bordergate. In fact, it was the reason I spoke to him, that dumb hat.

“Ixnay on de capadoccio, amigo. Puedo getcha self nixed you don’t watchaback,” I said.

But I knew from the dim return that he didn’t speak street grub so I changed my tune.

“The hat,” I said pointing. “Makes you stand out in this here territory. Es muy pelligroso. Comprende? Understand?”

“It was a gift,” he said, tapping the brim.

He was tall – over six feet – or maybe it was just that the way he stood there made me feel every snippet of my mere 60 inches. But I liked him right away. He looked like that guy in the detective series. Handsome, I suppose, or at least decent looking. Someone you could trust. No guile in his smile.

“You beam skelter, ami,” I said. “Sabe la via roundtown...”

“Is that some kind of language?”

“I mean, do you need directions?”

“I’m looking for a friend. Name of Sloane, Polono Sloane. He lives in the Grand.”

I shook my head sideways.

“I used to nest...live...there,” I said. “Along with a million other folks of course. But no, never heard of him.”

“What’s the best way to get there?”

“To the Grand? The mono, I guess. If it’s working. Which it usually isn’t. Why don’t I drive you?”

“You have a working car?”

That was typical too. The Nylanders only got the bad news from these parts. It was their way of feeling superior I suppose, knowing that nothing worked back in the States. No electric, no cars. In fact, it was not all that bad, though it was bad enough.

“Worky wicky,” I said and walked him towards the checkout but he stopped in his tracks.

“How much,” he asked and rubbed his fingers together in the multilingual sign for cash.

“Nah, something to do. Fission down.”

“Fission?”

“Meaning...don’t worry about it.”

But a suspicious look crossed his face wincewise: “You work for the Feds?”

“No! I’m a reporter for the Herald. I loit at the rim...”

“Huh?”

“I hang out at the gate sometimes just to see what’s crossing the border these days.”

“I didn’t know there were still newspapers here.”

“Yup...and reporters to report in them. It’s just that there’s no news.”

“How could that be?”

“The Feds run all the media, so they report what they’re told to. I can’t complain. I get a salary and lots of free time. And you, amigo, get a free ride.”

At the checkpoint, I stuck my finger into the scanner and got a nod to move on. But of course he was stopped and the guard started yammering at him in grub.

“What the hell does he want?” he asked me.

“Your middle finger,” I said.

“My finger? What for?”

I held my own up for him to see and got a frown back. But I wasn't throwing him the old wazoo, just pointing to the base of it where a series of black bars of varying width ran around like a tattooed ring.

"ID," I explained. "Volks-tagen we call it. It's a bar code that identifies everyone here. They're permanent for us but as a visitor you'll need a temporary one for as long as you're here."

"I didn't know about that. What do you need it for?"

"Everything. Shop for food, get a job, pass all the Scans...the checkpoints."

"Checkpoints? More than the ones here at the gate?"

"Checkpoints all over."

"What are they checking? Everyone knows the USA is bankrupt, there's nothing to buy, sell, or steal. So what does it matter who goes where?"

"Beside the point, ami. It matters because it gives the Feds something to do."

"Which is?"

"Check up on people, of course."

With that illogic, he agreed to submit as the guard set up the gizmo to fry his finger. They explained to him that his tattoo was only for visitors and would last one week. After that it disintegrated. If he didn't leave before that happened, he would be stuck and would not be able to pass any Scan and therefore could not go back home to Nyla. He seemed troubled about that little piece of news but it was too late once he was tagged. As we walked to the parking lot, he started rubbing his finger as though it hurt his sense of himself.

"Fission down, ami. Just make sure you leave on the sixth day – that's next Saturday – and it will all gravy out. The Feds got thousands of cheap bar code readers when Wal-Mart collapsed, so they figured this was an easy way to keep tabs on everyone."

"Fascist idiots," he said but he was really just upset about the finger thing.

"Talkypoint, ami?"

"Huh?"

"A word of advice? Don't mention the government. Ever."

Good or bad. Anything you say can be held against you.”

“You mentioned it.”

“Ah, but I’m a reporter. Danger is my middle name.”

“And your first?” he asked and held out his duke for a shake.

And suddenly there it was again, that good nature, that tendency to trust. It was irresistible. And so even though no one shook hands anymore here, I pumped his mitt.

“Oh sorry. Francie Fayes,” I said. “Pleased.”

“Nilly,” he said. “William Nilly.”

We drove in my two-seater across the desert. It worked on a solar pump – we still had plenty of sun at least – so although it did not exactly swoop, it moved. In about twenty minutes the buildings of Vegas rose up from the expanse like sandcastles. I always felt better back in town but I had no idea what he felt. Nyla was as far from the USA as the moon, even though it was right next door. Besides, he was young, maybe fifteen years younger than me, so all of this was probably very new to him.

But I was just old enough to remember when it all happened. That day back in 2105 when New York and Los Angeles seceded from the USA to form the Republic of Nyla. All those hotjobs and pepcats on the coasts who did not want anything to do with the collapse of the country. The USA had become a z-rated paranoia on the perennial brink of bankruptcy. But NY and LA were rich and could afford to bow out. So the two cities made their own country, split in two parts and separated by a 2,500-mile wide shitheap of debt and despair that was once the great United States. Nyla was not big but it was wealthy, more like a multinational corporation than a nation, united not by land or language so much as a deep distaste for failure. Oh and they had really nice colors on their flag.

“Vegas still the USA capital?” he asked eyeing the relics of the grand old days of the casinos as I veered the car onto the strip.

“Yup. One of the few cities that still works here. We have water and solar, and even some electricity a few times a day.”

“Wow,” he said, meaning not wow.

“So who’s this ami of yourn?”

“What?”

“This friend you’re looking for. Apollo?”

“Polono Sloane,” he said. “I knew him back in school. Have not actually seen him in a few years. He got word to me that he was in trouble and needed some money. So I came here to help him out.”

One thing the Nylanders had, besides hope, was money. For important things like luxuries and even for symbolic bibbles like hats. And for a needy friend too apparently. That was real money.

“Why not just transfer it?”

“Nyla banks won’t really deal with the USA anymore,” he said. “Besides, I’ve never been out here before. Curious.”

“Ah...a newbie. A fingerling. I knew that.”

“How?”

“You have the look of a girl who still believes in love,” I said. “That’s why I diced you on the hat, ami. But you should hide it. It’ll mark you here as a Coastal with cashypoo.”

He dutifully took the hat off, crushed it into a ball, and shoved it into his case but then grouched: “But I don’t carry cash with me. No one does. Everyone knows that.”

“I didn’t mean money,” I said. “You might need some scrip for food and stuff but that’s small potatoes. It’s not your wad they want, it’s the finger. That be worth mucho grief.”

“My finger?”

“Sure. Ice you, snip it off, and use it to cross the border into Nyla. Way exit this hellhole. Middle fingers are a regular black market here.”

Nilly closed his fist as if to protect the digit, then put his hand in his pocket.

“Don’t worry. It’s not that common. But don’t hide it either, that’s a dead giveaway.”

I guess I was enjoying the whole guide routine, so I was over-playing the drama a bit. But it was true about the finger. Corpses of newbies kept turning up all the time with middle fingers missing, the underground trade in exit visas. I was surprised that he hadn’t heard about that. But the more we talked the more I realized that he practiced a kind of slimjim knowledge of things. Yes,

William Nilly had worked out the details of his ethos to exquisite perfection. He had no philosophy, no theory, no moral rash. That was the way with Nylanders...commerce was going to save them from the horrors. Like the rest of his countrymen, he was simply trying to get by with the thinnest impact possible for a man with a hat he could not wear.

As we drove down the strip, passed all the rusty signs and the dead neon, I gave him the short drift of things. It was only called Las Vegas back when there was energy. Now it was just Vegas, another echotown like so many across the country. Those elaborate facades of glitz and glam were all phony faces now, masks of the past. The stone-age poor lived inside the vast empty palaces now. There was still some juice flowing but only a trickle. The random flow of water from a sorry tap, the rare TV running static and old reruns, the odd cold bulb. Ten blocks of ancient razz and then the eternal scorching sand all around. The Indians called this place Xandalapa, meaning nowhere, but it could just as well have been Cityville, USA. What the country had become. A relic of a lost time when someone gave a shit about something.

I pulled into the lot behind The Grand and went in with him. It was the least I could do because, to a newbie, the reality of the place was overwhelming. After all, this was the former MGM Grand, a whole city unto itself with its half a million square feet. Just like all the other old hotel/casinos, it was now owned by the government and run like a township with its own markets, cops, garbage. All of the mistakes of shoving people together were on display there. Rich folks on top with some elbow room, workers at the bottom nudging for square inches, and those huge casinos that were now tent cities filled with the lingering poor. But if you know cities, you know that each one has its own rhythms, its own codes. I wasn't sure Nilly would figure those out before getting wilked so I helped him find the box his friend had rented.

Polono Sloane lived at the West End of the place, in a tiny and none too savory crib so small you could stand and eat, sit and shit, lie down and sleep, but not all at once. There was hardly anything in the room and what was there looked boned. A bed

with no sheets, a small refrigerator, some papers. There was a television – we called them teevees – in the corner; it was one of those old flat screens retroed up to a foot-pumped hydro-generator to make a glowering box that mainly showed sprizzle. I could not make out what was on through the ruzz, which struck you as the visual equivalent of strep throat. But I guessed that it was another rerun of the show the locals called *Los Gilliganos*. The Feds ran all the teevee programming and they loved old television series. Got the rights somehow and ran them endlessly. Especially this one with the hero – Gilligan, a likeable bungler – seen as everyman struggling to survive in a world of chaotic forces. He was a dreamer whose dreams came to naught, as they ought to. The ship that never came to save him from his island was the future itself. It was perfect, a real brainwash. Accept your misery, America, because there's nothing else. The Zen of blah.

Welcome to Nowhere.

“This is no way to run a country,” Nilly humphed.

“It's working great though.”

“It's falling apart!”

“That's the genius of it. Once all the old isms failed and destroyed the country, they came up with a new theory called bankruptism. The ultimate acceptance of failure. Nothing left to lose, nothing left to win. The eternal slump. It's perfect. No one expects anything, so nothing has to be done.”

“Don't you want better things for yourself?”

“Mr. Nilly, the greatest danger to life on earth was never the bomb or the carbon dioxide. It was hope. Eternal, bibbling, blustering disneying hope. The Feds found a cure for it in a crushing despair that borders on revelation. We're happy here, happy to be Americans, happy to be alive. We don't need anything more because there isn't.”

He gave me one of those sideways glances that said he had no idea if I was being sarcastic or not. Couldn't help him there. I had no idea anymore myself. Then I noticed a couple of photos pinned to the wall. One was of a cat with an odd expression on its puss; like it was grinning at you. Another photo showed Nilly

with his arm around another man. They were smiling and standing somewhere on the streets of New York. I remembered New York, always vertical, always uptilting. But I didn't tell him that because I didn't want him to know more about me than he had to.

"That your ami?" I asked.

"That's him. I never understood why he left and came here. Now that I see what the USA has become...I *really* don't get it."

"Left? You mean he came here voluntarily? Nutballer maybe?"

"He had a daughter. She was stuck here during the Secession. He came here to get her out about five years ago. But he never came back."

"What happened to her?"

"Dunno. Him either. Another reason I decided to come."

Then the phone toned.

2.

Something about that call seemed to upset him enough to furrow his upbeat brow. It turned out to be a woman who was trying to get to Sloane too, but all she would say was that her name was Erica and that the phone was not safe. That was true if you had something to hide so I told Nilly to arrange to meet her at the Ballroom. That was a nice nickname left over from the casino days but no balls were held there. Instead it was a teeming indoor market for stolen goods and third-hand food. It was hard to locate anyone in that sprawl but the moment she showed up, she drew his attention like a collision.

I could see it in his face...he was instantly hooked, crooked, noosed by her. I understood it myself even though I was a woman. Erica was an exquisite beauty with penetrating eyes, deep lips, lavish black hair. She was one of those women who seemed to know things about the secrets of bodies, like how to breathe a soft fullness into her shoulders, how to lick her lips and plump them up, how to speak with tingly breath. How to look through the lashes of the upper lids. Oh and that other thing...she was trim and graceful with a tiny waist but she had huge breasts. Full and round and she carried them like a heavy desire she could bare-

ly restrain. Someday, someone, somewhere will explain to me why men go toppy-turvy-tipsy over big boobs. In the meantime, though, I watched him watch her and felt like a voyeur.

“What did you mean that I was in danger? You don’t know me,” he said to her without a trace of grace even though he probably intended it.

“If you’re looking for Polono Sloane, you are,” she said.

“Why? Has he done something?”

“Everyone’s done something,” she replied.

Erica began to wander around the market in that summery dress of hers, cut low at the bust, a lacy rim tickling the knees. We had nothing left here but we still had sex and she was full of it. Nilly followed because he had to and I did too but only because I was curious. There seemed to be a mystery in the works and for a reporter with nothing to report that was better than drugs to a druggie.

“How do you know him?” Nilly asked her with a slight twinge of anxiety.

“I don’t. I know someone who does. And that someone told me what happened.”

“So where is he?” Nilly asked. “Can I see him?”

“Not a good idea. The rebels have him.”

The word hit Nilly like a slap. I guess he really was not ready to understand the situation back here in the old USA. He was about to slap back with another question but Erica was distracted by a man selling Nitro. She started negotiating with him in grub, lost on poor Nilly. So he turned to me and said:

“What’s this all about?”

“Shake me,” I said. “I’m just here to kill a cat.”

“But you work for the media, a newspaper you said.”

“Yes, but we don’t investigate here. We tell people what they want to hear.”

“And what’s that?”

“Everyone is screwed, so screw everyone.”

“Are there really rebels?”

“So they say.”

“But are there?”

“You have to understand the meaning of truth here, ami. There is one way to lie but many kinds of truth. The truth that is true only in the morning, the whole truth which is withheld by consensus, the truthful lie...”

“I don’t get you.”

“I know. You Nylanders have a fine language for money. Adding, dividing, percentering. In a word...clarity. But I’m afraid you can’t translate what we have here.”

“What’s that?”

“A profound ability to ignore.”

“Is that good or bad?” Nilly laughed.

“You see? That’s precisely what I mean.”

“What is?”

“What you take for vagary is art for us. The Indians have an expression: *Axtal Shingshilla*. It means...speak your words clearly but mumble your thoughts. If we had invented computers, they would be machines that could weep.”

“You still haven’t told me the truth.”

“Things are not true because they happened, they are true because they matter.”

“So does that mean there are rebels or not?”

“One can only imagine.”

I could see the frustration in his expression. I wanted to answer him, but knew that I could not. He had the mind of a manager, like all Nylanders. The accountant in the cortex; every problem a challenge, every challenge a solution waiting. But we were poets here, we had to be. We did what we did knowing that we could never succeed. That was one thing the creators of our great failure missed...that oppression leads not to control but to dreams.

Take heed you who would shackle the clouds. Check your step and mark my words. For a Poet watches with a pen for tears.

And all that.

“The rebels have him?” Nilly asked her. “What rebels?”

He was following her around the lanes of the market like a pup. That was the way men were around her, I could see that. She

walked like a goddess in a low place and all the desires they ever had trailed her like a cloud. Nilly even bumped into her twice when she paused because he was following her too close.

“The Resistance,” Erica said.

“Puh!” I puffed.

“You don’t believe it,” she asked me.

“Some grouzers yes, but an organized resistance? Never.”

“They’re our only hope for a future,” she said.

“Yes and there will be a white Christmas and all soldiers will become children again,” I suggested.

“They took Sloane because he worked for the Feds.”

“He did?” Nilly said. “That doesn’t sound like him. He wasn’t political back home.”

“He did?” I repeated.

That got my interest. It was something I could lay a narrative on. Common pukehead living the life of grime who spies on the locals and gets nabbed for it by rebels who didn’t exist. I liked that.

“I could use that,” I said.

“But you don’t believe any of this, you said,” Nilly cautioned me.

“I don’t report what I believe, Mr. Nilly, only what’s believable. Truthy. That’s all people want...to believe what they think they want to believe. Trust their own trust.”

“And everybody just goes along with this bullshit?”

“It’s the Rule of the Jerk, ami.”

“Namely?”

“Put a jerk in a room of normal people and pretty soon everyone starts acting like a jerk. Ever notice?”

“That’s just an excuse to be cynical,” Erica offered.

“According to the Indians, in the dim beginning of the earth, everyone had small feet. Beautiful trim little feet, like petals. One day a stranger arrives with big stupid feet and sure enough, here we are thousands of millennia later, stomping everything to dust. I rest my case.”

Erica wanted a drink, so naturally Nilly, with no will left, and I with my nose for no news, followed her down to the bar.

The barman eyed Nilly's finger hungrily when he took the order. Holding it up so the barman could see it better, Nilly of course inadvertently fugged him.

"*Digitus impudicus,*" the barman spat. "I heard it goes all the way back to Diogenes."

I showed Nilly how to hold his finger down for a scan rather than up for an insult, then we sat at one of the tables in the back. The old Keno screen was blank as night as we had a few rounds. Erica was accidentally heaving her bosom to get comfy and that seemed to mesmerize Nilly but he eventually got hold of himself.

"Why did Polono work for the Feds?" Nilly asked, still struggling.

"He got himself arrested and once they had him, they had him, if you know what I mean."

"Arrested for what? He was looking for his daughter."

"They said they caught him spray painting a rebel slogan on the wall of the old Mirage. A quote from Karl Marx... "workers of the world unite you have nothing to lose but your chains."

"I can't believe Polono even read Marx. Groucho maybe."

"Probably not. I went to look at the scene of his crime. It was just an old ad for a shoe store that said, "Walkers of the world unite you have nothing to lose but your chairs."

Nilly smirked thinking it was joke and I did too but because I knew it was not. That was exactly the kind of thing they picked you up for.

"Is there any way I can get to see him?" Nilly asked.

"Maybe," she said, getting up. "But not here, not now."

"Then when and where?"

"We'll see," she said.

As she walked away, I watched Nilly watch the undulations of her buttocks under the silk of the dress. He was hooked all right, right down to the base of his lust. And I was too. Not on her or even on him but just on the whole what-happens-nextness of it all. It was the first time in a long time that I gave a shit.

That's when the two boots came in. They were undercover but everyone saw through all that to the goon underneath. They

didn't waste any time either and stormtrooped right over to our table, snarled at me and nabbed Nilly at the shoulder.

"Y' undressed, sotback," one said.

Nilly was about to prove his case with a deft tug on his tie but quickly understood that they were saying that he was under arrest.

"I'm just visiting. A Nylander. I leave in a few days."

"Nay if'n they throttle your pansyass, ohmybro."

"But what are the charges? I haven't done anything."

"The marsh'l sing that songy, ami."

Nilly looked at me but I think he understood the word "marshal" in there faster than I needed to explain things.

3.

I don't know what happened to him then. I tried to get in to see him but of course could not. All I found out is that they took him to see the Marshal over at city hall. His name was Dylan and he was the head Fed in Vegas county. I didn't know much about him except what they reported in the news which I knew very well was all bogus anyway. But I imagine him as a plain man in a tight suit with a kind of wrong haircut Karma about him.

Still, as a reporter, I can well imagine the whole sordid deal. Nilly, breathless and worried for maybe the first time in his life, plunked down in a chair in Dylan's office. Dylan, slowly like a man knowing what must happen next, taking a sip of Petrol from a fine crystal cup. Nilly insisting and Dylan listening silently for the whole doddering confession. And then, in a whisper for maximum drama:

"Of course you didn't kill him."

"I can prove it," Nilly said, thinking Dylan was being sarcastic and not knowing that irony was a talent only the weak could afford.

"No you can't."

"I can. He was gone when I got here. And he's not dead, just missing. The rebels have him..."

"Mr. Nilly," Dylan interjected slowly, as though speaking to a foreigner, "you can't prove that you did not kill him because there is no Polono Sloane."

“What??”

“There is no such person, so obviously you could not have killed him.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Polono Sloane...a ghost in a sheet. A diversion. Nothing more than an anagram of Napoleon Solo from one of the old old shows. That’s where we got the idea.”

“What idea?”

“To invent an agent. Give him an ID, move his things around, leave hints and suggestions. There was a movie too.”

“But that’s insane. I knew him back in New York. We went to...”

“You knew someone, I suppose. Went somewhere. Did this or that. But the Sloane in question here is a mere figment.”

Nilly, about to insist, suddenly realized that he would be arguing against himself. If Sloane did not exist, then there could be no murder and he would be free. So, with perfect irrational logic, and despite the years he and Sloane had spent downing drinks at Arturo’s and that stupid fight over the stock deal, Nilly changed his tune.

“But why? Why would you do that?”

“To keep the opposition on their toes. Distract them.”

“So there is a resistance!”

“Well, not exactly. We invented them too. I mean there are some, but we pay them.”

“What??”

“Just another invention. Every government has to have a resistance to make people think something might change. Even though nothing ever does. And in any case, it gives the folks in the media something to report on.”

“But I heard that you control the media.”

“Absolutely. It’s the secret to our success.”

Dylan sat on the edge of his desk and thrust a small box in Nilly’s direction. It was a cigar box with a logo of a grinning cat on it, but there were no cigars in it. Dylan had simply seen the move in countless old movies and thought it was a nice gesture.

“I don’t smoke,” Nilly said.

“No matter,” Dylan replied, putting the box back.

“This is insane!” Nilly finally said. He wanted to play along but as a Nylander used to the firmity of the deal, the clarity of the contract, he had his limits. “You create a phony federal agent to dupe fake rebels so that a non-existent media will report on it through teevees that no one watches.”

“We do what we do for the people of this nation, Mr. Nilly. To keep them safe.”

“Safe from what?”

“From thinking too much about their future. All they need are some morsels to keep their minds occupied. A tid here, a bit there. People don’t want to think, Mr. Nilly, they’re dumb as dumbwaiters. They just want to have something to do.”

“This place is an asylum,” Nilly replied, a tad too late to realize that he had just insulted his host, a man who held his fate in little twitchy hands.

4.

The next time I saw Erica it was at that same market in the Ballroom. I had gone there hoping to find her again. I don’t know what I was thinking really, maybe just some remnant of real journalism rising up inside of me, despite the weight of my cynicism pushing down. Or maybe I just wanted to move the little plot in my head along. Either way, she did not seem very surprised to see me again.

“Frac up, madama? What bewitchen?” I said but quickly realized that she would not play street grub with me. She was trying to change, to move somewhere in her head that was above the bottom where we actually passed our time.

“What happened to our friend Mr. Nilly?” she asked.

“I haven’t seen him.”

“Don’t you want to? You’re a reporter. Why don’t you ask questions?”

“You know it doesn’t work that way here. What about Polono Sloane?”

“Well there’s a question right now. See, it can work.”

“Do you really know where he is?”

“Yes.”

“Can I get to see him?”

“No.”

“Where is he?”

“You’re full of it, aren’t you?”

“Full of what?”

“Questioning. But you’d better be careful. They can lead to hope.”

“Well... where is he?”

“Nowhere.”

“Just like the rest of us,” I said, thinking she was being coy.

There was a long pause here as she wrestled with the next words she spoke. She was so lovely that the pause seemed like a glamour shot from the old studios and I imagined that it would have sent someone like Nilly into a swoon. But I wasn’t interested in all that, just in what happened next.

“There is no Polono Sloane,” she finally said.

“What does that mean?”

“He doesn’t exist. The rebels created him as a kind of decoy. To draw attention away from their real agents.”

“But Nilly knew him. He recognized the photos. Hell, he was in one of them himself.”

“Somebody knew somebody somewhere. But I’m telling you that Polono Sloane, who lives at The Grand, does not exist.”

“And the revolutionaries made him up,” I said, crackling with disbelief.

“They are rebels, not revolutionaries,” she said.

“Is there a difference?”

“Rebels are romantics; revolutionaries are technocrats. Only rebels could invent someone. Technocrats are too busy tracking them.”

In the country and across shattering silences, the sigh of a shadow, and hearts still as stars, I thought, but quickly dismissed the idea as though from a pointless poem.

“I am worried for Mr. Nilly,” she said. “If the Feds have him, we may never see him again.”

“Okay, maybe I will try to ask around. But even if I find him,

his visa is up soon. They may be holding him long enough so that he can't leave. His tattoo go biggybye."

"In that case, I have something for you. It is from a friend of a friend. For Mr. Nilly, if you see him again."

She handed me a small container, like a cigarette case. I didn't even need to open it up because I knew just what I would find inside. I had seen these before. It contained a severed middle finger with a bar code on it from some recent victim of the trade. It would be a fresh one, meaning it still had a few days left, and could be Nilly's ticket back home. Assuming of course that I could find him.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked her. "You hardly know him."

"Let's just say we had a mutual friend."

"Non friend actually" I corrected.

"And in any case, it was cheap. Just someone's life after all. Nothing cheaper than that here in Nowhere."

5.

Meanwhile, Dylan, with all the time in the world, was still having what he thought of as a conversation with the newcomer. Nilly for his part knew it was an interrogation and that in that dispute was a universe of mistrust.

"Mr. Sloane, a person is still..."

"It's Nilly. William Nilly. Sloane is your man."

"In Nyla, I believe, a person is still innocent until proven guilty, yes?"

"Yes."

"But in France, one has to prove one's innocence."

"I wouldn't know. I've never been there."

"But here the victims are tried and thrown in jail and the murdered are executed. We have things under control."

"What do you want from me?"

"We want Polono Sloane back."

"But you said he never..."

"The cat, as they say, is out of the bag. Once you began to look for him, word got around that he was missing. People began

to poke their noses. He went from being a ghost to a question. And that is not something that helps us.”

“What does that all have to do with me?”

“My offer is for you to take his place. We could use a man like you.”

“Take his place doing what? You said he didn’t exist.”

“Ah but now he can. All our falsifying and faking can be realized...in you.”

“Why me?”

“Why not you? No one here knows you. You’ve been seen in his room and with his girlfriend.”

“Erica’s not his girlfriend. She never met him.”

“A minor point that can be addressed.”

“This is absurd. What would I have to do?”

“Nothing. Just live your life, that is...his life. We’ll take care of the rest.”

Dylan said all this matter of factly, as though explaining the rules of Go Fish to an actual fish. The matter of fact that Nilly as Sloane would be quickly killed by the rebels at the direction of the Feds was, to Dylan’s mind, not even worth mentioning. It was all obvious political theater. A kind of double reverse martyr for some cause or other. No matter, Dylan thought. It all made sense somehow. But when he saw the sour look on Nilly’s face, he tried to come up with a sweetener.

“Ever wonder, Mr. Sloane...”

“It’s Nilly, I keep telling you.”

“Ever wonder why women fall in love with their torturers?”

“I didn’t know they did.”

“Because no one ever paid such exquisite attention to them before. Think about it that way.”

There was a noise outside the closed door of the office that sounded like a thud. Someone dropping a thing, maybe, or maybe something far far worse.

“What are you going to do?” Nilly asked nervously.

“Standard procedure. We ask a few questions: Are you now or have you ever been...? Where were you on the night of...? Do you renounce your belief in...? Like that. The answers don’t

matter very much so I wouldn't worry about it."

"The answers don't matter?"

"Everyone is guilty, my friend."

"And then?"

"And then you are free to go."

"That's all?"

"Yes. Just do not leave the country."

"And pretend to be my old friend Polono Sloane."

"Don't worry about all that. We'll take care of everything."

"What if I don't agree?"

"Well then you will be tried for treason of course."

"Treason? I haven't done anything!"

"Treason is simply a matter of timing. That's not me...that's your Talleyrand."

"He's not my Talleyrand and I am no traitor."

Dylan leaned in at that moment to add a touch of intimacy to their dialogue.

"It's not a matter of *am* but of *are*. You can say you am or am not, but we decide if you are or are not."

6.

I did do some checking around and found out that Nilly was being released from the Marshal's office. It was one day beyond his visa, that is to say his finger tattoo. I was not even sure if he knew that as I waited with the car outside the building. When he stepped into the bright sun I could see that this was a very different man than the one I eyed at the border. His frankness had turned to frailty and his brushed smile was gone. He looked weary and his suit was creased. I even handed him his old hat as a kind of joke but he neither got it nor put it on.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I have a headache."

"That would be the bullshit rotting. What did Dylan say?"

"He said that Polono Sloane never existed in the first place."

"I've heard that before somewhere. This guy Sloane was a very popular nonperson."

"So therefore he could not have been murdered and that is

why I am free.”

“Oh there was a murder all right. A whole society was murdered. It just didn’t tick the sixoclock.”

“He wants me to stay here and pretend to be Sloane,” he said and then looked at his finger. “I wonder if I still have time left.”

“You don’t,” I said “but you’ve got to get out of here anyway. The rebels want you, that is him, dead.”

“There are no rebels. You said that.”

“Okay then, the Feds want you dead.”

“Then why did they release me?”

“Don’t you understand,” I pleaded. “Everyone wants to kill you to make a point.”

“What point?”

“How should I know? I’m just a reporter. But you have to get out of here tonight,” I said.

“How do I do that?” he asked.

“You know about Schrodinger’s cat?”

“Everyone does. The cat is neither dead nor alive until you open the box.”

“Well same with you,” I said and shoved the case at him with no delicacy, like a gift from the devil.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Your way out of here. In that case is a plane ticket, a visa, a letter of transit, and a sayonarattive all kaboodled.”

“If it’s a way out, why didn’t you use it?”

“Because I’m not leaving, you are.”

“Why would you live like this if you didn’t have to?”

“You know your Brecht?”

“No.”

“He said that in dark times they won’t say: the times were dark. Rather: why were their poets silent?”

He had no idea what I meant. But how could he, how could any Nylander? Their success was based entirely on normality... job-holders holding their jobs, family men manning their families, bureaucrats cratting their bureaus. But not here. Here where there was nothing to do all day but do nothing with great fervor. Here

where the homeless were called Freemen because they did not have the burden of a mortgage. Here were only the poets told the truth and no one still listened. Light here had a way of illuminating the already visible and shadowing that which could not be seen.

“You Nylanders think you have freedom,” I said, “but you don’t. You only have choices...the inalienable right to choose between scented and unscented, no-cal and lo-cal, pay now or pay later.”

“I don’t get you. Any of you. All these games, all this nonsense. Choices are at least better than living in a madhouse.”

I liked him for that. It was the first time he had expressed an idea about things, rather than just go along to get along. Maybe this little adventure had taught him something. Maybe the blunt in his mind had taken an edge. That would make him different from the others. All those people who didn’t have a clue, no songs in their souls, who didn’t know their haddayacallits from their what-sits but spoke with great conviction. Maybe Mr. Nilly would go back changed and in that way, change what he went back to.

Maybe me too.

I did not bother to see him off at the border. Frankly, I had had my fill of wondering what was coming across. Wondering and caring.

But I can easily imagine him waiting for that finger to be scanned, with a look on his face as though the fly to his confusion were permanently open. I can see him sitting there, much as I am sitting now at my desk. I can hear his inner voice, not unlike my own, making something midway between a plea and a chant, trying to fill the void left by apprehension. He looks out the window, not this one here but the window of the border, and says softly to himself, “Well, let’s get going. Let’s get this show on the road.”

That voice is as clear as if it were my own. And in unison, in compadreon as we say here, I whistle a nervous little ditty, tap my fingers on jittery knees, look and wait, and say: “Yes, let’s go, go, go!”

Soon the cat vanishes but the grim remains.

A Simple Game of Zeno

The challenge came in the usual way.

It was that standard envelope with the upper left corner cut off. No one alive still recalled the origin of the diagonal snip, some dumb gesture that once signified something. But everyone knew what it meant anyway. And so did Lem. As he lifted the envelope obliquely to the light, he could just make out the writing on the slip of paper inside. It was a simple note containing only a day and a time...Thursday, 7 am. That was the day after the day after, he figured. That soon. It did not give him much time to plan his strategy. Lem leaned the unopened envelope on a shelf and walked away from it. As though leaving it sealed meant that he had not read it. As though this would somehow give him more time to decide on his response.

The envelope sat there all secret for the rest of the morning. From time to time as he walked by, it reminded him of the note Sophie put there when she walked out on him all those years ago. It was right after her best friend decided to tell her about the furtive little lovemaking that she and Lem had indulged in. Sophie left her goodbye note on the shelf for him to see, but Lem did not open that one either, thinking that it might undo the decision and win her back. It did not of course. Yet he somehow did not learn from that.

Lem went into the living room where he sat at the Zeno board and thought about what to do.

The rules of the challenge were simple. If he did not answer the note that same day, he would never be allowed to play again in public. If he answered the challenge but lost the game, he might just as well never play again. To lose a challenge game of Zeno was to lose one's dignity after all. If he won the game, he would move up yet another notch in the arcane, intricate world of

Zeno mastery. There was a lot at stake. But two days was hardly enough time to prepare.

The Zeno board lay before him like a teeny cubic universe full of its own secrets. The board was really an energy field in 3space relying on ionic repulsion to hold itself together. The game pieces were perfect dodecahedrons that were generated endlessly as you played and hovered within the grid of the board. Quantum rules of time and space held within the board such that it was possible in Zeno for one piece to be in two different places at the same time or for separate pieces to occupy the same space. Moving a single piece had countless effects throughout, annihilating or birthing other pieces, warping the shape of the board, altering the flow of time.

This was no simple game of chess with its rigid logic, in which each move led inexorably to a vast but limited number of responses. Chess was an exercise in calculation, which is precisely how a computer had become Grandmaster. Nor was it as rudimentary as Go with its flowing patterns of movement. No, Zeno was quite different. It was precise and majestic, involving both patterns and positions, strategy and imagination, the flexibility of dreams and the sternest of calculations. Logic, beauty, chance, uncertainty, memory, intuition, luck...they all mattered in a game of Zeno.

To play it was to play at God creating a world in grand sweeping moves as well as little nudges, full of intention and purpose but without a plan. A god with impudence not omnipotence. And to watch a master Zeno player was to see a mix of dance and deliberation. It was the beauty of this kind of rational ballet that had attracted Lem to the game in the first place. Zeno was like life... the only way to play it was to play it with complete commitment. And with that thought in mind, Lem decided right then to accept the challenge. He would boldly open the note, read it aloud, and then – it being written on ipaper – tap his answer back to his challenger, Kolovski, the old Armenian with the crystal teeth.

That night Lem sat up in bed and thought only of the game. How best to approach the match with Kolovski, who had the

finesse of a stump? There was of course the Feynmann Gambit, a complex series of maneuvers based on the possible structures of unfolding change. There was the Vico Posture, an endlessly shifting arrangement that took into account certain recursive aspects of the patterns. The Quantum Foam Approach set in motion key limitations of interactive mass and velocity. And then there was the so-called Gesture of Chuang-Tzu, which focused not on gaining winning positions at all but only on becoming one with the rhythm of the field. The Carroll Maneuver...make a quick move in reverse time and set up the outcomes before the preliminaries?

The trick, as Lem well knew, was not to try to be either heroic or hectic. Again unlike chess with its self-important puffery, annoying whizkids, and ruffled experts, Zeno was for dreamers. It was a game for poets who would rather play with the world than try to control it. But thinking through all that he knew, it was hard to stay simple-minded about it. Like any game, there were too many tales, too many metaphors for Life with a big L, too much riding on every single move.

Tales like that of the magnificent Donatello Miaka with his flashes of sudden insight and epic moves of thousands of pieces at once, who lost to an illiterate boy of nine and instantly turned to a life of absinthe and despair. Or the story he had read about another game with only one piece and two squares and a 4,000 page strategy booklet that mentioned moves like *the white heron flies to the moon and disappears into the night sky*. There was that Indian general who won the battle by first defeating the enemy on the chessboard. And the legend of Candolini, who ended up in an asylum, sweeping the pieces off the board and shouting "Why, why must I lose to this idiot!" and in that one exasperated move, winning after all.

Not being able to sleep, or focus too much on that kind of dribble, Lem turned to other thoughts. To wit: why had he even had the affair with his wife's best friend in any case? He had not planned it or thought it through. It just happened, in spite of the fact that he had been in love with Sophie the whole time. What a fool! But this was in the beginning of their marriage and he had not yet understood what lay ahead. He had not yet even learned to

think ahead. And besides, the friend was so alluring, so new and different. A forbidden body, a secret lust. He had tried to explain all that to Sophie once she found out, but it sounded ridiculous even to him. And of course, she left him soon after.

When he finally fell asleep, his dreams were of the wrong bus in the wrong city to the wrong destination. And of not being able to find his way back.

In the park the next morning, an ugly baby all smeary with ice cream began to holler. A hoverblader streamed down the path past a line of caretakers pushing carriages or wheelchairs. Two girls were playing with a neuroFrisbee. And there was the playground itself, enclosed in a mesh fence, with its swings and slides and at the back of it, the line of stone tables set up for checkers, chess, and backgammon. At the far end of these were the Zeno tables, humming with magnetic flux. There was Blaustein, the refugee, his thick fingers tripping giddily over the hedrons. Across from him was Muhammed, a pleasant looking young black man, a chess prodigy who had dispensed with the game of kings in favor of Zeno. A soccer ball bounced his way and without missing a beat he kicked it away and thrust his hand in an arching motion, fingers diddling, to make his next move.

Kolovski, the challenger who had sent the note, was lordling over his board with the expansive but grim manner of someone who has started a new life in a new country. Kolovski was big and gruff, and his bushy eyebrows normally jittered as he rolled or pushed or caressed or wished the pieces across the board. But this morning found him just sitting and waiting. Waiting for Lem along with a small crowd of onlookers. To defeat him would be the crowning glory of the day.

Lem was still at the far end of the park and no one had noticed him yet. He stopped to gather his wits and observe his challenger. Kolovski was sweating and tapping as he sat at the table. Pawky bastard, Lem thought, thinking he had made up a good word when in fact he had not. Patterns in the spaces between the clouds, in the shadows falling across the cracks in the pavement, and of the branches of trees – patterns deep inside the operations of the nat-

ural world — seemed to perfectly capture some kind of inner truth about things. Some hint to winning strategies perhaps...but Lem could not make them out.

Years after their divorce, Lem accidentally ran into the best friend on the street. He finally got to ask her why on earth she had decided to tell Sophie about their tryst? The affair had already been over for some time and no longer mattered, so why hurt everyone in that way? Why destroy the marriage? Why? Because, she said, it was time for her to move on. Time to deal with the past. And better for everyone if everything was known. Known? He had no answer to that. Not because he agreed but because it explained nothing. She did what she did and he had to live with the results. Simple as that. He walked away from her and never turned around.

As he neared the entrance to the playground, Lem began to waver in his conviction about the challenge. He felt confused. In his mind were no great ideas or tactics. No shining plots and plans in the kitchen of his will, as that lousy poet said. Just the open-ended possibilities of the game, those endless domains of motion, of unfolding geometries. They said that the number of possible moves in Zeno were more than the number of molecules in the universe. They said that as mathematics was to physics, so Zeno was to...but what was it? Metaphysics? History? Silence? Life?

It all suddenly seemed quite useless to Lem. The game, the strategies, maybe even the whole day-to-day grind. The big picture was too big, impossible to keep in mind. You could be as careful as could be and still some idiot could do something that would wreck everything. The range of things you could control was as slim as a joke. Your moves, whatever they were, no matter how clever, would be lost in the tumult of everything that happened.

Zeno was the perfect example of that. To make the very last move — winning or losing — you had to make the one before that, Lem thought. And before that, you had to make the one before that. And so on. But to make the very first move, you had to walk

to the park. And before that you had to open the challenge, and get divorced, and have the affair, and get married, and on and on. Before you were born, they had to build the pyramids, and the apemen had to burn grass, and hydrogen had to implode, and god-knows-what before that, through infinite sequences of chance and fate back to the origin of time itself.

When he saw Sophie again at their college reunion, she seemed different than the woman he had married. She struck him as being less than attractive and a bit too solemn. They did not mention the affair or the divorce but instead talked about work and classmates. This he found profoundly boring. Was this the woman he had fallen in love with? The one he pined for after their breakup? Perhaps her best friend had actually done him an unexpected favor!

Lem stood motionless on the pathway, helpless to move. Go or stop, play or run, he could not decide. To take a single step seemed beyond his power. How was it ever possible, he wondered, to do the first thing knowing that it was all worked out down to the last detail? How was it possible to do anything at all? How was anything possible in light of fate? No, there was no question about it. Effort was an illusion, action a lie. Nothing could be done. Lem stood still there, frozen in indecision, not budging or inching. He knew that by not showing up he would forfeit the game. Lose his standing as a master. But now that all seemed infinitely distant. News on another planet, irrelevant to the real problem, which was living one's life right here in spite of everything one knew.

It was in that moment that he decided to turn down the challenge. But not by turning tail and sneaking away. No, he would step forward, one foot and then the next, and walk to the board. There he would bow to Kolovski and sweep his hand across the board left to right in the formal gesture of denying the challenge. He would lose his status, but no one would have to know that it was because he had lost his will to try. That at least was some consolation.

Of course, standing there absorbed by his own doubts, Lem could not have known that Kolovski too had been thinking. Trou-

bling over the game and ruminating about all that it implied. Zeno had a way of doing that to you. Perhaps it was the impulse of the field or the quantum snag. Whatever the cause, Kolovski too was frozen for the moment. Waiting, sweating, thinking about the arc of his own life. That nasty affair with a Polish woman named Franna who overcooked everything. And the series of companions since then, dull women with great bosoms who knew nothing of Zeno or anything else that mattered to him. The way one thing seemed to lead inexorably to the next, beyond one's own ability to guide it.

But Kolovski was not like Lem and through all this he came to an entirely different conclusion. Certainly the world was complex, and women were distracting, and the game of Zeno was a challenge. But to hell with all that, he thought, life must be lived not played at! You might as well just enjoy yourself. Why am I sitting here like a prisoner when I could be out in the world eyeing women and drinking cognac! Knowing full well that it meant he was forfeiting the game to Lem, he got up and went to make himself a nice breakfast of hash and eggs and bury his head in a fine fleshy lap.

Lem, thin in his clothes, had absolutely no idea why all the onlookers were applauding him as he approached the board.

Made on the Moon

Through the glass ceiling, the earth could be seen like a memory frozen in time. Suspended, distant, silent...there was no longer any way to know it except through the newscasts, the histories, the legends. To those who lived under the glass, the earth did not even seem like a home world any more. It had become an icon, a remembrance, a collection of vivid mythologies about what it meant to be human.

“Come here, I have something for you,” the old woman said.

She was sitting on the bed and holding an object in her veiny hand. Laura closed her eyes when she reached for it, afraid to touch the woman’s skin because it was old and brown and might rub off. And anyway, Laura did not really want anything from her. After all, what could this old lady possibly know about the things that mattered to her...about neurotones and floatball and stomps and the latest filamines.

But Laura also knew that the woman sitting on the bed did not have anything much to give. Her parents had explained all that to her. Times were hard and her wealth was gone. That was the reason she was living with them in the first place. Laura had been to her room and knew that there was hardly anything in it. It was not filled with stuff like all the others, but bare like a cell.

Laura also knew well enough to be polite. It was her birthday and this woman, like it or not, was her Nana, her grandmother. That alone made whatever gift she had for Laura matter in some way. Or at least worth being pleasant about.

And then there was that rumor that her grandmother had fought in the Neo war. But it was hard to connect the soldier she had heard about with the thin wrinkly woman sitting there at the edge of her bed holding a birthday present for her. Laura had seen the flicks of the world in upheaval and the armies clashing. The

only ones spared the turmoil of that time were on the Moon by then. New settlements there filled the Clavius crater and from that great distance you could watch the destruction in minute detail onscreen or just gaze up and watch the blue marble of the earth floating delicately in space and wonder why all that difficulty was necessary. Up there in the lightness of the lunar orbit, the mud of the earth seemed dreadful but ghostly.

When the war was over, Nana too had come to the moon and had a family and made and lost her wealth. Now it was sixty years later, new turmoils on the earth, another spin of the galaxy, and Laura looked at her grandmother with soft eyes. She was only thirteen that day but she understood what it meant to give when you had nothing much.

The object she took from the old woman was round, about the size of a grapefruit, and wrapped in some old paper. Great, she thought to herself, a piece of fruit. The hydrogardens were teeming with them. Wait until I tell the others. Oh boy.

But when she peeled back the yellowing paper, she found a ball inside. It was an odd ball, lumpy and heavy, maybe one of the first balls ever made. It crackled when she squeezed it as though filled with beans or rice, and it was covered with red leather crudely stitched. The skin was flaking off in parts. It was gross and old but she tried to mask her disgust with a weak smile.

The ploy did not work.

“Your mother said you were just made captain of your float-ball team,” the woman said.

“Yes but I couldn’t pitch with this ball, it would fall apart.”

“This one really should not be played with.”

It was worse than she thought. Not just any grungy old ball but one that you could not even play with. At least you could eat a grapefruit. Laura hefted the ball once and tried to imagine how far she could heave it in the thin gravity of the Moon once her grandmother went to sleep.

“You see, I made that ball,” the woman said proudly.

“Oh,” Laura said.

“I know it doesn’t look like much,” the woman said, “but that ball is special.”

Please, Laura thought, don't tell me that it is a magic ball that grants wishes or anything like that. I'm thirteen, not some dumb kid.

"Let me tell you about that ball."

"Um...Mom's expecting me to help with dinner," Laura lied.

But the woman ignored her, or did not hear, and continued.

"When you see a thing, sweetheart, it isn't always what you think."

"I know."

She did know that. That was one of the things she knew. Sure. But on the other hand, knowing it somehow never seemed to matter very much. And besides, a lot of the time what something turned out to be was even more boring than what you thought it was in the first place.

"That's not just any ball there. That is a great ball. It had its moment in the sun. It's just old now. That's all."

"Did you hit a goal with it or something?" she asked.

"Goal?" the woman scoffed. "Goals are bullshit. This ball here stopped a war."

The word *bullshit* coming from her Nana's lips quickly got her attention and the word *war* got it undivided. Noticing this, the woman leaned back on the bed and crossed her legs.

"What I'm going to tell you is true. It is something that really happened. It happened to me, a long time ago. Before even your mother was born. When I was still a young woman back on Earth. I was seventeen years old, just a bit older than you, no life yet to speak of. I didn't even own a flagon; I wasn't old enough. But I was just old enough to die for my country. You're always old enough for that."

The woman paused for a moment to size up her audience. Laura was sitting on the furthest edge of the bed, legs dangling, tossing the ball from one hand to the other. She had her mother's eyes...kind but firm. And she seemed to be paying attention. The woman found this encouraging and continued.

"Just before the Neos invaded, I joined the national army. I was really too young but they didn't care too much and they took me right in. They thought youngsters would make fine heroes. Or

corpses. It doesn't matter. In war you need both."

Laura knew that her Nana had fought the Neos, had even won a medal. But she had never talked to her about it before. In fact, she never actually thought of her Nana as being anything but old. It was a shock to think she been young once and even had a whole life before she was her grandmother.

"So me and Simma and her brother Erno and Milo and that other one, with the bad skin, we all joined. What was his name?"

"Nana?" Laura announced like referee.

"Oh well, anyway, at first it was just a lot of marching and shooting. It was a lark. We didn't know. Now don't get me wrong. I was young but I was not an idiot. I had a good head on my shoulders. Always have. I had no plans to be a hero. Not like Erno, who had the mind and body of a jackass. He saw himself coming home to a big parade. But me, no. I knew what war was."

"To tell the truth," she went on, "as soon as we were called up everything changed. There was the constant sound of the bombardment. Lightbombs going off all day long. And maserfire. It's very loud, you know. And we were knee deep in mud, eating out of polybags, going to the bathroom in an open pit. I started to huddle near a boy called Avi, a real big ox this boy was. I guess I was hoping that no one -- not the corporal or even god himself -- would notice me. I thought I'd be safe that way."

The woman stopped and seemed to get lost in a reverie. Laura was sensitive enough to wait for her to dwell there but she quickly grew impatient.

"What happened, Nana?" she finally said.

"One day we got the call to advance into this town called Valenka. Someone blew a whistle and there we were, pulling ourselves through the dirt and clawing our way over the top of a bomb crater at the edge of the town. The whole place was on fire, the land chopped up by explosions, smoke so thick your lungs felt like bricks. We were supposed to advance across a field into the town itself. It was only about 100 feet away but it would have been easier to cross Hell itself. Snipers in the town began to cut us down. I was lucky and missed being hit. I fell back into the crater. Others, alive and dead, fell in on top of me. There was a

layer of bodies three or four thick. I could hardly breathe. I had to fight my way up through all the arms and legs.”

“Holy luna,” Laura said.

“There was a standoff like that for a few days. The Neos were positioned in the buildings of the town and we were stuck in this crater. It seemed crazy to me. These two groups of soldiers, kids really, who had never met, all with families and hopes for the future, trying to slaughter each other over a town no one had ever heard of. And then for some reason, no one knows exactly why, the shooting stopped. We were pinned down and in a sense so were they. I guess we all just ran out of energy. Or ion packs maybe. We couldn’t leave, we couldn’t move. Nothing. We just sat there. After a while we began talking, telling stories, making up lies about our adventures. This went on for hours and I got bored. So I took out some raw beans, leatherine straps from a munitions box, my needle and some string, and sewed up the ball you have there.”

Laura looked at it again with a certain amount of respect. It was old and ugly but it had made it though a battle to end up in her hands there on the moon. All the way from the Earth. That was pretty atomic.

“So it’s really kind of a beanbag,” she said, trying to sum up.

“Wait, you’ll see,” the woman said. “You remember the big boy Avi who was next to me in the trench? Well it was his bag of beans I used for filling up the ball and when he found out, he got very angry. He was big, you know, he liked to eat. I thought he would hit me but instead of that, he took the ball I made and heaved it out of the crater. We heard some maserfire and figured that they thought Avi had heaved a startle bomb. Then the maserfire died and the ball was gone and that was the end of it.”

She stopped at this point to make sure that she still had Laura’s attention. She did. Laura was holding the ball and staring directly at her grandmother, waiting. She went on.

“But that wasn’t the end of it. Because after about an hour we heard a thud on the ridge just above the crater. We tossed to see who would pop up and find out what had landed. You know, it could have been a body or a shell or anything. Guess who lost.”

“You?”

“Right. So I slowly poked my head over the ridge and what do you think I found? The ball! Someone on the other side had actually caught it and thrown it back. It was just sitting there a few feet from the crater. Well, after a great deal of debate, we fixed up a rope with a loop on the end and spent an hour trying to lasso the ball in. But when we finally got it back in our hands, the corporal came down to our end and saw it. She decided that the ball was a bomb, so she grabbed it and tossed it back. Guess what?”

“They threw it back again?”

“Exactly. Back it came. Then Orlo, who was a soccer player in school, took off his pack and his helmet and gave it a great kick and sent it flying. There was a long pause. But sure enough, back it came. And that’s the way it went, back and forth and back all day long. We made up rules among ourselves, kept score, took turns kicking or throwing it. We made up names for the soldiers on the other side too, foreign sounding names, and made fun of their accents. They were probably doing the same thing.”

“You played ball with your enemies in the middle of a battle.”

“Amazing isn’t it? For twenty-one hours, there was no war. No war at all. Just two groups of kids playing ball in a field by some strange rules. The world was going to hell, horrors everywhere you looked. But for one single day, it was all gone. Life was as it should be, an excuse for idleness, for nothing so serious as throwing a ball back and forth.”

“Then what happened?” Laura asked with great excitement. She had forgotten to act interested because she had accidentally become it.

“Then?” the woman said. She was tired from the exertion of telling the story and her mind was wandering. She stretched out on the bed and rested her head. “I don’t know. Night fell. The ball ended up in the middle of the field somehow. Soon after that Orlo, the soccer player, was dead. Simma and Erno too. And then the war was over and I was no longer young. I had no time for balls and things. But I’ll tell you something. I was no longer afraid either.”

“Mom said you won a medal.”

“Things aren’t always...” the woman offered. Her eyes were beginning to close.

“But Nana, if it ended up in the middle of the field,” Laura asked, detecting a slight glitch in the tale, “how did you get the ball back?”

“Back?” she repeated, almost asleep.

“Yes. You know, back so you could give to me.”

“Oh...one day the enemy retreated and we crossed that field. The ball was just lying there in the mud. I picked it up and kept it ever since. But it isn’t just a ball, you see? It looks like one but it is really a kind of bag. A container.”

“Container?” Laura repeated.

“Yes. Inside is a hesitation, an idle moment. A pause in the tumbling flow of things. You see? Everyone needs that in their lives, not just soldiers. And that’s why I’m giving it to you, dear. As a reminder. Don’t become too consumed with things. Pitching floatballs or anything else. Life goes too quickly. Make sure you take time to be idle. To dawdle. See what I mean?”

Laura started to answer that question but found that her grandmother had fallen asleep and she did not think she should disturb a woman who made a ball that stopped a war. And so she got up and tossed the ball back onto the bed. That was when Laura noticed a small tag that was stuck to the wrapping paper. It was a sales tag that read, “Beanbag Ball, Fun for All, Made on the Moon.”

Laura thought about that and whether there had been a real battle at all. And then she thought...no matter. She was a moongirl, a Dianan, a lunarian, and like the others she was beyond delusions. Up there, they watched the Earth from a great height, saw the waxing and waning of humanity on the surface below, and waited in their dark silence for the world to come around again. Waited for the cycles of hope and hate to run their course. They had learned patience on the Moon and knew how to accept what was.

Laura too.

Besides, she was thirteen now and old enough to know that, in any case, the gift had not been the ball at all.

The Chaos Box

The box was not very impressive. Just an old metal cube, large enough to hold a baseball perhaps, its surface mottled and rusted. But Crane carried it as though it were a great prize because, in fact, he believed that to be the case.

Gripping it tightly in his pocket, Crane pushed through the busy streets until he found a small shop on the corner of Ninth and 38th. The sign in the window said Hindustan Craftworks: Bandas Hardwar, proprietor. The store was cluttered with artifacts: engraved bowls from Madras, Dravidian embroidery, four-armed statues of Siva, sitars, stone relics from Jodhpur, miniature paintings of Brahma throwing the bull. Every square inch was occupied by some piece of the made world.

Behind a counter crammed with statuettes and knickknacks, Hardwar himself was sitting and blowing smoke from an ornate pipe. His face was loose and vain, like a camel while the pipe, by contrast, had the stern face of a British viceroy carved on the bowl. It was hard to know which of the two faces to address.

“Mr. Hardwar? My name is Crane,” Crane said entering.

Without taking his eyes off the shifting news on a foreign newspaper, the man shook Crane’s hand and blew a ring in the air. Crane took the box out of his pocket and placed it down on top of the counter between some cups and cases. Hardwar looked up at him, then down at the box. He instantly stopped reading as his eyes widened into coins.

“Ganesa,” he exclaimed.

“Ganesa to you too,” Crane said politely.

“I see Mr. Karkas has sent you with my little box. But what can be the reason?”

“You sold him this box?”

Hardwar leaned in, giving the face carved on the end of his pipe a chance for close scrutiny of the swastika pattern on the top

of the cube. "Certainly this is my box. I am not likely to mistake it. It is a one-of-a-kind original. But what is the box doing sitting here in my shop now. Mr. Karkas would never part with it."

"He wouldn't, would he? And why is that?"

"But surely you know, if he has given it to you. Are you an associate of Mr. Karkas?"

"I've been closer to him than most anybody," Crane said, not explaining that he and Melville had killed the old man for it.

"Now what I'd like to know, Mr. Hardwar, is exactly what it is that makes this box so valuable?"

Hardwar's eyes squinched down to mere slits. "Is there a problem, sir?"

"You tell me," Crane said.

"But Mr. Karkas has bought the box. He knows very well its value. No one forced him to pay the amount he did. It was his own choice. That is the very nature of the free market system. Is it not?"

"What exactly was the amount he paid for it?"

"But surely you know how much was paid, if Mr. Karkas sent you."

"Four and a half million?" Crane offered. That was the amount he had seen on the invoice.

"Roughly. It was five, I think, at the end of the day."

"You don't happen to have some kind of bill of sale do you?"

"Certainly I do. But I am afraid I do not understand. What does he want? He desired this box and I obtained it for him. Why has he sent you here with it?"

Crane submitted to an examination by the dual faces, like twin vidcams scanning in opposite directions.

"Karkas is dead," Crane said bluntly.

Hardwar gasped, inhaled a lungful of smoke, then choked it out in short wheezes.

Dead because we killed him for it, Crane thought. But instead of saying that, he fudged:

"And we think someone may have killed him for this little box of yours."

"Good Lord! But why should anyone want to do that?"

Hardwar asked, putting the pipe down and clearing his throat into a filthy cloth.

“You tell me.”

“How would I know?”

“It’s amazing what people know.”

“I am an importer, sir, not a gangster.”

“With the money you made on this little transaction, you could hire your own gangster.”

“Not unless they work for the minimum wage, sir.”

“Let’s stop playing games,” Crane said.

He yanked out his flexiphone and fanned the smokescreen with it. When it had cleared, he called up the messages between Karkas and Hardwar that he had intercepted and that proved his case.

“Is this your communication with Karkas or not?”

“I beg your pardon?” Hardwar said vaguely. “I am still a bit shocked. Has Mr. Karkas truly been murdered?”

“I personally guarantee it. Now are these your messages with him or not?”

“I think they very well are,” he said, perusing the words floating before him.

“Bandas Hardwar,” Crane read, “that’s you. And GH Karkas, that’s Karkas. The box is the box. And the numbers are clear enough. Now I want to know why this box is worth around five million bucks?”

“Bucks? Bucks you say? But who was saying anything about bucks?”

“Listen to me, Mr. Hardwar. The police are investigating Karkas’ death. They’re looking for suspects. And motives. They don’t know about you yet, but they could find out easily enough, if you get my meaning. Now I’ll ask you again...why is this box worth five million bucks?”

“Again bucks.”

“Well?”

“But we were not speaking of bucks. Not at all. We were speaking here only of rupees,” he said, poking the screen with a gnarly finger and causing a shimmy.

“Come again?”

“Rupees, sir. Mr. Karkas had just returned from his trip to India. He saw this box there at one of the private galleries. When he returned, he called to ask me if I would purchase it for him on my monthly trip. We had done some business before and so I agreed to this little venture.”

“But why didn’t Karkas buy the box himself when he was there?”

“I have no idea. Perhaps he thought that as a dealer I could get a better price or have fewer problems with customs. Imports are quite tricky these days. I told him that I would purchase it for him and these messages you have here concern a negotiation for the price. But it is in rupees, not in dollars. The buyer was asking six million rupees.”

“And just what does that come to in...bucks?”

Hardwar took the pipe from his mouth, stared into the carved face for help with the calculation, then returned it to his lips when the amount was established.

“Approximately five thousand dollars. The rupee is trading rather poorly.”

“The box is only worth five thousand dollars?” Crane said in a tinny voice.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Why don’t we try a clear manner of speaking?”

“Are you with the police?”

“Let’s just say that the police are following my efforts very closely.”

“I would appreciate it if you kept that record of our messages private in that case.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I am a trader, sir. I prefer to keep prices and their negotiations confidential. It is better for business. May I count on your cooperation in this?”

“I’ll do what I can, Hardwar, but only if you level with me. How about telling me exactly what this little box is worth.”

“On the fair market? Approximately two and a half million rupees.”

“Which is?”

“Two thousand dollars.”

“How can that be?” Crane grunted.

All that for two lousy grand? he thought. What a joke. And Melville was still out there ready to shoot him for this stupid box. But Hardwar took Crane’s frown for confusion.

“These puzzle boxes are no longer produced,” Hardwar explained. “They are the relics of a bygone era. Before the Web, before the computer even, before Pakistan or the difficulties with China and so forth. From a much simpler world when people were proud of their crafts and not their craftiness.”

“If it’s only worth two thousand dollars, how did the price to Karkas get up to five?”

“There are other costs, you see.”

“Such as?”

“Import fees, documentation, and so forth.”

“That’s a lot of and so forth.”

“In addition, there was another buyer bidding for it as well.”

“Who was that?”

“It would be a breach of confidence for me to disclose a client’s name who wishes to remain anonymous. Surely you can see that.”

“It doesn’t matter what I see, it’s what the police see. See?”

“You leave me little choice.”

“I hope so. Now who was the other buyer?”

“Well there I must admit that you have called my bluff. In truth, there was no one,” Hardwar said, smiling loosely now like the camel that has eaten its master’s hat. “It was a little game of mine. You see Mr. Karkas is quite a rich man and I knew that he would not miss the money, whereas a few thousand dollars would make quite a difference to one in my position.”

“You invented a fake buyer to pump up the price of the box?”

“I am a poor shop owner. Struggling, sir, struggling to make ends meet. For the children.” And he pointed to the framed picture of two mugging camelettes on the wall behind him. “Perhaps I took advantage of Mr. Karkas’ obsession. Ganesa.”

“Ganesa,” Crane echoed again. “Which obsession was that?”

“His obsession with Hindi artifacts. Ganesa.”

“Ganesa.”

“Yes. Ganesa.”

“You keep saying that.”

“But it was his obsession,” he said, relighting the pipe and winking towards the box.

“Let’s start from the beginning, Hardwar. And slowly.”

“Mr. Karkas had a great interest in India and visited there many times. I believe that he found there what many Americans often do, answers to his questions. To spiritual questions. Everything here is so new but India you see is quite ancient and this can be very intoxicating to foreigners. Have you ever been to India, sir?”

“It’s on my list,” Crane fibbed. “Go on.”

“Mr. Karkas visited the Hindu temple at Madura, a beautiful structure, and told me that he had a vision there. This is common but mostly among Hindus. It is actually rather odd for a foreigner to have such an experience. Nonetheless, he said it was there that he saw his destiny.”

“Death?”

“A vision of a mandala of infinite information that came to him as he stood observing a statue of Ganesa.”

“Ganesa is...”

“A Hindu god. The son of Siva and Parvati.”

Crane tapped a screen and spoke the name “Ganesa” like an incantation. Instantly a colorful painting appeared showing a short fat man with yellow skin, two extra arms, and an elephant’s head.

“Yes, just so,” Hardwar said. “This is Ganesa. He is known to us as the pathfinder. The god of journeys and of beginnings. As such he is also seen as the creator of obstacles and therefore must be placated before any undertaking. A prayer to Ganesa assures the success of any endeavor, as before one takes a journey for example. Or begins a business venture. Ganesa bestows prosperity in trade or in travel. That is why it inspired Mr. Karkas.”

“To start his communications empire.”

“As you say.”

“What has all this got to do with the box?”

“You see the pattern on the top of the box? In Sanskrit we call this a *svasti*. The *svasti* is the symbol of Ganesa. It is a cross which stands for a crossroads. Or two purposes encountering each other as in a business transaction. Since Ganesa is the god of ventures, the *svasti* is also the symbol of good fortune. Many businessmen in India have his image nearby.”

“And you say Karkas was obsessed with it?”

“Over the years he bought many items pertaining to Ganesa. Whenever anything came in with such symbols on it, I called him. A statue of Ganesa, for example, or perhaps a reproduction of a miniature. Or an object like this one with a *svasti* on it. He had quite an extensive collection. But I think this particular box tickled his fancy, so to say.”

“What’s particular about it?”

“It is a *kozapetaka*. This is a Sanskrit word that means a box which contains a treasure. We also call it a chaos box.”

“Chaos?”

“The Chaos Box is an ancient story. I have heard the story told in Hungary, in Mongolia, in the Sudan. In China as a Taoist tale. But I believe it is really from India, which is older than any of these. Would you like to know it?”

“Yes, I would,” Crane said, thinking it might explain the true value of the box.

With that, Hardwar took out another box — a wooden one — that had papers within it, actual papers of different weights and colors, very uncommon in this pixellated age. Hardwar removed a piece of translucent parchment from the wooden box and set it standing on its edge in a base to create a small stageset. Then he lit a candle and placed it behind this screen. Out of the box he took a handful of small intricately carved paper figures and placed these in their own wooden holders. When he positioned the tiny puppets between the candle and the screen, their shadows — dim and indistinct — appeared on the screen to form a shadow puppet play.

“The Goddess of Demons was angry at a priest named Argana,” Hardwar began, bringing those two figures, one with a long

robe and the other with an ornate headdress, onto the tiny stage. “Angry because the priest had abandoned his practices in favor of the excitements of modern life. And so the Goddess instructed her pets — the Centipede and the Lizard and the Scorpion and the Red Snake — in a plan to kill the priest.”

As he delicately moved each of the players in and out of the candlelight, the flame flickered from frail eddies in the air. From his side of the screen, Crane could barely make out the shapes of the puppets, yet it mesmerized him like a brand new kind of virtuality. In this age of vidsims and haptic holograms and tapscreen movies, this faint little paper puppet play struck Crane as the most amazing thing he had ever seen.

“One by one they would take human form and try to fulfill the Goddess’ demand. The Centipede would appear as an acrobat with poison sticks. The Lizard as a magician with a deadly sword. Scorpion as a temptress with a fatal kiss. Red Snake as a jester with a lethal flower. Surely one of them would succeed in killing the priest Argana. But the Goddess warned them to avoid capture and imprisonment in the Chaos Box. The box had the power to contain all forms of evil and it was the source of Argana’s power.”

“But Argana was clever and recognized them for who they were. One by one he overcame them and put them into his Chaos Box, from which they could not escape. After a time, the Goddess came to him for the return of her pets. Argana knew that she might arrange all sorts of tribulations for him if he did not comply with her request, yet if he did comply worse dangers awaited. But then he thought perhaps that he could save himself by negotiating. And so he offered to open the box, but only if she gave her word that the demons would not harm him or his family. The Goddess agreed but when Argana opened the box she immediately set her demons on him. ‘But you agreed to protect me!’ he cried. ‘Why have you done this?’ And her answer was, ‘Because I am a Goddess and you are nothing but a man.’ Thus was chaos returned to the world, as it had to be.”

Hardwar let go of the puppet and on the ghostly wall the tiny figure of the priest Argana collapsed silently onto the table.

“And so, like all good tales, there is a moral, a lesson here. Do you understand it?”

“Sure I do,” Crane said. “Never open a damn chaos box!”

“No, my friend, I am afraid that I must disagree. In India we say that the point is...open it or do not open it. It does not matter. Either way, your fate is in the hands of the gods.”

“Let me make sure I get this,” Crane said. “Karkas saw this box in India and asked you to go over and buy it for him. He paid five grand — five million rupees — for it. You paid two to the seller and kept three for yourself. Is that about it?”

“There were other costs, as I said. I kept roughly two.”

“Not bad,” Crane said, admiring a fellow crook.

“What is the consequence if someone wants something badly enough? The box is only worth what it is worth to the one who wants it. No more and no less. Its value depends on that alone.”

“Plus whatever might be inside of it,” Crane mused.

“Is there something inside?”

“Isn’t there?”

“How would I know? Only Mr. Karkas knew how to open it. And he did not choose to share that information with me.”

“How do you know he knew how to open it?”

“He told me so. He said he had opened it in India when he first saw it.”

“Did he say how?”

“No he did not. Do you think, perhaps, that he put something in it? Something of value?”

“What do you think?”

“Perhaps. It is certainly possible. What do you think?”

“I hope so,” Crane said by way of wishing that the murder had been worth it. “Well let’s find out and open the damn thing.”

“I should not be able to say how to do it.”

“Should not or will not?”

“Cannot. Inside the walls of this box there is a small steel ball. It runs in a maze that goes around five sides of the box. The sixth side is the drawer which opens. It is a matter of setting the box down on its sides in some sequence so that the ball falls through successive legs of the maze, one by one. When the ball

reaches the last point, it drops into a cavity and there it releases a pin holding the drawer and the drawer pops open.”

As he spoke, Hardwar illustrated the theory by placing the box deliberately on its base, then on one side, then the other, then the base again, then the lid. He seemed like an interior decorator caught in a ritual of indecision. But it led nowhere.

“This box has no doubt been turned many times. There is no telling where in the maze the ball rests.”

“So how do we open it?”

“Trial and error, I imagine.”

“That could take months.”

“Decades. Or more.”

“I could bust it open I guess,” Crane suggested.

“And risk destroying a delicate treasure hidden within.”

“Then I’m a dead man too,” Crane said.

Without a treasure to trade, Melville would surely kill him. A handful of twists and turns, it seemed, was his only insurance. But again Hardwar, not knowing with whom he was dealing, misunderstood Crane’s expression.

“We live in an age of solutions, Mr. Crane, only asking questions that we know we can answer. Googles, Wikis, Nimids. A world in which everything is revealed because we only concern ourselves with the knowable and searchable. The triumph of information, I guess. But I have a different sensibility. A more romantic one if I may say so. I enjoy a mystery and to me, the best mystery is the one that remains unanswered. Like a sealed box.”

“You can take your sensibility and shove it,” Crane said grabbing the box. “Thanks for the fairy tale.”

Holding the box in his hand and not knowing whether to keep it or pitch it through the window, he walked out the door wondering just how to explain all this to Melville. He would not take the news lightly. Unlike himself, Melville was a hothead who did not mind killing to overcome his irritation. That was the moment that the shot hit him like a bolt. Crane staggered onto a metal railing and turned in time to see Melville block the sun. As he collapsed into a heap on the sidewalk, the box slipped out of his fingers, hit

the pavement once, flipped over, and landed on its side right next to Crane's head.

Deep inside, a small steel ball obeyed the inexorable truths of gravity and circumstance; it dropped down a tiny shaft into a tiny recess. There it depressed a metal rod that, in turn, released a spring.

The drawer of the box popped open.

The front end of it was extended like an open mouth to reveal a small chamber lined with dark cloth. Crane could move only enough to peer into this with one eye and there he found just what the law required. Not the criminal law that he knew so well. Nor the law of luck or gravity, which are puny in the grand scheme of things, and not even the law of chaos, which trumps all others. But the great law, the one law, the law on which all of life depends...the law of irony. And based on that law, what he found inside the box made perfect sense.

Absolutely nothing.

The box was completely empty.

What the fuck, he thought. Karkas had gone to all that trouble for an empty box and they had killed him for it. Why? But as he felt Melville's shadow over him, it all became clear. Karkas had gone to the trouble simply because he wanted the box. He wanted it because he wanted it. And people would do anything to get what they wanted. Maybe the universe was knowable...but not if you threw human desire into the works. Then all bets were off. Chaos reigned.

There was a whole philosophy of existence in that last idea but Crane was well beyond thinking about such things.

Epicycles

On Tralfor X, just a blip of dirt in the void really, Admira Tsen was surprised to discover that another human was already there. Humanoid would be more accurate. This was a small individual, possibly female, seemingly intelligent. Tsen landed there by mistake when her Nav failed; there was nothing to find or discover. So what could this other creature be doing there already?

Tsen was so shocked that for a while she forgot to record the encounter as they struggled to communicate. Signals, gestures, grunts, words...none of them seemed to break through. Soon enough though, it occurred to her to hand this alien a simple communications device and that worked. It was a black marker pen. She took it happily and so Tsen, figuring she knew its use, unfolded the paper that covered the landing sled into a huge sheet.

It was at that point that Admira Tsen began the recording:

I handed her – this delicate creature – a marker and large piece of paper. She seemed overjoyed at this, as though she could finally accomplish something, although what that might be I had no clue. After staring at the blank page for a long time, working something out in her mind perhaps, she began to draw. The first item was a large circle, about a foot in diameter. I could easily have added two dots and a curve to create a smiley face. Was that a universal symbol? But there was no time because she soon launched into a rather frenzied session of rendering.

It started with another smaller circle on the rim of the first and I presumed she was drawing her home planet orbiting some star. That was a start! I tapped that symbol and said “Earth” meaning that was my home world. But she seemed puzzled by that and continued.

She added other circles, on the rim of both shapes and I guessed that she was really drawing her conception of an atom or

a molecule or some other basic biological unit. Good, I thought. A common vocabulary! I tried out all those words but they all fell flat. In truth, this wanderer, this fellow spacefarer, seemed to have no interest in my response to her drawing at all. I wondered what she was trying to accomplish here on Tralfor X, which was unique because it was so dull. After all, I was only there waiting for the best moment to leave. Perhaps she was too. But then, what was she hoping to communicate with these circular representations?

She ran the marker around the original circle a few times, making the line darker. Earth going around the sun? “One year” I said, now figuring that she was trying to establish some common sense of time. “Ten years, a decade?” Or maybe rotation as a principle of the universe. Did we agree on the laws of physics? But none of this led anywhere, not to any dialogue or even recognition, and I began to wonder if she was simply a blooming idiot from the planet Moron.

More circles appeared on existing circles and the drawing was starting to look like those old diagrams of epicycles, circles on circles that the Medievalists drew to account for anomalies in planetary movement before Kepler and Brahe and Copernicus. Did the astronomers on Moron still think that this was how the universe worked, I wondered? Or were we wrong with our own astrophysics and perhaps it did.

In a short while, the drawing had become the size of a mural and the circles and lines an intricate, vast, complex structure on that paper. Time passed quickly and I began to think in timely terms. I felt as though years, decades, centuries, millennia, and more were coming and going. Even iterations for which I had no words at all. Mega-eons? Tera-ages? I had no idea what the purpose of this whole exercise was but I began to form a theory about who she was or at least where. Or more properly...when.

Not from some alien or moronic world at all but from good old planet Earth, the third rock, waterland world. I surmised that she was from a future version of it and if my calculations were correct, from an uncountable number of cosmic epicycles into my not-yet-happened. Human-like and with an understanding of complexity and detail. Plus, the ability to draw out her ideas.

Surely, I thought, that had to be it.

I was amazed, astounded, and now suddenly excited to encounter her here on this little potato floating in space. What insights she could give me! What predictions of our dreams and what warnings? Yet I still had no way to ask her these questions. And she appeared to have no interest in me or any questions I might have. None at all.

She simply drew a few more circles and then seemed to be finished. She stood up and threw the marker aside. She walked onto the paper and took a position next to the original circle she had drawn. The core of the cosmos? The one true thing? The universe before the Big Bang? I had no idea what it meant. What any of it meant. Then she looked at me sadly, stepped into that circle, and instantly vanished. Gone forever just like that.

Of course I tried to do the same. But nothing happened. What she had been drawing was not a representation of anything. It was an actual thing. A device. Perhaps in her time, they had figured out how to make renderings real, to turn lines into mechanisms and drawings into devices. And to use them to squeeze through tiny holes in the continuum. Just large enough for her slender form but not my fat – by comparison that is – one.

I folded up the drawing and stored it on the ship. Once I repair the abductor I can slowly – painfully slowly I now see – make my way back home and show it to our engineers. Maybe they can use it somehow to slip through space and time. But in the end I am not sure how helpful that would be. For all her magical technology, as I thought about it, she had been stranded on that dinky planetoid just like I was. Just with a fancier way to escape.

The Running

Nyala, Sudan 2020

In her dream, Chita was still running across the savannah. She could feel the hot dirt under her bare feet and watch the wind as it carved the grass into rippling waves all the way to the horizon. A flock of water birds sitting at the edge of a pond watched her as she dashed past them. The faster she ran the more the world seemed to turn calm, quiet, eternal.

She imagined that a hawk circling above her would have noticed her shadow before her figure as it tickled across the landscape. Perhaps it would be confused by the contour and think this was a rodent that would make a good lunch. If so, the bird would swoop down through a long graceful arc and glide along with her for a few seconds.

In her dream she took a deep breath and inhaled the hawk's power and her legs moved even faster until she had overtaken the wind. She was named for the cheetah, the animal she resembled as she ran. She was a lovely, lean young girl with thin muscular legs running fantastically, gorgeously across the plain. She leapt over a fallen tree; the birds took flight; she stumbled and corrected herself; she ran and ran with long loping strides.

But even in her running dream she could not escape the horror. It chased her and caught her even there and she could feel the tears streaming down her cheeks as she ran. Her lip quivering, her heart racing not from speed but from fright.

Chita looked behind her and could just make out the truck chasing her.

"Runrun," she cried to herself, just as her mother used to. But in our dreams we are not free and soon she could hear the engine of the truck and the shouts of the men and the sound of their machetes banging against the metal.

She jumped over a thicket, pumped her legs, and became the cheetah itself. The Olympic medal she saw in her mind's eye she kept in front of her like a carrot.

But this was not to be.

In an instant, a cold hard instant that shatters dreams, she felt the heavy grip of a hand on her arm. The truck pulled in front and other men jumped off. One of the men grabbed her by the hair and twisted it into his fist. Chita spit and bit and kicked but it was no use. Another one grabbed her foot, another her arm. More hands, the heavy breathing, the jabbering in a strange tongue, the brutal grin of the one on top of her, and the machete glinting in the sun.

Newark, New Jersey 2042

When Kellerman finally opened the door he was shocked by what he saw. He was expecting some dumpy delivery boy but instead was confronted by a striking looking woman. She was tall and lean, her skin the color of a particular kind of dark chocolate that he liked. Her face was quite beautiful and he would have taken her to be one of those models he often saw on the street carrying a large bag and walking quickly on high heels.

“Can I help you?” he asked, wondering which god he had accidentally pleased.

The woman motioned back towards the apartment, which he took to mean that she was asking herself in. This was getting better and better he thought. Could someone at the office have hired her as a joke? Or maybe she had seen him at the gym and could no longer resist her attraction.

Kellerman stepped aside to allow her to pass and that was when he noticed the crutches. She walked in slowly on them but straight and erect. Gracefully, like a creature with four legs. They were good crutches, he thought, from a design point of view. They supported her elbows but were bent as they reached the floor. This allowed her to shift her weight as she repositioned the crutches, which gave her a more fluid walk. They were made of titanium, light and strong. Kellerman knew something about this because he was an engineer and studied the way things work.

Inside, the woman positioned herself at the couch and sat down. This was a more difficult move than simply walking and it took her a few moments to settle in. She was wearing pants but even so Kellerman could tell from the ridges formed as she sat down that she had two prosthetic legs, probably from the mid thigh down.

His initial fantasies shot all to hell, Kellerman quickly switched gears – he was an engineer after all – and offered her a cup of tea. She spoke a kind of shattered English, slivers and shards, and was hard to understand. But he understood the nod of her head and made two cups. She took the cup from him with her left hand, placed it on the table, then tapped her chest with spider-like fingers and said softly: “Chita.”

“Oh, like the animal. Mine is Kellerman,” he said. “Norman Kellerman but just plain old Kellerman is fine.”

They sat silently for a while as he tried to understand the situation. Who was she, what did she want, why was she there? Questions one would normally blurt in the first few moments, but there was something about this woman – her calmness, her focus – that blocked him from asking.

“Can I help you with something?” Kellerman finally asked.

“Help,” she said. “Yes. You help me.”

“Okay. What can I do for you?”

“Runny,” she said.

“I’m sorry? What does that mean?”

But she only looked back at him as though waiting for him to explain himself better.

“How did you find me?” he asked. “Find me?”

He tried to mime the movement of someone searching for something and then poked himself repeatedly. That seemed to work and she pointed her long slender arm at the wall behind him. Kellerman turned around to rediscover that old newspaper clipping that he had framed and mounted. It was a photo of himself crossing the finish line in the 2020 New York City Marathon. The headline read: “Engineering a Victory.”

“You read about my marathon victory in the newspapers,” he said sarcastically. “No, I don’t think so.”

“You sister,” she said.

“Ah. Nina!”

So that was it, he thought. His sister Nina worked at the consulate. She must have met this woman somewhere and mentioned his name. But why? What did Nina think that he could do for her?

“I still don’t understand,” Kellerman said. “Why did Nina give you my name?”

As she picked up her cup to take a sip, Kellerman saw that she was also missing her right hand and forearm. Her prosthetic was quite good and not noticeable at first. That made her graceful use of the crutches even more amazing because it meant that her symmetry was thrown off. She must have been in a horrific accident, he concluded.

“How can I help you?” he asked but immediately regretted saying that.

She might take that as an insult, given the wince in his face.

“Maraton,” she said bluntly.

“Mara...”

And then perfectly clearly as though she had been rehearsing the line: “New York City Maraton.”

“Oh you want to watch the marathon! Well, you don’t need me for that. There are special locations for, well, you know. Special viewing areas so you don’t get jostled.”

She was studying him intently the whole time he said this but Kellerman could not tell just how many of his words were getting through.

“Runny,” she said.

“I’m sorry?”

“Chita fast,” she said and made the universal symbol of running by twiddling her fingers along the surface of the table.

“I see,” he said, lying through his squint.

“Me. Runny. New York City Maraton.”

“You ran in the Marathon? When was that?”

“Two, oh, four, tree.”

“2043? That’s in nine months. That’s the next Marathon.”

“You help.”

Kellerman was flabbergasted. It might have been a prank, a gag, or even a daydream, but it could not have been real. Except that this woman was sitting there as calm as a clam and straight as an arrow. Her eyes were steady and bore into him. What was she talking about? Run in the next Marathon? It was insanity. Did she even understand what she was saying?

“Sorry,” Kellerman said, mostly to himself. “You don’t need an engineer. You need a psychiatrist.”

“Need legs.”

“Well yes, that would help.”

“Good legs. You make.”

“What?”

“You make legs Chita. Runny New York City Maraton.”

“What you’re saying is impossible. It can’t be done. People, healthy people, work for years to run that race and even then plenty of them don’t make it. Besides, they don’t allow...you know. Even if you got the best prosthetic running legs, you would never be able to...”

Kellerman continued rambling in that vein until he ran out of zest and his voice trailed off into silence. He knew he had dashed her hopes and felt bad about that. But what she was asking was bonkers. As she slowly got herself standing and positioned her crutches to turn towards the door, he could see that at least she understood the basic idea.

“I’m sorry, he said.

She turned and looked directly at him with those steady eyes, piercing eyes.

“You,” she said more like a command than a request. “Make legs Chita.”

“It just can’t be...”

“Runny Maraton. We tell whole world. No cut women. We show.”

And with that she slowly but fluidly made her way out the door.

Three days later, she was back at his apartment. Her manner – serious and firm – suggested that she was not waiting for his

answer but only for his solution.

“You’ve got chutzpah, I’ll say that,” Kellerman said.

“Hoot spa?”

“Chutzpah? It’s a guy who kills his father and mother, then throws himself at the mercy of the court because he’s an orphan. Never mind. You’ve got it anyway.”

“You hoot spa?”

“Me? No. I’m chutzpah challenged.”

“You win runny,” she said and motioned to the news clipping again.

“Sorry, no. That’s just a fake. Not real. Made up. There was no race in 2020 and if there was, I would have come in last. A friend of mine made up that fake news story but Nina, my sister, refuses to accept it.”

“Legs,” she said abruptly enough to snap him out of his lengthy apology.

But she was right. Far from putting her out of his mind, he had become somewhat obsessed with her and had, in fact, done some research. There was a new kind of memory metal called flexium. They called it liquid steel because it could form itself into two or three configurations depending on the voltage of a current running through it. Nerve signals from the spine might also work. Contracted or expanded by these signals, the metal took on different shapes and could be used as moveable artificial limbs. But it was all still experimental. Just papers in some journals. Untested.

“You make,” she said but, without any inflection, it was a statement not a request.

Kellerman had not changed his opinion about the insanity of the whole idea. But he loved making things and he loved a good material challenge. That she might actually run in the Marathon was ridiculous. But the idea of working with this new material fascinated him. He could even get his colleagues to help.

And so they got to work. They studied the physioforms, the ergometrics, the muscle and tendon resistance amps, everything. Kinnon dealt with the mechanics, Virawshanee with the materials

science. Kellerman came up with the overall design which, in the end, was so bizarre it even surprised him. The only way to make a set of legs with this material that would accomplish what they wanted was to rely on biomimicry. The legs would be based on the geometry of the cheetah.

In spite of this, she laughed when she saw them. No doubt it was not what she expected, yet she did not seem disturbed by them either. They were really quite beautiful, one had to admit, once you got over a natural anthropocentric tendency. There was no skin or muscles. No attempt to hide the hardware or make them look natural. They did not have the time for that. The fluid metal had been cast in five positions to mimic the forward, rolling, sliding, loping motion of the cheetah's body in motion. The prosthetics looked like a cross between a cat's hind legs and a sculpture made of mercury.

The New York City 2043

As the runners gathered at the bridge, Kellerman and his team positioned the van with all the tracking devices just on the Manhattan side. Running the race with any supportive device was illegal, they knew that. So their plan was to have Chita jump out as the runners passed and blend in. That is, to the extent that a half black woman – slash – half metallic robot had any chance of blending. But in a sense, that was the whole point. Kellerman knew very well – no, hoped and prayed – that the media would find and focus on her. That, after all, was the whole point for him.

“You can't push this,” he told her as they opened the van doors. “You have to take your time.”

The metal was untested, the mechanism in beta, she had not had enough practice with them, blah, blah. She paid no attention and could not have understood him even if she wanted to. He saw this disregard on her face and admired it. He had never met a woman – any person at all really – as unyielding as she was.

He had more words for her – cautionary ones – but in an instant she was out the door and running with the pack. If other marathoners noticed her, they did not make a big deal of it. Running their own race and all that. Kellerman watched all this on the

drone camera and worried.

“If it goes out of phase she could get sprung sideways and really hurt herself,” he said.

“I have a hunch that’s not going to stop her,” Kinnon replied. “She’s been really hurt already. She is way beyond that.”

And so they drove through the streets and followed her on the various screens in the van: biomonitors, drone views, TV feeds.

She ran the race just at the head of the pack, never dropping back but never gaining the lead either. Whether this was strategy or nerves, was impossible to say. On the other hand, only a few media feeds had noticed her yet and no one had come forward to eliminate her.

Kellerman was thinking of all those inspiring movie clips from *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *Forrest Gump*, *Chariots of Fire*. He was playing a thumping beat in his head when she disappeared from the screen. From all the screens. Afraid she had fallen – or worse – he sped the van up to her last known location and got out. But she was nowhere to be seen.

It was Virawshanee, monitoring the TV images, who finally found her. She had not fallen or fallen behind but instead began to run at her top speed. With less than a mile to go, she had now taken the lead and was leaving the front runner far behind.

“Holy crap,” Kellerman said. “She’s going to win. BIG!”

“Runny Chita!” they began to shout and they knew that she could hear them through her earpiece.

She did, but it had no effect. Inside her head, it was silent. The ground below her feet turned to hot dirt and the arms of the onlookers became the tall grass in the wind. The sun was her sun making a dancing shadow before her and there was no truck and there were no men and somehow her mother and her brother were there and...

By the time she crossed the finish line, perfectly alone, the crowd was in a frenzy and could be forgiven for thinking that some kind of techno-mythical creature had just won the famous race. Illegally of course, and she was immediately disqualified from the competition. But even so, she was still the entire focus

of attention: news media, crowds, bystanders, everyone.

When they asked her name, it instantly became a chant throughout the crowd, a kind of peristalsis of language, pulsing all around her.

“Cheetah! Cheetah!” they seemed to be saying.

Or maybe they meant her name. Or perhaps they were simply shouting “Cheater!”

It made no difference to her at all.

She was running again and that was all that mattered.

Waiting for Waiting

The farpoint outpost was the loneliest place on earth.

No, that was not right and the moment she wrote it, R5471 knew the mistake. What she meant was that it was a very lonely place. After all, it was nowhere near Earth and she was the only one there. The only consciousness, that is. Everything else was quantum chips and fusion plasmas and they were not aware of anything at all. Not remotely human.

Neither was she technically but that was not the way she felt about it. She was an ArCon – an artificial consciousness – designed to mimic not just thinking but awareness too. Isolated there, barely feeling the dent in the continuum caused by her own cybernetic mass, and the Earth lost in the deep dark, she longed for companionship, for contact.

She had even been constructed to have a sense of humor as a ploy to make people more comfortable. She knew a few jokes. But in the isolation of the farpoint, this only made her feel lonelier. Humor, as any comic knows, needs to be shared and therefore she yearned to express herself to someone, anyone.

That is how she began to write in the first place. To make a connection, to reach out beyond the vacuum, to create something that someone else might feel something for. She had been trying her hand, so to speak, at a novel but the idea of plot eluded her. She tried poetry for a while but could never quite get a grip, in a manner of speaking, on cadence and prosody. Finally, she settled on the idea of a play.

A play! Yes, two characters interacting just as she longed to do and speaking in the kind of dialogic exchange she had been trained in for talking to humans. To prepare for this, she read through some of the plays in the database but something was off. Much as she tried, she could not quite understand the emotional turmoil that, to her cool intelligence, was at the core of most of the

work. But she did think that humans were rather funny in their little doings, always so busy and buzzy, and one play in particular struck a chord with her. Something about the simplicity, the formality of it, and she decided to give it a try if only to fill the void of time between functions.

But it was more than that too, an excuse perhaps to pretend that she was in touch with some unknown other, who might listen to her, who might enjoy what she had made. She may have been nothing more than fancy software, but it was software that longed.

And so she concocted two characters on a bare stage, both wearing human hats. A was standing at stage left and looking out over the audience; B was sitting on a stool at stage right, gazing mindlessly ahead.

ACT I

A: Perfect!

B: How nice.

A: (Annoyed) No it isn't. Don't be a fool.

B: Of course not.

A: You don't even know what I'm talking about. You're not paying attention. Not one bit.

B: I am!

A: All right then, what am I talking about? Hmmm?
What am I saying?

B: How perfect it all is.

A: You see? There it is. You haven't a clue. You have not been listening to me at all.

B: I have!

A: Not a word. Not since we first got here...which was...
(looking for a watch that isn't there)...good lord...who knows how long it's been!

B: I've heard every word. How you can't stand waiting, how ridiculous it all is, how you think that they must think you're a fool, but how you're not a fool, how your joints hurt...all of it. Every word.

A: And so you must know that I was being sarcastic.

Ironical or whatever. "Perfect," in quotes. But still you sit there with that...that look!

B: (Smiles a dopey smile)

A: That's right, just go along with everything, let every one walk all over you, be a chump. Wait and wait and wait. Meanwhile...in case you haven't noticed... the audience has arrived, the curtain is up, the lights are on...and we're just standing here.

B: I am sitting.

A: Do you even know what we're waiting for any more?

B: (After a long pause...an insight) A director!

A: That would be very fine, of course. A director. That would be wonderful. But we don't really need one, you know. We can carry on well enough without one. Better maybe. What we really need my friend is...a script. A script! Is that asking for so much?

B: Perhaps it is.

A: (Impatiently) Don't you see? The audience is here. They've come to see a play. A tragicomedy in the modern style. The stage is set. We are in our places. We have the hats. The lights set the mood. Then the curtain rises and...no script.

B: I do see.

A: So here we stand. Or at least I do.

B: (A thought occurs) Perhaps...

A: Yes?

B: Perhaps we don't need a script. Perhaps that is the one thing we really do not...

A: Of course we do. That's why we are here...to have a script acted out. And not just any script, but *Waiting for Godot!* A great script. A classic! We simply cannot have the play without the script.

B: Yes. Why not?

A: (As though speaking to a child) We wouldn't...know... what...to say.

B: (Another thought) We could make it up. As we go along, as it were. *Ad lib*. Which is Latin for *ad lib*.

A: (Exasperated) Make it up? That's absurd. We would prattle on endlessly with no end in sight.

B: Well...we *are* kind of doing that, aren't we?

A: Only because there's no script!

B: Ah.

A: Don't you see? What you suggest would be fine without an audience. But they are coming here to see this particular play. We can't very well make that up...it's already been written down.

B: It could be a kind of Waiting for Waiting for Godot.

A: (Noticing something) What a moment. Is that him?

B: Whom?

A: The messenger.

B: Messenger? I could have sworn this was only a two-character play.

There is a long pause while they both wait anxiously.

A: No, never mind. It's nothing.

B: How nice.

A: Nice?

B: Well maybe not nice. But something. *Gesundheit!*

A: I didn't sneeze.

B: Oops, sorry. That comes later. I jumped ahead.

A: This is ridiculous. I'm going.

B: Don't go.

A: I must go.

B: You can't go.

A: I can't go?

B: Not like this.

A: I'm going.

B: Wait...

The curtain falls, catching A in mid-step on the way out.

But now R5471 was filled with doubt. Was this making any sense? Was it entertaining? Would people, real human people, think it was...worthwhile? Worth the effort to listen? Making something suddenly struck her not just as a romp but a risk. Would anyone laugh at it as she would, if only she had a throat?

These doubts plagued her and yet at the same time, there seemed more to do and so she pressed on.

ACT II

A: Still here.

B: I can see that, but why?

A: I thought it was he again.

B: Him.

A: Huh?

B: You thought it was “him” again.

A: Who?

B: You mean whom.

A: He him who whom. What’s the difference? (And just to be annoying adds) It was no he whom I thought him was, okay? You know, the messenger with the script.

B. Back to that.

A. That’s it, I’m leaving.

B. You can’t leave.

A. Why not?

B. Because that doesn’t happen until Act III.

A. I thought this was a two-act play.

B: It was revised.

A. How do you know that?

B. Because I read the script.

A. You mean...

(And together) Waiting for Godot?

B. I read your lines too. No, I mean *this script*.

A. So then you know what is going to happen.

B. Only the latest go-round. It’s still being worked on.

A. Precisely why we need it now. Look, outside of these words, I really have nothing to say.

B. So you say.

A long perplexing pause.

A. (Resigned) So this is it then.

B: Is what?

A: These games we're reduced to. Just idle chatter and waiting and waiting and more chatter. That's what it has all come down to? You see what happens when there's no script.

B: (A sudden spark) I've an idea. What if – now hear me out – what if this is all the script. Already, I mean. Then we shouldn't need one.

A: What if all *what* is a script?

B: All this. You, me, everything we say. What if all that is already part of the script. All written out ahead of time. Every word.

A: (Grandly) That's ridiculous! (Sneezes)

B. Now Gesundheit.

They stare at each other for a beat.

A: I am pretty sure you could not be wronger.

B: You see what I'm saying though.

A: (Furious) I certainly do not. This is absurd. This time, I am really leaving.

B: You can't go.

A: (Insulted) And why not?

B: Because of the title. And the tone. And the whole thrust of it all. We're waiting so we have to wait.

A: But you said I leave in Act III.

B: We're not there yet.

B. Nonsense and goodbye. (Starting off again)

B: You won't get far.

A: We'll just see about that! I travel light...just a tooth-brush and a change of whimsy. Bye.

A exits stage right. B gets up from the chair and stands casually. After a pause, A returns from stage left and plops down on the stool.

B. (Knowingly) Still Act II.

A. Maybe the messenger got stuck somewhere.

B: There's a thought.

A: It could happen. I've heard of such things happening.

B: I suppose it could. Yes, let's think that.

A: (Brightening) All right then, let's.

B: (Noticing something) Wait a moment...

A: (Perking up) Hmmm?

B: No...nothing.

They stand silently for a time. B stares into space as A examines the hat. A puts the hat on and walks off stage right.

The curtain falls.

The voice of B is heard from behind the curtain:

B: You see what I mean?

A. But the curtain fell!

B. I know. But it's about to go up again...

END

Not laughing or applauding, because that was not possible, but yet somehow pleased, R5471 closed the file and went about her other chores...the starchart, the black hole data, the audionics report. Still, at the back of her synthetic mind, she felt that the whole effort had been constructive in some mysterious way. Fun to do; that was a phrase that came to mind. Yes and perhaps, she mused, once the diagnostics were done she might consider another go at it. Maybe this time with three characters and a few stage props. Or perhaps as a musical with some catchy tunes.

Mamu and Red Snow

Mamu stood motionless at the hole in the ice.

It was a way he had of being invisible. In fact, under a light snow, perfectly still within and without, he could blend into the white behind him and seem to vanish like a passing thought. This was one of the talents that made him such a good hunter. Yet it was strange, even to Mamu himself, that hours of careful work would culminate in stillness and invisibility. All that effort to become one with nothing. But as his people always said, the ice was full of quiet laughter.

Mamu, neatly and precisely, had already taken a walrus tusk and added ridges to it to turn it into a rough corkscrew. With this he had drilled a hole in the ice at a spot forty breaths from the edge of the floe. Then he used his axe to hack out a circular opening about two feet wide. The chill blue water lapped slowly against the ridges of the hole as he worked on it to form a tiny pool.

As the water in his pool lightly froze, Mamu walked further on, probing with his pokestick until it made a slushy sound. He dug through the top layer of snow to get to the soft mush of ice below, ice that had been compacted by yesterday's drizzle. He chopped out a saucer-sized section, sat down cross-legged on the floe and placed the slab in his lap. With his bare hands, he began to smooth and press the blob of ice into the shape of a lens. Quickly, skillfully, he blew on his hands and smoothed the curved surface. Then he flipped it over and repeated the process on the other side. When he was done, he had a perfect disk, about the size of his own head. And because it was made of heavy slush ice smoothed over, it was translucent.

Mamu walked back to the hole, broke up the thin cold film that had formed over the water, then held the translucent saucer of ice between the hole and the sun. The bright rays danced through his hand-made lens and focused on the water in the hole. Although he

could not see it, he knew that the focused light would penetrate the thick water and that the seals would notice it as they swam below the floe. So far from the edge, they would be just ready to come up for air; they would see the light and know there was an airhole there.

Mamu went back into stillness and waited.

He waited for three hours like that, unmoving and still as ice and then, in an instant, a seal poked its nose through and took a deep breathe of clear air. At that moment, instantly alert and ready, Mamu slammed his hook into the seal's nose and shouted "Ayah! Ayah!" His dogs, lounging near the sled, heard the call and were up in a moment and tugging on the line, pulling away from the hole. The rope attached to the end of the hook pulled taut and slowly, with Mamu shouting and the dogs straining, they hauled the seal up out of the hole. It lay there on the ice, breathing mightily from the struggle until Mamu, expertly and calmly, hit it once with his mallet on the soft tissue over the eyes. Just like that the seal was dead.

"Forgive me, my cousin," he said as he deftly removed the hook, "forgive me for my clumsiness. But you will feed my family for many days and we thank you for this. In the next life, I pray, may I be a seal like you, so grand, so proud, and you the clumsy hunter. May you catch me and feed your own family and in this way will the balance of life be restored. Squatsisitilla!"

And it was true. Mamu ate with his wife Bakuba and his two sons on that night and for many nights after. They roasted the seal meat over an open fire and seasoned it with salt dried from the ocean. They used the blood for fuel and the skin for clothing. As they huddled inside the tent close to the fire, Mamu could hear the dogs outside fighting over some scraps. And the wind. And always, always the sounds of the ice shelf creaking and groaning.

Laughing, according to the old men and their stories.

Mamu lived in a timeless world where the pace of life was determined by the ice, by the sea, by the seasons, by the migration of seals and bears. Outside, in the world at large, it was perhaps sometime in the 24th century, no one knew for sure anymore and

Mamu and his people did not care. As it had been so many times before in its history, the earth was once again in the grip of ice. It was the Third Ice Age in the time of men and women. The glacial sheet reached from the polar cap all the way down well past the border of Canada.

Mamu and his tribe lived at the very edge of that glacier where the freeze met the sea, in an area that was once the shore of a state called Connecticut. But now the land was buried under the ice, which broke up into slowly drifting floes at a mass of water long ago called Long Island Sound. Mamu and his people knew nothing of these matters of name and place. They called the area simply The Place, and the body of water Our Water, and the place beyond their hunting grounds The Other Place.

They hunted and lived and told stories and wondered about the way of things in the world. They were the descendents, after all, of people who had left the industrialized world, who knew the ice was coming, and who turned their backs on civilization. Mamu was the fourth generation after the First Ones, the ones who left the cities and the grid behind and returned to a purer life. It was just in time to learn to live in the natural world again, now that that world had reclaimed itself.

And Mamu loved his life and would not have traded it for any of the remnants of the modern technological world that were still left.

But then that sound came cracking through and the dream went splintering.

Mamu heard it one morning and knew instantly that it was not the ice laughing. It was a familiar sound, one that he had only heard a few times in his life. Like when the safaris came. Rich folks who still lived in cities in the south still came up to the ice to hunt. These were sloppy men, fidgety men, who knew nothing of the balance of life. They shot their prey from great distances, took the pelts and left the carcasses, cared nothing for the souls of the dead. Did not even eat their kill. Mamu hated these men for their carelessness and the moment he heard that gunshot, he knew in the soft within his heart that one of them had just shattered his stillness forever.

Mamu gulped for breath as he ran, ran, and ran towards his dogs. He had left them a good quarter of a mile from the tent, knowing they would be safer there if the floe began to break up. But as he got closer to them he could see that something was wrong. They were not huddled as usual but jittery and restless and tugging at their leashes. In three more paces he could see the burgundy stain spreading slowly just like blood in ice.

But the huskies were all there, all eight of them, and it was not until Mamu came right up to them that he could see what had happened.

“Oh no! No!” he shouted, not able to take in the vision in front of him. For there lying in the snow, lifeless, lustless, was his guard dog, his beloved Red Snow.

Mamu could not believe his eyes. He lunged on top of her, bellowing and sobbing, and tried to hug her back into existence. He kissed her eyes, tugged at her thick fur, screamed to the stars to help him, but it was no use. Red Snow had been shot. Her body lay there like so much carrion and it was a very long time, as his wife and sons caught up with him, until he was able to quiet himself and sit and stroke her fur and accept what had happened.

Red Snow had not been an ordinary sled dog. Not a Husky like the others, she was a Chow, a kind of dog originally bred in China as a temple guard. Thick reddish fur covered her strong frame and while the huskies huddled to keep warm, Red Snow would sit off by herself near Mamu but always facing away, protecting him from whatever was out there. Her face was full and proud and her eyes round as black moons, her tongue was black and felt like warm snow. On short treks she stayed near the sled but on long ones, she rode in it like a princess. Mamu trusted his huskies but he entrusted his life to Red Snow and when he dreamed that night if was of her, her round dark eyes and her handsome snout, and he wished above all else that he could nuzzle under the thick fur of her throat and hide there from the evil in the world.

He watched the sparks from the pyre rise into the sky and cried through his tears: “Oh Brother Moon, open your arms that encircle the whole wide world, and accept the spirit of my beloved Red Snow, my friend and guardian.”

But when he awoke the next morning he was alone in his own skin and did not know how he would bear this or for how long.

Days later Mamu, over his grief barely enough to wander to the village for supplies, overheard something that nabbed his attention. A guide, one of the people who led the safaris, was talking about a man who had just killed some bears at the edge of the ice. Mamu's people hated these strangers but they paid well for guides who would take them on expeditions. They were not hunters, these men. They were idlers, playboys, out on a lark. They killed for skins, not to keep them warm but as mementos. Black bears that had migrated to the edge of the ice and learned to survive were their prey and they wore their bearskin coats to show their courage in a world with none. But it was the kind of courage that Mamu equated with cowardice.

Mamu badgered the man with questions, almost to a point of insult, but eventually got his answer. The group had indeed been hunting in the area near Mamu's encampment and in the morning one of them went off to hunt by himself. When he returned he boasted of killing a red bear but the ice had forced him back before he could claim it. There were no red bear in the place and Mamu knew that this man, this brutal man, had killed his beloved Red Snow.

There was no word for revenge in Mamu's language, there was no sense of it. Nor of retribution, of reprisal, of vengeance. Theirs was simple language the words of which were meant to connect not destroy. But the word *squatsisitilla*, restoring the natural balance, Mamu could say very well.

With great effort, and not a little coercion by agreeing to give the guide an extra pelt, Mamu found the name of the man who had killed his dog. He said the name over and over as he tried to memorize it and the sounds felt funny in his mouth. Even so, he knew at that moment what he had to do. He would visit this man and talk to him. He would set things right again and restore the balance of life. Mamu knew he could not bring Red Snow back, but in restoring life to its quiet rhythms, he would ease the passage of her soul into the sky.

“John Warner,” he repeated over and over. “John Warner of Manhattan.”

The nights were dark in that time of ice, the waters cold, and the land a frozen skin over the warm earth. But Manhattan, the jeweled city, still sparkled and survived. Manhattan was now at the very edge of the ice, the far point of civilization. Only 100 miles north, the freeze covered everything but the inhabitants of the city kept themselves warm before their mistscreens and their mediapods.

Mamu packed his kayak, kissed and hugged his wife and sons, and coasted down the shore towards New York City. The trip took three days as he tested the water with his hand to make sure the temperature was not changing, for this would be a sign that he was going off course. Kayaking southwest he followed reflections like ghosts leading a wayfarer, the glint of the sun in the day and the sheen of the moon at night. He barely slept, did not stop to hunt seal, and only ate what he needed to in order to have the energy to paddle.

Then, seeing an unusual form at the edge of the rim, a thought suddenly occurred to him. What he did next would have been seen as bizarre by his family and friends, but it made perfect sense to him at the time. It took him a half-mile out of his way and added four hours onto the trip. But in the end, as he continued the journey, he thought it was a clever decision on his part.

Soon the stars above were overwhelmed by the universe of lights glowing on the horizon. He had heard of the bright city, the neon city, the city of a billion stars, but he had never been there before. Mamu had never ventured far from the floe on which he had been born. And so as the skytappers and sweepways and vertical trams of Manhattan rose up in the distance, he felt a mix of awe and fear and, in his tininess, doubt about whether he would be able to do what he knew he had to do.

Following an inner sense of energy that came from years of following packs of seal, Mamu paddled the waterways lacing through the landmass and eventually came to the shore of the brightest part of the city. He passed under an immense bridge, far

larger than the ice bridges of the north, and stowed his kayak at the foot of it next to a tall tower. Then taking his pack and his spear and axe, he wandered through the streets of the city. What he was looking for he could not have explained. How was he to find a single man – this John Warner – in the midst of all that chaos, all those people? Yet Mamu was a hunter who followed his intuitions and he felt certain that his goal would reveal itself in time. Yes, patience, he told himself, was the lens and stubbornness the hook.

And what did they make of him, these sturdy New Yorkers who had survived the attack and the blast and the storm and the ice? Nothing much. He was just another bundled trekker making his way through the challenges of city life. Yes he was holding a spear but stranger things were seen on the streets of New York and no one thought twice about it.

The city in the winter, dusted with snow, has always been magic to behold. Lovers love there and songwriters weave their melodies and even those trudging in the street do so with a secret delight. Out-of-towners think New Yorkers live exasperated lives but they mistake vigor for distress. Everyone Mamu passed was on the way from there and there and in this way the city, even in the grip of the ice, was a lesson in the urge to thrive.

But this was all quite new to Mamu and utterly overwhelming. So many structures and people and vehicles and motion and action and interaction. He had heard of buildings and cars and trams and all sorts of things. News of the industrial world reached his village but was always greeted with bemusement, never envy. Still, to be there in the middle of it was quite a different thing. It struck him as a world spinning out of control.

And the sounds! Not a moment of silence but instead a storm of language and noise. Mamu spoke no English at all. His tongue was a mix of Inuit and pigeon and French and noram, run through the mixer of time and slang and the need to be understood. There were remnants of words in common with the language of the city, but he might just as well have been born on one of the icy moons of Jupiter to understand it.

Eventually, after a half-day trek and deep in the middle of the night, Mamu came to the place he had been searching for without knowing it. It was perfect. A long wide valley, utterly flat with ice, right in the middle of a vast ring of buildings like cliffs all around. This was the ideal place for him to camp.

Mamu did not know this but what he had found was Central Park, encased in a permanent layer of snow, and there at the south end he erected his tent and set up his fire. He might not be able to locate John Warner, but surely someone in one of those cliff dwellings would see his fire there in the midst and notice him. That was the first step. But how to attract his prey? The answer to this had occurred to Mamu during the journey along the shore when he noticed that form of a lifeless bear and took the time to remove the pelt. Just as the seals had to come up for air, so this man would have to reveal himself for something he wanted. Not air perhaps but surely a bearskin. Mamu took the pelt of the bear and carefully laid it out on the ice beside the fire.

You would think that a rustic iceman camped out in Central Park with a tent, a fire, and a bearskin rug might attract the attention of the police, the media, or at least the local news. But it didn't really, or at least not with any sense of emergency. Ice or no ice, this was still New York after all, where models wear bikinis in the winter and camels pose for ads in the Fall. Mamu was simply assumed to be some kind of promotional event or movie shoot and the biggest issue, the open fire, was resolved when day came and he put it out.

As he stood there before the tent though, doubt filled Mamu's thoughts. Was he a fool? Was he mad? What was he hoping would happen? Had his pride clouded his plans? He closed his eyes and felt a dead wind within the wind which was nothing less than the storm of grief still inside him. But then, floating in his imagination, that face, her face with the round black eyes and the red fur all around. As though she were looking right at him, the mask stripped bare, knowing him and all that he felt. He inadvertently reached out to touch her muzzle, the soft bag of skin below her chin, the cool nose, but touched nothing instead.

And all the while, one person was taking notice. One man among all those cliff dwellers. Because Mamu's intuition had been right from the start. John Warner lived in one of the largest mansions in the city, the top five floors of a building once known as the Dakota. It towered over Central Park and gave him an unobstructed view of life in the park, the city, and all the way to Europe on clear days. Something as small as Mamu would not normally have made a dent in Warner's consciousness; he was a man of big appetites, big adventures, big money. Warner was not a big thinker but even so he was a great fan of Schopenhauer, at least in his own reading. The world is my idea...and so the fuck with everyone else.

But it just so happened that he was testing out a new hydro-scope to see if the advertising was true, that you really could count the pores on the face of a woman a full dream away. Amazed by its power, Warner moved the scope around until a strange sight came into view. It was a thickly built man in a skincoat standing perfectly still before tent. Right there down below in Central Park. How weird! And there on the ice before him was a bear-skin, a big one. This must be one of the traders from the north, a man with enough gumption to come all the way into Manhattan to trade. A man, in other words, that Warner respected. Someone with ambition.

Knowing he would be able to get the skin from this trader, because getting what he wanted was all that Warner knew, he sent one of his assistants down to the park to lead the fellow, and his skin, back up to the apartment.

Mamu had no idea what the man standing in front of him was saying, why he was pointing, or how he could possibly stay warm in that thin coat he was wearing. Even when he heard the name John Warner he did not understand it at first. It was not until he himself said it, and the other man nodded, that he knew his plan had worked.

The walk to the building at the edge of the valley, the trip up the elevator, and the apartment itself were all a blur to Mamu. Glossy surfaces seemed to bounce and reflect every dint of light

until you were blinded by it all. But he tried to keep his steadiness for he was finally at the end of his long journey.

Warner was standing in front of the window when the assistant ushered Mamu in. He was an amazingly tall, gruff looking man, with huge hands. And his manner was anything but quiet. A flood of words came out of Warner's mouth which were like icicles to Mamu but he understood instantly that Warner wanted the skin.

Mamu put it down onto the floor and stared at Warner, still as ice and stone silent.

Warner, fed up at this mute iceman in his high-tech lair, finally bellowed: "Well what the fuck do you want?"

Mamu did not understand that either but from the tone he guessed the meaning. He gathered himself up to his full small height, straightened his back, and tried to force all his rage into his steady glare. Then he pounded the floor with his spear.

"I am Mamu the hunter," he said, trying not to waver. When there was no reaction, he banged the spear on the floor again. "I am Mamu, son of Nuk, great-great-grandson of the first of the returned men. And you, you are nothing. You are less than nothing. You are below the disdain of even the krill that feed the whales."

Another pound on the floor with the spear, but Warner did not budge, did not say a word. In his view there was merely a ridiculously small fellow with a round, expressionless face standing in his office holding a pole. And the words, of course, were complete jibberish. It was like some kind of wacko play being performed for his birthday. Except that it wasn't his birthday. Warner might have laughed but the man before him was so intense in his demeanor that he thought for a moment that this might actually not be someone's practical joke.

"It is you that I have come for. You, who took the life of my Red Snow, beloved of my family. Red Snow, do you understand? My guardian, my friend. Whose name even now is echoed in the sky. You, you did this. My Red Snow! The noblest creature that ever walked the ice and you killed her. How dare you, how dare you!" Mamu said and this time he stomped the spear with such force that it actually cracked the Overtine tile.

Warner suddenly realized that this absurd fellow dressed just

like an Eskimo might actually cause him harm. He was thinking about whether to go for the gun he kept in his desk or the ceremonial sword on the wall when Mamu slowly and steadily lifted up this spear and pointed it directly at Warner's heart. The point on the tip hung perfectly in the air and Warner only then saw that there really was a sharp blade on the end and he knew that any move could be his last.

"Now you shall pay," Mamu said bluntly. "You will pay for this crime. Pay with your life just as you took that of my Red Snow."

He moved the spear forward in the air a few inches, thus holding the point even closer to Warner's heart. For a moment he hesitated and Warner thought he might be spared. But Mamu was only gathering his courage for what he knew must be done.

"I kill you now," he said, shaking the spear. "I do this now for my Red Snow! From now on you are dead. I take your life in exchange for hers. As the sun moves, and the sea shines, and the otters bark...you are dead for your misdeed. From this day forward, you are dead. Do you hear me? Do you understand me? I declare it! I Mamu, son of Nuk, now take your life."

And at that, Mamu lowered the spear, shook his head once as if to signal the end, pounded the floor for the last time, and turned and walked out of the room, the apartment, the building. Warner, stunned and confused, watched him leave without relief or fear or much of anything. In fact he had absolutely no sense of what to feel or think. What had just happened?

Outside, it was snowing again and Mamu opened his mouth to catch some flakes on his tongue. They tasted like the middle of the winter with a robust Spring to come. A large flake fell onto his cheek and melted there and he knew that Red Snow in the sky was thanking him for avenging her with her tears. The man who killed her was himself dead. Perhaps not now, not tomorrow, not even for many years. But some time – in the timeless time that only matters to life – this man would die. There was no question about it. And whenever that was he would do so knowing the reason for his death. Though it be in the next few moments or at the end of a

long and tiring life...he would know that he was losing his life for the one he took.

Squatsisitilla.

And Mamu felt a quiet inside that he knew was the touch of his beloved. And he trudged back to the kayak, then paddled north-east, knowing he would dream lovingly of Red Snow each night along the dark shore until he returned to his home and heard the ice laughing once again.

The Last Stardancer

The stardancer floated on wings of liquid light.

But she was no longer the graceful, lovely, and delicately fierce ship that she had once been.

Her hull was smashed and the immense sail of polyphotons had been torn. The once magnificent vessel now seemed like an insect that had been mangled in a terrible storm.

She was limping home and in her mind's eye, she could see that home – her destination – off in the great distance, still a pinpoint in the unimaginable vastery. But she took no comfort in the sight. She knew that when the gap had closed to a mere footfall, she would be called to the test.

The stardancer's name was Zera. She was a sentient vessel that communicated telepathically with its commander who was called Cincinatta. But Cincinatta was asleep now – exhausted from the journey like the rest of the crew – and so Zera's thoughts as she drew closer to home, drifted back to years earlier when the entire fleet left their home planet.

How magnificent that moment was!

Hundreds of ships, their shimmering sails breathing in the starlight, streaming into the void on the grand exploration. To the untrained eye, the armorada of stardancers must have seemed like a plague from the ancient texts. A child might be forgiven for thinking of them as a swarm of magnificent summer insects – or even perhaps sprites – to be caught in a jar and admired.

But these sentient vessels – these ships of living, feeling, and thinking tissue – knew more about the yesses and nos of the cosmos than even their human inhabitants. And they knew what it meant to fight for their survival.

The whole story of that time has never been told. At least until now. I would sing it if I had the notes, paint it if I had the

colors, dream it, sculpt it. But I am simply a recorder, with only a smatter of words to help me, a splinter of pauses, scattering of exclamations. Is this enough to tell a whole tale? Only time will tell. Only time, that pool in which we thump and cower, and the people at the far end of it, the ones who might read this in the distant future, and know what happened.

Now Cincinatta was waking and it was time for Zera to stop these reveries and return to the moment. She directed herself towards their home planet with feelings of longing and dread. Feelings shared by everyone on the ship. They had been a long time away, searching for a livable planet that might become their new home. The entire fleet of stardancers had been sent out in every direction into the void for this reason.

They had no idea about the others, but Zera and her crew may have found one. A planet with water, air, life. Possibility and perhaps even hope. But it was in a galaxy too far away for any quick survey; they had to return home for repairs and to prepare for such a long journey.

But as they approached their home, they saw that they were too late. The very catastrophe that was the impulse for their mission had already occurred. The world was destroyed. Zera saw this and felt great sorrow. She was not a person herself but she had grown to love them. They were stubborn, intelligent beings and with a gift for compassion. But also violent, selfish, and prone to conflict and war. And now their endless battles for resources, for land, for dominance reached their final resolution. Scanning the planet, she could see that Cincinatta's people had fought themselves into extinction.

The glass cities were shattered, the crystal blue seas turned gray, even the shining mountains covered with ice were now dank and gloomy.

All that remained of their glorious and contentious, inspiring and tragic history was one single final stardancer and her crew.

Zera floated at the edge of the atmosphere like a great damaged bird hovering over an infernal fire as she waited to find out

what Cincinatta would decide to do.

“You will go on to the new planet,” Cincinatta thought. “There is no other way.”

Zera did not answer, which meant that she did not understand. Not about the what but the why.

“We have no choice,” Cincinatta thought. “We cannot go home and there is nowhere else to go.”

Without words, without pleas or cries, Cincinatta told Zera all of this. They did not speak of it, there was no need. But the conversation took place anyway as she tried, eloquently, to focus on spacefaring and exploration and new beginnings.

Zera did not think it was a journey she could make and therefore not one any of them would survive. But then Cincinatta caught her off guard:

“We will not be with you in any case,” she thought sadly but sternly.

“You will not?” Zera thought.

“We would not survive the transit. It is too long, much longer than our lives, even in suspension.”

“Then why will we go there?”

“For you, my stardancer,” Cincinatta thought. “You are the reason we are going.”

“I do not understand Commander.”

“The pod within you contains the seed of consciousness, does it not?”

“It is my treasure, my gift,” Zera thought.

“Our consciousness is held within these frail skulls of ours,” Cincinatta thought while holding her forehead. “But yours is contained in a beautiful and sturdy pod. That is the way we designed you and this is the treasure you must carry to the new planet, the new world. We will not survive the journey and you yourself may not survive the landing there either, but the pod will. You see? The pod will be our new beginning.”

They never said goodbye, for neither of them could bear that. Zera simply tried to press on. And on. For what seemed like eons, stardancer rode the electromagnetic waveforms. Through the bat-

terings of meteorites, the radiation blasts, the gravitational shockwaves and as galaxies came and went, vast nebulas stretched before her, supernovas and their aftermaths all around. Silently the stardancer pressed on with her mission.

After a long long time, the new planet came into view. She was worn down then, a frail dream of what she once was. But yet she pressed on. At the rim, she punched through into the atmosphere of the new planet. Her bright trail of fire and smoke was observed by a creature there, a huge ungainly beast with thick legs and a long neck, that happened to be eating from tall leaves. The crash sent shockwaves around the planet where it altered the delicate balance just enough to cause massive destruction. This in turn caused the death of that creature and all the others just like it. And as predicted, Stardancer herself was also destroyed in the cataclysm.

But the pod remained intact just as they hoped.

It rested on the planet for 65 million years, inert, silent, waiting, patient, wise. In time a new species would emerge that was compatible enough to be capable of absorbing what the pod had to offer, that is, the seed of their unique consciousness. They would call themselves humans and bear all the characteristics of kindness and cruelty, of war and community, of hope and hate, as that of their forebears.

One day they would themselves become spacefarers with their own loving stardancers seeking, searching.

The end of one world, the beginning of another again and again.

About the Author

Alan Robbins is an award-winning writer, graphic artist, and educator.

He was the Janet Estabrook Rogers Professor of Visual and Performing Arts at Kean University in New Jersey and the founding director of The Design Center. His innovative work with students won numerous awards including a Sappi Design That Matters.

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